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Life Experiences of Head Start Teachers in a Midwestern Region Pursuing Higher Education

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

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by

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MA, Webster University, 1985

BS, North Carolina Central University, 1978

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

The 2007 Head Start Reauthorization Act mandated that all Head Start teachers have at least an associate degree and 50% of teachers within each Head Start program should have a baccalaureate degree in early childhood education. The problem addressed in this study was that Head Start teachers from a Midwestern region encountered barriers as they pursued higher education to meet mandated requirements to continue employment. The purpose of this study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. Tinto's academic and social integration model and Cookson's interdisciplinary sequential specificity time allocation comprised the conceptual framework for this study. Research questions focused on life experiences, barriers, coping strategies, and support Head Start teachers need as nontraditional higher education students. A basic qualitative research design was used, and data were collected through interviews with nine Head Start teachers pursuing higher education. Data were analyzed in an iterative coding process and synthesized into five themes. Findings indicate that Head Start teachers use their life experiences, various types of support from family and colleagues, and various coping strategies to overcome the financial and life barriers they face while pursuing a higher education degree. The resulting project consisted of a white paper with recommendations for Head Start leaders focusing on the potential development of specific programs to support Head Start teachers in successfully pursuing a higher education degree. This project contributes to positive social change by enhancing awareness about the supports needed by Head Start teachers to successfully overcome life barriers and build effective coping strategies while pursuing higher education.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my husband, Ken, my children, and my grandkids who were avid supporters during the dissertation process. My gratitude and appreciation are extended to family members and friends who provided ongoing words of encouragement throughout my journey. Equally important, I would like to dedicate this study to the supportive staff at Head Start and the administrative staff. I also dedicate this study to a devoted Head Start teacher: Ms. Patricia Miller started her degree in higher education and departed from this earth in May 2013. She will be remembered as a committed and dedicated employee who loved the children and families of Head Start. She aspired to be a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

This qualitative project study focused on Head Start teachers as nontraditional students pursuing higher education. As a result of the Head Start Reauthorization Act (HSRA, 2007), Head Start lead teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree. Each Head Start classroom has two teachers: a lead and an assistant. The assistant teachers are required to have an associate degree, while lead teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree. Head Start has increased the minimum educational requirement for lead teachers and directors of the early childcare program (Office of Head Start [OHS], 2010; Office of the Administration for Families and Children, 2015a). HSRA required Head Start teachers to complete higher education requirements by September 2013 (Bassok et al., 2016).

During the early years of Head Start, the programs were faced with challenges related to retaining and hiring teachers with early childhood experience. Many Head Start teachers were parents or other community workers who had a passion for working with young children (Kaplan & Mead, 2017; Walter & Lippard, 2017). Even at the inception of Head Start in 1965, no mandate required the completion of higher education degrees for Head Start teachers. From the early 1980s to 2007, Head Start teachers were required to have only an associate degree or the child development associate (CDA) credential in childcare (Administration for Children and Families, 2015b; Council for Professional Recognition, 2015; Smith, 2016). Head Start teachers are expected to have the necessary

skill set for teaching children, especially young children who require highly focused teaching to facilitate effective learning.

Discussions continue among childcare professionals related to Head Start children not being kindergarten ready. In fact, the Head Start Impact Study indicated, "Head Start children lag behind national norms in all aspects of school readiness" (Muhlhausen & York, 2017). Moreover, several researchers have agreed that education and childcare are necessary pillars for the health and welfare development of young children and have emphasized the need for educational improvement of teachers and other adults who guide programs for these children (Bassok et al., 2016; Child Care Aware of America, 2015). HSRA holds educators of young children accountable and calls upon all Head Start leaders to prepare themselves for improved instruction by completing a college degree (Goddu, 2012; Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, 2007). For Head Start programs to receive federal funding, lead teachers must have a bachelor's degree. Therefore, the completion of higher education degrees by Head Start teachers positively impacts both federal funding and improved instruction for preschool children.

In this section, I define the parameters and the rationale for the problem analyzed in this qualitative project study. I also discuss the details of life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies used by nontraditional students and the identified support needed specifically for Head Start teachers pursuing higher education. The research questions guiding this qualitative project study and the conceptual framework are also identified. The literature review conducted for this qualitative project includes an examination of theories, conceptual models, and issues that have a bearing on or a relationship to the life

experiences, barriers, coping strategies, and support related to nontraditional students pursuing higher education.

The Local Problem

In 2016, throughout the nation, 73% of Head Start teachers held a college degree in early childhood education compared to only 44% in 2007 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). HSRA required Head Start teachers to complete higher education requirements by September 2013 (Bassok et al., 2016; De-Souza, 2014); however, many Head Start teachers received extensions to comply with this mandate due to various barriers they were experiencing.

The local context for this qualitative project study was a Head Start organization (HSO) located in a Midwestern state in the United States. At the local HSO site, approximately 60 teachers provide services for Head Start students and families. Of the 60 teachers, 10 were enrolled in higher education classes to complete their baccalaureate degrees. There is a gap in practice between the degree requirements and degree attainment as identified by Head Start teachers, Head Start administrators, and Early Childhood Education college instructors. The problem addressed in this study was that Head Start teachers from a Midwestern region encountered barriers as they pursued higher education to meet mandated requirements to continue employment. Research in the field of education, along with the requirement of a higher degree in education for Head Start teachers, has led to many changes in the structure of teaching (Head Start education coordinator, personal communication, December 5, 2017). Conducting research on adult learners in higher education exploring perceived life experiences,

barriers, and coping strategies of nontraditional students will provide data to guide support for future nontraditional students pursuing higher education both at the local HSO and nationwide.

Head Start Teachers

Head Start teachers are part of the early childhood education teacher workforce and differ from K–12 teachers in several characteristics, including earning potential, demographics, and professional training. Head Start teachers are typically paid less than public school teachers. Quite often Head Start teachers have the same academic degrees as public school teachers, but because of their low wages, they often face economic uncertainty (Head Start teachers, personal communication, December 12, 2017; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017). The federal reauthorization of the Head Start program in 2007 stipulated that the number of lead teachers with bachelor's degrees in any program must be at least 50% of the lead teaching staff. Kaplan and Mead (2017) highlighted how many programs made positive strides, while others experienced an increase in Head Start staff turnover. Many Head Start teachers can earn more money in other childcare programs, such as public kindergarten, with the same degree.

Barriers impede the Head Start process. Head Start teachers encounter barriers as they pursue higher education to meet the mandated requirements of completing a college degree to continue employment with Head Start (Head Start teacher, personal communication, December 2017). Head Start teachers pursuing higher education are often nontraditional students aged 25 years or older, enrolled in college after years of delay (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017;

Lang & Weinstein, 2013). Nontraditional students usually attend college either on a part-time or a full-time basis, while working as a part-time or full-time employee. Nontraditional students also may be financially independent, have dependent children and a spouse, or may be single parents (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017; Remnick & Bergman, 2021; Rosser et al., 2014; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013).

Several research studies indicated that increasing numbers of adults are making the decision to enroll in higher education (Cotton et al., 2017; Davidson, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2014; Miller, 2013). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that 74% of students enrolled at the undergraduate level could be classified as nontraditional. Nontraditional adult students represent an increasing population in higher education. Almost 50% of enrolled undergraduate students are adults at least 25 (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

A qualitative project study conducted at New York colleges and universities found that over 70% of students were nontraditional enrollees Davidson (2016). This trend in the enrollment of nontraditional students in higher education is recognized as a common occurrence in states across the nation (Davidson, 2016; Lin, 2016). For example, in 2009, President Barack Obama made a call to the nation to improve college attendance among the adult population. He stressed the need for the nation to make a concerted effort to produce the highest number of college graduates internationally (Miller, 2013). At the time of the president's call for higher education in all sectors, only 39% of the population had a degree from a college or university. Therefore, to meet the

president's goal, an additional 60% of the population needed to enroll in higher education and complete a selected course of study for a college degree (Miller, 2013).

Nontraditional students enroll in higher education for various reasons and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Kurantowicz and Nizinska (2013) noted in research conducted in Poland that nontraditional students' participation in academic education raises their prestige and status in their communities and increases their motivation to study. Adults are enrolling in colleges and universities in increasingly high numbers to train for new positions and to refresh their skills in varied career fields (Lin, 2016; Rosser Mims et al., 2014). Changes in educational attainment have been linked to issues family income level, career choice, health and wellness level, religious beliefs, and social values (Gibbons & Hughes, 2018; Griffith, 2011; Harding, 2019; Jones & Berger, 2018; Lin, 2016; Merriam, 2009). Nontraditional students, in general, return to school to pursue education to reach educational attainment (Busher & Nalita, 2019; Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013; Lin, 2016; Miller, 2013; Rosser Mims et al., 2014).

However, many researchers have agreed that nontraditional students face a litany of barriers different from that of the traditional student (Balcarczyk et al., 2015; Busher & Nalita, 2019; Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017; Kaplan & Mead, 2017; Knight et al., 2012; Muller & Beiten, 2013; Rabourn, et al., 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The educational barriers that exist for nontraditional students are institutional, situational, and dispositional (Bassok et al., 2016; Knight et al., 2012; Quiggins et al., 2016). Some other barriers that exist for nontraditional students are life context barriers (Knight et al., 2012). These barriers are academic preparedness, lack of motivation, finances, income, time, and

cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Carfagna et al., 2014; Knight et al., 2012; Rabourn et al., 2018). Nontraditional students continue to face obstacles that prevent successful completion of higher education because of the absence of skillsets and discussed barriers.

On the other hand, several researchers highlighted key factors for nontraditional students to experience success in higher education (Knight et al., 2012; Pearson, 2019; Tinto, 2017; Trolian et al., 2016; Zepke, 2015). Moreover, these researchers concurred on factors important to the success of nontraditional students while they pursue higher education (Knight et al., 2012; Tinto & Engstrom, 2008; Tinto, 2017). Institutional flexibility, faculty accessibility, academic support, financial need, student goals, persistence as motivation, and social support are factors that empower nontraditional students in completing their educational goals (Bell, 2020; Crounse et al., 2018; Davidson et al., 2020; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Tinto, 2017; Trolian et al., 2016; Zepke, 2015). Furthermore, researchers supported the value of nontraditional students as being one in which nontraditional students are viewed as a positive role model to family members and community and as individuals who ultimately improve the personal, communal, and financial value of human capital (Knight et al., 2012; Millicent, 2013; Zepke, 2015). Empowering nontraditional students, providing meaningful support and resources while pursuing higher education affects the family, community, and the economy (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Son et al., 2013).

Head Start teachers at the local HSO, as nontraditional students, encounter barriers specific to the demands associated with their academic status and could benefit from targeted organizational support. Women make up the largest percentage of childcare

teachers (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Koch & Farquhar, 2015; Mouslakas, 2018). Nontraditional students targeted in this qualitative project study were female Head Start teachers who have encountered many barriers while in pursuit of higher education.

The demand for continuing education of adult learners is increasing both locally and nationally; therefore, it is important to identify, understand, and address barriers and biases working against adult learners (Knight et al., 2012; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2012; Zerquera et al., 2018). Although the local Head Start program is federally funded, the funds received from the federal government continue to be reduced. The administrative staff continues to seek venues to meet federal guidelines related to staff and overall compliance. During 2013, the local Head Start and the school district implemented an agreement to collaborate using staff and common building space. Unfortunately, there were many challenges related to staff schedules and conflicts related to regulations and requirements (Head Start teacher, personal communication, November 3, 2015).

Evidence of the Problem

Nontraditional students have spent many hours providing service in the workforce (Meuleman et al., 2015). Work experience gives nontraditional students the ability to understand comprehensive issues and make critical decisions that provide a different mindset related to education and change. The mindset of nontraditional students related to education and change results in a continuing increase of nontraditional students pursuing higher education (Meuleman et al., 2015). Barriers prohibiting adult learners

from pursuing higher educational opportunities need to be recognized and understood (Crounse et al., 2018; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Karmelita, 2018; Knight et al., 2012).

Knight et al. (2012) categorized barriers related to adult learning in three areas: institutional, situational, and dispositional. Institutional barriers are factors present in a student's environment, specifically related to the standard practices of universities that may present challenges to the learner (Garrity et al., 2019; Knight et al., 2012; Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013; Schomer & Gonzalez-Monteagudo, 2013). Situational barriers are also external factors connected to the life and personal experiences of a student. Situational barriers include prior knowledge, the learning environment, cultural consideration, and an individual student's personal environment (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Knight et al., 2012; Rossman & Teniell, 2019). Dispositional barriers are different from institutional and situational barriers, as their source is often the students themselves. For example, dispositional barriers relate to personal perceptions students create about their own skills and abilities to pursue higher education as well as their own attitudes relative to their ability to learn (Knight et al., 2012; Lin, 2016: Mouslakas, 2018).

Kurantowicz and Nizinska (2013) noted in research conducted in Poland that nontraditional students' participation in academic education raises their prestige and status in their communities and increases their motivation to study. Some other barriers that exist for nontraditional students are life context barriers (Knight et al., 2012). These barriers are academic preparedness, lack of motivation, finances, income, time, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Carfagna et al., 2014; Knight et al., 2012; Lin, 2016).

Nontraditional students continue to face obstacles that prevent successful completion of higher education because of the absence of skills and the discussed barriers.

Increasing numbers of adults are making the decision to enroll in higher education (Davidson, 2016; Kimmel et al., 2014; Miller, 2013; Rabourn et al., 2018). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reported that 74% of students enrolled at the undergraduate level could be classified as nontraditional. Nontraditional adult students represent an increasing population in higher education. Almost 50% of enrolled undergraduate students are adult at least 25 years old (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Adults are enrolling in colleges and universities in increasingly high numbers to train for new positions and to refresh their skills in various career fields (Dikhtyar et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2021; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Rosser Mims et al., 2014). The engagement of adults in higher education affects various aspects of their lives. Changes in educational attainment are linked to family income level, career choice, health and wellness level, religious beliefs and practices, and social values and beliefs (Dikhtyar et al., 2021; Gibbons & Hughes, 2018; Griffith, 2011; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Merriam, 2009). Nontraditional students, in general, return to school to pursue education to reach educational attainment (Dikhtyar et al., 2021; Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013; Miller, 2013; Rosser Mims et al., 2014).

Nontraditional students enroll in higher education for various reasons that contribute meaningfully to their communities. Nontraditional students face a litany of barriers different from those experienced by traditional students (Balcarczyk et al., 2015;

Karmelita, 2018; Kaplan & Mead, 2017; Knight et al., 2012; Muller & Beiten, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). In addition, women make up the largest percentage of childcare teachers (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Koch & Farquhar, 2015; Lin, 2016). Nontraditional students interviewed in this qualitative project study were women who have encountered many barriers while in pursuit of higher education. Conducting research on adult learners in higher education and exploring perceived life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of nontraditional students could lead to greater support to future nontraditional students pursuing higher education.

Several researchers highlighted factors that are key for nontraditional students to experience success in higher education (Knight et al., 2012; Tinto, 2017; Trolian et al., 2016; Zepke, 2015). Certain factors are important to the success of nontraditional students while they pursue higher education (Knight et al., 2012; Tinto & Engstrom, 2008; Tinto, 2017). Institutional flexibility, faculty accessibility, academic support, financial need, student goals, persistence as motivation, and social support are factors that empower nontraditional students in completing their educational goal (Bell, 2020; Davidson et al., 2020; Horm et al., 2013; Jones & Berger, 2018; Marrero & Milacci, 2018; Tinto, 2017; Trolian, et al., 2016; Zepke, 2015). Nontraditional students are viewed as positive role models to their family members and their community and ultimately improve the personal, communal, and financial value of human capital (Knight et al., 2012; Millicent, 2013; Zepke, 2015). Empowering nontraditional students, providing meaningful support and resources while pursuing higher education, affects family, community, and the economy (Lin, 2016; Son et al., 2013). This evidence supports that

there is a gap in practice between teacher educational requirements in HSRA and the ability of Head Start teachers to meet these requirements.

Rationale

All Head Start teachers are required to complete a higher education degree to continue employment with Head Start. All Head Start classrooms should have a lead teacher and an assistant. The lead teacher should have a bachelor's degree and the assistant should have an associate degree or CDA. The local Head Start staff continues to experience problems recruiting Head Start teachers who hold a bachelor's degree (Head Start director, personal communication, November 12, 2018). A variety of educational barriers impede nontraditional students from attaining a terminal degree (Quiggins et al., 2016). These barriers are institutional, situational, and dispositional as evidenced by a lack of intrinsic motivation by nontraditional students (Head Start teacher, personal communication, May 4, 2016), low compensation for teachers with a bachelor's degree (Hall, 2015), and competition with other jobs that offer higher wages to teachers with these qualifications (Head Start teachers, personal communication, October 2, 2015). The rationale for focusing on the attainment of higher education as the local problem for this qualitative project study was to highlight the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies Head Start teachers face along with the support needed as they pursue higher education (Garrity et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. There is evidence of this problem at both the local level and in the literature.

Definition of Terms

The following terms and definitions used in this qualitative project study relate to the Head Start program as a national focus on the improvement of program and services for children in low-income families:

Academic integration: The extent to which students are doing reasonably well in their classes, perceive their classes to be relevant and of practical value, and are satisfied with their majors (Tinto, 1998, 1999).

Attrition: The proportion of students enrolled to students retained (Brinson, 2015).

Coping strategies: Active tasks designed to resolve stress related to educational and life concerns for nontraditional students. Some examples are mentorship programs, training, and professional development (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

Cultural capital: An individual acquires knowledge skills, and abilities for self-improvement. Cultural capital can improve an individual's productivity in the world of work and increase quality of life in the home and community (Carfagna et al., 2014).

Dispositional barriers: Internal barriers related to a student's self-perceptions and attitudes (Knight et al., 2012).

Educational barriers: Institutional, situational, and dispositional barriers (Knight et al., 2012).

Head Start: A federally funded program that provides services for children from low-income families. Children from birth to age 5 receive training and school readiness skills to advance their development in the areas of cognitive, emotional, and social advancement (Administration for Children and Families, 2014; OHS, 2010).

Head Start mandate: A document that requires all teachers have associate degrees and 50% of teachers within each Head Start program have a baccalaureate degree in early childhood education by September 30, 2013 (HSRA, 2007).

Head Start teachers: Instructors who provide training and related services to children (ages 3–5) who are enrolled in a federally funded program (Administration for Children and Families, 2014).

Institutional barriers: Issues outside the context of an individual that occur within the context of an individual institution (Knight et al., 2012).

Life experiences: An individual's encounters in life including accomplishments, failures, challenges, and influences, which can be transformed into knowledge, skills, and behaviors that influence learning (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; Botha & Coetzee, 2016; Lanford, 2021; Rosser Mims et al., 2014; Yu, 2017).

Motivation: A personal state or condition that generates specific actions and behaviors to guide and direct the individual (Francois, 2014; Garrity et al., 2019; Trolian, 2016).

Motives: Internal forces that drive the intention of the individual to a specific action, which can be internal or external (Garrity et al., 2019; Spagnola & Yogos, 2020; Thunborg et al., 2013).

Nontraditional student: An adult individual whose path into college starts when they are age 24 and older and have a full-time job along with other obligations related to family (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; Lin, 2016).

Office of Head Start (OHS): An office of the Administration for Children and Families (2014).

Situational barriers: Barriers from outside the individual; each individual has a different experience in the context of each situation (Knight et al., 2012).

Social integration: Students' degree of social and psychological comfort with the campus environment and a sense of belonging that provides security to join with others for common causes (Tinto, 1998).

Student engagement: The physical and psychological aspects of the energy and motivation each student offers within the academic endeavor (Astin, 1984).

Validation: Includes teacher–student interactions that helps the learner develop and maintain positive feelings about themselves and their ability to achieve success and maintain a level of accomplishment commensurate with their goals and objectives in their course of work in the college environment. Validation also includes gaining and maintaining recognition, respect, and appreciation (Barnett, 2011; Lanford, 2021).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this qualitative project study was that it provided insights necessary to understand the lived experiences of a group of teachers in the Head Start program who return to college as nontraditional students pursuing a higher degree in education. I explored the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students pursuing higher education, and identified support that Head Start teachers needed for the successful completion of their degree. As a result of HSRA (2007) requiring Head Start teachers with associate degrees to complete

requirements for a bachelor's degree, these teachers were the target group for this qualitative project study. The importance of achieving higher education was noted by a former president of the United States. During 2009, former President Barack Obama issued a call to action among the adult population of the nation, calling attention to the need for higher education (Miller, 2013). The call to action highlighted the need for new skills, a higher level of training, and college affordability (Miller, 2013). The federal government took the charge a step further by focusing on college completion rates and pressure to tie state funding to performance measures linked to graduation rates (Miller, 2013). Educational foundations, postsecondary institutions, and state governments responded to the call to increase degree completion rates, and the success of Head Start teachers, nontraditional students is an element of this goal.

Many professions responded to President Obama's call related to higher education. In fact, 490 members of the Association of Public Land-Grant Universities and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities pledged to boost college completion rates by 3.8 million students by 2025 (Miller, 2013). Government entities at local, state, and federal levels agreed that college completion rate is of great importance for the nation (Miller, 2013). In 2016, 73% of Head Start teachers had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to only 44% in 2007 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). From 2008–2010, federal funding was provided for Head Start teachers to pursue higher education (Head Start staff, personal communication, December 5, 2017). Nontraditional students are a vital factor in increasing national degree completion rates. Therefore, the presidential call related to the need for higher education for the adult

population and the college completion rates noted by Miller (2013) both speak to the significance of this qualitative project study.

Data from the OHS (2014) demonstrated that the growing need for early childcare teachers continues to increase. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2012), there was 20% expected growth for childcare workers and early childcare teachers between 2010 and 2012. The need for care will continue to grow as the number of children under the age of 5 increases.

As the need for care increases, the need for qualified early childhood educators is vital for the success of children. Barnett and Carolan (2013) and Gould et al. (2015) suggested that requiring bachelor's degrees for prekindergarten teachers is likely to maximize the positive effects of early learning programs on young children's school readiness. Therefore, if the Head Start teachers are to assume the role of nontraditional students and complete higher educational requirements, then the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of these teachers, as well as their needed support, must be identified.

The outcome of this qualitative project study has the potential of identifying barriers, coping strategies, and support Head Start teachers need for completion of a higher education degree. Findings from this qualitative project study could be useful for the local Head Start site to identify barriers students encounter while pursuing their degrees. This qualitative project study provides the Head Start administration with knowledge of Head Start teachers' coping strategies and support they need. The findings of this qualitative project study could lead to training and agency support to assist future

Head Start teachers. The results of the qualitative project study may also provide useful information related to life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies that increase the retention efforts of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students in higher education.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. The life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies that nontraditional students encounter as they pursue higher education are far different from those of traditional students (Miller, 2013). Many Head Start teachers have received extensions of the due date for compliance with the mandate to earn a bachelor's degree due to various barriers. To address the problem in this study, I developed four research questions:

RQ1: How do Head Start teachers perceive the way their life experiences have influenced their pursuit of higher education?

RQ2: How do Head Start teachers describe the barriers they encountered when returning to school as an adult learner?

RQ3: How do Head Start teachers describe ways they coped with barriers as they pursed successful completion of higher education degrees?

RQ4: What kind of support do Head Start teachers perceive they need to successfully complete a higher education degree?

Review of the Literature

In this section, I discuss the literature and the problem as it relates to Head Start teachers pursuing higher education. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to

explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. To examine the literature for this qualitative project study, I used research databases containing information related to Head Start teachers and higher education. The search for current literature included 70 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2020. Saturation was reached when the entries among databases became repetitive.

The literature review in support of this research qualitative project was conducted on two major domains: first, defining the nontraditional student and life experiences, barriers, coping strategies of nontraditional students; and second, literature to support services to assist nontraditional students in completing higher education. To locate literature to support the current knowledge base related to this qualitative project study, academic journals and peer-reviewed articles were selected from Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), governmental databases, ProQuest, Sage, Education Research Complete, and other diverse online websites. The following keywords were used in the search for literature: *nontraditional student, perceived life experiences, barriers, experiential, lifelong learning, motivated learners, older workers, adult learners, work challenges, time management, multiple roles, stress management, adaptive coping strategies, intrinsic motivation, internal desires, aspirations, collaborations, community partnerships, validation, persistence*, and *academic integration*.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this qualitative project study included two conceptual models. The first is the interdisciplinary sequential specificity time allocation and lifetime (ISSTAL) model of participation in adult learning (Smith, 1980). The second conceptual model focuses on academic integration and social integration related to higher education (Tinto, 1984, 1996, 1998, 2017). I chose these two models because of their direct alignment with the challenges faced by Head Start teachers pursuing higher education. I analyzed the integration of these two models in the context of the focus of this project.

The first conceptual framework applied to this qualitative project study was Smith's (1980) ISSTAL model of participation in adult learning. This model identifies social–psychological and situational variables that impact an adult's decision to participate in adult education (Boeren et al., 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Yu, 2017). ISSTAL incorporates the factors of an individual's social background, roles, and other aspects of their external environment. The combination of these factors has the potential to encourage or discourage adults as it relates to participating in further education (National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2005).

Smith's model originally was designed to explain adult participation in leisure activities but was later applied to participation in adult education. Cookson (1987) applied Smith's (1980) ISSTAL model to explain why adults choose to participate in further education. The variables identified in the ISSTAL model are placed in a linear order, according to the role they play in the decision-making process (Boeren et al., 2005). The further left that a variable occurs or the sooner that a variable appears, the

smaller the role the variable plays in the decision-making process for participating in adult education (Boeren et al., 2005). The first step of the model reflects a person's social context, and this step leads to sociodemographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The next steps of the model are psychological variables that include the individual's evaluation, intellectual capacity, attitude, and composite knowledge, perceptions, plans, and other personal characteristics. The model concludes with situational variables. The variables that appear later in the model are stronger influences upon the individual's ultimate decision to participate in education (Boeren et al., 2005). Based on the ISSTAL model, an adult's decision to participate in education is considered an individual discretionary behavior. This discretionary behavior depends on the six variables described in the model (Wikelund et al., 1992): (a) external contextual variables; (b) social background and social role variables; (c) personality traits and intellectual capacities; (d) attitudinal dispositions (values, attitudes, expectations, and intentions; (e) retained information (images, beliefs, knowledge, and plan); and (f) situational variables (immediate and definition of the situation).

Cookson (1987) identified the ISSTAL model of participation as applied to adult education participation as the most comprehensive theoretical framework applicable. These six categories of variables jointly and linearly explain the behavioral outcome in adult education participation. Subsequent researchers have examined the magnitude of the impact of these variables and identified various methods for measuring the variables described in this model (Cookson, 1987).

The second conceptual model in this study was Tinto's academic and social integration model (Tinto, 1984, 1998, 1999, 2017). Tinto's model is based on two core principles: academic integration and social integration. Tinto indicated that the two core principles have a reciprocal effect on student persistence (Tinto, 2017). According to Tinto, as noted by French (2017), persistence is among the most important challenges facing university or college administration related to nontraditional students. This model also deals with student motivation and persistence. A student's goals, motivation, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, perception of curriculum impact, the student's persistence related to education.

The first conceptual framework applied to this qualitative project study was Smith's (1980) ISSTAL model of participation in adult learning. This model identifies social-psychological and situational variables that impact an adult's decision to participate in adult education (Boeren et al., 2005). Situational variables include challenges, experiences, and persistence of diverse students regarding race, ethnicity, gender, first-generation status, and socioeconomic status (Tinto, 1987, 1998, 2017). The challenges include understanding the reasons for student persistent decisions, the rates and the kinds of impact practices in which institutions can engage in working toward a solution (French, 2017; Tinto, 1984, 1996, 1998, 2017; Zerquera, et al., 2018).

The two conceptual models noted in this section are in direct alignment with the barriers related to higher education. Many factors, such as illness, lack of childcare, socioeconomic status, and age, are prevalent related to pursuing higher education (Head Start teacher, personal communication, December 12, 2018). These barriers are aligned

with the factors proposed in Cookson's (1987) model. In Cookson's model, the situational variables and external variables were two key components. On the other hand, Tinto's (1998) model highlights that academic integration, social integration, motivation, and persistence are key components. On several occasions Head Start teachers spoke of not having a sense of belonging, confusion about curriculum and expectations, problems with childcare, lack of follow-up related to academic resources, and lack of motivational drive and commitment to complete the required courses related to higher education (Head Start teacher, personal communication, December 5, 2017; Head Start teacher, personal communication, December 12, 2018). Therefore, both models for this qualitative project study's theoretical framework aligned with the factors that Head Start teachers indicated as barriers to higher education.

Review of the Broader Problem

Historical Development of Head Start Teacher Program

The federal Head Start Bureau was created under President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Head Start program was developed as part of the War on Poverty. Head Start has served children from families with low incomes, ages 3 to 5, since 1965 (Morland et al., 2016). Head Start, which is federally funded, represents one of the most comprehensive preschool programs in the United States, with a population of over 900,000 children from low-income families (Office of the Administration for Children and Families, 2015b). Service to Head Start students occurs in nearly 50,000 classrooms across the nation (ACF, 2015b). The mission of Head Start is to "promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children and families" (Early Childhood

Learning and Knowledge Center, 2010, para. 3). Although Head Start began as a childcare antipoverty program, Head Start became a school readiness program that prepares 3–5-year-old children for kindergarten. Several research studies have shown that early childhood educators who engage in higher education and professional preparation increase program quality and have a noteworthy effect on the cognitive and emotional development of children (Garrity et al., 2019; Hoyt, 2016; Jaisso et al., 2021; Zeichner, 2014). Therefore, mandating higher education of Head Start teachers significantly affects the children and provides a benefit to the parents and the community.

Head Start provides access to early and comprehensive services, including health, education, and nutrition. Research indicates that Head Start can have long-term profound positive effects on the lives of families and children. The positive effects include improving social outcomes such as attendees' chances of going to college, avoiding teen pregnancy, and staying out of jail (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017). According to public data and global needs, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of early childhood educators and education programs such as Head Start that support children's healthy development and give them a head start related to learning (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017). Head Start draws roughly a third of its participants from competing preschool programs, many of which receive public funds (Kline & Walters, 2016). The Head Start program generates larger test score gains for children who would not otherwise attend preschool and for children who are less likely to participate in a preschool program (Kline & Walters, 2016; Morland et al., 2016).

During the inception of Head Start in 1965, no mandate required the completion of higher education degrees for Head Start teachers. Many of the teachers were parents and volunteers who had a passion for Head Start but had no degree. From the early 1980s to 2007, Head Start teachers were required to have only an associate degree or the CDA credential in childcare (ACF, 2015b; Council for Professional Recognition, 2015; Smith, 1980). HSRA (2007) stipulated that the number of lead teachers with bachelor's degrees in any given program must be at least 50% of the lead teaching staff (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017). Most programs have made positive strides toward this educational goal; however, these degree requirements have increased the rate of turnover in Head Start programs (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017).

The literature highlights barriers, perceived life experiences, challenges, and coping strategies that nontraditional students encounter in their pursuit of higher education. The role of the nontraditional student as a parent is a part of the discussion. In addition, the role of the nontraditional student as a teacher also warrants discussion for this qualitative project study.

Characteristics of a Nontraditional Student

Researchers have commonly defined nontraditional students as individuals who have any of the following characteristics: (a) is a college student who is more than 22 years old, (b) is at least 25 years old, (c) is attending school on a part-time or full-time basis, (d) is working part-time or full-time while attending school, (e) is independent financially, (f) has dependent children, (g) is a single parent, or (i) might not have finished high school (Cotton et al., 2017; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Shillingford & Karlin,

2013). Not all the characteristics may be applicable to all nontraditional students. The one characteristic that stands out above all others, however, is that nontraditional students have not followed a continuous educational path from high school to college (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; Holmegaard et al., 2017). Nontraditional students are older than average traditional students and bring a different perspective to the educational arena.

The motives of individual learners impact learning. Nontraditional students' motives and commitments to higher education also differ from those of traditional students (Cotton et al., 2017; Gardner et al., 2021; Lanford, 2021; Lin, 2016; Quiggins et al., 2016; Rabourn et al., 2018; Thunborg et al., 2013). Several researchers have highlighted the connection between motives and motivation as extrinsic or intrinsic driving forces for intentional individual actions (Francois, 2014; Pearson, 2019; Quiggins et al., 2016; Thunborg et al., 2013). Motives are interconnected with each other and are dynamic and changeable over time (Lin, 2016; Mouslakas, 2018; Thunborg et al., 2013). Some mature students cite pursuing higher education to change their life course (Francois, 2014; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Rabourn et al., 2018).

Nontraditional students who are committed to higher education also have chosen a learning path according to their life situations. In other words, the nontraditional student is described as different from a traditional student. Nontraditional students are mature, motivated, committed, and they place high demands on themselves. Nontraditional students have invested in both their studies, and themselves, as individuals. Thus, the sacrifices these learners make to pursue further formal education have significant

meaning that could influence the lives of their family and community (Atkins, 2021; Busher & Nalita, 2019; Davidson, 2016; Dikhtyar et al., 2021; Lanford, 2021).

Demographics of Nontraditional Students

The number of nontraditional students entering higher education has increased considerably. Several studies showed that women have responded to the call to higher education in larger numbers than other groups (Gibbons & Hughes, 2018; Schomer & Gonzalez-Monteagudo, 2013; Mouslakas, 2018). The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) study of 2015 also highlights the increase of females enrolled in higher education. During the fall of 2016, nationally, women enrolled in higher education outnumbered men 11.7 million to 8.8 million. Furthermore, among the adult student population 61.3% of them were females (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Lin, 2016; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2017). It was predicted that women undergraduates could outnumber males in mainland European countries and the United Kingdom. This trend continues with women being the largest group enrolled in higher education as nontraditional students (Beiter et al., 2015; Lin, 2016).

Several studies have highlighted the fact that female students face significant challenges within their personal lives (Bonner et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2016; Kalil, 2014; Spagnola & Yogos, 2020; Rosser & Mims, 2014). Often the challenges for the female adult learner are related to work, personal matters, for example, pregnancy, childcare, and family responsibilities (Jones et al., 2016, Lin, 2016; Mahaffey et al., 2015; Moore et al., 2019). Many researchers, on the other hand, indicated that women dropping out of higher education is highly probable because of the wide range of burdens associated with work,

school, and family they assume (Dwyer et al., 2013; Rosser Mims, 2014; Thunborg et al., 2013; Yu, 2017).

Barriers Experienced by Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students encounter barriers that differ from those of traditional students. Many of the barriers can affect recruitment and retention efforts such as low wages, lack of scholarship funding, family issues, lack of requirements for the degree, time issues, and language differences (Jacoby & Lesaux, 2017; Walter & Lippard, 2017; Zerquera, et. al., 2018). The barriers nontraditional students face can be divided into three categories: institutional, situational, and dispositional (Saar et al., 2014).

In the following paragraphs, the three types of barriers are discussed in detail. Examples of each barrier are provided for greater clarity along with an understanding of the impact on nontraditional students pursuing higher education. The definitions and examples of various barriers that nontraditional students encounter while pursuing higher education are discussed.

Institutional Barriers. Institutional barriers are external to the individual and are experienced similarly by most individuals (Knight et al., 2012). An institutional barrier is related to students' need for technical assistance in accessing the institution's technology, barriers pertaining to instruction and educational planning, and technical assistance in resolving issues (Atkins et al., 2020; Davidson, 2016; Gijbels et al., 2014; Knight et al., 2012; Quiggins et al., 2016; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2013; Zerquera et al., 2018). In fact, in Quiggins et al. (2016) study, the nontraditional students identified perceived institutional barriers as the greatest barrier to continuing education. Along the same lines,

increasing numbers of institutions of higher learning found useful to resort to electronic media to inform students of enrollment processes. The procedures, important dates, calendar of events, directions, and options available for students to manage coursework effectively are also discussed. Of course, when the electronic communication systems fail to function properly or the information is not available, a serious barrier occurs (Knight et al., 2012).

Institutional barriers are often referred to as the support conflicts nontraditional students experience during their process of attaining their degrees. Institutions may offer office and class times that are not suitable for adults who work, have families and children, and other responsibilities (Collom et al., 2021; Busher & Nalita, 2019; Knight et al., 2012; Lin, 2016; Muller & Beiten, 2013). Institutional barriers may include cost, weather, the lack of support, and the availability of technology (Bell, 2020; Beiter et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2012). Institutional barriers (school, work, and related barriers) were the most mentioned barrier related to nontraditional students.

The absence of support from the higher education institution for students can determine when and how successfully a student fulfills the requirements necessary to complete a degree (Davidson et al., 2020; Fowle, 2018; Jones & Berger, 2018; Lin, 2016; Remenick & Bergman, 2021). It is also clear that students experience institutional barriers differently depending on their own circumstances (Head Start Teacher, personal communication, March 12, 2012). For example, a student who is a computer expert may view the lack of technical support as less of a problem (Balcarczk et al., 2015). Some other examples of institutional barriers include the cost of education, the weather, the

lack of adequate technical assistance, a lack of guidance from course instructors, insufficient computer literacy, a curriculum advising staff that is not knowledgeable, and the lack of institutional support (Balcarczk et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2012; Schomer & Gonzalez-Monteagudo, 2013). Other examples of institutional barriers are related to students who lack the abilities or skills to access required information, or to procedures for completing financial information such as Federal Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) application to assist in funding their education (Head Start Teacher personal communication, 2016).

Lack of Successful Integration. There are additional barriers nontraditional students face as they pursue higher education. One component leading to a high attrition rate is the lack of successful integration of nontraditional students into the academic environment. Specifically, an additional barrier for nontraditional students is balancing work and school. Researchers have observed a pattern of reduced attachment and commitment to university life because of nontraditional students working long hours (Huss-Keeler et al., 2013; Luedke et al., 2019; Rosário et al., 2014; Trolian et al., 2016). Nontraditional students are more likely to work full-time and attend class part-time (Chen, 2014; Rosário et al., 2014).

Situational Barriers. Situational barriers are external to the individual and are experienced differently by individuals (Knight et al., 2012). Situational barriers refer to conflicts nontraditional students face with family, finances, employment, and other events that present themselves.

Salaries. Head Start is a program that targets students from low-income families. Historically, childcare teachers were paid lower salaries than school districts childcare staff. Compensation and benefit levels of teachers in Head Start and community-based early childhood programs continue to lag those in the public schools for teachers with comparable levels of education (Gould et al., 2015). According to the National Head Start Association (2015), Head Start grantees are not able to pay teachers a competitive salary because of reduced funding.

Nontraditional students, who are also parents, often feel a sense of guilt for not being available for their children and family during class and study times (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Finances can be a problem because the discretionary money is used to pay for education and often affects the lifestyle of others in the home (Lin, 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Colvin (2013) described "some of these barriers as situational such as those relating to scheduling problems, home responsibilities, childcare, finances and health" (p. 22). Situational barriers may include family life, financial cost, and limited employer support (Collom et al., 2021; Lin, 2016; Saar et al., 2014). A final barrier for nontraditional students is the lack of financial resources. Many Head Start teachers experience difficulties in funding courses required to complete the higher education degree (Roberts et al., 2016).

Responsibilities. Women over 25 years of age continue to be the leading group of nontraditional students enrolled in higher education (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Kalil, 2014; Mouslakas, 2018). Several studies highlighted those nontraditional female students face significant challenges within their personal lives (Bonner et al., 2015; Jones et al.,

2016; Kalil, 2014; Lin, 2016). Quite often the challenges for the female adult learner are related to work or personal matters. These include pregnancy, childcare, and family responsibilities (Collom et al., 2021; Luedke et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2016; Mahaffey et al., 2015) Thunborg et al., (2013) suggested there is a high probability of women dropping out of higher education because of the burdens associated with work, school, and family. The barriers and challenges of the nontraditional pursuing higher education affect life experience and the learning process (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; Karmelita, 2018; Lin, 2016).

As noted, the nontraditional student is faced with a significant number of barriers. Nontraditional students delay completing a college degree because many of them have too many other personal obligations, roles, and responsibilities to assume, while their traditional counterparts are able to enter college immediately following high school (Kasworm, 2012; Lin, 2016). This is an example of how responsibilities can create barriers related to graduation for nontraditional students. As a result of these anticipated barriers and their direct influence, these students are at risk of dropping out or delaying graduation if customized support needed is not provided (Meuleman et al., 2015). In a mixed methods study conducted by Overton Stanard (2013), employees' participation in workplace training was examined using the ISSTAL model as a theoretical framework for understanding the factors leading to participation. Overton Stanard (2013) found that availability of time was a deterrent for participation thus reinforcing conclusions in prior literature that adult learners often have responsibilities that do not allow the time necessary to participate in adult education.

Low-Income Households

The researchers focusing on this issue found that students of low-income households are enrolling in higher education. Low-income students and students of color are the fastest growing population in higher education (Holmegaard et al., 2017). These students are generally underserved, underrepresented, and first-generation students (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Pennington, 2013; Tinto & Engstrom, 2008). Gijbels et al. (2014) claimed that, historically, higher education has fueled economic and social mobility in America. Nonetheless, degree attainment is accessible differently across racial and economic lines (Moriano et al., 2013; Pennington, 2013; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013).

Disparities are prevalent throughout society related to income. This disparity is present in the field of higher education. There is a wide disparity between higher income households and low-income completing degrees (Gibbons & Hughes, 2018; Mertens, 2014). DeNavas-Walt and Proctor, (2015) and Pennington (2013) documented the attainment gaps comparing low-income households to those of higher-income households. According to Pennington, "Only 9% of students from low-income households have earned postsecondary credentials by the time they are 26, compared with more than 50% of students from higher-income households" (p. 1). In fact, socioeconomic disparities affect study skills and the ability to navigate one's education (Gibbons & Hughes, 2018; Gijbels et al., 2014; Pennington, 2013). Low-income and first-generation college students seeking to pursue higher education face many obstacles that their wealthier counterparts do not face (Garrity et al., 2019; Gibbons & Hughes,

2018). In summary, there may be a connection between culture and socioeconomic status of the employees (Gijbels et al., 2014). The Head Start program is composed of a culturally diverse group, teachers, and students alike. It is the goal of this study to explore perceived life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students pursuing higher education, and to identify support that Head Start teachers need for the successful completion of their degrees.

Dispositional Barriers. Dispositional barriers are internal and related to the student's self-perceptions and attitudes (Colvin, 2013; Knight et al., 2012; Lin, 2016; Spagnola & Yogos, 2020). Dispositional barriers refer to intrapersonal attributes. Dispositional barriers relate to how the student perceives the value of the education program, the image of the teacher and the means of learning (Garrity et al., 2019; Knight et al., 2012). Some examples of dispositional barriers involve self-image, the perceived credibility of the instructor, confidence level, lack of motivation, maturity level of the student, and perceived program value (Knight et al., 2012).

An adult nontraditional learner can be nervous, apprehensive, and intimidated about the education process; thus, increasing the dispositional barrier to learning (Raghavan et al., 2015; Spagnola & Yogos, 2020). The nontraditional student may worry about the expectations and being able to compete with traditional students in the classroom (Kibelloh & Bao, 2014). Some examples of dispositional barriers are the student's self-perception, perceived program value, or evaluation of the instructor.

Confidence Level. Other researchers have identified distinct barriers for nontraditional students such as confidence level, high cost of education, lack of

institutional support and guidance, poor study skills, accessibility due to age, cultural value of education, and insufficient computer literacy (Atkins et al., 2021; Garrity et al., 2019; Knight et al., 2012; Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013). Tan & Mohd Rasdi (2017) used the ISSTAL model as a theoretical framework to examine employees' decisions to participate in e-training. The researchers included self-efficacy as a predictor of participation, in accordance with the dispositional variables described by the ISSTAL model. They found that self-efficacy was a dominant factor in employees' decisions to participate in e-training thus supporting prior literature that identifies dispositional variables such as confidence level as a factor in adult learning participation.

Perceived Importance of Work and Life Experiences. As nontraditional students, this unique population brings to the classroom a wide range of knowledge and skills because of their working background. It is important to incorporate their life and work experiences into the learning process. This approach of incorporating work and life experiences enables the student to engage (Courtner, 2014; Lin, 2016; Luedke et al., 2019; Rabourn, et al., 2018). If there is the absence of this approach, there will be the lack of engagement for nontraditional students (Courtner, 2014; Rabourn et al., 2018). The value of work experiences and life experiences will be discussed thoroughly in this qualitative project study during data analysis.

Nontraditional students handle dual roles such as student and worker or as student and parent. As a result of the constraints placed on their busy lives, they are faced with making decisions about the directions they will take such as choosing distance learning or accelerated learning formats (Brinson, 2015; Conradie, 2014). However, distance

learning or accelerated formats often do not incorporate learning pathways to support the unique learning style of nontraditional students.

The low wages, lack of financial assistance, and the lack of scholarship funding for Head Start teachers (nontraditional students) present a problem related to meeting higher education requirements. However, one researcher explained that effective early childhood educational programs are important in retaining childcare workers for long periods of time (Huss-Keeler et al., 2013). These programs tend to provide higher wages, better benefits, and provided college or professional development which led to higher educational levels of staff (Huss-Keeler et al., 2013). It is very important that successful integration, balancing multiple roles and financial assistance, is available to childcare teachers and education professionals so nontraditional students can complete their degree program in a timely manner.

Perceived Life Experiences of Nontraditional Students

The perceived life experiences of nontraditional students are valuable to the learner as they pursue higher education. The nontraditional student has typically lived longer than the traditional student and has a greater reservoir of lived experiences that influence learning for themselves and others (Blau & Thomas-Maddox, 2014; Gardner et al., 2021). Nontraditional students are often described as mature students (Francois, 2014). Mature students tend to be more diverse than younger ones regarding their expectations of the college or university and in their motivations for attending academic life (Luedke et al., 2019; Trolian, 2016; Wardley et al., 2013).

Nontraditional students typically earn higher grades than traditional students (Brandle & Lengfeld, 2017). These students desire high grades but focus more on what can be done with the knowledge acquired (Brandle & Lengfeld, 2017; Wardley et al., 2013). Nontraditional students, unlike traditional students, have responsibilities related to their work and personal lives that may lead to role conflict and demand overloaded when merged with school (Lin, 2016; Wardley et al., 2013). According to Campbell-Meier & Hussey (2016), colleges are comprised of an increasing number of student workers. In addition, several variables influence nontraditional students' decision to participate in work-related courses such as demographics (age, gender), socioeconomic variables, education level, household income, price, or employment status (Lee & Schneider, 2016; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

The mature age learners generally demonstrate diversity in their learning approaches, preferences, coping strategies, and in their prior schooling histories. The different experiences and characteristics of adult learners allow them to have a different strategy and perception about things in life (Lin, 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). The perceived life experiences of the nontraditional student differ based on views and demographics. For example, disenfranchised groups of people, especially the poor, are aware of the social and political contradictions in this world that characterizes who they are, and attitudes related to education (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Lawson, 2014).

Fregeau and Leier's (2016) study on Latina teachers found that critical consciousness and resiliency are end results of higher education. Resiliency and critical consciousness are both by products of life experiences, motivation, and enthusiasm

related to completing higher education (Cotton et al., 2017; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). Teachers who have earned a bachelor's degrees and have additional specialized training in early childhood education were more effective than those without these qualifications (Oyekanmi & Obi, 2017; Ng'eno & Chesimet, 2016). The life experiences and the personal development that teachers gained from pursuing higher education allow Head Start teachers with degrees to influence others by sharing personal knowledge and experiences.

Nontraditional Students as Parents and Teachers

It is important that nontraditional students understand how higher education influences not only their lives, but their families too. Researchers indicated that mothers who have a college education spent approximately 4.5% more hours each week interacting directly with their children than do mothers with a high school diploma (e.g., Kalil, 2014; Lin, 2016). This difference in time investment with their children is an important element because time with children has direct and casual effects on children's cognitive test scores (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2015). Parental time is not the only characteristic that distinguishes nontraditional students as parents. Head Start teachers who are nontraditional students may also be parents themselves; therefore, considering the role of these Head Start teachers as parents and nontraditional students is also important.

According to Stroup-Rentier et al., (2015), many of the Head Start parents were groomed to become Head Start teachers. Therefore, as both parents and nontraditional students, Head Start teachers must understand that the value they bring to the classroom

aids others in the learning process (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Sakai et al., 2014). It has also been highlighted by researchers that the cultures, beliefs, and life experiences that nontraditional students bring to the educational arena are a source of strength in the classroom environment (Chen, 2014; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Sakai et al., 2014). More importantly, nontraditional students should understand that their investment in higher education yields a greater investment for the children they teach. Overall, higher education bridges the parenting divide and will improve the life chances of economically disadvantaged children.

Coping Strategies Experienced by Nontraditional Students

Coping strategies refer to activities that address stress associated with nontraditional students' educational and life concerns (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Lin, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Researchers defined nontraditional students as those that have task-oriented skills and diverse coping strategies (Rabourn et al., 2018; Johnson & Kestler, 2013). Scholars suggested that nontraditional students have superior or more adaptive goals and coping skills than traditional students (Cotton et al., 2017; Johnson & Kestler, 2013). Nontraditional students are usually more mature and have gained more experiences as compared to traditional students, their coping strategies have been more effective as they have learned these coping strategies from experience (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Jaisso et al., 2021; Mouslakas, 2018; Rosser Mims et al., 2014). Colleges and universities utilize various delivery systems and learning modalities as ways to help nontraditional students cope with the challenges related to pursuing success in academics and completing coursework.

For years, evening classes were a preferred way for nontraditional students to complete their coursework (Rabourn et al, 2018; Tilley, 2014). Various universities embraced the flexibilities of place and time and have changed curriculum to meet the adult learners' needs (Rabourn et al., 2018; Tilley, 2014). The choice of enrolling in an evening class is a coping strategy for nontraditional students (Rabourn et al., 2018; Tilley, 2014). Several researchers indicated that higher education institutions should strive to enhance adult learners' accessibility, expand their offerings, experiment with new modes of teaching and learning, embrace the uniqueness of each individual learner; and welcome those students they do not ordinarily attract (Moriano et al., 2014; Muller & Beiten, 2013; Sogunro, 2014; Rabourn et al., 2018).

Table 1 summarized the coping strategies discussed in this subsection. The topics in Table 1 served as a potential source to develop data collection tools and to structure the data analysis process.

Table 1

Coping Strategies for Nontraditional Students Pursuing Higher Education

	Definitions	Examples	Sources
The flexibility of place and time	Institutional systems and procedures could be quickly modified to accommodate student needs. The topics of professional development will be based on the themes identified during data collection and data analysis.	Allowing a student to complete an exam, at a later date, as a result of a family emergency	Howley et al., 2013; Muller & Beiten, 2013
Mastery of goals	Focus on learning; mastering the task according to set standards	Establish time/dates to complete the task	Parker-Young, 2017
Engaging a tutor	Education assistance by a professional who will assist with understanding assignments and provide a transition to higher education	Routine meetings with a tutor to assist in understanding/completing assignments.	Colver & Fry, 2016; Lambrinidis, 2014; Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014
Allocating more study time	Reviewing one's schedule to find opportunities to dedicate to study	Daily when all family members are asleep or engaged in an activity	Muller & Beiten, 2013
Mentorship programs	Trained professionals assist individuals academically while also impacting the community	Mentorship program whereby the local college provides mentors to assist Head Start teachers pursuing higher	Jacoby et al., 2017; Chen, 2014
Training, professional development	Training provided that focuses on improving the knowledge skills and abilities of the learner.	Training on study skills and test taking.	Patton et al., 2015; McKinney et al., 2015

Support Services for Nontraditional Students

Scholars have documented several types of support that assisted nontraditional students in successfully completing higher education (Atkins et al., 2021; Burg et al., 2015; Chen, 2014; McKinney et al., 2015; Muller & Beiten, 2013; Van Doorn & Van Doorn, 2014). Burg et al. (2015), and Muller and Beiten (2013) claimed that committed faculty mentors, college advisors, supervisors, and work colleagues who understand the community and cultural context of lifelong learners in reaching their education goals, are

essential in helping working adults continue their education. Muller and Beiten further highlighted the importance of instructors knowing the learning strategies of lifelong learners in order to adapt curricula and instructional strategies to meet the needs of this group. Aside from mentoring, individualized tutoring was another method to help nontraditional students in ensuring success in completing higher education (Atkins et al., 2021; Holmegaard et al., 2017; Muller & Beiten, 2013).

Tutoring is a resource offered by many institutions of higher education. Individualized tutoring has become a standard offering in many programs institutions of higher education created to help students persist toward graduation (Busher & Nalita, 2019; Colver & Fry, 2016; McKinney et al., 2015; Patton et al., 2015). Research showed tutoring being especially beneficial for first generation college students. Colver and Fry's (2016) study provided evidence that students who receive peer tutoring exhibit higher scores on information pertaining to knowledge and scored significantly higher on items related to synthesis. Tutoring affects the students' understanding of the course material, improved work on assignments, and increased confidence (Atkins et al., 2021; Colver & Fry, 2016). Colver and Fry's study also indicated the academic benefit of tutoring and academic advantage those receiving peer tutoring had compared to those who do not receive tutoring. In summary, individualized tutoring impacts the student's understanding, confidence, and overall success related to learning. Support from family, peers and an informed and committed faculty is another method to help nontraditional students in ensuring success in completing higher education.

Faculty support is one of the foremost agents related to student success in higher education. There is considerable research that indicates the benefits to students, academically and socially, related to self-confidence, satisfaction, and retention (e.g., Cruise & Wade, 2016). Much like Head Start teachers, teachers today face challenges directly related to academics; therefore, student-faculty interactions could have a significant effect on students' persistence (Dwyer, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2016). It is important that faculty members are knowledgeable of campus resources to help students that face life stressors. This shared knowledge may support students to remain successful in their studies despite life stressors. Providing financial resources is another method to help nontraditional students in ensuring success in completing higher education.

Early in the program, on average a Head Start teacher had to spend more than one-third of their salary available to attain a 4-year degree (McCoy et al., 2015). DeNavas-Walt and Proctor (2015) discussed the benefits of borrowing to finance higher education. Loans helped many students by reducing overall financial stress, and loans also make provision for time to study and maintain social involvement in extracurricular interests in campus life (Gould et al., 2015). Several students in one study explained that loans made it possible for them to switch from full- time work to part-time work to focus more on their studies (McKinney et al., 2015). The tuition cost of a bachelor's degree continues to be a concern and challenge for nontraditional students. It was my goal to develop a professional development training program that will assist future nontraditional students pursuing higher education.

Implications

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. Therefore, the findings from this qualitative project study could serve as a guide for administrators from institutions of higher learning, school district administrators, the Health Care Financing Administration, the entity that regulates Head Starts. It can also help Head Start programs in understanding and providing needed support to nontraditional students as they pursue higher education degrees. The data collection and analysis process will help identify supports and develop strategies to assist the Head Start teachers.

One of the possible outcomes of this qualitative project study could be a detailed policy recommendation report. The policy recommendation report would include a background to the existing problem, a summary, and an analysis of the findings. Evidence to support recommendations relating to the policy report will be presented from both the results of this project study and from the review of literature that will be part of the project study that will describe this potential policy recommendation. All information will be shared with Head Start administration, school district administration, and Head Start teachers. The policy recommendation will also include an action plan that will potentially support Head Start teachers' life experiences. Potential strategies will be developed to ensure the success of Head Start teachers pursuing higher education.

A second potential project might be a three-day professional development training program. The professional development training would focus on the purpose, goals, and

learning outcomes for target audience, the HS teachers. An evaluation plan would be provided as part of this professional development training program. Patton et al., (2015) indicated that the value of professional development is that training can be sustained over time and aligned with practices. This professional development training program would be a guide for Head Start teachers pursuing higher education through program completion and increase the completion rate for nontraditional students at the institution of higher learning.

Summary

The HSRA (2007) was the moving force that determined Head Start teachers to pursue higher education as nontraditional students. There was a gap in practice between teacher educational requirements stated in the HSRA (2007) and the ability of Head Start teachers to meet these requirements as nontraditional students pursuing higher education. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies, and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. The research questions guided this qualitative project study by addressing the life experiences, barriers, coping skills, and support needed to be successful in higher education. The two theoretical models for this qualitative project study included Interdisciplinary Sequential Specificity Time Allocation and Lifetime (ISSTAL) model of participation in adult learning (Smith, 1980) and Tinto's model on academic integration and social integration related to higher education (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2007). The two models were in direct alignment with barriers related to higher education and factors Head Start teachers indicated as barriers to higher education.

The findings from this qualitative project study could serve as a guide in understanding nontraditional students and providing needed support as they pursue higher education degrees. These findings may be most applicable for administration from higher education institutions, school districts, the Health Care Financing Administration, the entity that regulates Head Start, and Head Start programs. The next section includes a discussion of the qualitative research design and the approach. The selection of participants, the procedure for gaining access to participants, methods of establishing a participant-researcher relationship, methods for protection of participant rights, confidentiality, and privacy, data collection instruments, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations will be discussed. This section also focuses on the accuracy and credibility of the findings, discrepant cases, data analysis results, and discussion of the findings.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

In this section, the discussion focuses on the methodology and research design for the study. The purpose of this study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. This section includes discussions of research design, population, sample and sampling procedures, data collection procedures, data analysis, participant protection, and trustworthiness.

Qualitative research is a social science approach used to address a research problem with an emphasis on the collection of data that uses inductive thinking, places importance on understanding the viewpoint of the subject, and occurs in natural settings (Taylor et al., 2016). A basic qualitative research design was selected for this project study. Based on the purpose and research questions, a qualitative methodology was the most appropriate for this project study. The phenomenon explored included the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers who pursued higher education as nontraditional students. The qualitative approach was the best method in exploring the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers and identifying meaningful support needed for their successful completion of individual degrees (Silverman, 2016; Tavakol & Sanders, 2014). Therefore, data about the experiences and perceptions of these individuals were the focus of this qualitative project study.

A basic qualitative research design is generally based on a social constructivism perspective. Research problems become research questions based on prior research experience. The sample sizes can be small and data collection can involve strategies such as interviews, observations, or content data. Interpretation is based on a combination of researcher perspective and data collected (Merriam, 2009). The research questions for this study were qualitative in nature and focused on life experiences, barriers, and support received among Head Start teachers who pursued higher education. Therefore, a basic qualitative design approach was used to conduct this project study.

The rationale for choosing a basic qualitative research design was its potential to provide insights related to life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students pursuing higher education. The goal of using a basic qualitative research approach was to identify potential approaches needed to assist Head Start teachers in completing requirements for higher education. Other research designs such as ethnography and grounded theory were explored.

Ethnography essentially refers to behavior patterns of a specific group identifying the culture (Merriam, 2009). Grounded theory differs from the ethnography approach. Grounded theory is described to involve procedures for taking the findings and generalizing them to develop a theory applicable to other settings. The data for the grounded theory are gathered over an extended period (Lodico et al., 2010). Furthermore, when grounded theory is used, individuals are re-examined over time with the main purpose of contributing to a general explanation (Charmaz, 2014). The ethnography and grounded theory approaches were not selected because of the misalignment between their

purpose (Pink, 2015) and the purpose of this study. The basic qualitative research design meets the purpose of this study and provides greater insight into student perception, barriers, coping strategies and support needed for students to continue in higher education.

Participants

Target Population

The target population for this qualitative project study consisted of Head Start teachers who were enrolled in a bachelor's program while employed with Head Start and were completing their degree as an adult learner. Some of the participants had associate degrees; others had completed college classes but had not completed a degree. The participants met the following criteria: (a) did not attend college immediately after high school, (b) were at least 25 years old, (c) at the time of the interview were employed part-time or full-time as a Head Start teacher, and (d) would be completing a bachelor's degree as a nontraditional student.

In the United States in the 2015–2016 school year, approximately 240,000 Head Start teachers were employed (National Head Start Association, 2016). The states in the Midwestern region of the United States include Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The total number of Head Start teachers in this region was more than 51,000, according to the National Head Start Association (2016). The local Head Start agency in this study is in Illinois, in a suburban part of the state. The Head Start I used for my study was affiliated with an agency that provided additional programs and services for residents. There were

approximately 60 teachers at the local Head Start site, and approximately 30 teachers met the selection criteria.

Sampling Procedure

I used a purposeful sampling approach to select participants for this qualitative project study. Merriam (2009) defined purposeful sampling as a research process based on the assumption that a researcher desires to discover, understand, and gain insight. Purposeful sampling relates to selecting rich cases for in-depth study, whereby a researcher can secure information about issues of central importance related to the stated purpose of the research (Lodico et al., 2010). Using purposeful sampling is a means by which a researcher can gather important data to use in constructing answers to research questions. Purposeful sampling procedures empower a researcher to choose participants who possess qualifications necessary to produce useful answers to interview questions relative to the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010).

Purposeful sampling enables a researcher to focus on characteristics of a population of interest (Lodico et al., 2010). Homogeneous sampling is the specific type of purposeful sampling I used for this study. Emmel (2013) identified homogeneous sampling as a "group or sub-group in considerable detail" (p. 39). The people and cases share characteristic traits that are similar. The bases for selection of participants were inclusion and exclusion criteria. Defining the inclusion and exclusion criteria increases the likelihood of producing reliable and reproducible results while minimizing the likeliness of harm to subjects. From the target population, a purposeful sampling strategy (e.g., Robinson, 2014; Tavakol & Sanders, 2014) was developed to recruit participants.

All participants of this study had to satisfy the following inclusion criteria (Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009; Robinson, 2014):

- Did not attend college immediately after high school
- Were at least 25 years old when pursuing higher education
- Were employed as a Head Start teacher when pursuing higher education
- Were employed part-time or full-time as a Head Start teacher at the time of their interview
- Had obtained a bachelor's degree as a nontraditional student

The purpose for the exclusion criteria was to define conditions or characteristics that make it inappropriate for a participant to be part of the study. The criteria for exclusion were at least one of the following: (a) had not yet obtained a bachelor's degree as a nontraditional student, and (b) had the intention of resigning as a Head Start teacher within 6 months prior to the study.

Sample Size

The sample size for this qualitative study was based on the point of data saturation (Tran et al., 2017). Data saturation is the point during data collection when adding new data from new samples only produces a small or insignificant change in the coding scheme or coded data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Tran et al., 2017). I used a sample size of nine Head Start teachers who met the designated participant criteria. The input from the nine participants ensured data saturation by providing redundant information synthesized in themes and subthemes described in the findings section of this study.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

To begin recruitment, I sent a request letter to the Head Start director at the local administrative office. In the letter I requested permission to conduct a study with Head Start teachers at the local Head Start site in Illinois. In the letter, I provided an outline of the research process, descriptions of my responsibilities, and the role of the agency in the study. The Head Start director was asked to assist with identifying potential participants based on the inclusion criteria of this qualitative project study. Permission to conduct the study was provided and is included in Appendix B. A Head Start agency human resource staff member provided a list of potential participants and their contact information.

Once the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved my application for this study, I emailed 20 letters of invitation to eligible participants (Appendix C) and the informed consent document as approved by the IRB. These documents were emailed to potential participants once a week for 4 consecutive weeks. Participants were invited to complete the consent form and return the signed copy (digital signature) to me to indicate their desire to participate. Once both forms were completed and returned, a date and time for interviews was scheduled with the selected participants. The first nine teachers who answered the email and returned a signed informed consent form were selected for this qualitative project study. Emails were sent initially to 20 qualified teachers. Five teachers responded to the first email request. The second round of emails were sent to 10 participants. Four more participants responded to the second request. The interview data were analyzed as the interviews were completed and redundant information indicating saturation was identified as the interviews were

completed; all 9 participants who answered and met the inclusion criteria were interviewed for this study.

Methods for Establishing a Researcher–Participant Working Relationship

The researcher–participant relationship was especially important (Berger, 2015; Wright et al., 2016). The goal was to establish a working relationship that did not cause conflict, did not interfere with the agency's operation, and was accommodating for the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Stahl, 2016). I acknowledged and recognized the importance of all participants during this study. I did not view the participants as passive subjects. I remained vigilant, ensuring high ethical standards were maintained, while making room for necessary and useful accommodations for the changing nature of research relative to this project (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I also maintained a confidential, respectful, objective, and professional relationship with all participants while conducting this study.

Measures for Ethical Protection of Participants

Before conducting this study, I submitted the appropriate and applicable documentation to the IRB seeking approval of research on human subjects (approval number is 01-07-21-0280771). I ensured ethical standards were adhered to and strict guidelines established by the IRB were followed to protect and minimize potential risks to the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Ethical standards used included using numbers to identify each participant instead of using names to protect their identity and place of employment and to insure confidentiality. I notified the participants that their involvement would be strictly voluntary, and participants completed informed consent

forms prior to interviews (Sanjari et al., 2014). The time required of participants was also included on the consent form. I informed participants the interview would be held via telephone or online data collection strategies based on the health restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of data collection. Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and was digitally audio recorded.

Confidentiality is a main consideration to be discussed in the informed consent form (Sanjari et al., 2014; Van den Hoonaard & Van den Hoonaard, 2016). I informed participants that I would use pseudonyms to replace any identifying information such as names, gender, or site location (Lahman et al., 2015). I would be the only one who would know the identity of the participants. Interviews were conducted by telephone and/or online data collection strategies. Participants were informed about the measures I would be using to ensure the data were kept secure. I kept all non-electronic documents in a locked cabinet in my private home office. I kept all electronic files password-protected in my personal laptop. All electronic and nonelectronic files will be kept in a locked file cabinet for 5 years after culmination of the study. The personal laptop used for the study will also be kept in a locked file cabinet. All non-electronic files of this project study will be shredded and appropriately disposed of at the end of the 5-year period.

Through the informed consent, I also informed participants that the interviews would be audio-recorded (Killawi et al., 2014). Recording the interviews was important to facilitate verbatim transcription of the interviews (Cridland et al., 2015). Participants were informed that they were invited (not required) to participate on a volunteer basis for this study. The participants also were informed of the risk and benefits of this study

(Cridland et al., 2015; Killawi et al., 2014). The participants were provided with a sample of the interview questions, a description, and the purpose of the study via the informed consent letter. This procedure was designed to enhance their understanding of what was expected of them and to aid them in their desire to participate. The privacy of the data, confidentiality, and how the data were secured were also documented on the consent form. I built trust and safety for participants by being a good reflective listener and paying close attention to what was said (Fern, 2001). I monitored ethical considerations throughout this study to ensure full compliance with all requirements by following all ethical institutional guidelines set forth by Walden's IRB. I completed the National Institutes of Health research ethics course (Appendix F) and obtained a certificate of completion. This course involved preparing the doctoral student on the importance of interviewee rights and ways to ensure confidentiality when conducting research.

Data Collection Methods

This section outlines the data collected as well as justification for the selected data. Researchers in qualitative studies collect and analyze various data points as they spend time in various research settings gathering information (Lewis, 2015).

Data Collection Instrument

The instrument to collect data was an interview protocol. An interview instrument entitled "Autobiography of a Nontraditional Student," proposed by Ronspies (2011) and presented in Appendix D, was used to collect descriptive information from the participants of the study. This instrument proposed by Ronspies was developed as part of a basic qualitative research study and the author fully described the trustworthiness

strategies implemented throughout the research process. The instrument also went through a thorough peer review process before being published in a journal fully dedicated to qualitative research. Approval has been granted to use the instrument (Appendix E).

All questions used in this study were open-ended and provided the participants with the ability to describe their personal lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). There were four research questions for this study. The data collected were in alignment with the research questions that were derived from the local problem and respectively the purpose of the study, as described in Section 1 of this study. The interview questions were grouped reflective of each proposed research question (see Table 2).

Table 2

Instruments for the Study

Research questions (RQ)	Interview questions (IQ)
(RQ1). How do Head Start teachers perceive the ways their life experiences have influenced their pursuit of higher education?	IQ2, IQ3, IQ4, and IQ5 directly address RQ1
(RQ2). What are the barriers that Head Start teachers experience going back to school as an adult learner?	IQ6, IQ7, IQ8, and IQ9 directly address RQ2
(RQ3): How do Head Start teachers describe their coping with the barriers as they pursue successful completion of higher education degrees	IQ10 and IQ11 directly address the RQ3
(RQ4): What kind of support do Head Start teachers perceive they need to successfully complete a higher education degree?	IQ12 directly addresses the RQ4

In qualitative research, the emphasis is placed on collecting descriptive data, using inductive thinking, and emphasizing an understanding of the subjects' point of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I used semi-structured interviews to collect data for this study. Lodico et al., (2010) claimed that qualitative researchers use semi-structured interviews driven by a list of questions prepared to allow for probing or follow-up questions. After receiving consent forms, I scheduled interviews with participants at a time convenient for them.

Data Collection Processes

Once the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved my study, I emailed 20 letters of invitation (see Appendix C) to eligible participants along with the informed consent document. These documents were emailed to the potential participants along with an invitation to complete the consent form and return the signed copy (digital signature) to me to indicate their desire to participate. Once both forms were completed and returned, a date and time for interviews was scheduled with the selected participants. These documents were sent again, once a week for four consecutive weeks, to those participants that did not acknowledge their intention to participate in the study.

I conducted the interviews using Zoom on-line conferencing platform. One day before each interview, I gathered the materials needed for the interview (e.g., interview protocol, backup audio recorder, paper, and pens) and tested the audio recorder to ensure it was working properly. At the beginning of the interview session, I gave a brief introduction of the topic, purpose, and potential significance of the project study and informed the participant of the interview flow. The other information provided by the

participant was based on the introduction part of the interview protocol. The participants were informed both prior to and at the beginning of the interviewing process that all information would be audio recorded and asked if they agreed with the recording. Nine participants agreed to be videotaped.

Questioning based on the interview protocol occurred with follow-up questions to explore deeper into the answers of the participants. After asking all the questions in the interview protocol, I informed the participant that the interview was over. The participants were then asked to present any question or give comments about the study. I addressed each question or comment appropriately and then thanked the participants for their time. Within two days of conducting the interview, I transcribed the interview session. No external transcriptionist assisted in this process to keep the identity of the participant and the information from the interviews confidential.

I used NVivo software to organize and analyze data. NVivo also aided me in gaining richer insight from the information collected. After conducting each interview, I took interviewing notes regarding the gestures and nonverbal expressions of the interviewees. The documentation was from one to two pages in length per interview to make sure that the data were descriptive, informative, and straightforward to facilitate efficient analysis. All information collected was objective and did not include personal perceptions. I made sure that the prominent themes to be included in the findings would have a supporting quote from the interview, based on the transcripts. The data collected in a digital form were stored on a computer that was password protected and I was the only person with access to this password. The digital data was also backed up on a USB

flash drive protected with encryption of data. The data collected or generated in a hardcopy format was stored in a locked cabinet at my home in a room where only I have access to that cabinet. The data is scheduled to be deleted or destroyed, as applicable, after 5 years.

Role of the Researcher

I interviewed the participants, interpreted the data collected, and explained the views and perceptions of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As the researcher, I remained aware of ethical issues as learned from my training and was forever mindful of biases and experiences that could influence the outcome of this project study. I served in the past as the Head Start director and an education consultant. In this role, I provided routine in-service training related to Head Start federal standards. I worked with teachers, mentoring, and persuaded them to enroll in higher education classes. At the time of this study, I had not worked for the Head Start agency for several years. Therefore, my past involvement with the Head Start agency did not affect data collection or create biases. It was my goal to ensure the research was reported honestly, shared with participants, not influenced by personal interest, and duly credited to authors that contribute (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

I have worked in the education field for over 25 years. Education is indeed my passion. I have seen how acquiring a college degree influences individuals and affects the family structure in such a positive way, along with affecting change in their respective communities. I am employed with a public community college where I teach and mentor nontraditional students. Many of the nontraditional students were required by the state of

residency to complete a national manager food service sanitation course and master the national exam to maintain employment. My role was to provide course instruction and to proctor the national exam.

I have 10 years of professional experience working as a human resource deputy director with a private healthcare facility. In that function, I mentored individuals pursuing higher education. I also worked as a social worker and 12 years as a public health administrator for state and federal regulatory compliance related to healthcare facilities. I have served as a Head Start director and worked as a teacher in several school districts. As an administrator, I supervised staff, conducted training, exhibited sensitivity, patience, flexibility, and effective communication skills. These learned skills were used with the interview participants of this study.

At the time of this study, I was no longer employed with the Head Start organization. I left Head Start to pursue other business interests related to community empowerment. I provided several training courses for Head Start, which related to quality assurance audits and professional development (cultural sensitivity training, staff development, evaluations for managers, etc.). I am an adjunct professor at a local community college and a regional director of an organization that provides educational services to the community. However, my education experience in the secondary and higher education fields provided me with transferable skills that assisted me in conveying the needs of nontraditional students fulfilling higher education requirements that resulted from this study.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis takes place throughout the research process. In addition, the qualitative researcher spends significant time focused on the development of rich, descriptive ideas that are generated from collecting and organizing the data into themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Miles et al., 2013). As I completed each interview, I transcribed verbatim the recorded data, followed by analyzing the data sets.

Steps for Analysis

To analyze the data, I used Clarke and Braun's (2014) thematic analysis process, which involves six steps: (a) familiarizing of data, (b) coding, (c) theming, (d) revising themes, (e) finalizing and defining themes, and (f) writing up findings. First, I transcribed verbatim the recorded interviews in Microsoft Office Word format and then I reviewed the resulted documents to ensure that the interview information provided by the participants was correctly transcribed (Edhlund & McDougall, 2016; QSR International, 2017).

In the first step, I familiarized myself with the data from the interviews and journal entries. I read each interview transcript and interviewing notes, in accordance with directions researchers suggested (Bazeley, 2013; Miles et al., 2013). I conducted a second pass reading of the data to ensure familiarization and understanding of the information obtained from the participant. As I conducted the second reading, I began highlighting important phrases, which I used for the coding in the second step. These important text chunks were needed to offer a direct answer to the research questions of the study (Miles et al., 2013).

In the second step, I performed coding of a small set of data (e.g., three interview transcripts). I identified words, phrases, or groups of phrases that were related to the study. I grouped similar statements under one code until I developed a coding scheme. I used descriptive phrases to code the dataset and develop the coding scheme or codebook. According to Saldana (2013) structural coding is suggested and appropriate for analyzing data when using semi-structured data collection methods and exploratory studies, which were both applicable to this research. Therefore, structural coding was performed for this study.

With this emerging coding scheme, I used the NVivo software to code the entire data set and selected the text chunks from the documents that provided direct answers to the research questions. Nodes are the coded data or expressions that are relevant to the study (Houghton et al., 2017). In the NVivo software, I coded data by labeling similar text chunks and phrases and putting them in basins called nodes (Bazeley, 2013; Ozkan, 2004; Zamawe, 2015). These codes or nodes were the basis used when I was browsing through the answers of the participants. When I was coding, I labeled each part of the transcript to correspond to the code applicable to it as researchers recommended (Houghton et al., 2017; Zamawe, 2015). When performing coding through nodes in NVivo, I identified several text chunks or phrases that corresponded to similar nodes based on the first three interviews. These nodes defined the initial list of codes.

Included in the data analysis process was ensuring that the data reached saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). To determine if data reached saturation, the first six interviews were coded. Two more data sets were coded to determine any significant change to the

coded data (e.g., number of codes, occurrence of codes). If a significant change were observed, then two more interviews were coded (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Tran et al., 2017). The process of coding additional data and checking for data saturation was repeated until there were little or insignificant changes to the codes. I continued until all data sets were coded and data saturation was reached (Houghton et al., 2017). I continued reviewing the contents of each node by double clicking the nodes while continuing to code or group the data from the interviews (Zamawe, 2015).

In the third step, I identified the themes that emerged from the codes (Bazeley, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2014). I conducted this step by grouping similar codes. Using NVivo software, I was able to process a larger set of data and discover existing patterns in the texts. In NVivo, to group codes into themes, I formed images that identified codes as part of a broader node, which were identified as the theme (Bazeley, 2013; Zamawe, 2015). The first set of higher-level nodes were the basis for the initial list of themes.

In the fourth step, I reviewed the initial list of themes and make necessary revisions (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Miles et al., 2013). From the initial set of themes, I identified relationships. After analyzing the interview data, the journal logs were analyzed using the same steps used for the analysis of the interviews.

In the fifth step, I finalize the major themes and identify relationships and associations between the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Miles et al., 2013). I verified the results from both data sources. The themes that were present in both data sources were the major themes. The remaining emergent themes were considered as minor themes. I performed one last set of changes to the definitions of the themes and established the

significance of the themes in relation to the research questions of the study. In the sixth step, I discussed the analysis and findings of the emergent themes from the data.

Ensuring the Trustworthiness of the Study

A key role of the researcher of a qualitative study is to provide evidence of the quality of the study by ensuring its trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the data collection and analysis, I took steps to ensure the findings were trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness has four main components. These components include credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability

Credibility

I used member checking and peer review as strategies to ensure the accuracy of data and findings for this study (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Member checking occurs throughout the inquiry and is a process in which collected data is played back to the informant to check for perceived accuracy and reactions. Researchers reinforced the importance of member checking to ensure the accuracy of information documented (Ferguson & Liu, 2015; Habibi et al., 2016). Member checking helped minimize researcher bias and consequently ensure the accuracy of the data collected from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants were afforded the opportunity to review their responses from the interview (Appendix J). They were asked to respond via email within 14 days from receipt of the documents to review. Changes, when needed, were made accordingly.

To improve the credibility of the findings, I also initiated a peer review process (Lee & Moher, 2017). I implemented this strategy by asking a peer who holds an earned doctoral degree in education to provide impartial feedback about the logic of the findings and the justification presented to explain the findings of the study. I provided the peer reviewer with a copy of the findings and initial discussion. Two days after receiving the findings, the peer reviewer met with me to discuss the comments and feedback and to make changes to the discussion or presentation of the findings.

Transferability

Transferability involves ensuring that the data from this project study was usable to other types of research in this area (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To improve transferability, I provided in depth description of the process. Through a detailed discussion of the methods and procedures, future researchers and readers may easily replicate the study to identify if the findings are transferable to another population or setting.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the extent or level of stability and reliability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I performed an audit trail to improve the dependability of the findings. The audit trail included complete documentation of the data which were relevant to implementing the methodology for this qualitative study.

Confirmability

Confirmability was equivalent to the objectivity of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data for a qualitative study had to be based on the actual experiences or

perceptions of the participants or the members of the target population. I only served as the messenger who allowed the public to know about the perceptions of the participants. To improve the confirmability of the data, I had items in the interview protocol that were iterative.

Procedures for Dealing with Discrepant Cases

During this study, it was important to provide information on discrepant cases. I analyzed discrepant cases and information to compare the findings of this study. Discrepant cases were used to assist with a greater understanding of the depth of collected data (Merriam, 2009). Discrepant cases and discrepant data included information that could provide competing explanations and or disconfirming evidence different from the findings of my study (Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, I analyzed discrepant cases alongside confirming cases to explore emerging themes and patterns. When discrepant data arose, I asked participants for additional information. A description of these cases is described in the study. Discrepant cases also assisted with further understanding the depth of the data (Merriam, 2009). The combination of discrepant cases and confirmed cases maximized the results and supported the need for the study. Therefore, the inclusion of discrepant cases maximized and provided credibility and accuracy to the qualitative project study (Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. Four research questions guided this qualitative project study. The target

population for this qualitative project study consisted of Head Start teachers who were enrolled in or had completed a higher education program as a nontraditional student. The participants met the following criteria: (a) did not attend college immediately after high school, (b) were at least 25 years old, (c) were employed part-time or full-time as a Head Start teacher, and (d) completed a bachelor's degree as nontraditional students.

The participant information is described with demographics such as age, ethnicity, gender, level of education, number of children, marital status, and number of years of experience in the early childhood education (ECE) field. The participants of this study were between the ages of 39 and 60. Their years of experience ranged from 12 to 35 years of early childhood education experience. All participants were female and were either African American, Caucasian, Spanish or Asian American. All participants had completed or were in the process of completing educational advancement by returning to school as a nontraditional student. Their actual experience provided insights for answering the four research questions proposed for this study.

The process by which the data were gathered and recorded included the completion of interviews with all 9 participants. An interview instrument entitled "Autobiography of a Nontraditional Student," by Ronspies (2011) was used to collected descriptive information from the participants. All questions used in the interviews were open-ended, which provided the participants with the ability to describe their personal lived experiences. Four research questions were included in this qualitative project study. The data collected were in alignment with the research questions that were derived from the local problem, and respectively, the purpose of the qualitative project study. I

conducted interviews using Zoom virtual conferencing software. Within two days of conducting the interview, I transcribed each interview. No external transcriptionist assisted in this process to keep the identity of the participant and the information from the interviews confidential.

NVivo software was used to organize and analyze data. NVivo also aided me in gaining richer insight from the information collected. I wrote journal logs after conducting each interview and included the following information in the journal logs: major themes that seemed to emerge, gestures, and nonverbal expressions of teachers.

In qualitative research, data analysis takes place throughout the research process. In addition, in qualitative research, the researcher spends significant time focused on the development of rich, descriptive ideas that are generated from collecting and organizing the data into themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Miles et al. 2013). As I completed each interview, I transcribed verbatim the recorded data, followed by analyzing the data sets.

Following Clarke and Braun's (2014) thematic analysis process described in the methodology, the key words and ideas that emerged from the analysis of the data formed key concepts used to identify several codes. These recurring ideas, concerns, and experiences emerging from the participants' responses made up the coding system. A total of 35 codes were identified through the coding process and are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Coding Table

Code	Meaning	Code	Meaning
NR	New requirements	FP	Family problem
AP	Additive personality	PE	Personal excitement
VT	Voluntary teaching	SD	Self-discipline
SE	Supervisory encouragement	PE	Previous experience
NM	New mandate	BWS	Balancing work/school
IQL	Improve quality of learning	LC	Losing credit
PC	Passion or calling	M	Money
WO	Watching others	FGS	First generation student
LP	Life problems	FP	Faith and prayer
Ed	Eating and depression	EM	Encouragement and motivation
RS	Resources and support	CLE	Credit for life experiences
MA	Mentors and assistance	WLC	Work life credit
UR	University requirements	UP	Unapproachable professors
NVOS	Negative view of older students	NES	No employer support
ML	Military living	LES	Little employee support
EL	Energy level	FC	Family conflict
FS	Family support	SF	Staying focused

I analyzed the coded data to identify emerging themes. I narrowed the themes identified through coding to recognize subthemes that provided me with the vital information needed to reach reliable findings. The themes and subthemes identified through the data analysis process are summarized in Appendix C.

Findings from Thematic Analysis

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who are completing their degrees. Participants' answers to the interview questions generated four themes and 16 subthemes. Quotes from participants' responses are included to provide

"thick descriptions" of participants' comments in the data analysis, as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, p. 30).

The themes are directly linked to the research questions. The first research question focused on how Head Start teachers perceive the ways their life experiences have influenced their pursuit of higher education.

Theme 1: Perceived Life Experiences Influence Participants' Pursuit of Higher Education

Subtheme 1.1: Family, Values and Encouragement from Others

During the interview, the participants focused attention on details such as their age, experiences, beliefs, values, and so forth. These elements played a role in their desire to complete a higher degree in education.

Participants indicated that their value of higher education was instilled in their own family upbringing. P-3 explained, "All of my jobs in the past have been in the education field. I believe in getting an education despite the barriers you face. My goal is to complete my bachelor's degree in Elementary Education."

Similarly, P-4, said, "I was raised with traditional Greek and Irish Roman Catholic views. My parents stressed to me to always be prepared to take care of myself. They stressed, 'Get a degree and support yourself so you will never have to rely on a man.'"

P-5 added, "I was always taught to respect others and to treat people the way you want to be treated. I have been a giver and one that always finds a way to help others. I have a passion for people and love making a difference in the lives of others."

Relative to their involvement in the Head Start program, participants had similar experiences that included either becoming a Head Start employee, enrolling their child or children in Heard Start, or a combination of both. For example, P-6 stated, "I was introduced to Head Start as a parent in 1998. Since that initial meeting I have sat on policy council, worked as a family development specialist, lead teacher and site director."

P-7 stated, "I was hired by Head Start as a bus chaperone and promoted to a teacher while I was working on my associate degree. I enrolled my daughter in Head Start and fell in love with the program." P-8 elaborated on her past experiences as a daycare provider before being employed in Head Start as a teacher. P-8 explained, "I enrolled two of my children in the Head Start program, which was an advantage for me financially. I fell in love with the Head Start program because of the structure and the learning my children received."

In a similar manner, P-9 explained that she worked in early childhood education over 33 years, with the first jobs being in daycare facilities for over 13 years. P-9 further said, "I started with Head Start while working on my CDA certificate, later completed an associate degree, was promoted from an assistant teacher to a lead teacher; later the mandate required lead teachers to have a bachelor's degree."

Observing Others Encouraged the Pursuit of Degrees. As participants called attention to influences of family life on their effort to pursue higher education, each of the nine participants was able to interject varied external as well as internal influences. External influences included achievement of family members, availability of grants, new mandates, and other Head Start coworkers who finished their bachelor's degrees. Internal

influences included having a strong desire to accomplish a goal, dealing with a son who had HFA, relying on my inner strength, instilling the value of an education in the life of my child, being excited about attending class, recognizing the mandate and realizing the value of an education, and seeing others complete their higher degrees.

Life experiences among participants that encouraged them to pursue higher education included specific involvements such as watching other family members get their degrees and deciding to follow a similar path. Though older than traditional students, P-9 made a decision that earning a higher education degree "was something I could do. I understood the importance of the mandate as well as the value of higher education." P-7 provided a detailed description about her decision after watching the experiences of others,

> I was excited about attending classes because I saw others do it. I decided to do online classes, which were not hard, just more detailed papers and explaining yourself more in words. I wanted to make sure I was showing a positive example to my daughter, working on a dream and completing it.

In like manner, other participants commented about having a strong desire to accomplish a goal, to keep a job, and to improve self by continuously working toward a higher degree. Having to apply for different grants, to maintain responsibility for the care of a child with HFA, provide a livelihood as a single parent, and other similar life experiences did not deter participants' determination to finishing a higher education degree. P-4, P-5, and P-6 called attention to the importance of relying on inner strength, a belief in the value of an education, and the importance of frugality in living, while

striving to achieve higher education goals. Overall, however, eight of the nine participants acknowledged the federal mandate as the main reason they made the decision to return to school to pursue higher education. P-7 referred to higher education, stating, "I truly believe education is an equalizer."

Self-Discipline While Completing Classes Was Most Helpful. The participants identified several internal and external life experiences they found helpful as they strived to complete higher education requirements. Helpful life experiences deriving from within included self-discipline, time management, remaining focused, and self-sufficiency experience. As P-1 said, "Since I was good at self-discipline, I was able to do most of my course work online. Not everyone is cut out for online learning".

Focusing on her experience as a mother, having to juggle responsibilities and use time wisely, P-4 called attention to how her internal experiences supported her decision to complete a higher degree, commenting, "Being a mom was definitely helpful. My sons helped; we did so many things together with their classes. Working at Head Start gave me indelible skills needed to complete papers, projects, and most requirement." Calling attention to internal experiences, P-5 indicated that, "Throughout my life, I learned self-discipline, time management and how to remain focused on a task. I would always stay ahead of assignments. I believe these were helpfully related to completing my degree.

Helpful life experiences from external sources included group therapy, hands-on training, and motivational speakers; previous support of family; counselors at the various college campuses, online classes and independent studies; previous college experience; and previous work on an associate degree. The support of family was the most frequent

type of external source among participants. Husbands and children were supportive and engaging as well as parents, siblings, and other relatives. Other than immediate family members and other relatives, participants also called attention to external sources such as counselors, support programs, and previous college experiences. As P-3 stated, "The counselors at the various college campuses were very helpful and available for assistance." On the other hand, P-6 explained,

> When I first began my college education, there were not so many options to pursue your degree. The ability to take a class online and independent study were certainly welcome experiences for me. While not always easy, they were still better than having to find a sitter for the kids and being out late in the evening.

Similarly, P-7 mentioned that her experience at and outside organization gave attention to the needs of nontraditional students pursuing a higher degree.

> It was helpful for my daughter to see me attend school, maintain a job and help her with schoolwork. I was also in a program at Catholic Charities called 'Self-sufficiency program.' This was a program to assist single parents take classes, group therapy and hands on training to teach one to be self-sufficient. This program provided motivation for me to keep going.

Participants P-8 and P-9 called attention to the importance of previous experience and how it supports nontraditional students who are pursuing a higher degree. As P-8 mentioned, "Having previously attended college was valuable to my success. Many things had changed, especially the online learning. I had a coworker who assisted whenever possible." In supporting the comments P-8 made about previous experience in

higher education, P-9 indicated that, “It was helpful that I had worked on my associate degree as an adult. I had a good understanding of how to study and plan ahead of time for assignments.”

Subtheme 1.2: Head Start Mandate – Completing the Requirement

Life experiences that influenced completing higher education degrees varied among the nine participants, with four (44%) of the participants indicating that the new mandate requiring a bachelor’s degree to teach in Head Start was the deciding factor. In as much as most of the Head Start teachers had only an associate degree when they were employed, they were required to complete a bachelor’s degree to maintain employment in the Head Start program. Other experiences from individual teachers included addictive personality, volunteer teaching in Head Start, the loss of a teenage son, and desire to improve quality of learning. For example, P-1 called attention to routine changes that occurred as she worked as a Head Start teacher when she stated “As times changed while working at Head Start, new requirements were put in place asking that all teachers have at least an associate degree. This is what prompted me to go back to school”.

On the other hand, P-3 explained that her life experience as a volunteer in the Head Start program was the key that led her into a career in early childhood education:

> I volunteered my time as a parent when my son attended Head Start. I really enjoyed working with younger children. I decided to apply for a teaching position with Head Start. After being in that position I was promoted to a site director position. I chose early child education because we can make a positive change in the lives of our children.

The life experience of becoming a parent herself was the turning point in the educational career of P-5. She stated, “After I had my child, I realized getting a degree was the way to advance myself in life. The mandate posed by Head Start motivated me to complete my degree.”

In like manner, a life experience at home impacted the progress of P-6 as she pursued higher education, “I experienced a tragic loss of my teenage son during the time I was pursuing higher education. It set me back for a few semesters but, with support from family and friends I completed my degree.”

Having previous coursework from another country rejected was a life experience that impacted P-8 in her effort to pursue higher education: “I had a degree from my country in education. The review of my credits indicated that some of the classes were not accepted, and additional early childhood courses were needed to be completed in order for my degree to be recognized in the state of Illinois. The Head Start mandate was the force which prompted me to complete the additional courses to receive a degree in early childhood education.”

Though most of the participants embraced an opportunity to return to school to complete a higher degree or to complete the credentials needed to become a certified Head Start teacher, others dreaded having to go back to school. Though she did not embrace the idea of continuing her education, P-9 realized that her livelihood depended on her reentry in college because she needed to maintain employment for her own livelihood. As she stated, “I hated the idea of going back to school. I knew as a result of the mandate there was no other choice. I felt overwhelmed but knew it had to be done”.

Subtheme 1.3: Experience Working with Young Children Was the Reason for Becoming Head Start Teacher

When asked for a reason for choosing to become a Head Start teacher, the responses were similar among eight (88.9%) of the nine participants who indicated that the reason stemmed from love, a passion or desire to work with small children. One participant extended her reason, including children and their families and becoming an advocate for them all. In similar comments participants provided similar reasons for choosing to work at Head Start level, with most of them calling attention to an inner desire to help children and families in need. The words or terminology used most frequently among participants to explain the inner feeling that promoted them to choose Head Start as a career included "passion or calling." For example, P-5 indicated,

> I chose to work at Head Start because I love working with low-income families and children. I was able to be an advocate by providing and directing them to needed community resources. I chose ECE because I felt this was the stage, I could make the greatest impact on the young learners.

Another commonality in the reasons participants chose to work in Head Start related to their past experiences as students in the Head Start program as well as parents of Head Start students. P-5 captured the essence of those participants who decided to teach in Head Start because they had a child in the early childhood education program. She said,

> I chose early childhood education because I had enrolled my oldest son in a daycare. I chose Head Start because I watched and loved their program for kids. I

> loved everything about their program, even the paperwork. I loved how Head Start follows the best practices of early childhood. The Head start program helped me to understand my classwork and complete it with ease.

The inspiring nature of the Head Start program was the element that encouraged P-6, P-7, P-8, and P-9 to pursue credentials to teach in the same program. Each of these participants had a similar reason to pursue a career as a Head Start teacher. Engulfed in the processes and procedures being implemented in the Head Start program, each of the three participants described how the program served as a personal motivation for them to engage in the program alongside their own children who were attending. Their love for working with children and understanding how they could make a positive impact on the lives of children in the Head Start program helped them to decide to apply for work as teachers, especially after supervisors and staff in the Head Start program acknowledge that they had "great skills for helping little ones. (P-8)" Having a passion for working with little children as well as getting an opportunity to assist in the Head Start program provided encouragement that led the way for participants to enter the teaching profession at the early childhood education level. With two of her children enrolled in the Head Start program, P-8 was able to use her creative talents and skills to enhance learning and make a difference in their lives. In a similar manner, P-9 chose Head Start because of her passion for working with young children. As a result of her performance as a Head Start teacher, she received positive evaluations, including comments about her special skills and the patience in working with young children.

The second theme is directly aligned with RQ2 which focuses on the barriers Head Start teachers experience going back to school as adult learners.

Theme 2. Barriers Encountered Affected Completing Higher Education

Subtheme 2.1: Financial Issues Such as the Need for Funds

Seven (78%) of the participants indicated that barriers derived from financial issues, failing coursework, and family problems. Excerpts from P-1, and P-2's comments identified the most pressing barriers encountered in pursuing higher education as financial, parenting, balancing family, work, school, and traveling to class when the weather was bad sometimes (4-hour round trip). P-6. P-7, and P-8 identified financial issues as paramount among the barriers that affected their degree attainment process.

Two (22%) of the participants identified failing to progress, resulting from barriers such as losing credits after transferring from state to state, being a first-generation college student, discouragement after failing mathematics two times, academic probation, a daughter needing a tutor, and having to work two jobs for survival. For example, P-3 called attention to failing coursework as a barrier and losing credits as a transfer student because each state had new class requirements. In addition to losing credit as a transfer student and the lack of finances, another barrier related to being the first generation in the family attending higher education.

Life Situational Barriers Included Limited Finance. Life or situational barriers varied among the nine participants, with no specific barrier being inclusive among the nine participants. Four participants identified finances as a personal or situational barriers. Two participants identified the lack of employer support, and three participants

identified family issues such as military family locations, life crises, lack of energy, and spousal conflicts.

Though participants identified different specifics that related to their own situational barriers, limited finance continued to be overwhelmingly germane to the issue of completing a degree in higher education. Different specifics included “no employer support” (P-1); “transferring to different colleges and universities because of military stations” (P-2); and “life in general, dealing with life crises; and little employer support funds/finances needed to complete higher education, and childcare were problems often specifically related to evening hours when classes were being taken” (P-5).

Discussing the barriers connected to meeting the mandate for higher education as a Head Start teacher, P-8 explained, “A couple times I was trying to pay for the required classes that I had to neglect my utilities. I moved in with a family member to stay afloat. I realized in order to keep my job I had to complete the required classes”. In a similar manner, P-9 described barriers of finance and family experiences:

There was a period whereby my husband thought I should find another job. The job was causing problems with my spouse. The higher education requirement was also interfering with the time I needed to monitor my teenager that was acting out. My husband was tired of working two jobs. Financing my education became a problem. I applied for loans to make it easier for all. In a similar manner, P-5 identified the lack of financial support as a main barrier, calling attention to the need for further financial assistance. She said, “My salary was inadequate to support my education. Head Start

administrators did not provide any assistance. So, I sat out while I found resources to pay for the early childhood classes."

Equally, P-6 described her biggest challenge as the absence of financial assistance during her undergraduate program, causing her to be unable to complete internship due to lack of funds. Finding funds to complete the required classes was a common barrier participant identifies. The result of this barrier affected participants progress in higher education. P-7 explained, "I had to drop out one semester to save money for classes. A few times I was depressed but talking with family and coworkers helped to get me through.

Subtheme 2.2: Family Challenges

All nine participants identified, directly or indirectly, challenges that made it difficult to continue with higher education. Family stressors, university requirements, life problems and working two jobs generated financial instability. Therefore, responses from all nine participants were included as barriers and challenges that made it difficult to continue with higher education. P-4 included barriers such as being responsible as a caregiver for ill parents and a son on medication, while working two jobs to support the family, and the death of a father were some of the burdensome experiences that affected progress in higher education. It was a challenge to focus on higher education: with my constant prayer and belief in self I endured" (P4). In a similar manner P-9 added,

> My challenge was keeping up with assignments, handling job responsibilities, and completing all the school assignments on time. I also had problems with one of my teenagers skipping school, acting out and so forth. This caused me to have to

drop a class because I was failing. This required me to retake the class which impacted me completing classes at a slower pace than others.

Subtheme 2.3: Lack of Employer and Institutional Support

Six of the nine participants identified financial issues as barriers related to institution of higher learning. Three of the participants identified feelings of disconnection as barriers related to institutions of higher learning. Other barriers included disconnections related to lack of assistance specified for nontraditional students, and unapproachable professors. Two of the participants also called attention to dialect issues, lack of financial assistance and guidance, negative view of older students, no mentors available, and no credit for work experience.

Initially, P-1 said, "The main barrier was finding financial ways to afford and stay in school. In comparison, P-2 offered, "Barriers related to the institution included night and weekend school for me. I did not feel like I was connected to the school. Sometimes, I did not feel like the staff was helping me or respected me as an adult." However, P-3 identified university requirements as barriers but identified no specific example. While P-4 indicated that her only barrier related to running out of funds, P-5 highlighted, "The rising cost of college courses, no resources available to assist nontraditional students with cost and the absence of a mentorship program to assist students" as institutional barriers she incurred. While most of the barriers related to the lack of funds to continue in higher education P-8 and P-9 called attention to other barriers that affected progress negatively. For example, P-8 commented, "I always felt the instructors were not approachable and were distanced because of my dialect. The other barrier was no financial assistance

provided and no one to guide me through the process." In support of P-8's concerns, P-9 said,

> I always felt that instructors viewed older students in a different way than the traditional students. The institutions should have mentors in place for nontraditional students to ensure all online resources are understood. I also feel institutions should give credit to nontraditional students for work life experience.

Theme three is directly aligned with RQ3 which focuses on how Head Start do teachers cope with the barriers they encounter as they pursue successful completion of higher education.

Theme 3: Coping Strategies Used to Complete Higher Degrees

Subtheme 3.1: Family Support and Additional Support

When participants responded to the question asking how they coped with the barriers encountered as they pursued successful completion of higher degrees, three identified family members (P-1, P-3, P-5), three identified praying (P-3, P-5, P-7) two identified coworkers (P-4, P-5), and one identified eating as coping strategies (P-5). Added to these overall coping strategies, six of the participants identified focusing, communicating with counselors, and in general, doing what needs to be done; dropping classes; and having faith, drive, and determination (P-4).

In her comment, P-5 admitted, "I prayed a lot and found ways to plan around my daily schedule. I found learning techniques that were suitable and assisted me with the learning process." In a similar manner, P-6 explained,

> My financial barrier was to take out student loans. Dealing with fatigue and not spending the time needed with my children was difficult, but it was a great example to my children on how to study and to make education a priority.

Then P-7 called attention to the issue of poor coping skills when she added, "In the beginning, I did not cope well. I was stress eating, gaining weight which made me depressed. I felt overwhelmed with my daughter, required schoolwork, and life itself. The people at my church supported me." Similar coping skills emerged from P-8's comments and focused on the importance of family as a source of assistance. She said, "To cope, I had to move in with family. I felt bad about giving up our apartment, but I knew staying employed was what was important." The coping strategy P-9 identified resembled what other participants mentioned, indicating that she "was able to cope by talking with co-workers and family. My family and coworkers encouraged and motivated me to continue. Co-workers started helping me with proofreading papers and sharing textbooks to offset cost."

Subtheme 3.1.1 -Varied Types of Support and Supporters Identified

Types of support provided and individuals who provided positive support resulted from all nine participants who invariably identified encouragement and one who included assistance. Four participants indicated that family members provided the encouragement they needed (P-1, P-2, P-5, P-7). Three indicated that friends and coworkers provided the encouragement they needed (P-4, P-8, and P-9). One participant stated that coworkers, family, and friends provided motivation (P-6). Participant P3 indicated that "My former

bosses and other site directors helped a lot. They showed me which classes were available and ways to apply for different programs/assistance." P-6 added,

> I recall a gentleman at my church who was in graduate school, and he was a military man. I will always remember him telling me that I could do it. Just put my mind to it and get it done. This man recently retired from the Army as a Brigadier General.

Relative to family support, P-7 stated, "I had my family support and my boyfriend and coworker's support. Most of my coworkers were in school, with children and husbands. We all talked about our struggles but also gave each other motivation to keep going."

Subtheme 3.1.2 -Support From Head Start Management.

Discussion of support from Head Start managers is based on the responses from eight of the nine participants. Five of the participants identified financial support of varying kinds (P-1, P-3, P-4, and P-7). Nonfinancial support from the other three participants included items such as use of videotaping and unlimited discussion time, permission to attend conferences and to listen to motivational speakers (P-4, P-5, and P-8). Two participants included words of encouragement as additional support from Head Start management. Examples of these comments derived from P-8 and P-9.

P-8 stated, "Head Start management always encouraged me. Often the director would check on me to see how things were going. I was not able to receive any funds from Head Start". In a similar tone, P-9 elaborated,

> Head Start management directed me to grants available for early childhood education teachers. I remember on a few occasions the Head Start director would provide motivational speakers to keep all teachers motivated. We were able to attend conferences annually that provided information related to new trends in early childhood education. I always felt I was thoroughly informed as a result of attendance at conferences and workshops in the community.

Subtheme 3.1.3 -Faculty and Staff, Traditional Students, and Other Support

All nine participants acknowledged receiving supports from faculty and staff, traditional students and others such as family and friends, faculty and supervisors, cohorts, coworkers, and management. Among the nine participants, seven identified supports from faculty and staff, friends, and coworkers (P-1, P-2, P-3. P4, P-5, P-7, and P-9). As P-6 explained,

> Cohorts are popular. You learn together and the support is built into staff development. Another thing I recall is that if I had completed a class, I would share notes and information about this class with others. We would share which instructors and classes would be the best, most beneficial. Sometimes sharing books so we did not have to incur that cost.

P-7 also explained that "As a student, I reached out to coworkers for assistance. I was able to use some of the books from one of my coworkers. I went to coworkers if I had difficulty understanding an assignment. This was helpful to me."

In a similar manner, P-8 reiterated, "Coworkers helped me relative to classes and sharing textbooks. Most of my support came from my family and my church family

members who would always let me know that they had confidence in me and believed in me." In addition, P-9 indicated, "My coworkers, family and management at Head Start provided support through continued words of encouragement and positive actions to assist me in completing classes".

Subtheme 3.2: Intrinsic Motivation

All nine participants indicated that, at times, they turned their attention inside themselves to find the inner strength needed to pursue their goals. Helpful strategies from five of the nine participants included "studying late at night" (P-2); "focusing on things that can be done and ignoring things that cannot be done" (P-3); "looking forward and moving on, encouraging self; taking time out for self; and keeping in contact with family and friends" (P-4). Added coping strategies from four participant included "praying, worshipping, and getting support from church family" (P-5, P-6)); "eating" (P-7); "engaging actively in hobbies and staying active with children" (P-8); and "taking advantage of personal leave and vacation to focus on self-improvement and assignments" (P-9). P-9 further explained,

> We were not offered educational leave to pursue higher education. Therefore, I would take personal leave days and vacation days to stay on track to complete required assignments. I would spend many days in libraries away from everyone to focus on assignments. This was the one thing that helped me pass my courses. I also prayed a lot.

Theme four is directly aligned with RQ4 which was focused on the kind of support Head Start teachers need to successfully complete a higher education degree.

Theme 4: Future Support needed for Nontraditional Students

Subtheme 4.1: Mentorship Programs

The participants identified several support types that might reduce the barriers and challenges nontraditional Head Start teachers face as students pursuing higher educational goals. Seven of the nine participants identified financial barriers and challenges, five identified sources of support such as mentors, cohort groups, training programs to teach nontraditional students how to acquire financial assistance and how to navigate through the curriculum: and incentives for completing a higher degree. Other supportive activities participants offered for consideration included,

- Forming cohorts so that teachers can take classes together and support each other (P-1, P-3, P-7, P-9).
- Establishing mentorship programs (P-4, P-5, P-7, P-8).
- Establishing a training program to show nontraditional students how to apply for financial aid and how to navigate through the curriculum (P-1, P-5, P-7).
- Providing access to online learning. Nontraditional students first need to learn and build confidence in the challenging technological advancements to be successful. Once mastered success can be easily obtained (P-4, P-6, P-9).

P-3 said, “I strongly believe if nontraditional students had someone to guide them like a mentor, they would be more successful. P- 5 supported the same by indicating “I believe in order to support future nontraditional students pursuing higher education, if financial assistance and a mentorship program were in place challenges and barriers

would be easier to face. P-6 and P-9 were concerned about providing training in online learning. P-9 surmised,

> I believe in the future, support to assist nontraditional students should be financial assistance to pay for courses. Secondly, training related to navigating on-line and understanding how to prepare and submit papers would be helpful. I believe if there were mentoring activities for Head Start teachers pursuing higher education, a mentor to guide teachers through higher education assignments, these efforts alone would promote greater success for nontraditional students and would expedite the process related to the completion of a higher education degree.

Subtheme 4.2: Tangible and Intangible Resources

Some resources that participants found useful as they pursued higher education goals included tangible and intangible support. Tangible resources included resources such as desktop computer, use of the library; online resources, writing center assistance; a college advisor and a counselor; financial aid; proofreading resources; support from family and coworkers; work and educational funds; family and occasionally church family; childcare, guidance, used textbooks; notes; coworkers' assistance; and a teenage daughter demonstrating how to navigate and access information online. Intangible resources included words of support from family and coworkers and networking. P-9 stated,

> My resources were co-workers helping me and my teenage daughter showing me ways to navigate and access information online. Using old textbooks also helped a

number of times to offset cost and provided notes which aided me in successfully completing classes.

Subtheme 4.3: Financial Support and Training

Supports available to nontraditional students pursuing higher education were identified and included different kinds of financial support from different sources. All nine participants identified at least one kind of support, including financial support from agencies and organizations, financial support from agencies and organizations; credit for life experiences; mentorship and financial assistance; monetary support and approved time off to work on degrees; tuition reimbursement, travel, and time off to students completing higher education; up-to-date laptops with the latest technology and training on how to use the technology; tuition reimbursement and mentorship programs to help students; time off, financial assistance, and training to help students pursue a degree; and educational leave, paid time off, mentorship programs, finances, and tuition reimbursement.

Participants had specific ideas relative to the type and nature of support nontraditional students need to increase the likelihood of them enrolling in higher education and maintaining the requirements for earning the credentials necessary to maintain employment as a Head Start Teacher. As P-1 stated, “Many agencies and organizations provide financial support and employer support.” P-4 and P-5 further clarified how agencies and organizations provide support. P-4 explained that most agencies provide monetary support in conjunction with approved time off to work on

degrees, and P-5 added, "Other agencies provide tuition reimbursement, travel and often time off to students completing higher education degrees."

P-7 called attention to other agencies that provide tuition reimbursement and mentorship programs to assist students through higher education programs. P-8 explained that many agencies provide time off for students to complete educational requirements. On the other hand, P-8 surmised, "Unlike Head Start, most agencies provide educational leaves to employees for required classes. Employees are able to use their benefit time which means they can still be paid."

In support of P-1's comment, P-3 and P-9 called attention to the need of mentorship programs. P-9 offered, "A mentorship program would be ideal. Most importantly, finances and/or tuition from organizations are useful to assist students who are pursuing higher education.

P-6 thought technology and related training could be a part of the support available for nontraditional students. P-6 said, "After working in the school district, I realized that the support to help me learn fast moving technology was valuable. We were given up to date laptops and technology training."

Summary

The project deliverable was constructed based on the findings related to the four research questions proposed for this study. Using Research Question 1-4, I explored (a) how Head Start teachers perceive the way their life experiences have influenced their pursuit of higher education; (b) what barriers Head Start teachers experience going back to school as adult learners; (c) how do Head Start teachers cope with the barriers as they

pursue successful completion of higher degrees; (d) and what kind of support do Head Start Teachers need to successfully complete a higher education degree.

Findings showed that life experiences relative to age, marital status, number of children, barriers, coping skills, supports, and other life experiences relate directly to nontraditional students and their success rate in higher educational institutions. Similarly, participants identified internal and external life experiences that they found helpful as they worked diligently to complete higher education requirements. Insights derived from Research Questions 1-4 will be useful for constructing the project deliverable as an outcome of these results.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. The results of this project study may provide the local Head Start organization administrators and local college administrators with information to help them understand the barriers that exist while Head Start teachers pursue higher education and to understand the support nontraditional students need to be successful in completing their degree.

Rationale

In the research study, I explored the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students pursuing higher education. The rationale for focusing on the attainment of higher education as the local problem for this qualitative project study was to highlight the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers along with the support needed as they pursue higher education (Garrity et al., 2019). I sought to identify barriers that impede the progress of nontraditional students as they pursued higher education degrees. The major findings indicate that mentoring activities related to self-discipline and navigating higher education courses; mentoring activities related to financial assistance and financial resources; mentoring activities on balancing higher education, work, and family; and mentoring activities on technology and technical assistance related to higher education courses/requirements were desired by al1 participants of this study.

Researchers have found that a position paper can provide an avenue to present a factual summary of a study to gain stakeholder attention, provide background information and details of facts pertaining to relevant issues, add to existing body of knowledge regarding barriers nontraditional students encounter while pursuing higher education, provide a solution to the problem, and add to the credibility of the study (Newsom & Haynes, 2018). The term *white paper* is often used to refer to position papers (AIC Position Paper Guidelines, 2013). A position paper suggests an established and agreed upon approach to an identified problem. A position paper is an official report with the purpose of advocating a certain position, providing an argument for a specific position, or recommending a solution to a given issue (Bala et al., 2018). The position paper should include a topic, purpose, and data and be no more than two pages in length with an introduction, description, and conclusion (Newsom & Haynes, 2018). A position paper is an important tool that can provide information on a solution to a problem in an intellectual and summarizing manner (Newsom & Haynes, 2018). Therefore, a position paper was the best approach to present the findings of this study and use the data as evidence supporting a recommendation for a mentoring program to address barriers, coping strategies, and support needed by Head Start teachers to successful complete higher education degree requirements.

Review of the Literature

Search Strategies

The literature review for this position paper was grounded on two major frameworks. The first was Smith's (1980) ISSTAL model of participation in adult

learning that applies to nontraditional students pursuing higher education. This model identifies social–psychological and situational variables that impact an adult's decision to participate in adult education (Boeren et al., 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The second conceptual model was Tinto's (1984, 1996, 1998, 2017) academic and social integration model. Tinto's model is based on two core principles: academic integration and social integration.

To locate literature to support the current knowledge base related to the project, I selected academic journals and peer-reviewed articles from databases such as Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search Complete, governmental databases, ProQuest, Sage, and Education Research Complete, as well as from diverse websites. The literature review includes current findings on mentoring and supporting nontraditional or older adult students. To guide the literature search, I used keywords such as *mentoring circles, paired mentoring, coping strategies, internal/external motivation*, and *self-esteem, position papers in qualitative research, and white paper in qualitative research*. Topics in the literature review include (a) increasing success of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students, (b) meeting federal mandates through mentoring and professional development, (c) addressing financial issues and acquiring financial support, (d) providing technology training and assistance, and (e) balancing work, school, and personal life.

Strategies to Increasing Success of Head Start Teachers

Findings from the research study revealed that participants used varied strategies to increase their success as Head Start teachers. Three (33%) of the participants identified

family members, three (33%) identified praying, two (22%) identified coworkers, and one (11%) identified eating as coping strategies. Added to these overall coping strategies, six (66%) of the participants identified focusing, communicating with counselors, and in general, doing what needs to be done; dropping classes; and having faith, drive, and determination.

With the college population shifting from young dependent adults to older populations who work part-time or full-time, have family commitments, and are striving to balance time among competing responsibilities, nontraditional students face challenges in their pursuit of higher education that impede their progress to graduation. Osam et al. (2017) provided insights on the barriers that adult learners face as they pursue higher education. Osam et al. also offered solutions that educational planners in higher education institutions can use to help nontraditional students overcome some of the barriers they face. Osam et al. (2017) identified three kinds of barriers that nontraditional students face: situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Situational barriers derive from issues related to family responsibilities, limited finances, health issues, conflicting work schedules, and poor transportation, but barriers relative to family life such as gender roles and financial issues were the most prominent situational barriers among the nontraditional students in their study (Osam et al., 2017). Situational barriers include issues related to limited childcare, increased work responsibilities, marriage issues relating to conflicting ideology about college reentry, family relocations, and so forth (Fowle, 2018; Osam et al. 2017; Spagnola & Yogos, 2020).

Institutional barriers Osam et al. (2017) and Nicklin et al. (2019) have identified include difficulty navigating the higher education system; absence of clear or definitive pathways; limited time to spend with admissions and advisement staff who spend their time primarily with younger/traditional students; difficulty in understanding policies, following procedures, and navigating websites. Nontraditional students in Osam et al.'s study expressed having to locate their own resources for remediation to ensure mastery of college work and having to make curricular choices without adequate guidance or assistance. Other institutional barriers relate to difficulty in trying to rectify scheduling conflicts without adequate assistance, having limited course offerings in evenings, inconvenient class schedules, and problems with college resources such as financial aid and enrollment services (Fowle, 2018; Pearson, 2019; Remenick & Bergman, 2021).

Dispositional barriers Osam et al. (2017) described included lack of confidence because of faculty perceptions of older adult learners' low academic skills and fearfulness about personal ability to meet the academic requirements of college and anxiety/fear of the unknown about reentry into college and insecurities about personal ability to succeed. Low self-efficacy resulting from anxiety, low performance in previous schools, and low self-esteem are paramount dispositional barriers (Osam et al., 2017; Spagnola & Yogos, 2020). Added to these dispositional barriers are issues such as perceived differences between adults and other students, feelings of exclusion from the school environment, lack of acceptance into the research culture of colleges, feeling out of place, and anxiety about succeeding academically (Yu, 2019).

Within higher education, mentoring is an increasingly available option to encourage students to reach their higher education goal (Collier, 2017). Although mentoring activities for nontraditional students vary, researchers described the overall goal of mentoring as initiatives to provide the assistance and support nontraditional students need to keep them in school until they reach their higher education goal (Adams, 2019; Ambrosetti et al., 2017; Atkins et al., 2021; Jabel, 2021).

Meeting Federal Mandates Through Mentoring Programs

Findings from the research study showed that participants, in meeting the mandate for higher education as a Head Start teacher, had to search for their own strategies to meet the federal mandates. Researchers reported that mentoring programs were useful (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Muller & Beiten, 2013), but findings showed that participants in this study used other coping mechanisms to meet federal mandates. For example, P-8 explained that a couple times they tried to pay for the required classes and had to neglect paying their utilities and move in with a family member. P-9 described barriers of finance and family experiences, suggesting that higher education requirements interfered with parenting responsibilities, spousal relationships, and financial stability.

For Head Start programs to receive federal funding, lead teachers must have a bachelor's degree. Therefore, the completion of higher education degrees by Head Start teachers positively impacts both federal funding and improved instruction for preschool children. The federal Head Start mandate requires all Head Start teachers to hold an associate degree and 50% of teachers within each Head Start program to hold a college degree in early childhood education by September 30, 2013 (HSRA, 2007). Being an

older adult in a higher education environment includes challenges and issues that differ from the traditional student who enters college immediately after graduating from high school. Financial constraints, family responsibilities, and time management were among the most challenging barriers Hoffman (2016) found in a study of nontraditional students in a prekindergarten teacher education program. Similar to the participants in the current study, the teachers in Hoffman's study had families and worked on a full-time basis as they attended college either on a part-time or a full-time basis.

A combination of such factors along with instructional requirement of activities such as field experiences, special individual projects, and observation hours required can lead to nontraditional students experiencing stress, discouragement, and disconnection with their college initiative. Most of the students in Hoffman's (2016) associate degree program indicated that their passion for working with small children was the driving force that kept them motivated to pursue higher education. Findings from several studies in the literature review suggest that nontraditional students in teacher education programs could benefit from resources and programs designed to take into consideration the unique situations and needs of older adults who are nontraditional students (Collier, 2017; Gonzales, 2018; Jepson & Tobolowsky, 2020; Potter, 2021; Spagnola & Yagos, 2020).

Adams (2019) studied the effects of a mentoring program designed to empower and motivate older undergraduate students through the process of engagement in conducting publishable research. High-quality mentorship benefits faculty as well as students (Adams, 2019). Mentoring increases students' knowledge, concepts, and skills and increases their self-efficacy and self-confidence (Adams, 2019). The experience

allows students to expand their skills and knowledge, increase self-efficacy and self-confidence, increase learning gains, and connect classroom learning to real-world settings. Being involved in mentoring can inspire older adult students to continue their education and pursue higher degrees (Adams, 2019).

Harding et al. (2019) provided documentation from a national study of Head Start teachers' professional development in which they examined teachers' well-being, attitudes, and practices in relationship to increased job satisfaction and improved level of learning activities in mathematics. Teachers' mentoring support related to a higher level of developmentally appropriate attitudes among Head Start children. Professional development activities did not relate to teachers' well-being, attitudes, or teaching practices. Early care and education programs shape children's daily experiences in ways such as teachers' well-being, attitudes about child development, and teaching practices, which influences children's learning.

Harding et al. (2019) used data from a study of 484 Head Start teachers across the nation to explore whether teachers' job satisfaction, depression, developmentally appropriate attitudes, and frequency of engagement in math and literacy activities associated with overall professional development supports among teachers. Professional development support that significantly associated with outcomes were specific teacher outcomes, although associations were weak. To contextualize findings from the study, Harding et al. (2019) called attention to ways in which professional development supports and teachers' outcomes changed to include some key Head Start policy changes. Findings from this research contribute to previous research that offered initiatives to

prepare and support teachers in their pursuit of higher education as they prepare to teach of some of the most vulnerable children in the nation (Betts et al., 2017; Cantora, 2020; Merrill, 2018; Nicklin, 2019).

Strategies for Addressing Financial Issues for Nontraditional Students

In the present study, all nine (100%) the participants identified, directly or indirectly, financial issues as barriers and challenges that made it difficult to continue with higher education. Family stressors, university requirements, life problems, and working two jobs often were indicators of financial instability. Adult students experience major financial barriers in their quest for higher education. The lack of financial support is an area of need among older adult students that Chen and Hossler (2016) examined in their study of older adults pursuing higher education. The effects of financial aid on college success of 2-year beginning nontraditional students were the focus of the study. In conducting this study, Chen and Hossler (2016) found answers to research questions that centered on the effects of financial sources such as Pell Grants, subsidized student loans, and unsubsidized student loans on 6-year college outcomes of nontraditional students. The three areas examined in the study included (a) degree attainment, (b) system departure, and (c) continuous enrollment without a degree. Findings suggest that nontraditional students tended to drop out during their third year in college. All three types of financial aid were effective in lowering risks of dropping out among nontraditional students. Neither of the three financial sources was considerably effective in insuring timely degree completion.

Chen and Hossler (2016) cautioned that these findings do have implications for policy and practice, when designing when designing and implementing policy as well as ways and means of addressing the wide range of differences within the pathways of nontraditional students and their backgrounds and barriers to higher education. The findings also contribute to recommendations to promote persistence in college attendance that leads to graduation.

Impact of Technology Training and Assistance to Learners' Success

All nine (100%) the participants in the research study offered examples of the kinds of support they thought should be available to nontraditional students. Among the support offered, participants called attention to the need of up-to-date laptops with the latest technology and training on how to use the technology. Older adults' descriptions of digital technology and their experiences in interacting in digital inclusion sessions provided useful data for Betts et al. (2017) as they explored the lived experiences of older adults in their quest for professional growth and personal use of technology. The study included 17 older adults, ranging in ages from 54 to 85 years old. The participants engaged in two focus group discussions that lasted 90 minutes each. Based on open-ended interview questions, interpretative phenomenological analysis yielded two themes including (a) the thirst for personal knowledge improvement and (b) a list of basic skills for advanced digital technology advancement and development.

Betts et al. (2017) performed separate content analysis to determine the type of instruments participants found useful as digital technology. Findings from the study revealed that participants identified digital technology most frequently as computers and

cellphones. These researchers concluded that this group of older adults have a wide range of knowledge, concepts, and skills relative to digital technology, want up-to-date skills, and knowledge enhancement through one-to-one mentoring sessions.

Similar findings were derived from a study of older adults engaged in technology-based instruction used to improve the level of learning outcomes and transfer. Wolfson et al (2014) conducted this study to provide an overview of the cognitive and socioemotional changes associated with aging and to identify ways these changes can be accommodated in a technology-based training environment. Based on their findings from this study, Wolfson et al. (2014) recommended that technology-based training for older students be provided in a technology-based training environment. Technology-based training should capture the attention and interest of older student, and the instructor who teaches older adults should provide feedback on a regular basis and adaptive guidance on a one-on one basis. Intellectual reasoning, prompts, and principles from cognitive load theory and theory of multimedia learning should be available. Instructors should include simple instructional activities that are consistent throughout the course. With a focus on organizations as well as business schools, Wolfson et al. (2014) also discussed contextual variables older learners need to enhance training or improve their transfer of training. Wolfson et al. (2014) also recommended areas needed for further exploration geared toward age-specific differences in technology-based instruction design.

Strategies Used in Balancing Work, School, and Personal Life

In the research study that informed this project, the participants, nontraditional students, expressed concerns related to balancing higher education with their personal

life. Seven (78%) of the participants indicated that barriers derived from financial issues, failing coursework, and family problems. Other findings showed that the most pressing barriers encountered in pursuing higher education included financial, parenting, balancing family, work, and school, and traveling to class when the weather was bad sometimes (4-hour round trip). Older adults face many responsibilities as they return to school to pursue higher education. Yet, little research is available to show how older adult or nontraditional students manage to present or maintain a sense of personal well-being while they are part-time or full-time, pursue higher education, and give attention to family responsibilities and personal needs.

The two theories researchers used to study balancing work, school, and personal lives were conservation of resources theory and work-family enrichment theory (Nicklin et al., 2019). Using these theories, Nicklin et al., explored personal and psychological resources that enrich older students' higher education experiences and decrease imbalance and stress. This study included 231 graduate students who worked full-time jobs while they pursued higher education. Nicklin et al. (2019) described findings that showed mindfulness related negatively to stress via perceptions of conflicts and enrichment, whereas self-compassion, resilience, and recovery experience related negatively to stress through conflict and not through enrichment.

These findings support the work of Eller et al. (2016) showing that graduate students who can balance work, school, and personal life may experience higher levels of well-being as they pursue higher education because of their involvement in a higher number of enrichment experiences and a lower number of conflicting experiences at

work, in school, and in their personal lives. Eller et al. (2016) conducted this study of balancing work, study, and home responsibilities to understand the strategies that nontraditional students employ to manage the responsibilities related to work home and study. Participants in this study included 18 participants who participated in individual interviews, which generated a list of individual tactics participants used to balance the demands of home, work, and school. The analysis of data allowed Eller et al. (2016) to identify 18 strategies participants used to balance responsibilities of home, work, and school that the authors classified as behavioral, communicative, physical, and temporal. The researchers concluded that older or nontraditional students develop an active role by understanding the expectancies of the individuals in their environments from home, work, institution of higher learning where they live, work, and study. Then older or nontraditional students devise limitations with a degree of flexibility that produce a sense of equal balance among these three equally important categories of responsibilities.

Project Description

The project chosen was a position paper that provides an overview of the study and recommendations to be used for the potential development of various mentoring activities at a local Head Start organization. The results from the qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews revealed the firsthand perceptions of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students while pursuing higher education. Findings from research questions 1-4 of the project study provided an outline for constructing the project deliverable.

Interviews were conducted with nine Head Start teachers who are currently or were employed at the study site. All were females, ranging in age from 39 to 60 years old. As nontraditional students, six of the participants were over 50 years old. The findings from the analysis of the interviews highlighted the need for mentoring activities. Based on the themes and subthemes from participant interviews, the following mentoring activities were noted repeatedly by participants as potential means to assist them with the successful completion of higher education degrees:

- Mentoring activities related to self-discipline and navigating through higher education courses (Theme 1, Subtheme 1.1, Theme 3, Subtheme 3.1, and Subtheme 3.2).
- Mentoring activities related to financial assistance and financial resources. (Theme 2, Subtheme 2.1, Subtheme 2.2, Subtheme 2.3)
- Mentoring activities on balancing higher education, work, and family (Theme 2, Subtheme 2.1, Subtheme 2.2, Subtheme 2.3, Theme 3, Subtheme 3.1, and Subtheme 3.2)
- Mentoring activities on technology and technical assistance related to higher education courses/requirements (Theme 4, Subtheme 4.3).

The goal of the position paper is to "elucidate the knowledge gap" by providing "evidence-based review of options" leading to recommendations (Bala et al. p.1). The position paper developed for the capstone project includes a recommendation for a change to the training policy of the study site, to create mentoring activities reflective of the dimensions listed above. Themes uncovered from the analysis of the interviews of the

research study are to be integrated into the recommended mentoring project. As supported by the findings from the literature, mentoring increases students' knowledge, concepts, and skills as well as increases their self-efficacy and self-confidence, learning gains, and connects classroom learning to real world settings of (Adams, 2019; Gordon, 2017; Harding et al., 2019; Sowell, 2017).

Mentoring is also viewed as an approach to support beginning teachers, promote insight, and offer an opportunity for reflection (Hall et al., 2017; Nolan, 2016; Schwartz & Dori, 2016). Being involved in mentoring can inspire older adult students to continue their education and pursue higher degrees (Adams, 2019).

I am no longer employed at the Head Start site of this study; therefore, I cannot implement the recommendations. What I can do, however, is provide a position paper for administrators, supervisors, managers, and stakeholders at the Head Start study site to bring to their attention the importance of having mentoring activities available to Head Start teachers to meet the federal mandates of the Head Start program. If Head Start leaders find the recommendation from this position paper worthwhile, they may implement the recommendations and develop specific programs both at the local and other regional Head Start centers in the Midwestern region.

Rationale for the Project Genre

I chose a position paper as the project genre for this basic qualitative research study because the results of this study combined with the goal of this study are a good fit for this type of project. A position paper can serve to transfer knowledge and understanding of a particular topic, provide information to help decision making process

or present a professional perspective. Often a position paper explains the results or conclusions resulting from research collaborations, or design and development effort.

Researchers have found that a position paper can provide an avenue to present factual summary of the study in which to gain stakeholders' attention, provide background information, details of facts pertaining to relevant issues, add to existing body of knowledge regarding barriers nontraditional students encounter while pursuing higher education, provide a solution to the problem and add to credibility of the study (Newsom & Haynes, 2018). The term white paper is often used to refer to position papers (AIC Position Paper Guidelines, 2013). A position paper suggests an established and agreed upon approach to an identified problem. It is an official report with the purpose of advocating a certain position, providing an argument for a specific position, or recommending a solution to the given issue (Bala et al., 2018). The position paper should include a topic, purpose, and data and be no more than 2 pages in length with an introduction, description, and conclusion (Newsom & Haynes, 2018). A position paper is an important tool that can provide information on a solution to the problem in an intellectual and summarizing manner (Newsom & Haynes, 2018). Therefore, a position paper is the best approach to present the findings of this study and use the data as evidence on why a mentoring program is recommended to address barriers, coping strategies and support needed by Head Start teachers to successful complete higher education degree requirements. I am no longer employed at the Head Start site of this study; therefore, I cannot implement the recommendations. What I can do, however, is provide a position paper for administrators, supervisors, managers, and stakeholders at

the Head Start study site to bring to their attention the importance of having mentoring activities available to Head Start teachers to meet the federal mandates of the Head Start program. If Head Start leaders find the recommendation from this position paper worthwhile, they may implement the recommendations and develop specific programs both at the local and other regional Head Start centers in the Midwestern region.

I will present the position paper containing the recommendations on mentoring activities at the study site. After contacting the local Head Start director, I request an opportunity to present findings and recommendations. I will also request permission to share the findings of this study with the leaders of other Head Start organizations. I will also request a meeting with the education chair of local colleges to share findings related to the non-traditional students whom they serve. In sharing my findings, I will discuss the content and recommendations of the position paper.

By enlightening the key stakeholders, leaders, and representatives of other Head Start organizations, relative to the possible valuable results of this study, when implemented, I may begin to create opportunities for Head Start teachers to be successful as they complete their bachelors' degrees. Over time, mentoring activities as described could be viewed as a valuable opportunity for employees. It could be viewed as a part of the career ladder for teachers, who have a passion for working with such a vulnerable population as Head Start children and their parents, while being successful as they complete higher education degrees.

Barriers to Implementation

The Head Start program is very similar to other federally funded programs. Budget constraints continue to present barriers to program development and the implementation process. The process of creating an additional full-time or part-time position or adding additional duties to current staff, requiring them to conduct mentoring activities, could increase the budget for the study site. Additional funds may not be available, and even if they are, obtaining funds on an ongoing basis may require approval from the Department of Health and Human Services. While Head Start leaders and programs are tasked with promoting the school readiness of children, the mentoring activities are somewhat peripheral to the overall mission of Head Start and may not be prioritized.

As a researcher for this project study, I may be available to respond to inquiries about my study and the position paper. I do not have an assignment that would allow me to make or implement any recommendations. I do not work at the study site in which this study was conducted. I am a consultant and an independent contractor, providing educational training in my community. It is my hope and understanding that the position paper I created, will be used at the study site, and beyond, to improve and increase the success of nontraditional students who are completing higher education degrees.

Project Evaluation

A researcher-developed instrument and individual interviews will be used to evaluate the mentoring activities (see Appendix A). The objective of the project is to assist Head Start teachers with successful completion of their bachelor's degrees.

Clutterback et al. (2017) proposed that prior to implementing mentoring activities, there needs to be a baseline or starting point identified prior to the program, and then compare the baseline with the results of the implementation. Clutterback et al. (2017) discussed the importance of having evaluation models and frameworks to determine the effectiveness of all mentoring activities.

Baht (2018) listed two common types of evaluation models for mentoring and the improvement of the learning process. The formative and summative approaches can be combined to gain helpful information on the effectiveness of the mentoring program. For this proposed project, formative and summative evaluation methods could be applied by Head Start administration and managers as they are implementing the program and upon completion of the program.

Formative evaluations are used to monitor the instructional process to determine whether learning is taking place (Baht, 2018). There are many advantages of the formative process. It provides sufficient information to teachers for modifying teaching. The formative process provides feedback to students as well as teachers while facilitating retention and the transfer of learning. Students can also modify their behavior after receiving feedback from the evaluation. Equally important, the formative process can work as a self-evaluation device for learners (Baht, 2018).

Formative evaluation could be completed by conducting group or one-to-one discussions, creating checklist or answering surveys. The summative evaluation approach can serve as a guide to improve curriculum, curriculum planning, and teaching methods (Baht, 2018). This method may be performed after the mentoring activities have been

completed. I propose evaluating the mentoring activities formatively through checklist and surveys. A summative evaluation may consist of an assessment at the end of the program.

It was not possible to compare this project plan with other mentoring activities. I could not find any evidence of mentoring activities used to assist Head Start teachers while pursuing higher education to complete bachelor's degrees. What appears to be lacking in the private and public education sector is the recognition of the value of mentoring activities to assist the adult learner in achieving higher education requirements to meet required mandates.

Project Implications

The information in this position paper may assist stakeholders, supervisors, and others affected by the study problem to assist Head Start teachers in becoming more successful at completing their degrees. Implications for social change could include greater moral, increased self-confidence, knowledge, skills, and abilities for Head Start teachers who have successfully completed bachelor's degrees with the assistance of a seasoned Head Start teacher. This could inspire existing staff at the Head Start site with desires to become a Head Start teacher. This project could be seen as a career ladder within the organization and an overall retention tool for Head Start. On a broader scale this project could serve as a template for other Head Starts organizations who are required by the Head Start Program Performance Standards to implement a formalized approach to staff training and development. Overall, implications for social change through mentoring could enhance staff skills, foster positive relationships in the

workplace, create a career ladder, improve positive child outcomes, and ensure greater school readiness for the children within the Head Start program.

Conclusion

In Section 3 of this project study, I described how the use of a position paper is the appropriate format to disseminate research findings and offer suggestions for mentoring activities to assist Head Start teachers pursuing a bachelor's degree. Specific research details are provided along with implementation and evaluation suggestions for the project at the local Midwest Head Start site.

In the final section I reflect on the process and the scholarly journey of becoming a researcher from the development of the project to implications for future research. I discussed the project's strengths and limitations, along with alternate approaches. Additionally, I reflect on my growth and development as a contributor to the scholarly world.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In this study, I explored Head Start teachers' barriers and life experiences when pursuing higher education and completing a bachelor's degree. After analyzing the data and conducting a comprehensive review of the literature, I concluded that a position paper would be the most appropriate course of action to communicate the findings. In this section, I discuss the project strengths and limitations as well as alternative approaches. I also reflect on my journey as a scholarly researcher. Finally, I discuss the potential for social change through the recommendations in my position paper. These recommendations have the potential of strengthening Head Start programs by identifying barriers and coping strategies and identifying support Head Start teachers need for completion of a higher education degree. The findings from this qualitative project study could lead to professional development training and agency support to assist future Head Start teachers pursuing higher education.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The primary strength of the project was the opportunity to dialogue with the participants virtually. Several participants were in remote locations, preventing face-to-face contact, so using Zoom allowed this process to happen. As a result, I was able to see and hear from the participants directly and discover their views and experiences as teachers pursuing higher education. As a neutral observer, I was able to elicit their views in a way that someone in their organization or someone in authority may not have been able to elicit; at the very least, their answers regarding organizational and authority

figures may have been guarded. The participants shared several things I expected to hear, but I was often surprised by their reports. For example, all nine participants reported enjoying their job and expressed how the positive impact of pursuing higher education affected their families and the lives of others. Participants' concerns were centered around how they were perceived, treated, financial constraints, and the lack of mentors to guide them through the higher education process, not about the nature of their employment.

A limitation during the data collection was that I asked only specific questions, although they were designed to be open-ended. There were many topics I could have asked about participants' life experiences while pursuing higher education as a Head Start teacher that might have been relevant, such as participants' individual parenting experiences. In addition, the study was weighted heavily toward Head Start teachers as opposed to supervisors, resulting in a 5:1 ratio. Views of supervisors could have been valuable. These concerns are inherent in qualitative research, but a qualitative study should not attempt to be comprehensive, but rather serve as a springboard for future studies (see Creswell, 2012).

The deliverable for this project was a position paper containing a series of recommendations focusing on creating a mentoring program that may assist Head Start teachers returning to college as nontraditional students to complete a higher education degree. The recommendations stated by the participants of this study were: the provision of funds to help Head Start teachers meet the requirements to keep their positions, providing mentors, professional development training related to acquiring financial

assistance and navigating through the curriculum, training in using technology and a mentor to guide them through the process of successfully completing a higher education degree. This mentoring process would allow teachers to develop newly learned skills, share insights with others, and promote more open and active communication that may allow the organization to understand the issues of teachers pursuing higher education and become more proactive in supporting their needs. The result of incorporating a mentoring program may impact the retention rate and is likely to maximize the positive effects of early learning while enhancing the quality of life for the teachers, children, and families they serve.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies, and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. Despite the Head Start mandate that prompted a higher education degree requirement, the benefits, pay, recruitment, and retention of teachers for Head Start programs have not increased. Retaining teachers is essential to Head Start. The retention of teachers provides continuity of care for Head Start children, assists with maintaining head start standards and program requirements. Equally noteworthy is the requiring of bachelor's degrees for prekindergarten teachers. This requirement is likely to maximize the positive effects of early learning on young children's school readiness. In this research study, I looked at one Head Start program in the state of Illinois. A different approach could have included participants from different states and Head Start regions, which would result in fewer limitations by widening the geographic area. There was

limited options to present this information to stakeholders, management, and Head Start leadership to prompt change. I considered two main options for disseminating the research: internal publication and external publication. I chose internal publication in the form of a position paper following the research study.

A position paper was my preferred method to present the information gained from this study and to disseminate the recommendations of the proposed change to the training policy to implement a mentoring program for Head Start teachers pursuing higher education. The position paper may be presented to Head Start leadership. There are a few alternative ways in which to present the research findings, such as publication in a professional journal or presenting at a professional conference. However, these external formats may not have given Head Start leadership direct and convenient access to the study's results. Therefore, these alternative options may not have been the best method to provide the outcomes of this study to Head Start leadership.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

As an educator, adjunct professor, and a student researcher, I have realized that the life of a student is centered on gathering information and acquiring knowledge to apply it. I have grown considerably from my journey becoming a researcher and through the doctoral program. Although there were times when I was apprehensive, my resilience, commitment, dedication, and internal driven purpose helped keep me focused. I realized an important part of scholarly commitment is peer engagement and giving back to the scholarly community through research. As a lifelong learner, I have uncovered many interests and passions. My professional and public servant journey has been one of

identifying problems and finding resolutions. Deciding what to research in general was easy. I was able to see the problem firsthand, how it impacted the lives of so many and the need for change.

Research can be complex and requires resiliency, commitment, faith, and patience. The process of designing and performing this research and creating the project was enlightening and fulfilling. Early in the process, I discovered that alignment is a much bigger process than I anticipated, essential to making sure the research flows and stays on target. Throughout this process, I have tried to practice continuous reflection and iteration in all stages to make sure I was staying true to my intent. The preparation and design of the study required careful thought. The nature of the problem drove the design of the research questions, while the nature of the research questions compelled the study approach. I learned that every step of the research must be grounded in theory, evaluations, methodology, and practice.

For the project, I found it was necessary to support every step with data from the literature and responses from participants. I learned not to make assumptions about what the data may be. It was enlightening to discover that what was relevant to the participants was not what I expected. It was also interesting to see the volume of information gleaned from careful and thorough thematic analysis of the data.

I learned that research is rigorous, and every step must be well documented, detailed, and descriptive. Particularly important was the realization that one misstep in the study's design or execution could invalidate the study and its findings. Likewise, the project deliverable was valuable only because it was produced from careful research. I

believe that the hard work associated with this project showed me the true meaning of scholarship and gave me the utmost respect for all researchers who have conducted studies.

Reflection of the Importance of the Work

The social importance of research depends on two things: the number of people it can affect and the degree of good it can do. The number of people potentially affected by the findings of this study could be large. In 1965, the Head Start program was designed to help break the cycle of poverty by providing preschool children of low-income families with a comprehensive program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs. In 2019, Head Start served more than 37 million children, birth to age 5, and their families. According to Head Start ECKLC, during 2020, over 1,436,008 Head Start teachers were employed by Head Start in the United States. This qualitative project has the potential to strengthen Head Start programs by identifying barriers, coping strategies, and support Head Start teachers need for completion of a higher education degree. In addition, the findings from this qualitative project study could lead to professional development training and agency support to assist future Head Start teachers as they pursue higher education.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The significance of identifying and understanding the support nontraditional students need while pursuing higher education cannot be underestimated. This project could affect social change by including a mentoring program that provides support, role-modeling, and success related to completing a higher education degree. The impact of my

research and position paper for social change is significant within Head Start programs throughout the U.S. The social change will not only impact head start teachers, head start administration, head start children and families, local colleges, and other early childhood education professionals. The recommendations in this project may provide benefits to the head start teachers and head start programs, including career ladders, upward mobility, improving stability, professional development, economic well-being, which may also support the well-being of head start teachers, the children, and families they serve. In addition, I believe effective and meaningful training programs such as the mentoring program noted in this position paper, if successful, could be standardized and implemented at other head start programs.

Future research could include a follow-up study to determine the effectiveness of the mentoring program and whether there was an increase in the success rate of teachers completing their degrees, including the impact on the head start program. An additional future study at the same center could be conducted to identify additional or new barriers and coping strategies head start teachers encounter while in pursuit of higher education. This study would also be beneficial to support future nontraditional students in completing their higher education requirements.

Conclusion

The motivation for this project came while serving as a Head Start director of a local head start program. The head start mandate impacted the lives of many. Seeing firsthand the impact on teachers, teachers resigning, lateral moves, transfers to other departments while others were struggling to meet the requirements led me to share an

overt problem with others. I have always had a passion for the importance and power of education. Nelson Mandela says it best “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. I developed this project study and subsequent position paper to provide insights necessary to understand the lived experiences of a group of teachers in the head start program who returned to college as nontraditional students. The focus of the study included exploring the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies participants needed for the successful completion of their degree.

The position paper was the logical conclusion of the literature review and project study. The position paper can provide concise information to stakeholders to enhance knowledge and promote buy in to elicit change. The goal of the position paper was to present the findings of the research study and provide recommendations for decision makers at the local university to consider, relative to the implementation of a mentoring program to improve the success rate of older adults as nontraditional students pursuing a degree in higher education. A conclusion is that participants’ perspectives about their life experiences, barriers they face, coping strategies they used, and the support they needed could form the basis for a mentoring program for Head Start teachers returning to college as nontraditional students to pursue a college degree in the future.

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Appendix A: Project Study

Life Experiences of Head Start Teachers in a Midwestern Region Pursuing Higher Education

The Goal of the Project Study

The goal of the position paper is to present the findings of the research study and provide recommendations for decision-makers at the local university to consider relative to the im0plementation of a mentoring program to improve the success rate of older adult students pursuing higher education.

The Problem

Head Start teachers encounter barriers as they pursue higher education to meet mandated requirements of completing a college degree to continue employment as a Head Start teacher. Exploring perceived life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of nontraditional students provided insights about Head Start teachers pursuing higher education both at the local site and nationwide.

Nontraditional students spend many hours in the workforce; therefore, it is very important to recognize, understand, and call attention to the barriers prohibiting nontraditional students or adult learners from pursuing higher educational opportunities (Holmegaard et al., 2017; Meuleman et al., 2015). Barriers related to adult learning are classified as institutional, situational, and dispositional.

Institutional barriers include many standard practices of universities that challenge adult learner (Garrity et. al, 2019). Situational barriers are external factors connected to the life and personal experiences of the nontraditional student, including prior knowledge, the learning environment, cultural consideration, and an individual student's personal environment (Holmegaard et al., 2017).

Dispositional barriers relate to the personal perceptions that students create about their own skills and abilities to pursue higher education as well as their own attitudes relative to their ability to learn (Lin, 2016). These barriers, according to Lin include academic preparedness, lack of motivation, finances, income, time, and cultural capital (Davidson, 2016; Homegaard et al., 2017; Rabourn et al., 2018).

Researchers highlighted factors that are key for nontraditional students to experience success in higher education. Moreover, these researchers concurred on the factors important to the success of nontraditional students while they pursue higher education (Tinto, 2017; Trolian et al., 2016).

Institutional flexibility, faculty accessibility, academic support, financial need, student goals, persistence as motivation and social support are the

factors that empower nontraditional students in completing their educational goal (Tinto, 2017; Trolian, et al. 2016; Zepke, 2015).

A gap in practice existed between teacher educational requirements stated in the Head Start Reauthorization Act of 2007 and the ability of Head Start teachers to meet these requirements, as nontraditional students pursuing higher education. The local problem derived from this gap was that Head Start teachers as nontraditional students face many unknown barriers impeding the completion of higher education requirements as mandated by the Head Start Reauthorization Act.

Research Questions

The research questions focused on life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers as nontraditional students pursuing higher education, and support Head Start teachers need for successful completion of their degree. The first research question investigated how Head Start teachers' perceived life experiences influenced their pursuit of higher education. The second research question generated data on the barriers Head Start teachers experienced as an adult learner completing higher education. The third research question investigated how Head Start teachers coped with the barriers as they pursued successful completion of higher education degrees. The fourth research question generated specifically the kinds of support Head Start teachers need to be in place for completion of a higher education degree.

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the gap in research relative to barriers nontraditional students face as they strive to complete a higher education degree.

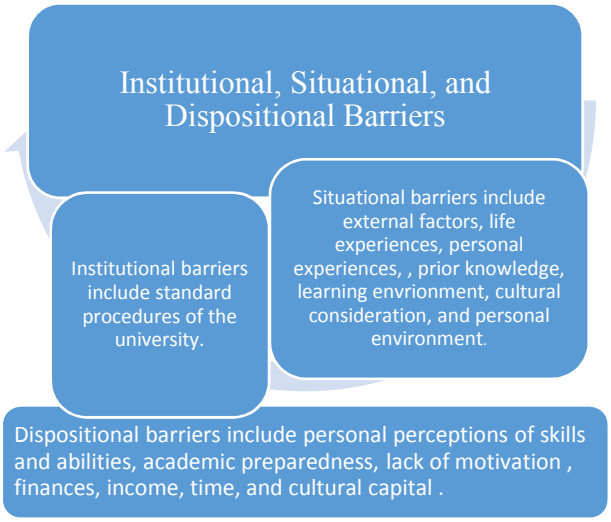

Figure 1. A visual picture of the research gap of the project study.

Participants

The nontraditional students interviewed in this qualitative project study were females that encountered many barriers while in pursuit of higher education. Therefore, conducting research on the adult learners in higher education exploring perceived life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of nontraditional students provided support to future nontraditional students pursuing higher education. The participants assisted in describing the identified gap in practice and provided insights related to barriers that impact the success for Head Start teachers as

nontraditional students in higher education.

Conceptual Framework

Two conceptual models were used to undergird this study. The first theoretical model included Smith's (1980) Interdisciplinary Sequential Specificity Time Allocation and Lifetime (ISSTAL) model of participation in adult learning. ISSTAL identifies social-psychological and situational variables that impact an adult's decision to participate in adult education (Boeren et al., 2005; Yu, 2017).

The second conceptual model is Tinto's academic and social integration model (Tinto, 1998, 2017). Tinto's model is based on two core principles: academic integration and social integration. Tinto indicated that the two core principles have a reciprocal effect on student persistence (French, 2017). This model also deals with student motivation and persistence. The student's goals, motivation, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, perception of curriculum impact the student's persistence related to education.

Research Design

A basic qualitative research study was used to explore the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of Head Start teachers, and to identify meaningful support needed for teachers' successful completion of individual degrees (Silverman, 2016, Tavakol & Sanders, 2014). The goal of using this approach was to gain a thorough understanding of approaches needed to assist Head Start teachers in completing requirements for higher education. Based on the purpose of this study and the research questions, a basic qualitative research study was the most appropriate type to be implemented.

Data Collection and Analysis

An interview instrument entitled "Autobiography of a Nontraditional Student," proposed by Ronspies (2011), was used to collected descriptive information from the participants of the study. Open-ended questions provided the participants the ability to describe their personal lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). I conducted data collection through Zoom data collection strategies.

The data collected in a digital form were stored on a computer that was password protected and I was the only person with access to this password. The digital data were also backed up on a USB flash drive protected with encryption of data.

As I completed each interview, I transcribed verbatim the recorded data, followed by analyzing the data sets. To analyze the data, I used Clarke and Braun's (2014) thematic analysis process, which is composed of six steps: (a) familiarizing of data, (b) coding, (c) theming, (d) revising themes, (e) finalizing and defining themes, and (f) writing up findings.

During the data collection and analysis, I took steps to ensure the findings were trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used member checking and peer review as strategies to ensure the credibility of

data and findings for this study (Birt et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The summary of the interview transcript was sent to participants via email, and they were asked to reply with any changes or to confirm that the transcription is accurate using the same communication tool (Fauria & Zellner, 2015; Khatri et al., 2017). Changes, when needed, were made accordingly on the transcripts. Member checking helped minimize researcher bias and consequently ensure the accuracy of the data collected from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were afforded the opportunity to review their responses from the interview

To improve the credibility of the findings, I initiated a peer review process (Lee & Moher, 2017). To improve transferability, I provided in depth description of the processes that were performed in the study. I performed an audit trail to improve the dependability of the findings.

To improve the confirmability of the data, I had items in the interview protocol that were iterative. I analyzed discrepant cases and information to compare findings of this study. When discrepant data arose, I asked participants for additional information.

Results

Four themes and 16 subthemes resulted, Themes included: (a) life experiences impact participants' pursuit of higher education, (b) barriers encountered affected completing higher education, (c) coping strategies used to complete higher degrees, and (d) participants received various kinds of support from different sources. Figure 2 includes the themes in the study.

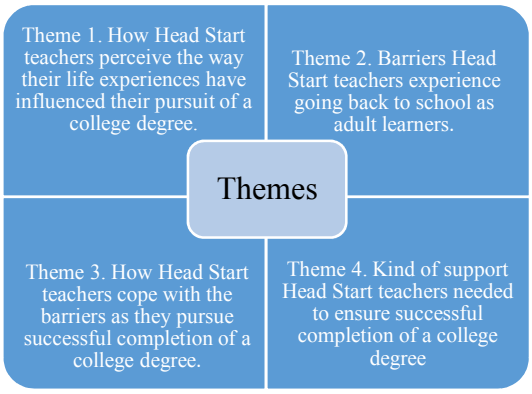

Figure 2: Graphic illustration of the themes in the study

Exploring Life Experiences, Barriers, and Coping Strategies of Head Start Teachers

Perceived Life Experiences

Theme 1

Theme 1 addressed the following research question: "How do Head Start teachers' life experiences influence their pursuit of higher education?" Responses revealed how teachers felt, in general, about the impact their life experiences had on them as nontraditional students striving to complete a higher education degree. Participants focused attention on details such as their age, experiences, beliefs, values, and so forth. These elements played a role in their desire to complete a higher degree in education.

1.1: Family, Values and Encouragement from Others

Relative to their involvement in the Head Start program, participants had similar experiences that included either becoming a Head Start employee, enrolling their child or children in Heard Start, or a combination of both.

"I was hired by Head Start as a bus chaperone and promoted to a teacher while I was working on my associate degree, I enrolled two of my children in the Head Start program, which was an advantage for me financially. I fell in love with the Head Start program because of the structure and the learning my children received."

Some of the participants explained that they worked in early childhood education and were influenced to complete a higher education degree. Others had children in the early grades and were influenced to become a Head Start teacher. Then there were those participants who indicated that they enrolled in higher education to meet the demand of the federal education guidelines.

External influences included achievement of family members, availability of grants, new mandates, and other Head Start coworkers who finished their bachelor's degrees. Internal influences included having a strong desire to accomplish a goal, dealing with a son who had HFA, relying on my inner strength, instilling the value of an education in the life of my child, being excited about attending class, recognizing the mandate and realizing the value of an education, and seeing others complete their higher degrees.

"I was excited about attending classes because I saw others do it. I wanted to make sure I was showing a positive example to my daughter, working on a dream and completing it."

1.2: Mandate – Meeting the Requirement

The new federal guidelines that mandated a bachelor's degree to teach in Head Start was the life experience or deciding factor for most of the participants. An associate degree was the requirement to become employed as a Head Start teacher, but late in their career, teachers were required to complete a bachelor's degree to maintain employment in the Head Start program. Other life experiences participants identified varied from having an addictive personality, to volunteering in Head Start, the loss of a teenage son, and desire to improve quality of learning.

"...new requirements were put in place asking that all teachers have at least an associate degree. This is what prompted me to go back to school. I knew the next thing they would require would be a bachelor so, I skipped the associate and applied for my bachelor's degree."

Though the majority of the participants embraced an opportunity to return to school to complete a higher degree or to complete the credentials needed to become a certified Head Start teacher, others dreaded having to go back to school.

"I hated the idea of going back to school. I felt overwhelmed but knew it had to be done. I knew working on a bachelor's degree would be a little more demanding than an associate degree.

1.3: Passion for Teaching

Participants provided similar reasons for choosing to work at Head Start level, with most of them calling attention to an inner desire to help children and families in need. The words or terminology used most frequently among participants to explain the inner feeling that promoted them to choose Head Start as a career included "passion or calling."

"….. because I love working with low-income families and children. I was able to be an advocate by providing and directing them to needed community resources. I chose Early Childhood Education because I felt this was the stage, I could make the greatest impact on the young learners."

The inspiring nature of the Head Start program was the element that encouraged participants to pursue credentials to teach in the same program. Each of these participants had a similar reason to pursue a career as a Head Start teacher.

Engulfed in the processes and procedures being implemented in the Head Start program, participants described how the program served as a personal motivation for them to engage in the program alongside their own children who were attending. Their love for working with children and understanding how they could make a positive impact on the lives of children in the Head Start program helped them to make a decision to apply for work as teachers, especially after supervisors and staff in the Head Start program acknowledge that they had "great skills for helping little ones"

Barriers Encountered While Completing Higher Education

Theme 2

Theme 2 addressed the following research question: What are the barriers that Head Start teachers experience as a nontraditional student completing higher education? The second theme includes the perceived barriers that participants faced as nontraditional students pursuing a higher education degree.

2.1: Financial Issues

Life or situational barriers varied among the nine participants, with neither personal barrier being inclusive among the nine participants. Participants identified finances, the lack of employer support, and family issues such as military family locations, life crises, lack of energy, and spousal conflicts as personal or situational barriers. Different specifics included limited employer support, transferring to different colleges and universities, dealing with life crises and childcare, and meeting the mandate for higher education as a Head Start teacher.

"A couple times I was trying to pay for the required classes that I had to neglect my utilities. I moved in with a family member to stay afloat. I realized to keep my job I had to complete the required classes."

The participants identified financial support of varying kinds. Nonfinancial support included items such as use of videotaping and unlimited discussion time, permission to attend conferences and to listen to motivational speakers. Words of encouragement represented additional support from Head Start management.

"Head Start management directed me to grants available for early childhood education teachers. We were able to attend conferences annually that provided information related to new trends in early childhood education."

Some of the barriers identified by participants were related to financial issues, lack of prerequisites skills coursework, and family problems and issues. Pressing barriers included balancing family, work, school, with financial issues as paramount among the barriers that affected participants' progress. Failing coursework, losing credit as a transfer student, and being the first generation in the family attending higher education were other barriers. Even though participants identified different specifics that related to their own situational barriers, limited finance continued to be overwhelmingly germane to the issue of completing a degree in higher education.

2.2: Family Challenges

Directly or indirectly, participants included financial issues among barriers and challenges that made it difficult to continue with higher education. Family stressors, university requirements, life problems and working two jobs generated financial instability. Being responsible as a caregiver for ill parents and children on medication, while working two jobs to support the family, and the death of a parent were some of the burdensome experiences that affected progress in higher education.

"Salary was inadequate to support my education. Head Start administrators did not provide any assistance. So, I sat out while I found resources to pay for the early childhood classes."

Other challenge included keeping up with assignments, handling job responsibilities, and completing all the school assignments on time. Addressing problems with teenagers caused one participant to have to drop a class because of failing grades. Retaking the class resulted in completing classes at a slower pace than others traditional students.

2.3: Lack of Employer and Institutional Support

Participants identified financial issues as a major barrier related to completing courses in higher education. Associated to financial issues, participants included other issues such as feelings of disconnection related to lack of assistance specified for nontraditional students, and unapproachable professors.

Participants also called attention to issues such as dialect issues, lack of guidance, negative view of older students, absence of mentors, and no credit for work experience. Other barriers included night and weekend classes.

… "I did not feel like I was connected to the school. Sometimes, I did not feel like the staff was helping me or respected me as an adult."

…. "Felt that instructors viewed older students in a different way than the traditional students. The institutions should have mentors in place for nontraditional students to ensure all online resources are understood. I also feel institutions should give credit to nontraditional students for work life experience.

Coping Strategies used to Complete Higher Education

Theme 3

Theme 3 related to the following research question: How do Head Start teachers cope with the barriers to pursue successful completion of higher education requirements? When participants responded to the question asking how they coped with the challenges and barriers as they pursued successful completion of higher degrees, they identified family members, praying, coworkers' assistance, and eating as coping strategies.

3.1: Family Support and Additional Support

Participants also identified focusing, communicating with counselors, and doing what needs to be done such as dropping classes, and having faith, drive, and determination

"I prayed a lot and found ways to plan around my daily schedule. I found learning techniques that were suitable and assisted me with the learning process."

Similar coping skills emerged from participants focusing on the importance of family as a source of assistance. Moving in with family members and talking with co-workers, church members, and family encouraged and motivated participants to continue.

"Co-workers started helping me with proofreading papers and sharing textbooks to offset cost."

3.2: Intrinsic Motivation

Participants indicated that, at times, they turned their attention inside themselves to find the inner strength needed to pursue their goals. Helpful strategies included studying late at night, focusing on things that can be done and ignoring things that cannot be done, looking forward and moving on, encouraging self, taking time out for self, and keeping in contact with family and friends. Added coping strategies included

engaging actively in hobbies, staying active with children, and taking advantage of personal leave and vacation to focus on self-improvement and assignments.

"…take personal leave days and vacation days to stay on track to complete required assignments and spend many days in libraries away from everyone to focus on assignments.

"Having previously attended college was valuable to my success. Many things had changed, especially the online learning. I had a coworker who assisted whenever possible."

Future Support for Nontraditional Students

Theme 4

Theme 4 related to the research question that asked: What kinds of support do Head Start teachers need to ensure successful completion of a higher education degree? Types of support participants identified, and individuals who participants said provided positive support included people who provided encouragement and ones who offered varied kinds of assistance.

4.1: Mentorship Programs

The participants identified a number of supports that might reduce the barriers and challenges nontraditional Head Start teachers face as students pursuing higher educational goals. The participants identified supporting factors such as mentors, cohort groups, training programs to teach nontraditional students how to acquire financial assistance and how to navigate through the curriculum as well as incentives for completing a higher degree.

Other supportive activities participants offered for consideration included, (a) forming cohorts so that teachers can take classes together and support each other, (b) establishing mentorship programs, (c) establishing a training program to show nontraditional students how to apply for financial aid and how to navigate through the curriculum, (d) providing access to online learning. Nontraditional students first need to learn and build confidence in the challenging technological advancements to be successful. Once mastered success can be easily obtained.

"I strongly believe if nontraditional students had someone to guide them like a mentor, they would be more successful. I believe support to assist nontraditional students should be financial assistance to pay for courses, training related to navigating on-line and understanding how to prepare and submit assignments, and a mentor to guide teachers through higher education assignments."

Participants identified sources of support such as mentors, cohort groups and training programs to teach nontraditional students how to acquire financial assistance, navigate through the curriculum with a guide. Family members, friends, and coworkers provided the encouragement they

needed. The types of support included encouragement, assistance with registration, and identifying which classes were available and ways to apply for different programs/assistance.

"I believe if there were mentoring activities for Head Start teachers pursuing higher education, a mentor to guide teachers through higher education assignments, these efforts alone would promote greater success for nontraditional students and would expedite the process related to the completion of a higher education degree."

Support included financial assistance from agencies and organization, credit for some life experiences, mentorship and monetary support, approved time off to work on degrees, tuition reimbursement, travel, and up-to-date laptops with the latest technology and training on how to use the technology.

"Agencies and organizations provide some monetary support in conjunction with approved time off to work on degrees"

Participants called attention to the need of mentorship programs. They also thought technology and related training could be a part of the support available for nontraditional students.

"After working in the school district, I realized that the support to help me learn fast moving technology was valuable. We were given up-to-date laptops with the latest technology, and we were trained on how to use technology."

Participants identified supports provided to nontraditional students pursuing higher education varied. Support included financial assistance from agencies and organization, Participants called attention to the fact that their families provided the support they needed to continue their education. In addition to family members, church groups provided the assistance they needed to feel positive about their desire to complete a college degree.

"I had my family support and my boyfriend and coworker's support. Most of my coworkers were in school, with children and husbands. We all talked about our struggles but also gave each other motivation to keep going."

"I received positive support from my family, coworkers and my church family."

4.2: Tangible and Intangible Resources

Some resources that participants found useful as they pursued higher education goals included tangible and intangible support. Tangible resources included resources such as desktop computer, use of the library; online resources, writing center assistance; a college advisor and a counselor; financial aid; proofreading resources; support from family and coworkers; work and educational funds; family and occasionally church family; childcare, guidance, used textbooks; notes; coworkers' assistance; and a teenage daughter demonstrating how to navigate and access information online. Intangible resources included words of

support from family and coworkers and networking.

"…co-workers helping me and my teenage daughter showing me ways to navigate and access information online. Using old textbooks also helped a number of times to offset cost and provided notes which aided me in successfully completing classes."

Participants acknowledged receiving supports from faculty/staff, traditional students and others such as family and friends, faculty and supervisors, cohorts, coworkers, and management. Cohorts were a popular source of support for learning together in professional development activities.

"I would share notes and information about this class with others. We would share which instructors and classes would be the best, most beneficial. Sometimes sharing books so we did not have to incur that cost."

Participants also received assistance from faculty/staff, traditional students, and other support personnel, including used books and tutoring from coworkers for difficulty understanding assignments.

4.3: Financial Support and Training

Supports available to nontraditional students pursuing higher education were identified and included different kinds of financial support from different sources. Participants identified financial support from agencies and organizations; credit for life experiences; mentorship and financial assistance; monetary support and approved time off to work on degree; mentorship programs and training to assist students in completing their degree.

Summary of Findings

Life experiences that influenced completing higher education varied among the participants, including the new mandate requiring a bachelor's degree to teach in Head Start, an additive personality, volunteer teaching in Head Start, the loss of a teenage son, and desire to improve quality of learning. Reason for choosing to become a Head Start teacher included having a passion or calling and a love for children and their families, a passion or desire to work with small children.

Influences of life experience included intrinsic motivation. Some of the intrinsic experiences such as watching other family members get their degrees, having strong desire to accomplish a goal, recognizing the mandate and realizing the value of an education, and seeing others complete their higher degrees.

External influences included achievement of family members, availability of grants, new mandates, and other Head Start coworkers who finished their bachelor's degrees. Internal influences included having strong desire to accomplish a goal, dealing with a son who had HFA, relying on inner strength, instilling the value of an education in the life of my child, being excited about attending class, recognizing the mandate and realizing the value of an education,

and seeing others complete their higher degrees.

Helpful life experiences deriving from within included self-discipline, time management, remaining focused, and self-sufficiency experience. Helpful life experiences from external sources included group therapy, hands-on training, and motivational speakers; previous support of family; counselors at the various college campuses, online classes and independent studies; previous college experience; and previous work on an associate degree.

Barriers derived from financial issues and family problems, failing to progress, discouragement after failing mathematics two times, academic probation, family stressors, university requirements, life problems, and working two jobs often were indicators of financial instability. Other barriers included disconnections related to lack of assistance specified for nontraditional students, and unapproachable professors as well as dialect issues, lack of financial assistance and guidance, negative view of older students, no mentors available, and no credit for work experience.

Coping with the challenges and barriers included relying on family members and coworkers, praying, coworkers, eating, focusing, communicating with counselors, dropping classes, and having faith, drive, and determination. Helpful coping strategies also included studying late at night, focusing on things that can be done, ignoring things that cannot be done, looking forward and moving on, encouraging self, taking time out for self, keeping in contact with family and friends, staying active with children, and taking advantage of personal leave and vacation to focus on assignments.

Types of support provided included encouragement and assistance from family members, friends, and coworkers. Tangible resources included desktop computer, college advisor, use of the library online resources, writing center assistance a counselor financial aid proofreading resources support from family and coworkers, work and educational funds, family and occasionally church family, childcare, guidance, used textbooks, notes, and personal assistance from coworkers, and family members assisting with technology navigation skills. Intangible resources included words of support and encouragement from family and coworkers, and networking with other students.

Support from Head Start management included words of encouragement, some funds at the beginning of the higher education enrollment, use of electronic equipment, guidance in applying for grants, and permission to attend conferences to hear motivational speakers.

Participants identified support they received from faculty/staff, traditional students and others such as discussions, encouragement, videotaping classes and interview faculty members, supervisors' motivation, and cohort sharing of notes, books, and advice about professors and classes. Other types of support included encouragement from coworkers, family, and management such as financial support from agencies and organizations,

credit for life experiences, mentorship and financial assistance, monetary support and approved time off to work on degrees, tuition reimbursement, and up-to-date laptops with the latest technology and training on how to use the technology.

Proposed Recommendations

Based on the findings from this project study supported by the literature, the following recommendations were made to support Head Start teachers returning to college to as nontraditional students to complete a higher education degree.

- Provide funds to help Head Start teachers meet requirements to keep their positions as guidelines change (Harding (2019).
- Form cohorts for teachers to take courses together and support each other (Collier, 2017).
- Provide mentors for nontraditional students (Clutterback et al., 2017; Gordon & Lowery, 2017; Hall et al., 2017; Onchwari & Keengwe, 2018).
- Provide professional development training to teach nontraditional students how to acquire financial assistance and how to navigate through the curriculum (Eller, 2016: Cox & Sallee, 2019).
- Provide access to training in using the challenging technological advancement to be successful; provide funds for college assistance and increase the salary of Head Start teachers (Chen & Hossler, 2017; Fowle, 2018).
- Provide a mentor to give students assistance in gaining financial assistance, grants, and loans. A mentorship program should be in place; the agency should provide financial assistance (Nolan & Molla, 2016).

Significance

The significance of this qualitative project study was that it provided insights necessary to understand the lived experiences of a group of teachers in the Head Start program who returned to college as nontraditional students. The focus of the study included exploring the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies participants used and the support participants needed for the successful completion of their degree.

Requiring bachelor's degrees for pre-kindergarten teachers is likely to maximize the positive effects of early learning programs on young children's school readiness (Betts et al., 2017; Sowell, 2017). If the Head Start teachers are to assume the role of nontraditional students and complete higher educational requirements, then the life experiences, barriers, and coping strategies of these teachers, as well as their needed support, must be identified (Adams, 2019; Cantora et al., 2020; Hoffman, 2016; Nolan & Molla, 2016; Potter, 2021).

The significance of this qualitative project study is that it has the potential of strengthening Head Start programs by identifying barriers, coping strategies and identifying support Head Start teachers need for completion of a higher education degree. The findings from this qualitative project study could lead to professional development training and agency support to assist future Head Start teachers (Cox & Sallee, 2019;

Harding et al., 2019; Nolan & Molla, 2016).

Conclusion

The goal of the position paper was to present the findings of the research study and provide recommendations for decision makers at the local university to consider, relative to the implementation of a mentoring program to improve the success rate of older adult as nontraditional students pursuing a degree in higher education. A conclusion is that participants' perspectives about their life experiences, barriers they faced, coping strategies they used, and the support they needed could form the basis for a mentoring program for Head Start teachers returning to college as nontraditional students to pursue a college degree in the future.

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Appendix B: Permission to Conduct Study

[redacted]

Date:

Dear Jeanette O. Keyes

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Head Start Teachers as Nontraditional Students Pursuing Higher Education within the Head Start program with [redacted] As part of this study, I authorize you to survey, interview teachers, and access the PIR reports, data collection, triangulation, and member check. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include providing contact information of Head Start teachers currently pursuing higher education and teachers who completed higher education as nontraditional students. We understand triangulation will be conducted. Triangulation is granting the researcher the permission to collect data such as surveys, interviews, and reviewing related documents. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Appendix C: Themes and Subthemes

Themes and subthemes from Research Question 1-4

Theme and subthemes	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	RQ4
Theme 1. Life Experiences Subtheme 1.1: Family, Values and Encouragement from Others Subtheme 1.2: Mandate – meeting the Requirement Subtheme 1.3: Passion for Teaching	X			
Theme 2: Barriers encountered affected completing higher education Subtheme 2.1: Financial Issues Subtheme 2.2: Family Challenges Subtheme 2.3: Lack of Employer and Institutional Support			X	
Theme 3: Coping strategies used to complete higher education Subtheme 3.1: Family support and additional support Subtheme 3.2: Intrinsic Motivation			X	
Theme 4: Future support for Nontraditional students Subtheme 4:1: Mentorship Programs Subtheme 4:2: Tangible and Intangible Resources Subtheme 4:3: Financial Support and Training				X

Appendix D: Letter of Invitation to Head Start Teachers

Dear Head Start Teacher,

My name is Jeanette O. Keyes. I am conducting research for my EdD project study with Walden University. My research study is on Head Start teachers and higher education. The title of my study is *Life Experiences of Head Start Teachers as Nontraditional Students Pursuing Higher Education.*

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the life experiences, barriers, coping strategies, and views of support needed by Head Start teachers who were completing their degrees. Head Start teachers enrolled in higher education and Head Start teachers who completed higher education as nontraditional students represent the individuals that could potentially provide information of firsthand lived experiences.

I am inviting you to consider voluntarily participating in an individual interview. The interview I plan to conduct consists of the following:

- The interview will be lasting for 45 to 60 minutes
- The interview will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy
- This interview will be done via Zoom on line conferencing.

My plan is to select 10 Head Start teachers representing nontraditional students. I will ask participants to conduct member checks once the initial data analysis is complete. Member checking is participants' reviewing the initial data analysis to check for accuracy of the analysis and gather feedback.

I am an adjunct professor (17 years), with the College of Lake County (Business Education/Workforce Development Department), and CEO of Keyes-Overby & Associates (Education/Empowerment Organization). I have served as Director of Senter Focus Educational Services and Head Start Director of Lake County Community Action Partnership for 5 years. My role as a researcher is not related to my employment position, but it is a part of my role as a graduate student with Walden University.

This is a voluntary request of you for my study. Your response to volunteer or not is respected and does not affect your relationship with the local Head Start agency. You may change your mind at any time by requesting to participate or not participate. Your information will be kept confidential, anonymous, and securely locked up for 5 years after the project study is completed, then disposed of by shredding and deleting files of the project study. If you choose to participate, please email me at Jeanette.Keyes@waldenu.edu or reply to this email. My contact number is (847) 421-1956.

The attached document to this email, a letter of informed consent, explains how you will be protected from harm and ensures your confidentiality. Please sign the form, if, after reading, you agree with its contests and you are interested to participate in this research.

I would like to thank you in advance for your consideration to participate, and the assistance you will provide for future students in higher education. If I do not hear from you in a timely manner, I will assume you are not interested and respect your decision. Again, thank you for taking the time to consider this request. I look forward to your response to volunteer.

Sincerely,

Jeanette O. Keyes

Appendix E: Interview Protocol

First, I would like to thank you for accepting the invitation to participate in this study**.** This interview will be audio-recorded for the purpose of transcription. This study is voluntary. You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. Everyone will respect your decision whether you choose to be in the study. No one at Head Start facility will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. In addition, if you decide to stop the interview at any time, you may do so without any consequences.

Please answer the following questions, including as much details as you would like to share.

IQ1. Please tell me about yourself (examples may include age, experiences, education, jobs, beliefs, values, etc.) _____

IQ2. Discuss how life experiences influenced completion of a higher education degree (RQ1). _____

IQ 3. Why have you chosen to become a Head Start teacher? Why did you choose early childhood education as a career (RQ1)?

_____

IQ 4. How have life experiences influenced you while pursuing higher education (RQ1)? (Please give examples)

_____

IQ 5. What life experiences were helpful to you in successfully completing classes and or meeting higher education requirements (RQ1)? _____

IQ 6. Have you encountered any barriers while pursuing higher education (RQ2)? If so, please give examples and ways of dealing with them.

_____

IQ 7. What barriers and challenges made it difficult for you to continue with higher education (RQ2)?

_____

IQ 8. What types of barriers were related to the institution of higher learning (RQ2)? _____

IQ 9. What type of personal or situational barriers did you face (RQ2)?

(Situational barriers may include family life, financial cost, and limited employer support.) _____

IQ 10. How did you cope with barriers you encountered while completing higher education (RQ3)? _____

IQ 11. Were there specific coping strategies that were helpful during the pursuit of higher education (RQ3)? Please discuss.

IQ 12. Describe the type/s of support provided allowing entry into the field of higher education (RQ4)?

Who were the individuals that provided positive support?

Who were the individuals that provided negative support?

What were the resources available to assist with higher education?

What type of support did Head Start management provide while pursuing higher education?

_____

_____

IQ 13. Discuss ways faculty/staff, traditional student, and others provided support in completing a higher education degree (RQ4).

_____

IQ 14. What types of support do you think are provided to other nontraditional students pursuing higher education (RQ4)?

_____

IQ 15. What do you think can be done in the future to support nontraditional students (Head Start teachers) with barriers, and challenges while pursuing higher education (RQ4)?

_____

IQ 16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about being a nontraditional student pursuing higher education (RQ4)?

_____

I appreciate your support. Jeanette O. Keyes – Researcher

Interview questions adopted from Ronspies (2010) "Autobiography of a Nontraditional Student."

Appendix F: Interview Instrument Approval

Jeanette Keyes <jeanette.keyes@waldenu.edu> 7/22/15

Good morning Dr. Ronspies,

I am a doctoral student with Walden University. I have a request form attached and a sample of my interview questions explaining the purpose of this email.

Have an exceptional day.

Jeanette O. Keyes

2 Attachments

Copyright request letter to Dr. Ronspies 7 22 15.rtf
Appendix E interview Questions for Proposal 7 22 15.docx

==========

Scott M Ronspies 7/23/15

to me

Jeanette...you have my permission to use the questions with proper citation of my name in your work.

Sent from my Verizon Wireless 4G LTE smartphone

==========

Jeanette Keyes 8/1/15

Dr. Ronspies,

I thank you for granting permission to use the questions. I assure you proper citation of your name in my work will be used.

Jeanette O. Keyes

==========

Scott M Ronspies 8/1/15

to me

No worries.... please send me a copy when you are done....thanks

Appendix G: CITI Program course

Certificate of Completion

Date of completion: August 20, 2020

Record ID: 34704282

This is to certify that:

Jeanette Keyes

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Student's Researchers (Curriculum Group) **Doctoral Student**

(Course Learner Group) **1 - Basic Course** (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

Walden University

Appendix H: Sample Email Inviting Participants to Perform Member Checking

TO: The participants of the Head Start study

FROM: Jeanette O. Keyes, Doctoral Student

DATE: August 2, 2016

RE: Member checking of Interview questions

I am submitting the shared findings from the interview process. Member check allows you as a participant of the study to analyze critically the findings and comment on them. As a participant, I need you to affirm that the summaries reflect your views, feelings, and experiences, or that they do not reflect these experiences.

Member checks serve to decrease the incidence of incorrect data and the incorrect interpretation of data. The overall goal of this process is to provide findings that are authentic, original, and accurate. Please review and make changes as needed. You are a valued contributor to this study. Your help in capturing the actual findings will assist in this study's accuracy.

Respectfully submitted,

Jeanette O. Keyes