

# Alternative Certification Programs in K-12 Schools: The Experiences of Diverse Teachers

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## Abstract

Through individual interviews and focus groups, this qualitative phenomenological study explored 11 conditionally licensed teachers' experiences in earning their full teaching license in a Mid-Atlantic state in the United States. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis method. The findings of this study showed that the conditionally licensed teachers were career changers from diverse ethnic identities, and they mainly struggled with classroom management. The study also found that they had little support and information regarding the certification process, and their work-life-study balance was challenging. This study suggests that schools, school districts, and the university develop strong partnerships to provide appropriate support to these teachers to make them licensed and effective classroom teachers in order to meet the needs of the national teacher shortage.

**Keywords:** alternative certification, conditionally licensed teachers, diverse teachers, teacher shortage

## 1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right, not a privilege. Each child deserves quality education to help them grow as a human being, lead their life, and contribute to their family and community. Therefore, each child needs qualified teachers who can help them achieve academic and social skills. To be a qualified classroom teacher in the United States, the traditional route of teacher licensing involves candidates completing course work in a preservice teaching program at a four-year college, interning at a local school, and passing the licensing exam. Only those who show the minimum qualifications and qualities of the teaching profession are licensed to teach in K-12 classrooms. This licensing procedure has made teaching one of the most licensed professions in the United States (Kleiner & Krueger, 2010; Shuls & Trivitt, 2015). However, many of these licensed teachers do not continue on to the teaching profession.

### *1.1 Teacher Turnover*

Teacher turnover refers to the rate of teachers quitting their profession or switching schools. Teacher turnover is a significant challenge in the United States, as many licensed teachers leave the teaching profession every year. Steiner and Woo (2021) predicted that about one-third of K-12 teachers in the United States would leave their jobs at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Bassok et al. (2021) discovered that about one-third of teachers dropped out of the profession in the first two years and never returned to teaching. Other studies showed that the teacher turnover rate is higher in the schools where more students were eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Meal Program (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Young, 2018). In other words, schools in impoverished communities suffer more from teacher shortages than the affluent community schools.

Teacher turnover has explicit and implicit adverse effects on students, schools, districts, communities, and the government. Among the direct effects, teacher turnover negatively affects students' academic progress (author, year; Gibbons et al., 2018; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). When teachers leave schools during the school year, their students' academic achievement goes down by 7.5%, and if they quit between December to April, it has even worse consequences on their students' report cards (Henry & Redding, 2020). Also, there is a direct financial impact on schools due to teacher turnover. School districts must recruit and develop new teachers, which costs 7.3 billion dollars per year in the United States (Carroll, 2007). Among the implicit impacts, teacher turnover adversely impacts school climate and practices (Young, 2018). Also, it takes time for the new teachers, students, and their parents to know each other well and form a relationship, which is essential in teaching and learning.

### *1.2 Teacher Shortage and Alternative Certification Programs*

Teacher turnover creates teacher shortages in schools every year. In 2017-2018, for example, there were at least 110,000 teacher shortages in the U.S., then, schools hired about 109,000 uncertified teachers to put in K-12 classrooms (García & Weiss, 2019; Sutchter et al., 2019). Nguyen et al. (2022) found that in 2020-2021, at least 163,000 underqualified teachers were hired nationwide; and yet there were still 36,000 vacant positions. As a result, many school districts hire uncertified and sometimes underqualified teachers or eliminate the positions if they cannot hire someone for their classrooms (Bowling & Ball, 2018). This teacher shortage creates teaching-learning gaps for students, which negatively impacts their academic outcomes. Students need qualified teachers in their classrooms.

To meet schools' needs, in the 1990s, at least 47 states and the District of Columbia opened the opportunity to hire non-licensed teachers and career changers through alternative certifications in over 130 content areas (Rose & Sughrue, 2020; Wilcox & Samaras, 2009). Alternative teaching certification is for individuals with a four-year college degree in a particular discipline but not from the traditional route of a preservice teacher preparation program. Those individuals can earn a conditional license for teaching. School districts often hire them for their classrooms when they have teacher shortages. Additionally, the increased diversity in the K-12 classrooms in the U.S. demands the necessity of diverse teaching professionals, as most classroom teachers are White females (García, 2020; Taie & Goldring, 2020).

### *1.3 Diversity in K-12 Schools and Alternative Certification Programs*

In 1998, President Clinton's Secretary of Education Richard Riley (1998) said that classroom teachers should be diverse like American society; he said that because the student population in the U.S. is diverse, but not the teaching staff. In 2015, the United States Census Bureau (2015) projected that by 2020, students of color and their White counterparts would be 50-50. But data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that, in 2021, of 49.2 million students in K-12 schools, 22.4 million were White (NCES, 2023b). In other words, in 2021, about 55% of enrollment was students of color. NCES teacher data also showed that, in 2021, 80% of classroom teachers were White women (NCES, 2023a). Ultimately, this means that students of color do not see themselves and their culture represented among their teachers.

Research shows that teachers of color have a direct positive impact on their students of color. Gottfried et al. (2022) conducted a longitudinal study on a high school in California and found that Latinx students' unexcused absence rate decreased with the presence of Latinx teachers in their classrooms. Hwang et al.'s (2023) longitudinal study in an elementary school in Indiana found that teachers of color's presence in the self-contained classroom positively impacted students of color's academic progress. This suggests that schools need teachers from various ethnicities to meet the demands of diverse students. Grossman and Loeb (2021) said that the alternative certification process, through conditional licensing, effectively recruits diverse teachers in regards to race and gender. Alternative certificate programs can also potentially recruit White male teachers for the classrooms to represent White male students.

### *1.4 Career Changers as Conditionally Licensed Teachers*

When school districts recruit for teaching through alternative certification, the results invariably are career changers. States conditionally license them to teach. Very often, they are known as conditionally licensed teachers. For example, 40% of teachers in New Jersey classrooms are career changers with alternative certification (Grossman & Loeb, 2021). According to the Official Site of the New Jersey Department of Education (n.d.), a candidate must have a 2.75 GPA with 30 credits in any subject area to be conditionally licensed. Similarly, to get a conditional license for two years in Maryland, experienced individuals can be hired as licensed teachers as long as they have at least a 2.75 GPA in their undergraduate degree and a minimum of 30 credits in their respective teaching subject area (The Maryland State Department of Education [MDSE], n.d.). As the conditionally licensed teachers already have a bachelor's degree, they must go to graduate school in a preservice teacher preparation program (e.g., Master of Arts in Teaching) for coursework and a teaching internship. According to the MSDE (n.d.), a conditionally licensed teacher should earn their teaching license within two years or they can renew their certificate for another two years if they earn at least 12 credits from a university. To earn a full certification in Maryland, a conditionally licensed teacher must pursue a degree from a preservice teacher preparation program and must pass a content and pedagogy competency test (e.g., Praxis II).

### *1.5 Conditionally Licensed Teachers' Challenges*

During their conditionally licensed period, the career changers teach in the classroom and take college courses to earn a teaching degree through a state-approved preservice teacher preparation program. They take coursework, methods classes, do their internship, and earn a degree in teaching. The preservice teacher preparation programs also support the conditionally licensed teachers to successfully pursue their full licenses (Bruno et al., 2018). Before being fully licensed, conditionally licensed teachers face more challenges in their classroom than the traditionally certified teachers as they have a lack professional training, do not have internship experience, and have no continuous professional training that in-service teachers get. As a result, due to their lack of experience, many conditionally licensed teachers struggle to handle classroom stress and to manage students and their behavior (Schonfeld & Feinman, 2012).

Pankowski and Walker (2016) found that conditionally licensed teachers lack skills in classroom management and dealing with student behavior. These teachers are also less qualified in content and pedagogy than traditionally licensed teachers (Shen, 1997). Thus, conditionally licensed teachers are more likely to quit the teaching profession due to a lower level of commitment to teaching (Chambers-Mack et al., 2019). Additionally, Newton et al. (2020) found that many conditionally licensed teachers who came to teaching by switching their professions leave teaching profession soon. Some of them even leave the teaching profession after getting licensed. And while school administrators understand conditionally licensed teachers' lack of preparation and its impact on students (Bartholomew et al., 2018), the administrators cannot help these teachers with every challenge they face. Thus, these teachers often feel helpless and stressed.

### *1.6 About This Study*

Conditionally licensed teachers are career changers with diverse identities who lack content and pedagogy knowledge and classroom management skills (Casey et al., 2011). They may struggle to smoothly run a class and may not satisfy their students. Their lack of content knowledge may keep them from being able to answer the questions of their students accurately and professionally. Their students may treat them differently than the traditionally licensed teachers. There might be professional relationship issues between conditionally licensed teachers and seasoned teachers. There might be policy issues (e.g., salary structure, responsibilities) with the alternatively certified teachers. They also might have families and other social obligations that may result in not having enough time to pursue the certification. They may have financial barriers. They may have a lack of support. Managing all the challenges, many of these teachers pursue their full certification and become licensed teachers to meet the national demand.

### *1.7 Purpose Statement*

This study aimed to explore and describe conditionally licensed teachers' experiences pursuing full certification. This study focused on these teachers' experiences in their work-life-study balance. This study also explored their thoughts about how their schools,

school districts, and the teacher preparation program could better support them as they strive to be fully licensed.

### *1.8 Research Questions*

1. What experiences do conditionally licensed teachers have in pursuing their full certification?
2. How do they maintain their work-life-study balance while they pursue their license, and what support do they get?

## **2. Methods**

This study focused on conditionally licensed teachers' experiences pursuing their full certification through studying in a pre-service teacher education graduate program, maintaining their full-time teaching job, and performing personal and family responsibilities. Ultimately, grasping and interpreting the participant teachers' daily lived experience of earning a full certification was the phenomenon of this study. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to investigate that phenomenon as this approach interprets and describes participants' daily experiences (Fuster-Guillén, 2019). Gupta (2021) said that phenomenological study involves collecting studied individuals' lived experiences about a particular phenomenon.

This study also collected participants' experiences attaining full teaching certification through the alternative route of certification. Valentine et al. (2018) said that phenomenological study investigates phenomena through individuals' lived experiences. This study also explored a particular phenomenon of the experience of pursuing a full teaching certification. Additionally, Nigar (2020) described the phenomenological approach as a study that explored the hidden truth of the participants' daily experiences. This study also explored the apparent truth in the participants' daily experience of working full-time in a school, studying as a pre-service teacher, and maintaining personal lives for their full certification.

### *2.1 Research Site and Participants*

The research took place in an eastern state of the U.S., and the participants were from a Master of Arts in Teaching Program at an accredited institution of higher education. The participants were from two neighboring school districts of that institution. These districts' student demographics are very diverse, and most of them are students of color. The Master of Arts in Teaching program prepares teachers for middle and high schools in the areas of Art, Biology, Chemistry, English, History, Mathematics, Music, Physical Education, and Physics. This preservice teacher preparation program is approved by the state and nationally accredited by the Council for the Accreditation Educator Preparation (CAEP). A candidate should have a minimum of 3.00 GPA with at least 30 undergraduate credits in the concentration area to apply to the program.

Participants were recruited from the above-mentioned program. A request was sent to 45 preservice teacher candidates. They were conditionally licensed in different subject areas. The preservice teachers were diverse, but there is no specific data in the program about their

race, gender, and ethnicity. Eleven participants agreed to participate in this study. From their self-identification, there were six men and five women. Four identified themselves as Asian, two as Black, one as African American, one as Native American, and three as White. Pseudonyms were used and have no connection to their identity.

Table 1. Participant List

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Teaching Level &amp; Subject</b>
Andrew	Male	Black	High school history
Billy	Female	Asian	Middle school science
Cyrus	Male	White	High school American government
Duke	Male	Native American	Middle school social studies
Edward	Male	Black	High school music teacher
Francis	Female	Asian	Middle school math
Grace	Female	Asian	Elementary 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade
Helen	Female	Asian	Middle school history
Ivan	Male	White	High school history
Jade	Female	African American	Middle school world language
Kevin	Male	White	Middle school music

## 2.2 Data Collection

First, a semi-structured interview was conducted and recorded over Zoom for about 25-30 minutes for each participant. Pre-prepared interview questions included: why they chose the teaching profession; what professional training they received so far and how this training helped them in classroom instruction; what challenges they faced in the classroom for not being a fully licensed teacher; what support they got from their administrators and colleagues; how their students, colleagues, and administrators treated them for not being a licensed teacher; and how they manage their work-life-study balance while working on becoming fully licensed.

Then, there were two virtual focus groups for getting participants to share thoughts about how their school districts could better support them and other conditionally licensed teachers to continue in their profession, how their school districts could inspire more career changers

like them to teach, how their schools could support them to maintain their work-life-study balance; and how their university could help them to become fully licensed. Billy, Francis, Helen, Grace, and Jade were in the first focus group. Andrew, Cyrus, Duke, and Ivan were in the second focus group. Due to a time conflict, Edward and Kevin could not join a focus group. Each focus group was one hour long.

### *2.3 Data Analysis*

A qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze transcribed interview data to finalize themes from the data. A three-step thematic analysis (Sundler et al., 2019) was followed. These steps were: achieving familiarity with the data through open-minded reading, searching for meanings and themes, and organizing themes in a meaningful wholeness. The researcher first read each transcribed interview twice and wrote possible meanings and themes (e.g., “balancing work-life is challenging”). Then, the researcher recorded the frequencies of the themes and finalized the top four themes as findings.

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

The focus of this study was to explore conditionally licensed teachers’ experience of earning full license in teaching through the alternative route of certification. Data was collected from 11 participants, and four themes emerged from the data analysis. These were: (1) external and internal rewards for teaching are attractive for career changers, (2) classroom management is a big challenge, (3) the licensing process is vague and difficult, and (4) work-life-study balancing is arduous. These themes are described below, with subthemes followed by a brief discussion of each theme.

### **Theme 1: External and Internal Rewards for Teaching are Attractive for Career Changers**

Teachers are one of the largest groups of professionals in the U.S. (Powell, 2019) and serve the community through their teaching. Teaching attracts people with its external and internal rewards. Powell (2019) mentioned that the external rewards for teaching include the salary, benefits, flexible work schedule, and long off time, especially in summer, and these attract many people to teaching. Also, there are many internal rewards that people do not see but feel. These rewards include love for children and passion to contribute to developing the next generation. These rewards are motivations for people to join the teaching profession.

However, many licensed teachers quit the profession within five years (Perryman & Calvert, 2019). This situation creates a teacher shortage in the classroom, a national concern in the U.S. (Carothers et al., 2019; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2022). As a result, school districts hire unlicensed teachers for their classrooms, providing conditional licenses. Many of the unlicensed teachers are career changers. All the participants of this study were career changers. They switched their profession to teaching as the external and internal rewards motivated them.

### *Flexible Work Schedule*

A flexible work schedule for teaching motivates many people to join the teaching profession. Teachers have long summer and winter breaks, work 180 days a year, and their daily work schedule is six hours. Rahman (2019) said that flexible work schedules attracted many people, especially women, to teaching. Like a participant, Francis was an architect and then taught math in middle school. She chose to teach for its flexible work schedule. She said:

I was an architect and had to work every weekday up to six-seven in the evening. When there was a project, I had to stay for a longer period. It was not life. I love social life. I need to do something suitable for a mother. I am a protective mom. So, I want to go home early and be with my family.

As can be seen here, this flexible work schedule attracts many career changers to teaching. As Francis said, she switched her career from being an architect to teaching for a flexible work schedule. Similarly, another participant, Helen, who was a homemaker, said, “Teaching is a perfect job for a woman because of the work time. It has breaks throughout the year, and it is easy to maintain family responsibilities. I love it. I found it.”

### *Financial Benefits of Teaching*

Teachers are an essential part of formal schooling. Without classroom teachers, teaching-learning cannot happen. When licensed and experienced teachers quit their jobs, it creates a teacher shortage. However, COVID-19 increased the crisis and made it acute. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022), in 2021, 44% of public schools in the U.S. have teacher shortages, and the COVID-19 pandemic increased the rate to 61%. Many career changers took advantage of the shortages and joined teaching for the financial benefits. One participant, Duke, used to work in marketing and lost his job due to COVID-19; he then found teaching a safe harbor for his livelihood. He said:

I always wanted to be a teacher and was afraid I would be a bad teacher. Then I joined in marketing. I lost my job due to COVID-19, and then my cousins asked me to try teaching. Now I enjoy it. I like to teach young people to be a good global citizen.

Like Duke, other participants like Edward and Kevin also lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic and found teaching a safe place for their livelihood. Kevin said, “I was a singer, and COVID messed that up. I could not go outside and sing anymore. I have a vocal pedagogy degree. So, I was thinking, why not teaching in school?” Kevin also said that he did not have health care and was happy to get it from teaching. Similarly, Edward said, “I had a small retail job. Then, I looked for something more financially consistent. I thought, if I wasn’t performing, then why not teach music? Also, I don’t need to go to work during summer.”

During the focus groups, participants were asked how school districts and schools could motivate more career changers in teaching. They all said that more financial benefits would attract more career changers to teaching. Grace said, “[The school district] should increase salary as the living cost is higher.” Billy said, “Financial benefit is a big motivation for the career changers.” Similarly, Duke said, “They can create a pathway offering a good starting



salary.” Cyrus said, “Better pay and working conditions will bring more people into teaching.” Andrew, however, said something different. He said, “The district should raise the reimbursement portion of tuition fee for certification.” Therefore, school districts should consider some viable salary options to entice more career changers towards teaching.

### ***Love for Teaching and Children***

Some participants shared their passion for working with children and their love for teaching. They had experiences or family connections with teaching before migrating to the U.S. Billy, Grace, and Jade came to the U.S. from the Middle East/Asia. They were homemakers who took advantage of the teacher shortage and joined teaching. Like Billy said, “I choose teaching because I love to teach. My dad was a French language teacher. I learned a lot from him. I used to tutor many kids in my back home.” Similarly, Jade said, “I love to teach as I saw my mom teaching kids. She was a math teacher. My sister is also a teacher. I love my students as I love my own kids.” Grace also mentioned her experience of teaching her back home, which made it easy for her to think about teaching in the U.S. She said, “I taught kids when I was in middle school. I taught my family members and neighbors when I was in college. So, it’s my passion, and I found myself in teaching.” Andrew, another career changer who had been a priest, also had a family connection in teaching. He said, “As a pastor, I taught parish. But as a young minister, I think teaching is in my DNA from my mother. She was a very good teacher.”

### ***Theme 1 Discussion: External and Internal Rewards for Teaching are Attractive for Career Changers***

People join different professions for different motivations. Teaching is not an exception. In his study, Akar (2019) found that people joined teaching through alternative certification programs for mostly extrinsic motivations like time for their family, salary, and job security. The career changers who join teaching have experiences in other careers, and thus, they have the practical knowledge to get a suitable job for them. The current study’s participants also shared that they joined the teaching profession to give more time to their families. They understood that the daily six hours of work for 180 days in a year is a good option for them to maintain their families while maintaining their full-time teaching. Some participants found teaching to be a secure job as they lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The career changers in the teaching profession have been contributing to mitigating the acute teacher shortage through their conditional licensing. Ekinici (2020) found in her study that external and internal motivations for teaching were essential for teachers to join the teaching profession. The findings of the study reported here showed that each conditionally licensed teacher was motivated either for external or internal or both types of motivation. Some participants came to teaching for its flexible work schedule and long off time, and some for their passion for teaching or family connections. Whatever their motivation, the schools and the school districts need to take care of those teachers for their retention so that they do not create another teacher shortage. Other than contributing to teaching, these teachers were diverse in their backgrounds and added diversity to their schools, especially the number of noteworthy male representations. So, the policymakers and implementers need to concentrate on the alternative certification process to increase the recruitment from diverse identities.

## **Theme 2: Classroom Management is a Big Challenge**

Classroom management is an essential part of teaching. Teachers' classroom management skills are the strategies for teachers to monitor student activity, engage students in learning, and when and how to respond to any event (Wolff et al., 2021). Each teacher should have classroom management skills to lead a classroom. Career changers who came to teaching did not have the traditional route of preservice teaching practices. When the school districts hire them and place them before the students, these teachers must deal with many important aspects of teaching, like instruction, engaging students, dealing with parents, and classroom management.

Classroom management is an important responsibility among these essential activities as teachers' classroom management capabilities defines their identity and self-efficacy (Lazarides et al., 2020). Hettinger et al. (2021) said that classroom management was the teacher's approach to controlling disruptive behavior, managing students to follow classroom rules, and engaging them in productive teaching-learning activities. Now, the questions come about how these conditionally licensed teachers deal with classroom management. There were no direct questions regarding classroom management during individual interviews or focus groups because the focus was licensing.

### ***Challenging Student Behavior***

However, the conditionally licensed teachers shared their classroom management experience and found it their biggest challenge. Francis said, "It is the hardest part, and in my first year, I was about to quit teaching. I was asking everyone how to deal with student behavior. I did not know how to deal with them." Francis was not alone in struggling with classroom

management. Duke said, "One thing that concerns me is that it is difficult for teachers to navigate when any student [is] acting up or if a student threatens you." Ivan said, "You know a few teachers are leaving the schools. I know one of them has been getting frustrated with students' behavior." Cyrus said:

I think the behavioral issue is challenging and creates a culture of chaos. You are kind of like spending half of your time dealing with the behavior of a couple of students. Then, the students who really want to learn, and you can't help them.

### ***Experience Matters***

As the conditionally licensed teachers gain experience working with children, they gradually learn how to deal with students. All participants shared the same feeling about classroom management. As Duke said, "I feel like classroom management is something you as a teacher have to work on for three to five years." Another participant, Jade, said, "It's very challenging. I think the first and second years are a little bit difficult to adjust." All participants shared their frustration about classroom management. Like Billy said, "It takes time, but in the end, you can balance." Many of the conditionally licensed teachers showed positive attitudes towards classroom management. Duke said, "I am doing better, but I am still not where I want to be. I want to lead my class with love, not with an iron fist." Andrew said, "For

student behavior, we put something in place called restorative justice. Instead of [being] punitive, we try to restore [students]. We try to figure out what's going on with them.”

### ***Collegial Support is Helpful***

As they did not have preservice teacher training, the participant teachers had difficulties with classroom management. It was the most challenging part of their job, but they all learned every day and got support from their colleagues and administrators. Edward said that he always asked for support from his colleagues in the building, and they helped him. He said, “Sometimes [colleagues] advise me like ‘contact their father their fathers are very supportive’ or ‘that parent gonna jump on you.’” Similarly, Helen said, “Our principal is awesome. She keeps asking me if I need support. My colleagues are also supportive. We support each other. I got more support during my first year.” Cyrus said, “Really, a supportive administrative staff would help relate to behavioral issues to give teachers good support. They take that off the teacher’s plate, so the behavioral issue is not a bulk of what we do in the classroom.” Kevin said, “[Colleagues] are very receptive to me. If I ask for help and they help me with something. They also help me with classroom management.”

### ***Knowing Students is Important***

Knowing students is essential for teachers. When teachers know their students, they can better help and support those students. It also helps them manage behavioral issues. One participant, Kevin, said, “I’ll tell you right now that probably one of the biggest things is classroom management. Not every child comes from the same background. So, you have to figure out what tricks work better for them.” Similarly, Helen said, “It is something new to me. You know my students help me a lot to learn the culture and even my colleagues help me. Now I know how to deal with it.” Clearly, the teachers understood the importance of knowing their students and their backgrounds.

### ***Theme 2 Discussion: Classroom Management is a Big Challenge***

Classroom management is a critical part of teaching. Because a teacher's classroom management style significantly influences students' motivation to learn (Adedigba, 2020). People who come to the teaching profession through the traditional certification route get clinical experience as preservice teachers under skilled mentor teachers. But, the conditionally licensed teachers who come to teach through the alternative path of teaching licenses do not have clinical experience in teaching. They need proper training and support regarding classroom management, especially in dealing with student behavior. According to Rose and Sughrue (2020), conditionally licensed teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the many facets of the teaching profession.

This study found that all conditionally licensed teachers face challenges with classroom management, especially with student behavior. If these teachers fail to control their classrooms, they cannot teach properly to their students. The participants shared their frustration with student behavior and even their security. These people are an essential part of the schools, and their retention is essential in the classroom. Thus, school districts and schools need to provide appropriate support to those teachers so they would not quit the

profession and create further teacher shortages.

### **Theme 3: Difficult Licensing Process**

Career changers who join teaching with conditional licenses need to complete a preservice master's program (Master of Arts in Teaching) from any university. The program must be approved by the state's Department of Education. This program provides candidates with foundational skills in teaching through internships. Along with completing the preservice master's program, they must pass the performance-based, subject-specific assessment (i.e., Praxis II exam or edTPA) to show their proficiency in content and pedagogy in their respective subject area. Only then do the candidates get their teaching license. Therefore, the licensing process is not an easy path for them.

#### ***Lack of Knowledge about Licensing***

All the participants in this study were middle-aged and many of them were confused about the licensing process. They did not have enough information about the process. The conditionally licensed teachers worked for a few years and struggled to figure out the licensing process due to a lack of information. One participant, Kevin, said, "Praxis? What's that? That's probably the only thing I need help with. I just, like, I have no idea. I am pretty sure that are websites that help you practice the Praxis." Ivan said, "It doesn't seem a clear pathway. I was in the wrong program for not knowing the process [certification]." One participant, Edward, said:

The certification process is a little bit confusing because of how it is documented. There is something that could be simple, like taking Praxis I and then Praxis II. I am still trying to figure it out. I think it is a challenge.

#### ***Inadequate Support***

Career changers who are coming to teaching and helping meet the demand of the teacher shortage need support to earn their full certification, which can help them continue in the profession. These teachers have come to teaching to serve the students and thus, they need help and motivation to earn their full certification. Getting their full license will benefit them, the schools, and their students. If these teachers get appropriate support, it will motivate them to continue in their profession, and they will feel like they belong to the school community. But Rose and Sughrue (2020) found that conditionally licensed novice teachers did not get the expected help from their administrators as administrators also had little knowledge about the certification process.

Participants also struggled with their school districts' policies regarding the certification process. Andrew said, "It is very difficult for teachers to stay here with all the unnecessary requirements for licensing. [The district office] make[s] it difficult to get there for tons of red tape." Similarly, Duke shared his experience of submitting his undergraduate transcripts for certification, and, after about a year, hearing back from the district office saying that they changed the certification policy for conditionally licensed teachers. He said, "[The district office] make[s] the certification process more difficult where I know there is a global

shortage of teachers.” Another participant, Ivan, shared his experience with certification. He said he was in a program for certification, and, after two years, the district office informed him that the program would not be appropriate for certification. Duke said,

I am graduating in December, and then I am still not a professional [licensed teacher], right? Then I need to take 2 or 3 classes [for the Praxis II exam]. And then you must wait for the next school year. It’s a long time, especially for career changers.

The participants’ experiences were not conducive to keeping people in teaching. School districts need to figure out an easy pathway for certification as these teachers are already serving in the classroom. Francis requested her school district have a more straightforward pathway; she said, “Help us gain our certification. Find something out that we can accomplish.” Cyrus said, “Teaching is such a draining and emotional profession that we love. But you don’t want to be sitting on the phone with HR to figure out the licensing process.” Districts need to hear their voices. For example, the school district can arrange some information-sharing sessions regarding certification. Like Billy and Kevin said, “Some certification tutoring, or sessions would be better.” Jade requested free resources for certification and Praxis as she found only one textbook on Amazon.

### ***Test Anxiety***

Conditionally licensed teachers must take Praxis or edTPA for their licensing after completing their preservice program in college, but these teachers often have test anxiety. Grace said, “I heard from another teacher that Praxis is hard. I didn’t try it, actually. I have to work a lot to get the Praxis.” Jade echoed the same, saying, “It is the Praxis, and it’s a very hard one. I don’t know much about it.” Other participants of this study were also anxious about the licensing exam. Some of them were worried about losing their job due to certification. Helen said:

I have to renew my conditional certificate this year. You never know whether or not they will renew it. You know the test [Praxis] is a little bit hard for me. I don’t know more about it. I wonder if they want me to take it.

Francis added, “They have extended our time for Praxis II, but still, it is not easy, and maybe some support will be good for us.” Some participants also had comments about the licensing process. As Abuja said, “Licensing is a challenge. Actually, the teacher union does provide sessions on practicing for the Praxis exam.” Among the participants, only Dubai showed confidence about it, saying:

I know people with expired conditional licenses. I know some people who haven’t done the things that they need to do. I am excited to have the full license. I have two bachelor’s degrees and am going to university again just for the license.

### ***Theme 3 Discussion: Difficult Licensing Process***

The conditionally licensed teachers joined teaching with the alternative certification process. They joined with a condition to earn their teaching license in two years. They have the option to renew their license for another two years. By that period of time, they must earn their full

license in teaching. Their full teaching licenses are essential for them to continue their job. Their licenses are also similarly essential for the schools as they need teachers. These teachers work hard for their licenses and maintain their full-time jobs at school and at home. Everyone who is involved in the licensing process needs to realize their contribution to the schools and hard work for their licensing process.

Unfortunately, this study found that the conditionally licensed teachers' struggle for licensing is overlooked. Many conditionally licensed teachers do not have the necessary information about licensing, and even they do not know what to do for their licensing. They are not getting support from their school administrators. Their district's office does not provide support. Rather, it makes the process complicated for them. District Office and school administration jointly can provide support and guidance to these teachers so that they can earn their teaching license.

#### **Theme 4: Work-Life-Study Balance is Challenging**

Conditionally licensed teachers provide support to the school, contributing to teaching and teaching-related activities. However, in addition to their full-time teaching job, they have personal and family lives, and they also go to graduate school in the preservice teaching program for certification. Maintaining all these responsibilities, as they try to pursue their license in teaching, is difficult.

##### ***Family Responsibilities First***

The participants of this study were in their middle age. They have personal and family lives. They need to balance responsibilities, like family and work, as well as their education for certification. As Francis said, "I have three jobs. I work at school. I have a job when I go home as I have my husband and two kids. I have another job, and it is my study for certification." Edward echoed the same. He said:

I will be totally honest. It is challenging. There has been a time when I feel I focus more on top of the work. Then you see family life come. Obviously, I must prioritize whichever one comes first. I am taking one day at a time to balance to go forward.

##### ***Working and Studying Simultaneously is Difficult***

Maintaining family, work, and continuing graduate education is difficult. As Helen said, "I am sleeping less than before because of my own kids. They need help with their homework. Then I prepare my lesson, cooking, and I have to finish my certification." People like Helen struggle. Another participant, Grace, shared that she was a single mom with three kids. It was difficult for her to maintain her work-life-study balance. Participant Kevin said that people ask him questions like, "'Are you doing your classes for certification?' and 'How do you sleep?'" However, Andrew, who was a pastor said he could manage his balance. He said:

It is not challenging for me because I am in an empty nest. I have only one child and am not responsible because she is married. So, I have a lot of free time. I am ready to do the coursework. I really think it is a mindset.

### *Expect Empathy and Support from College Professors*

The participants in this study had specific expectations about help. As Duke said, “Give us real tangible experience so that we can go to the next level of certification.” Cyrus said they need a strong partnership with their university to get more help for certification. Kevin said that he wanted proper advisement for coursework for certification to make sure that he would not take any unnecessary coursework that could be a burden for him. Grace asked for support from professors with constructive and timely feedback to motivate them for certification. All participants asked their professors to empathize to understand their full-time job and family responsibilities to help them get their licenses.

### *Theme 4 Discussion: Work-Life-Study Balance is Challenging*

Conditionally licensed teachers are essential to schools. The growing number of conditionally licensed teachers through alternative certification helps with the teacher shortage problem (Aragon, 2016). These teachers deserve appreciation and support so that they can continue their job in teaching. These teachers are career changers and middle-aged people. They must maintain their personal and family lives besides their job and study for licensing. Mercado (2019) conducted a study and found that work-life balance matters for teachers’ job satisfaction. When the conditionally licensed teachers are satisfied with their work and life balance, they devote themselves to their teaching and also concentrate on earning their licenses.

However, this study found that its participants’ work-life-study balance was unsatisfactory. They were struggling with maintaining their family lives, work, and studying for licensing. They did not get enough time for their personal health, saying they did not have enough time to sleep. Thus, it is essential to create a supporting environment for them in the schools and in their studying universities. One participant, Grace, said that they needed more planning time to finish their next day planning for teaching at school. Extra planning time could give them more time at home for their families. Their college professors could also support them by providing extra time to submit coursework. Some participants urged their professors to empathize with them. Ultimately, these conditionally licensed teachers need support from every stakeholder during their certification process as they are willing to earn their certification to continue in the teaching profession.

## **5. Conclusion**

Conditionally licensed teachers are an integral part of K-12 schools. The alternative certification process helps diversify teaching professionals, as one of the missions of alternative certification was to recruit diverse teachers for diverse students (Grossman & Loeb, 2021; Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). This study found its participants were from diverse ethnicities: four were Asian women, two were Black men., one was an African American woman, one was a Native American man, and two were White men. The participants showed that the alternative certification program had the potential to recruit diverse teachers for diverse students in the U.S. Therefore, school districts and schools can use this alternative pathway to recruit diverse teachers. All teacher candidates in this study showed enthusiasm

for teaching and were eager to contribute to their students' development. Their presence in the teaching profession is an addition to the diversity.

The career changers who come to this profession in middle age want to continue. All participants of this study showed enthusiasm for earning a full license in teaching as they intended to stay in this profession. In fact, one of the participants already took the Praxis II exam for middle school mathematics and passed. The flexible work schedule of teaching was one of the main reasons for them to join teaching, but they struggled with classroom management, an essential part of teaching. Participants shared that they attended professional development programs for teaching, which were helpful but not enough. They also got help from their colleagues and administrators but still struggled to deal with student behavior. They were frustrated and tried to cope with the situation. That showed their positive attitude toward teaching. Dugan (2022) found that the alternative certification process could create a pathway for effective classroom teachers. As such, schools and school districts need to find ways to make these teachers effective. Schools can provide appropriate professional development and assign mentors to coach those teachers in classroom management.

This study also found that the conditionally licensed teachers knew little about the licensing process. Neither the school nor the school district provided the necessary resources and guidelines to attain a full license. All participants shared their eagerness to earn a license but had no clear pathway to go forward. Lack of support from their schools and school districts was a significant challenge for them. That situation made them confused and frustrated. The school and school districts should provide them with clear guidelines and mentoring so that these teachers can earn their licenses easily. These teachers are good contributors to the schools, so the school must not ignore the necessity of support for the certification process. Districts can arrange sessions to provide necessary guidelines. The university can also organize information-sharing sessions for their teacher candidates. This type of session will motivate the teachers and help solidify the university and school district partnership. Ultimately, the K-12 students will get licensed teachers in their classrooms.

Teachers' mental health matters for their service to the students and schools. This study found that all the participants were exhausted due to their work-life-study balance. They struggled to maintain their lives, duties, and responsibilities. The schools and school districts need to figure out viable ways to support these teachers so that they do not leave the profession and create an alternative problem for the schools and students (Bowling & Ball, 2018). The participants of this study asked for extra planning periods to plan at school instead of home. Schools can consider their expectations and provide extra time for them. The participants also asked their professors to empathize with them while studying for certification. Professors also can provide some extended time for assignment submission. The professors can help these teachers by giving timely feedback and responding to emails in a timely manner. Overall, the schools, school districts, and the university should take care of the conditionally licensed teachers to help meet the demand of the national teacher shortage.

## **6. Recommendations**

The findings of this study urge the school districts, school administration, and the university



to adopt some policies and practices to attract more career changes in teaching through the alternative routes of certification and develop them as licensed teachers to meet the needs of teacher shortage. Also, school administration and district office need to take some measures to care for those teachers' well-being so that they remain in their teaching profession.

First, the school administration may consider assigning fewer classes in the first year to the conditionally licensed teachers and place them as mentees under seasoned teachers to observe and practice classroom management in those seasoned teachers' classrooms. Second, the school administration may organize monthly simulation sessions for the conditionally licensed teachers to practice and analyze classroom management strategies. School administration may organize information sessions for the conditionally licensed teachers at the beginning of the school year to provide them with guidelines regarding the licensing process. Licensing experts from the school districts and local higher education institutions may be invited to those sessions. Finally, the school administration may organize one-on-one check-in sessions at the end of the school year for the conditionally licensed teachers to learn about the status of their licensing process to guide and motivate them to earn their full license in teaching.

School districts may support the conditionally licensed teachers by organizing several information sharing and check-in sessions with conditionally licensed teachers about their licensing process. School districts may consider some coaching and financial support for the licensing exams for the conditionally licensed teachers. School districts may recruit certification mentors to guide the conditionally licensed teachers throughout the year for their classroom management issues. The university where the conditionally licensed teachers go to study for their certification may organize coaching sessions for the licensing exam.

Recruiting teaching through Alternative certification programs can be an effective system for schools and school districts to recruit diverse teachers by connecting the school community to the recruitment process. Diverse teachers currently working may be good advocates for the schools and districts to help the recruitment process in the community.

## **8. Significance**

The findings of this study are beneficial for schools to understand the necessity and contribution of conditionally licensed teachers to provide them with the necessary support to retain their jobs. These findings can help school districts reshape their policies and practices around the licensing process to make it easier for conditionally licensed teachers. University faculty members who teach conditionally licensed teachers will benefit also from these findings by learning how to better support these teachers.

## **9. Limitations**

This study had some limitations. First, the data is from one source: conditionally licensed teachers. The inclusion of data from school administrators and district officials could make the findings stronger. Second, observations of their teaching could have provided real data about what aspects of classroom management they struggled with. Last, the findings may not be generalized as there were only 11 participants.

## **10. Scope For Future Studies**

This study has created scope for some research on conditionally licensed teachers. First, a mixed-method study may be beneficial to find ways to recruit diverse teachers and staff to match the student body. Second, a case study with a few conditionally licensed teachers may be beneficial to specify their classroom management struggles. Third, another case study can discover the school's mentoring process (coaching, observation, and feedback) with the conditionally licensed teachers and their growth as classroom teachers. Third, a qualitative study with about 20-30 conditionally licensed teachers may be beneficial to discover their struggle with the licensing process and determine the necessary support they need to be fully licensed teachers. Finally, a qualitative phenomenological study may be conducted with the school administrators, district officials, and university faculty to develop a solid partnership to recruit and retain teachers for the K-12 classroom.

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No additional data are available.

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