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A Phenomenological Study Exploring a Teacher's Pathway into Education

by

Amanda M. Abdelaal

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

Lehigh University

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2026

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Abstract

This phenomenological study was conducted to examine the ways in which early-career teachers are certified in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and to understand what they experience in their training programs, induction programs, and professional development. It is urgent that the state and nation consider the growing trend of alternative certification with the goal of improving early-career training that differentiates preparation across the varied pathways and supports teachers at all stages. The changes to certification and pathways to become a teacher have recently been intentionally incentivized; the experiences of newly hired, early career teachers in Pennsylvania must be recognized. Properly training teachers with appropriate certification creates positive outcomes for students. Examining this increasingly prevalent phenomenon of preparation and training for early career teachers should guide universities, the state, and teacher training programs (pre-service and professional development) in the best ways to support teacher retention, and potentially find ways to recruit qualified teachers for hard to fill positions. This study highlights the real-life experiences of educators coming from various pathways, both traditional and alternative pathways.

This study conducted thirty-one semi-structured interviews of early-career teachers across Pennsylvania. The teachers were identified as either traditionally trained or alternatively trained. The study was conducted at a moment in time when there have been many rapid changes in the state regarding certification and licensing of teachers. Pennsylvania has started to adopt new policies to retain and recruit teachers and allowed for alternative pathways to become certified. The study found that regardless of the teacher's training program, university experience, or alternative mode of certification, they shared many similar experiences once they obtained a job in the state. This study found that strong mentorship and a positive school culture

were most important in retaining teachers. Additionally, professional development and induction programs should be molded to fit the needs of the early-career teacher and must provide for any gaps in their education or training. Traditionally trained teachers perceived guidance from mentors and other colleagues to be valuable; additionally, teachers from a alternative pathway wanted to work closely with tenured teachers and gain additional time observing, shadowing, and collaborating with veteran teachers.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Teachers are arguably the most influential in-school factor that affect student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024; Nguyen & Springer, 2023). School districts are tasked with attracting and training high-quality teachers who use high-quality instructional practices to create better outcomes for students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Every teacher must obtain a teaching certificate within the state they teach, and certification often requires years of education, training, and the completion of teaching exams (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025; Goldhaber et al., 2020). As a result, there are various ways to obtain a teaching certificate (Greenberg et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2020). With growing enrollment and fewer teacher candidates in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, various pathways to becoming an educator have been necessary to meet the demands of the field (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025; Greenberg et al., 2011; Nguyen & Springer, 2023; Ronfeldt et al., 2020).

The traditional pathway to becoming a teacher includes an undergraduate or master's degree in education, a student teaching experience with a cooperating teacher, a formal induction program upon being hired, and the assignment of a mentor who is knowledgeable in their area of subject or certification (Ronfeldt et al., 2020). Unfortunately, due to the national teacher shortage, not all positions are filled with qualified teachers who have the correct certification for the job (Fuller, 2022; Nguyen & Springer, 2023; Tan et al., 2024). The pathways to becoming a teacher are quite varied, and over the past decade include a wide range of preparation programs and experiences (Matsko et al., 2022; Van den Borre et al., 2021; Yarrell, 2022).

There has been an extensive amount of research on teacher training programs, student teacher placement, and induction programs; however, the literature has failed to explain the

many experiences early-career teachers have had in the various pathways to certification in Pennsylvania. In addition, Pennsylvania has changed how certificates are earned in some hard to fill positions such as special education, science, mathematics, and other specialized degrees (Allee & Castner, 2025; Truwit et al., 2024). As these changes and new pathways emerge in the Commonwealth, it is essential to hear from those attending these certification programs. Policymakers, teacher educators, and school leaders have been concerned with the lack of people entering teacher training programs (both traditional and alternative) and are actively trying to create varied pathways to welcome new candidates to the field (Allee & Castner, 2025; Matsko et al., 2022; Truwit et al., 2024). In response to the teacher shortage, several pathways have been created. Researchers know little about how the diversification of the pathways and if it has affected the efficacy of early-career teachers, their experiences with or without a mentor, involvement in an induction program, and ultimately how it affects teacher retention or attrition.

Certification and Pathways

Since the 1980's there has been a need to offer alternative pathways to traditional teacher licensure (Matsko et al., 2022). Throughout the nation there is a teacher shortage, which has spurred national discussion and concern about the future of our children's public education (Matsko et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2024; Yarell, 2022). The need to fill positions as a result of retirement and attrition has led to changes in teacher educational pathways and the certification process (Nguyen & Springer, 2023). Newly adopted alternative paths that do not follow the typical university-based preparation program have expedited licensure for many candidates across many different states (Matsko et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2024). Specifically, in Pennsylvania, certification pathways are being incentivized with stipends for student teaching or paid residencies; in addition, the state is issuing more emergency certificates while candidates

complete their coursework more than ever before (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025; Fuller, 2022; Saenz-Armstrong, 2023; Tan et al., 2024). School districts are turning to the state and policymakers to help build a strong candidate pool of teachers who are properly trained and will remain in the teaching field. Teachers must receive appropriate training and professional development to adequately address the needs of our students (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Ronfeldt et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2014).

Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition has been a concern for many years, but the pandemic exacerbated these issues (Yarrell, 2022). Stress, teacher burnout, and poor working conditions all negatively impact teacher retention (Harbatkin et al., 2024). Teachers who feel unhappy in their job, unsupported by administration, or work in schools with few resources are more likely to leave the profession (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Van Den Borre et al., 2021). Research shows that school districts with a positive working environment tend to retain more teaching staff year over year and experience lower attrition rates (Harbatkin et al., 2024). Districts that hold professional development and train teachers to work best with the demographics of their school are more successful. (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al, 2019; Van Den Borre et al., 2021).

Teacher Preparation Programs

Regardless of the teacher training pathway (traditional or alternative), teachers must all earn certification in the state in which they teach. (Franco & Patrick, 2023; Sutcher et al., 2019). Pre-service teacher preparation, student teaching, and mentors are not always available or a part of the various pathways to teaching (Matsko et al., 2022). If an early career teacher has the opportunity to work with a cooperating teacher to oversee their student teaching, research shows it does create more positive outcomes for the early career teacher and the students they teach

(Boyd et al., 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Comparatively, if a new teacher has a positive and uplifting mentor teacher who supports them through their induction program, the teacher is more likely to remain in education and provide high quality instruction to their students (Clarke et al., 2014; Goldhaber et al., 2020; Ronfeldt et al., 2018). There has been extensive research about traditional pathways to teaching, and the importance of pre-service and early career preparation. However, there is a research gap in how teachers who have been trained in an alternative pathway experience early-career professional development and all the requirements of the job.

Background of the Study

Teachers have a shared experience that should inform educational policy and influence educational practice. This study examined the phenomenon of new teachers who have recently completed their teaching licensure and training programs and are newly hired. I used a qualitative phenomenological approach to help leaders and policy makers orient their thinking to the lived professional experiences of early career teachers, who are unfortunately those most likely to leave their jobs. The various pathways that exist in Pennsylvania are important to understand in order to prepare teachers more efficiently. Acknowledging the different pathways to teacher certification is imperative and it should determine how early career teachers are trained, mentored, and developed to prevent teacher burnout and attrition. Teacher voices matter and they should not just be a part of a larger quantitative accounting of these trends.

Problem Statement

Teachers are most likely to leave the field of education within the first five years (Sutcher et al., 2019). Teachers claim mental health, burnout, and lack of support as the main reasons they leave the classroom (Sutcher et al., 2019; Yarrell, 2022). If people are not willing to become teachers, and the positions remain vacant, students will suffer and have adverse outcomes

because they lacked a certified teacher who could provide a quality education (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019; Van den Borre et al., 2021). The teacher shortage is a national crisis, which is being addressed at the state level with various incentives and different pathways to becoming a certified teacher (Nguyen et al., 2024). In Pennsylvania (PA), the teacher shortage persists due to a decline in the number of candidates entering teacher certification programs (Nguyen et al., 2024; Nguyen & Springer, 2023; Tan et al., 2022). Pennsylvania experienced a significant decline of enrollment of teaching candidates into traditional certification programs in 2015, which led to a major shortage over the past decade (Fuller, 2022). As a result, alternative pathways were created and implemented to quickly attract and retain quality educators in the classroom. There is a gap in the literature that explores what a teacher experiences in their training, preparation, and early years of teaching. Exploring this gap, this study aims to respond to the teacher shortage and gain a better understanding of teacher attrition in Pennsylvania.

Purpose of the Study

It is urgent that the state and nation consider the growing trend of alternative certification with the goal of improving early-career training that differentiates preparation across the varied pathways and supports teachers at all stages. The changes to certification and pathways to become a teacher have recently been intentionally incentivized; the experiences of newly hired, early career teachers in Pennsylvania must be understood. I conducted this phenomenological study to interview teachers about their varied experiences in their pre-service and early career training, preparation, and professional development as an early-career teacher.

Research Questions

How do teacher education programs and school districts prepare early-career educators who experience varied traditional or alternative pathways to becoming a teacher?

1. How do early-career teachers perceive the impact of their school district's induction program? Do perceptions of induction programs and professional development of new teachers vary across educators from different preparation pathways?
2. What experiences do early-career educators perceive promote or discourage their retention?
3. Why do early-career teachers remain in the teaching profession?

Significance of the Study

This study has significant implications for policymakers, school district stakeholders, teachers, and most importantly students in Pennsylvania. Properly training teachers who are certified in the subject creates more positive outcomes for students. Examining this increasingly prevalent phenomenon of preparation and training for early career teachers can help to guide universities, the state, and teacher training programs (pre-service and professional development) in the best ways to support teacher retention, and possibly find ways to recruit qualified teachers for hard to fill positions. The study highlights the real-life experiences of educators coming from the various pathways offered in Pennsylvania, and it illuminates teachers' perspectives. The teacher's voice has not been heard in the discussion surrounding early career teachers training and their various pathways to becoming an employed teacher in Pennsylvania. The qualitative analysis explains what teachers experience and how those experiences affect their likelihood of retention and success. This study was conducted at a moment in time when there were many rapid changes in the state regarding certification and licensing of teachers, and Pennsylvania has

started to adopt new policies to retain and recruit teachers. The study highlights the first early career teachers that received some incentives and experienced newly adopted paths to become a teacher.

Preview of the Findings

This study found that early-career teachers, regardless of pathway, felt that the most important aspect of their training and professional development was having a strong, positive mentor to assist them throughout their first few years. The pathway to certification did affect what training, induction, and professional development programs were productive and supported their retention in the classroom. Traditionally trained teachers felt that they would like continued support in their classroom with clear guidelines and expectations. Early-career teachers who experienced an alternative pathway appreciated all types of professional development in addition to their induction program. They felt that time with seasoned teachers to collaborate with, shadow, or observe was most productive for them because they did not always have a cooperating teacher or mentor during their training program. All the participants said that they were motivated to teach and remain in their classroom because of their students and the relationships they built within the school community and with their colleagues.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been a steep decline in the number of teachers in the field of education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023). In response to a teacher shortage and many hard to fill areas of certification, varied pathways to becoming a teacher have been created (Sutcher et al., 2019). The growth of alternative certification programs and training opportunities has become more commonplace over the last two decades (Hedrick-Shaw, 2024). In Pennsylvania, the teacher shortage has become a serious concern for school districts, policy makers, and communities (Franco & Patrick, 2023). As a solution, Pennsylvania has implemented various programs and offered incentives to encourage individuals to pursue education (Allee & Castner, 2025; Truwit et al., 2024). Grow-your-own programs have started to emerge and offer potential teacher candidates experiences to observe, take classes, and provide an alternative pathway for prospective candidates to become a certified educator (Allee & Castner, 2025). School districts and universities have created stronger partnerships to build grow-your-own opportunities for students, discuss the changing needs of school districts, and work closely with the Intermediate Units in each county to meet the unique demands of the many schools (Yarrell, 2022).

Teacher training programs and certification programs had to respond to the teacher shortage across the country (Franco & Patrick, 2023; Sutcher et al., 2019). There are many pathways and programs to train candidates to become teachers; those pathways are varied to meet the needs of the field (Matsko et al., 2022). This study aims to showcase the various pathways to becoming a teacher and to discover early career teachers' perspectives about how their pathway to teaching supports or does not support them remaining in the education field. There is a gap in the research surrounding teacher voice and their perspective on how one

becomes a teacher, the varied pathway experienced, and how professional development and training of a new teacher helps or hurts teacher retention.

To better understand this phenomenon, this study will identify the pathways as either traditional or alternative. A *traditional certification* pathway is identified as a person attaining their bachelor's degree in education, with a student teaching experience monitored by a certified educator and a university advisor. Once the candidate is hired in a role with the correct certification, the teacher has a formal mentor and is enrolled in a formal induction program. An *alternative pathway* is whenever a candidate is hired into a position with an emergency certificate, alternative certification, and/or teacher training program. They may not have had a formal student teaching experience or pre-service field work experience, a formal induction program, or a formal mentor.

Traditional Certification Pathway

The field of education depends upon quality teacher training programs and effective pre-service experiences such as student teaching and practical field training. As the largest college-educated profession (Goldhaber et al., 2020), educator preparedness and the apprenticeships they experience need to be high-quality and meaningful (Greenberg et al., 2011). In addition to coursework at a college or university, educators participate in a student teaching or fieldwork experience to complete their initial certification (Ronfeldt et al., 2020). Teacher training and success are linked to student success, which implies that quality teacher training programs leads to better student outcomes (Goldhaber et al., 2020). Studies have shown that the student teaching experience is thought to be one of the most important pieces of teacher training programs (Cuenca et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2020).

The student teaching experience has an impact on a teacher's career and may affect the efficacy of the teacher. Pre-service student teaching placement impacts a teacher's preparedness and willingness to enter the classroom and continue in the field (Ronfeldt et al., 2014). Darling-Hammond et al., (2002) found that teachers felt better prepared to enter the classroom if they attended a traditional teacher education program rather than an alternative or emergency teacher certification program. Engaging in a year-long student teaching experience may also help teachers feel effective and remain in teaching longer (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Teacher training programs have been made more rigorous and have instituted longer field placement assignments in response to positive outcomes for other nations' teacher preparation processes (Ronfeldt et al., 2014). Some schools partner with universities to provide professional development, offering high-quality training that the district may not be able to offer (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Strong connections between specific teacher training programs or universities and specific school districts imply that more affluent districts will partner with colleges and universities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). Designed partnerships may result in fewer pre-service student teaching placements in disadvantaged areas (Goldhaber, 2019). Goldhaber (2019) states that the location and school in which teacher candidates were placed for student teaching are predictive of their first job placement, which indicates that teacher candidates may not enter disadvantaged schools if they did not student teach in them.

Cooperating Teachers

Cooperating teachers with high evaluation ratings positively affect the pre-service teacher's ability in the classroom; with the right guidance pre-service teachers earn higher evaluation ratings (Bastian et al., 2020). Student teachers who learned from high-quality cooperating teachers and were given the ability to make instructional decisions showed stronger

teacher efficacy (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Using a mixed-methods, value-added analysis Boyd et al., (2009) surveyed teachers and looked at student achievement and found that they were better prepared for their first year in the classroom if their preparation program assigns meaningful assignments that resemble the workload of a classroom. If learning to teach in an underserved school, student teachers report no effect on their preparedness, efficacy, or future if they have a collaborative and supportive cooperating teacher to guide them (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Once teachers are hired, induction programs, mentors, and collaboration with other teachers help raise retention rates and lower teacher migration (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Preservice teacher preparation is affected by the quality of their mentor or cooperating teacher (Clarke et al., 2014). A cooperating teacher is identified as the teacher of record who agrees to have a pre-service teacher learn to teach with them for either an eight- or sixteen-week placement (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025). When a first-year teacher has an effective cooperating teacher during student teaching, studies show they are just as effective as a third-year teacher who learned from an average cooperating teacher (Goldhaber et al., 2020). Policymakers and educational leaders have found that instituting minimum requirements for cooperating teachers, who influence preservice teachers, increases the quality of preservice teachers (Ronfeldt et al., 2018).

Preservice teachers report feeling more prepared with effective cooperating teachers, saw positive outcomes in evaluations, were more instructionally effective, and worked in more successful schools (Ronfeldt et al., 2018). Cooperating teachers serve as models of teaching techniques and mentors for student teachers as they learn to teach. The student teacher is supervised by the university-based field instructor and the mentor or cooperating teacher. Feedback and collaboration from both supervisors lead to a better student teacher experience

(Goldhaber et al., 2022). Teacher preparation program leaders find it difficult to locate and recruit effective teachers to serve as cooperating teachers due to lack of knowledge about who the effective teachers are in the schools, school district administration hesitation to allow novice pre-service teachers to affect student outcomes, or because of teacher exhaustion (Ronfeldt et al., 2020). Teacher education programs often fail to recruit or seek out the best teachers to serve as cooperating teachers or mentors due to the additional responsibilities of mentoring early career teachers or training of pre-service teachers (Clarke et al., 2014).

Mentors

Mentor teachers are assigned to a newly hired teacher who is also enrolled in an induction program provided by the school district (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025). Most times, a mentor teacher has achieved tenure and shown exemplary teaching abilities in their subject area or certification area (Ronfeldt et al., 2018). The mentor is assigned to a new teacher for the first year and is usually paid a stipend. Throughout the induction year, the mentor teacher takes time throughout their day to help answer questions, model instruction, and help the new teacher navigate their first year of teaching.

The induction program is required by the state for the new teacher to achieve tenure. Recently, Pennsylvania has changed the requirements of the teacher induction program by extending the length of mentorship to two years rather than one (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025). At the end of the two years, the mentor teacher must sign a district document that states what they have done to help train the new teacher; although this document does look different for each district, the state does require some sort of accountability at the district level (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025).

Alternative Certification Pathway

There are many pathways to become a teacher. Matsko et al., (2022) references that there are multiple different pathways to prepare teachers that have emerged over the last 50 years, which has sped up the ability to obtain teacher licensure through an immersive residency model or a full-year classroom apprenticeship. The certification pathways are rapidly changing and morphing due to the ever-expanding teacher shortages across the United States (Matsko et al., 2022). More specifically, in Pennsylvania, teacher shortages have prompted policy change to incentivize teacher training programs. Offering stipends for student teaching, fast track training programs or residencies, and allowing for more emergency certificates than ever before, Pennsylvania is attempting to create a grow-your-own program across the state by linking Universities and local school districts (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025).

Typically, alternative pathways to teaching include on the job training with expedited course loads and residencies (Matsko et al., 2022). Rather than student teaching prior to being hired by a school, there are programs that have teacher candidates serve as the teacher of record while earning their credentials and education degrees (Allee & Castner, 2025). Creating new pathways to education is imperative to ensure quality people are hired for open positions; alternative pathways are often a way to recruit outsiders into the field and quickly train them.

Although the requirements are ultimately the same for teachers to become certified, alternative certification may include a Master of Education rather than an undergraduate training program, it may include an emergency certification until the person completes the required tests and/or coursework, a field work experience (student teaching) may not have occurred, and the teacher may not have had a mentor. In some cases, teachers also may not have undergone a formal induction program in their first few years (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025;

Matsko et al., 2022). For Career and Technical teachers in Pennsylvania, typically the technical school will hire the candidate and then allow for the person to complete a program of study through a university while they are educating students (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025).

Teacher residencies are another type of preparation. Becoming more popular over the past two decades, teacher residencies are meant to prepare teachers in often hard-to-staff districts or in specific subjects that are more specialized (Truwit et al., 2024). Many times, teacher residencies are a yearlong fieldwork experience in one classroom, for which they later become the teacher of record (Truwit et al., 2024). Residencies serve as a bridge between traditional and alternative pathways to teaching, providing districts with a stable option for filling vacancies while promoting partnerships with universities (Matsko et al., 2022).

Policy

In response to the national teacher shortage, school district administration and policy makers must take quick action to solve the teacher shortage crisis (Van den Borre et al., 2021; Yarrell, 2022). Following the Great Recession, public education lost almost $600 billion in funding due to cuts in state education budgets (Yarrell, 2022). Based upon the U.S. Department of Education's reports, Yarrell (2022) found that in 2015 school districts were spending less per pupil than they previously did in 2008. In another study, Sutcher et al., (2019) analyzed the National Databases and the teacher workforce reports and advised that solving the teaching shortages will require a comprehensive strategy at the federal, state, and local levels focused on increasing the number of well-qualified, prepared entrants to fill the vacant positions created by teacher attrition (Sutcher et al., 2019). The policies must also ensure students receive a quality education while there is a limited applicant pool (Sutcher et al., 2019). Van den Borre et al. (2021) found that early career teachers must be a priority; the field of education must influence

policymakers and school districts to make teaching an economically attractive profession. Those who are motivated to teach should be compensated appropriately and ultimately help to re-invigorate others to join the profession (Van den Borre et al., 2021).

Teacher Retention

Teacher retention and attrition are a national concern. "During the 2020-2021 academic year, the U.S. Department of Education reported teacher shortages in nearly every state, and within key subject areas, nationwide" (Yarrell, 2022, p. 230). Poor working conditions, a lower salary when compared to other fields, and the demands placed upon potential educators create and fuel the shortage (Sutcher et al., 2019; Yarrell, 2022). A teacher's decision to stay in the field is important for student outcomes and district stability (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019; Van Den Borre et al., 2021). Higher levels of teacher turnover tend to persist in the lowest-performing, high-poverty school settings (Harbatkin et al., 2024). School districts' commitment to support and train their teachers is a key to teacher retention; moreover, the working conditions are important factors in a teacher's decision to stay or leave the district or profession (Harbatkin et al., 2024).

A positive school environment, effective school leadership, and staff agreement are all associated with teacher retention (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019). There is a body of evidence that shows teacher attrition is higher when teachers are not well prepared for teaching. Teachers who receive little to no pedological training are two to three times more likely to leave education within the first two years (Sutcher et al., 2019). Teachers who have left the field have reported that unhappiness with teaching accounts for about two-thirds of all attrition (Sutcher et al., 2019). Those who are happy in the profession report that the school promotes mutual respect, collaboration, and is highly supportive of new educators (Van Den Borre et al., 2021). School

leaders and teachers' perception of leadership style play an important role in retention or attrition; those who feel supported and receive clear communication are less likely to leave the profession (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Van Den Borre et al., 2021). School districts should set retention intentions and provide professional development opportunities to increase teacher resilience, self-efficacy, and reduce teacher burn out (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Van Den Borre et al., 2021).

Pennsylvania Teacher Crisis

High-quality teachers are crucial for achieving positive student outcomes. Several reports have focused on the need for quality teachers and the national teacher shortage. Teacher shortages negatively affect student outcomes because the positions are either left unfilled or underqualified candidates take the position (Nguyen et al., 2023).

> Policymakers have spent a considerable amount of time working to recruit and keep qualified teachers in the classroom. In the United States, teacher quality is a rare point of bipartisan consensus in American education, with both No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizing the importance of hiring and retaining high-quality teachers in every classroom (Nguyen & Springer, 2023, p. 993).

Nguyen et al., (2024) estimate there are approximately 49,000 vacancies and 400,000 underqualified teachers in the classroom, while there continues to be a decline in teacher preparation programs and an alarming increase in teachers leaving the field in the last two years.

As of the 2020-2021 school year, Pennsylvania had approximately 13,337 teachers who were not fully certified for their teaching assignment (Franco & Patrick, 2023). Reported by The Pennsylvania Department of Education, in the 2023-2024 school year there were 865 unfilled teacher positions (Tan et al., 2024). The same report also found that 17,003 teachers were not fully certified the subject or grade in which they were assigned, and of those teachers 2,499 were

teaching with an emergency certification (Tan et al., 2024). Fuller's (2022) study found that in Pennsylvania, the number of teacher certifications decreased drastically from 19,000 initial teacher certifications in 2012-13 to only 5,101 in the 2021-22 school year. As a result of these shortages, the number of emergency certifications has as gone up, but not enough to fill all vacancies. Over the last ten years, there has been a 25% decrease in enrollment of teacher training preparation programs, with only 70% of programs being enrolled in, as compared to ten years earlier (Saenz-Armstrong, 2023).

If Pennsylvania wants to see all positions filled with quality educators, there must be a sustained increase in educator certification in the next three to five years (Fuller, 2022). Research shows that students suffer academically and have lower test scores when taught by teachers who hold emergency certification permits (Fuller, 2022). As a result of the alternative teacher training programs, there has been some recovery regarding the teacher shortage (Saenz-Armstrong, 2023). Saenz-Armstrong's (2023) study found that there has been a 20% increase in alternative teacher training programs in the past six years, but only a 4% increase in traditional teacher training programs over the same years. The increase in alternative pathways has helped the situation across the country, but specifically in Pennsylvania it may be the only way to fill hard to find positions such as STEM, mathematics, and special education (Fuller, 2022; Tan et al., 2024).

Teacher preparation programs must respond to the changes in how teachers are being certified; policymakers and school districts must work closely to provide incentives to new educators, identify teacher needs, and create positive working conditions to retain quality educators (Franco & Patrick, 2023; Fuller, 2022; Tan et al., 2024). The gap in the literature fails

to understand how early-career teachers experience their various pathways to becoming a certified teacher, their professional development, and the first years of their career.

Research Focus/Contribution

Every educator working in a public school must be certified by the state in which they are teaching. Each educator's experience and training are varied, but all have attended some type of training program to certify in an area of expertise. There is a gap in the literature that provides teachers' voice in describing and informing about their pathway to gain training experiences. Teacher retention is a national concern, teachers' voice and their experiences will inform the field and others outside of education. Specifically, in Pennsylvania, there were approximately 900 teaching positions unfilled in the 2023-2024 school year (Tan et al., 2024).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires high-quality teachers, and the more recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has placed greater emphasis on how teachers are evaluated. Research about teacher quality has produced evidence about how teacher quality affects student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). "Little empirical work has been done to determine the degree to which intended differences in nontraditional pathways are being actualized in candidates' preparation experiences" (Matsko et al., 2022, p. 226). Teachers' training and their experiences in different educational programs lead them to feel differently about their preparation.

There is a wide range of variety across the programs and pathways into teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Traditional teaching programs and their length of time for a teacher to be trained cannot meet the demands of growing population (Isaacs et al., 2007). Alternative certification programs help to provide teachers in hard to staff areas and may produce better qualified teachers in certain areas such as STEM fields and world languages (Isaacs et al.,

2007). Program exemplars which produce highly effective teachers must be the model to showcase how to effectively train and prepare teachers in all certification areas. There must be improvement to training and certification programs to keep up with the growing need for quality teachers in public schools (McBrayer & Melton, 2018). To best support students, teachers trained in nontraditional pathways should practice under veteran and/or highly effective teachers' supervision and mentorship (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). One of the most important factors to improve teaching is a volunteer mentor willing to work cooperatively with a new teacher (Eken, & Gündogdu, 2017).

The traditional path (bachelor's degree in education, student teaching, induction program, and dedicated mentor) and the alternative path (alternative certification or teacher training program, no student teaching or paid field work, induction program with or without a mentor) can both produce high quality teachers. Teachers trained in different programs all indicated that they valued and felt their relationships and partnerships with fellow educators in the field to be important and influential (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). When examining alternative versus traditional certification, an important factor is in the field experience or student teaching practicum. Although the field experience may not be extensive, the reflection and questions linked to educational theory and their experience are imperative to develop high quality teachers and must be trained under quality veteran teachers (Uriegas et al., 2014).

Chapter 3: Methods

Research Focus

To better understand how to prepare teachers effectively, this study aims to highlight teacher experiences and identify what is perceived as helpful or the struggles they endured in the state of Pennsylvania. Every teacher's experience is important to policy makers, school districts, and the community to ensure that teachers are supported and have helpful guidance in their pathway to retain teachers and reduce attrition. Due to lower enrollment in teacher training programs over the last ten years, Pennsylvania has started various alternative teacher training programs to incentivize teaching (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025). Researchers know little about the diversified pathways and how early-career teacher efficacy is affected by the varied pathways, training, and supports. Guided by this gap, this phenomenological study asked the following research questions:

Research Questions

How do teacher education programs and school districts prepare early-career educators who experience varied traditional or alternative pathways to becoming a teacher?

1. How do early-career teachers perceive the impact of their school district's induction program? Do perceptions of induction programs and professional development of new teachers vary across educators from different preparation pathways?
2. What experiences do early-career educators perceive promote or discourage their retention?
3. Why do early-career teachers remain in the teaching profession?

Methods

This phenomenological study is designed to learn about early-career teacher's experiences in their varied pathways to becoming an educator. A phenomenological study aims to "describe the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept…reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Educators' varied experiences and pathways into education and their perceptions of their training and certification pathway are important to understand to inform policymakers, school districts, universities, and the community.

Context and Participants

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews (approximately 45 minutes in length) with 31 participants with varied backgrounds and experiences (traditional vs. alternative) with member checking for clarification. I was able to recruit early-career teachers (those within the first three years of teaching) who work in school districts in Pennsylvania. I used an inclusion criterion (Appendix A) that was sent out to any willing participants prior to interviews that asked how they were educated and certified in Pennsylvania, what type of pre-service training they received, their participation in an induction program, and if they were assigned a mentor. I used the inclusion criterion as a screening tool to ensure there are multiple and varied voices from different educators who have entered the classroom with different pre-service and training experiences. During the interviews, I used a protocol (Appendix B) to guide the interviews which helped me to understand the teacher's experience in the classroom, their varied preparation programs and training, and how their training is perceived. The study was designed to hear how the varied backgrounds ultimately prepares or does not prepare teachers for their career and if it helps them to feel joy and/or pride in their work. This may inform the industry, policy makers,

universities, and the public and help to shape what should change or remain the same in the teacher training programs and state requirements to obtain a Level II certificate, which lasts for 99 years (DOJ, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024).

Figure 1

Traditional Participant Matrix

Participant	Traditional	Student Teaching	Cooperating Teacher	University Supervisor	Mentor	Certification	Other
#2	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	Elem/LS	Stipend
#3	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 Science	Masters
#4	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	PK-4 Elem	No Stipend
#5	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	Pk-4	Stipend
#7	T	✓	✓	✓		7-12 SS	2nd Career
#8	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	Spec. Ed	Yearlong Student Teaching
#9	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 Math	Stipend
#12	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 English	Yearlong residency
#16	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 Math	Stipend
#18	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	k-12 spec. ed	Stipend
#20	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 English	No Stipend
#21	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 Science	Out of State Program
#23	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 SS	M. Ed Out of State
#26	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 English	Out of State Training
#27	T	✓	✓	✓	✓	PK4/ Spec.Ed	No Stipend

Figure 2

Alternative Participant Matrix

Participant	Alternative	Student Teaching	Cooperating Teacher	University Supervisor	Mentor	Certification	Other
#1	A			✓	✓	Spec. Ed	I.U. Cert
#6	A	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 English	M. Ed Accelerated
#10	A				✓	7-12 Spanish	Intern Certificate
#11	A	✓	✓	✓	✓	4-8 Math	M. Ed Accelerated
#13	A					Spec. Ed	Intern Certificate
#14	A	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 SS	M. Ed
#15	A			✓	✓	7-12 Math	M. Ed Accelerated
#17	A	✓		✓	✓	Business	Emergency Certification
#19	A	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 Science	Residency M. Ed Accelerated
#22	A	✓	✓	✓	✓	7-12 Math	Residency
#24	A	✓	✓	✓	✓	Elementary	M. Ed Accelerated 2nd Career
#25	A	✓		✓	✓	K-4 Elementary	Intern Certificate
#28	A					Physics	Emergency & Intern Certificate
#29	A				✓	Pk-12 Business	Intern Certificate
#30	A	✓	✓	✓	✓	Pk-4	Emergency Certificate
#31	A			✓		7-12 Biology	Emergency Certificate

Data Sources

The study was conducted to better understand how teacher preparation programs inform school districts, teacher training programs, and the education field. This research is intended to give teachers a voice and represent teachers experience in Pennsylvania who have less than four years of experience teaching. Capturing a teacher's experience in years one-three is important because teachers do not obtain their tenure until they have completed at least three successful years of teaching or six satisfactory observations along with an induction program and 15 credits of post baccalaureate coursework (Department of Education, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024). An early-career teacher (years 1-3) should undergo two years of an induction program (DOJ, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024).

This phenomenological study includes 31 early career teachers who participated in semi-structured interviews with a protocol. I contacted each Intermediate Unit (I.U.) director, there are 28 in total, that cover the entire state of Pennsylvania to ask them to introduce me to early-career teachers, explaining that I hope to understand teacher experience in the varied pathways into teaching. Due to minimal feedback, I contacted each Superintendent of every school district in Pennsylvania and asked them to send my study to their early career teachers. The Superintendents responded to my email, and many did send out the study information. I used the inclusion criterion to identify the region of the state I was able to secure participants within including their varied experiences and training backgrounds to become a certified teacher in Pennsylvania. The inclusion criterion (survey of how teachers became certified to teach in Pennsylvania, experience in education, mentor status, and induction status) was reviewed prior to selection and/or interview. The inclusion survey (see Appendix A) guided me and helped

illuminate the participants that varied by subject area, grade level, and school district in addition to their varied pathway to certification.

I gathered a wide range of experiences and paths to becoming an educator to ensure the study has varied voices to inform about the teaching profession. There were 57 willing early-career teachers who completed the inclusion criterion. As the willing participants completed the inclusion criterion, I used a purposive sampling approach to select the participants. I selected 31 teachers based upon their varied backgrounds, region of the state, and grade level/subject area. Once I selected the participants, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a protocol that were approximately 45 minutes in length. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. The interview protocol did account for each participant's varied background and how and why they became a certified teacher in Pennsylvania. The interview asked the participant about their experience and perceptions of their traditional or alternative pathway into education.

Data Analysis

From the interviews, I learned about the participants' experiences and their perceptions of their pathway into education. I used multiple analytic approaches as I read the interviews and employed several exploratory techniques to keep accounts of the data. I kept an accountability log to track the participant's background, pathway, region, subject matter, and grade taught (Miles, et al., 2020). The transcribed interviews were read, and I annotated perceptions and experiences surrounding their pathway into education. I used a summary-aided approach to organize the annotations and ultimately create codes. I analyzed the data and used two cycle hybrid coding approach. In the first cycle inductive coding I identified significant statements through descriptive coding and developed textural and structural description of what early-career teachers experience. The second cycle deductive coding, I used thematic coding to find emerging

themes. While I conducted interviews and analyzed the data, I used memos to suspend my own beliefs and experiences as my approach to bracketing. Following each interview, I wrote a memo to ensure my own background did not get involved in the early career teacher's experiences. I completed 45 memos while conducting interviews, data analysis, and prior to writing my findings. Specifically, I wrote a memo following each interview to suspend my own experiences and to focus on the participant's lived experience. I wrote memos while comparing the traditional and alternative pathways to identify themes and to ensure that my own understanding of education as not included into the findings.

A hybrid inductive-deductive, descriptive coding was used to analyze the data (Saldana, 2021). The hybrid approach to coding was based upon the participants individual interview and what they experienced in their pathway to education. I created a contrast table to keep overarching themes and experiences from each interview which included their pathway and feelings about their training and first years. In my findings, I use rich description and relay the teacher's responses and looked for meaning in their experiences shared as a classroom teacher (Kaur, Kabilan, & Ismail, 2021). I used a phenomenological approach to capture how teachers viewed their training and experiences related to their career (Clark & Boyer, 2015). I was able to probe into the teacher's experiences and perceptions of their certification, induction programs, and their training as an early-career teacher.

Trustworthiness

In this study, I conducted 31 interviews which were audio recorded and have detailed transcription with teachers who had various experiences within their training and preparation to become educators (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). The study embeds trustworthiness through careful transcription of each interview to produce rich detail. All of the evidence, both positive and

negative are included in the findings to help show the true experiences of educators. The study includes 31 early-career teachers; 16 teachers had a traditional pathway and 15 had an alternative pathway. Their experiences and perceptions of their traditional or alternative certification are presented in the findings (Cresswell & Miller, 2000). Any discrepant evidence within the different pathways or between the pathways, are noted and reported in the findings. I used memos to as my approach to bracketing and separate memos to analyze the interview transcription; I completed 45 memos in total (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I have engaged in sessions of peer debriefing to review the qualitative data with my university committee members. The participants' experiences and perceptions of their training, certification, and experiences as an early-career teacher will be described in rich detail in the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Positionality

As a teacher and educator for the last 20 years, I must recognize my own experience and make sure to acknowledge my own path to becoming a teacher is not the only path or considered preferable in any way. I graduated from high school and immediately went to an undergraduate program and selected Education as my major. I attended the University for four years and within those four years, participated in field study work for the prescribed 90 hours and then enrolled in two eight-week student teaching experiences. I was afforded a mentor teacher in a Pennsylvania public school at each placement, and I had a university advisor who checked in on my progress bi-weekly. After passing my state licensure exams and successfully completing two student teaching placements in my final semester, I graduated from my university.

After graduation, I was certified in Pennsylvania to be a grade 7-12 English teacher. I obtained my first job only three months after graduation; I was hired by an affluent suburban middle school and was a long-term substitute with a contract. I had a mentor and went through

the school district's induction program during that placement. My second job was at a Career & Technical school. I attended their teacher induction program but was not provided with a mentor teacher during my first years of teaching there. I obtained my Level II certification and completed the six satisfactory observations within the required five-year timeline (DOJ, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024), I was then board and state approved as a tenured teacher within Pennsylvania.

My path to becoming a teacher and obtaining tenure, which ultimately helped me to stay in the field of education, is seen by many as "traditional." I confess I felt prepared to teach and appreciated my experiences to become an educator.

Throughout my career I have met many educators that have followed a more "traditional path" like I did but have met many highly successful teachers who have followed a more "alternative path." My study has highlighted how much I appreciate the varied backgrounds of teachers, and especially see the importance of highlighting all paths to becoming a teacher. It is important for teachers from all backgrounds with varied experiences to voice their own path to becoming an educator and to better understand the staggering teacher shortage in Pennsylvania and the United States. I hope that regardless of how a person becomes a teacher, they feel valued and supported to stay in the field of education. Capturing teacher experiences, voices, and viewpoints about their training and preparation programs is imperative to inform the stakeholders and the public to build a larger pool of educators.

As an Assistant Principal, I can see every day that there is a teacher shortage. My building of 1400 students is missing between 1-10 educators almost every day. Teacher retention and the teacher pipeline is diminishing; I hoped this study would collect all viewpoints and give a voice as to why teachers either want to stay in education or leave the teaching profession. I

used memos to recognize and understand my own positionality and acknowledge that any path to becoming an educator is important to me, especially in the role I am in today. I have conducted many interviews and supervise over 100 teachers each day; I can attest to how teachers from various backgrounds all bring different strengths and experiences to the classroom and school environment. I hoped to capture this phenomenon through my study.

Additional Limitations

Time is another limitation that I must think about because I hoped to capture the teacher's viewpoint at a critical time in education. Pennsylvania is allowing for new alternative pathways to obtain a teaching certificate each year. The state has just started providing payment or scholarship for student teachers if they apply for the reward (DOJ, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2024). I captured this new stipend with participants that experience this reward but may have missed some teachers who received different scholarships or residencies. This is just one example of how teacher training and development is shifting currently, the future can only be predicted so the study could not fully account for the different changes that may occur.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This study's findings show how early-career teachers experienced their pathways into education in Pennsylvania. The perceptions and experiences of becoming certified, being hired by a Pennsylvania school district, and receiving training as an early-career teacher vary depending on the pathway individuals used to enter the teaching profession. The participants who were traditionally trained had a clear pathway and understood the steps to obtaining certification in Pennsylvania. Alternative pathway teachers faced more barriers on the journey to certification and had to manage more responsibilities in their first years, in addition to gaining permanent certification. As a result of the non-traditional training, alternative pathway teachers were interested in and appreciated their induction programs and the professional development time to collaborate with other educators. Traditionally trained early-career teachers, however, found less value in their induction program and professional development than alternatively trained teachers. Regardless of the pathway, time spent collaborating with colleagues, departments, and grade levels was deemed most valuable in preparing early-career teachers for their daily classroom duties. All the participants in this study shared that a mentor was the most valuable resource in their first year(s). Positive relationships with their colleagues and the joys of teaching children are the new teachers' biggest motivators to remain in the classroom and work through any challenges that arise.

I organized the findings by certification pathway: traditionally trained early-career teachers and alternative pathway early-career teachers. The findings are chronological, meaning that a new teacher's experience includes pre-service training, student teaching, cooperating teachers, and possible stipends before their early-career experiences, the induction program, and

professional development. The chapter itself is a pathway that illustrates the many experiences of new teachers in their first three years and ends with the teacher's experiences and challenges, which ultimately determine if the educator will remain teaching in schools. The final section discusses retention and what the participants deemed to be their reasons for being retained.

Pathways to Certification in Pennsylvania (RQ1)

The pathways to becoming certified in Pennsylvania are varied, and each participant's experience is unique in how they became certified to teach. An early-career teacher's pathway is deemed traditional if they have attended a university to earn their education degree and had a university supervisor, had a cooperating teacher for student teaching, prior to being hired by a school district; after graduation, they were hired by a school district with a mentor and included in an induction program.

The alternative pathway in Pennsylvania is varied and may not include any of the traditional aspects; rather, the participants in this study are working with an intern certification, emergency certification, and, in many cases, are completing their coursework through an accelerated program while in their first three years of teaching. While the alternatively trained teachers may have had student-teaching experience, eight of the fifteen in this pathway completed their student teaching during their first year(s) on the job, not prior to being hired, unlike traditionally trained participants.

Traditional Pathway

Early-career teachers who completed a four-year undergraduate degree or a master's degree to become certified after their bachelor's degree follow a traditional pathway into education. Throughout their pre-service training, they completed internships, observed classrooms and teachers, and actively planned their next steps to become teachers in the state. I

interviewed and included 16 early-career teachers of the traditional pathway. Each participant in the pathway pursued a degree in education and completed a student-teaching placement with a cooperating teacher. They were certified upon completing their degree, student teaching, and passing the Praxis exam. Their experiences, overall, were positive, and their pathway was clear to becoming certified in Pennsylvania. Participant 2 said, "I did a four-year college program. I think it was a pretty good program, because from your first education class, you have an internship, so I've had a lot of different internship experiences on top of my student teaching." The pre-service training from their university provided them with a clear path to becoming certified in the state. Participant 4 described her pathway: "I did their undergraduate program, and I had to complete a professional semester, and then I had to complete a student teaching semester as well. After I passed those two things, I had to take the certification tests." After completing the state licensure exams, the early-career teachers have accomplished all requirements deemed necessary by the state to obtain their certification.

Many universities offer dual majors, which can open more job possibilities in the future. Participant 9 recalls,

> I went into their secondary education Mathematics Program. I was a dual major, so I was both a math major and a secondary education major. If things work out terribly, and I really don't like teaching, I have a mathematics degree under my belt. I could go use that if I please, but so far, things are good.

Early-career teachers who went through a traditional program were glad to have options if they were unsure about their experience in education.

The new teachers recognized that education could change over time, and their university supported them in obtaining more than one degree in their four years. One teacher explained, "I

have my degree in humanities with a Bachelor's of English, and then I did my secondary education courses alongside that" (Participant 12). The new teachers each reflected on their studies and how they were able to specialize in a subject area or grade level while taking their education classes to better prepare them for the classroom. After completing a bachelor's degree, Participant 3 realized they wanted to pursue a career in education. As a result, they participated in an accelerated master's degree program. "They told me about this program that if you have a degree already, you can get a master's in secondary education in one year. It's like an accelerated program" (Participant 3). Although the pathway was accelerated, the teacher was able to have a student-teaching experience, a cooperating teacher, and a university supervisor who monitored their progress toward certification.

Some universities have specific requirements for admission to their programs, ultimately to help certify more teachers for hard-to-fill positions. Participant 27 explained, "When I found out what I wanted to do…There was a dual certification; it wasn't a choice, you had to do special ed… you couldn't just do regular ed." When the participant shared this, they remarked that the university required all education majors to be dual-certified because 10 years ago, it was hard to find job openings in Pennsylvania. The requirement to have both elementary and special education certifications allowed the participant to be hired immediately upon graduation. In an accelerated traditional pathway, the student-teaching experience is still required; it is just the coursework that is accelerated. Participant 24 said, "I started an accelerated master's program with teaching certification, I did 14 weeks of student teaching. After that, I came back into this building I'm at now and I was able to land a contract job here at the same building." Several teachers who went through the traditional pathway were able to secure a contracted teaching job in the district where they student taught. Participant 5 explains, "I actually student taught there

and the university has a really nice program where they're doing your professional semester, and you have a literature block semester, and all three, you're in the classroom. For all three, I was at the same school." The participants felt that competing their pre-service work in the Pennsylvania supported them remaining in the state to teach.

Two of the traditionally trained teachers had negative experiences with the certification process in Pennsylvania. One participant enrolled in a traditional teaching program in a different state and did not have as clear a path to certification in Pennsylvania as compared to those who did pre-service training in the state. Participant 21 said:

> Then, after I graduated from college, I moved to Pennsylvania and began the process of getting my Pennsylvania certification, which was tricky I actually got my general science certificate first, but for both of my certificates, I just had to take a Praxis, and then I waited for the Pennsylvania Department of Education to accept my practice scores and review my transcripts and all of that before they gave me my certificate.

If the early-career teacher is not trained in the state, their access to and ease of becoming certified are more difficult. The second participant, who was traditionally certified, did not immediately enter teaching because of their experience in pre-service training. Participant 7 said, "I spent the last 13 years coaching college football at various places. I think I have a different perspective on a lot of things, which I also think my experiences just helped me in the classroom." Holding a Pennsylvania certification for over a decade, the early-career teacher did not pursue a pathway into the classroom due to a negative experience during student teaching. Returning to the profession, the certification was still valid within the state, but required the candidate complete additional tasks to re-activate the certification. There were 14 of the 16 early

career teachers who perceived their pathway into education was clear, and they knew exactly what steps to take to obtain a teaching position in Pennsylvania.

Alternative Pathway

The interviews uncovered that the teachers who follow an alternative pathway detailed how complicated becoming certified in the state can be, but also outlined how it is possible. I included 15 early-career teachers who experienced an alternative pathway to becoming certified teachers in Pennsylvania. Twelve of the fifteen early-career teachers had experience with an alternative pathway and are second-career educators, and eight of the teachers did not have a student teaching experience.

Early-career teachers who experienced an alternative pathway all had different training experiences to be a certified teacher in Pennsylvania. Participant 1 explained, "They had a Zoom session, and it was like as long as you had a bachelor's degree, you could apply for this master's program where you took five courses, the kicker was you did not have to leave work to do your student teaching. You could do it at your current job." Several alternatively trained early-career teachers enrolled in accelerated programs because they had access and agency to work with students and complete the requirements on the job.

If the early-career teacher did not work in schools, they switched careers to go back to school, or they gained an intern certification to begin substitute teaching. Participant 3 said, "I think I might want to give teaching a try. I think I'll enjoy it." In accelerated programs, early-career teachers are often trained in cohorts. Participant 11 said, "We had degrees somewhere else and wanted to be teachers. It was cool, it was an interesting group of people." Several participants expressed that their accelerated programs were extremely time-consuming, and while in their first teaching positions, they were also completing coursework concurrently.

Participant 19 said, “I would be teaching Monday through Thursday, and then I’d have classes Friday and Saturday, from basically 8 am to, let’s say, 5 pm, and then Sunday was my singular day off.” Teachers reported that their alternative and accelerated pathway was often difficult to manage throughout their certification process. Participant 6 said, “I am actually a second-career teacher as well. I applied for my master’s through the university, they’re eight-week courses, and I basically went all the way through from March all the way through my student teaching.”

Two participants found that their alternative pathway was an advantage, making the task of becoming certified worthwhile. Participant 14 imparted, “I actually think that my weird route is a little bit of an advantage to me, because I think I’m more willing, I’m more flexible, so, I think that’s beneficial. By the time that I went back to school for education, I was ready to get into this field by any means.” Internal motivation to become a certified teacher overcomes any obstacles in the alternative pathway.

One participant did not perceive the pathway to be difficult and worked through the coursework and new job with grace. Participant 17 said:

> The principal talked to me in football preseason and just said, ‘Hey, you know, there’s an opportunity, if you have a bachelor’s degree, to teach under emergency certification, we think you’d be a good resource in the business classroom. The first year I was on emergency certification, so, I started in November, and then in that Spring, I got my, I passed my two Praxis exams, and by the following fall, in 2023, I started under my internship certificate.

As a result of the administrator’s understanding and advocating for the new teacher, the participant was able to enter the field and become certified on time. Regardless of the pathway,

the early-career teachers who entered the field later all desire to be teachers and are willing to pursue alternative pathways to earn their certification.

Leaving a different field, early-career teachers who obtained certification through alternative pathways explained that their paths were filled with many responsibilities in addition to obtaining certification. Participant 24 said, “I feel like something is drawing me to this, and I needed to try. [My friend] went through this program, and understanding that it was accelerated, it was manageable.” Seven of the fifteen participants stated that they chose to try teaching because there were programs that allowed them to maintain another job and provided time for their family.

Navigating the alternative pathway, the early career teachers each had a different experience and explained how candidates can enter the teaching profession in Pennsylvania. Participant 25 explained, “I am actually not certified yet. I am in the University’s intern certification program. They were able to offer that for interning, slash student teaching.” Working while completing a student teaching experience may not be possible for all teachers; intern certification helps to provide an opportunity for student teaching while in the first year of teaching, allowing the early-career teacher an income to maintain their life as they earn full certification.

Pennsylvania is certifying teachers while they complete their coursework in their early years. Participant 13 shared, “Right now, on an intern certificate, I’m working through a college to take classes to get that. I have three years to finish a certification for special ed.” The three-year window to complete all requirements does help to welcome new candidates into the field. Without planning to be certified while teaching, Participant 10 said, “The thought this year was I’m going to substitute teach. I went through the I.U. program to substitute, but then what ended

up happening was they had a meet and greet with all the different schools, and I was going to get my intern certificate. The head of their HR was like, we can work with an intern certificate." The intern certification helps prospective candidates enter the field, earn a salary to support themselves, while training the teacher in the field. Intern certification in the state has afforded many candidates for hard-to-fill teaching positions.

Half of the alternatively trained teachers expressed frustration with Pennsylvania's requirements and discussed how their certification process was more difficult because it was not clearly defined. Participant 28 said, "Granted, Pennsylvania's website, Department of Education, has all the information. It's great, but it is very convoluted. It is very hard to find specific information, it took me a very long time to figure out even what I needed to even get the emergency cert and what kind of pathway to go." Several participants felt that the alternative pathway needed more support to navigate the state's requirements.

Without any guidance or a program to learn from, the educators struggled to find their pathway. Participant 29 found "The process of figuring out how to get a certification, after having a bachelor's degree already and being in the workforce, basically, in an area I want to teach, was extremely difficult. I think it's more of a PDE issue where they don't like that they're not pushing it enough, and they're not giving the resources to the people that need them to give people the right information." Second-career teachers found it difficult to become certified if they were not already enrolled in a teacher training program, even if they have an undergraduate degree in the subject area they want to teach. Participant 29 said:

> I finally ended up finding that I needed an online program because I was working in the school, so I was hired as an emergency-cert, long-term sub for the rest of that school year. I have a bachelor's degree. I have two years of experience in the field. We're living

> in a world where there are teacher shortages and things like that. It shouldn't be this difficult to get somebody like me an opportunity, and so I kept looking, kept digging, and then I came upon myself the intern certification through PDE. I applied for that on my own. My advisor even told me it wasn't possible, and I did not qualify for it. I kept doing the research. I knew I qualified for it based on the stipulations, so I applied for it. I was accepted. She was like, dumbfounded, and again, I'm not blaming her. She was great, so I got that intern certification. I had to explain for myself what an intern certification even was for me to even get that interview for that position, and it ended up working out. I ended up getting that position.

Becoming certified was difficult because school districts and universities lack the knowledge and experience in how to certify candidates within the state, as it changes.

Advocating for themselves, early-career teachers with an alternative pathway often face barriers to entry into the field. Participant 30 experienced similar roadblocks: "You were able to sign up for the program, but what they don't tell you in the beginning is that, because you're in Pennsylvania, you can't just do that. Now, had I had been somewhere like Wisconsin, I could have just taken the test and been done and certified." Online programs quickly provide an alternative pathway to candidates; however, Pennsylvania's rigorous expectations require more than many online programs. If the teaching candidate is not enrolled in a university program, the alternatively trained teachers also noted that the state does not help the new teacher find placements for student teaching or opportunities to student teach while in their first year.

The alternative pathway often required new teachers to educate districts and universities about how to use an intern certification. Participant 13 was first hired on an intern certification: "It could be a long-term sub or a contract position and that was to apply for the intern cert."

School districts have had to learn how to create pathways for early-career alternatively trained teachers. The new teachers had to explain to the districts how they were certified in alternative ways, which was not common knowledge.

Once districts understand different pathways, they are willing to hire qualified candidates. Participant 31 recalls, “I had a friend of mine and gotten his intern cert, and then became a full-time teacher eventually, and the district had made it pretty easy to follow that path. They said, you’re qualified to do this. We can emergency certify you, and you could do this for the semester.” If the district is willing to hire someone with an intern certificate, then the new teacher has the opportunity to become permanently certified within three years.

Early-career teachers seeking certification in Pennsylvania reported struggling to obtain licensure. Participant 19 shared: “They actually wanted us to stay in New York. It wasn’t required, so I had to figure out how to get certified in PA, and that was with minimal guidance from the district and a lot of self-research.” The early-career teachers with an alternative pathway expressed that their pathway was not paved for them, they had to create the road to certification. Another teacher coming from a different state said: “I actually started subbing two years ago in the school district, and researching how to get my license here….and took maybe two months or so, and then I got notification that everything was approved, and I was licensed” (Participant 15). Entering education from another career and state, these early-career teachers expressed how much time it took to get the right information to the state to ultimately become certified.

Impact of Preservice Training (RQ1)

The participants felt that their preservice training was necessary to obtain certification but felt that the student teaching experience was more valuable than the coursework. The traditionally trained teachers felt that the on-the-job training experiences, such as internships and

student teaching, was where they learned the realities of the profession. They found that their university coursework should have been more specialized in the subject area/grade they teach. Similar to traditionally trained teachers, the alternatively trained participants felt that their student teaching experience was more valuable than the coursework, but half of the group also recognized that they the teacher of record for the first time while competing student teaching and coursework requirements.

The traditionally trained teachers each experienced preservice training from a university which include coursework, observation hours or internships, and a student teaching placement. Participant 8 explained, "I had a really great advisor for my full four years. She had everything laid out for me. She had a section online for me to go to like a checklist I completed and any tests that we had to take and my whole senior year was spent student teaching." The teachers all found that their experience in the classrooms working with students was important because it helped them feel more prepared in their first year(s) teaching. Participant 2 remembers, "I definitely think the most valuable would be just the amount of opportunities I was given to be in that setting and to be given insight into so many different areas." Although well-balanced, the participant did share that the department was too small for steady instruction and that did affect the early-career's feelings of preparedness for the classroom, and they hoped for direct support from professors. Alternatively, participant 4 said, "Something that I still remember and use all the time, is the inquiry-based learning that they taught us and how to take the curriculum and just make it a little bit more interactive for the kids." Feelings of support from university professors and supervisors was appreciated and viewed as a positive experience.

Some teachers did not feel that their coursework at the university was as important as the on-the-job training they received in student teaching. Participant 27 said: "I feel like some of the

stuff like that, they made you do, like lesson planning was kind of a waste of time, because no one's sitting here writing eight-page lesson plans as a real teacher. That's not real life. I feel like I learned a lot more after, like, during my student teaching and then subbing." Gaining access to classrooms helped keep the preservice teachers motivated to complete their coursework. Participant 12 said, "There was a moment in my sophomore year where I was like, I don't think I can do this anymore, and a lot of that was because they start with the theory, then later in my sophomore year, I was able to get into the classroom, and that just blew me away." The teachers felt uninspired until they were able to get back into the classroom.

Experience in classrooms and working with students was their motivation to continue through their program. Participant 21 recalls, "It was a good program, but to be honest, parts of it just felt like I was jumping through the hoops they wanted me to do." The field experiences helped them to have a better understanding of teacher responsibilities and how to run a classroom. Participant 3 said: "I learned the most about the life of a teacher, and, like, how to be an effective teacher through student teaching. I got along great with my cooperating teacher and I really looked up to him and he did a great job of easing me into it." When the pre-service work and training includes a strong guide and/or cooperating teacher that was when the new teachers said they learned the most valuable information.

Some participants felt their coursework did not prepare them enough to teach specific subjects and hard-to-fill positions. Participant 18 recalls, "I feel like a lot of the education classes weren't great,…but it's not really based off the quality of the work you're doing, and you don't get feedback. I do think the student teaching was probably the most valuable thing for me." The interviews revealed that if early-career teachers could have more specialized training and support

throughout their pre-service training for the subject area and grade level they would have felt better prepared. Participant 9 explains:

> There are two sides of the coin, the thing that I liked about the program was they put us in the classroom, and they put us in schools every like curriculum year; however, I did not really like the classes that we had to take, the education classes, per se. I like the foundational education classes but, I wish that we were able to dive into the curriculum that we would be teaching. I think what I've recognized now is I'm sitting here and, you know, I feel like I'm three steps behind all my students because I don't know what their prior knowledge is. Yes, I'm supposed to teach Algebra II, but what exactly is Algebra II in terms of, this is what you want me to teach. This is what needs to happen so, I think really breaking apart, you know, the like, the sequences, and steps of what I should teach as a math teacher, I think would have really benefited me.

Coursework that is tailored to the certification pathway and implicitly guides the preservice teacher is more effective. Each early-career teacher, in the traditional pathway, said that their student teaching experience was the most valuable training they received.

Early-career teachers who followed an alternative pathway into education had varied experiences. Several participants had no pre-service training. In some cases, they had completed a student teaching experience, but it may have been a paid position without a cooperating teaching or little guidance from a university or the school district. One participant experienced student teaching while working as a paraprofessional in the building. Participant 1 said: "Each of us in our cohort, maybe 10 of us, we were assigned one of the professors that had taught us over at the IU who came and observed me. I would just put my, like, a small group of kids together, a group of three to eight kids and teach a small group lesson to them." She had no cooperating

teacher to guide her, and her university supervisor observed four separate times with minimal feedback.

Alternatively trained teachers all stated that if their university supervisor was non-threatening and willing to give feedback in a way that helped them to grow, they felt confident in themselves, and felt prepared to teach on their own. Another participant who went through an accelerated alternative pathway felt that the coursework that was geared toward her subject area and grade level was positive; however, the program had few experiences that were specifically tailored for the individual teacher. Participant 22 recalls, "It was a lot. I took a lot of courses that I don't think affected me as a teacher at all in the slightest. I like one class that was specifically about teaching math, and that class I found so informative and so engaging." Similar to the traditionally trained participants, more specific subject area training prior to entering the classroom would have made the accelerated program more efficient. Participant 11 said: "Definitely the student teaching part was the most valuable just with getting thrown in there and having to teach every day, I think that was the most valuable experience I got out of it." When the coursework was geared toward the early-career teacher it was appreciated, if it was not, it was deemed unhelpful.

The eight alternatively trained teachers (see Figure 2) who completed coursework while working in their first teaching positions all stated they were consistently busy and barely able to balance all the tasks that needed to be complete. Participant 25 said: "Last fall, I actually was a long-term learning support substitute as I started the program. I think there's a lot of things that got filled in because I was doing both at the same time." Although busy, the coursework coupled with on-the-job training helped to prepare the new teacher for their first year.

Two alternatively trained teachers' interviews revealed discrepant evidence. They shared that their coursework and preparation were positive experiences because of the accelerated pathway. The teachers who had positive experiences in pre-service training also felt prepared for their first years in education. Participant 14 shared: "I thought it was great. I obviously didn't get any of the in-person stuff because it was during the pandemic and she just treated me like a student teacher." Several early-career teachers in this study did switch into education during the pandemic and were second career teachers. Due to the school closure, they were able to enroll in accelerated programs and then complete an experience similar to student teaching to earn certification. Participant 19 said: "It was absolutely incredible, even though it was hellish during it, because it was just, you know, accelerated and it was so much, but they really thought of everything except classroom management, really had no training on how to deal with students. I suppose was supposed to be trial by fire while I was student teaching." The participants who experienced the accelerated program often completed their student teaching experience without a cooperating teacher or a teacher of record, often navigating the new experience alone.

Entirely committed to becoming a certified educator, the early-career teachers in an alternative pathway expressed happiness in the program that best worked for them. Participant 6 said, "I guess for my circumstances, I felt like it was okay because I could still work full time in my full-time non-teaching position, and finish the coursework at the same time, so that was helpful." All of the participants who endured the alternative pathway stated it was difficult to manage their time but had to fulfill their goal of being a teacher. While working another job, participant 17 was given an opportunity by the school district to teach. Participant 17 explains,

> I think it was well worth it, the work's just part of it is getting there. The courses were good. I liked how a lot of them were asynchronous, where I was able to work with my

schedule, be able to kind of do the work when I could do it late nights, early mornings, whenever. I would recommend it to anybody that was in my situation.

Provided with the right supports and the drive to complete the program, early-career teachers can accomplish their degree through alternative pathways.

Another participant had a similar experience but noted that the coursework may not keep up with the reality of schools today. Participant 31 said, "I do know, like current practices and what's expected, and I have found that what I'm doing in my classes doesn't necessarily align with what I'm doing in practice, and I have a lot of like, hands on experience, so I do feel prepared to be a teacher now at this point, like full time, but quite frankly, if it were like just my classes, I don't know that I would feel prepared." The coursework seems to have helped provide background knowledge, understand educational jargon, and given some skills otherwise not known, but the most valued training is the on-the-job training.

Student Teaching **(RQ1)**

There were 25 out of 31 participants that had a student teaching or residency experience; 24 out of the 25 teachers said that their student teaching experience was positive and helped prepare them for their first year(s) in education. The traditionally trained teachers all had a cooperating teacher and a university supervisor. I found that the earlier preservice teachers were matched with the cooperating teacher and the longer the relationship between them made them feel more prepared in the classroom. The connections the student teacher made with other staff members during their student teaching experience was a positive motivator for the early-career teachers. Alternatively trained teachers did not all have that same guidance or supervision, often lacking a cooperating teacher, and they felt that the first year was a challenging experience with less support.

The teachers with a traditional pathway had at least a semester for student teaching with a cooperating teacher from the school district and a university supervisor to oversee their work. The participants indicated that the longer the relationship between pre-service teacher and their cooperating teacher, the more prepared and positive the experience was for the new teacher. Participant 2 said:

> I was in there in the fall, like intermittently, and then the full six weeks at each in the spring. I really enjoyed having it in the fall, because it really helped to build that relationship with students. I feel like, if I had only six weeks to get to know them and teach a full program like it would have been very, very difficult.

Early-career teachers who were eased into the role, felt much more comfort over time. Participant 5 said, "I had such an amazing experience..." Over three semesters, the new teacher was able to be integrated into the district and grade level without feeling isolated or alone in the process of learning to teach. The university and local school districts can easily create pipelines to education if they build in enough support through several guided experiences that help the new teacher prepare for any situation in the classroom.

The connections made with the other staff members was a positive motivator for several early career teachers. Participant 3 states: "I thought the relationship I had with him was fantastic, and he did a great job of easing me into it. You know, he didn't throw me right to the wolves right away." Early-career teachers explained that time to learn slowly and time with a classroom with guidance helped them to feel more comfortable. Participant 21 said:

> The biggest thing was just seat time, like I had time in the seat as a teacher, and I think I learned more in student teaching, like how to run a classroom and how to deal with discipline and how to plan and how to communicate with parents and staff like I think

> just the experience of student teaching is something that I don't think any classroom will ever be able to match, so I definitely think positively of student teaching in that way.

The participants felt supported with a safe space to learn how to teach, they were able to manage a classroom and adjust to the student's needs.

The traditionally trained teachers all said how much the other staff and teachers around them during the experience meant to them. Participant 12: "I think if I did not have the amazing like observation and cooperating teachers that I had, I think I would have maybe even left education, because it's so incredibly overwhelming." The relationships that early-career teachers built become their foundation and help to keep them in the field.

When schools shut down or became hybrid during the pandemic, it created space between everyone, which produced a different environment for student teaching and preservice experiences. Participant 20 states:

> I was virtual for student teaching was the same teacher as my last observation. It was eight different times that I was able to go in to watch her teach. I was able to talk with her and then when I taught she was able to give me that feedback of, like, what was good, what to work on. And so already having someone who you were a little bit comfortable with, I think was pretty helpful.

Although student teaching may not have been in-person, the connections and feedback from cooperating or mentor teachers helps to guide and support early career teachers.

All early-career teachers, regardless of pathway, described their student teaching experience as one of the most important parts of their training. One of the participants experienced student teaching negatively and ultimately did not enter the profession until 15 years later. Participant 7 describes student teaching: "It was terrible experience, one of the reasons why

I didn't go right into coaching or working to teach….Yeah, four different preps, which I thought was unfair, and then, I mean, I was just surviving, and I thought my person I did was doing it for, wasn't very supportive in terms of just like helping." A negative student teaching experience deters candidates from entering the classroom. The early-career teachers from both pathways felt that if they did not have support in their first experiences, they would not have stayed in the classroom.

Alternative pathway teachers may have been hired on an intern certificate or an emergency certificate to simultaneously complete their student teaching or internship while beginning a new job. Similar to the traditionally trained teachers, those alternatively trained teachers who did have a cooperating teacher felt better prepared for their first year(s). The alternatively trained teachers who did student teaching while in their first job felt less prepared and actively sought out support of other teachers and/or their mentor.

Alternatively trained teachers either have cooperating teachers in student teaching or mentors if they complete student teaching in their first year hired in a district. As a commonality between the two groups, all the participants said that their relationships with their mentor or someone teaching near to them helped them through their first experiences in the classroom. Participant 24 said: "I was very fortunate. I had amazing mentor teacher in third grade. She also was a second career teacher, it worked out really well because we fundamentally understood each other and why we were making the journey into education." The alternatively trained teachers felt the guidance that was given on day-to-day tasks and planning were extremely effective. Participant 11 expressed, "Even throughout my student teaching, my advisor was really great, and it seemed like they just are really supportive." New programs for alternative

certification with strong support systems help to provide connections with other early-career teachers.

Participants in accelerated programs that did have student teaching experiences shared their perspectives. Participant 14 said: “I thought it was great. I got observed more frequently than some other people I know have gone through student teaching, like, I got observed every two weeks, I want to say, and I think that that was really nice.” Much like the traditional pathway, strong partnerships between school districts and university supervisors helped the alternatively trained teacher experience continuous feedback to grow and ultimately get hired in the state of Pennsylvania.

One alternatively trained teacher did note that their cooperating teacher could have been more supportive. Participant 22 recalls, “I felt like a lot of days she would just give me the notes, I would teach the notes, and then that was it. I wish there was more work that I had to do, because once I actually became a teacher, and I was like, Oh! No one just hands me a note packet. I have to, like, make stuff or take things from other teachers and tweak it.” As an outlier, participant 22 felt that his student teaching placement was incredibly packed with coursework and the student teaching experience could have been more rigorous. Regardless of pathway, all of the new teachers said that student teaching prepared them for their first year; if they did not have a cooperating teacher or mentor who was supportive, they felt less prepared.

Several of the alternatively trained participants in this study did not have a cooperating teacher because they completed their student teaching placement while beginning a new contracted job. Participant 29 explains, “When I would have had a student teaching placement, somebody in our department in the middle school retired. The first semester of my time hired at the middle school counted as my student teaching.” Creating this pathway for an early-career

teacher helped to get him into the district, but may have created a more difficult experience for the teacher because he lacked a cooperating teacher. One participant had to wait to complete their student teaching experience until there was a position open in the district, ultimately choosing not to have a cooperating teacher. Participant 31 said: "I could have, in theory, lined up like an actual student teaching role in for this fall, but I was not willing to go unpaid or lose my benefits." In the alternative pathway, the early-career teacher may have to choose between receiving a paycheck or having a cooperating teacher.

Cooperating Teacher (RQ1)

The participants in this study, who had a cooperating teacher, were happy to have support and guidance in the classroom as they may have been teaching for the first time. Cooperating teachers, generally volunteering to guide a pre-service teacher, are still the teacher of record and responsible for student outcomes.

Traditional pathway teachers felt that if they perceived their cooperating teacher as supportive and positive, they deemed their experiences to be more successful; however, if the relationship with the cooperating teacher was more restrictive, then they learned less and were not as successful. Alternatively trained teachers said if they did not have a cooperating teacher, they found it difficult to deal with different difficult situations and had to seek out other colleagues to support them. The experience of the early-career teachers, both from traditional and alternative pathways, said their cooperating teachers had a strong influence on how they teach and the methods they employ.

The traditionally trained teachers felt that if their cooperating teacher was collaborative and gave direct feedback, they could grow and learn in the classroom; however, if the teacher of record was not welcoming, they did not learn as much in their student teaching experience.

Participant 3 said: “I got along great with my cooperating teacher, he thought that I worked really hard at it.” When the cooperating teacher acts more like a mentor and a guide, the pre-service teacher can flourish. The relationships between the two teachers can help build the new teacher’s confidence and desire to teach. Participant 4 recalls, “It was great. She kind of let me, like, take over, whenever I would have to teach or record a lesson, she would go in the hallway and kind of just like, let me do my thing.” Several participants discussed that gentle guidance and supervision while attempting to teach independently was positive and felt comfortable for early-career teachers.

There were some participants that perceived their cooperating teachers to be helpful because they provided specific feedback about their teaching and techniques. Participant 9 said: “there are a few things that I didn’t want to do in my classroom, but she said, ‘this is what’s worked for me’, and I implemented it, it was very useful what we were able to do, collaborate with those things, and she challenged me in those ways as well.” Learning in the field can be difficult, some early career teachers may want more help than others. Participant 27 shared: “The Life Skills teacher I was with, she was great, she was just very, like nurturing. My regular ed one, I was her first student teacher, and I think she just struggled to like, loosen that control of her classroom.” The participants reported that they relied on the cooperating teacher, and the student teacher must adhere to both the university and school district directives while still learning their own rhythm and style of teaching.

Several alternatively trained early-career teacher did not have a cooperating teacher or a consistent mentor. Participant 19 said:

> COVID hit, and he kind of got stuck in the city, and he really didn’t like where he was at, but he was still a great teacher and a very good like he was more of a friend than a

mentor, though, to be honest, the second one she retired on me. So, in May, she was gone, so I basically had a month of myself teaching, so the relationship of her wasn't as good, and especially when she retired on me, that definitely changes the game for you.

This participant's first student teaching placement was positive and helped the teacher, but an absent mentor makes it harder to complete the work. Without appropriate support and guidance, early-career teachers felt overwhelmed. Participant 15 stated: "It was pretty chaotic!" I found that nine of the fifteen alternatively trained teachers did not have a cooperating teacher or licensed teacher in their classroom while they completed a their pre-service work, which led to them feeling overwhelmed and meant that they relied heavily on other teachers that taught similar subjects.

Student Teaching Stipend (RQ2)

Both the traditional and alternatively trained participants felt that the student teaching stipend should be universally paid to all student teachers. The PA student teaching stipend was first implemented in the 2024-2025 school year; this new incentive was received by five participants and three did not receive the stipend. The traditionally trained teachers that received the stipend experienced less financial burden and more efficacy and validated their hard work. The alternatively trained teachers felt that a student teaching stipend, or a residency model, where the teacher was paid during that experience, would promote education and becoming a teacher. All the participants, regardless of pathway, felt that student teaching should be compensated because of the requirements and commitment to the classroom.

The early-career teachers discussed their feelings about the PA stipend and how it affected them. Participant 2 said, "I think it's really amazing that they're doing that and it was definitely very helpful to me, because, like, right out of college, I didn't really have a choice

other than to move out, so I was able to use that to sustain myself through the summer, until I got a teaching job." Getting selected for the $10,000 stipend as a student teacher can be life changing and relieves some financial burdens for the early-career teacher. Participant 11 responds, "Yes, yes, I did. I worked very hard to get it and we're all really excited, because it's a lot of money." Every teacher who applied for the stipend said that they felt it was a confusing process and there was not enough clear communication about how and if they received the stipend.

For those that did receive the stipend, it made them feel like they received compensation for a difficult job they were paying tuition to complete. Participant 5 said, "I definitely think that it is an amazing idea. This is a little bit of reward for the full-time job that I'm doing where I cannot handle just about anything else right now." Early-career teachers who received the stipend do understand how impactful the award was and they state they are able to have more balance in their early years as a teacher. Participant 18 recalled, "For me, it was incredibly helpful, I would have probably had to take out loans." Working in an unpaid internship affects how professionals view their worth, the early-career teachers recognized how important it is for them to have the compensation so they can put their engagement into the schools and their teaching practices. Participant 22 commented, "It just I felt like I had no time for anything, like I was taking grading home, like every single day, and I paid $6,000 to do this, like it was just felt backwards." All of the participants felt that paying tuition while completing student teaching without compensation is thought to be unfair and unjustified.

The participants who were second-career teachers, alternatively certified, and student taught while in their first teaching position received compensation without hesitation. Participant 15 responded, "Absolutely, the amount of work that they do. I do think that they deserve some sort of financial pay. I got emergency certified, and I was able to do it without, without anybody

in the room with me, so to speak." The majority of the traditionally trained and alternatively trained participants said they could not have stayed in education without being paid or getting the stipend.

Every participant, whether they received a stipend or not, agreed that the stipend is a good thing to offer pre-service teachers. Participant 17 said, "I think it's a good thing. I think we need to do whatever we can to get people teaching, keep people teaching. It's a rewarding job, but it's a very taxing job, too." Offering incentives to teaching candidates was suggested by several participants, they reflected on their own experience and how they felt during the time. Participant 7 also agreed: "I don't know much, but I think that makes a lot of sense. I think they need to be creative and allowing maybe middle-aged people to become teachers, and I think that that could help." The participants felt that more candidates may be drawn to the profession or current early-career teachers would feel less burden upon in regard to tuition or having to work a second job to pay back student loans.

Three of the early-career teachers did not receive stipends from the state, but they did get either a scholarship or stipend from another program. Participant 3 responds, "I did get a scholarship. It's called The NOYCE scholarship, and it basically if I taught in a high school need two years after graduation, all of my grad school loans would be paid off." Two participants received a scholarship, but one participant had experience with a paid residency where she began working with the school district the summer before her year-long student teaching experience. Participant 12 said, "I was paid $1,500 at the end of my full year from the school district. This was actually, as far as I'm aware, this was this university's first time having a student teaching residency program." Programs that build in supports such as compensation or stipends help to strengthen early-career teacher's feeling of pride in their work.

Several early-career teachers did not receive a stipend; some participants did not know about the opportunity, some chose not to apply, and a few were not selected for the stipend. Participant 23 states: “I have only bits and pieces, and all of my other kind of first- and second-year teacher friends were like, well, it sucks that we didn’t get it.” As a result of the program being new, many of the participants either missed the opportunity or did not know about it at all. When asked about the stipend, participant 10 said, “I never even heard of that.” Some of the participants that were unaware of the opportunity, but stated they felt it would have been beneficial to have received a stipend during student teaching.

Any type of stipend or payment would have been helpful for the new teachers. Participant 26 remarked, “Well, if I did receive a stipend, I probably would have felt less pressure to have an outside job during that time, during my student teaching semester, it definitely, like, compounded the stress, because, like, I would only be able to work in the evenings, and then have to, like, figure everything out ahead of time.” The pressure of balancing student teaching and life responsibilities can wear on an early-career teacher. Participant 6 said, “it would have been nice to have to basically offset the tuition that I was going to have to pay, yeah, but I think it's really unfair and silly for me to have to pay full time tuition to go to school when I'm not going to school, I’m actually working. No other profession does that.” The early-career teachers felt they had too much experience to not get compensated.

A few participants were denied the stipend. Participant 25 said, “Noting paid student teaching really does affect people, I think. And had a couple of people that were in my cohort, they were hoping to get the internship and didn't, or were a little disgruntled about it because of the finances, which I understand.” As teacher preparation programs evolve, the participants hope that there will be compensation to offset the burdens of student loans and no income. As a

second career teacher, participant 24 said, “I applied right when the deadline was and I wasn't accepted… kind of the bummer, because all of a sudden we went from a dual income to no income for 14 weeks.” Those that did not receive a stipend also felt that the application process should have taken into consideration the needs of the applicant. The way the stipend was awarded seemed unpredictable and all participants felt they should receive some type of payment. Participant 28 said, “I think it's shouldn't necessarily be a stipend…It really should be more of like part time work, slash salary, or like an hourly rate, rather than just a lump sum.” The student teaching stipend has been appreciated by those who received it. I found that the teachers were concerned with how the new stipend was being dispersed in addition to how it was awarded in Pennsylvania.

Early Career Teacher Experiences (RQ 2)

Balance of Teacher Expectations

The various tasks and student needs teachers must manage each day can be overwhelming. Early-career teachers, some with little to no experience, attempt to balance their own teaching responsibilities while gaining experience in their own classroom. All the participants felt that they were not balancing their teaching responsibilities well in their first year; but, as they gained more experience and understood the expectations, they felt more capable in their second and third year(s) of teaching.

The interviews allowed the traditionally trained participants to discuss their experiences within their classroom. They frequently talked about finding balance and managing the different aspects of the classroom. Alone for the first time in their own classroom, several participants said that negative student behaviors were difficult to manage. Participant 2 said, “I haven't necessarily gotten a lot of help in how to address the behaviors.” Without any support or direction in ways to

adjust or control student behaviors, it breaks down the early-career teacher's ability to cope with misbehavior. Participant 27 recalls, "This year, I would say it's student behaviors. I went from having 14 students last year to 21 this year, so just a bigger class size, and there's a lot of big personalities in my room." With less resources and more concerns, the early-career teacher expressed the desire for more help and more guidance to support their classroom. The teachers felt that negative student behavior affects their ability to accomplish the instructional goals and standards.

The teachers stated they were concerned about student achievement and felt a great deal of pressure to produce positive student results and scores. Balancing these expectations was overwhelming for some participants. Participant 5 explains, "Because there's so much expected of us, testing and progress monitoring, that we're supposed to be doing, the standards of what first graders are able to do and what these kids are capable of doing is a lot different. So, balancing that, challenging them, but also making sure that we're filling in the gaps." Addressing individual student learning needs can be overwhelming when coupled with the daily tasks an early-career teacher must accomplish. Participant 4 said, "It's like every second is instructional time, and you need to get it in, or you're behind, or you're not doing anything with fidelity, so I feel like there's pressure to get everything done." Many of the traditionally trained teachers said that balancing the quality of content and keeping up with the learning goals placed them under extreme pressure.

The administrative tasks that occur outside of teaching hours is difficult to master as a new teacher. Participant 18 remarks, "I feel like I deal with so much other stuff outside of teaching that's related to special ed that I have a hard time reminding myself that I'm there to teach and help them." With so much focus on paperwork and compliance, early-career teachers

feel overwhelmed, but still want to do what is best for their students. Participant 3 said, “It just feels like I'm running a race every single day.” With the best intentions, early-career teachers spend their days trying to compensate for a lack of time to best prepare their students. Participant 7 stated: “It gets overwhelming sometimes with all the grading and, you know, kids coming in new, you start with the new students, my schedule is the same every day, but every day is not the same.” The participants explained that they have to triage concerns and issues each day which makes them feel they never know what to expect.

Throughout the school year, new teachers attempt to balance the assignments that they provide for their students and adjust them in response to each individual’s learning needs. Participant 26 said, “I'm still finding it’s striking the good balance of like, what's appropriately challenging for my students versus what's way too difficult or way too easy on them” Adjusting and monitoring student success can be stressful as they balance other responsibilities and continue to gain experience. The participants felt as they had more time in the classroom, they had more tools to support with and respond to student needs. Participant 21 explains: “Just trying to stay on top of things, I guess, with the kids, and setting daily expectations and trying to adhere to them very closely, I think is good for them and myself.” Gaining confidence and feeling secure in their decisions, the traditionally trained teachers begin to find success and find ways to juggle all the aspects of being a teacher.

Similar to the traditionally trained teachers, the alternatively trained participants felt that they were overwhelmed at tie and always trying to find a healthy balance between work and home life. Participant 12 said, “I think just that it takes so much more time than they might remember, and I understand a lot of this stuff is state mandates, but also, like the turnaround time between all the extra work, talking to parents, making tests, grading tests, essays, it adds up.” In

addition to the teaching requirements, the added administrative tasks begin to take up any preparation time that is built into their schedule. Participant 15 states: “I would say for me, a lot of its time management. I'm definitely one of the people that's that stays late a lot.” The participants shared the only way for them to fully prepare for the next day or following week. Participant 16 recalls, “My biggest challenge is that work life balance.” Grading, planning, preparing for new units of study can be time consuming and the teachers expressed the need to work after hours and on the weekend. Participant 31 said, “I did feel a lot of like anxiety and uncertainty about what the role, what my expectations were going to be, and I really had no prior knowledge of the curriculum or what was, you know, expected out of me, in a way.” All of the participants felt that entering a new role with new curriculum could be stressful and time consuming.

Several alternatively certified participants were hired by the district while the school year had already been in session. Hired on an emergency certificate or an intern certification, they did not have months to plan for the new role they accepted. Participant 11 states: “I am developing the curriculum as I teach it and that's a little bit challenging, so I'm figuring it out as I go. But I do wish that I could have had something set, or at least a path to follow instead of just kind of winging it.” Without proper guidance, the early-career teachers expressed they feel a great deal of pressure to do multiple tasks at the same time. Participant 14 discussed, “I have four preps this year. One of them is an honors class; it's a class that I haven't taught before, so two of those preps are brand new to me this year.” The participants felt that if they had been hired prior to the start of the school year, it would have been advantageous. Excited to teach rigorous courses, the teachers felt great pressure to produce high-quality lessons and provide high-quality instruction.

Just as the traditionally trained participants explained, the alternatively trained participants explained that negative student behavior in the classroom distract and interrupt their instruction. Participant 25 said, “I think that there's too much going on. There's too much classroom management, that if you haven't been in the classroom regularly, that would be a shock to come into.” The second career teachers in this study all felt that the demands of daily classroom management in addition to writing new lessons and following a new curriculum was consuming. Participant 25 replied, “I am lucky to have the other teachers in my grade that have been there 20 plus years. So just to see their balance in curriculum and real-world child experience, and what helps them has been, that's good.” When new teachers have good models to emulate, they felt more capable and comfortable with a road map to manage all the expectations placed upon them.

It is important for early-career teachers to feel supported by colleagues and administration as they manage new expectations. Participant 11 responds, “I think that they forget that we are out here and we're just scared and we have no idea what's going on most of the time, because a lot of times, I think they just assume that we know things, and just with a lot of it is like the background tasks that we have to do that don't have anything to do with our teaching.” If the teachers do not know how to complete ancillary tasks such as paperwork, phone calls to parents, or documentation that is all done outside of their teaching schedule, the tasks become overwhelming. Placing more pressure on new teachers, professional development and supplementary training in addition to their daily tasks can feeling daunting to most early-career teachers.

Two alternatively trained participants presented discrepant evidence and valued the additional tasks and duties because they felt it made them better equipped educators. Participant

17 said, “It was good, because I got to meet with a lot of different people, I learned a lot of things that I needed to know that I otherwise wouldn't have.” These participants agreed that when training was provided to help them complete administrative tasks, paperwork, and other duties assigned to them, they felt better about their performance. Participant 1 recalls:

> This year, I know my teachers have complimented, they're like, ‘Wow! You're a different person. This year, you're really like, you're helpful.’ Yeah, but because I, like, have a clue and I know what I'm doing now. But like, right, last year was insane.

As the early-career teachers gain experience, they also gain more foresight in how to conduct themselves and accomplish more within their schedule.

Classroom Preparedness and Preparation

The interviews uncovered that all the early-career teachers, regardless of their certification pathway, felt prepared to teach when they had access to their curriculum, technology, and teaching materials. It was also helpful when they gained an understanding of the building, staff, and resources. The traditionally trained teachers felt that they would have benefited from additional guidance in the first few weeks of the school year unless they student taught in the same building. Half of the alternatively trained teachers felt prepared to teach because they had previously held roles in the district; however, the other half felt they were dumped into a classroom without appropriate resources and most times while school was in session.

The traditionally trained participants understood what their first job would entail; but overall, felt that nothing could truly prepare them for the first year. Participant 5 said, “I will say that no matter what program you're at in, anywhere, you're never fully prepared. There's definitely a lot of things that I had to stop and go: ‘Well, never experienced this in student

teaching, but here we go.'" When first hired into a new position, the teachers felt that it was assumed they knew what to do and could accomplish any task instantly. Participant 23 said, "Here's the course, here is the textbook. Spend as much or as little time on anything in here that you want, like you've got the standards, do your thing; it would have been very beneficial to have someone be like, here's a pacing guide for you, or a sequence throughout the year." The new teachers had hoped for more guidance in their first year, especially in the first month. Participant 16 recalls, "I was given a computer. I was given pieces of a curriculum. There wasn't really much there, so I'm kind of building my own curriculum as I'm going with my courses." If they had to create the teaching materials and assessments without guidance, the new teachers remarked the first year felt daunting.

During the first few days in the job, prior to the students arriving, early-career teachers are working diligently to prepare and acclimate themselves with the school building and culture. Participant 16 stated:

> I was able to figure out where everybody was, who was around me. You know, we got to meet as departments then too, so I got to know everybody in my department and in my grade level so, that way we could kind of focus on the academic and social concerns that we had for some students coming into it.

A good support system of teachers and colleagues is important and deemed most valuable by early-career teachers.

A few traditionally trained early-career teachers did not feel prepared by their training pathway to enter the classroom. Feeling unprepared, the teachers explained they had less experience and resources to approach the job. Participant 9 said,

> I think in terms of in classroom training and having a four-year degree, I think it's pretty lacking. I would think that an emergency certified person, or, you know, someone going through more field work, would actually benefit and would have more experience than I would, because someone who's emergency certified is someone who, you know, they're in the classroom. So, in terms of actual applicable knowledge and experience, I think other people are actually more experienced than I am.

Student teaching cannot fully prepare them for all the tasks, duties, and responsibilities in addition to teaching new material, writing new curriculum, and preparing lessons each week. Participant 18 admits, "I wish I would have had more IEP writing training because I truly feel like college did not prepare me for IEPs." Several of the participants had to seek their own training to fulfill a gap in their education or training.

Alternatively trained, second career teachers felt that their real-life experiences helped them enter the profession with skill and found success. Participant 7 stated: "Honestly, I think it's a negative that somebody who went to a four-year school and went through student teaching and never did anything else. I think they're actually behind somebody who has other experiences." The early-career teachers who had other professions, felt they were better equipped to handle some of the difficulties educators experience. Participant 23 said, "I feel that I'm better prepared at 26 walking into a classroom, kind of for the first time. 'I don't know that I would have lasted in the profession, had I started at 22 I don't think I would have been nearly as good of a teacher as I am now." Traditionally trained teachers expressed that they were not fully prepared to start a new school year in the job without additional guidance and support from the school district. Those that did feel more prepared for their students sought out learning opportunities from their district prior to the start of the school.

The alternatively trained participants each had a different experience in regard to being hired. Those that had some guidance and time to shadow another teacher in the position felt more prepared than those who were very quickly placed into their position. When the alternatively trained teachers discussed their experiences, they were just as varied as the traditionally trained early-career teachers. Participant 30 said, "I was expected to be teaching all subjects right away, and I was fine with it. I was comfortable with it because I had been subbing for two years beforehand." The early-career teachers who had prior experience or knowledge within the school district before they were had a great advantage over those who did not have any prior experience. Participant 25 said, "I think they've experienced the job differently, for sure. I mean, I have kids. I have been in the classroom for three years now, not making lesson plans, it's but I have real kid experience."

One participant was emergency certified by the school district so that the retiring teacher could mentor before he took the leave. Participant 17 explained, "He started giving me one class at a time, and then then I would teach it, and then he would kind of sit there and we would talk about it. So, it was kind of nice. I mean, I was thrown into it, but not completely thrown into it." While teaching was new, with the right supports, alternatively trained early-career teachers explained they were prepared for the classroom once they understood the classroom needs and expectations.

The alternatively trained teachers who were hired with little guidance struggled in their first year. Participant 13 said, "I had zero skills, and I was panicked." Feeling unprepared and being new to education can be very difficult; additionally, the participants shared that being hired mid-year was difficult. The daily stress of the job can affect the early-career teacher's ability and efficacy. Participant 10 shared:

> With school, it's very mentally draining, and then, during my prep time, I can't focus, so, like, it's hard for me to get anything done during prep, so I'm up late doing work, and then during class, it's hard to manage hard behaviors, and then I have a lot of duty time in my schedule, and they'll fill it up.

Without prior knowledge and experience in teaching, the new teachers were overwhelmed by all the different expectations placed on them each day.

Participants that are employed and certified on an intern certification expressed they were unprepared for the role but wanted to be successful, so they found ways to work through their difficulties. Participant 15 said, “When I got dumped here, I asked about what are people using? What kind of notes are they using? What kind of homework are they giving? Is it a lot of the textbook? Are they using their own worksheets? Like, if so, can I get access to some of that?” When the teacher does not have access to materials, curriculum, or programs, they felt less prepared for the school year and said it was more difficult to do the work. Participant 11 states: “Oh, it drastically affects how your year goes. I didn't get any curriculum or resources until probably a few days before that in orientation happened, and I just would have loved to prepare the entire summer instead of just two weeks before the kids walked in.” Coming from a different career, the alternatively trained early-career teachers relayed they were anxious to get started in education but did not always get the resources they needed to be fully prepared.

When the early-career teachers did receive on-the-job training, they felt that it was too late, and they had already encountered issues and they no longer needed that training. Participant 14 said, “Those meetings that we had last year with the specific topics were really good, but a lot of times they would come up after we already had to troubleshoot that thing and try to because our mentor teachers didn't always know the answers.” The participants felt that the timing of

training and informational sessions was important if they were provided before they had started the school year.

Onboarding

Each one of the interviews revealed that the approach to how the teachers were hired and the way they were provided their teaching materials affected their feelings of preparedness in the first year. Referred to as onboarding, teachers wanted to talk about their experiences and how it shaped their first experiences within the district. When onboarding was organized and they were provided with teaching materials, the new teachers felt prepared. If they were not given access to their materials, teaching tools, and curriculum, it made their first weeks hectic and more difficult. Teachers from both pathways expressed the same concerns.

Traditionally trained early-career teachers who had a student teaching experience, relayed that their onboarding into the district and their classroom was not easy. Participant 2 said, “Here I am with this classroom full of students I don't really know what to do, so I feel like maybe a longer, like transition period, or like maybe a slower transition or even like, a week to get used to, for them to be like, here's the curriculum you're going to be teaching. Like, go ahead and get a chance to look at it.” They explained that the transition between their college student teaching experience is very different than being a first-year teacher without any supports in the classroom. Participant 9 recalls, “I panicked, and I was, I was freaking out. I was still trying to figure out even the small logistic things of technology, it was a lot. It was not fun.” The participants felt that instead of opening day meetings with broad information, more specific training for new teachers to welcome their students would have been helpful.

Preparing for the new year, the early-career teachers said that they did not have access to or help with different resources. Participant 5 recalls, “I had a lot of trouble in the beginning of

the year getting access to things." Instead of planning, completing lesson plans and gathering materials for the students, the new teachers said they spent their time trying to access the programs and resources that were not provided. Participant 8 said:

> Maybe, like, a cheat sheet of a Google Cloud. We use Google Classroom. Hey, here's the next level stuff of Google Classroom. Or here's, like, things I wish I knew. Maybe if there was, like a few teachers who got together made like things, I wish I knew about Power School or Google classroom.

With proper onboarding, the teachers said they could have experienced their first weeks differently and spent more time preparing instructional materials for their students.

In addition to access, the early-career teachers said they needed more guidance with their grade level or subject content and classroom expectations from the district. Participant 3 said,

> What I would have liked to have is first, support. I would have liked to have had more like guided, worksheets, notes, activities, testing, quizzes, kind of laid out more because, what I was sort of given was like curriculum, cover this content, cover this content, a scope and sequence; great, but it wasn't any samples of like, how do you teach this? Like a sample lab, sample activities, that's good, that wasn't really presented ever, so would have been beneficial, but I kind of had to do make most of it myself.

Although the participants appreciated the autonomy to teach the content as they wished, they would have preferred more clear guidelines and parameters surrounding their content.

Some of the traditionally trained participants did feel that their onboarding experience was positive due to a strong mentor and ample time to prepare for the start school. Participant 21 expressed, "I don't know that I really need any more than what I had. I feel like my mentor teacher, when I came to the district, was really helpful, and I that induction week, I guess,

learning things like how to use the technology that our district relies on, and just kind of district expectations and things like that was nice. It was helpful to learn all of that." The interviews displayed that the onboarding experience was positive when the teacher had access to their teaching materials, there were clear content and course requirements, and the new teacher had a positive mentor.

Early-career teachers who had an alternative pathway into education had a more chaotic onboarding experience. Participant 1 said, "I wish they would come up with a better onboarding plan for us, just because it, it's and maybe even especially, I don't know, maybe it was at a fault because I didn't have that normal student teaching, but, like, I really didn't have much of a clue about a lot of things." Without a full orientation or any type of onboarding, they felt they could have used someone to work with them to get a better understanding of how and what to do each day. Participant 24 recalls, "I was hired three days before a new teacher orientation." Without having a pre-service experience, several of the alternatively trained early-career teachers felt that they were unsure of themselves in the first few weeks and months. Participant 31 shared:

> I did not feel supported per se, it felt very much like sink or swim, and some days I was sinking, and I really didn't know what to do. I just really was like, I'm so overwhelmed today I don't know, I might just drive home. I'm gonna go sit in my car and cry and then go home, and then I'd go back into the building.

Feelings of inadequacy leave teachers feeling exhausted, which ultimately affects their willingness to stay in the position.

Alternatively certified teachers may not have any orientation or onboarding at all within the school district. Proper school district support through their own orientation process can help teachers feel more comfortable. Participant 28 states: "I had an orientation through the staffing

agency that typically does all, like substitutes in across the country, So they had, like, teacher orientation, but through the district, no, I have not." Without district supported orientation, the teacher felt like they needed to learn everything on their own.

Just as the traditionally trained teachers shared, the alternatively trained participants also explained they struggled with a variety of required tasks that were not directly related to their teaching duties. Participant 30 said, "I would have appreciated more planning help, because in our district, we have to post our plans weekly into a drive, but for me, it was very, very stressful in the beginning, because I didn't know this curriculum." The teachers explained they feared making mistakes. Participant 15 explains, "I think there's a lot of things that they just take for granted that people know. I think sometimes they just take for granted that, yes, teachers don't want to sit in on meetings that could be accomplished in an email, but also maybe sometimes it would be helpful for them to have a little sit down with some of the new teachers." Proper onboarding allows new educators to ask questions or clarify information.

Just as the traditionally trained teachers, the alternatively trained teachers explained that were excited when there was proper onboarding, and they could get training prior to the school year. Participant 10 said, "Well, one that was really cool is they have a full day dedicated to like a tech day, that was interesting, because you got to pick which sessions you got to go to throughout the day, but I thought it was really neat, because I did implement a few things from that with my own classroom." The alternatively trained teachers appreciated every opportunity to learn and grow prior to the start of the school year and employed all new strategies as soon as they could.

Practical Training

The interviews indicated that early-career teachers, both traditionally and alternatively trained, needed supplementary support throughout the year to ensure they could accomplish the required tasks that accompany teaching. Traditionally trained early-career teachers explain that they relied upon their mentors, colleagues, and administration to support them in their day-to-day needs. Participant 2 shared, “I didn't have all these things that I needed, it's been, like, almost two months since I started, and I still kind of feel like I'm still figuring out what we're doing in a day, because it's a work in progress.” The participants explained that their mentors and administrators helped them to understand their role fully and supported them in meeting deadlines.

The participants explained that they want the administration to understand their needs and the additional time it takes to feel prepared. They requested some practical training opportunities in areas specific to what they teach. Participant 9 said, “I would just want them to know how much time that I'm spending doing this and being able to collaborate with those other math teachers in the other buildings. I wish that I was put in contact with them way sooner.” The information and planning time shared within departments and grade levels was the most important practical training according to early-career teachers. Participant 12 states: “I definitely think common planning time and regular meetings is super important, especially as a first-year teacher.” Time to collaborate and discuss their shared experiences helps the new teachers to identify new techniques, more resources, and to feel more comfortable in the new position.

The participants explained that new teachers appreciate feedback and want to be successful; however, when faced with a new challenge the ability to discuss and process the issue is helpful. Participant 20 remarked, “We do have a lot of questions that we just aren't sure of the answers to, and so when anyone provides that at any time, it's great.” Often, early-career teachers

are hesitant to ask questions or tell their administrators that they need help. Participant 5 said, “I want to show that I know what I'm doing…I think there's a lot of programs that I would have appreciated being more trained on…” Open communication and the ability to say that they need more support could help early-career teachers accomplish more in a day. Participant 21 replies, “I think at the high school they put pressure on us to be good and to try to continue to improve, but I don't think they put it on us in a way that's unhealthy. So, I am really happy with the principles that I got, but I guess just remembering what it's what it's like to be a new teacher.” Opportunities for growth and on-the-job training is extremely valuable. Participant 27 said, “I feel having a long-term sub placement and moving to all the different buildings in different locations, I feel like that all made me a better teacher.” The traditionally trained teachers said the most valuable training was being exposed to different types of schools, locations, student populations, and working with other teachers.

New initiatives and programs do take additional time to understand and to fully implement. The early-career teachers expressed that they hope to get more planning time to keep everything balanced; practical training to support new learning would be helpful. Participant 26 said, “I think for first year teachers, it was like, you know, in the mess of everything else you're getting, the information you're being given, it's like, I don't even know what to do about that.” Additional guidance from administration was requested by the participants, they felt they could have done a better job had they understood district information and policies more accurately.

The interviews showed that the participants feel pressure to raise positive student outcomes and they felt overcome by the goals. Participant 4 remarks:

> I think it's the system as a whole that's the problem because I feel like there's pressure from the higher ups, and then our principals have pressure, and then it comes back to us.

It's not it's just the system, when you have kids sitting all day, we're going to have behavior problems, and nothing is going to get fixed unless the system's fixed.

The participants all said that training on how to manage students, deal with technology, and keep up with their curriculum was considered to be a more practical use of their time. Participant 23 explains, “Technology has really changed things. Yes, and it’s the biggest distraction in my classroom for sure.” All of the teachers voiced their concerns with how to best manage the changes over time while supporting high student achievement.

Both the traditional and alternative group of teachers hoped for more practical training to address their own needs that affect their efficacy. The participants indicated that training or professional development on how to manage daily stressors or student non-compliance would be useful for new teachers. Participant 16 states: “I think they're kind of forgetting what it is to like have all the stresses of being a teacher, because you have to lesson plan, you have to make sure all your curriculum is ready to go. When they ask us to do all these extra things, they're like, well, you have the time to do it, but I'm like, do we really have the time to do it?” The participants’ concerns surrounding adequate planning time and their ability to manage several tasks at the same time was a universal concern. Participant 7 remarks, “They tried to jam so much in the three days before school. If we would have come in maybe a week before that and just hammer out, like, this is how you use Power School, just like to take attendance to the process of stuff, all the software, I just thought, could have been a little bit more in depth, or maybe better structure.” Both groups of teachers hoped for a better use of their time with more practical training.

The participants did acknowledge that they did feel better prepared when they experienced practical training and hoped to be acknowledged by the administration for their

success. Participant 3 said, “I get along pretty with everybody, but early career teachers are easy targets for older, crankier teachers, and to make sure that admin that it's clear, like, if you are doing a good job, make sure to let the let them know that they are doing a good job.” Sometimes the most practical training they can receive is advice from their administrators. Participant 8 remarks, “I think I'm doing pretty good with the support that they've given. Our superintendent reaches out a lot to us to make sure that we're doing well, she'll make sure we're ready for stuff and not like anxious about what we're doing.” The participants who had supportive administration and open communication with them frequently, felt more prepared and said they could talk to their administration team freely.

The alternatively trained teachers emphasized that their first teaching experience was the best practical training because they were learning day-by-day. Half of the participants did not have an any prior experience teaching or observing prior to their pseudo-student teaching assignment where they were the teacher of record. Even though they were able to manage the daily expectations, they shared that they would have appreciated more check-ins or input from their leadership. Participant 22 said, “It sounds crazy, I wish that the principals checked in more.” Unsure of how initiatives and directives get handled by the administration, the early-career teachers are willing to ask questions if they had the opportunity. Several participants explained they wanted more feedback from their principal and would have liked their input regarding their job performance. Participant 24 shared:

> I think that reassurance is helpful, arranging more of that purposefully, and for the fact of team building and people building. Just like, you know, not being afraid to say you're doing a good job, but also hey, you could try this, making those suggestions in a way that is not coming across as you're doing it wrong.

When they received supportive feedback, the participants felt that they could continue to grow and learn new strategies to use in their classrooms. Participant 17 stated: “I mean, that helps with a new teacher. They need a lot of encouragement. They need a lot of support. They need people to check in on them.” I found that the alternatively trained teachers wanted more administrative feedback than the traditionally trained teachers who looked more toward their colleagues for support.

Several alternatively trained teachers included in this study are second career teachers. They were hired swiftly and are experiencing true on the job training. The relationships they built with the administration and their peers was vital to their feelings of success. Participant 28 said, “Having that one-on-one connection is always needed” The early-career teachers want to be included and supported within their building, the relationships they built were valuable and provided for them if they needed help. Participant 29 explained, “I've always been a person where I've not shied away from administrators and principals being in my classroom. I always said good relationships with them…. I think having that working relationship with your administrators, curriculum administrators, things like that, is only a benefit.” These participants said that they felt more comfortable asking questions, talking to their administrators, and collaborating with their leadership. As they reflected, they found that their prior experience in different fields and other life experiences made them more willing to speak to their superiors.

Both the groups of teachers expressed that working with peers and collaborating within their departments was valuable practical training. Participant 6 said, “I think one of the things that I think is super helpful is, I mean, besides just getting hands on experience, which we do every day in the classroom, I think we need to basically look at teaching in a different manner. I think collaborating with peers, or, like, even being in department would help.” All the

participants hoped for time to share their experiences amongst grade levels and subject areas. Participant 19 explained, “I'd want to hear from veteran teachers explaining what they learned over the years and what they think would be helpful to new teachers with, like, zero admin in the room. Like, I wanted to be teacher to teacher, like, heart to heart. Like, here's how I stayed in the career for 20-30 years.” Throughout the interviews, their desire to shadow others, see other classrooms, and learn strategies while completing their first few years was a strong theme.

Impact of Induction Programs (RQ1)

Every early-career teacher must complete a two-year induction program in Pennsylvania. School districts are required to have a two-year program to educate them about their district, initiatives, technology, and provide guidance for quality education. Both the traditionally trained and alternatively trained teachers explained their induction experiences. I found that all the participants felt their induction program experience to be positive when they were able to collaborate with their peers and commiserate together about their first years in the classroom. Both groups of teachers explained if the induction program was repetitive or irrelevant to their classroom, they felt it was useless and made them more stressed and overwhelmed.

Initially, the traditionally trained participants thought their induction program was helpful and positive. They did remark that each subsequent year of the induction program was less useful and often became repetitive. Participant 4 said, “I just was dreading going to these meetings because we already listened to them and I feel like there could have been other things that was that were talked about.” If the material was new, the participants felt that the meetings were helpful. Participant 12 explained, “It was a very limited induction program. I met with my mentor teacher three times a year, beginning, middle and end, and she did a checklist of how I was doing, and because I had supports elsewhere, I was doing pretty well, and that was the extent

of my induction program." Teachers felt that the induction program should guide them to grow and learn new relevant information, it should not be a place holder or an item to simply check off the list of required tasks.

Participants shared they talk to teachers in other districts about induction and how the induction programs varied across the state. Participant 20 explains, "My first year, I think it was good in the beginning, when it was like how to use Google and everything, and so, I think as you get through it more, it starts to get a little repetitive." Most induction programs have their meeting time after the school day concludes, the participants relayed that if the information was not engaging or pertinent to them, they felt it was unproductive. Participant 18 shared, "It's has not been helpful for me at all. So they hired an outside company to do induction and she has like, PowerPoints we go through with specific activities and questions we have to answer. It feels very like college-ish, like icebreakers, activities, brainstorming, one on one, talking with other new teachers." All the participants felt that in their first year, additional assignments and meetings were a burden if it did not relate to their specific classroom tasks. Participant 21, in his third year of teaching, reflected upon his induction experience: "I guess it was helpful in that sense. I don't think everyone benefits from it, because I think some people just kind of throw it together just from listening around, but it was beneficial to me." The traditionally trained teachers expressed their appreciation of thoughtful induction programs that are well planned. The alternatively trained teachers agreed but also felt that in some instances induction programs assigned more tasks to the already inundated new teacher.

Although each school district employs a different induction model, all participants found value in the program when it was collaborative and related to their classroom needs. Participant 3 recalls, "I like the observations. Those were probably my favorite. The monthly meetings were

the only ones that were kind of annoying, because they kind of would just like, bring us in, show us some video about teaching, and then that was it." The teachers were looking or real-life solutions to the problems they faced in their classrooms.

The induction program can be used to distribute many types of information to new teachers. The participants felt that their induction experience was less valuable if it did not focus on all aspects of the job. Participant 23 said, "It's a two-year program, most of it is going through the rubric that we are observed and evaluated on Danielson rubric, so almost every day is going through that kind of stuff." Useful training and appropriate ways to address classroom needs would have been more powerful according to the new teachers. Participant 7 said, "I thought that was pretty good, and then every six weeks, there's an induction meeting with all the new teachers, like all the other teachers, everyone's on their laptop, like every other PD day and they're talking about safety, or they're talking about differentiation. So it's yeah, like, we could use an hour of training on Power School or something like that." All the particicpants acknowledge that the information they are given is important, but the method in which it is disseminated mattered; they felt that if a training could have been an email, that may have been more helpful.

The early-career teachers valued their induction program the most when they were teacher centered and allowed time for them to interact and support one another. Participant 5 explains, "Our induction, it partners with the university to train to continue to train the on the new educators. It is a very comfortable meeting. It is all of us together, and we are learning together and learning from the experience and it is really valuable." New teachers want to talk through their experiences and when coupled with two professors that were active veteran educators was very valuable to the new teacher.

Neutral to the induction program and sensing that all training was valuable as a new teacher, one participant said it was the people she looked forward to seeing each session. Participant 8 said, “I mean, it was nice in the sense that I got to meet a lot of other people who were in the same boat as I am, where they are starting their first year and I'm starting my first year. So, it's really nice to get to see like this group of people. Right now I'm pretty neutral, I don't think that any training can really hurt.” One teacher did not see any value in her induction program, except to talk to her peers. Participant 18 admits, “I think the only value I get out of it is when I'm able to talk to other teachers without a prompt.” The induction program should be a safe space where new teachers can collaborate and share their classroom experiences. Participant 16 shared, “That time it's nice to meet with admin and get their perspective on things, but then we also get to hear the perspectives from new teachers as well, and what they're going through and how we can support one another.” If a teacher feels their induction program has created a network or a cohort of new teachers, they stated they were more likely to feel happy and supported in their new positions.

Alternative Pathway Induction Experience

The alternative certification participants felt that the induction program had meaning and was valuable. They commiserated with the traditionally trained teachers and shared that their experience was more positive when they had time to collaborate with other new teachers. Induction programs that are repetitive or resemble coursework are not as valuable as sessions that provide new skills or pertinent information.

The induction program was valuable to the alternatively trained teachers if they were given time to ask questions and learn from others. Participant 22 said, “Yes, I one I went through at my first school was the one where we had the three big days before the school year started. We

had, like, once a month meeting after school, and that was really cool." Time to work with other teachers and administrators, the participants shared they looked forward to the induction meetings. Participant 30 stated: "We do monthly induction. It was a nice way to start to get to know people and a monthly induction meeting with our principal, the new teachers in the building, I don't mind it so much because the whole thing is just new to me, because of not going about it that way, like, not going about it the normal way." As a result of taking an alternative pathway, the induction meetings were a set time for the new teacher to collaborate and get a new training opportunity.

With little prior experience in the classroom, the alternatively trained teachers viewed the induction programs as positive professional development. Participant 6 recalls, "One of the things that I found super helpful was understanding those resources that we have available and being able to communicate that to the students." An induction program is deemed useful when it provides new resources and opportunities for teachers to support their students and classroom. Participant 17 recalls, "It was good, because I got to meet with a lot of different people, I learned a lot of things that I needed to know that I otherwise wouldn't have. It was really eye opening, so I didn't really mind it, because it was all stuff that was new to me. I mean, because everything was brand new to me, so it was all helpful." The early-career teachers felt the induction program was most impactful when they learned how to communicate with parents, complete grades, manage student behaviors, and implement safety measures.

Rather than listening to speakers or lectures, the teachers appreciated the time to interact with one another and share ideas and felt their induction experience was positive. Participant 29 recalled, "Overall, I think it was, it was very good, we would have monthly meetings with the group, but it was also just a good opportunity to have everybody that was new to the district,

kind of have that camaraderie, like your class of new teachers." When new teachers have a place and space to work closely with a group of people, they felt a sense of belonging.

One teacher felt that their experience with the induction program was not valuable at all, but provided ways it could be better. Participant 11 explained, "The teacher induction program: I don't think is very helpful, but I think it could be helpful if it was run a little differently. I think that the couple meetings we've had where all of the new teachers in the district got to meet and we could just talk and swap stories and experiences and figure things out together, those were really good meetings." Many of the alternatively trained participants said it can feel as though they are in silos, especially if they are completing their certification requirements while in their first year of teaching.

There were a few alternatively trained participants that felt that the induction program was not beneficial in their first three years of teaching. Participant 19 reflects, "There's induction and once a month, I would have to go to a school with all the other new teachers and sit through pretty useless meetings, and it would always be like when I was most stressed, and there is actually a year two, but it's a lot more asynchronous, which is nice." Holding meetings to complete a requirement rather than learning from them can be frustrating for early-career teachers. Participant 24 said, "I could have done this on Zoom and not come up here, whereas I could probably benefit from like, time watching other teachers, like model lessons." Teachers felt that if the program could be made more convenient with less travel time, the lessons may have been more effective, and the teachers would have more time for their own planning and preparation. Participant 14 remarks, "A lot of the induction program has been very frustrating because it feels like it just adds work and paperwork, it's definitely, it is a strain, because it does affect whenever I'm trying to get all of that stuff done, that's time that I'm not putting into my

lessons, right?" Several participants expressed they were frustrated that they did not need more coursework to complete but would appreciate true professional development for the subject or grade level they teach.

The recent changes to induction program requirements in Pennsylvania also caused frustration to some participants. Participant 1 said, "I am salty about the two-year induction that I have to go through now that they changed. To me, it's just so much extra unnecessary work and I'm trying to finish my master's. I'm trying to be a new teacher." The early-career teachers who initially had one year of induction felt that when their district moved to a two-year induction program, the program was drawn out with no new learning opportunities. I found that if the induction program was repetitive, lacked interaction, or was designed like collegiate coursework, the early-career teachers did not value the program; however, if the induction program allowed for new teacher collaboration and comradery, it was deemed a positive experience.

Professional Development (RQ1)

Although each participant's professional development (PD) experience was different, the interviews revealed that professional development should be specific for individual teachers. When PD is directly related to a teacher's content or grade level and provides teacher collaboration time, then it is most beneficial to the early-career teachers. The traditional pathway teachers felt that time to work with their peers, collaborate on their curriculum, and discuss ways to manage their classroom were the most effective professional development days. The alternatively trained teachers felt that almost any professional development time to learn new information about the district, the classroom, or training was beneficial in some way. An alternatively trained teacher's professional development should be geared toward the gaps in their training rather than broad informational sessions.

The traditionally trained teachers felt that their time was valued, and the training was essential if it aligned to their classroom and what they teach. Participant 21recalled, “Last school year, we had a day for professional development where we talked about the STEEL standards, so that was beneficial, and it kind of it aligned very well with what I was taught in my teaching program.” Specific training on new standards and new initiatives was appreciated and the participants felt it was valuable. Participant 5 said, “I wish that I could have more days of training with our curriculum, but I'll take what I can get at this point.” Dedicating professional development days to curriculum, safety, and subject specific training helps to elevate stress for early-career teachers who cannot secure substitutes during the regular school year. Participant 2 stated, “I mean, there are, of course, like, a million trainings I have to do. One thing that was really beneficial to me was having the knowledge to then support my students medically.” Real-life PD is important for new teachers to have prior to the start of the school year.

Early-career teachers explained that they usually do not get to attend the PD if their building cannot get a substitute, which makes them feel like they are falling further behind and not as valued by the district. Participant 12 remarks, “When we have, like, department meetings or PD days, they really do try to give us time there, which is helpful, because other than that, you don't really get to collaborate or see your peers.” Time to work within a grade level or subject area is vital to early-career teachers, they found that time with their peers the most useful professional development. Participant 9 states: “As a first-year teacher, I just want more time to do work and to actually prep and do things that will directly benefit my students.” The participants were all eager to collaborate with their peers in PD because they were actively preparing for the lessons and curricular units for their students.

Some traditionally trained teachers did feel that the professional development was not helpful and seemed to waste their time. Participant 23 states: “A lot of that stuff that happens in those PD days, I'm kind of just like, why are we doing this? Like, there are much better things I could be doing with the two hours that we're sitting in this meeting.” Professional development days generally occur at the end of grading marking periods and semesters, teachers are concerned with getting their grades done and completing tasks to plan for the next unit of study. Participant 18 said, “I've really noticed that with PD and this type of stuff, they do not focus on special ed. They focus on regular ed. So even all the professional development I've had so far this year, none of it has pertained to me.” The early-career teachers all felt that if the PD was not mandated by the state, the school districts should consider what training and development each teacher is required to complete, instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach. Participant 3 recalls, “I think every year, that doesn't really benefit me a ton, to be totally honest with you, I just think content wise, it's tough to kind of connect with professional development days.” The traditionally trained early-career teachers expressed that professional development should be specific to their classroom, it should be presented in a different manner.

Alternative PD

Unlike the traditionally trained teachers, the alternative pathway participants felt that almost any professional development and training helped them learn about the classroom and was beneficial in some way. Participant 30 said, “You know, an early career teacher that is right out of undergrad with their degree may look at the job and the tasks and the training differently than somebody that's coming from a second career, but, you know, still kind of going through the same training, but definitely gleaning different positivity things or negative things out of those trainings or those experiences.” The second career teachers did explain that their guidance and

experiences were different than traditionally trained teachers, and they felt that professional development days were often a time to collaborate and gain more knowledge.

Much like the traditionally trained teachers, the alternatively trained group said professional development that provides more resources and time to collaborate with their colleagues was deemed a positive experience. Participant 30 shared, “I don't mind things like PD teaching us, because I didn't learn those things in undergrad.” The participants also expressed the need for specialized training because they had no prior experience with the programs or tools they were supposed to use. Participant 25 explains, “We did some training of assessments, specifically with phonemic awareness that I think was helpful, that I know was helpful.” Collaboration time with experienced teachers was a strong theme throughout the interviews. Participant 22 said, “My current school, like, we have our professional development days where we do a lot of like events together, like as a school and like as a department, where we analyze data, and we kind of have time to look at lessons.” The collaboration time with a subject or grade level helps to develop the early-career teacher and help them use best practices to best serve their students.

Teachers’ perceptions of professional development are affected by timing of the training and by who is delivering the instruction. Participant 1 states: “Throughout the whole year, there was like, three and a half days where I was pulled and sent to a science of reading training, and I feel like that would have been more beneficial to learn that before I hit the ground running at the beginning of the year.” Properly planning a PD calendar should be the district’s top priority so that early-career teachers are not scrambling to deliver instruction without proper training. The participants also felt that those providing the PD should be current in their practices with students. Participant 19 explains, “The people who give the presentations at professional

development, they're typically not teachers anymore." The participants felt there would be more relevant delivery of professional development and more teacher buy-in if presented by a colleague rather than a person who is not a teacher.

Experiences and Challenges (RQ2)

Classroom Management

All the participants indicated that classroom management was a major challenge that early-career teachers encountered. Regardless of pathway, the early-career teacher experiences a wide range of students' ability and willingness to appropriately sit and learn in their classroom. Managing a classroom environment can be challenging if the teacher is not equipped with the right tools and resources to correct negative student behavior. The participants that had a traditional training path said they were not always prepared for the disruptive student behaviors and felt that they had to find resources once they were in their first job. The alternatively trained participants also felt classroom management was a concern for them, but they relied on their life experiences, and they found ways to cope with the difficulties in the classroom.

The traditionally trained early-career teachers felt that while their preparation program discussed classroom management, they did not fully grasp how to deal with certain behaviors on their own. Participant 2 said, "You know, there's definitely a lot of like, on the behavioral side of the students that I haven't necessarily gotten a lot of help in how to address that." Without clear steps to take if students do not follow the classroom rules, early-career teachers did feel that they must deal with disruptions and there is no recourse to address the issues. Participant 4 stated: "I feel like even in college, you don't really talk about that, it's kind of just like, here are some strategies you could use, but no one really ever taught you how to actually deal with it every single day." The teachers felt that teacher training and professional development does not prepare

new teachers to address non-compliance or provide actionable resources if there are disruptions to the classroom environment.

Early-career teachers often hesitate to ask for help, fearing it will make them look like they cannot manage their classrooms. Participant 27 reflects, “I would say it's student behaviors. I went from having 14 students last year to 21 this year, so just a bigger class size, and there's a lot of big personalities in my room.” From year to year, early-career teachers have different classroom management concerns based upon class size, student needs, and are expected to differentiate and support all students. Participant 21 relates, “This year, the classes that I have, I'm having more discipline issues, and it seems like I've run out of options more quickly this year than I have in the past.” The teacher may try many different management methods and tools, but if the students do not respond positively, they must continue to adapt.

The teachers said in addition to behavior, keeping students who are absenteeism concerns or academically behind engaged can be difficult. Participant 23 said, “My two below grade level classes are a pretty good mix of those kids that truly are just below grade level and the kids that got stuck there because they’re behavior problem.” Students who are chronically absent and students that exhibit distracting behaviors typically fall behind in their coursework; the early-career teachers are not always prepared to deal with that day in and day out. Participant 3 explains “Kids being absent is a big challenge and it's like trying to compensate for every kid in the class has been really challenging.” The participants hoped for more support and central office help regarding absenteeism and student behavioral issues.

The participants felt that maintaining clear expectations and knowing a routine does help both the teacher and the students be more successful. Participant 9 explained, “I just think that the clear expectations and procedures that they want us to do and that I'm expected to do would

be the best." The participants said that dealing with consistent classroom behavior issues negatively affected their mental health and made them question their career choices. Participant 12: "Last year, I had a really challenging group of students who were not necessarily like your typical behavior issues, lots of little behaviors and talking that add up, and that impacted my mental health. It impacted my classroom management, because I definitely was not the teacher that I strive to be, because I was constantly overwhelmed." What an early-career teacher refers to as "little behaviors" creates a tidal wave of disruption and dysregulation in the classroom. When students refuse to sit down or get up throughout instruction, throw objects, and make noises that are unnecessary, it is hard to maintain composure. Participant 7 states: "Classroom management, I think, is more important than content, because it's not fair to the good kids." The new teachers also said that they did not want to be a disciplinarian each day, but rather an educator who supports students in their learning and success. I found that the new teachers were hoping for a positive school environment to educate students, rather than a negative experience with student issues.

The alternatively trained participants also stated one of their biggest challenges was classroom management and addressing negative student behaviors. Participant 22 said, "Student behavior was really bad last year, okay, and that was burning me out very quickly." Several participants did not student teach, so they experienced classroom management and disruptive students for the first time. Addressing behavioral concerns and juggling the various other responsibilities while completing licensure was one of the most difficult concerns. Participant 14 recalls, "My biggest is classroom management and keeping up with all of the paperwork feels like a lot this year, but classroom management, from what I understand, that is like very normal for first and especially because I was coming into it a bit later it was a factor." Working through

challenges, in real time on the job, presented as a serious issue for all of the participants, regardless of pathway.

The alternatively trained teachers also felt that managing the classroom became more difficult if the students were not carefully scheduled to minimize disruption. Participant 11 explained, "…mine's considered like a specials class. They just mix the pods for my class. So, if they were to separate specific kids into different pods for their everyday classes, they could be mixed for my class, which causes a lot of issues with that scheduling problem." Several early-career teachers said that scheduling issues were factors in placing students together that should not be in the same room at the same time. Participant 10 felt, "Some of the students just have all this disrespect. They just don't care. There's a lack of fear of authority and the consequences that they could potentially get for anything." Experiencing disruptive and disrespectful students made the participants feel overwhelmed and often made them question their choice to go into education. Participant 30 noted, "…that can be very difficult when you have super disruptive students or students that are not being properly disciplined for their actions in school." The participants did relay that if the students' challenging behavior was not addressed, and they were allowed to continue disrupting the room, the teacher felt unsupported.

Engaging students and trying to overcome challenges was also a strong theme that emerged from the alternatively trained teachers' interviews. There are many distractions that students bring into the classroom and the students' desire for instant gratification has caused early-career teachers to struggle with keeping the students engaged and interested in their learning. Participant 17 said, "I'm kind of hoping that cell phones are banned in school for kids." The participants felt that engaging every student was difficult, even if there are not any behavioral issues, but did want to try to create amazing lessons each day. Participant 25 said, "I

have three attention seeking kiddos that, of course, are giving me a run for my money, but are also a great learning experience." Locating ways to address behaviors and improve student outcomes is the goal for the teachers.

As the teacher gets more time in the classroom, they find more strategies to cope with difficult behaviors and situations. Participant 1 stated: "I definitely feel like I have a better handle on that this year compared to last year, you just keep trying different things until you achieve that." The second and third year alternatively trained teachers each explained that they learned to work through the ebbs and flows of behavior management. Participant 13 stated: "I think that to a great extent, I'm very, very patient, and then every once in a while, it's, it's hard not to take it personally when you invest so much." Working tirelessly to support the students, early-career teachers invest all of themselves into the classroom. Participant 31 said, "I do feel like training on that could be very beneficial. De-escalation techniques, redirection, what to do about cell phones. I mean that was kind of all just stuff to learn about." The participants all said that classroom management is a major concern and felt that additional support, training, and professional development could help. Possessing the knowledge of what to do when they encounter negative student behaviors was the most sought-after solution.

Financial Support and Resources

The participants shared their experiences and challenges in their first few years as educators; the school's lack of resources and diminishing budgets were of great concern for the new teachers. When they shared their experience of training, support, and preparedness, the participants communicated that the lack of resources became a challenge and roadblock to their feelings of success. The participants from both pathways stated that financial support was needed to compensate for a lack of classroom resources.

Early-career teachers with little to no experience are usually hired at the lowest salary step. The second career teachers and those who have a master's degree may be hired at a higher pay scale, but still at the bottom for years of experience. The Pennsylvania Public School Employees' Retirement System (PSERS) made changes in 2011 and 2019 affecting how new hires were contributing to a retirement plan. A teacher's salary is no longer supported by a strong pension, but rather requires the educator to pay much more into retirement and benefit packages. Participant 3 said, "Honestly, just more pay. The pay is not terrible, don't get me wrong. but this year particularly, since I opened up a retirement fund last year, money's been a little more tight than usual and I'm not paying a ton of expenses. I still feel like I'm pinched for money." To offset new costs and a lower starting salary, early-career teachers who are moving out on their own often will take on a second job or try to coach or advise student groups. Participant 27 explained:

> Pay has been a very big thing this year, because I moved out on my own, and pay here is not fantastic, so that's been a struggle. I wish there was more opportunities for, like, after school clubs, or like, any of those things that, like, I can get paid to do something extra in the building where I'm not having to go find a whole other job.

I found that several early career teachers hoped for salary increases and attempted to earn more to support their lifestyle and their classrooms. Participant 27 said, "The amount of money I spent as a first-year teacher, and not having those like resources from the school. I think when I put most of it together for my taxes last year, it was well over a thousand dollars." If the school district does not have resources to provide for each teacher's classroom, the participants shared they pay for the items they need on their own.

The participants with an alternative pathway did have similar concerns to the traditionally trained teachers about financial support and resources for their classrooms. Participant 29 said,

“I'm making this sacrifice to turn away a full-time job where I'm making pretty good money, and now I have to basically work, prove myself again, work for free, just to step in the door.” The second career teachers did reference how hard it was to go into education without some type of compensation. Although there is a significant teacher shortage, the state has not identified or created enough pathways for willing candidates to enter while being supported financially. Participant 14 agreed and said, “We do have a lot of stresses with the financial aspects, with starting out at that, trying to balance it, maybe with another job, and kind of winging the classroom management strategy is like we're figuring it out.” Early-career teachers’ salary is also affected by their desire to create an inviting classroom. Participant 30 shared, “Calming corners cost money.” The participants want their classroom to be inviting and have interesting spaces but feel pressure to create this without resources from the district.

One teacher provided discrepant evidence and said they did not feel financial strain as a new teacher. Participant 6 disclosed, “I feel very fortunate that I'm in a very good school district in that and that I don't necessarily have to worry. I make really good money for being a first- and second-year teacher, so I think that is helpful in starting and staying.” Early-career teachers from an alternative pathway did feel that financial incentives and school resources increased their desire to join the education field.

Work/Life Balance

Several early-career teachers discussed that they had poor balance between work and their private life. I found that both traditional and alternative pathway teachers experienced the same concerns. Participant 16 said, “I think the biggest challenge for me personally is the time management piece, because, like, I'm working so much extra outside of school, and has been kind of hard. My biggest challenge for me is that work life balance.” Working outside of contract

hours was common amongst the participants. The grading, planning, preparation, emails, and parent communication takes up a great deal of the early-career teacher's time. Participant 24 explained:

> I mean, so, just like work life, home life, balance. I'm a disaster at that. I always have been, so this is like just magnifying it, because I feel like you cannot get anything done during the day. It does not matter if there is a planning meeting assigned, like something will come up, someone will want to talk to you. You have to eat. Like you have to do all these things and you still have to kind of maintain face.

As a second career teacher, participants new to education found it difficult that they had no personal time to manage their stress or find an outlet due to the schedule constraints and the quick pace of the school day. Participant 15 shared, "I think that the juggling of all of the things that you do as a classroom teacher, especially as a new classroom teacher, it can definitely be overwhelming at times." The participants shared that the daily tasks associated with being a classroom teacher are requirements and maintaining a healthy balance between working hours and personal time is difficult.

When new teachers begin, they said regular tasks take more time due to the mental load that weighs on them. Participant 17 said, "I think that would help some kind of mental health, I don't know, like a work life balance coach or something like that." Mentors and colleagues cannot always be enough support for early-career teachers trying to balance their classroom needs, administrative tasks, paperwork, and their own personal life needs. The participants did recognize that they sometimes do need additional supports or a break to better serve their students and maintain their own passion for teaching. When new teachers prioritize themselves at times, they generally found more balance between work and home needs. Participant 29 recalls,

"This year, I think, is the first year where I can confidently say I'm actually making strides to separate job and life, the work life something. It's a huge negative, but the work life balance was something that I really needed to work on myself." The participants of this study all relayed they want to do the best possible job for their students and the school district. Managing a new job as a novice educator can be difficult when there are student and parent concerns, new curriculum and expectations, and a lack of resources.

Retention of Early Career Teachers (RQ3)

Expectations or Burnout of Early Career Teachers

Expectations and requirements of early-career teachers can leave them feeling fatigued when they are consistently dealing with challenges. Teachers must manage their classroom, teach their content area, work with students to be successful, properly document and follow student IEP's, communicate with parents, and follow any school or state mandates. Schools and the community expect teachers to manage all tasks even if there is a lack of resources, challenging student behavior, and difficult schedules or duties. I found that early-career teachers from traditional and alternative pathways have the same expectations and face potential exhaustion due to the nature of the work.

Managing the different aspects of a classroom teacher, new teachers, often in their first professional jobs, find themselves engulfed and extremely occupied in their first three years. Participant 12 said, "I understand a lot of this stuff is state mandates, but also, like the turnaround time between all the extra work, talking to parents, making tests, grading tests essays, it adds up." Outside of their teaching schedule, teachers must find time to address other aspects of the job. Without enough time in the day, early-career teachers shared that they are constantly rushing to try to accomplish everything by their deadlines. Participant 3 explained, "We get through so

much in such a little bit of time that it just feels like I'm running a race every single day." Educators are expected to deliver in-depth lesson plans that adhere to state standards and teach students their grade level standards. Participant 7 explained, "You have three different lessons, you know, half of your day. I think we try to fit too much in the day and kind of lose sight that we're here to teach, we're here to develop social, communal skills." The growing expectations placed on school districts and teachers to support student's growing needs was one of the hardest aspects of the job for the participants.

Schools historically taught children in their subject areas; today, schools must teach, protect, and supplement for student needs. Participant 5 recalls, "We're trying to solve the world's problems in the middle of the first-grade hallway, but I don't know that I can give a perfect solution, because I feel like I'm not even experienced enough to be the one to answer that question." Without proper resources or support, the participants felt they often struggled to address every student's needs without sacrificing their own time and personal resources. In specific classrooms, teachers need additional paraprofessionals or aides to help with their student's needs. Participant 2 recalls, "If the aide is not there and someone needs to use the bathroom, it's a whole group endeavor to take to use the bathroom." Several of the participants from both pathways felt that more personnel to assist them in the classroom would be beneficial for all of the students.

The participants indicated that their feelings of fatigue were a result of managing individual student needs while maintaining a rigorous classroom and preparing materials throughout the year. Participant 23 shared, "It's definitely overwhelming as an early career teacher to be building the curriculum as you're as you're teaching the curriculum." The

participants shred that they felt building their own curriculum, pacing guide, and teaching a new subject without guidance made them feel extreme pressure.

The alternatively trained participants felt similarly to the traditionally trained teachers and explained that some of the expectations placed on educators can be difficult to manage. Participant 10 said, “I feel like all I'm doing is just, like, working nonstop. I feel like with corporate, at least there was a good cut off, okay, I'm done with work now I can go do fun things with school, it's very mentally draining.” Second-career teachers shared that in their previous jobs, there were defined hours whereas in education, teachers often work outside of their contract hours to accomplish all the required tasks. Participant 24 explained, “We have so many meetings during the week. We have working faculty every Wednesday morning, then you're right into this school day. We have these collaboration meetings two times a week. We have our grade level meetings. I have new teacher meetings.” Meetings and collaboration are important, but new teachers are overseeing many details, and the additional meetings can cause them to lose preparation periods that could be dedicated to lesson planning and classroom tasks. Participant 1 states: “I get pulled to sub a lot, which is another complaint.” With teacher and substitute shortages, teachers are often pulled during their preparation periods to cover their colleague’s classes; the expectation is that everyone works together to support the school.

Participants did remark that additional coverages or duties adds another layer of stress to their day. Trying to meet all the expectations, early-career teachers may feel unsupported by their administrators if they are misunderstood or if they make a mistake. Participant 22 recalled:

> We had some pretty awkward conversations and awkward run ins, and I felt like I was getting in trouble for, like, very little things. I drove home that day and I was like, ‘Do I

even want to do this anymore?' So having, like, supportive administration is really important to me too.

Managing the stress each day and maintaining their classroom can lead to teacher burnout. The participants in their first year recalled more feelings of burnout than the participants in their second or third year of teaching.

Within their classroom, the early-career teachers did explain that test scores, apathetic students, and classroom management were sources of stress and did not support them staying in the classroom. Participant 15 said, "Our tests are our scores are bad. We're in improvement right now, we're trying to bring it up, but I feel like switching to that textbook. I don't think that's the answer." Changes to curriculum and resources based upon standardized testing caused the early-career teacher to feel overwhelmed.

Attempting to teach new material while managing student behavior is difficult for any educator, but especially tough for early-career teachers. Participant 31 said, "I mean, the hardest thing is probably, like, somebody who's, just disinterested in bettering themselves, that's the hardest. It's tough to get somebody to care when they just don't." Faced with students who are constantly using technology, phones, and computers, early career teachers try to adapt to their student needs and keep their attention. The expectations that the students will adhere to the lesson is daunting if the teacher has a group of students who are not interested in their education. All the participants felt that a culture shift within the schools could help to get students more engaged and ultimately keep teachers from exhaustion.

Mentorship

School districts assign a tenured teacher to be the formal mentor for new teachers as a part of the induction program. In this study, twenty-eight of the thirty-one participants had a

formal mentor assigned to them. Every participant shared that their mentor or a trusted colleague was the single most important factor in their success; without a positive mentor, the teachers did not feel they would remain in education.

The early-career teachers that had a traditional pathway benefitted from having a helpful mentor. If there was no mentor or the teacher did not have a positive relationship, the teachers experienced a more difficult first year. The timing and assignment of a mentor is important, if the new teacher is not assigned a mentor right away, they felt it made their first experiences harder. Participant 4 said, “I didn't necessarily have a mentor for my year as a building sub. Without that mentor, it was really hard. If I had someone that could just kind of support me and help me with that, that would have been nice my first year.” Early-career teachers hired as a long-term substitute should have a mentor, but because they may not have a contract, school districts usually do not provide that support.

As districts fill sudden vacancies, the early-career teacher may not have a mentor assigned right away. Participant 2 shared, “I didn't actually have her technically until last week. So, there was definitely a lot of stuff I just kind of had to learn on my own, but now that we're at the end of like the first marking period, she's been really helpful.” The participants explained that the relationship they have with their mentor is important; if the relationship was positive, the mentor was the best source of support for the early-career teacher. Participant 21 shared, “He was really helpful, but I guess the biggest thing is he was just there a lot. Anytime I had a question at all, I would ask him in the morning, before school or at lunch. Honestly, it makes me want to come to work. Feeling like there is another person to lean on during the first years in the classroom helps to retain early-career teachers. Participant 8 said, “She's really great, I can go to her with any questions that I have.” An approachable mentor helps to create a more positive

school environment for the early-career teachers. Participant 20: “I could just ask her, and I didn't have to feel like any pressure about the question, which was great.” The participants with a traditional pathway did explain that without the mentor they would have felt unsure about their decisions and would have felt awkward asking other more seasoned teachers.

Half of the traditionally trained teachers said that they appreciated their mentor, but found that other colleagues were also just as valuable when they needed assistance. Participant 27 commented, “My mentor is great, and then my next-door neighbor teacher was awesome, and answering questions and helping me through so that was really helpful.” Many times, other teachers who are not the mentor also help to support the early-career teachers. Participant 5 said, “It is difficult when a lot of the support that I am getting is coming from the other first grade teachers, and the person that's being compensated for that is not even in my in my grade.” Early-career teachers did find that if their mentor was not teaching the same grade or subject area, they felt they depended on the kindness of others teaching the same content. Participant 9 responded, “Yes, I do have a mentor teacher, but I am the only algebra two teacher in my building, so it's very difficult to collaborate and talk with her about algebra two content.” The participants explained that if the mentor did not teach the same subject area, they still appreciated their help with questions and procedures about everything else except for the content area.

Some participants had good relationships with their mentor, but they did not rely on them as often. Participant 3 recalls, “I don't talk to him a whole lot, not like there's any beef. It's just, they're literally on the other side of the school, and they actually didn't teach any of the same classes that I teach right now.” Several participants discussed that if they were not within a close proximity to their room, they did not talk to their mentor as often. Participant 16 said, “He gives me some real back behind the scenes in insight to what's going on in the state of education,

everything, especially with our district, but I could also go to any of the other teachers, and they would be willing to help me out, work with me and all that, and I think I'm very grateful for that." A collaborative school culture helps early-career teachers stay motivated to remain in education.

A few participants had little support and lacked clear guidance from their mentor. Without strong supportive mentors, the early-career teachers did express their discomfort during their first year. Participant 26 was neutral to his mentor, "I think it was helpful. Our mentor was our department chair. I never would have thought that this was a mentor mentee relationship." Without an active mentor, participants felt they did not have a clear contact to talk to about their concerns, questions, and experiences. Participant 12 explains, "I did not have much of a relationship with my mentor. I think she came to check on me maybe three times throughout my entire first year." Without a good mentor relationship, this participant felt that she would not have remained in education and would have left the profession. "I think I probably like, genuinely I don't think I would still be teaching like, if that had just been the only like relationship and support, I had was an absent mentor" (Participant 12). The interviews exposed that positive mentors who actively support the early-career teacher in their first year make the biggest impact on how the teacher feels in the school and in their role.

Similar to the traditionally trained participants, the alternatively trained participants overwhelmingly wanted to have a positive mentor to assist them as they began teaching. Eight participants out of the fifteen had positive relationships with their mentor and they perceived that their mentor made the first year of teaching much easier. The early-career teachers in this group who were simultaneously student teaching during their first year had no cooperating teacher, their mentor was their lifeline during that time. Participant 25 shared, "I have a mentor teacher,

no cooperating teacher." Learning how to teach without a cooperating teacher can be difficult, but the participants that had a positive mentor who was engaged with them throughout the year explained that that relationship made the job attainable. Participant 10 who had no cooperating teacher, mentor, and is teaching through an intern certification said:

> She's always been super helpful. A couple times, she's even come over to my room and given me support and I feel like there's other teachers too, like I have one other teacher as well who, she's kind of taken me under her wing and has given me some guidance as well. So, I've been like a pseudo mentee.

If they are teaching for the first time, on an intern certificate, the participants said that without their mentor they would not have had enough support to continue in the field. Participant 11 recalls, "I received a mentor when I was long term subbing, and that was a really great program." Coming from a second career or experiencing an alternative pathway, the mentor may be the first and only person to help the early-career teacher learn how to teach. Participant 17 shared, "Great relationship, the relationship was good. It was very helpful to have their help. I mean, she gave me some stuff to get started that she had used and that helps when you've never taught before. So, I mean, it's helped me grow as a teacher." The participants from both pathways discussed how important mentorship was and that the right mentor for each new teacher greatly affected their ability to teach and manage their own classroom.

New teachers state there are many requirements and expectations specific to the building and district. Participant 6 recalls, "She's been super great in assisting in any questions, definitely helpful." The participants said that their mentor was someone they could turn to for any reason and that made them feel better about the job they were doing. They felt that patience and the willingness to share resources or advice was most valuable to them. Building a strong

relationship with their mentor, the participants felt they had a place that was safe to share and discuss difficult topics, which helped to keep them in their role.

Four alternatively trained teachers did not experience a good rapport with their mentor. One participant felt that the way the district paired mentees up with a mentor was not well planned and it caused the teacher to feel uncomfortable. Participant 30 said, “It was a little difficult for me to try and not feel excluded. I can always go downstairs and talk to another fourth-grade teacher if I need to, or other people in the building.” Mentors must be carefully chosen to best support new teachers. . Participant 24 recalled, “She has several mentees. I am one of, in this year's group in my building, I'm one of five.” If the mentor had several teachers to support, the participants felt that the relationship was not as robust, and they were not able to freely turn to the mentor. Mentorship should be individualized to support the teacher.

Apathetic mentors do not provide support for early-career teachers. Participant 19 recalls, “He did nothing for me, I mean, it's funny, he just got the title of mentor, but nothing was ever really, like, said about it, and then, like he would check up on me every once in a while. I luckily didn't feel like I struggled too bad. But, I mean, a good mentor would always be useful. You know?” Consistency in mentorship is important for new teachers to have support throughout the year. Participant 22 states: “My first mentor was literally right across the hall from me and I felt uncomfortable asking her questions. I felt like I was bothering her.” When teachers do not have supportive mentors or colleagues, they are morel likely to leave the district or the profession. Participant 22 did leave the district following her first year and was hired by a neighboring district that provided a more positive mentor. The participants explained that they were motivated to stay at their district or to leave the district based upon the relationships they had with their mentor and other teachers in the building.

Motivation

All the participants shared their motivation to become a teacher and remain in the classroom is to teach students. Although they expressed some challenges they experienced as early-career teachers, they universally felt that the working with their students made them want to stay in the classroom. They all felt that helping students achieve their learning goals and performing to their best ability outweighed any struggles or difficulties in the profession.

The traditionally trained participants explained that the experience with their students and helping them to achieve their educational goals was the top reason the teachers were motivated to remain in the classroom. Participant 2 shared, “I'm very passionate about helping kids who grew up like I did and helping them to overcome the barriers that poverty has, and helping to make their lives better, and hopefully they'll have, like, a better life than I did, like better childhood.” Creating better outcomes for students was a common reason why the participants enjoy the classroom. Participant 16 said, “I think the other thing about my job is that I just love to be of assistance to students, because I knew as a teacher, as a student, I always needed that support system and that my teachers were there for me.” I found that as former students in the classroom, teachers often remember their own experiences and want to create positive learning environments for their students.

The connections and relationships the teachers build with their students is impactful. Participant 21 remarked, “I think a lot of it would just have to be the students, and knowing I make a difference. I have developed a lot of connections with these kids, and I've seen the way that I can affect them or kind of inspire them.” Inspiring students to achieve more and learn something new each day keeps the teachers coming back each day excited to work with their students. Participant 23 stated: “My favorite part about my job, the part that keeps me satisfied is

my students and seeing them kind of grow and develop, not only as students, but like, as people." The participants explained that being a positive role model and helping them to grow overall was important to them. Participant 5 said, "I think that that motivates a lot of teachers is they keep you coming back every day, and they keep you caring, because you care for them. The motivation of hoping to see the light bulb, hoping to see them discover something about themselves that they don't know." Describing their inspiration, several participants discuss what it is like to see a student learn a new skill, accomplish something that used to be hard for them, and realize their own potential.

The participants felt that watching their students learn and grow is powerful and continues to motivate them to return to the classroom day over day. Participant 7 responded, "It's a good group of kids and parents." Due to his relationships with the students and their families, he wanted to keep showing up for them every day. Participant 20 stated: "I really like coaching, and that is one of the big things that like keeps me coming back. Like I coached the past two years, it was awesome, and then I start to apply things from teaching to coaching, and coaching to teaching, and I see it carry over, and I'll see it work." Two participants both felt their coaching and teaching career went hand in hand, in the classroom and on the field, they were there to support their students to grow and do their best.

Several participants also said they loved being in a school environment and that their school had a positive culture. Participant 3 said, "I love the fact that the job feels more like it feels like a community, and like I can be involved. What keeps me motivated to stay in the classroom is, like, seeing, like, hearing the kids say, you know, I love your class. This is a great class, and you know, you're like one of my favorite teachers." When the school feels like a

community, the teachers relate to each other along with the students, there is a shared goal to educate them and support their growth.

Working with other professionals, many participants commented that their relationships with their colleagues was a motivating factor to remain in education. Participant 4 reflected:

> Definitely, being around the kids. I love, just like being around the kids and like making a difference in their lives. I love, like collaborating with my co-workers and just, I feel like we're together all the time, so it's important to collaborate, work together, bounce ideas off of each other.

The shared task of educating students can only be understood by the people in the classrooms next to each other. The early-career teachers that had a traditional pathway all said that the culture of the school and the students were the main reasons they love to teach.

The early-career teachers from an alternative pathway all entered education as either a second-career or after finishing another degree. Their desire to teach, and their willingness to take a non-traditional pathway, shows their motivation to be in the field of education. Participant 30 shared, “My motivation for even subbing, because it was a big career change for me, I started subbing because there was a need, and I didn't want to see kids miss instruction because they didn't have a substitute.” This participant was motivated to teach because of the teacher shortage and for the desire to make a difference in students’ lives. Participant 29 said, “I think for me again, back to the community thing, like it's more than a job for me.” Differently from the more traditional pathway, the alternative participants shared their desire to support the community and the students within the community schools as their motivation to enter into education. Participant 22 said, “It's the kids. They're great, it's fulfilling.” I found that the early-career teachers experienced great satisfaction in their student’s learning. Participant 31 shared, “The

kids make it worth it, there really is not a better feeling as a teacher than when somebody gets it for the first time, when you feel like you've made a difference, like you've actually taught them something, and like, made a difference for really, the rest of their lives." Much like the traditionally trained participants, the alternatively trained participants all felt pride in their work when a student achieved new learning and made progress toward their goals.

The relationships and positive rapport the teachers build with their students was also discussed numerous times as being motivation to return each day. Participant 10 said, "Those little moments that I think are cool, and then some fun random things too, just the random stuff that they decide to tell me." Several of the participants shared that the notes, tokens of appreciation, and presents the students gave them made all the hard work worth it each day. Participant 15 shared, "It's always nice to have the to have the kids. You get the a few that are like, they'll let you know that you're their favorite teacher, or you're the reason that they're happy to come to school every day. You know those little affirmations are definitely helpful." The participants responded that the students were their motivation to return each day, but they did not realize how much their responses informed this study about how teachers positively affect students.

Working side by side with other teachers, the participants said that their colleagues motivated them to come to work each day. Participant 6 explained:

> If I wasn't passionate about it, I feel like I wouldn't continue to do this. So, I think that's on me number one, but I also think of the passion of my colleagues, and being able to collaborate with my colleagues and get we have a very cohesive department, so being able to connect with them and work with them helps as well.

School environment is shaped by collaboration and positive synergy between teachers. Participant 11 said, “Just the whole mindset of the building can make or break your experience. I definitely do love the kids that I teach, so that itself motivates me.” If the teachers are happy to be at work, they are motivated to remain in the classroom and at the school district. Teachers explained that their retention was related to the culture of the building. Participant 14 expressed: “I ended up making friendships with a lot of the teachers. I really loved the school climate. I love the teachers I was working with. I really loved the students, and I just got very attached to it, I knew that this was a special place to be, so I wanted to be here.” Several participants shared that they waited to obtain jobs in specific schools and districts based upon how the school climate felt, if they had relationships with other teachers, and if they were invested in the community. Participant 17 reflected:

> I'm hoping to remain in the classroom as long as I can, like I said, I enjoy it. It's different, like before I was a man who did a lot of work on the farm where I was physically tired when I got home. That first year, I realized how you can be mentally exhausted with teaching. I'm open to be able to continue to teach for a while, and I've enjoyed it.

The participants share that they felt many rewards in teaching and that is their reason to stay in the classroom and educate students.

Conclusion

In Chapter 5: Discussion, I will answer the research questions explicitly and propose changes to retain high quality teachers in Pennsylvania and beyond based on the empirical evidence I reviewed in this chapter. The early-career teachers’ experiences and their perspective on the training and pathway into education is important. Their experiences and the gaps in their training must be addressed to retain teachers, especially in the first five years.

Anyone who wishes to become a teacher, regardless of pathway, should have a clear and concise pathway with few barriers to enter education.

Based upon the findings, I make recommendations to support early-career teachers and help to fill the gaps in their education and experiences. The state must partner with school districts and universities to make clear paths and partnerships for more candidates to become teachers. The state should advertise how to become a teacher and should continue to incentivize teaching through stipends and residencies. Teacher training programs, universities, school districts, and school communities need to provide professional development and an induction program that is designed for specific teachers' pathway and background.

School district leaders must be cognizant of the needs their new teachers bring to their positions, with necessary supports, which often vary across teachers of varying teacher training backgrounds. For example, mentors must be carefully selected for a new teacher. Early-career teachers need mentors that are close to them in proximity and possess a willingness to provide guidance for any reason.

Educational policy should require the induction program, professional development, and assigned mentor to be matched to a new teacher of the same grade and content level. Alternatively trained teachers with no student teaching experience, should be paired with a veteran teacher with a two-year mentorship to ensure they have another trusted colleague to support them in their first years.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine how teacher education programs and school districts prepare early-career educators who experience varied traditional or alternative pathways into education. The findings indicate that early-career teachers, regardless of their pathway, enter their own classrooms feeling excited to teach, but all said that they had a mentor or another supportive teacher with more experience to help them in their first years. Traditionally trained teachers explained that they had a clear pathway and understood the steps to become certified and obtain employment in Pennsylvania. Alternatively trained teachers encountered more barriers to become certified and experienced the pathway as less clear due to universities and school districts that were often unsure of the new pathways that have been created in the state (Fuller, 2022; Tan et al., 2024). Second career and alternatively trained teachers had to manage many more responsibilities in addition to becoming certified if they were teaching with an intern or emergency certification in the state (Fuller, 2022; Matsko et al., 2022; Saenz-Armstrong, 2023; Tan et al., 2024).

Several important implications were discovered through this research. New teacher schedules must include common planning time with their department or grade level. Their schedules should not be overloaded with additional duties and their schedule should not reflect several different courses or levels to teach. A new teacher's induction program and professional development should be tailored to their pathway and prior experiences. Most importantly, new teachers need strong mentors who will remain with them throughout induction. The veteran teachers serving as mentors must be prepared and potentially receive their own training to provide significant guidance within the early-career teacher's first years.

How the Findings Illuminate the Research Questions:

RQ 1: Early-Career Teacher Perceptions of Induction Programs and Pathway Differences

Both groups of teachers explained that their student teaching experience or time in the classroom was where they learned the most. Traditionally trained teachers showed that the earlier and longer the relationship between the preservice teacher and their cooperating teacher or district meant that they felt more prepared and thought it was a positive experience as a new teacher (Boyd et al., 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). The connections that they made in student teaching with the staff and district were a positive motivator for the early-career teachers. Student teachers must be matched with cooperating teachers who have a positive view of teaching, are highly qualified, and have patience to engage and guide their student teacher. If a student teacher's relationship with their cooperating teacher is not supportive or is more restrictive, they will not gain as much experience, which negatively affects their efficacy (Bastian et al., 2020; Greenberg et al., 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2020).

Several participants received the PA student teaching stipend in the traditionally trained group; they expressed that the stipend was helpful. The stipend relieved some financial burden while empowering recipients with compensation for their work throughout student teaching. The early-career teachers who took an alternative pathway said that with guidance and support, student teaching was helpful (Matsko et al., 2022). Alternatively trained teachers need to have some type of early mentor or an opportunity to co-teach until they feel prepared to take over a classroom on their own. New teachers should not be given a full course load if they have not had any experience or guidance in the classroom. School districts should keep ahead of the changes to certification pathways so that alternatively trained teachers do not loose income to student teach. The districts who need teachers should be willing to hire the new teacher on an intern or

emergency certification (Truwit et al., 2024). The participants of this study unanimously felt that the student teaching experience should be compensated, and they felt it would bring more candidates into education (Yarell, 2022).

The participants perceived their induction program to be positive regardless of their pathway but valued different aspects of the programs. A powerful induction program allows new teachers to have guided collaboration and the ability to commiserate with their peers. Induction programs must inform new teachers about district and state requirements but should also be a meeting that new teachers value (Clarke et al., 2014; Goldhaber et al., 2020; Ronfeldt et al., 2018). School districts must analyze their induction program to ensure the meetings are not repetitive and should provide space for the new teachers to ask questions and interact with the district administration.

Traditionally trained teachers do not need induction programs to resemble their college coursework; rather, they need practical district and building information, so they know what to do in any classroom situation. Traditionally trained teachers' induction program should have classroom management, safety, and medical training prior to the start of the school year with mini lessons throughout the two-year program to supply them with innovative teaching ideas (Isaacs et al., 2007).

Alternative pathway teachers need the same information as the traditionally trained teachers but would benefit from more direct instruction in how to handle assessments, grading, technology, and school policy. Regardless of pathway, induction should include conversation and collaboration rather than a lecture or presentation. Training new teachers to critically think through problems they experience in the classroom will help them to feel more prepared and confident in their first three years. This study's findings indicate that new teachers should have

time to learn and grow together as a cohort in a new position to promote retention (Fuller, 2022; Uriegas et al., 2014).

Understanding that traditional pathway and alternative pathway teachers experience professional development (PD) differently, school districts must address teachers' individual needs and learning gaps. The traditional pathway participants should experience training and professional development days that allow them to work with their colleagues on curriculum, or topics relevant to their content area, and should be primarily teacher directed (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). Professional development presented as a traditional meeting or additional initiatives to be implemented right away creates additional stress in the early-career teacher's first three years.

Conversely, the alternative pathway participants are eager to participate in almost any professional development time to learn new information that might help them in their day-to-day classroom. Additional time should be provided for alternatively trained teachers so they can be exposed to more information (Matsko et al., 2022; Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). School districts should create varied professional development opportunities based upon a teacher's pathway and perceived needs. A menu of professional development options for teachers to choose their PD path and address their own learning gaps would create a more meaningful PD experience for early-career teachers.

RQ 2: Early-Career Educators' Perceptions of Experiences Influencing Retention

New teachers are tasked with a multitude of different job responsibilities. The participants perceived that their first year was more difficult to manage all the responsibilities. To address new teacher's concerns, school districts and mentors should monitor how much is assigned to the new educator and assist them in required tasks.

The way teachers are hired and trained within a few weeks prior to the start of school must be improved across Pennsylvania. Onboarding and access to materials, with guidance on how to teach materials with a trusted mentor, could have made the early-career teachers feel much more confident and prepared in the first year. Every new teacher reported that the information shared between teachers during common planning time was critical and helped them tremendously when that time was left intact by the district (Sandoval-Lucero et al., 2011). Spending preparation time with their colleagues to make instructional decisions or prepare instructional materials together was the most practical training they received (Uriegas et al., 2014).

Both groups of participants, traditional and alternative, found that classroom management was a concern for them and did not promote their retention (Harbatkin et al., 2024). Managing difficult student behaviors, absenteeism, disruptions, and having several different classes to teach felt overwhelming for the new teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). School districts must provide who and when to contact if the teachers have concerns or questions. The district should provide all new teachers with a professional learning community to help them as needed. Professional learning communities should share a content and/or grade level and partner tenured teachers with the early-career teachers to guide them in all aspects of the teacher's day.

School districts must incorporate school-wide positive behavior supports for both student success and teacher retention. Just as Yarrell (2022) found, when there is a positive school climate, feelings of community, and engagement of both students and staff, teachers are happier and more willing to endure challenges to remain in the classroom. Schools that have a positive culture keep their teachers longer (Sutcher et al., 2019).

Both groups of teachers stated that they had financial concerns due to lack of school resources, which did not promote their retention. As Harbatkin et al., (2024) found, the school culture and climate are important, and the teachers want to create a positive school environment with innovative classrooms. Rather than encouraging teachers to use their own funds to create a positive learning space, school districts should provide materials and supplies to support the students and staff. The school community wants their children to have the best possible outcomes, which begins inside the classroom. Support through education foundations, parent/teacher organizations, and school wide fund-raising would help early-career teachers create a positive school environment with furniture, reading areas, and spaces to enrich and remediate for student needs (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019).

The participants unanimously felt that they need a better work and life balance in their first three years of teaching. The school district should help to minimize the new teachers' required responsibilities outside of their teaching time. Traditionally trained teachers may use more time daily but could benefit from more frequent planned breaks throughout the school year in addition to weekends. Continuously managing through the stress of each day and desire to do an excellent job is consuming for new teachers. Alternatively trained teachers had little work and life balance, especially if they were completing coursework and certification programs in their first three years (Allee & Castner, 2025). Teacher training programs and universities training the alternative pathway teacher must consider a person's capabilities and other responsibilities outside of their job. A new teachers' experience is tiring in the first years while attempting to manage their families, homes, and other responsibilities. Additional support to help new teachers balance their responsibilities is important; mentors and tenured colleagues should receive a

stipend to support early-career teachers throughout their tenure (Allee & Castner, 2025; Matsko et al., 2022).

It is important for schools to recognize and promote teachers' hard work and dedication to their students. All the participants said that helping students to learn, be successful, and show growth throughout the year is what keeps them motivated and excited to teach. Understanding that teachers motivate their students and become a part of the school community through coaching, advising clubs, and helping at school wide events is important. It is imperative that schools continue to pay teachers stipends or hourly rates to keep them engaged with the school community (Van Den Borre et al., 2021). A positive school community is found in and out of the school building and promotes teachers to stay in education (Harbatkin et al., 2024). Teachers create bonds with their colleagues as they shared the same experience and dealt with the same positive and negative aspects of the job. The comradery of sharing the same goal to support and educate students was perceived to be one of the most positive experiences that encourage teachers to stay in education. Schools must create spaces for teachers to work together and build strong bonds to best support their students.

RQ 3: Motivations for Early-Career Teacher Retention

Teachers remain in the profession because of their students. Their passion is educating students and creating opportunities for student success year after year (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019). None of the participants felt that they would leave the field; the alternative pathway teachers ardently shared that they already worked hard to get a job as a teacher and felt that their careers would remain in education until retirement. In addition to the students, the participants felt that they remain in the profession and overcome the challenges because of the mentorship they received in their early years.

Mentorship was the single most important factor in teacher success and retention. School districts must foster relationships between the mentor and the new teacher and ensure they have a positive, supportive, and knowledgeable mentor. Mentors must be willing to collaborate often and consistently with the early-career teacher. School districts should train and support their mentor teachers to help retain early-career teachers. (Ronfeldt et al., 2018). Early-career teachers' motivation to remain in the classroom is strengthened when mentors and colleagues develop trusting relationships and provide responsive, ongoing support. Just as Harbatkin et al., (2024) and Sutcher et al., (2019) found in their research, if teachers felt that they had a positive mentor or colleague that was willing to collaborate with them, and there was a positive school culture, they felt more prepared and excited to go to work each day.

The community that teachers create in their schools and district must be supported and fostered by the school environment and the backing of the administration, parents, community, and students. If early-career teachers perceive their district environment as unsupportive or lack access to strong mentors and collegial support, they are more likely to consider leaving the profession or to change positions in search of a more supportive setting (Sutcher et al., 2019; Yarrell, 2022).

Implications for Leadership Practice

The participants in this phenomenological study all shared their experience becoming certified teachers in Pennsylvania. Their voices and experiences are necessary to better understand what is and is not working in the way early-career teachers are trained, how they experience induction and professional development, and mentorship. New to the profession, early-career teachers need a strong, willing mentor to guide them through the first year(s) of teaching (Clarke et al., 2014; Goldhaber et al., 2020; Ronfeldt et al., 2020).

School district leadership and building level administrators must ensure that a new teacher's schedule includes common planning time with their department or grade level, and they should not have more than three different curricula or classes to prepare for each day (Sutcher et al., 2019). Just as Yarrell (2022) found in his study on teacher retention, overloading new teachers and asking them to teach four or five different classes in a day can lead to burnout and frustration. Pennsylvania's education system must support teachers differently based upon their certification pathway; they all have different needs and potential gaps in their training (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019; Van Den Borre et al., 2021). Educational policy, school districts, and teacher training programs all recognize and understand that there is a growing teacher shortage that must be addressed to ensure that the students of Pennsylvania have a quality education (Van Den Borre et al., 2021; Yarrell, 2022).

School districts must work teacher training programs and universities to better support new teachers. To retain teachers and promote the career to possible candidates, changes must be made in the way teacher training programs, universities, and school districts train, employ, and support new teachers (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019). Early-career teachers, no matter their pathway, entered the field to work with students, educate them, and help them find success. The one size fits all certification requirements, induction program, and professional development no longer works for new teachers (McBrayer & Melton, 2018). An individualized professional development and induction program should be created that uses the teacher's background to determine their mentor, how they are supported in the classroom, and how much time they should have to prepare before starting a new school year (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Matsko et al., 2022).

Implications for Professional Development Changes

Regardless of a teacher's pathway into education, the professional development model should be geared toward the teacher's subject area and needs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Eken & Gündogdu, 2017; McBrayer & Melton, 2018). The federal and state mandated training is not included in this recommendation; the mandated requirements must be completed to remain in compliance. The district directed professional development model should be updated and reflect the needs of its teachers. School districts must focus on the well-being of their teachers, especially the early-career teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). New teachers need different training than tenured or veteran teachers. A menu of professional development options that best support teacher's individual needs should be offered as they approach different times in their career (Van Den Borre et al., 2021).

The traditionally trained early-career teacher does have different PD needs according to the participants. School districts must differentiate the professional development rather than use one-size fits all approach. Districts must provide for training related directly to a teacher's grade level and content (Yarrell, 2022). New teacher professional development should be dedicated time that allows for collaboration with veteran teachers and common planning time within their grade or subject (Sutcher et al., 2019; Yarrell, 2022). Professional development days should offer new teachers an open forum with scenarios they may experiences or questions that might need to be addressed. Training that supports the early-career teacher and promotes retention is PD directly related to the teacher's classroom needs (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019; Van Den Borre et al., 2021).

For the alternatively trained teachers, depending upon their preservice background, the school districts should consider what they have experienced and where they need more support

(Matsko et al., 2022). If a teacher is hired on an intern or emergency certification, the PD and induction program must consider the teacher's experience and give examples of teaching strategies, provide observation time with veteran teachers, and provide shadowing opportunities (Matsko et al., 2022; Truwit et al., 2024). Where new teachers' preservice training lacked, the school district should create mini lessons on classroom management, technology, grading practices, differentiated lessons, and student safety. If the alternatively trained teacher did not have a cooperating teacher, it is imperative for them to have time to plan and observe a strong veteran teacher. The mentor assigned to early-career teacher should have common planning time and teach similar grade level to help guide the teacher's planning and materials (Matsko et al., 2022). Professional development must be customized for each teacher and their individualized pathway into education (Van Den Borre et al., 2021; Yarrell, 2022).

Implications for Induction Changes

The induction program at each school district is presented differently; however, Pennsylvania mandates and requires each new teacher to be enrolled in a two-year induction program (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2025). When and how the induction program is offered is important to new teachers and the district should provide time for early career teachers to collaborate, discuss their concerns, and grow together (Greenberg et al., 2011). School districts need update the induction program offer the meetings as cohorts that foster collaboration; the materials should be presented in an organized and thoughtful manner for new teachers to participate and partner through their learning (Harbatkin et al., 2024).

Regardless of the pathway, early-career teachers need induction programs that are relevant to what they are teaching and prepare them to manage the classroom each day. The comradery amongst the early-career teachers from either pathway was deemed the most valuable

part of the induction program because the new teachers felt less alone in that space. If they could build a community of new teachers together, they were excited to learn new information and go to the meetings even if they were stressed from the job or feeling unsure about tasks (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Sutcher et al., 2019).

The mentor assigned as a part of the induction program is extremely important to early-career teachers' success. District administrators should be very cautious about who they allow to be mentors and how they are assigned to early-career teachers. The state should monitor who mentors early-career teachers just as it monitors aspects of the induction program (Harbatkin et al., 2024; Van Den Borre et al., 2021). The new teacher should have a mentor that teaches the same or similar courses and/or grades and should be a tenured teacher who has a positive attitude toward education and a willingness to collaborate (Bastian et al., 2020; Boyde et al., 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). School districts should create training and resources for the mentors to ensure their new teachers are being supported in similar ways across the district. Regardless of the pathway, the early-career teachers relied upon a more seasoned teacher to guide and support them in their first years (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

The mentor should also remain with the early-career teacher throughout the induction program. Currently, the school district can determine who oversees the new teacher in year two of the induction program, often leaving the teacher to be monitored by a district administrator or the building principal. The closeness of the mentor matters to early career teachers, and their mentor should be near them and shares the same experience as the new teacher (Clarke et al., 2014; Goldhaber et al., 2020; Ronfeldt et al, 2020).

Implications for Future Research

This phenomenological study provides teachers' experience in their first three years and their perceptions of how they were prepared and certified in the state. It examines their experiences related to how they received their induction, professional development, and what they perceived to be helpful or unhelpful throughout their first few years. Growing from this study, future research should be conducted to better understand the findings of this study.

1. Longer engagement with subjects: Future research could be conducted over a longer period, focusing the teachers from either pathway with longer engagement and different data points throughout the school year to understand their motivations to remain in the classroom.
2. Alternative program research: Individualized professional development programs and alternative training models should be researched to understand how each one affects teacher retention or attrition.
3. Larger sample in different areas: Future research should gain a larger sample size across different states and pathway. A national study may provide a better overall picture of what new teachers experience. Conversely, focusing on the varied pathways within each state may explain why teacher shortages occur in different states or what barriers are present there when trying to enter the profession.
4. Training methods: A quantitative study could be conducted to gauge how well the traditional versus alternative teachers are trained and if their training positively or negatively affects student outcomes.

Policy Recommendations

Policy Recommendation #1

The various pathways to certification in Pennsylvania should be advertised and made simpler for candidates to become teachers. The state should analyze the experiences that early-career teachers have and try to create clearer pathways and specific training to complete to become certified. State websites must be maintained and stay up to date with the changing pathways into education. School districts must work with teacher training programs and Universities to create opportunities and training pathways from students in middle school and high school to potentially enter the field of education. Creating a clear pathway for potential new teachers does not mean less rigor or lower standards for certification; rather, make the requirements easier to understand with actionable steps to take toward certification (Van Den Borre et al., 2021; Yarrell, 2022).

Policy Recommendation #2

The student teaching stipend should be offered to all preservice teachers if they are not student teaching on an intern certificate (Nguyen et al., 2023). The policy and determination surrounding who can receive the stipend should be reviewed, and all preservice teachers should be provided with some level of compensation. School districts must support the student teaching stipend along with the state to ensure the early-career teachers are given a student teaching stipend. School districts could potentially hire or sign for the early-career teacher to student teach and ultimately fill a substitute, short term substitute position, long term substitute position, or an upcoming vacancy. This could help address the current teacher shortage and encourage second career teachers to try to pursue certification in the state (Franko & Patrick, 2023; Fuller, 2022; Tan et al., 2024). If the state values high-quality teachers, it should ensure they are

appropriately compensated for their work with students, regardless of their certification stage, so that preservice and early-career teachers feel acknowledged and respected. (Tan et al., 2024).

Policy Recommendation #3

Every teacher, no matter how they are certified or their previous experience, must be assigned a positive, strong mentor to guide them through their tenure. Pennsylvania should require each new teacher to have a mentor who is trained and prepared to support a new teacher for three years (Ronfeldt et al., 2018). If the state mandates that the mentor remains with a new teacher for three years, the school district would be expected to report who they assigned to the new teacher and the outcome of the mentorship. Any new teacher hired, with or without a permanent contract, should be assigned a mentor. School districts must identify positive teachers who are willing to serve as mentors. The mentors should be paid a stipend, determined by the school district, for the three years just as teacher leaders and department chairs are paid. A specific set of guiding principles must be identified to ensure that new teachers have a knowledgeable, kind, supportive, and positive tenured teacher as their mentor. Mentors must teach the same grade or content area and must be close in physical proximity.

Policy Recommendation #4

Teacher training and professional development must be tailored to meet the needs of early-career teachers. Depending upon the teacher's pathway into education, the induction program and requirements should be prescribed and allow for teachers to obtain the training and information they need to be successful. School districts, specifically Curriculum & Instruction department, should be planning to address the different pathways into education. Traditionally trained teachers need more one-on-one guidance; the professional development and induction

program should provide that guidance and support in the teacher's classroom along with monthly meetings that fill their experience gaps and learning needs. Differently, the alternatively trained teachers need training that supplements gaps from their certification programs and pathway; the induction program must include training from seasoned teachers, additional opportunities to learn in the field, and specific training on the various tasks teachers must complete. Teacher training and ongoing professional development must respond to the changes in education, the traditional and alternative pathways, and daily expectations put upon teachers.

Limitations

Although I was able to interview 31 early-career teachers across the state of Pennsylvania, this study does not include a teacher from each Intermediate Unit (I.U.). I.U.s in Pennsylvania function similarly to Educational Service Agencies in other states. Additionally, the large urban superintendents were unwilling to send the study out to their early-career teachers. Due to the amount of time I had to recruit, I did not reach more than 15 of the 28 I.U.s across the state. Interviews were conducted in the Fall of 2025; some of the participants had only been in education for 3-4 months, while others had been in for almost three years. The interviews were prior to the Thanksgiving and Winter breaks, and the teachers' responses may have been affected by the time of year and how they were feeling prior to getting a break. New teachers' perception may be very different in the third year of their tenure versus the first year. I attempted to interview teachers evenly across years one through three but may have too many first-year views and the results may sound more stressed and overwhelmed than the teachers who are in years two and three.

Conclusion

The early-career teachers all shared that their pathway into education was unique and the most appropriate option given their personal, academic, and professional contexts at the time of entry. The traditional pathway is rigorous and can be lengthy but provides a clear path for candidates to follow. When school districts establish pathways with universities or teacher training, the teachers benefit from long-term engagement and potential job opportunities. Student teaching stipends, paid residencies, or internships help to promote the traditional pathway. Although there is a teacher shortage, the alternative pathway into education has not been oversimplified. There are many barriers to becoming certified in Pennsylvania and the candidates often had to advocate for themselves. With high motivation to be in the classroom, alternatively trained teachers must be better supported by school districts, school communities, and teacher training programs with clear guidance to become certified.

The two pathways to certification, although different, both experience the induction program and professional development. Alternatively trained teachers benefit the most from professional development and their induction program; their training while in the first three years must be supported with opportunities to work with seasoned teachers, observe successful lessons, and allow for common planning time with their mentor. The traditionally trained teachers should experience professional development produced for their specific area of certification. Induction for all teachers, regardless of pathway, must allow for teacher-to-teacher conversation and sharing that embeds important building and district information and requirements.

Positive mentorship and a supportive school community are the most important supports and factors for new teachers. Their mentor and how they felt within the school was the beacon of light during the first years. Mentorship and an individualized professional development for all

new teachers should support them and scaffold them to be the best teacher possible. Early-career teachers' experiences prove that with a positive school environment and a strong mentor, regardless of their pathway, teachers are happy to be in their position and feel they will be retained in the role.

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Appendix A

Inclusion Survey for Qualitative Study on Early-Career Teachers' Pathway to Education

Name:

School District:

School District Intermediate Unit Number:

Is your school district considered Urban/Suburban/Rural?

Subject/Grade Taught:

How long have you been teaching?

Did you attend an:

- Undergraduate teacher preparation program

-Post-graduate masters route

-Alternative certification program (please explain) _____

-Other (please explain) _____

Did you have a student teaching placement? Yes/No

-If you answered yes- did you receive a student teaching stipend? Yes/No

Did you have a Cooperating Teacher who mentored you in a pre-service classroom experience?

Yes/No

Did you have a university supervisor when completing pre-service classroom experience?

Yes/No

What training/program did you complete to become a certified teacher in Pennsylvania?

_____

Upon being hired as a new teacher:

Did you have a mentor? Yes/No

Did you complete an induction program? Yes/No

-If yes, how many years was your induction program? 1 year/2 years/3 years

Are you willing to participate in a 45-minute interview to discuss your experiences to becoming a certified teacher in the state of Pennsylvania? Yes/No

If yes, please provide your name, email address, and phone number below:

_____

Appendix B

Various Pathways to Teacher Certification Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:

1. What do you teach and for how long? What certifications do you hold?
2. Why did you apply to this school district to get a job as a teacher?
3. How and why did you become a teacher? What was your pathway to get certified?

   Follow-up with any timeline questions about training and ultimate certification.
4. What university did you attend and what was your major? How did that lead to you becoming a certified teacher in PA?
5. What was your experience with your university or teacher training program in guiding you to becoming a teacher? What was the most valuable/least valuable experience you had?
6. What pre-service student teaching or residency did you complete? (If there was no student teaching–What type of in-the-classroom training did you complete?)
7. Were you a recipient of a student teaching stipend?

   Follow up-If Yes, what are your thoughts on the program and stipends? How did the program affect you? What were some of the good and/or negative aspects of the program? How would you feel about the program if you did not get the stipend?

   Follow up- If No, What are your thoughts on the program and the way PA determined who received stipends? What are your thoughts on the program and how do you think it would have affected you if you did receive it?
8. Do/Did you have a mentor assigned to you upon being hired?
   a. What was your experience with or without the mentor?

Follow up: If so, how did that relationship help or hinder your growth as a teacher? If not, how could a mentor have made your first year(s) different?

9. Does your school district do anything through training, support, mentors that support you? Or do not support you?
10. How did you experience an induction program and any specific tasks you were assigned to complete in the first year.

    Follow up: How do you think it affected you during your first year(s)?
11. What training or support would you have liked to have in place as a new teacher?
12. What aspects of your job help you and keep you happy in your role?
13. What are some challenges in your job, how do you deal with those challenges?

    Follow up: What would some solutions be to help you feel better about these challenges?
14. What are your motivations to remain in the classroom?

    Follow up: Can you think of anything that would help to keep you motivated in the classroom?
15. Do you know of other early-career teachers that have recently been hired that have experienced a different educational pathway than you to become certified?

    -If yes- How has the training/induction process/professional development been different or the same?

    -If no- What training aspects do you think would be helpful or unhelpful for something trained differently than you?
16. What would you like your supervisor to know about being an early-career teacher?
17. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked about? Do you have any questions about my questions?

Appendix C

Recruitment Strategy

Intermediate Units (28 in total): I plan on recruiting early-career teachers by connecting with the Professional Development Directors and Superintendents of each Intermediate Unit (I.U.) across the state of Pennsylvania. I will send them my abstract and hope that each I.U. will be able to provide possible participants. I will provide them with my definitions of traditional and alternative certification pathways.

Superintendents: If the I.U. directors can not get my study out to the school districts, I will email every superintendent in the state of Pennsylvania and ask them to send my study out to their early-career teachers.

Pennsylvania Department of Education: I will use the PA Department of Education teacher reporting log to find who has been certified by the state in the last three years and try to locate those individuals. The reporting of student teacher stipend recipients is also reported to the I.U. and school districts, I hope to use that information to locate and recruit participants who have/have not received this stipend.

PA Principal's Association: I plan to contact the PA Principal's Association board to ask them to send my study out to the Superintendents and Principals across the state of Pennsylvania. The association does contact the members and inform the state overall of the studies that are occurring in regards to teacher retention and recruitment.

Deans of Education: If the recruitment strategies previously outlined do not result in enough participants, I will contact the Deans of Education at various colleges, universities, and junior colleges. Almost all universities, colleges, and junior colleges have some type of education certification program and/or know of training programs and alternative sources of certification.

Appendix D

Participant Characteristics Matrix

Participant #	Traditional	Alternative	Student Teaching	Cooperating Teacher	University Supervisor	Mentor
Certification Type						
District/School						
Subject Taught						
Grade Taught						
Urban/Sub/Rural						
I.U. #						
Other						

Vita

AMANDA M. ABDELAAL

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PUBLIC EDUCATION PROFESSIONAL

An educator certified in Pennsylvania that holds a 7-12 English certificate and a certified principal in public education over 20 years. Possesses years of experience in education actively working to improve schools, student outcomes, and teacher experiences. Passionate about teacher training and retention to allow for more student access to a positive school environment. Remains committed to relational leadership skills to support a positive school culture and climate. Serving as a school leader, possessing strong interpersonal skills and building relationships amongst students, teachers, staff, colleagues, and community.

Educational Leadership • Professional Development • School Improvement • Teacher Retention
Building Administration • Public Education • Community Engagement

EDUCATION

Lehigh University

Doctoral Program In-Progress
Ed.D Educational Leadership (2026)
Superintendent Letter of Eligibility (2026)

Master's Degree
Educational Leadership (2011)
Pennsylvania Principal Certification (2011)

Bloomsburg University

Bachelor's Degree-Secondary Education
Pennsylvania Certification (7-12 English)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Assistant Principal
Springhouse Middle School, Parkland School District — January 2021 – Present

Administrative Internship
Parkland Central Office, Parkland School District — 2023-2024 Full Year

Teaching Experience
Parkland High School, Parkland School District — August 2010 - January 2021

Lehigh Career & Technical Institute, LCTI	August 2006 – August 2010
Orefield Middle School, Parkland School District	August 2005 – January 2006

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance Services (SAP Trained)
- PennSSI School Safety Training
- Act 55 Trained
- CSTAG Trained
- Study Island Trained
- IXL Trained
- LinkIt! Trained
- NISL Trained
- 2022 SAS Institute Conference, Hershey, PA, October 2022

AFFILIATIONS AND ASSOCIATIONS

- *Pennsylvania Principals Association*
- *The National Society of Leadership & Success*