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## Examining the Lived Experiences of Nontraditional Students in a Teacher Education Program

Katy Ann Turpen  
kturpen@georgefox.edu

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Examining the Lived Experiences of Nontraditional Students in a Teacher Education Program

by

Katy Ann Turpen

FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

Chair: Scot Headley Ph.D.

Committee Member: Terry Huffman Ph.D.

Committee Member: Susanna Thornhill Ph.D.



GEORGE FOX  
UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

“EXAMINING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN A TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM,” a Doctoral research project prepared by KATY TURPEN in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Educational Leadership.

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by:

5/10/18 *Scot Headley*

Committee Chair

Date

Scot Headley, PhD

Professor of Education

5/10/18 *Terry Huffman*

Date

Terry Huffman, PhD

Professor of Education

5/10/18 *Susanna Thornhill*

Date

Susanna Thornhill, PhD

Associate Professor of Education

### Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of five nontraditional students who graduated from the Elementary Education Program at George Fox University (a degree-completion program targeting adult learners). Each of the participants simultaneously completed a Bachelor of Science Degree and obtained a teaching license during their program. The researcher sought to hear participants' stories and how they gave meaning to experiences while completing the alternative teaching licensing program. Participants' status as nontraditional included their age of 23 and older, working part-time, and attending classes in a hybrid part-time format. Participants shared unique stories fraught with challenges, yet all persevered to program completion and are currently teaching. In an analysis of the data, three major themes surfaced including, *Participants identified multiple educational experiences both before and during their alternative teacher education program that made them self-identify as nontraditional, Participants entered the program with determination, believing that not finishing was not an option, and Participants entered the program knowing they wanted to be teachers; they wanted a clear path to completion.* The implications of this work suggest a further examination of the role of grit regarding nontraditional student performance, a call to universities to include structures that support nontraditional student success, and an understanding of how the identity of nontraditional can impact student success at the university level.

Key words: *nontraditional student, pre-service teachers, grit*

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The culture of higher education is shifting as the needs of students are becoming more diverse. This has required universities to rethink routes of access for potential students who cannot attend a traditional four-year university. Students who do not fit into the traditional mold are typically defined as nontraditional and have become a topic of interest in my work. The reasons four-year universities cannot serve an increasingly diverse population of students are complex and warrant examination. However, it has become even more important for me to understand how nontraditional students who are successful make it through programs. What are their stories and how can we learn from them?

To address the shift to a more diverse student population in the higher education student demographic, George Fox University introduced an alternative route for teacher preparation called the Elementary Education Degree Completion Program (ELED) in 2008. To complete the program successfully, teacher candidates must meet all the state-required conditions for acquiring a teaching license while working on the requirements to obtain a bachelor's degree. This means that students must complete coursework, student teaching, and licensing tests within a twenty-month period. The program is structured to meet the needs of nontraditional students in multiple aspects, including accelerated classes, a discounted tuition rate, class meetings scheduled in the evening and on weekends, and a mandated cohort model.

In the state of Oregon, the ELED Program at George Fox University is one of the very few options that provide teacher candidates the opportunity to receive a bachelor's degree in a nontraditional accelerated format. Because the program is unique, and because it is potentially far-reaching due to George Fox University's partnerships with K-12 districts, I was interested in

learning more about the people who are completing the program. I aimed to gain a greater understanding of how these completers described their experience in the program. This work is intended to contribute to a current paucity in the literature regarding nontraditional students' perceptions of their learning experiences.

My recent appointment as director of the ELED program also incentivized me to examine and understand the lived experiences of nontraditional students. From 2008-2015, I was a faculty member in the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at George Fox University. Two years ago, I transferred to the ELED department, and the first group of students I managed as cohort leader graduated in Spring 2017. I took on the responsibility of directing the program in Fall 2016. My work led me to this research topic because I am continually seeking ways to enhance my effectiveness as the ELED director. Nevertheless, I understand the challenges of balancing these roles, and committed myself to conducting a descriptive phenomenological study with students who were no longer in the program and thus potentially subject to power issues that might arise in the process of sharing their experiences with me.

The distinct differences between the ELED teacher candidates and the many other students in my past teaching experience have caused me to reflect and examine my practice, both in teaching and in relating to students. As I journeyed through the twenty-month program with my first cohort, their shared stories impacted my practice on multiple levels. I quickly noted the uniqueness of this particular group and the complexity of their lives. This experience presented a specific set of questions. Who exactly are these students? How are they experiencing the program?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The ELED Program is relatively small, even compared to other teacher preparation programs within the university. George Fox has admitted 110 students into the ELED program over the last eight years. Nevertheless, in examining higher education as a whole, depending on how nontraditional descriptors apply to students, the research literature indicates that the nontraditional population can range from 40 (Kasworm, 1990) to 70 percent (Compton & Cox, 2006) of the overall student population. This subgroup of the university population merits attention, as it is a population on the rise across universities as a whole, despite the rather small numbers of nontraditional students in the ELED program at George Fox University.

Kasworm's (1990) important research consisted of a meta-analysis of one group that consistently classifies as nontraditional, adult students. In her work, Kasworm described *adult* as 25 and older. Through the exploration of over 350 studies spanning the previous 20 years, Kasworm identified five domains, or descriptors, that researchers used to classify nontraditional/adult students. The first domain was labeled *Implied Deficiency*. In this domain, Kasworm pointed to research studies that focused on nontraditional status as having a deficiency. According to Kasworm, researchers examined differences in academic performance between adults and traditional undergraduate students and assumed deficiencies in nontraditional students as the norm. The second domain was called *Image of Student Entry and Adaptation*. In this domain, Kasworm pointed to researchers' examination of the interplay between student entry characteristics and their motivations to perform academic tasks. Researchers were scrutinizing the process of adaptation into the university environment as they examined both motivation and student satisfaction. The third domain was called *Image of Description and Characterization*. The articles included in the meta-analysis were of the greatest number in this domain, as scholars

struggled to define nontraditional students in concrete terms. The fourth domain was called the *Image of Psychosocial Development*. In this domain, the researchers targeted the growth of students throughout their educational experience. Essentially, scholars were endeavoring to examine factors that influenced student success, including external dynamics, role commitment, and conflicts. Finally, the fifth domain was called the *Image of Equity and Outcome*. In this domain, researchers examined the outcomes of these adult students and how they compared to the traditional student population.

These five areas encompassed the themes of the 354 articles analyzed and provided researchers a foundation to build from when studying nontraditional students. Kasworm's (1990) meta-analysis inspired questions for other researchers to consider. What assets do nontraditional students bring to the university? What characteristics and attributes define nontraditional students when they come to the university? Are nontraditional students transformed through a university experience? This study is an attempt to consider all the above-mentioned domains to and to take it one step further by examining how nontraditional students give meaning to their experiences. With the complexities that nontraditional students bring, it is important to grant them the opportunity to share their stories so that universities can better serve this demographic. It became evident through the interviews that attributes and experiences are distinct from one another, and that the literature does a much better job defining the former than the latter.

Researchers are still using Kasworm's (1990) work. This is evidenced by the domains' persistence as an infrastructure through which scholars can classify their work. Although the classifications used to describe adult learners presented by Kasworm have been labeled differently by other researchers (Figure 1), there are still distinct links back to the original meta-analysis. As a small sample of Kasworm's impact, two more recent models have been examined

and compared to the original domains in an attempt to demonstrate the rationale for the literature reviewed in this study. The background for understanding nontraditional students as the literature currently defines them was vital as a foundation to this study, not only to help me define the appropriate population, but to understand the structures the university put in place to support nontraditional students and how students perceived these structures. While the domain names I ultimately used were different from Kasworm's (1990) original five, I wanted to demonstrate the connection back to her seminal research (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – Positioning the Study Within the Literature**

Kasworm (1990)	Bergman, Gross, Berry & Shuck (2014)	Kiely, Sandman & Truluck (2004)	Turpen Domain Names and Key Questions Emerging from the Literature
Image of Description and Characterization	Entry Characteristics	Learner	<i>Defining Nontraditional Students</i>  Who are nontraditional students?
Implied Deficiency Psychosocial Development Image of Student Entry and Adaptation	Entry Characteristics  Internal Characteristics  Entry Characteristics	Context  Process of Learning  Role of the Educator	<i>Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students</i>  How do nontraditional students learn? What learning models are most effective?
Image of Equity and Outcome  Image of Student Entry and Adaptation	Internal Characteristics External Characteristics	Role of the Educator	<i>Retention Practices</i>  What are retention practices that are relevant to nontraditional students?
Psychosocial Development Implied Deficiency  Image of Student Entry and Adaptation Image of Equity and Outcome Image of Description and Characterization	Internal Characteristics  External Characteristics	Learner  Context Process of Learning Role of the Educator	<i>Perceptions of Nontraditional Students.</i>  What perceptions and experiences do the nontraditional students report?

In a study by Kiely, Sandman & Truluck (2004), which presented an adult learning theory, there are links to Kasworm's (1990) five domains. Their adult theory has four components. The first is the *learner*. In describing this component, the researchers point out the importance of knowing the attributes of adult students as learners, emphasizing that they are unique. The second component is the *process of learning*. This component brings light to the

different processes adult students might encounter because they experience situations that are very different from traditional students. The third component addresses the *role of the educator* in adult learning. According to Kiely, et. al. (2004), this is especially important because adults need a unique educational experience. The fourth and final component is the *context*. Adult students have a context both in and out of the classroom that can and will impact their educational experience. In relating the Kiely, Sandman & Truluck model to Kasworm (1990), there is a connection to all five domains presented by Kasworm (see Figure 1). The theoretical stance of the researchers in the 2004 study points to the initial findings of Kasworm, as both focus on the distinct learning needs of nontraditional students.

Bergman, Gross, Berry & Shuck (2014), in their study of adult learners and retention, addressed the same basic concerns as did Kasworm, organizing their approach into three overarching components: *Entry Characteristics*, *Internal Characteristics*, and *Environmental Characteristics*. Bergman et al. (2014) analyzed student entry characteristics, external factors that impact students, internal factors that impact students, and student persistence. For students' *entry characteristics* Bergman et al. included characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, parental education, previous college credit, educational goals, children, marital status, income/SES, and motivation. Bergman et al. defined the factors inside the university control (*internal factors*) that would impact retention as cumulative GPA, institutional support, academic advising, faculty support, financial aid, cost, flexible course options, active learning, and prior learning assessment. The factors the researchers considered as *environmental characteristics* included finances, family influences, work influences, significant life events, community influences, and hours of employment. While the intent was to categorize students using three overarching categories (Entry Characteristics, Internal Characteristics, and Environmental



Characteristics), the impact of each factor on student persistence was also examined, the results of which will be discussed further in Chapter Two. The connection back to Kasworm's 1990 work is evident in the attempt to address the complexity of nontraditional student retention; there are many factors that impact nontraditional student success (See Figure 1).

As evidenced in these two more recent models, Kasworm's work in the 1990s laid the foundation for examining the types of studies that define the field's understanding of nontraditional students; the connections are evident although the domains are labeled differently in each study. These connections were made to demonstrate the rationale for the categories I chose to explore in the literature, as the domains I have laid out are also connected to Kasworm (1990). Researchers have attempted to define nontraditional students, to look at how nontraditional students learn, and to learn how nontraditional students transform as learners. Researchers have also compared nontraditional students to traditional students. This dissertation study also intersected with Kasworm's (1990) domains by connecting back to Kasworm's foundational work on nontraditional students but with the added perspective of the more recent literature (Figure 1). As such, the domains examined for this study are referred to as, 1) *Defining Nontraditional Students*, 2) *Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students*, 3) *Examining Retention Practices of Nontraditional Students*, and 4) *Perceptions of Nontraditional Students*. By defining these domains, I was able to shape questions that would be relevant to nontraditional students and the complex lives they live. I was also able to begin coding through a priori themes based on this framework in the beginning phases of data analysis.

Constructing a current definition of a nontraditional student was foundational for the work of this study. The current literature advises the modification of *nontraditional student* from Kasworm's (1990) description to include many more attributes, which will be explored in

Chapter Two. This is important to note because a very liberal approach to defining nontraditional students could mean that any student who is not 18-22, white, and attending a four-year university could be labeled “nontraditional.” Focusing on age as the only attribute is ambiguous and whitewashes the intricacies of the individual differences within the domain of the nontraditional label. To create more clarity, researchers now use the term *nontraditional students* to describe adults students who are at least 23 years old (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Lundberg, 2003; Ogren, 2003; Schue & Slowey, 2002), students of color (Schue & Slowey, 2002), students who work at least part-time (Compton & Cox, 2006; Ogren, 2003; Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, 2011; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011), students who are financially independent from their parents (Hardin, 2008; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Wyatt, 2011), students who are enrolled part-time (Ogren, 2003; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011), and students who may not have graduated from high school or postponed school by at least one year (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Lundberg, 2003; Schue & Slowey, 2002). The diversity represented in these more current descriptions of a nontraditional student is foundational to this study. Identifying characteristics of nontraditional students in the current research base aligns with Kasworm’s domain one, Image of Description and Characterization (See Figure 1). For the purposes of this study, this domain will be referred to as *Defining Nontraditional Students*.

The second area of the literature base for this study addresses the concerns in domains one and four in Kasworm’s (1990) model (See Figure 1). Domain one is Implied Deficit, and domain four is Psychosocial Development. I have combined these two concepts to examine research that falls under the domain I refer to as *Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students*. Regarding Kasworm's domain one, the literature has shifted from a *deficit* view to a *difference* view. Researchers are increasingly discussing this difference as a

strength rather than as a weakness (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Simply stated, the differences nontraditional students bring to the university is not negative, and student qualities that were previously considered a weakness may now be considered an asset. Regarding domain four, researchers have discovered that many nontraditional students struggle academically, but with perseverance, they overcome initial obstacles to their learning (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm, 1990; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 2015; Samuels et al., 2011). Interestingly, nontraditional students also have a unique connection to the classroom, the faculty, and the university as a whole. A classroom is a sacred place for nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Wyatt, 2011), and faculty who understand the perspective and the unique needs of the nontraditional student are vital for their success (Brockett, 2015).

The third domain I proposed for this study, *Examining Retention Practices of Nontraditional Students*, aligns with domains two and five in Kasworm's (1990) work (see Figure 1). Domain two encompasses student entry and subsequent adaptation to the university. Domain five pertains to the outcome of adult students in comparison to traditional students. I account for both of Kasworm's domains in an examination of retention practices. Moreover, investigating the literature on retention reveals practices that are unique to nontraditional students. The journey by which nontraditional students arrive at the destination is different in comparison to traditional students (Bergman et al., 2014; Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Are different practices around retention justified? For example, nontraditional students value the interaction in the classroom space much more, and the social aspects of the university much less than traditional students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Donaldson & Graham, 1999; Gilardi

& Guglielmetti, 2016). Understanding the particulars of nontraditional students' experience can often determine the difference between success and failure in university programs.

Finally, the last part of the literature reviewed addressed student perceptions as nontraditional students and is called *Perceptions of Nontraditional Students*. This domain would, in theory, connect with each of Kasworm's (1990) domains since that who students are, how they develop, and why they stay may be lenses through which they describe their experiences. However, it is important to note that while there is a connection back to the original meta-analysis, the literature is lacking regarding to nontraditional students telling their own stories. As such, this study was developed with the intent to contribute to an aspect of the literature that is underdeveloped since it is quite difficult to pinpoint a specific definition of what it means to be a nontraditional student.

### **Problem Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine successful nontraditional students' lived experiences during their participation in the EEd program. Specifically, through personal interviews, I examined the experiences of five graduates to explore what might have influenced their journeys through the degree-completion program. In order to be considered for inclusion in this study, participants had to be successful completers of the program and have secured a teaching job within a year of graduation. Meeting these criteria (graduating, licensing, and a teaching job) was labeled *successful completion of the program*. One objective of this investigation was to learn how events and relationships influenced nontraditional students' educational experiences, and how they gave meaning to those events and relationships. Another objective of this study was to learn which practices were perceived as influential in their decision to complete the program.

**Research Question**

- 1) What are the lived experiences of nontraditional students who have successfully navigated a teacher-preparation program? What meanings existed in those experiences?
  - a. How do they describe their positive and negative experiences?
  - b. How do they give meaning to their positive and negative experiences?
  - c. How did interpersonal interactions with faculty and other students shape their experiences?
  - d. What are their expressions of identity as nontraditional students?
  - e. What experiences do they name as “pivotal/choice” moments in their program?
  - f. What aspects of their program (people/curricular/application) arose as critical elements to their continuity in the program?

**Key Terms**

Elementary Education Degree Completion Program (ELED). The program that participants in this study completed. Students are admitted with an associate's degree or equivalent and graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree and a K-12 Teaching License in this 20-month program. Students attend classes one night a week and one Saturday a month and take accelerated classes.

Nontraditional student. For this study, a nontraditional student was quantified as a student who was over 23 at the start of the program, had some life experience, was living independently, and received a degree through an alternative program called the Elementary Education Degree Completion Program.

Successful completion. A student who graduated on time, with all licensure requirements met, and then secured a job within a year of the degree conferral.

Licensing requirements. In the state of Oregon, teacher candidates must earn a degree, pass licensing tests, including the edTPA (or work sample for alumni from earlier groups), and complete a practicum.

Kasworm (1990) domains.

*Implied deficiency.* Research studies that focused on nontraditional status as a deficiency.

In this regard students are expected to perform poorly, are unprepared, and assume the weight of expected failure simply since they are nontraditional.

*Image of student entry and adaptation.* Researchers' examination of the interplay between student entry characteristics and their motivations to perform academic tasks.

*Image of description and characterization.* Research studies that attempted to define nontraditional student attributes in concrete terms.

*Image of psychosocial development.* Researchers' targeting the growth of students throughout their educational experience.

*Image of equity and outcome.* Research examining the outcomes of these adult students and how they compared to the traditional student population.

Domains specified in this study.

*Defining nontraditional students.* Attributes of nontraditional students are explored to create a more current definition of nontraditional students.

*Examining the learning needs of nontraditional students.* Research explored to deduce the learning needs of nontraditional students.

*Examining retention practices of nontraditional students.* Research explored to examine ineffective and effective retention practices for nontraditional students.

*Perceptions of nontraditional students.* Research regarding nontraditional student perceptions was explored.

Grit. Passion and perseverance for long-term goals (Duckworth, 2016).

Growth mindset. The ability to see potential growth in a situation that a participant perceives as challenging (Dweck, 2006).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This is a phenomenological study, which examined participants' lived experiences as students in a teacher education program. I interviewed five students in two separate interviews for a total of ten interviews to gather data to uncover themes. There are several limitations and delimitations that needed to be addressed prior to starting the interviews.

**Limitations.** While the program is eight years old, there was a relatively small sample size from which to pull, and this is undoubtedly a limitation of this study. Data garnered from the university shows that there has been a total of 110 total students admitted to the program, and 80 of those have graduated. I used purposive sampling to identify five students to interview. Also, due to the uniqueness of the program being studied, and because there are so few programs that serve the purpose of licensing and degree completion in one package, findings are not generalizable. However, due to the very nature of a phenomenological study, and the focus on process and meaning (Van Manen, 2014), a small sample size was not all negative as it allowed me to personalize and explore concepts with depth. Another limitation was the possible biases of both the participants and myself. I am the program director and have a vested interest in the success of the program. Also, each selected teacher was a successful completer of the program, which in and of itself could cause bias as participants may have associated success with the program, rather than more critically examining personal attributes that enabled success. In

addition, students might have been apprehensive to share negative aspects of their experience because the events were private or because they saw me as a person of power due to my current role. Finally, students in the sample may have graduated as early as 2010. This is seven years ago, and their memories might be impacted by the length of time between graduation and the interview.

**Delimitations.** The first delimitation has to do with the fact that I focused on one program at a university where I teach. I was looking at a very specific demographic of student. In addition, while I could focus on programmatic goals, this research sought to understand participants' perceived experiences of Elementary Education Program graduates. As noted above, to avoid research bias, I only interviewed students with whom I have had no previous contact in the Elementary Education Program. This decreased the population to 53 students. By including the additional requirements of obtaining a teaching license and acquiring a job within one year of graduation, and locating a current email address, the sample size was decreased down to 23 possible participants. Questions were written carefully to avoid programmatic issues and instead to focus on the stories of the participants. I also employed member checking by returning chapters four and five to participants to read prior to final publication.

My interest in understanding nontraditional students has fueled this study for both personal and professional reasons. Building a literature base – to define the concept of nontraditional student, to understand how nontraditional students differ in their learning processes, to understand retention practices around nontraditional students, and to examine literature that has also focused on the perceptions of nontraditional students – shows the importance of this work, as student perceptions are not accounted for as a strong strand of literature.



## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

The nontraditional student demographic in higher education is growing. Researchers in the 1990s claimed that nontraditional students comprised 40 percent of the higher education population (Kasworm, 1990). More recently, that number was argued to be 73 percent (Compton & Cox, 2006). Research about who nontraditional students are is accumulating, however, research on how nontraditional students perceive their experiences in higher education is lacking in the literature. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of nontraditional students who completed the Elementary Education Program at George Fox University. To build a foundation for this study, it is evident that four areas of the literature are pertinent.

First, it is important to answer the question, who are nontraditional students? What makes them nontraditional and why are these characteristics essential? The literature defines multiple domains whose intent is to provide perspective on the complexity surrounding the identity of nontraditional students in higher education. This will be referred to as domain one and called *Defining Nontraditional Students*.

Second, it is essential to understand how nontraditional students learn and how nontraditional students construct learning environments. The classroom needs of nontraditional students are distinct, as are their learning processes. This will be referred to as domain two and will be called *Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students*.

Third, it is essential to examine how universities utilize retention practices to retain nontraditional students despite the many external obligations they are likely to encounter. Retention practices for nontraditional students are different from those for traditional students. Because this study focuses on students who completed the program successfully, retention is a

pertinent topic to explore. This will be referred to as domain three and will be called *Examining Retention Practices of Nontraditional Students*.

Fourth, examining other studies that have looked at nontraditional student perceptions is essential. While the literature base regarding nontraditional students' perceptions has limited depth, some studies have examined the experiences of nontraditional students as they navigated higher education programs. This will be referred to as domain four and will be called and *Perceptions of Nontraditional Students*.

The literature examined in this research process is a combination of qualitative and quantitative studies, as well as theoretical models. The research spans multiple years, multiple countries and various universities. While the initial plan was to examine research within the last 20 years, it became evident that studies from the 80s and 90s are also relevant because they provide the necessary historical context regarding nontraditional students in higher education.

### **Defining Nontraditional Students**

As discussed previously in chapter one, Kasworm's meta-analysis done in 1990 summarized nontraditional students in five domains. Domain three is Image of Description and Characterization. In this domain, she pointed to a large body of research that attempted to define characteristics of nontraditional adult students in particular. Kasworm noted the difficulty in coming to a concrete conclusion in this work. As recently as 2011, researchers have still been examining descriptors and characteristics of nontraditional students and continue to struggle with the diversity of the characteristics nontraditional students embody (Samuels et al., 2011). However, since 1990, researchers have coalesced their perspectives about nontraditional students across several factors; namely, age, employment status, independence from family of origin, enrollment status, race/ethnicity, first-generation status, alternative routes to high school

graduation, and/or a gap year(s) before starting college. For the purpose of this study, the information will be categorized into Domain one, which is called *Defining Nontraditional Students*, as nontraditional students are a heterogeneous group representing diverse backgrounds (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

**Age.** Historically, in the literature, age was a crucial descriptor used to denote a nontraditional student (Kasworm, 1990). While there is a bit of interplay in the range of ages distinguishing adult from adolescent – researchers hesitate to make a concrete distinction between adult and young person (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, Merrill, & Taylor, 2013) – researchers are generally in agreement that twenty-three is the cut-off point (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Kasworm, 1990; Lundberg, 2003; Ogren, 2003; Schue & Slowey, 2002). An assumption in the literature is that most traditional students finish college between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-two. By placing the adult age at twenty-three, researchers acknowledge at least one gap year between traditional undergraduate students and nontraditional students, and as such twenty-three will be the age consideration for the nontraditional student in this study. Age is one consistent factor that researchers associate with the term nontraditional.

**Employment status.** A second attribute defined in the research has to do with students' employment status. The average age to be independent of one's parents, or to start college is eighteen, so students who have passed this benchmark by five years have most likely found some vocation to pursue. In fact, since so many nontraditional students work, employment status has become a characteristic to consider in the definition of nontraditional students (Compton & Cox, 2006; Ogren, 2003; Samuels et al., 2011; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). While some research considers part-time work enough to qualify a student as nontraditional (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), others expect that nontraditional students must be working full-time (Hardin, 2008;

Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Regardless of whether it is part-time or full-time, working while attending school creates a unique dynamic for nontraditional students. Time committed to work may eliminate, or compete with, time to do homework, time to socialize with faculty and other students, time to use the library and other university services, and time to pursue any extracurricular activities.

**Independence.** In addition to working, nontraditional students are independent of their parents financially (Hardin, 2008; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Wyatt, 2011), and are also living independently (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Ogren, 2003). This may be considered an asset.

However, self-sufficiency carries added responsibility because nontraditional students are more likely to be married and have dependents of their own (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm, 1990; Wyatt, 2011). The interplay between the lack of a college degree and a commitment to dependents often means that nontraditional students live with the reality of a low socio-economic status (Kuh et al., 2008; Ogren, 2003). Thus, nontraditional students are spread thin, managing many different priorities (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Samuels et al., 2011), with commitments to family (Hardin, 2008; Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Ogren, 2003; Samuels et al., 2011) and community. However, this is not all negative. The life experience that adult learners bring to their learning through their participation in a job, a family, or a community can enhance the academic experience (Schue & Slowey, 2002; Stevens, 2014).

**Enrollment status.** The reality of living with a low socio-economic status has forced many nontraditional students to enroll only part-time in the university, such that part-time attendance has become another descriptor of nontraditional students in the literature (Hardin, 2008; Ogren, 2003; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). The most significant concern is not that nontraditional students are attending part-time, but rather what factors nontraditional students are

balancing while also taking classes. Part-time attendance allows for life and school balance for nontraditional students (Byrd, 2001), which is important due to the complexity of non-school factors in nontraditional student lives.

**Race and ethnicity.** In recent years, there has been a trend in education to bring the topics of diversity and equity to the forefront of educational practice to address the changing student demographic. For this reason, researchers agree that race and ethnicity are now considered defining attributes of nontraditional students (Schue & Slowey, 2002). It makes sense that higher education populations are changing, because k-12 student populations are evolving significantly. In fact, in the 2017 equity report from the State of Oregon, thirty-one districts in Oregon have a population that is more than 40% diverse and diverse populations in k-12 school in Oregon are increasing by 1% each year (Highlights: 2017 Oregon educator equity report, 2017). The equity report, sent to all districts in Oregon, is an attempt to show the disparity of educational practices for students of color. The struggle present in k-12 education is also present in higher education (Schue & Slowey, 2002). More students of color are entering college than at any other time in history, and yet the research on students of color in higher education settings is limited (Scott & Homant, 2007). The traditional classroom practices do not necessarily align with the academic needs of students of color. For this reason, students of color are considered nontraditional students, and as such, traditional university policies are not sufficiently providing for their unique needs (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016).

**First-generation college students.** Along with students of color, first-generation students often fall into the nontraditional category. In 1996, Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora analyzed survey data collected from 23 universities and almost 4,000 students. In this study, researchers learned that first-generation students do indeed come with

more obstacles to overcome than traditional students. These obstacles include a lack of critical thinking skills and a lack of encouragement from families (Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation college students also report spending fewer hours on school and more time at work. In addition, first-generation students are also likely to come from low-income families (Terenzini et al., 1996). Understanding the unique difference of first-generation students is vital as faculty engages nontraditional students in the classroom (Terenzini et al., 1996). If first-generation students indeed lack skills, then their needs in the classroom are going to be unique. For all these reasons, first-generation students are also considered nontraditional students.

**High-school completion and gap year.** The final category to examine regarding descriptors of nontraditional students has to do with how they graduate from high school and how long they take between high school and a serious commitment to a college. It is not unusual for nontraditional students to come to their college experience without a high school diploma (Compton & Cox, 2006; Wyatt, 2011). Also, a gap year, or years, is not uncommon (Compton & Cox, 2006; Dill & Henley, 1998; Hardin, 2008; Wyatt, 2011). Some nontraditional students take multiple gap years. While some nontraditional students bring transfer credits (Kasworm & Pike, 1994), and others bring life experience (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Lundberg, 2003; Schue & Slowey, 2002), the gap can result in academic deficiencies (Hardin, 2008; Kasworm & Pike, 1994; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). On a positive note, the life experience can be seen as an asset (Dill & Henley, 1998), because students come ready to build on a schema that is already present (Wyatt, 2011); students are able to connect new learning with an array of previous experiences. In a study done by Ross-Gordon (2011), the students' life-experience was found to be an asset rather than a deficit. In short, alternative pathways to a high school diploma, and time

away from school can translate into assets or deficits depending on the student and other circumstances.

**Conclusion.** To summarize, the term nontraditional incorporates various descriptors and as such the overall domain is referred to as Defining Nontraditional Students. A nontraditional student is over the age of 23, and he or she is independent. Also, a nontraditional student is more likely to be enrolled part-time due to the complexities of adult life. The nontraditional student label can include students of color and often represents students who have taken multiple years between high school and college. In short, a nontraditional student is a complicated being. Wearing one or more of the above descriptors can impact students in profound ways, and yet there is evidence that universities lack support structures for nontraditional students (Davidson & Holbrook, 2014). This is something that must be addressed as universities welcome more nontraditional students each year. To begin, it is essential to examine how nontraditional students learn.

### **Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students**

Kasworm's meta-analysis done in 1990 identified two domains in which researchers examined how students learn and how they developed as students, which were Implied Deficiency and Psychosocial Development. For this study, the literature will focus on the nontraditional student learning context and process, and will be referred to as domain two, *Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students*. Thus, the next section of the literature review is dedicated to examining the distinct differences in nontraditional learning theory, nontraditional student learner descriptors, academic deficiencies nontraditional students face, nontraditional students' unique relationship with the university, nontraditional students' need for

a sacred classroom space and strong connections to faculty, and finally, the role motivation plays in nontraditional student learning.

**Nontraditional learning theory.** Learning is a complicated process that researchers have been examining for centuries. There are many renowned learning theorists who have profoundly shaped the education of children. Best practices for the learning of children is a broad topic with many perspectives. However, it has been much more recently that researchers have begun to build learning theory regarding nontraditional students.

Since students who identify as nontraditional are 23 or older, adult learning theory is pertinent to this subgroup. One theorist whose work is foundational in the adult learning literature is Malcolm Knowles (Merriam, 2001). Most commonly known for his work around adult learning and his coining of the term *andragogy*, which refers to his theoretical approach to adult learning, Knowles published a text called *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, (1980) that is fundamental for more recent work on adult learning theory. The research Knowles reported on helped the academic world understand that adults learn differently than children do. Knowles presented essential realities that should be considered when engaging adults in the content and learning process. The first is that adults want to be self-directed (Knowles, 1980). Also, instructors need to be intentional about providing real experiences in which adults are involved in the learning process (Knowles, 1980). Finally, adults crave an understanding of the *why* in absorbing new material and like to connect the new learning to real experience from their lives (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). Of late, scholars have added the need for critical reflection to Knowles's list of useful practices for adult learners (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Based on the previous description of nontraditional



student characteristics, the rationale of Knowles' theory connects well to the complexity of their educational needs. Purposeful learning is a felt reality for nontraditional students.

A more recent, less prominent, theory of adult learning was described by Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, (2004). These theorists describe a model that has four components. The first is the learner. In this component, the researchers point out the importance of knowing the essential attributes of adult students as learners, which are distinctive. The second component defines the unique process of learning for adults. In this component, the researchers bring light to the different processes adults students might encounter because they are experiencing situations that are very different from traditional students. The third component addresses the role of the educator in adult learning. According to Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, (2004), this is especially important because adults need a unique educational experience. Thus, experienced faculty play a central role in nontraditional students' educational experience. The fourth and final component is the context. Adult students have a context both in and out of the classroom that can and will impact their educational experience. While the theory presented by Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, (2004) does not precisely align with the work of Knowles', in examining both theories, it is clear that there are strong indications that nontraditional students need practical, purposeful instruction that is tailored to a distinct audience.

As a concrete example of society embracing nontraditional students, it is vital to examine the work by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Summarizing key theorists, CAEL has established eight best practice standards that educational institutions must embrace to adequately serve the adult learner population (<https://www.cael.org>). These standards are known as the Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) principles and are a call to all who work with adult learners. These eight principles are summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 - ALFI Principles**

1) The institution conducts its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers of time, place and tradition to create lifelong access to educational opportunities.
2) The institution addresses adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrollment to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals.
3) The institution promotes choice using an array of payment options for adult learners to expand equity and financial flexibility.
4) The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor.
5) The institution's faculty use multiple methods of instruction (including experiential and problem-based methods) for adult learners to connect curricular concepts to useful knowledge and skills.
6) The institution assists adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
7) The institution uses information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.
8) The institution engages in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

These ALFI principles provide the foundation for effectively serving the nontraditional adult learners and align well with Knowles (1980), and Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, (2004). A highlight of these standards is that they do address the lived reality of nontraditional students, including obstacles and challenges that nontraditional students face. Experiential and pragmatic learning is highly effective with nontraditional students, and support systems are essential to the students' success.

The research has concluded that adult students do indeed have unique learning needs, and for this reason, their classrooms should look and feel different from traditional classrooms.

However, currently there is little evidence that any modifications for nontraditional student learning are happening (Brinthaupt & Eady, 2014).

**Nontraditional student learner descriptors.** Let it be noted that as unique as nontraditional students are in their attributes, their academic needs are equally diverse. While it is imperative to apply nontraditional learning theory with nontraditional students, it is equally important to understand that the students enter the university with very different dispositional stances and learning profiles.

Much of the academic diversity nontraditional students may exhibit can be explained in the classifications outlined by Kasworm (2003). Kasworm, describes the nontraditional student academic performance by classifying students into five types. The first classification is the *Entry Voice Student*. A student who falls under this classification is one who finds the classroom confusing but will work to be effective. The Entry Voice Student also does not think they can make academic connections on their own and instead rely on faculty to make the connections initially because the classroom is a new place (Kasworm, 2003). The second type of classification is called the *Outside Voice Student*. This type of student sees the classroom as a step to bigger ambition and struggles to find a relevant connection to their personal life. When students can make connections back to their world, the knowledge they have acquired in the classroom is more valued. The third classification is called the *Cynical Voice Student*. This type of student had a previous negative school experience and views faculty as incompetent. The fourth type of student is called the *Straddling Voice Student*. The students that fit into this profile attempt to engage in the classroom and try to connect academic and real-world knowledge. They find value in both the classroom and the real world. The last classification is called the *Inclusive*

*Voice Student*. This student wants intellectual depth, and to be fully embedded in the academic world. The Inclusive Voice student internalizes the impact academics will have on their lives.

Before Kasworm (2003), Endorf & Mcneff, (1991) also characterized adult learners into five categories, which include: *Confident, Pragmatic, Goal-Oriented Learners, Affective Learners, Learners in Transition, Integrated Learners* and *Risk Takers*. The first category, Confident, Pragmatic, Goal-Oriented Learners, includes students who are self-motivated, need little from the university, and hold themselves to a very high standard. The second category is the Affective Learner. In this classification, students willingly engage in their educational experience and desire to please the professor. The third category, Learner in Transition, contains students who are pragmatic and who desire faculty to connect with their emotional preferences. The fourth classification is called the Integrated Learner. Nontraditional students in this category feel a sense of control, and at ease with the process of becoming a student. The fifth and final classification is called Risk Taker Learners. The students that fall into this category are students who enjoy balancing the complexity of life and their schooling, engage willingly with professors, and are confident in their educational endeavors.

Understanding the diversity in the characterization of nontraditional students' profiles is critical to the success of nontraditional students. Nontraditional students who fall into the Straddling Voice (Kasworm, 2003) and Inclusive Voice (Kasworm, 2003) classifications might be more willing to engage in the university despite hurdles they will face. Also, students who are Risk Takers, according to Endorf and McNeff (1991), might outperform those who are considered Transitional. Regardless of the label students earn as they engage academically, it is important to note that each learner is unique and will approach the university with distinct strengths and challenges.

**Academic deficiencies.** The research describes the path to becoming a student as indirect and unclear for nontraditional students (Crossan et al., 2013). Perhaps this is because one of the consistent topics addressed by the researchers regarding nontraditional students in higher education is their perceived academic deficiency (Hardin, 2008; Jacobs & King, 2002). Pike and Kasworm (1994), stated it like this: “Past research indicates that many older adult learners enter higher education from family backgrounds that tend to place them at an academic disadvantage, [and] bring with them deficiencies in academic skills” (p. 694). Perceived academic deficiency is due to multiple factors. One factor scholars have determined that contributes to an academic struggle is that many nontraditional students have focused on a vocation with a particular skill set they have mastered well; however, skill does not translate into a classroom very smoothly (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Another factor to consider when discussing academic deficiency is the distance in time between high school and college. If nontraditional students are twenty-three or older, that places at least five years between high school graduation and enrollment in higher education; they may well have forgotten how to be a student. This is important because distance from an academic setting can result in a lack of confidence for nontraditional students (Ross-Gordon, 2011). However, there are considerations other than academic performance that contribute to the academic success of nontraditional students. For example, effective educational practices, such as pragmatic classes tailored to nontraditional students, can compensate for lower academic skills (Kuh et al., 2008). Hence, nontraditional students need not be defined by deficiencies. In a study done by Kasworm and Pike in 1994, although academic deficiency was noted, nontraditional students had higher GPAs than traditional undergraduates. Kasworm found similar results in a study performed in 1990, as did Graham & Donaldson in 1999. Knowing that

adult students might struggle is valuable information but should not be the defining aspect of their university experience.

**Nontraditional student relationship with the university.** In addition to their academic struggles, nontraditional students are balancing many factors, including dependents, jobs, and community commitments. One would assume that the social aspect of the university would be a consideration in the academic performance of a nontraditional student, but that is not necessarily the case. In fact, the literature shows that the social environment of the university is much less critical to a nontraditional student than the classroom environment (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bye et al., 2007; Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Wyatt, 2011). The classroom takes precedence as the most crucial aspect of a nontraditional student's learning experience (Donaldson & Graham, 1999), because nontraditional students want to experience personal, pragmatic and intentional learning; it is the space where they make meaning (Kasworm, 2003). Students in a study done by Samuels, Beach, & Palmer, (2011) went as far to say the classroom was the only connection to the university; it is the epicenter of a nontraditional student's identity.

**Nontraditional student relationship to faculty.** The diversity nontraditional students bring to the classroom requires faculty to know each student, the variables impacting student success, and the complexity of the life nontraditional students are maintaining (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). Because nontraditional students view the classroom as their primary connection to the university, it is not surprising to know that interactions with faculty are essential for nontraditional students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2016; Samuels et al., 2011). Faculty report an awareness of a need to change their practice (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), but don't due to the norms of the university (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). In order to alter the norms of the university to meet nontraditional student needs, faculty have many responsibilities, as they

are the bridge between the culture and social gaps nontraditional students experience (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). Nontraditional students are looking for faculty who encourage self-direction and autonomy (Merriam, 2001), who require active participation (Wyatt, 2011), who utilize purposeful activities that are relevant for nontraditional students (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), who embed intentional practices to engage students in instruction (Kuh et al., 2008), and who value interactions with nontraditional students (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). Also, nontraditional students value faculty who have experience (Wyatt, 2011), and those who know how to engage students proactively rather than reactively (Simpson, 2004). In short, strategic, purposeful, and dedicated faculty are needed for nontraditional students to find success.

Brockett (2015) represents the reality of nontraditional student needs in his book *Teaching Adults*. He describes seven characteristics teachers of adults should have, including trust, empathy, authenticity, confidence, humility, enthusiasm, and respect. Not one of these attributes relates to content knowledge, but instead all focus on the relationship between nontraditional students and faculty. This does not negate the need for adults to have meaningful experiences, nor quality content. Instead, it demonstrates the importance of knowing the students in order to make teaching an intentional, transparent process (Compton & Cox, 2006), because for nontraditional students a relationship with faculty has been found to be more important than the relationship with peers (Kasworm & Pike, 1994), though collaboration with peers has also helped students overcome educational struggles (Wasley, 2006).

**Motivation.** When these facts are considered – that nontraditional students have academic deficits, a unique and somewhat limited relationship with the university, and a need for purposeful relationships with faculty – it is not surprising that motivation is a contributing factor to the academic success of nontraditional students. What nontraditional students bring to the

university, in terms of their attitude and dispositions, has been shown to impact how nontraditional students experience the university despite the many obstacles they face.

In some regards, the experiences nontraditional students bring qualify them as better-prepared than traditional students (Wasley, 2006). The benefit of attending higher education with more life experience means that students are more mature (Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Wyatt, 2011), more goal oriented (Compton & Cox, 2006), and more focused (Spitzer, 2000). In essence, life experience is an asset (Ross-Gordon, 2011), which in turn can translate into self-confidence (Manos & Kasambira, 1998). It is also important to note, regarding focus and maturity in nontraditional students, their motivators for returning to school. Often, nontraditional students report that they are seeking a vocational advancement, inspired to make the change due to a significant life transition (Samuels et al., 2011). Education in such a case is a means to an end, so even if nontraditional students lack academically, they can still find success (Grimes & David, 1999). Researchers attribute some of this success to intrinsic motivation.

*Flow*, a coin termed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), is the idea that a person is completely and entirely absorbed in a mental state on a task that is purposeful and challenging. In 2009, Daniel Pink described flow as the presence of three components; autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Mastery means a belief that there is always something somewhere that can be improved (Pink, 2009). Autonomy provides for choice in how a problem is tackled, and purpose signifies that there are meaning and worth in performing the activity (Pink, 2009). It is reasonable to suggest that it is a state of flow that enables nontraditional students to move past academic deficiencies.

Studies have verified that nontraditional students are more intrinsically motivated than traditional students (Bye et al., 2007; Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Vallerand & Bissonnette,



1992). According to Bye et al. (2007), intrinsic motivation relates to student reports of learning activity being challenging, sparking their curiosity and their personal belief that they can master the content. In addition, Consedine, Magai, & King, (2004) found interest to be a fundamental part of motivation. Summarizing the critical components of research regarding nontraditional students and their motivation into descriptors like challenging and interesting suggests connections to the foundational work of Csikszentmihalyi, (1990). Many educational programs do not allow much autonomy in curriculum choice, including the program featured in this study. However, the ideals of mastery and purpose may be sufficient to keep students motivated.

**Conclusion.** Nontraditional students are unique, and as such require distinct experiences in the classroom due to their academic deficiencies, their potential learner profile, their unique connection to the university, their specific classroom /professor needs and their motivation. All of these characteristics will be classified under domain two, *Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students*. When researchers consider all aspects of nontraditional students, an examination of retention practices universities use to prevent attrition of nontraditional students is warranted and important.

### **Retention Practices**

In her 1990 meta-analysis, Kasworm addressed the ideal of retaining students in two of the five domains she described. These two are Image of Student Entry and Adaptation, and Image of Equity and Outcome, which have been combined in this study and referred to as domain three, *Examining Retention Practices of Nontraditional Students*. Kasworm (1990) pointed to the research that had been done to identify the process of evolution nontraditional students undergo in the Image of Entry and Adaptation domain. In the Image of Equity and Outcome domain Kasworm was examining the research that compared nontraditional students to

traditional students. For this study, Kasworm's (1990) domains will be synthesized to examine retention practices for nontraditional students.

Retention is a heavily discussed topic in the university realm (Tinto, 2007). This is not surprising because universities rely on tuition to fund university operations, so learning about why students leave and how to retain them can mean the difference between the survival or demise of an institution. This section of the literature will examine retention with respect to nontraditional students. First, the concept of accelerated programs will be explored, followed by an examination of key theorists in the retention literature, followed in turn by a summary of crucial retention factors as they relate to nontraditional students.

**Accelerated programs.** To set the stage for this particular student demographic, it is important to note that nontraditional students generally perform better in nontraditional formats (Flint & Frey, 2003). Nontraditional formats can take many forms, but one pertinent aspect to define regarding nontraditional programs has to do with the concept of accelerated courses. According to Richards (2006), an accelerated program has specific defining parameters:

These programs are structured to take less time than conventional programs to attain a degree or credential. Accelerated courses are taught sequentially (one at a time) rather than in the traditional parallel fashion in which several classes are taken at once. Rather than splitting one's focus between several subjects for one semester, the student focuses on one subject at a time with deeper concentration (p. 2).

Scott & Conrad (1992) critiqued accelerated programs and presented six conclusions. First, intensive, accelerated courses procure equitable outcomes in comparison to traditional length courses. Second, there were some disciplines that found accelerated courses to be superior. Third, accelerated courses are met with positive reactions from nontraditional students

due to their convenience and ease. Fourth, the perception of faculty regarding accelerated courses is a significant obstacle. Fifth, the amount of time invested in a course is not the prime indicator of learning outcomes. Sixth, while the reason is not fully understood, students do learn in accelerated courses. This analysis suggested that "students were often motivated, excited, and inspired by intensive course experiences and that concentrated learning generated a level of satisfaction unlike that experienced in traditional-length courses (p. 444)." The relevance of this information lies in the fact that participants in this study were part of a program that made use of the accelerated format. According to Fincher, (2010), 21-33% of adult students will fail in an accelerated degree program regardless of how well the program is run, however, the attrition rate for participants in this study was only six percent. Such a large difference between the norm and the university data suggests there were factors at play that enabled nontraditional students to overcome university norms; it is possible that the accelerated program format was one of those factors.

**Key theorists.** To understand the significance of the low attrition rates in the ELED program at George Fox University, it is important to examine the known voices in the retention literature. Vincent Tinto has contributed substantially to this field. His work in 1975 laid the foundation for the development of a model that universities use as a basis for studies around retention. In his work, mostly based in the sociological realm, Tinto identified the importance of student entry characteristics as a critical factor in student retention (Tinto, 1975). He also pointed to a student's commitment as a contributing factor to retention. In addition, he cited the importance of belonging to the community of the university both academically and socially, stating, "Central to this model was the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction

between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year” (Tinto, 2007, p. 3).

Tinto (2007) also discussed the importance of understanding student backgrounds and how they can impact retention, the complexity of different types of universities and college settings (i.e., two-year vs. four-year), and the intricacy of student retention, which was oversimplified in early models. In examining the literature in the previous section, it is not difficult to comprehend the complexity of retention issues, especially regarding nontraditional students. Tinto's more recent work (2007) is a call to action, to not only understand why students leave but also to change university practices to keep oversimplification from happening in future circumstances. Specifically, he addresses the need to examine classroom practice, and details the impact of faculty development on retention practices; faculty who know and understand how to build relationships with students will be more effective with nontraditional students.

In 1985, Bean and Metzner expanded Tinto's work and applied it to nontraditional students. Bean & Metzner (1985) describe the reasons nontraditional students drop out, based on four variables. The first is academic performance. Students with poor academic performance are more likely to drop out than those who are performing well. The second variable that contributes to attrition is what Bean and Metzner have called *intent to leave*. Deemed as one of the two strongest predictors of students leaving, intent to leave was most influenced by the students' view of education being useful and by the students' satisfaction at the university. The third variable relates to the background of the student, especially to their high school performance and their educational goals. Those students with higher GPAs who could articulate education plans were more likely to be retained at the university. The fourth variable is the environmental factors that can impact student retention. Bean and Metzner's (1985) study culminated by asking faculty

to do two things to remediate retention issues for nontraditional students. The first was to recruit students who have better academic performance, which can be measured by incoming GPA, and the second is to have faculty involved in students' university experiences, which in turn would encourage attendance.

The critical difference between the Bean and Metzner model and the Tinto (1975) was the introduction of environmental factors as a contributor to student attrition. Bean and Metzner (1985) described environmental factors as circumstances (i.e., a job) that might impact student performance. A revisit of the first stage of the literature, regarding the complexity of nontraditional students, does indeed support the need to examine how external factors might impact a nontraditional student's ability to engage and maintain at the university. Bean and Metzner (1985) also started a meaningful conversation about the difference between traditional and nontraditional student retention practices.

In 2004, Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon introduced a third model in an attempt to refine the work of Tinto (1975) and to include a more diverse population, namely commuter students. In this model, researchers proposed that academic and social integration are both viable factors to consider. However, the importance shifted depending on the demographics of the students. For example, commuter students are more affected by their academic performance, and residential students are more impacted by their social connection to the university. This is not surprising when considering the literature previously discussed regarding nontraditional student needs from the university and the classroom. The literature supports the fact that nontraditional students are more likely to struggle academically, and find less need to be connected to the university socially – instead, they value the classroom space.

In 2014 Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck developed an additional model, and this work was specifically targeting nontraditional students. These researchers present a model in which entry characteristics, external factors, and internal factors are all interrelated to determine persistence. The researchers constructed a quantitative study to compare nontraditional students who persisted with those who did not, and then reported the results.

Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck (2014), defined *entry characteristics* as gender, age, ethnicity, parental education, previous college credit, educational goal, children, marital status, income/SES, and motivation. In their findings regarding persistence, the researchers state, "Of all student entry characteristics, only educational goals were significantly related to the likelihood of persisting" (p. 9). Referring to the literature regarding nontraditional student learning and relationship to the university, this is not surprising. The research previously reviewed did corroborate these findings in that nontraditional students were found to be more motivated and able to overcome academic deficiencies with the proper support.

Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck (2014), defined *external factors* as finances, family influences, work influences, significant life events, community influences, and hours of employment. In their study, the specific external factors that impacted persistence were financial means and being supported by family. The financial stress identified in the previous part of this literature review supports this conclusion. Also, it was noted in a previous section that family encouragement is a contributing factor to nontraditional students' success.

The third and final category introduced by Bergman et al. (2014) has to do with the *internal characteristics* of the university. Researchers defined internal characteristics as enrollment status, cumulative GPA, institutional support, academic advising, faculty support, financial aid, cost, flexible course options, active learning, and prior learning assessment. The

only variable they found to be related to persistence at the university was institutional responsiveness. Students want to be seen, and to know that faculty are meeting their needs. In fact, when they perceive the institution as responsive other stressors that might impact retention can become less significant (Bergman, Gross, Berry, & Shuck, 2014). If the classroom is the place of meaning for students, and the faculty relationships are highly valued, that means the classroom space and faculty responsiveness can fall into the category of institution responsiveness.

**A summary of the factors regarding retention.** Theoretical models are important to examine; however it is also important to examine overarching themes. Bean, (2012) provides six themes present across multiple retention models including student background factors, organizational factors, academic factors, social factors, environmental factors, and attitudes, intentions, and psychological processes.

**Background factors.** According to Bean, (2012), background factors can include many different descriptors of students. First, parents play a significant role for students – parental support, parents' education, and parents' income. It is possible that the influence of parents would be less for nontraditional students since many are parents themselves. More pertinently to nontraditional students, Bean also includes the prior academic performance of students as a contributor to retention in the background category. Academic background included their goals, their academic status coming into the university, and college preparedness. In relation to nontraditional students specifically, the understanding of the deficiencies nontraditional students bring to the university, and providing supports for these deficiencies, might make or break the university experience for a nontraditional student.

*Organizational factors.* The second category identified by Bean (2012) is called organizational factors. Researchers describe these as factors that are important to student success but often outside of student control. For example, financial aid falls into this category. Finances are often an issue for students (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004), and if there is no aid available, students who are financially independent have little or no choice about attending college. In fact, a study done in 2017, (Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2017), found that the most prominent risk factor regarding retention for nontraditional students is their financial status. Universities must be able to help nontraditional students with financial aid, even if they are attending part-time (Flint & Frey, 2003).

Another key in the category of organizational structures is the focus on accelerated programs. In this setting students move through content quickly – six to eight weeks per class – and have a varied schedule (Kasworm, 2001). These programs allow for block scheduling and weekend and evening classes, which in turn meet the needs of nontraditional students (Flint & Frey, 2003). Also, the universities with accelerated programs often consider prior learning (PLA) as credit-worthy; students are given credit for vocational experiences. This validates the experience nontraditional students bring to the university, and thus PLA is considered a best practice for nontraditional students (Flint & Frey, 2003; “Home | CAEL - Council for Adult and Experiential Learning,” n.d.). Knowing that nontraditional students need student support systems that are specific to their needs (Compton & Cox, 2006), and need alternative programming, it is not surprising that nontraditional students seek flexible programs (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

There are a variety of other factors to include in this organizational domain. However, programs often have little control over university policies and procedures created for traditional undergraduate students (Kasworm & Pike, 1994). A useful practice to help students navigate



through these domains is the practice of offering students support in the form of advising (Flint & Frey, 2003; Habley, Valiga, McClanahan, & Burkum, 2010).

***Academic factors.*** The next domain identified by Bean (2012) is called academic factors. In this category, Bean discusses the importance of the classroom space and student interactions with faculty. Student access to campus resources also falls within this domain. Bean's main point is that there are specific interventions the university must put in place to aid nontraditional students – specifically in the classroom and in interactions with faculty. If students perceive that they are engaged in purposeful activities, there is also a positive impact on persistence (Kuh et al., 2008). As an indicator of nontraditional student success, it is essential to watch students' academic performance their first semester. Researchers suggest this is a good predictor of their overall performance (Davidson & Holbrook, 2014), and that nontraditional student GPA is a strong predictor of retention (Nakajima et al., 2017). Simply stated, if universities are proactive in their approach to nontraditional students and use academic performance as a data point, retention is higher (Simpson, 2004).

***Social factors.*** Bean (2012) also identifies social factors as influential in student retention. Some of these factors include peers, social involvement within the university, and the level of integration students feel in the university. While peers can have a positive effect on retention for nontraditional students (Lundberg, 2003), as noted above, the social integration on the university level is not nearly as crucial to nontraditional students as it is to traditional students. The social needs of nontraditional students are met in their families, their jobs, and in their communities (Bergman et al., 2014). Being stretched beyond the realm of most traditional students, nontraditional students find it difficult to invest in the university (Graham &

Donaldson, 1999; Lundberg, 2003). However, the relationship with the university need not be a predicting factor of nontraditional student retention; there are many more relevant predictors.

***Environmental factors.*** In addition to the effect of social aspects of the university, student retention is also impacted by environmental factors. One of the most influential environmental factors for nontraditional students is family support. Researchers are in agreement that this support is a pivotal part of nontraditional student success (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016). However, nontraditional families might not understand or support the role of education (Samuels et al., 2011). Lack of support from the family can be the difference between persistence and non-persistence (Bergman et al., 2014). For those students who do not have family, community, and job support also play an important role. Support for nontraditional students is essential, but other environmental factors include dependents, a job, and financial security. As discussed previously, these are factors that weigh into the success of students. A delicate balance is important for retention.

***Attitudes, intentions, and psychological processes.*** The descriptors Bean uses for the category of attitudes, intention and psychological processes align with much of the content previously covered and can be simplified by summarizing in this manner: students' beliefs about who they are and what they can do impact how they interact in the university setting. For example, intrinsic motivation is imperative and can override academic deficiencies in certain circumstances. Self-efficacy can also influence academic achievement (Peterson, 1993). While understanding that the human psyche is never a simple process, understanding how to build confidence in nontraditional students impacts their retention in the university.

**Conclusion.** Retention practices are paramount to understand for this study. First, with a program retention rate of six percent, the program that participants completed has lower than

average rates of non-persistence (Bean, 2012). Also, participants in this study are considered completers, which means they finished the program and were retained by the university. The students in this study chose to remain at the university for the duration of their program; there was some reason to persist. Perhaps this is due to internal motivations of the student, but there is also justification to explore retention practices the university employed. All of these characteristics fall under domain three, *Examining Retention Practices of Nontraditional Students*.

### **Perceptions of Nontraditional Students**

The literature on nontraditional students is vast, complex, and informative. However, one area specifically lacking in research has to do with understanding nontraditional student perceptions about their learning experiences. What do they report as meaningful as they reflect on their educational experience as a nontraditional student? Hearing the voices of nontraditional students who are describing successful classroom practices and retention supports is the next step in the process of understanding the overall needs of this student demographic. This will be referred to as the fourth domain, called *Perceptions of Nontraditional Students*. To explore these perceptions a key study will be used as the framework. Kasworm, a renowned scholar in the literature regarding nontraditional students, did a case-study done with twenty students (Kasworm, 2001), and derived four pertinent elements related to their experiences.

The first element described by Kasworm (2001) that contributed to the student experience had to do with perceptions of programmatic support implemented throughout their learning experience. Nontraditional students can feel isolated and lonely (Scott & Lewis, 2012) due partly to the fact that they are breaking away from a former identity (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). In addition, many students report struggling initially in the academic endeavors, even to

the point of being called inflexible (Walsh, Abi-Nader, & Poutiatine, 2005). This might be because students perceive that academic skills can only be obtained through practice in real-life circumstances (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), but it could also just mean that they are still developing (Endorf & Mcneff, 1991). Program supports to alleviate or lessen the intensity of these struggles are important to the nontraditional student experience. Perceived supports include a variety of elements. First, support means that the classroom space feels like it was tailored to adult learning, even moving students to a new level of critical thinking (L. M. Scott & Lewis, 2012). Second, a clear degree completion map is important (Kasworm, 2001). Furthermore, students want caring faculty (Kasworm, 2001), but also hold high standards for the quality of instruction (Walsh et al., 2005). Small class sizes are also a must for students, as is content that is applicable to real world situations (Kasworm, 2001), even if it means more work (Walsh et al., 2005). Because nontraditional students want to be self-directed learners (Dwyer, Thompson, & Thompson, 2013), and as many as 95% report a desire to be in control of their learning, it is not surprising that support systems that enable this desire to become a reality are important.

Second, Kasworm (2001) noted the importance nontraditional students place on relationships with their peers regarding their own success. Students in Kasworm's student participated in a cohort model and Kasworm summed up the experience by saying, "They became a quasi-family of caring and supporting adults faced with adult life demands that were sometimes beyond their level of resilience" (p. 11). The shared experience of balancing life and school was valuable to participants (Kasworm, 2001). This was corroborated by Walsh et al. (2005), and by Dwyer et al., (2013). In both studies, scholars showed a strong connection between nontraditional student success and the support of their cohort. While it is important to

note that identifying a sense of belonging is complex (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), the cohort has been shown to be an effective model to obtain results. A small trusted group enables students to feel comfortable, which in turn produces the meaningful classroom interactions that nontraditional students value (Walsh et al., 2005).

The third key element proposed by Kasworm (2001) was that nontraditional students believe there is a specific student identity for effective learning and successful completion of the program. Nontraditional students report that navigating the world of higher education is complex and difficult (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), and cite differences between calling themselves a student and really embodying all that student means (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). However, owning the name of student is empowering (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), and it is an identity that students want to embody. Participants in Kasworm's (2001) study believed they were special; this belief was embedded in the idea that students perceived themselves as dedicated, committed, and responsible (Kasworm, 2001). Nontraditional students also believe they are making important sacrifices to make school a reality (Stevens, 2014). In addition, because nontraditional students are under the strain of balancing multiple roles with each role requiring significant amounts of time (Kim, Sax, Lee, & Hagedorn, 2010), being successful at school carries significance. Through hard work and dedication to success, nontraditional students perceived themselves as able to do something important and life-changing, often reporting that education was a means to an end; for students this meant a better job and more income (Stevens, 2014). In fact, the belief that they were better for becoming a student was so strong, that many expressed disdain for students who claimed to be there only for the degree (Kasworm, 2001). Researchers use words like *responsible*, *organized*, *mature*, and *goal-directed* to describe nontraditional students. Researchers also predict that students embody these traits due to the

complexity of their lives and the necessity to rise above the circumstance (Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Stevens, 2014; Walsh et al., 2005).

The fourth and final element identified by Kasworm (2001) had to do with paradoxical students' beliefs about their engagement in successful learning. First, students found practical classes important and relevant yet in turn wanted other types of classes. They also liked the accelerated program but struggled with the guilt of not being able to perform at their highest potential, and shared distress in attempting to balance life with school.

One area unaddressed by Kasworm (2001), were the features outside of the university that impacted student performance. Bergman et.al. (2014) describe these as environmental factors. Discussed previously, the strain of environmental factors such as financial status, and perceived family support, can make or break a student's success.

In survey data collected from 1156 nursing students, participants spoke to the intense impact of environmental factors on student retention (Jeffreys, 2007). As such, it is important to note that nontraditional students' stated family emotional support and friends inside and outside of class are perceived as the most meaningful contributors to student success (Jeffreys, 2007). Please note, a distinction must be made between family of origin and current family when analyzing student perceptions of familial support, as current family holds more clout for students (Plageman & Sabina, 2010). Interestingly enough, while support is important to nontraditional students, some researchers report that constructs such as intelligence or diligence are better predictors of performance (Plageman & Sabina, 2010).

**Conclusion.** Nontraditional students have been shown to be a complicated demographic; their identifying characteristics are often difficult to pinpoint in the literature. However, researchers generally agree that nontraditional students are (1) 23 or older, (2) working, (3)

enrolled part-time, and (4) financially independent. In addition, the learning practices that are best for nontraditional students are not being implemented faithfully at the university level. However, the literature does express that the classroom space, the interactions with faculty and the connections to their peers are important. While retention practices for traditional students have been studied, there is still some question about the best strategies for nontraditional students. The vital takeaway from the literature on retention is that nontraditional students have different needs. Finally, there is little research about student perceptions regarding all the practices universities employ to retain nontraditional programs. Hearing the lived stories of nontraditional students is important and necessary work.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of nontraditional students in an alternative teacher licensing program. The research was guided by the following questions:

- 1) What are the lived experiences of nontraditional students who successfully navigate a teacher-preparation program? What meanings existed in those experiences?
  - a. How do they describe their positive and negative experiences?
  - b. How do they give meaning to their positive and negative experiences?
  - c. How did interpersonal interactions with faculty and other students shape their experiences?
  - d. What are their expressions of identity as nontraditional students?
  - e. What experiences do they name as “pivotal/choice” moments in their program?
  - f. What aspects of their program (people/curricular/application) arise as critical elements to their continuity in the program?

This chapter describes the research plan including the setting, participants, sampling strategy and size, research ethics, research design, data collection analysis, and the role of the researcher.

#### **Setting**

The setting of this study was George Fox University, which is a small faith-based university in the state of Oregon. At the time of this study, the Elementary Education Degree Completion Programs was part of the College of Education and all students attended between the years of 2012-2015. All participants were public school teachers and represented five unique districts. All participants were licensed in Oregon through the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (TSPC).



For the data collection process participants were given the choice of online or in-person interviews and all chose to do the interviews online. As such, the setting of this study was online exclusively using a platform called Zoom. Each participant chose a location that was comfortable enough to talk for sixty minutes.

**State.** All the teachers I interviewed for this study received teaching certification from the state of Oregon as outlined by the Teacher Standards and Practice Commission. Because the students came from graduating classes over the last 8 years, programmatic requirements were somewhat inconsistent for different years. These distinctions were not a problem in terms of the study but they did impact the language that students used in the interviews. For example, some students wrote a Teacher Work Sample (a portfolio-based assessment scored by George Fox faculty) and others wrote an edTPA (a standardized assessment scored by Pearson) as a summative measure of teacher performance. I started teaching at the university the same year the first cohort started; even though I was working in a different program, the difference in program descriptors was not a barrier.

**University demographics.** George Fox University is a small, private university in the state of Oregon. The slogan of the university is “Be Known,” and the focal point of the university is to ensure that every student has a solid connection with the university; the faculty to student ratio is fourteen to one (“About George Fox University,” n.d.). The university is a Quaker university that provides a liberal arts education. On the university website, it is stated that the three values of the university are: “Students first,” “Christ in everything,” and “Innovation to improve outcomes.” The total number of students in the university is 4,080 (“About George Fox University,” n.d.). Of those, almost 1,400 are graduate students, and around 300 are adult degree students (“About George Fox University,” n.d.). The school has both

undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation programs in which students are receiving their preliminary license.

**Elementary Education Degree Completion requirements.** The Elementary Education Degree Completion Program is a unique entity that falls within both the School of Education and the Adult Degree Program at George Fox. In the program, students receive a teaching license while also completing a Bachelor's Degree. Most students enter the program with the equivalent of an Associate's Degree and then work for five semesters in a hybrid (a combination of face-to-face and online classes) program to finish their academic work in 20 months. The classes meet one night a week and one Saturday a month for the duration of the program. Other coursework was online. Students are part of a cohort model, which meant that every class is taken by all students in the same order at the same time. Another important feature of this program is the fact that students met off the main campus, in one of two satellite campuses located about an hour from the main campus in Newberg, Oregon. At the time of this study, nontraditional in the ELED program pay \$502 per credit and traditional undergrad students pay \$1004 per credit ("About George Fox University," n.d.). This difference in price has been consistent since the beginning of the program, although the price has gone up considerably since the inception of the program.

### **Sampling Strategy**

One important factor in selecting students was to eliminate students I taught from the pool of participants. Establishing this restriction decreased the population from 110 to 53 students. After these 53 graduates were crosschecked with the Oregon Licensing Agency (TSPC) to ensure that they did indeed secure a teaching license and were employed at a school, the population dropped to 23 potential participants. With email addresses secured from school websites, a google form (Appendix C) was sent to all twenty-three teachers asking if they had

any interest in participating in the study. Eleven of the twenty-three participants responded to the invitation. Five teachers responded that they were interested, four responded that they may be interested and two responded that they were not interested. This email was resent two additional times to ensure participants knew of the opportunity.

Due to the limited sample group, I used purposive sampling. From the list of graduates who returned the above-mentioned google form (Appendix C), I had five participants who were willing to participate in both interviews during the times I presented. Participants represented different races or ethnic identities, genders, socioeconomic statuses, ages, and each brought an array of previous life experience. When I identified the sample group, I requested that each participant sign up for two sixty-minute interview slots so they could participate in two interviews using a modified version of Seidman's interview model (2013). Seidman suggests an initial interview focusing first on context, a second interview focused on the details of the experience, and a third interview designed to foster reflection on the experience. For the purposes of this study, the context and details were the focus of the first interview and the second interview asked participants to make meaning from the described experiences (Appendix A). By asking participants to describe the details of obtaining their degree during the first interview, I was able to ask them to reflect on those experiences and individualize questions for the second interview.

### **Research Ethics**

As director of the program, I have access to past student data. It was vital that this data was kept confidential and that all students were protected. In each google form (Appendix C) I sent to garner interest or to set up interview times, I kept participants' names hidden. In addition,

the responses have been kept confidential through use of a password-protected file. Once the sample was selected, I destroyed the original google form (Appendix C) and google form data.

I collected a letter of informed consent (Appendix D) from each participant in addition to going over the expectations of the study during the first interview. The letter informed the participants of the intent of the research, the amount of time each participant was expected to invest in the interviews, the opportunity to member check the data, and the name of the sponsoring university. Participants also were informed about how the data would be kept confidential, how their identity would remain anonymous to others besides myself, and guidelines that explained how they could pull out of the study at any time or choose to skip any questions that made them uncomfortable. Since all participant and researcher interactions happened remotely in a Zoom meeting, I asked participants at the beginning of each interview to state that they had read the letter and verify consent to participate through email. These emails will be kept in a confidential folder on my computer for five years and then deleted.

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, I used pseudonyms on all data collection documents and in the reporting of the findings in Chapter Four. Documents included my field notes, interview recordings, and transcripts. Interviews were the main source of data in this study and were recorded, but participants' identities were password-protected and will be archived and destroyed after five years.

Because all the participants were alumni, I investigated an event that has already happened, and since the students were no longer part of the program being researched, there was only limited risk to participants.

### **Research Design**

This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the questions, “What are the lived experiences of nontraditional students who successfully navigate a teacher-preparation program? What meanings existed in those experiences?” The choice of a phenomenological approach aligned with intent of the study and was most appropriate for the question I chose because phenomenology examines lived experiences, but also explores how participants give meaning to their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). Van Manen (2014) calls phenomenology a “meaning-making method of inquiry” (p. 28) because researcher and participants work together to examine an event. The intent of this study was not necessarily to explain events but to return to the experiences to really understand the perceptions of those involved (Moustakas, 1994), then to find themes among the experiences (Creswell, 2013). The key to finding these themes was open-ended interviews and dialogues with participants (Moustakas, 1994). Taking time to sit with participants as they reflected on their experiences was a key factor in building trust so they could share their meaning with me.

### **Data Collection**

The main data source for this study was personal interviews, but I also supplemented the interviews with field notes (Huffman, 2017). Field notes enabled me to gather key ideas and formulate the beginnings of potential themes. Field notes also helped me craft key questions for the second interview as there was insufficient time to transcribe and code the first interview’s content prior to conducting the second interview. Since each participant did two interviews, I conducted ten total interviews and I conducted all interviews within a two-week timeframe. The most consecutive days between two interviews for any given participant was four days, and the shortest time lapse between interviews was two days. I digitally recorded each interview and I

also took notes as I listened. Then I had each interview transcribed so I could read transcripts and begin to identify themes in the text. The interviews used series of guide questions and were semi-structured, leaving me room to explore answers if necessary (See Appendix A). I sent the questions to students prior to the first interview. I did not do this for the second interview because it was based on key features and themes that surfaced from the first interview.

Seidman (2013) suggests that phenomenological researchers use an interview process that includes three separate interviews, each with a different purpose. He suggests focusing first on context, then the details of the experience, and then finally, reflection on the experience. Since participants in this study were all teachers, I knew it would be difficult to set aside three interview times, however, there was a strong rationale to focus on Seidman's process. Hence, I modified Seidman's approach to do two 90-minute interviews. While the intended plan was to have interviews one and interview two last ninety minutes each, there were a variety of factors contributing to the fact that most participant interviews were just an hour, or even a little less. For example, one participant had a small child to care for during the interview. Another participant was interrupted a few times because we were interviewing while she was still at school. These factors reminded me just how complex the lives of these teachers are.

To ensure that I had not misrepresented the participants, I employed member checking. After the initial analysis, I sent each member a draft of chapters four and five. I welcomed any feedback and asked participants to respond to the work should anything not be aligned with their intended meaning. Two suggestions were made that both were minor editing issues that were fixed immediately. Otherwise, students did not express any concern with the work.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, I coded the data to find emergent

themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2013). Using the grounded theory structure, I began the process with initial coding (Huffman, 2017), in which I read the raw data over and over again to find emergent themes. In this process, I used a combination of three strategies, a priori coding – phrases or concepts I could tie back to the literature, redundancy coding – phrases or concepts I found that participants repeated frequently, and indigenous coding – phrases or concepts I found to be unique to this group but consistent across multiple interviews (Huffman, 2017). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) call this “making the text manageable” (p. 42).

Following the first phase, I continued to employ the remaining five steps of coding suggested by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), which include grouping relevant ideas into categories, labeling the themes of each group, developing theoretical constructs based on the content of the group, and finally, narrating the results.

One important consideration as I examined the data was ensuring that sensitive data was presented ethically. In many instances, participants shared information that was extremely personal or shared a story about a faculty member who currently works at the university. I chose to be very strategic about what types of information to include in the analysis to protect both participants and faculty.

### **Bracketing**

As a researcher, my main goal was to simply listen, but I know that assumptions are always present. As a person who exhibits strengths of restorative, developer and strategic according to the *Strengths 2.0* assessment created by Tom Rath (2013), I know that I am a problem solver. The ability to listen intentionally without jumping to conclusions about how or why something was perceived one way or another was very important for me to practice, and I found this to be difficult at times. The need for students to feel listened to and heard is very

important in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994), and I needed to leave my desire to problem-solve at the door.

I also had to acknowledge that as program director, I have a vested interest in the success of the program. I have seen the data on our student scores and I am acutely aware of the problems in the program. If I was not careful, my biases could impact the way that I listened or the way that I analyzed the data. Remembering that this study was not about me or about the program was extremely important and led me to be careful of my conflict in roles. I also met with the chair of my committee between the first interview and the second round of interviews to discuss my process and be ready for more interviews.

Another issue that made this study challenging is that I am a teacher and I know the curriculum in multiple teacher education programs at George Fox University. I hold strong opinions of what effective teaching looks like and find the topic of instruction fascinating. In addition, I hold strong expectations of myself and am intrigued by the curriculum itself. However, this was not part of the study. The goal in this study was to hear the lived experience of students. Staying on a clear path for interviews was important so that I did not get sidetracked into issues of curriculum or program development.

The last consideration as I bracketed myself in this study was acknowledging the fact that the students who I interviewed have mostly been taught by faculty I know and work with. Despite how I feel about these people as colleagues, I had to keep the focus on the students themselves, rather than on the faculty with whom they worked during the program. While some students chose to use names, others did not, and I was very careful to not offer opinions of faculty one way or another.



## Chapter Four

### Results

This chapter is a reporting of the themes discovered from an analysis of the ten interviews conducted with five participants. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to invite and understand participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2013). Specifically, I was curious to know how five nontraditional students gave meaning to the experiences they described during their teacher education program at George Fox University. After reading and re-reading each interview, I realized there were essential themes across all ten interviews, but that there was also power in keeping the individual stories intact. Telling both the individual stories and then moving to interrelated themes allowed me to honor the individuals who participated and represent the overall themes across their stories. As I read, I discovered three central themes and a variety of sub-themes. To provide context for the data, it is important to understand the participants, to see how the data were initially coded, and finally, to understand how the themes emerged during the analysis.

#### Description of the Participants

The individual stories were each unique and compelling. I walked away with a strong sense of each participant and profound respect for their perseverance, humility, and grace. I initially planned on coding all the data to report only in themes, but the unique aspects of each participant's story also needed to be addressed in the analysis of the data. As such, this chapter begins with a brief description of each participant.

**Alex.** Participant one, who will be referred to as Alex, was the only male participant in the study and he had limited classroom experience prior to starting the program. Alex was one of the first to respond to the initial request for participation. I was in my office, and Alex was in his

house watching his young son. In fact, during both interviews, his son joined us on multiple occasions to say hello, which I found to be quite fitting considering the complex lives of these participants. Alex graduated within the last five years and has taught at two different schools in upper elementary grades. I would describe Alex as intelligent, relational, pragmatic, honest, and a problem-solver. He did not expound for hours on his answers, but he gave good information and a very raw portrayal of his experiences in the Elementary Education Program.

Alex's journey as a nontraditional student began in high school. Alex was a competent student, and openly shared the numerous times he was able to do well with minimal effort. He would engage when he found activities meaningful and admittedly invest less effort if he found the class to be a waste of his time. While Alex could have excelled in many areas, his heart was invested in journalism, and his journalism classes were where he dedicated most of his time and energy in high school. From high school, he had a career path laid out to go into the military – one that was significant to his family as both of his parents has served in the military– and at the last minute, his plans changed. This change sent Alex tumbling through an assortment of jobs, each a bit better than the next until he landed at a lawyer's office and met his future wife. During this time, Alex had also attended community college but found the classes to be uninspiring, too easy, and a waste of time and money. However, he pieced together enough classes to transfer into George Fox. While working at the lawyers' office, things with his girlfriend got more serious and Alex revisited some of the reoccurring themes in his life to decide that he wanted to be a teacher. He was engaged to be married on the same day he found out he was admitted to the program and subsequently described this coincidence as a key moment.

Alex described his program at Fox as a positive one, overall. Even as he hashed through some of the more stressful moments, he smiled and chose not to focus on the little things. A

resonating theme throughout Alex's interview was the positive connection he made with one particular faculty member. This relationship was described as the most significant part of his program and is something that he still values today. In fact, it seems as though Alex carried some things from this relationship into his current classroom dynamic in which he expresses a strong commitment to build relationships with difficult students. In turn, this has allowed Alex to have a profound impact on difficult kids.

**Maria.** Participant two was a middle-aged female that I will refer to as Maria. Maria is Latina, bilingual, and a first-generation college student, and had been working in a school as an Education Assistant prior to starting the program. Maria is a mom of two, pregnant with her third and teaching full-time. She has also graduated in the last five years and was in the same cohort as Alex. Maria has taught in two different schools as well.

I would describe Maria as determined, humble, honest, and a leader. There were tears in both interviews as she shared her journey and the impact the program had on her life, both during her time as a student and after. Maria's story was full of pivotal moments and I was inspired by her as I listened to her journey.

Maria describes her early education journey as "rough." She was born to an immigrant family and found the transition to school very bumpy, often finding it difficult to form relationships with teachers. She hated school and it showed, even through her first year of community college, where she failed all her classes. To Maria, flexibility was significant as she described the reality of balancing life and school. There was a distinct difference in Fox – much more flexible - than any of her other higher education experiences.

Due to the ending of a difficult relationship, Maria decided to start fresh and pursue a teaching career. She was already embedded in the school system as an educational assistant,

many people already believed in her ability to teach, and she was suddenly facing a new reality in her life. Thankfully, a new relationship also happened during this time, and Maria became pregnant shortly after the program started. Not to be stopped, she hunkered down and thrived due to the flexibility of the program and professors. Much of this success she attributed to one faculty member who advocated for her, supported her, and listened to her needs. Shortly after the baby was born, Maria became pregnant again and experienced a miscarriage, and of course, this was devastating, but she persevered, again attributing this success to the flexibility of the program and the relationships she had with faculty.

Maria described her experience at Fox as positive overall, and although there were indeed challenges, both in and out of the program, she persevered and now sees herself as an advocate for English Language Learners.

**Maddie.** Participant three was a middle-aged woman who graduated within the last ten years. I will refer to participant three as Maddie. Maddie had prior experience in schools as a pre-school director and was well established in her district prior to starting the program. For both interviews, Maddie was in her classroom, and I was in my home office. Maddie is a mother of three, and I would describe her as pragmatic, personable, determined, and honest. She was the participant who was the furthest removed from her graduation and belonged to one of the first groups to ever complete the program.

Maddie described her overall experience as a student as positive; she received A's and B's most of her academic career. At the age of eighteen, Maddie was set to go to a four-year private university but was surprised by an unexpected pregnancy. Determined to provide the best possible environment for her unborn child, she opted out of a private university and decided to do community college for a couple of years. The community college experience was difficult for

her as she described feeling very out-of-place as a pregnant teen. The people around her were not supportive, and she felt ostracized because she looked quite young at the age of eighteen. Maddie then decided to put school to the side and focus on her young family for the next fourteen years. Her husband was in the military and then he decided to go to school, so Maddie supported him through that adventure working full-time and occasionally taking classes. As her firstborn son entered high school, Maddie decided it was time to “beat him.” She wanted to finish her four-year-degree before he graduated, and a shift at work provided an excellent opportunity for her to pursue her teaching degree, something she had wanted since she was very young. At this point in her life, she was a mother of two with a baby on the way. She needed a flexible program that would allow her to maintain a job, be a mom, and still finish the requirements for her teaching license.

Through a series of providential events, Maddie’s brother took her to George Fox information night and through that experience Maddie decided Fox was a good fit for her, even though she had already been accepted at a different university. The program at George Fox was delayed for four months due to low enrollment, but Maddie waited and started in January and then had her baby in April. She was determined to finish at that juncture in her life and learned how to manage to care for an infant and complete coursework; in some situations, this required much creativity on the part of Maddie and George Fox faculty.

Maddie did “beat” her son and shared some powerful stories about what it meant to bring their story full circle, from community college all the way to George Fox. Now Maddie is an advocate for kids and works diligently to ensure that all kids are seen for who they are and what they need.

**Tammy.** Participant four is also a middle-aged woman who graduated within the last ten years. I refer to her as Tammy. Tammy had not had any long-term experience as a classroom teacher prior to starting the program. Words that describe Tammy are reflective, personable, kind, and pragmatic. Tammy is an ELD director and teacher for a small district and is loving her job. She is a dog-lover and is extremely close to her sister, niece, and nephew and her mom. In fact, throughout the interview, I was impressed by the strong relationships Tammy described. Tammy was very easy to talk to; she was open and willing to be vulnerable. Although there were many things that she could have focused on as negative, she remained positive and upbeat about life.

Tammy's story was fraught with challenges, one of the most serious she described happened to her at the age of 13. Suffering through a traumatic circumstance, her life spiraled into a world of drugs and alcohol, and she found herself with a felony offense at a very young age. Being that her father was a police officer, and coming from a Christian home, the dissonance between what she felt and how she should act was tangible. Due to these circumstances, Tammy struggled through high school. This was not due to lack of ability, but due to lack of interest, and lack of connection with the school.

Tammy eventually was able to conquer her drug addiction, a feat she attributes mostly to the support of her family, and she started work in medical billing. Medical billing was something that came easy for her, and she quickly worked her way up through the ranks finding the career to be lucrative and professionally stimulating. However, Tammy started volunteering in the classrooms of her niece and nephew and found that being in the schools triggered something inside her that was exciting. After a bump in the economy and a change in jobs, Tammy decided it was time to change professions, and teaching seemed to be the direction to go.

Tammy's willingness to finish the program was evident as she continued to battle obstacles. Tammy struggled with some ongoing medical issues and landed in the hospital at one point during her El Ed program. She also was diagnosed with a painful disease during her time in the program. However, she persisted and conquered. Tammy also shared during the interview that her student teaching required her to give up her home. She lived with her father during student teaching because she could not afford to go without a paycheck for that many months. Tammy's story was told with humor and humility. There was a raw openness about her struggles, and I appreciated the fact that she was willing to share her life so openly with me.

**Linda.** Linda was the most recent graduate of the Elementary Education Program, and she was also a middle-aged woman. She graduated within the last five years. Linda and I also met online for both interviews. While this had worked in the previous four interviews, Linda's last interview was interrupted numerous times by technological issues, and this made it difficult to stay engaged in the purpose of the interview. However, Linda was animated, reflective, and very accommodating. Her energy was palpable during the interviews.

Not only was Linda the most recent graduate in the interview pool, but she also had the most prior experience in schools before starting the program. Linda came to a program orientation by accident, after a series of events prompted her to start thinking more seriously about finishing her degree. She had started college twenty years previously, but because her husband at the time transferred schools before she finished, she had not been able to finish for twenty years. Linda worked to put her husband through school and focused her energy on being a mom. Before starting the Elementary Education program, Linda went through a divorce, and she decided she was ready to put herself back through school to fulfill her desire to be a teacher.

Linda was quite confident – not cocky – due to the vast amount of experience she had in schools before starting the program as an educational assistant. She had been affirmed by many colleagues that this was the right choice for her and was encouraged by her principal to make George Fox a reality. Linda found that classes that were practical and hands-on were the most meaningful to her. She sacrificed income, sleep, and time with her two kids to make completing the program a reality. Although there were many challenges, including financial difficulties and the lack of insurance during her student teaching, Linda had a very positive view of her experience and persevered to the end. She was offered a job in more than one school but ended up back at the school where she had been an Educational Assistant before starting the program. Linda described the program overall in a positive light, and I appreciated her candor and passion for life.

### **Data Analysis and Identification of Themes**

After receiving the transcriptions of all ten interviews, I used the process suggested by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), which includes three stages of coding. These stages included: initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding. In this analysis process, I discovered several multilayered themes.

In the initial coding, I identified 591 words, phrases, or stories I deemed significant. These codes were derived from the domains I structured for my lit review based on the work of Kasworm (1990), *Defining nontraditional students*, *Examining the learning needs of nontraditional students*, *Examining retention practices of nontraditional students* and *Perceptions of nontraditional students*. The codes were discovered through multiple readings of the data using a combination of three coding strategies, a priori coding, redundancy coding, and indigenous coding (Huffman, 2017). After those 591 codes were labeled and put into a chart I



began to collapse codes finding similarities and repeating concepts, or focused coding, to sort the data into 16 categories (See Figure 3).

*Figure 3 - Initial Coding of the Data*

<b>Theme Title</b>	<b>Number of Items Identified</b>	<b>Description of Items</b>
Identification as Nontraditional	99	A participant described something that qualified them as nontraditional. This could be before or during the program.
Pointing to Worthiness of Receiving a Degree	34	A participant described a story or situation in which they were comparing themselves to another student, validating their own journey to becoming a teacher, or showing that they had conquered obstacles in their own life to be in the program.
Aspects of Challenge	37	A participant described something that they perceived as challenging in their life.
Pivotal Moments	36	A participant described a life-changing moment that impacted them either personally or academically. These were both positive and negative. Pivotal moments were different than aspects of challenge in that they were an event versus a situation.
Descriptions of Structure	62	A participant described the benefit or challenge of a specific structure put in place by the university or their employers.
Examples of Perseverance	33	A participant described a response to either an Aspect of Challenge or a perceived detrimental Pivotal Moment.
Failure of the Traditional System	7	A participant described the perception of a failed school system prior to the George Fox Program.
Points of Inspiration	16	A participant described a person or situation that was inspiring in the completion of their degree and/or their journey to becoming a teacher.
Faculty Interactions that Impacted Participants	54	A participant referred to a positive or negative experience with a faculty member.
Awareness of Student Strengths and Areas to Improve	44	A participant characterized their performance as a student either prior to or during the program.
Desire for Efficiency and Meaning	23	A participant described attributes that were empowering or inhibiting due to student's perception of meaningfulness.
Identifying Attributes that Defined Participant Personalities	35	A participant described a negative or positive attribute regarding their personality and engagement of life.
Example of Family Support	31	A student described a structure or relationship in their family they perceived as supportive.
Identification of Teacher Identity	39	A participant described an attribute of their Teacher Identity before, during or after the program.
A Description of Restoration	16	A participant described an event that brought an incomplete aspect of their life back around to completion.
Identification as the Role model	14	A participant looked back on their story and described how they could now be an example for their own students or family.

Using the last process of thematic coding, I combined ideas and content to include the following themes and subthemes (See Figure 4). This process happened over a series of days with a repeated organizing and reorganizing of the data points pulling back into the initial domains outlined in the literature review in Chapter Two.

*Figure 4 - Themes Derived from the Data*

Theme Title	Description
<p><b>Participants identified multiple educational experiences both before and during their alternative teacher education program that made them self-identify as nontraditional.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prior experience sparked nontraditional identification</i></li> <li>• <i>Students used attribute-focused descriptors to express their nontraditional status</i></li> <li>• <i>Participants also shared emotional experiences to articulate nontraditional status</i></li> </ul>	<p>An examination of the data demonstrated the complexity in the identity of nontraditional that was embedded in multiple facets of participants' lives.</p>
<p><b>Participants entered the program with determination believing not finishing was not an option</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Participants believed they had earned the right to finish their degree</i></li> <li>• <i>The opportunity to finish a degree provides the perception of completion</i></li> <li>• <i>Supports were a key to success</i></li> </ul>	<p>Throughout the interviews, it became evident that these five participants were determined to finish the degree despite the many obstacles they faced.</p>
<p><b>Participants entered the program knowing they wanted to be teachers; They wanted a clear path to completion.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Participants had a strong sense of self</i></li> <li>• <i>The identity of teacher transcends the Elementary Education Program</i></li> <li>• <i>Participants had clear purpose and limited time a</i></li> </ul>	<p>Participants demonstrated a strong sense of self and an urgency to complete things in an efficient manner. They knew where they were headed and just needed to fine tune concepts and beliefs about the teaching practice.</p>

**Participants identified multiple educational experiences both before and during their alternative teacher education program that made them self-identify as nontraditional.**

It became evident throughout the interviews that the students' nontraditional identity had been developing long before the program began and continued to develop as participants completed

the program. A deeply-rooted identity was a finding I had not expected, and yet one that seemed quite crucial. Initially, I coded *pivotal moments prior to the program* in a unique category (See Figure 3). However, after further consideration I found that there was interplay *between the perception of a broken system and pivotal moments that happened prior to entering the program,* and the *participants' own experiences during the program* that all contributed to this idea that *Participants identified multiple educational experiences both before and during their alternative teacher education program that made them self-identify as nontraditional;* nontraditional is a complex identity. Hence, I examined the interplay differently than I had in the initial coding and decided upon three subthemes that fit the main theme of *Participants identified multiple educational experiences both before and during their alternative teacher education program that made them self-identify as nontraditional.* The first subtheme is *Prior experience sparked nontraditional identification.* In this category, I examined the experiences candidates described as attributing to their identification as a nontraditional student. The second subtheme is *Students used attribute-focused descriptors to express their nontraditional status.* This category had to do with students' perceptions of what it meant to be nontraditional and interestingly, focused on attributes. The third is *Participants also shared emotional experiences to articulate nontraditional status.* In this category, participants explained the reality of being in the program and the distinct experiences that made them feel different from a traditional undergraduate student. This became an important category because of the difference between how participants described nontraditional students, and then how they described their own identities as a nontraditional student.

***Prior experience sparked nontraditional identification.*** Perhaps the most important finding for me as a researcher was that among these five participants, participants' perceptions of

being a nontraditional student began long before the program had started. Through a combination of events that I labeled pivotal moments and traditional system failures, there was already a sense of nontraditional identity formation that was present before participants began the program. In this subtheme, *Prior experience sparked nontraditional identification*, I explored the formative events that influenced students to align themselves with the label nontraditional student.

For Maddie, an unexpected pregnancy at the age of 18 thwarted plans to attend a four-year university and changed her life path significantly. Up to this point, she described herself as a good student with a dream of becoming a teacher, but the pregnancy changed things on multiple levels. To be a good mom, she chose to attend community college, but she expressed the extreme discomfort she felt because of looking very young and thus feeling judged by those in her classes. She felt more mature than the other 18-year-olds in her classes but perceived their disdain rather than their respect. Maddie describes her experience like this:

Throughout high school, I was an A, B student, but I didn't really try very hard to be an A, B student. It just came naturally. Unfortunately, I probably could have been straight A's. Then I did community college a little bit differently than most because I had a baby at 18. My first semester of community college I was pregnant. It was really hard for me because I looked very, very young. Looking so young, I got a lot of nasty looks from professors.

Through these experiences, Maddie began to develop both an identity as a nontraditional student.

For Alex, the description of nontraditional student extended farther back to his childhood and resulted from a series of circumstances rather than one distinct experience. In comments and stories, it was easy to see that Alex was a bright student who was rarely challenged and thus found school a bit boring and irrelevant. He learned to invest time and energy in classes where

the teacher expressed an invested interest in who he was and gave less time and attention to classes where he was not challenged or did not find content relevant. He states:

I can also relate to the kid who is not feeling challenged because that was my K through 8. Everything came easy, and then when I got to high school, I had never been challenged and started to get challenged, and I folded like a tent.

Coupled with the fact that a military career path was changed due to the political climate, and Alex found himself a bit lost and openly admitted, “I did not know what I wanted to do after high school.” His parents, both military veterans, had an idea of what Alex should do and this was not the path he chose. In addition, he had alluded to an identify of nontraditional due to the fact that he was a bright student who was rarely challenged. A nontraditional identity was only exacerbated when Alex chose to take some community college classes and found the challenge level to be wanting. Through these stories, he expressed both the perception of a broken system, one that did not value his differences, and the beginning formations of his identity as a nontraditional student.

Maria’s bilingual skills and Latina cultural background contributed to her identification as nontraditional. She shared stories about hating school and feeling isolated due to a language barrier. There were no teachers with whom she could identify and no perceived supports to get her through her community college program. She explains it like this:

It was in English, and I only spoke Spanish. There was no support. There were not bilingual programs. The school I was going to, which at the time I had no clue, and my parents were always working, and my sisters had already gone through it. But for me, school was not easy, and it was hard to go from just speaking Spanish at home to being in an all-English classroom with teachers – I had no clue what they were saying. It

was just a really hard experience for me.

Maria made it through high school but also found community college to be challenging because, she still felt isolated and lacked inspiring, reliable relationships. Maria's story also reflected the narrative of education as a broken system and how, even at a very young age, she self-identified as nontraditional.

For Tammy, a pivotal event set her on a nontraditional path. She shared about a traumatic event that was so detrimental to her self-confidence it sent her on a journey to self-medicate her intense pain. This event was a turning point for Tammy, and from there, she described circumstance after circumstance that kept moving her further and further away from the "traditional world" until she eventually landed in court with a felony offense. Although her parents tried to support her through the trauma by placing her in a small private school, her school experiences got progressively worse. She described hating school and most importantly, recognizing that things outside of school felt so horrible, she just did not care. She stated:

I was a terrible student in high school. I hated school with a passion and school kind of hated me. Luckily, it sounds crazy, but I was just naturally good at school, so I put in very little effort in high school. I could pull C's to keep me going.

Tammy's responses indicate how the nontraditional label originated in her teen years, particularly as she experienced an educational system that did not perceive her needs for support and relationship.

Linda is the one student who had the most traditional path to the program. However, her age was the factor that set her most apart from traditional students. As such, her label as nontraditional applies because she was not able to finish her degree when she started right after

high school. Linda chose to support her husband and kids rather than pursue a degree. She describes her journey like this:

I was going to school, and I got engaged to be married. My husband was going to law school, and so we assumed that we would just stay in Arizona and he would go to law school and I would finish up. He didn't get accepted in Arizona. We got accepted everywhere but Arizona so we had to move. When we moved, he was in law school, so I worked and then is just kind of – then we had a child and things just got – he was in law school, and I needed to work and that is kind of how we got where we were.

Through these shared stories, the embedded themes regarding a long-standing nontraditional student identity and how the traditional system did fail each of these participants is began to emerge for each participant.

*Students used attribute-focused descriptors to express their nontraditional status.* When asked directly, the descriptions participants used to articulate their beliefs about attributes of a nontraditional identity were fairly consistent and in line with what the literature presented. They all articulated that nontraditional students work (Compton & Cox, 2006; Ogren, 2003; Samuels et al., 2011; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). Some talked about being responsible for multiple roles in their families (Hardin, 2008; Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Ogren, 2003; Samuels et al., 2011) and communities, and other expressed the power of life experience as an asset. Two participants referred to the uniqueness of the students in the cohort they were a part of and celebrated this diversity as a nontraditional student characteristic. In fact, one participant shared that he had a blackjack dealer and a nun in his cohort.



*Participants also shared emotional experiences to articulate nontraditional status.*

While all five participants' descriptions of nontraditional students were consistent regarding the attributes they described, it was their individual experiences in the program that revealed how deeply students identified with a nontraditional label.

Alex explained that the cohort that he was part of did not have a home location. Their classes would be in different towns and different classrooms, and the location changes were a consistent occurrence. Alex also shared a particularly compelling story where he stopped on the side of the road, "stealing" internet from a friend's coffee shop to participate in an evening synchronous class session. Alex gave these as concrete examples of things that would not necessarily happen for a traditional student.

Maddie was pregnant when she started the program. She talked about finishing a paper before allowing herself to go to the hospital to have the baby, and then shared stories of hiding in closed offices to pump breastmilk for her son, all while taking classes. Maddie shared these examples as things that made her nontraditional, but perhaps the most distinct story had to do with graduation. After arriving on campus, a place she had rarely been, the cohort became painfully aware that none of them received Latin honors in the program, as indicated by the traditional gold cord. In this instant, even though they all had a high-grade point average, they perceived themselves as unequal to the traditional students, and this left an impression on Maddie and other members of her cohort. All of these experiences were noteworthy and were meaningful in that they set her apart as a nontraditional student.

Maria was not pregnant when she started the program, but she became pregnant soon after. Maria chose to bring her son to class with her and found this experience to be surreal in many ways. She had to be flexible with her coursework as she navigated through the dynamics

of being a new mom. Maria also discussed some inner turmoil regarding cultural norms and women working instead of staying home with the kids. There were critical moments in Maria's journey that impacted her overall perception of what it meant to be a nontraditional student.

In Tammy's interview, there were two very significant events that related to being nontraditional in the elementary education program. The first had to do with Tammy's medical status. During the program, she encountered many medical dilemmas but was able to persevere due to the program structure. However, the struggle is one that she identified as making her different from her peers. The other reality Tammy experienced had to do with the sacrifices she made to make the program a possibility. Tammy had to give up her home to live with her dad during her student teaching because it was not feasible for her to remain independent. Tammy identified both experiences as ones that made her different from traditional students.

Linda describes her experiences as a nontraditional student in two facets. The first is the disconnect she felt from the university as a whole during her experience in the Elementary Education Program. She described sending her daughter to buy her a sweatshirt because the bookstore was never open in the hours she was there. This experience was significant to her as a nontraditional student because she did not have access to something that was a perceived norm for any traditional student. Linda also acknowledged her age as a factor that set her apart. The age gap Linda felt was especially poignant regarding the technology she was expected to use in the program. At times, she felt paralyzed by the complexity of the technology and found herself very frustrated. These feelings were those she associated with being a nontraditional student.

There were few parallels between how candidates described nontraditional students (i.e. they work and take evening classes) and the experiences they shared as being pivotal in their realization they were nontraditional (i.e. the weight of being a mom and a student

simultaneously). Even so, hearing all their stories enabled me to see the bigger picture that students did not derive nontraditional status from a one-time experience, nor was it a static descriptor. Nontraditional identity is fluid, and it is derived from both experiences and attributes, rather than only one or the other.

**Participants entered the program with determination, believing that not finishing was not an option.** A second theme that was derived in the thematic coding stage of the data analysis is Participants entered the program with determination believing not finishing was not an option. Words like “determined” were frequently embedded in candidates’ responses, and it became evident that there were many factors at play within the context of not giving up. The participants were very goal-oriented.

First, it was essential to hear the challenges participants faced, and then to figure out why they continued despite the challenges. Their responses explaining why they persisted coalesced around three main categories. The first was the participants’ belief that they had a right to finish, that they deserved to complete this work that many had started many years prior. This subtheme is called *Participants Believed They Had Earned the Right to Finish Their Degree*. In articulating this perspective, participants did not come across as pretentious, but held this belief because they journeyed through many obstacles to complete their programs. The second subtheme focused on the perception that the completion of a degree brought things full circle in participants’ lives. This could mean that they saw it as completion of something they had started long ago, or that they wanted to be a role model to lead others who had also traveled the nontraditional route. I called this subtheme *The Opportunity to Finish a Degree Provided Closure*. The third subtheme targets participants’ reality that students understood the supports that were embedded at the university and in their personal lives that allowed them to finish the

degree with all the extenuating circumstances in their lives. I called this subtheme *Supports were a Key to Success*.

Often during the interviews, there were moments of tears as participants described aspects of challenge and pivotal moments. They had each experienced various ways that life had not turned out the ways they had expected. Some participants deemed these unexpected events as positive, particularly with the gift of time and perspective; others were still emotional about those challenges. To understand the importance of students persevering, it was important to identify aspects of challenge and pivotal moments for each participant.

***Participant aspects of challenge and pivotal moments.*** Before understanding the significance of why students persevered, it is important to know what they endured, both before and during the program. Figures 5 through 9 indicate the challenges each participant discussed during their interviews. Before-the-program events were just as important to participants as during-the-program events, and I also found them to be equally important. In fact, in many cases, the events before the program were more impactful because they did deter students from taking a traditional path. Also, it was essential to examine during-the-program events because several participants experienced life-changing events during the program, and yet persisted in completing. As such, each participant's bio is presented in four categories, *aspects of challenge before the program, pivotal moments before the program, aspects of challenge during the program* and *pivotal moments during the program*.

*Alex.*

**Figure 5 - Alex's Challenges and Pivotal Moments**

<p><b>Aspects of Challenge Before the Program</b></p> <p>Alex was set to enter the military, but after 9-11 and the swift change in the military climate, he chose to pursue other options. There were a series of jobs he pursued, each one enabling him to “better himself” until he ended up unemployed for a 9-month stint.</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments Before the Program</b></p> <p>After a job loss, which lasted 9 months, Alex found himself working in a lawyer’s office. He met his future wife and decided he wanted to pursue a teaching degree. They were engaged the same day he found out he was admitted to the program.</p>
<p><b>Aspects of Challenge During the Program</b></p> <p>The challenging aspects for Alex during the program had to do mostly with faculty understanding the demographic of the nontraditional student.</p> <p>Alex also worked two jobs for the duration of the program and this made school difficult at times. During one specific class, Alex described an incident where a professor demanded things of students they were not able to perform due to the fact that they were all working.</p> <p>Alex shared that he was not finished with his pre-requisites prior to starting the program. Initially, he was under the impression that this would be okay, but Alex later discovered he had to take additional classes.</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments During the Program</b></p> <p>A pivotal moment for Alex in his personal life was getting married.</p>

*Maddie.*

**Figure 6 - Maddie's Challenges and Pivotal Moments**

<p><b>Aspects of Challenge Before the Program</b></p> <p>Maddie was a young mother, and due to her commitment to her husband and family, she dedicated her time and energy to getting her husband through school. Because of this, finishing pre-requisite classes at the community college took many years.</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments Before the Program</b></p> <p>There was a job change at her work that made her stop and consider doing something different with her life. She described this as a “do or die” moment.</p> <p>Maddie also realized that the son that she stopped to raise was going to graduate from high school soon. She was determined to “beat him.”</p> <p>When Maddie attending the informational meeting at Fox and was pregnant, the response was very different than what she had experienced as a young mom in community college, which had been quite negative. This was meaningful to her.</p>
<p><b>Aspects of Challenge During the Program</b></p> <p>Maddie worked full time during the program. She was a wife and a mother of two.</p> <p>Maddie described numerous moments when she felt set up to fail because expectations were not clear.</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments During the Program</b></p> <p>Maddie had a baby a few months after the program started.</p>

*Maria.*

**Figure 7 - Maria's Challenges and Pivotal Moments**

<p><b>Aspects of Challenge Before the Program</b>          Maria described hating school. As an English Language Learner, she found school to be frustrating and defeating, saying “I hated school!”</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments Prior to the Program</b>          Maria left a very difficult personal relationship right before applying to the program.</p>
<p><b>Aspects of Challenge During the Program</b>          Maria worked throughout the entire program.          She also battled some with identity roles as a new mother and wife. Maria identified this as a cultural expectation. Because of the requirement for a practicum in this program and her inability to work, Maria and her husband had to apply for government assistance to get through. She remembered being thankful she could breastfeed her son because baby formula was so expensive.          Maria did not have her required testing done for licensure at the end of the program and found herself with a job, but no license.</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments During the Program</b>          Maria met her current husband during the program and had a baby a few months later while still a student. When the baby was nine months old, she got pregnant again, but didn't know and suffered a miscarriage just a few months into the pregnancy. This she described as “The hardest, scariest thing I have ever gone through.”</p>

*Tammy.*

**Figure 8 - Tammy's Challenges and Pivotal Moments**

<p><b>Aspects of Challenge Before the Program</b>          Tammy was successful at her job but found it to be unsatisfying.</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments Before the Program</b>          Tammy had a traumatic event happen to her at the age of 18.          Due to that event, Tammy had a run with drug abuse and was charged with a felony. She describes the moment she was in court as life-changing. She said she never wanted to let her family down again after facing them in court in handcuffs.          Tammy made a decision to quit her job after volunteering in her niece and nephew's classroom. She said:          "I was always calling in sick, taking time off to volunteer in my niece's class. Finally, my mom said, 'Why don't you just become a teacher?' It came at right about the same time that at my job there were a lot of employment benefits I could get. I quit my job, quit working and I got to take a year and a half off. I just realized that volunteering at my niece's school was more fun than my job. So, I switched. I am the first teacher in my family."</p>
<p><b>Aspects of Challenge During the Program</b>          Tammy had some severe medical issues, one of which means she lives with chronic pain.          Tammy identified a struggle with math and struggled through classes that focused on math content.          Tammy was living on her own during the program, and since she had no income during the time she had to do her student teaching, she moved in with her Dad and lived with him for a few months.</p>
<p><b>Pivotal Moments During the Program</b>          During a class, Tammy had a professor tell her that all white people are racist. Although Tammy cannot remember the name of the professor, this was an intense moment and one she found to be very demoralizing.</p>



*Linda.*

**Figure 9 - Linda's Challenges and Pivotal Moments**

**Aspects of Challenge Before the Program**

Linda decided to stop school as a young woman, in her early twenties, due to extenuating circumstances and then decided help her husband finish his degree and be a mom.

In her words:

“I had started school and then we got married and then my husband went to law school and that all changed. I had to work. It wasn’t like I didn’t always want to do it. The time just wasn’t right. Then it had been so long that I was, well, I am kind of just doing what I’m doing. Then all of that kind of pushed me forward.”

**Pivotal Moments Before the Program**

Linda was divorced prior to starting the program and had a new reason to pursue her desire to be a teacher.

Linda also described coming to the program orientation night by accident. She thought she was attending an informational night. Because faculty encouraged her that evening, she decided now was better than ever to finally finish the degree.

**Aspects of Challenge During the Program**

Being a single mom during the program was not easy. Linda took a pay cut for an entire year to ensure that she could take the time to do her student teaching.

Linda also lost her insurance for a period of time because she was on a leave of absence.

In describing her experience, the aspects Linda found most challenging were regarding her course work “tumbling in all at once” and her perceived inadequacies regarding technology.

**Pivotal Moments During the Program**

Linda did not describe any moments she thought of as pivotal.

The moments described by the candidates were not small, nor insignificant. These challenges and pivotal moments were life-changing. So, the question for me as the researcher became, “Why?” Why did these students persevere during these problematic situations despite the turmoil each incident caused in their lives? Participants described three factors that contributed to their perseverance; *A belief they had earned the right to finish their degree, The opportunity to finish a degree provided closure, and Supports were a key to success.*

***Participants believed they had earned the right to finish their degree.*** The benefits of attending higher education later in life mean that students are more mature (Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Wyatt, 2011), more goal-oriented (Compton & Cox, 2006), and more focused (Spitzer, 2000). I found all these things to be true for participants, and as such they believed they deserved to have success in their Elementary Education experience. Participants were not cocky, nor did they display a sense of entitlement. Their stories were full of humility and grace and most importantly, the belief that they had come this far and deserved to be successful. Participants recognized the sacrifice they were making and viewed this sacrifice as an act of honor (Stevens, 2014). As such, nothing was going to get in their way. Perhaps one of the most poignant examples of this came from Maddie:

Hmmm, well, I knew I was in the right program, and it was the moment of “I’m going to finish this” when I was sitting on my bed the night before a final was due, with contractions and my Cohort Leader was, “Maddie, just finish what you have, just finish what you have, you are good.” I was, “I know I am in labor right now, I’m having contractions.” She said, “You are good, just finish.” I just felt, “You know what, I am going to prove to you.” At that moment I was, “This baby is not coming out until this paper is done.” I finished that paper. Because of the fact that she said, “You are good,

you are good. You know what, Maddie, you turn it in next week, or whatever you need to do.” I was, “Heck no, I’m going to do this right now.”

Also, students recognized how far they had come to this point in their lives. Alex stated that he was not ready to pursue higher education at 18, he had overcome the obstacles that had held him at bay in the past. His biggest obstacle was having to decide that teaching was the career he wanted to pursue and recognizing he was not ready to make that decision at the age of 18. Tammy discussed her journey from drug addiction, through medical issues, and her ultimate restoration with her family. It was now her time as she had done the hard work to repair and restore. Overcoming her past to build her future was an important element that kept her moving through the program. For Linda, Maria, and Maddie there was a subtle identification of “It’s now my turn.” All three women had made sacrifices in their lives to put family first, and once a key event happened in each of their lives (Samuels et al., 2011), this sparked the start of something new for each of them.

Participants all expressed the reality that the timing of the program was not something they took for granted. In each journey, there was a reason for them to believe that they deserved to be in the program, at that time, on their journey to become a teacher.

*The opportunity to finish a degree provides the perception of completion.* All five participants in this study shared examples of how the completion of the degree brought with it the perception of closure. For some, there were emotional pieces that were important regarding closure. Tammy described rekindling a relationship with her father during the program. She also reported being a role model to kids who might struggle: “‘Don’t do drugs, trust me, I know. I have done that – stupid idea.’ It is nice to have that first-hand experience, even with my nephew: ‘Dude, look at me.’”

Maddie shared the importance of having her brother at her graduation, the same brother who had attempted to get her into college when she was eighteen. She also shared the extreme importance of verifying for her son that he was “not the reason” she had decided not to pursue a teaching degree at 18. She stated:

But for my oldest definitely, and I think it made him – my son has always had maybe a little, I don't think it is guilt, but I think he tells himself, “Gosh, she may have finished this degree a lot sooner had she not had me. Look, mom gave me a lot of years.” You ask my son – my son is 22 now, he just turned 22 this weekend – and he would probably say, “My mom sacrificed a lot,” and I would say, “No, I chose to do this.” He would probably spin it and say, “Look at what my mom did for me. She waited on her school and she waited on my dad's school,” you know what I mean.

Maddie had started school fourteen years prior to the start of her ELED program and yet she had not finished. However, she was not going to allow her son to think that he was the reason she had yet to obtain her teaching license. Pursuing her degree at this juncture in her life brought her dream full circle, while still honoring her commitment to being a mom.

For Maria, it was important to return to the classroom to be the teacher she never had. She reported:

I feel like I bring something that other teachers don't bring. The first thing is obviously the diversity within the classroom. I understand the struggle of learning another language. I went through it, and so I have more compassion and more sympathy and more empathy for my students while they are learning another language. It doesn't even have to be another language, but while they are learning math, or they are learning science. I understand. It was hard for me.

There was defined purpose in bringing her story back around into the classroom to help children who might be experiencing similar circumstances. Maria also found purpose in that she paved the road for her brother and is now helping him apply to college.

Alex shared a desire to help kids understand that being unique is okay. He said:

We have a 5th grade meeting at the beginning of every year and this is your time to change your reputation, because it is your last year here and then you are going to middle school. You can change, so I always tell that story – I got told all through school that I was very talkative, so I, myself, told myself that, “Oh, I am just very talkative.” You cannot let what someone else tells you to dictate whom you are going to be or how you are going to act.

Alex also alluded to his interest in leadership in our conversation, and this speaks of his success in that he not only finished his degree but now is looking to lead others. Being a mentor to kids that struggle with who they are and the difficult decisions they have to make in life give Alex a sense of purpose and as such brings his own struggles back around full circle.

An interesting theme through all these interviews regarding their teaching practices, was that participants desired to see their students as unique beings. They talked about feeling left out as students and how important it was for them to pave the way for kids who might relate to their journeys.

**Supports were a key to success.** All five participants recognized the importance of support systems as an aspect of their success, which is supported by the work of Kasworm, (2011). Analysis of these data revealed that students categorized supports through three lenses. The first is faculty support. On numerous occasions, participants described having meaningful connections with faculty, and the literature also describes connections with faculty as essential to

nontraditional students (Brockett, 2015; & Compton & Cox 2006). The second needed support is university structures. Participants described the structures that were important to their success as a student. Findings here aligned with the research, as the literature is clear in explaining the retention practices for nontraditional students must look different than those for traditional students (Bergman, et al., 2014). Things like class structure and times fit into this subtheme. The third part of this subtheme is external supports, which include family, professional encouragement and other people perceived as supportive outside of the university.

***Faculty.*** All participants referred to faculty as a key to their success. In cases where faculty were not perceived as helpful, participants indicated this had a profound effect on the students' overall success. The importance of "good" faculty was important as they positive experiences seemed to outweigh instances when students felt the disconnect because faculty were not aligned with nontraditional students' unique needs. For the positive interactions with faculty, students used four different descriptors: relational, advocate, encourager, and supporter (See Figure 10)

**Figure 10 - Faculty Descriptors**

<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Example of Student Quotes</b>
<p>Relational. Participants described a time when a faculty member made a personal connection and demonstrated to the student that they were valuable</p>	<p>Alex: I think it was that he was always there. I could always talk to him. He always was willing to listen to me and give me advice. He made phone calls when I needed phone calls to be made. He really just invested – if I had to change the day that he was supposed to come observe me during my practicum, he would change his schedule. He was driving all over the valley at that point, because we had another teacher who lived in Eugene at that time. He was just like a really loveable and enjoyable guy. Even afterwards, when I was first thinking about administration, he was willing to drive to Newberg and sit down and have coffee with me. Even at that point, he was close to being done and retiring – I talked to somebody.</p>
<p>Advocate. Participants described moments where a faculty member intervened on their behalf.</p>	<p>Alex: Definitely with Cohort Leader. I still communicate with him on Facebook. I don't think I would have the jobs that I had if I hadn't called Cohort Leader. He is always, "Call me if you need me to make a phone call, I'll make a phone call for you." Ok, I'm really interested in this job, and he would call and no less than two or three hours later I would have a call from that school saying, "Hey, we want to bring you in for an interview." Now we are friends on Facebook so we communicate on there and stuff. When I was thinking about going into administration, I set up a time and we had coffee and talked about it and that type of thing. Maria: I was pregnant and I didn't know, and so, again, that was another moment where Cohort Leader was like, "You need to take care of yourself. Don't worry the practicum. Take time off and recover," and so I took about three weeks off.</p>
<p>Encourager. Participants described moments when faculty directly encouraged students in moments of difficulty.</p>	<p>Linda: There were definitely times when working full time and doing all that – actually I had conversations with Cohort Leader where I was, "I don't think I can do this." Cohort Leader is the ultimate cheerleader. She is kind of like your mom and cheerleader at the same time: "You can and you will. This is the right thing. This is what you need to be doing." I was, "No." There were little times when I would email her and say, "I think I need to stop." She was, "No, what can I do?"</p>
<p>Supporter. Participants describe a time when faculty provided tangible evidence of support.</p>	<p>Alex: I ended up taking two classes from LSU that Cohort Leader found for me, to help me complete my credit. It was basically like independent study. Maria: That is a decision I had to make when I had my baby – do I continue or do I stop? He was the one that said, "We can make things work. You are so close to finishing. You don't want to stop and then have to start all over again, and we will work with you to make sure that you are able to finish with your cohort."</p>

Students found faculty to be a key factor in their success and the key reason they were able to continue in the program despite the challenges and pivotal moments (Brockett, 2015 & Compton & Cox 2006). Interestingly, students were also very aware when curriculum planning reflected that student needs had been taken into consideration, or if they felt faculty were disconnected from the needs of nontraditional students. The interaction between class content and student perception is further explored in the last theme as it pertains more to student needs.

*University Structures.* The structure of the program, including but not limited to the cohort structure and the class meeting times, were referred to as aspects of support more than any other support structure. Students were very vocal about the structure of the program as a critical factor that allowed them to complete the program. This recognition echoed the literature (Bean, 2012; Compton & Cox, 2006; Flint & Frey, 2003; & “Home | CAEL - Council for Adult and Experiential Learning,” n.d.). The structure was indeed a reason students were able to be successful and persist despite the many obstacles that they faced.

*Cohort.* One of the most impactful university structures named by students was the cohort, and this connections with peers was much more important to nontraditional students than a connection to the university (Bean, 2012; Lundberg, Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Lundberg, 2003). Indeed, the structures assumed to be frustrating such as the inability to access the library, the constant movement of class space and location, difficulty with the registrar and financial aid, all seemed very minor issues to students in light of the support they found within the cohort. This was a place to find a homework friend, and a place that felt safe because everyone shared in common that they were different.

Alex states, “It was eclectic.” He also described the cohort “like a family,” as did all the other participants.



Maddie described how her cohort took a struggling student under their wing; holding him accountable and helping him remember deadlines. Maddie's cohort would also work together to partner with another student who needed extra support, carrying the weight of getting her through. In Maddie's cohort, students graduated at different times, and yet they all attended each other's graduations.

Tammy stated, "We celebrated all our birthdays together and stuff. We always went out and did fun stuff together. We were very close."

Linda described the cohort this way:

The cohort format was awesome, because you got to know people in depth, and you got to rely on them and get their perspectives. I think it pushed us more. Sometimes I think you can blend in, in a certain spot, and when there are only 12 of you and you are not blending in, and when you see the same teachers and the same people over, and then it calls you. There is a little level of accountability. I think I loved that part of it. It was small, intimate, but yet – yeah, there is no sliding below the radar. You feel that kind of connection like you don't want to let anybody else down, either. I liked it. I liked it a lot, actually.

Despite the challenges perceived by students, the grouping of students in a cohort made the obstacles feel less intense. The cohort model also provided supports around registration that were helpful. For example, the cohort leader would invite the program coordinator to class and all the students would register together. Students loved this part of the cohort environment as it eliminated the stress around "one more thing to do."

*Class structure.* Another university structure that enabled success had to do with class times and structures (Flint & Frey, 2003). Students met one or two evenings a week and usually

one Saturday a month. This structure was perceived as one of the most important aspects for students in the program. All five participants worked a full-time job for the entire program up to the point that they stopped to student teach. There was no other way to do school unless the scheduling of classes matched the busy schedule of nontraditional students' lives. Also, all students had different roles outside of school and appreciated that the program's flexibility allowed them to make their families a priority.

Maria said:

The evening classes worked great for me. It was once a week and then one Saturday a month, and then online classes, which was great. Then I kept working. I was able to continue my life and still be able to do my career.

It is important to note, the classes of the participants in this study rarely met on the main campus of the university, instead meeting at least an hour away at satellite campuses. As a result, many had never seen the entire campus until after graduation, but they did not describe this as a negative experience. The satellite campuses served as a home for students and met a major need for participants who did not want to drive all the way to the main campus, which was several hours away from where they lived. Location was perceived as an asset, although the overall experience did not create a strong affiliation with the university.

*External supports.* Participants were quick to admit the importance of external supports in their success as students. These supports came from family (Bergman et al., 2014) and their professional lives. The family was one theme that was easy for students to identify and one that was also evident in the literature (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2016). Spouses were a significant part of the support system for Maddie, Maria, and Alex. They each described instances where their significant other carried the weight of the household responsibilities, so they could do

school. Because of the practicum requirement, the fact that their spouse could carry the responsibility of providing income was tremendous support.

Linda, Maddie, and Maria also named their children as significant supports. While the kids in each family ranged in ages, it seemed essential to each of the participants with children that they lead their children by example.

Parents were also described as necessary support, which aligns with Bergman et al., (2014) who found lack of parental support to be overwhelmingly difficult for students. Alex and Tammy especially focused on the relationship with their moms, both stating that they still talk to their moms on a daily basis. Maddie shared the importance of seeing her parents at her graduation. Maria also felt a strong connection to her parents' support even though she acknowledged the fact that they did not necessarily understand what she was doing, as she was a first-generation college student. She explained:

I know they are proud of me, but they just don't express it. Having them there at the graduation, I know that they were proud. I was at my mom's house, and I saw a "George Fox Dad" button that he had bought, and I didn't see it when we were at graduation. I was, "What?" I didn't even know that he had bought a little button to put on at graduation. I just saw it last weekend.

Even siblings appeared as key supporters. Tammy's sister is a single mom, and Tammy takes her niece and nephew every weekend. The bond between the two sisters is strong and something that Tammy treasured throughout the program. Maddie described the support of a brother all the way from her first glimpse of college at the age of 18, to her graduation 14 years later. Maria also spoke of a sister who became a role model for her at community college and then attended a sister university at the same time she was in the program at George Fox. Tammy

also had a sibling who started school at the same time she did. Her brother was at George Fox, but in a separate program. Knowing that there was someone they loved and trusted doing the same work was something that was important to participants.

In addition to family, participants also referred to structures and supports that were outside of the university in their professional lives. Linda describes teachers who believed in her becoming a teacher, and who were her cheerleaders all the way through her experience. Maddie and Maria also had support from their employers. Because these three students worked in school districts before starting the program, their schools not only affirmed their journey through accolades, they also provided for students to take a leave of absence to student teach, and ultimately, to find a job. These supports came at key moments for each of the participants.

**Participants entered the program knowing they wanted to be teachers; They wanted a clear path to completion.**

Intertwined with the perception that their identities were nontraditional was the thread of who they were as a developing teacher. Participants did not just decide one day that they wanted to be a teacher. The themes of their lives had been calling them to the vocation of teaching for an extended period. Because participants perceived the decision to pursue education at this juncture in their lives as purposeful, they did not want to squander time on activities they found meaningless, and indeed demonstrated a strong knowledge of self throughout the interviews. Students were motivated and demonstrated intrinsic motivation in terms of mastery, autonomy, and purpose. They had control of their lives and were doing something that they perceived as worthwhile. Hence, their time in the program only enhanced and refined rather than defined and built. This became the third main theme that emerged from the data. Pieces of this refining and enhancing were seen in the subthemes of *Participants students had a strong sense of self, The*

*identity of teacher transcends the elementary education experience, and Participants had a clear purpose but limited time.*

***Participants had a strong sense of self.*** Participants demonstrated, on more than one occasion, a strong sense of identity in their interview responses. They knew their personalities, their strengths, and their weaknesses. All five participants described a clear educational trajectory and were adept in their academic skills. They described their role in the cohort and were proud of the part they played. Alex identified himself with words and phrases like, “I was the tech guy,” or, “I like to play the devil’s advocate.” Maddie talked about being the voice of the group, wanting to make sure all things were clear. Tammy, Maria, and Linda talked less about their role in the cohort, but certainly identified strengths and weakness in their learning styles that impacted their learning. Maria stated:

No, I don’t consider myself a perfectionist, not at all. Like I said, even at the community college, I sometimes would do the minimum to get by, and get a C or a B, and I’m okay with that. The effort that I am putting forth, and some of the other classes, I put a little bit more effort into them than other classes. I have just always been like that as a student.

Tammy said, “I am more of a ‘Just keep going.’ I am one of those ‘Make your own mistakes, make your own rewards’ kind of people, I guess. So, I just plow through.”

Regardless of positive or negative experiences, the participants knew who they were, how those attributes impacted their experience, and were okay with the consequences either way.

***The identity of teacher transcends the Elementary Education Program.*** Just as participants shared stories that solidified their perception of nontraditional that surfaced early in their lives, their identification as teacher was also woven through many of their experiences

before entering the program. As such, participants saw the program as an opportunity to refine their practice, not necessarily a place to define their identities as teacher. They also shared experiences, post program completion, which alluded to how the identity of teacher might be much more fluid rather than static.

Tammy, Maddie, and Maria all held paraprofessional jobs in the field of education before starting the program. Their identity as a teacher had been forming for numerous years, and they only needed an opportunity to bring the desire to teach to fruition. Maddie said:

I wanted to be a teacher forever. That was my goal since probably 5th grade. I knew that is what I would do. As soon as I graduated high school, I began working at a preschool, child development center at [an unnamed] High School. I worked as a preschool teacher. Obviously, you don't have to have a teaching license to teach preschool, but I taught in the preschool classroom. I taught in an infant-toddler classroom. Then I became the director of the child care center there. I oversaw a lot of things and then high school teen parents took classes within that building, because we also helped care for their children. All of those years, I knew what I was going to do. I didn't know when I would be able to get to it – afford it and have the time for it and everything else.

Maria said, "I already knew I wanted to be a teacher. It just took time."

Linda said:

I don't know, this is a hard question, because the answer doesn't make me sound super-humble, which I actually am. A lot of people had said all along – "You should be teaching, you should be teaching." I was doing way more than my IA job. I was doing a lot of co-teaching stuff with other people. So, the time came that my own kids were older

and it was easier and I was, “Well, here is a situation and the time is right.”

These students needed an opportunity to pursue a vocation, and when they were given a chance, they saw this as a fulfillment of something that had been in the process for many years.

For Alex and Tammy, the decision to become a teacher came at a juncture when they realized the jobs they were doing were not fulfilling a need to make a difference. As they both had moments to reflect during periods of unemployment, they examined events in their lives that had been meaningful and they both realized that teaching had been woven all through their lives.

Alex said:

My grandma was a teacher and my mom was a teacher, and all the people that had the most impact on my life were my teachers and stuff. I have people that I really looked up to as educators that I feel like those are the people that I think about when I think about what do want my legacy to be. Like, I want to be that teacher. I can remember my third-grade teacher and look back on their almost 35, and I remember Mr. [teacher] when I was in 5th grade.

Tammy said, “I think I just liked being with the kids in the classroom, because it was my nephew’s classroom and my niece’s classroom, and they are five years apart. I just really liked being in the classroom and with kids.” Although Tammy and Alex did not develop this teacher identity from a young age, it was easy to hear the consistent, subtle message in their stories of their adult years.

Because the concept of teacher identity was evident in each participant’s story before the start of the program, it was not surprising to hear students’ perceptions of experiences in the program as refining their practice as a teacher rather than defining it. In fact, the most significant shift that was consistent for all participants was that they merely felt more responsibility once

they were given their students. A few of the participants referred to a shift in their thinking regarding what it meant to be a classroom teacher, but the word “refine” was used consistently. Participants had a strong perception of what it meant to be a teacher and just wanted to tools to make their dreams a reality.

*Participants had a clear purpose and limited time.* With a clear purpose and a developed identity, participants in this study shared the importance of meaningful activities that maximized their time during their coursework. Because of participants’ desire to engage in meaningful activities and build self-efficacy, when structure or content did not align with the limited time and energy they had to give, participants found themselves very frustrated. With the complexity of multiple roles, participants did not have time or energy to do things that they perceived as a waste of time. The research aligns with nontraditional learning theory in that students want meaningful and purposeful activities (Knowles, 1980; Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004; & Merriam, 2001). When students found activities and content relevant, they were much more willing to fully invest. Alex stated, “Yeah, I am either going to be your best student or your worst nightmare.”

Maddie said:

I wanted them {professors} to help me to be successful and not waste my time. I think that would been hard for me to tell them that, but that is what I really wanted to tell them – “Help me be successful and do this well the first time. I don’t want to waste my time and I don’t want to do it halfway, because I have this desire to do things really well. I’m not trying to take baby steps here. I’m trying to get just through it.”

Statements like this were not said maliciously. Instead, participants simply wanted to feel like what they were doing was valuable; they were acutely aware of the sacrifices they were



making to finish their degree. When the university or faculty were not in tune with life outside of school, it was detrimental to student perceptions.

**Conclusion**

These data illustrated some significant points regarding how early the nontraditional student identity developed for these teachers. This identity transcended multiple experiences and seemed to contribute to their persistence in the program.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion & Implications

This phenomenological study affirmed many concepts and trends that were outlined in the literature. Participants certainly fit the descriptors of nontraditional student, including that they worked (Compton & Cox, 2006; Ogren, 2003; Samuels et al., 2011; Stevens, 2014; Wyatt, 2011), they had responsibilities in their homes and communities (Hardin, 2008; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Wyatt, 2011), they were over the age of 25 (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Kasworm, 1990; Lundberg, 2003; Ogren, 2003; Schue & Slowey, 2002), and they desired instruction that was unique and aligned with their specific learning needs (Knowles, 1980; Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004; & Merriam, 2001). Participants also alluded to retention practices that were important to their success in the program. Some of these elements included a meaningful connection to faculty (Brockett, 2015 & Compton & Cox 2006) and peers (Bean, 2012; Graham & Donaldson, 1999; Lundberg, 2003), and class structures that allowed participants to be students *while* investing in their families and communities, rather than students, exclusively. In short, the research, and the domains outlined in the literature review (*Defining Nontraditional Students* Who are nontraditional students?, *Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students* How do nontraditional students learn? What learning models are most effective?, *Retention Practices* What are retention practices that are relevant to nontraditional students? *Perceptions of Nontraditional Students*. What perceptions and experiences do the nontraditional students report?), provided a base from which to understand these participants. However, given the little that is known in the literature about how nontraditional students perceive their identities, this study inquired into the lived experiences of program completers in order to better understand this complexity. The three central themes

discovered in the interviews are delineated in Figure 11 below.

**Figure 11 - Themes in the Data**

Theme Title	Description
<p><b>Participants identified multiple educational experiences both before and during their alternative teacher education program that made them self-identify as nontraditional.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Prior experience sparked nontraditional identification</i></li> <li>• <i>Students used attribute-focused descriptors to express their nontraditional status</i></li> <li>• <i>Participants also shared emotional experiences to articulate nontraditional status</i></li> </ul>	<p>An examination of the data demonstrated the complexity in the identity of nontraditional that was embedded in multiple facets of participants' lives.</p>
<p><b>Participants entered the program with determination believing not finishing was not an option</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Participants believed they had earned the right to finish their degree</i></li> <li>• <i>The opportunity to finish a degree provides the perception of completion</i></li> <li>• <i>Supports are a key to success</i></li> </ul>	<p>Throughout the interviews, it became evident that these five participants were determined to finish the degree despite the many obstacles they faced.</p>
<p><b>Participants entered the program knowing they wanted to be teachers; They wanted a clear path to completion.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Participants had a strong sense of self</i></li> <li>• <i>The identity of teacher transcends the Elementary Education Program</i></li> <li>• <i>Participants had a clear purpose and limited time</i></li> </ul>	<p>Participants demonstrated a strong sense of self and an urgency to complete things in an efficient manner. They knew where they were headed and just needed to fine tune concepts and beliefs about the teaching practice.</p>

To better understand how the discovered themes relate to the original research questions, this chapter examine the research question and compare that question with the themes discovered in the data, provide an interpretation of the themes, draw conclusions from the data, and provide implications for future work with nontraditional students.

### **An Examination of the Research Question**

The original research questions in the study were:

What are the lived experiences of nontraditional students who successfully navigate a teacher-preparation program? What meanings existed in those experiences?

- a. How do they describe their positive and negative experiences?
- b. How do they give meaning to their positive and negative experiences?
- c. How did interpersonal interactions with faculty and other students shape their experiences?
- d. What are their expressions of identity as nontraditional students?
- e. What experiences do they name as “pivotal/choice” moments in their program?
- f. What aspects of their program (people/curricular/application) arise as critical elements to their continuity in the program?

To answer these questions, I developed two sets of interview questions for each participant and listened intently to the stories they told and the meaning they gave to those experiences (See Appendix A). The domains I derived from Kasworm’s (1990) work became a key framework for this study, not only to form the questions, but also from which to begin the analysis process (See Figure 1). The domains which included, Domain One (*Defining Nontraditional Students* Who are nontraditional students?), Domain Two (*Examining the Learning Needs of Nontraditional Students* How do nontraditional students learn? What learning models are most effective?), Domain Three (*Retention Practices* What are retention practices that are relevant to nontraditional students?), and Domain Four (*Perceptions of Nontraditional Students*. What perceptions and experiences do the nontraditional students report?), allowed me to build a clear picture of the participants and the complexity of each of their lives in regard to balancing the role of student with other extraneous expectations. The domains also provided a base in which to understand why the ELED program specifically worked for participants when

other systems had not. Participants described themselves using characteristics well established in the literature (domain one), they shared examples of how their classes needed to look in order to meet unique learning needs (domain two), and they shared examples of retention practices that aligned with the literature (domain three). In short, the research done prior to formulating the questions was foundational in the findings of this study.

**How do nontraditional students describe their positive and negative experiences?** It became evident that during these interviews, participants described experiences as part of the process, whether they were positive or negative. The reporting by participants was not an attempt to gain sympathy or accolades; participants simply viewed experiences as part of the learning process. While many of the negative experiences described could have been detrimental to their overall success, students had enough support and self-motivation to overcome those obstacles and to continue the path forward. This will be discussed further below in the section regarding grit.

**How do nontraditional students give meaning to their positive and negative experiences?** The overall perspective of the five participants in this study regarding meaning-making in any experiences was based in the belief that it was their time to finish and they were going to get it done regardless of the circumstance. Although some of the stories shared were tragic, participants also saw the end in sight and knew that in a few short months, they would be finished with a chapter of their lives that had been a long-time coming. Hope seemed to push participants through regardless of the circumstance. Participants were solution minded.

**How did interpersonal interactions with faculty and other students shape their experiences?** Faculty were a significant part of the students' educational experience. Participants were not hesitant to admit the importance they saw in faculty who understood who

they are and what they needed, and expressed angst with faculty who did not seem to understand. Also, relationships with members of the cohort were deemed a vital aspect of student success. In fact, on many occasions, it seemed that participants could overlook negative experiences because the perceived positive aspects outweighed the perceived negative aspects.

**What are nontraditional students' expressions of identity as nontraditional students?** For some of the participants, the identity of nontraditional student was developed in a key event before the program. In other instances, the identity as nontraditional developed through a series of events or experiences in the traditional educational setting. This happened after multiple smaller events sent the same message and eventually, students identified themselves as nontraditional. Throughout the interviews, students did not think of themselves as better than or less than traditional students. However, they did believe that they were different, and as such, required a different approach. Students described many attribute of nontraditional status that aligned with the literature (i.e. working, over 23, attending part-time), however it was key experiences that really brought the reality of nontraditional status to light for participants.

**What experiences do nontraditional students name as *pivotal/choice* moments in their program?** The variety in what students named as a pivotal event was fascinating. In some instances, it was program related, and in other circumstances it was in their personal lives. It was not the types of experiences that seemed to be interrelated amongst participants, but instead, the response to these experiences that was consistent. Just like the negative and positive aspects students described, the pivotal moments were also intertwined with this idea that giving up was not an option. While students spoke to challenges they experienced in the program, there was also not an option to quit.

**What aspects of their program (people/curricular/application) arise as critical elements to their continuity in the program?** Each participant walked into the program confident they could handle the academic rigor, that they could balance life and school, and that they were called to teach. Completion of a degree was seen as an opportunity to bring closure to a goal that had been developing for many years. However, participants each talked about the importance of a structure that met the needs of their demanding lives. For example, the classes one night a week and one Saturday a month enabled all of them to work for the majority of the program (Flint & Frey, 2003). Participants also stressed the importance of competent faculty and a strong connection to their peers (Kasworm, 2011). The great takeaway from the data I gleaned regarding these themes is the importance of universities enacting small changes to create tremendous outcomes for nontraditional students.

**The overall answer to the question.** Nontraditional students are unique; they have unique needs and they have overcome great obstacles to finish a degree, which for some, has been a long time coming. These participants did not want to be coddled, or thought less of, due to their nontraditional status. Instead, they were searching for a structure that would allow them to finish a degree and fulfill a calling. Once they found that structure, they were all determined to finish regardless of the obstacles. Perhaps this is because when the classroom space feels like it is tailored to adult learning, even moving students to a new level of critical thinking (Scott & Lewis, 2012), a clear degree completion map is present (Kasworm, 2001), caring faculty are engaged in student learning, and students have small class sizes, feeling nontraditional does not have to be perceived as negative.

## Interpretation

The three themes major themes in the data *Participants identified multiple educational experiences both before and during their alternative teacher education program that made them self-identify as nontraditional, Participants entered the program with determination believing not finishing was not an option, and Participants entered the program knowing they wanted to be teachers; They wanted a clear path to completion* suggest a need to reconsider the work universities do with nontraditional students. For example, identity is a complex topic, but important to nontraditional students, both grit and growth mindset are something to consider regarding nontraditional students, and universities have an important role in the success of nontraditional students.

**Identity is a complex aspect of nontraditional students' experience.** Considering how the concept of nontraditional student identity developed early for each participant, it was essential to return to the literature to examine student identity as a whole, and then to see if the development of nontraditional student identity specifically was anywhere in the literature. Assuming identity means being a kind of person in a given context (Gee, 2000). It is safe to say that participants identified as nontraditional in an educational context. However, it is important to note that an education context assumes there is also an interpretative system in place (Gee, 2000). For these participants, the traditional system would be the interpretative system. As they navigated through the educational system, the interpretation became that they were different, and in turn students began to identify as nontraditional.

There was very little literature on the idea of nontraditional student identity. However, Kaplan & Flum (2012) point out that identity and education are intertwined; suggesting that participants' long and winding educational journeys contributed to their identity formation long



before they began the Elementary Education Program. Even more interesting is the consideration of Erikson's development theory regarding students identifying as nontraditional. Four participants in this study experienced confusion about how they fit into the traditional system during the stage Erikson refers to as identity vs. confusion, which happens between the years of 12-19 (Cohen & Waite-Stupiansky, 2017). The formative experiences during these years for participants helped them to identify as a nontraditional student, an identity that would follow them through their university experience.

Interestingly enough, scholars are not looking to the role of identity on motivation (Kaplan & Flum, 2009), but this appeared to be a strong connection in this study. Participants' identities seemed to be connected to their motivation to finish; they wanted to show the world that they were just as deserving as a student who had taken a traditional route. However, more interesting to me than motivation was the concept of grit (Duckworth, 2016). These students did not give up, and that seemed to go beyond the constraints of motivation alone.

### **The Role of Grit and a Growth Mindset**

As I listened to the powerful stories of each of these participants, a strong determination to finish was evident, even in the face of life-changing circumstances. Participants demonstrated an underlying belief that they were going to finish this degree at all costs despite numerous setbacks.

Duckworth's (2016) recent book on grit seems relevant to these participants. The concept of grit, which she describes as a combination of passion and perseverance (Duckworth, 2016), is something that resonated as I considered my five participants. The "ferocious determination" (p.8) and unusual resilience described by Duckworth were attributes that were woven through participant's experiences. I imagine that if they had taken the grit assessment Duckworth created,

they would have all scored highly, and as such, I would like to explore nontraditional students and grit in future work.

While the concept of grit is important, a growth mindset is also an attribute of students who are gritty (Duckworth, 2016). Dweck (2006), who coined the concept of growth mindset, points to the difference between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset. The difference between the two can be found in a comparison of *fixed* and *growth*. A *fixed mindset* believes that there will not be change and that what students have been given is as good as it is going to get, whereas a *growth mindset* focuses on the idea that one can get better at something. People who have a fixed mindset would say, *I am a failure*, and people with a growth mindset would say, *I cannot do it, yet*. The difference is subtle, but it is distinct enough to cause some people to move forward and others to stay stuck. Duckworth (2016) talks about the importance of a growth mindset in the lives of those who score higher on the grit scale. After spending hours reading these interviews, these ideas seem very true for the participants in this study. Participants not only refused to give up: one of the motivating factors for each of them was the idea that they could become better at something, which is aligned with other intrinsic motivation scholars (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

### **Implications for Practice**

Three significant implications of this research are relevant to discuss. The first is that universities need to understand the role of identity in the lives of nontraditional students. Second, the type of faculty who work in nontraditional programs impact student success. Finally, universities must provide structures that enable nontraditional students to successfully balance life and school. My hope in sharing the stories of these five inspiring participants is to bring to

light the opportunity universities have to open routes of access for students who are unique, for whatever reason.

The role of identity is complicated when it comes to these five participants. However, it is important to note that identifying as a nontraditional student was considered neither negative nor positive, it was merely something that each one used to characterize themselves as different from a mainstream student. The participants knew who they were and did not appear to allow any part of that identity to stop them from becoming a teacher. They embraced attributes like “procrastinator,” and “determined,” and then moved on directly to how those attributes impacted their experience.

Although identity was well-established for participants, it was essential to each that their identity was valued and expressed through an intentional relationship with faculty and peers. In fact, four participants had walked away from a previous educational experience because they did not find the faculty relational. Connection to faculty mattered, and it can be assumed that it will matter to future nontraditional students. As such, universities have a responsibility to place understanding, knowledgeable, and relational faculty in nontraditional programs. Participants in this study had already learned how to function with accountability, responsibility, and integrity because they were working individuals who were successful in their professions before starting the program. This meant that they did not need to learn these things through strict deadlines and inflexible schedules. What they needed were faculty who could “bend” structures to provide routes of access to competent students.

In this study, the faculty who took time to know students personally, understand their lives, and extend grace when needed, enabled these participants to thrive. As a faculty member myself, I can understand how this takes extra time and intentionality, but participants provided

many examples indicating how vital this was to their success. It was evident that faculty stepped out of their traditional roles to become more of a mentor and facilitator than an expert in the field.

While universities cannot necessarily screen for faculty who are ready to teach nontraditional students, it is essential that nontraditional programs be intentional in hiring faculty who will put students at the center of the learning experience. It is also essential to note that faculty who teach nontraditional students need to be prepared to understand the demands on nontraditional students' lives to make the most out of every educational experience, and to ensure that students have a personal connection to the university. While instruction is important, the ability to build relationships with students is just as important. Participants gleaned more from faculty who invested in their lives on a personal level than they did from those who did not, which implies the importance of relationship-building for faculty who work with nontraditional students.

Another key implication was the importance of university structures including a cohort model, accelerated classes and night and weekend meeting times which enabled participants to live life and do school. In fact, this study suggests that structures were the most critical factor to students' success aside from participants' sheer determination or grit. Structures that acknowledge the complexity of nontraditional student lives and allow them to be a student while successfully fulfilling their other roles are a must in university programs that serve nontraditional students. Many participants expressed the reality that meeting outside of the university campus, closer to their homes, was an important attribute of the program. Location and time – evening classes – are vital to student success because nontraditional students work to support themselves and their families. Evening and weekend courses can make or break a potential student's

decision to join a program. It is also important to note that merely focusing on time and location is not enough. Students talked about their inability to access the library or the inability to get food on campus. These are small things but can have a profound impact on the students' overall experience. What if universities made a concerted effort to provide services equitably to all students? This means opening library hours to students in the evenings or even pursuing more online options because many cannot travel to campus more than once a week.

In addition, students needed a peer group to get them through their classes. Taking each class with the same group of students at the same time was very important to these nontraditional students. The cohort became a family and a support system in both their academic and personal lives. When students needed an extra push to make it through a somewhat difficult situation, the cohort provided the needed scaffolding. This setup requires intentionality on the university's part. It also means less flexibility in what classes students take, but for nontraditional students on a graduation track, the choice did not seem to be all that important. Opportunity for access took precedence.

In this study, participants wanted to succeed. They simply needed the opportunity to apply their determination in a setting that worked. Universities have a chance to open their doors to a unique university demographic, and it can be done with a few small tweaks. However, I recognize that a "simple" tweak can actually be a very complicated process depending on the governing structures of a university. As such, these programs need faculty who can advocate for the needed changes. Faculty can learn about nontraditional students and their unique needs, and then be given permission to individualize each educational experience based on the distinct needs of nontraditional students. While this sounds like a lofty goal, it can be as simple as extending deadlines on assignments when life is particularly busy for students, or adjusting the

start and ending time of classes by a few minutes to accommodate work schedules. In turn, universities can start creatively approaching the structures that impact student success, to ensure that nontraditional students have access to a degree that might otherwise be unattainable – not due to a lack of ability, but to the sheer complexity of life.

### **Conclusion**

There is still much to learn about students who fall into the category of nontraditional. With a vast array of descriptors, this group can be overlooked simply because it is hard to build parameters around which characteristics they specifically embody in an educational setting. However, it is time to shift attention to nontraditional students as they are a growing university population and will certainly have an impact on higher education practices. While there were many interesting findings in this research process, I walk away with many more questions. What will be the lasting impact of nontraditional student identity on university practices? How will universities create routes of access for nontraditional students? Why do nontraditional students demonstrate such grit? What are the implications of grit on recruitment and retention practices?

It was an honor to tell the stories of these five individuals, and I am very thankful to have an opportunity to examine a demographic of student that has changed the entire way I approach my teaching practice.

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## Appendix A – Interview Questions

### Interview 1

**History** (related to deciding to become a teacher, the pathway that led them to GFU’s program, the people/experiences that prompted them to make the decision/stick it out...)

- 1) Tell me about your experiences as a student prior to starting your teacher preparation program.
- 2) When/how did you decide you were going to be a teacher? Why? Who influenced this decision?
- 3) What kind of complexities did you have happening in your life that were considerations as you chose a teacher prep program?
- 4) Why/how GFU...tell me the story of how you decided on GFU for your program.
- 5) What kind of educational experience did you have at GFU?

Details (of experience within the teacher prep program related to self-identified pivotal moments where participants wanted to quit and did not quite, the support structures that made a difference, stories about people/class experiences that made a difference)

### Background Details

- 1) When did your classes meet?
- 2) Where did your classes meet?
- 3) Did you consider yourself a nontraditional student? If yes, why? If no, why not?

### Experience Details.

- 4) Tell me a story about a time that you identified yourself as a nontraditional student.
- 5) Describe a pivotal moment for you in the program.
- 6) Describe your transformation into a teacher.

- 7) Did you have any relationships with faculty or staff members at the university that influenced your persistence? If so, can you provide some examples?
- 8) Can you share an experience where you felt like you wanted to quit, but you did not? What were the circumstances in that event? Who influenced you to make the decision to persist? How did you make the decision to persist? Why did you make the decision to persist?
- 9) What support structures within the program seemed helpful or important to you in terms of your willingness to keep going?
- 10) What details can you remember about your experiences with licensing requirements?
- 11) What details can you remember about meeting graduation requirements?

## **Interview 2**

Meaning (Meaning of the experiences named in interview one: the pivotal/want-to-quit-but-didn't experiences, the support structures, the stories of people/class experiences that made a difference, the transformation from student to teacher)

- 1) Is there anything that has come up for you since our last meeting?
- 2) How was the identification of nontraditional student meaningful to you?
- 3) In the last interview, you said something related to your relationship with a faculty member. Can you tell me more about what that meant to you in terms of program completion?
- 4) In the last interview, you named XYZ as a pivotal moment. Talk about the significance of that moment with regard to successfully completing your program

- 5) In the last interview, you said that XYZ was a construct you deemed helpful. Talk about the significance of that with regard to successfully completing your program.
- 6) You stated XYZ was transformational to you in terms of identifying as a teacher. Talk about the significance of this specific event in terms of your overall identity as a teacher.
- 7) Is there a question I have not asked you, but you think is important?

### Appendix B – IRB Approval

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY HSRC INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Page 7

Title: Examining the Lived Experience of Nontraditional Students in a Teacher Education Program

Principal Researcher(s): Katy Turpen

Date application completed:

**(The researcher needs to complete the above information on this page)**

COMMITTEE FINDING:

For Committee Use Only

(1) The proposed research makes adequate provision for safeguarding the health and dignity of the subjects and is therefore approved.

(2) Due to the assessment of risk being questionable or being subject to change, the research must be periodically reviewed by the HSRC on a \_\_\_\_\_ basis throughout the course of the research or until otherwise notified. This requires resubmission of this form, with updated information, for each periodic review.

(3) The proposed research evidences some unnecessary risk to participants and therefore must be revised to remedy the following specific area(s) on non-compliance:

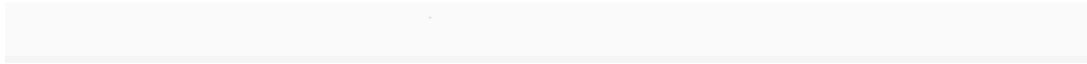
(4) The proposed research contains serious and potentially damaging risks to subjects and is therefore not approved.

Winston Leys

Chair or designated member

02/08/2018

Date



### Appendix C – Google Form: Invitation to Participate

I've invited you to fill out a form:

Interview Interest

**Email address \***

**Name**

**Current position**

**Number of years teaching**

- I am interested
- I may be interested depending on my schedule
- I am not interested

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

**Appendix D – Letter of Informed Consent**

George Fox University  
Doctoral Dissertation Research

Permission to Research Letter

January 25, 2018

Dear Elementary Education Graduate,

I am currently completing a Doctorate in Educational Leadership at George Fox University. As a faculty member who currently teaches nontraditional students, I am interested in examining your experiences during the program and how you gave meaning to those experiences. During the month of February, 2018, I hope to conduct interviews of several graduates of the Elementary Education Program. Each interviewee will participate in two ninety minute interviews at your chosen location. I will make audio recordings of each interview which will then be transcribed and analyzed for themes.

The information gathered in this study will be used to complete my dissertation and will be shared with my chair and my dissertation committee at George Fox University. Any data collected will be confidential and names will not be used. However, it should be noted that there is a small sample size and as such there is a slight chance your data will be identifiable. As I researcher, I will use pseudonyms, and will also allow each participant to read the analysis of the data prior to sharing the findings to ensure that I am representing your voice well. This is something researchers refer to as member-checking. At any time, you may opt out of participation in this study.

I would be honored to have the opportunity to interview you regarding your experience as a nontraditional student in the Elementary Education Program. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding my project. By returning this signed letter to me, you are agreeing to be interviewed and that you understand the information contained herein. I can be reached at [kturpen@georgefox.edu](mailto:kturpen@georgefox.edu). I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Katy Turpen

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Signature of Participant

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Signature of Researcher