

## **Examining Our Career Switching Teachers' First Year of Teaching: Implications for Alternative Teacher Education Program Design**

**By Dawn Renee Wilcox & Anastasia P. Samaras**

Before Kevin Laub became an English teacher, he was an investment banker for six years with Morgan Stanley on Wall Street with an office in Tower Two at the World Trade Center. During college, his goal was “to make enough money to live in New York City” (Biderman, 2006, p. 8). On September 11, 2001, his world changed. After running down 62 flights of stairs while a plane hit his building, he thought about his life and began to rethink his career goal. He chose teaching as his second career and completed the alternative teacher preparation program examined in this study. Although he graduated before this study and is not part of it, his story signifies that second career teachers get a second chance to make the difference they want to make in the world as teachers.

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This study explores the impact of an alternative teacher preparation program development from the “inside out” or through the voices of second career teachers, known as “Career Switchers,” at a mid-size state university. The major objective of this study was to probe into their perceptions to inform program development with reporting framed in their first year of teaching experiences. There has been much discussion about the quality, design, and growth of alternative

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teacher preparation programs which arose due to a growing need for newly hired teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Although there has been significant criticism about such programs, this study is responsive to the call for examining alternative teacher preparation at a local level, i.e., within a specific program.

In the 1990s, there was a growing need to secure highly qualified teachers in the United States, and that need was predicted to increase (Hussar, 1999). Recognizing the pending crisis, teacher education programs struggled to address teacher shortages issues while maintaining high standards to prepare highly qualified teachers (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Glazerman, Seif, & Pedersen, 2008; Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004; O'Neil, 2004; Pyle & Grimes, 2002). Many states created alternative certification programs (Feistrizzer, Haar, Hobar, & Scullion, 2005), at least 47 states have adopted some type of alternative teacher licensure route (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007), and currently 30% of teachers enter the profession through alternative teacher education programs (Whitehurst, 2007).

Researchers have stressed that all alternative teacher education programs, like all traditional ones, are not the same.

Continuing to classify and design research studies based on the gross categories of alternative or traditional, despite differences in state and local contexts and without consideration of similarities and differences in organizational structures and practices, will provide an inaccurate picture of teacher preparation. (Grossman & McDonald, 2008, p. 195)

Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) conclude it is not useful to compare alternative certification programs, suggesting instead that research is needed on a subgroup of individuals with similar backgrounds, school placements, and learning opportunities. Zeichner (2006) adds that it is the quality of the program that matters with more attention paid to program characteristics than to sponsorship. Those program characteristics can be delineated through case study research which is a recommended approach to yield data on program characteristics and impact (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). This study is framed in the context of a specific alternative teacher education program using a case studies approach.

### **Related Literature**

A review of related literature suggests that shortages of teachers who are qualified in their particular subject are of critical concern (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley, & Seo, 2002; deBettencourt & Howard, 2004; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). There has been an impressive response to teacher shortages with federal mandates supporting alternative licensing routes (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley, & Seo, 2002; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2001). And yet, debate has surfaced related to questioning the successfulness of implementing higher certification standards

verses lessening regulations and promoting alternative licensure routes (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heileg, 2005; deBettencourt & Howard, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Despite this discussion, alternative teacher certification programs have progressively become widespread (Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008).

Research about alternatively prepared teachers shows mixed findings (Brannan & Reichardt, 2002; Turley & Nakai, 2000). While many researchers reported teachers were satisfied with their training (Brannan & Reichardt, 2002; Shoho & Martin, 1999), others revealed that after a brief time in the profession alternatively prepared teachers expressed more concerns than traditionally prepared counterparts (Brannan & Reichardt, 2002; Education Commission of the States, 2003; Houston, Marshall, & McDavid, 1993). Those concerns included student motivation, managing teacher time, amount of paperwork, school administration, lack of personal time, and grading students; however, no differences were noted between teachers' perceptions of alternatively and traditionally trained teachers after eight months of teaching experience. Furthermore, while there is widespread research related to quality assurance procedures for traditional graduates, modest investigations have been completed to purposely explore the quality of alternative teacher education programs. Quality assurance procedures include the agreements between the teacher, college or institute, and employing school district that obligate the institution to provide additional coursework, counseling, or other support for new teachers not meeting district standards (Brannan & Reichardt, 2002).

The Education Commission of the States (2003) suggests that the following features are important to successful alternative route programs: (a) strong partnership between preparation programs and school districts; (b) superior participant screening and selection process; (c) strong supervision and mentoring; (d) a curriculum including coursework in classroom basics and teaching methods; and (e) field experiences and coursework prior to full-time teaching. Humphrey, Wechsler, and Hough (2008) advocate that an effective alternative certification program should place candidates in school environments with strong leadership, a collegial atmosphere, and adequate resources. Humphrey et al., (2008) also conclude that teacher development in these programs appears to be a function of the interaction between: (a) the program as implemented; (b) the school context in which the on-the-job training occurs; and (c) the career trajectory of the participant. Examining the components of specific alternative licensure programs might be useful to similar programs as they consider the implications for their program development (deBettencourt & Howard, 2004).

### **The Career Switcher Program**

The Virginia General Assembly created the Career Switcher Alternative Route to Licensure Program in 1999 as a measure to address the state's teacher short-

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age and prepare highly qualified teachers. The program was designed to reduce the number of career changers who take teaching positions with a provisional license and without preparation. Lawmakers worked with the Board of Education to develop a plan to attract well-educated individuals to a second career in teaching and initially provided funding for teachers and mentors. The geographic area for this mid-Atlantic state university draws from a particular labor market in Northern Virginia, i.e., mid-career and retired military personnel, lawyers, and State, government, and research company employees with specializations in critical needs content areas such as mathematics and the sciences. After initial piloting, the Commonwealth of Virginia began the *Career Switcher Program*, an alternative licensure system designed to entice subject matter specialists from various occupations to become “highly qualified” in critical needs areas. Our university launched its Career Switcher alternative route to licensure program in 2002 and is one of the State’s nine certified providers, which vary significantly in design, curricula, and requirements. Candidates complete the program after two semesters of course work followed by one year of full-time teaching with mentorship by a university and school mentor.

#### **Program Characteristics**

The following components were characteristic of our program at the time of this study:

*High quality standards for admission.* This program prepares individuals for full licensure as secondary school teachers with certification in biology, chemistry, earth science, English, history/social science, mathematics, or physics. Candidates must be admitted into the Graduate School of Education, i.e., it is not offered through a continuing education office or run as a set of courses or workshops. Admission requirements include: (a) passing Praxis I scores; (b) passing Praxis II scores; (c) passing scores on a communication and literacy assessment; (d) a Bachelor’s degree; (e) completion of all content-area endorsement coursework; and (f) documentation of a minimum of five years of professional experience in another career.

*Curriculum, field experiences, and seminar.* In the first year of the program, Career Switchers complete four courses over a two-semester period taking courses in: (1) Education Foundations; (2) Methods of Teaching their respective content area; (3) Human Development; and (4) Literacy in the Content Areas. Each course requires that students complete 15 hours of field experience in a secondary education school which most typically involves classroom observations and does not include student teaching. Career Switchers attend monthly professional seminars during this two-year program.

*Full licensure.* Career Switchers who successfully complete their first year of teaching are issued an “Eligibility License” and according to the State are fully eligible for employment as a “highly qualified” teacher and are not provisionally

licensed. They must secure a teaching position within two years and if not, they can apply their course work and complete the traditional secondary education program route which requires one additional advanced methods course. At the end of their first year of teaching, they must be recommended by their mentor, coordinator, principal, and school division to receive a five-year renewable teaching license issued from the State. All Career Switchers in this study received positive endorsements and were issued their teaching license. All are currently teaching.

*High quality mentors.* During the second year, Career Switchers complete a year of 'on-the-job' training in an internship which includes mentorship by a retired public school teacher. In this study, mentors were former teacher leaders, e.g., they had served as department chairs, clinical supervisors, and mentors in a nationally funded science research project at the same university. Mentors read and responded to their mentee's weekly journal reflections and met at least monthly with their mentees or as needed. They were continuously accessible through email and/or by phone. Many chose to 'front load' their mentoring visits and according to their mentees' needs. Mentors were paid with state and university appropriated funding.

*Active coordinator.* The Dean's Office funded a coordinator to actively work with faculty to build and develop the state supported program. As a state university, the program had continued to be offered, although with low enrollment. The coordinator was allocated a reduced teaching load to: (a) work with the University Admissions Office on candidate review and licensure eligibility; (b) interface with State administrators and other program coordinators at State wide meetings; (c) serve as Career Switchers' academic advisor; (e) make the program fiscally feasible through increased enrollment; (f) observe Career Switchers at their schools; (g) build an alumni base; (h) hold mentor meetings; and (i) connect Career Switchers with school division staff. During the monthly professional seminars, the coordinator modeled pedagogies and invited mentors to contribute their expertise. Student feedback about seminars was solicited at mid-term and at the end-of semester.

Each school division director and Human Resource director was contacted. A successful partnership was solidified with the university and the Human Resource director and staff of a large school division. Based on the Human Resource Director's recommendation, the coordinator wrote a proposal to the Secondary Education Committee to add a fall matriculation, thus enhancing candidates' employment possibilities since the school hiring process begins during the January employment fairs. Career Switchers in the fall cohort completed course work in the fall and spring semesters and those in the spring cohort completed course work in the spring and summer semesters. Following the study reported here, a fall and spring cohort matriculated. This measure helped to address the state teacher shortage while also doubling the university's program enrollment. The Human Resource Office also offered a mentor pool of retired teachers and mentors solicited retired teacher colleagues to serve as mentors.

## **Method**

At the time of this study, Dawn Renee was a graduate research assistant working with Anastasia and completing her Ph.D. Dawn Renee is a school division science coordinator. Anastasia served as the coordinator of the Career Switcher program. The researchers inquired, “How can the perceptions of Career Switchers (henceforth called “teachers”) be useful to informing and reforming our program quality?” “What are the supports and challenges teachers faced during their first year of teaching in our program?” “What components arise that would be informative to other alternative teacher education programs?”

Aligned with these broad questions, were specific research questions:

- What difficulties did teachers experience in their first year of teaching?
- What surprises did they encounter?
- What changes did teachers see in themselves over time?
- Did their teaching experiences align with their proposed professional goals?
- How can the identification of their needs be utilized for future planning?

## **Teachers**

Eight out of the nine teachers in the spring 2006 cohort had secured a teaching position after their first year of studies. We asked teachers if they were interested in being part of this study and four agreed with the understanding that they would remain anonymous. We assured them of anonymity and agreed to share the findings with them to check our interpretations.

Of the four teachers, one is a male and three are females. We have given them the pseudonyms of Jordan, Pat, Tyler (the male), and Robin. They are content specialists in their area of teaching entering the Career Switcher program from well-established careers in law, higher education, communications management, and a professional science organization. Three of the teachers secured a teaching position in a secondary high school; Jordan teaches English and drama, Pat teaches biology, Tyler teaches biology. One secured a teaching position in a middle School; Robin teaches middle school mathematics. Each teacher completed endorsement work in their content area which built on their earlier programs of college study. They were required to also pass the Praxis II test in their respective discipline before entering the program.

## **Data Collection**

Multiple data sources were collected and analyzed over a period of one year and included: (a) teachers’ weekly journal reflections; (b) mentors’ weekly responses to mentee’s journal reflections; (c) program progress reports; (d) a teacher focus group session; (e) a mentor focus group session; (f) mentors’ midterm evaluations; (g) mentors’ final evaluations; (h) teachers’ final self-evaluation reports; (i) teachers’

admission goal statements; and (j) researchers' notes, including those collected during school visits and observations.

*Teachers' journal reflections.* Teachers sent weekly electronic journal reflections to their mentor and to the coordinator. Teachers were introduced to Schwab's (1973) commonplaces of teaching, i.e., the teacher, the student, the subject matter, and the context. They were prompted to consider and write about the dilemmas observed and experienced.

*Mentors' responses to teachers' journal reflections.* Mentors responded to teachers' weekly journal reflections and copied their comments to the coordinator, enabling the coordinator to note any "red flags" and monitor teachers' progress and/or difficulties. Anastasia read and collected each reflection and mentor response and forwarded them, with teachers' permission, to Dawn Renee.

*Program progress reports.* Dawn Renee conducted a mid-year program evaluation for partial fulfillment of a course on program evaluation, basing her analysis of the teachers' reflections. Anastasia completed monthly program progress reports and a midterm program report.

*Teacher focus group.* The researchers held a teacher focus group session at the end of the program gathering information and suggestions for program improvement.

*Mentor focus group.* In addition to two mentor meetings, the researchers held a mentor focus group at the end of the program gathering mentors' perspectives and suggestions for program improvement.

*Mentors' mid-term evaluations.* Mentors completed midterm evaluations, using an evaluation form designed by Secondary Education faculty incorporating the professional standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). The evaluations provided data on teachers' experiences, progress, and difficulties.

*Mentors' final evaluations.* Mentor final evaluations provided data on teachers' first year of teaching, highlighting progress, and any continued and/or new professional goals.

*Teachers' self-evaluations.* Teachers were required to submit and present a final self-evaluation report at the last seminar including progress, insights gained, and areas for further professional development.

*Admission goal statements.* Teachers were required to submit a goal statement during their program application.

*Researchers' notes.* Researchers collected information throughout the study, i.e., notes and student feedback from seminars, from mentor meetings, and from the coordinator's school visits and informal observations.



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### **Data Analysis**

The study consists of an exploration of four cases involving specific in-depth data with context rich information (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998). A collective case study approach with cross-case analysis (Stake, 1994) was utilized to examine the data obtained across teachers. The in depth collective studies with cross-case analysis of the four secondary school teachers provided rich descriptions of their first year of teaching; the supports, difficulties, surprises, and changes they reported. Although the analysis of the teachers limits the ability to generalize the findings to larger populations, the findings may be useful to other alternative teacher education programs.

The analysis of teachers' journal entries and their mentors' responses entries was conducted using the categorizing strategy of coding and thematic analysis (Maxwell, 2005). The analysis elucidated topics through use of a pattern matching technique where a link between relationships, themes, and concepts was developed. Data collected for each individual was then compared and contrasted across teachers to explore for similarities and differences. Transcripts were scanned for specific "emic" level codes, or codes developed from the teachers' words, prior to examining the data for the purpose of answering the research questions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once journal transcripts and other data sources were analyzed and notes were made regarding emic coding was completed, the researchers revisited the research questions to search for reoccurring themes. Data from journals were triangulated using the additional data sources. The researchers examined teachers' goal statements submitted for program admission where they wrote about why they chose teaching as a career and what they hoped to gain from program preparation.

### **Findings**

Examining the multiple data sources and addressing our research questions, we report on the following: (a) difficulties experienced; (b) surprises encountered; (c) changes reported; and (d) setting and fulfilling professional goals.

#### ***Difficulties Experienced***

Three major themes emerged concerning difficulties across teachers: (a) meeting time demands; (b) managing student behavior and needs; and (c) appreciation of mentors.

*Time demands.* Data revealed that teachers shared common concerns related to the issue of time and energy required by teachers on a daily basis. The huge list of required bureaucratic tasks and meetings were both surprising and overwhelming. Research suggests new teachers are not prepared for the range of tasks required of them outside of the classroom (Bhatt, 2005) and this study supports that also applies to second career teachers. On the topic of time, Tyler reports wrestling



with teaching responsibilities, “I’m not sure there are many jobs, other than that of a teacher, where the past, present, and future obligations are so pressing day in and day out.” All wished they had more time to complete duties and tasks, such as grading papers. Balancing time with family, work, and other tasks was a frequent and common concern. All teachers reported distress at the number of meetings and extra duties required by teachers, both planned and unplanned. Pat continuously expressed her distress during the seminars about dealing with “administrivia.” Tyler felt overwhelming pressured by tasks.

Death by a thousand tasks. This week, I feel I have been frustrated by countless small, but legitimate and important tasks that have distracted me from the “real” work of planning strong lessons, keeping up with grading, and most importantly—teaching.

Teachers reported difficulty in managing lesson pacing and covering all of the standards within the allotted class time. This finding also aligned with their mentors’ observations. Pat expressed her frustration.

If I take too much time on a given subject, I will not complete the material. If I cut out some of the tougher concepts, all the material that could show up on the SOL will not be covered. . . All the emphasis in assessment draws attention away from the student as a person and focuses on the student as a performance machine.

Others reported trouble locating lessons and pacing guides. Robin expressed concern with having to take time to develop things “from scratch” and “really thought the school or county, would have developed a general format with an appropriate timeline.”

*Managing student behavior and student needs.* Teachers shared accounts of their difficulties in meeting the needs of all students, managing student behavior, and eliciting family participation in that regard. Two were surprised by their difficulty in helping English Language Learners (ELLs). Jordan reveals, “Meeting the needs of each and every student is as challenging as it gets.” Likewise Pat discloses, “The major challenge I have faced so far is how to engage and motivate some of my needier students.” Later in the school year, Robin reports:

What was most interesting was the distracting behavior of the students when they did not understand the material. It is one of those lessons ‘we teachers’ need to learn many times. If many of the students are off task, chances are they are confused and not getting much out of the lesson.

*Appreciation of mentors.* Although teachers faced challenging situations and difficulties, they were grateful for their mentors. Jordan writes, “I appreciate that I am strongly supported by the context in which I teach.” Pat reports appreciation for her mentor’s positive comments, in-class modeling and co-teaching when she struggled to implement a microscope lab and half way through the lab, she was almost in tears. She journaled, “The kids could not handle independent work. They

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did not have the discipline or the motivation needed to pursue this lab. Ashley lifted my spirits.” Similarly, Robin benefited from colleague and mentor support, “I must admit it is wonderful having so many great sources of suggestions and advice on improving my teaching skills. Some of the teachers on my team admit that they are still learning after 10+ years.” She frequently commented in seminar about the resources she received from Lucia, her university mentor. Jordan attests “I have myriad mentors from the university and school division who are there to provide encouragement and specific suggestions.”

#### **Surprises Encountered**

During seminars, teachers talked about how they thought they knew “what they were getting into.” They reported surprises relating to their interactions with three populations: (a) students; (b) parents; and (c) teacher colleagues.

*Surprises about students.* Teachers found surprises in their interactions with their students. Jordan was pleasantly surprised at the number of students with diverse talents and abilities.

How blessed I am to have such bright, eager, generally focused students! I’ve been especially pleased that many students who previously absorbed only the superficialities of a text are digging deeper and bearing down into Chaucer’s text, which so richly affords multiple layers of meaning.

Robin was “...delightfully surprised at how well behaved the children were becoming.” Tyler was “struck at the diversity seen among the students in my five classes... At least ten different languages.” Although Tyler had two English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, “even the ‘regular’ classes had students whose first language was not English which challenged me to check for student understanding.”

Pat’s surprise related to students’ lack of basic science content knowledge. She was astonished with the students’ scientific misconceptions, their lack of awareness of everyday objects, and their limited critical thinking skills. For example, one day she brought acorns and hickory nuts to class, and was “...shocked to realize that many of my students had never seen the inside of an acorn.” She also shared her astonishment that “...homework was not being completed by three-fourths of my students” and a quick review on test day revealed that “...very few students had actually studied.” In fact, “...seventy percent did not even look at their notes.” Similarly Robin emailed her mentor, “As I continue to spiral and integrate material we have previously covered, I am baffled by some of my students’ reactions. They behave as if they have never seen the topic.”

*Surprises about parents.* Teachers were disappointed by a lack of parent participation. Jordan came to the realization that “...no matter how much you communicate, it’s never adequate for everyone.” Robin was surprised that the parents of

a special education student declined services when their child reached middle school. Pat was stunned at the number of parents that are struggling with their children.

The hardest thing I have to accept as a teacher is the noninvolvement by some parents in their children's education. We truly have some parents (only a few) who appear not to care or want to be bothered by issues with their children. I never expected that reaction.

Jordan's mentor wrote in her final evaluation that Jordan not only "...utilized email and the telephone to keep in touch with parents and students. ... Additionally, when emailing a concerned parent did not resolve the parent's concerns, she telephoned the parent to further discuss the issue."

*Surprises about teaching colleagues.* Several teachers reported eye-opening experiences about colleagues. Pat expressed her dissatisfaction in her journal.

I have been striving to perform all my duties and obligations in the professional manner I am accustomed to. I thought that everyone was doing the same. Slowly, as I familiarize myself with the system more and more, I'm becoming aware that not everyone follows the prescribed administrative steps.

During seminars, teachers conveyed their displeasure in some colleagues who gossiped and in some school administrators who were ineffective. Teachers were also irritated by the seniority-based system of teachers' course load and the system of cart and classroom allocations. Two of the four teachers moved from classroom to classroom using a designated cart as their desk.

### **Changes Reported**

Teachers reported two major changes in themselves over time: (a) seeking a balance of work and personal lives, especially with peer support; and (b) interdependence/independence as developing teacher professionals.

*Seeking balance with peer support.* During seminars, there was frequent mention of self-health with worries about retaining the strength necessary to continue at a strenuous pace. The seminars were a venue for teachers to receive constructive feedback, encouragement in keeping a balance between home and school, and collegial mentorship about using time wisely, not getting bogged down in paper work, and working with challenging students and families. Teachers said they looked forward to talking with colleagues who understood daily dilemmas and frustrations and offered strategies to make teaching more manageable. Pat reports, "... a nice way to finish up the week and talk to friends wearing the same shoes." Robin adds, "It is always good to share ideas and experiences with someone in the same process."

While acknowledging that teaching is a difficult profession, teachers reported a "toughening of the skin" after being discouraged due to things like a student's unexpected poor attitude, a general lack of student motivation, or students 'getting out of hand.' Tyler explains a dilemma of balance he worked to resolve, "I want to

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keep things low-key and fun. However, some students want to take that as a license to talk and/or do things during class that distract them and their classmates from the task at hand.” Pat writes in her final self-evaluation, “After all your hard work, you see that some students have already given up...you need time to grow again as a person and not as a teacher.” Jordan writes in her final self-evaluation, “I’m not doing a good enough job of balancing my life overall. I spend too many hours at school, too little time at home. I’m not exercising enough... I’m following a schedule that flirts with burn-out.”

As the teachers moved through the school year, they each reported feeling disillusionment and a slowly growing resilience. They struggled to find a balance between their previously held concepts of teaching and the reality of schooling. Robin admits, “It often takes me days to find a better way to break a lesson into manageable parts that my students can master.” Teachers learned to modify their teaching and grading styles. Tyler is careful to “...make sure that I am not falling behind in my scheduled content. I have a calendar with benchmarks and I use this as a reference to how I am doing.” Pat states, “My expectations however, have changed drastically. I started with the premise that ‘everyone can learn because everyone is capable.’ Now it is ‘everyone can learn because everyone is capable, if they try.’” Jordan reports, “I may slow down my schedule to enable students to better meet their responsibilities.”

*Interdependence/Independence.* As the school year progressed, teachers became more independent. Although they still found themselves reaching out to others, they were learning to listen to advice from colleagues and mentors and then make their own decisions as they gained confidence from their successes. Robin expresses,

The weeks at school seem to be getting easier. I feel more confident in my lesson planning and classroom management. I am far from 100% proficient; just starting to see improvements on a regular basis. I had another couple of great lesson plans this week. All of the students were engaged, active and challenged.

#### **Setting and Fulfilling Professional Goals**

We examined for any commonalities across the teachers in their admission goals statements and if their initial goals and interests aligned with their reported teaching experiences. Two major professional goals were common across all teachers’ statements: (a) wanting a career change; and (b) making a difference in students’ learning.

*A career change.* Each teacher wrote that they wanted something more “fundamentally different and challenging.” In his previous career, Tyler often wondered, “what ‘good’ comes out of my efforts.” Teachers explained that something had sparked their change of career, such as an office reorganization, retirement, empty-nest scenario, or encouragement by a principal to become a certified teacher. Each had served as a volunteer working with adolescents in schools and in communities

and enjoyed those interactions helping them recognize that they wanted something to teach.

They were pleased and challenged with teaching by the end of year one. During the beginning seminars, teachers expressed vulnerability and altered self-concepts as professionals who had been successful in previous careers and now struggled as teachers. Nonetheless, Jordan writes, "I love this job, so I try to do whatever is needed to ensure that I excel in it and give as much as possible to my students." During one seminar Tyler shouted, "Careful what you wish for!" Similar to the findings reported by Williams (2007), in traditional programs, these teachers also showed a deep commitment to achieving their goal in becoming a teacher. And yet, they showed composure to deal with difficulties and as Jordan noted, "Whatever students, parents or colleagues might dish out to me, I've suffered worse and expect to survive and even thrive." Perhaps their first career and life experiences had contributed to that attitude and tenacity.

*Making a difference in students' learning.* Each teacher mentioned they wanted to become a teacher "...to contribute to the lives of others." This ideal is not uncommon to why many students, but not all, want to become teachers (Johnson, 2004). At the end of the year, Jordan exclaims "I cannot conceive a better use of my energies outside my family than to help spur other teenagers' passion for literature as a life-long source of joy, solace and knowledge, and to help them as they transition toward adulthood." Pat explains, "I feel happy and satisfied when I teach and I'm gratified to know that the children enjoy my classes." Each had received encouraging feedback from students and mentors. They recognized they had the ability to articulate difficult material in an understandable format. Robin states, "The very positive class reviews I received from students clearly reflect my enthusiasm and enjoyment in working with them." Tyler remarked, "I was particularly pleased when, while I was helping a student one-on-one, she told me that I was her favorite teacher."

Teachers expressed they were making a difference in students' learning. Jordan states, "Teachers seldom make headlines (unless we commit a grave error!), but we do make a difference with our students." ... "I used to wonder whether my work had any meaning. Now I know it does!" Tyler exclaimed at the end of his first year of teaching, "I've never worked so hard for so little and enjoyed it so much." Achieving professional goals as a teacher also impacted Robin's on a personal level.

One of the really, truly joyous things about my first marking period has been the realization that, in many ways, I feel like becoming a teacher has made me a better person. In everyday life, I find myself more patient and more accepting of other people's interests and foibles.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

The teachers in this study risked a career change to seek new professional fulfillments and after their first year of teaching, they reported satisfaction in that

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regard. Nonetheless, the difficulties and surprises they reported warrant our attention. There were issues of time, managing students, knowing students and families, and working in the politics of schools, all while seeking a personal balance in a very demanding professional life. After this study, we contemplated program changes to target the reported dilemmas while also considering what might be at the underbelly of these problems.

We frame our major recommendations informed through this study and the voices of teachers which support the importance of: (a) an integrated system of resource supports; (b) scaffolded mentorship; (c) situated learning experiences; (d) alternative new teacher network; (e) active coordination; and (f) university support.

#### ***An Integrated System of Resource Supports***

New teachers face numerous problems during their first years of teaching and find themselves in demanding school contexts with inadequate support (Johnson, 2004). Although some school divisions provide in-school mentor and induction support and work to connect beginning teachers with experienced ones, teachers need an integrated system of resource supports from the university and school. Placing a new teacher in a challenging classroom without a thorough induction plan and expecting them to perform like a seasoned teacher is rather like placing a newly licensed driver in a NASCAR race (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Common planning time allows for new teachers to collaborate with their mentors and with other teachers and requires additional resources. Teachers need to have the opportunity to become familiar with the time demands and realities of a school system (Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry & Hewson, 2003). We argue that an integrated system is also needed for teachers in alternative preparation programs.

#### ***Scaffolded Mentorship***

Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) state that "...a comprehensive program of education coursework and intensive mentoring have been found to produce more positive evaluations of candidate performance than models that forgo most of this coursework and supervised support." Carroll (2005) emphasizes the need for strong starts, mentors who understand the complexities of teaching and are recognized for their role in teachers' induction process. As Carroll (2005) notes, and we found in this study, mentors do not have to always be physically present but do nonetheless, need to be available through email and or by phone and be an approachable and consistent resource. Teachers in our program comfortably sought mentor support and suggestions to deal with the complexities of teaching. Teachers shared that knowing they had a "mentor lifeline" was very important although more frequent mentor classroom visits was also expressed.

Teachers worked with exceptional mentors who had a history of working with our program and understanding it and freely shared their concerns and ideas. It is

our recommendation that recruiting, collaborating, and compensating a cadre of qualified mentors is essential to program quality.

#### ***Situated Learning Experiences***

Meaning is acquired through social interaction in an authentic context (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Samaras & Gismondi, 1998). Mentors noted that in any teacher preparation program, teachers need situated learning experiences in schools before they became teachers. In a final university exit program report, the following recommendation was made.

The Career Switcher field component must include more hands-on teaching experiences aligned with their course work, e.g., tutoring, small group work, shadowing teachers, teaching, and collaboration with teachers' research projects and in a more systematic and graded manner.

This recommendation was a major initiative that later met with some initial success but needs further development. The Social Studies methods course professor required an in-school micro-teaching experience while other faculty considered ways to integrate field experiences in course assignments. The teachers and graduates from subsequent cohorts accepted the invitation to volunteer their classrooms for teachers' field experiences while encouraging them to interact with pupils. A Career Switcher alumna suggested that current Career Switchers apply to substitute in Career Switcher alumni classrooms, affording them the opportunity to discuss lessons beforehand and speak with a program completer. We contend that contextualized learning is critical to teachers' understandings of the realities of teaching, working and knowing students and schools.

#### ***Alternative New Teacher Network***

Although teaching involves intensive interaction with youngsters, beginning teachers often report a feeling of isolation or separation from their peers (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). High quality alternative teacher education programs include ongoing professional development at university seminars and an external network of alumni (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). Those program characteristics are also applicable to new teachers prepared through alternative programs. Interacting with a network of educators helps build a learning community in practice (Samaras, Freese, Kosnik, & Beck, 2008). As a developing learning community, teachers learned to be honest about their struggles and empathized with colleagues in a non-judgmental manner. When they presented their final self-evaluations, there was much to celebrate. We continued the celebration with our annual, end of the year event, the *Career Switcher Communitas*, with prospective and current students and invited alumni, teachers, mentors, staff, and faculty.



## *Examining Our Career Switcher Teachers*

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### **Active Coordination**

The Career Switcher coordinator kept constant contact with school districts, schools, and mentors, soliciting their advice and addressing concerns. Their input was invaluable. After this study, the coordinator and mentors developed a mentor evaluation. The coordinator sent a draft mentor evaluation developed from a collection of mentor evaluation components she had used in the past and mentors added components and sent edits. Collaboration with mentors and schools is vital to the mutual effort of preparing high quality teachers.

### **University Support**

The realities of funding and budgets require universities to pay attention to student enrollment encouraging many to promote alternative teacher education programs which generate new revenues. Nonetheless, it is our belief that the best investment in a program's success and its growth is an investment in supporting the quality of such programs, its teachers and mentors. Additionally, such programs need a coordinator and an administrative assistant who can devote the necessary time to work with teachers, faculty, mentors, and alumni in program development. Our university was quite supportive in that regard by reducing the coordinator's teaching load.

The voices of teachers in this study were valuable for our program and may be useful to similar alternative teacher education programs. The study adds to the knowledge base of the benefits and complexities of alternative teacher education programs. It is our hope that universities and programs seek and fund strong systems of support to encourage Career Switchers to not only switch to another career, but to also meet their professional goal of making a difference in student learning.

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