Childlessness in a Child-Centered Environment:
The Experiences of Voluntarily Childless Female Teachers

Linda J. Rees, B.A., B.Ed.

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies in Education

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Faculty of Education, Brock University

St. Catharines, Ontario

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Abstract

In the literature on voluntary childlessness there is a lack of research on the types of occupations held by women who choose not to mother and how their fertility choice influences their occupational experiences. At the same time, the experience of women with regard to the childfree choice has not been adequately addressed in contemporary feminist literature. In the field of education, much has been written about the association between mothering and teaching. Thus, childfree teachers become particularly interesting since they made seemingly paradoxical choices in that they chose not to bear and rear children yet they chose an occupation in which they are surrounded by and responsible for the daily care of many children. To gain an understanding of the work-related experiences of childfree women, in-depth interviews were conducted with 7 voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers from Southern Ontario. In addition, a focus group interview in which 3 of the 7 childfree teachers participated was conducted. Findings revealed that these women’s “choice” to be childless was the result of complex circumstances and multiple motivations. Also, despite their decision to forgo the traditional female role of mother, these women held surprisingly conventional beliefs with regard to family and gender roles. In addition, these childfree women at times identified themselves as mother-like when teaching, yet at other times distanced themselves as teachers from mothers. Finally, results showed that these women experienced both direct and indirect pronatalist pressures outside as well as inside the workplace as a result of their childfree status.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

This study examined the experiences of a group of voluntarily childless Canadian women who also were elementary school teachers. Childfree teachers were studied because they made seemingly paradoxical choices in that they decided not to bear and rear their own children yet nonetheless had chosen an occupation in which they were surrounded by and responsible for the care of many children.

Typically, researchers studying voluntary childlessness have attempted to cover a broad range of issues experienced by a diverse group of women (and men) who have chosen childlessness. While the broad scope of such research has led to the discovery of important issues in the study of voluntary childlessness, it has failed to probe closely into the work-related experiences of childfree women that result from their fertility status. More specifically, it has neglected to study the child-centered occupations of childfree women.

Feminist researchers have been called upon to adequately reflect and support the female experience of voluntary childlessness (Ireland, 1993; Letherby, 1994; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). In the late 1960s and early 1970s feminism promoted the importance of expanding reproductive possibilities through access to legal, safe, and effective contraception and through the promotion of careers as alternatives to motherhood (Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994). By the end of the 1970s, however, feminists had revived pronatalist ideologies which emphasized motherhood as desirable and satisfying (Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). A great deal of attention was given to the difficulties of combining motherhood with a career, yet the notion of replacing
motherhood with a career was no longer encouraged (Veevers, 1980).

Recent feminist scholarship continues to emphasize motherhood particularly in relation to the maternal virtues of caring, nurturing and connectedness (Morell, 1994). Psychological theories, as well, still equate normal adult female development with motherhood and offer no normative female identity for women who have chosen childlessness (Ireland, 1993). The essentiality of maternity is further reinforced by feminism’s limited attention to the childfree experience (Morell, 1994). Feminists’ earlier promotion of the childfree choice as a fulfilling and positive lifestyle is scarcely evident in contemporary feminist literature (Morell, 1994).

Since the alternatives to motherhood have received little attention recently, issues concerning the ability of women to make fertility choices without coercion also are in need of further investigation (Bartlett, 1995). Women often are pressured into becoming mothers as pronatalist societies present motherhood as the best and often only reproductive option, making it difficult for women to see any other choice (Bartlett, 1995). Similarly, women who have opted out of motherhood often have not made the direct and conscious choice to be childless (Morell, 1994). The social control of women’s procreative lives is exerted through Western society’s institutions, media, academic discourses, and theories (Morell, 1994).

One such institution, schools, has dictated the fertility state of female teachers for over a century. For most of the twentieth century, Ontario school board policies have prevented married women and mothers from teaching (Labatt, 1993). Even when such policies were revoked, women who wanted to be promoted were forced to remain
childless (Labatt, 1993). The view that mother-teachers did not make good teachers has turned around in the latter part of this century. Presently, women teachers with children tend to be viewed as better teachers than childless women because a mother’s knowledge of her own children is believed to facilitate her understanding of her students (Reynolds, 1987). Thus, childless teachers’ reproductive lives have become the target of control as mothers are seen as best suited for the job of teaching.

In North America, teaching is an occupation that commonly has been associated with mothering (Biklen, 1987). Historically, teaching was believed to prepare young, unmarried teachers for their ultimate careers as wives and mothers and was later seen as an extension of married women’s work in the home (Biklen, 1987; Clifford, 1991; Schmuck, 1987). Today, there continues to be a widely held assumption that female teachers, especially teachers of young children, are really only professional mothers (Biklen, 1987).

The association between teaching and mothering also is evident in the legal system which plays a part in perpetuating the belief that teaching is a form of parenting. Canadian educational law describes teachers as acting “in loco parentis” or as substitute parents when they are supervising pupils (Brown & Zuker, 1994). As “surrogate parents,” teachers are viewed as responsible for nurturing and guiding the physical and mental development of their students. Additionally, teachers have the legal duty to act as role models for their students and are provided with the legal authority to discipline their students (Brown & Zuker, 1994). Teachers are then constructed as “parent-like” to some extent by the legal system and thus are expected to perform the duties that are normally
carried out by parents when students are in their parents' care.

If teaching is, in some ways, equated with parenting by the legal system and by society at large, then how do women who have never mothered perform their duties as teachers? How do these female teachers act as "substitute parents" in the classroom if they have never experienced parenthood? This study investigated the experiences of childfree female elementary school teachers in a child-centered environment in which prevalent social norms and legal requirements equate their paid work with mothering.

Research Questions

To investigate the experiences of voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers, this study sought to answer the general question: What are the experiences of voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers as they perform their roles in the child-centered environment of schools? The larger question was approached through more specific questions including: How did these female elementary school teachers come to be voluntarily childless? How do voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers deal with the nurturing aspect of teaching young children? What is the relationship between voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers and parents of students? What, if any, social pressures do voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers experience as a result of their childfree status?

Background to the Research Questions

Many of the issues outlined in the research questions have been shown to have specific relevance in the area of voluntary childlessness. Focusing only on women participants is a common occurrence in studies on the childfree (e.g., Bartlett, 1995;
Ireland, 1993; Landa, 1990; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994; Woollett, 1991). The reason for this is based on the cultural notion of Western society that femininity is defined in terms of fertility and, in order for women to attain a mature adult status and realize a feminine identity, they must become mothers (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994; Woollett, 1991). On the other hand, a masculine identity traditionally has been linked with occupational success. Although fatherhood also is important, it is not seen as the center of a man's identity (Landa, 1990; Veevers. 1980). By rejecting what is thought to be the basic element of womanhood, childfree women open themselves up to and must deal with a degree of public scrutiny not experienced by childfree men (Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; May, 1995; Veevers, 1980; Woollett, 1991). Childfree women appear to give a great deal more thought to what it means not to become a parent since motherhood is more integral to the female role than fatherhood is to the male role (Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994; Woollett, 1991).

The factors that lead one to choose a childfree life are studied often by researchers of voluntary childlessness (e.g., Burgwyn, 1981; Campbell, 1983; Lang, 1991; May, 1995; Nave-Herz, 1989). In an effort to determine what drives individuals to deviate from a salient social norm, it is necessary for researchers to examine the rationales given by those who have opted out of parenthood (Houseknecht, 1987). This study also asked participants to describe their reasons for choosing childlessness. This information enriches an understanding of these women and their experiences as childfree teachers.

The abilities of voluntarily childless women to nurture children has been frequently examined by researchers in this field (e.g., Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; May, 1995;
Morell, 1994) and also was investigated in this study. There exists a popular assumption that women who choose not to bear and rear children dislike children, are incapable of maintaining relationships with children, and lack the competence to care for children (Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). Considering that the occupation held by the women in this study required them to be responsible for the well-being of many children, an inquiry into participants’ perceptions of their nurturing and care-giving behaviors was important.

Also of interest to researchers of the voluntarily childless are their relationships with others, especially with those who have children (e.g., Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994). Relationships between childfree women and friends who are mothers have received specific attention because both groups of women may have different interests. Childfree women may get tired of hearing about the details of a friend’s child, and mothers may not appreciate the lack of their childfree friend’s interest in a subject that is so important to them (Morell, 1994). Furthermore, childfree women have reported feeling left out of conversations about mothering. In such conversations they may be made to feel as if their childlessness disqualifies them from speaking on the subject (Hawkins, 1984; Woollett, 1991). In her book, Lesbian Motherhood, based on Canadian research, Fiona Nelson (1996) described the existence of a “culture of motherhood” shared by women who have experienced bearing and rearing children (p. 98). Nelson (1996) described how this culture is marked by a distinctive “maternal discourse” that includes a distinctive “maternal epistemology” (p. 99). This maternal discourse relies upon the claim that knowledge of motherhood and of children can only be acquired by becoming a mother. Women who have not experienced childbirth and mothering are
thought to lack this special knowledge and are excluded from this culture.

The existence of a culture of motherhood and a maternal epistemology may make it difficult for some voluntarily childless women to relate to those who are mothers and difficult for some mothers to accept a childless person as competent in contributing to the discussion of children. This research considered how childfree teachers dealt with mothers of students who did not welcome a childless woman as an authority on the subject of children. The study also inquired whether or not childless teachers experienced a feeling of being less knowledgeable about children than mothers of students and whether or not these teachers felt uncomfortable imparting knowledge to mothers regarding their own children.

A further reason for studying teachers’ experiences in interacting with parents of students is related to the much studied social pressures to have children (e.g., Bartlett, 1995; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980). It has been well documented that since the childfree have not complied with a dominant norm of Western society they often are seen as social deviants and can be the target of pronatalist pressures and sanctions that frequently come from those who have conformed to the norm (Bartlett, 1995; Morell, 1994; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1973, 1980). Thus, an investigation of the social pressures regarding fertility, notably the pressures to have children, experienced by childfree teachers was important. This study focused on the teachers’ perceptions of such social pressures.

Several of the issues explored in this study were chosen because they have a “reverse association” with voluntary childlessness. That is, the concept of teacher as one
who is surrounded by children on a daily basis appears to contradict the image of the voluntarily childless as those who have chosen a lifestyle that excludes children. Similarly, the idea of the elementary school teacher as one who works with young children in need of more care and nurturing than older students (Biklen, 1987), supposedly contrasts with the notion that childfree women choose not to have children because they want to avoid dealing with the added demands of youngsters (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981). The fact that these two sets of apparently disparate images of teachers and the voluntarily childless occur simultaneously was enough to warrant further investigation.

The Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain a further understanding of the experiences of women elementary school teachers who were voluntarily childless. This information not only contributes to a knowledge of women who choose not to mother, it also leads to an illumination of the diversity of women's experiences and identities (Letherby, 1994) and more specifically, broadens an understanding of the experiences of female teachers.

Social Position

A distinct element of feminist research is that the researcher is identified rather than appearing as an unknown authority figure (Harding, 1987). Disclosing the researcher's social position enables the reader to understand that the researcher has a personal history that he or she brings to the study. Therefore, the reader should know that I am a middle-class white married woman in my thirties. I have been married for 12 years and I am voluntarily childless. I am also a trained teacher at the primary, junior, and intermediate levels although I am not employed as a teacher at present. I consider myself
a feminist and, as a graduate and undergraduate student, I have pursued studies on the
family, the child, and on gender issues in relation to education.

My interest in women who choose childlessness stems from my acute awareness of
Western culture’s social norm prescribing that all women of childbearing age (especially
those who are married) should have children and from my realization of the negative social
constructions of childfreeness resulting from a violation of this norm. My personal
journals can attest to the less-than-positive comments I receive on a regular basis about
my childfree status from family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, young and old
alike. My sensitivity to what it is like to be a childfree woman in a society that promotes
motherhood has led me to research the experiences of others in similar positions.

It is this same heightened awareness that has caused me to focus my attention
particularly on voluntarily childless female teachers. Two years ago, during my teacher
training, I was told of a female teacher’s experience with a male principal who told her
that once she became a mother she would make a better teacher. In recounting this
incident to other teachers, with and without children, I have come to realize that this is not
an uncommon attitude. I began to wonder what it would be like for the voluntarily
childless female teacher, who already faces social pressures because she is childfree, to
perform a role that has frequently been equated with mothering.

Because my interest in this topic came from my personal experiences, I was not
completely removed from the research. I brought my own thoughts, experiences, and
sensitivities to the study which I believe enabled my participants to be candid with me and
allowed for a rich data base. However, I also maintained an open attitude that enabled me
to collect and interpret data that were contrary to my own experiences. It has taken me a lot of courage over the years to remain childfree but it has become an important part of my identity as my eight-year-old niece confirmed when she said, “I want to be just like Auntie Linda. I’m going to be a teacher. And I’m not having any kids!” (M. S. Button, personal communication, August 16, 1997).

Terminology

Researchers in the area of voluntary childlessness have used a variety of terms to describe women who choose not to have children. However, each of these terms is problematic. For instance, Morell (1994), Woollett (1991), and Veevers (1980) referred to their participants as childless yet each asserted that this term has negative connotations as it focuses on the lack of something. Morell (1994) also used the term not-mothers but believed that it, too, emphasizes a deficiency. Nonmotherhood was used by Letherby (1994) even though she realized it still defines women in relation to children. The term childfree (also written as child-free) was used by Bartlett (1995), Ireland (1993), and May (1995) although it is not in any dictionary and is not recognized by a computer’s “Spellcheck” facility (Bartlett, 1995; Letherby, 1994). Morell (1994) argued that childfree also is problematic in that it denotes the desire of women to completely eliminate children from their lives. Furthermore, Letherby (1994) found that childfree implies selfishness and an immature state, similar to that implied by the word carefree.

Letherby (1994) maintained that a key element of the feminist analysis of voluntarily childless women’s experiences is the creation of new terms that describe these women in a positive way and are independent of the words “mother” and “child”. Since
such a term does not yet exist this study used the terms childfree and voluntarily childless. Childfree seems to have a more positive connotation than the other terms described (Veevers, 1980) although neither it nor voluntarily childless adequately describes the women interviewed.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Historical Background of Literature

Prior to the 1970s there is little direct research on the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness (Veevers, 1973). A few studies on childlessness did emerge during the Great Depression when rates of childlessness were rising (e.g., Popenoe, 1936, 1943). Scientists of the time believed a rejection of motherhood was abnormal behavior (Burgwyn, 1981; Campbell, 1983; May, 1995). In a 1936 study of childless marriages for example, Popenoe concluded that the majority of those who chose not to bear children were "motivated by individualism, competitive consumption economically and an infantile, self-indulgent, frequently neurotic attitude toward life" (p. 472).

Voluntary childlessness was believed to be a pathological condition that resulted from one's faulty upbringing, flawed personality, and/or adverse surroundings (Campbell, 1983).

One of the first researchers to abandon this harsh view of the childfree and to recognize voluntary childlessness as a valid choice to an alternate lifestyle was Canadian sociologist, Jean E. Veevers. Her exploratory investigations of the childless by choice throughout the 1970s, which culminated in a book in 1980, contributed valuable insights to a topic long neglected by researchers.

Organization of Literature Review

Following Veevers's ground-breaking work there has been more attention given to this area of research, especially since 1975 (Houseknecht, 1987). In fact, many aspects of the lives of the childfree have been studied to some degree. It is the purpose of this chapter to sort out the research that has been conducted in this field since
Veevers's work. To accomplish this, the existing literature has been categorized according to the focus of the inquiry, and methodologies and findings are discussed and critiqued within the context of each category. In addition, each category is organized to separate research completed prior to 1990 and research completed since 1990. This gives the reader an idea of how methodologies and results have changed yet still integrates studies conducted under each topic. Many recent works fall into more than one category since the tendency for current research in this area has been to take a qualitative approach that analyzes multiple dimensions of voluntary childlessness. For the purposes of this study a focus on the research findings pertaining to childfree women is maintained throughout this review.

For the most part, the study of voluntary childlessness has focused on: (a) trends and rates; (b) correlates; (c) rationales and decision-making processes; (d) relationships; (e) social pressures, stigmas, stereotypes, and sanctions; and (f) the link to occupations. These areas are similar to those Houseknecht (1987) found to be the focus of studies conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s on voluntary childlessness. Two categories of research included here that Houseknecht (1987) did not review are the relationships of the childfree and the associations between choosing childlessness and paid work.

**Trends and Rates of Voluntary Childlessness**

May's (1995) book on the history of childlessness (both voluntary and involuntary) in the United States traced the trends in this phenomenon from the sixteenth century to present day. May (1995) drew from archival records and a sample
of 500 letters from childless respondents to detail the changes in reproduction over
time. Two similar yet brief outlines of the evolution of childlessness in American and
Canadian history also are provided by Burgwyn (1981) and Veevers (1980),
respectively, in their books on childfree marriages.

Until the early part of this century, having children was necessary for the
economic survival of the family and the community, and childlessness was seen as a
misfortune. However, the economic advantages of having a large family declined
following industrialization. Urbanization, child labor laws, and compulsory schooling
meant that children were no longer contributing to the family economy and, in fact,
were a financial burden. In the Depression of the 1930s, there was a record low
birthrate and an all-time high incidence of childlessness (Burgwyn, 1981; May, 1995).

According to Burgwyn (1981), May (1995), and Veevers (1980), the low
birthrate of the 1930s continued throughout World War II until the baby boom era that
began shortly after the War and ended in the early 1960s. During this period of high
reproductive rates, May (1995) and Veevers (1980) noted that voluntary childlessness
was virtually non-existent. This trend continued until the late 1960s when an increase
in childlessness ran parallel to the emergence of the feminist movement, a heightened
environmental awareness, gay and lesbian rights, and an emphasis on reproductive
choice. The childfree movement of this period was a reaction to the intense
pronatalism of the baby boom era as well as a rejection of the postwar domestic
ideology. In addition, Gerson (1985) reported that, due to an economic decline, this
also was a time when women began entering the workplace in large numbers.
Although no single cause can explain the rise in childlessness, the political philosophies of the time, such as the feminist movement, facilitated a more accepting climate for those who chose not to reproduce (Burgwyn, 1981; May, 1995).

While the prevalence of childlessness never reached the levels of the pre World War II era, many researchers in the 1970s and 1980s predicted a continuing increase in the rate of voluntary childlessness (Burgwyn, 1981; Campbell, 1983; Gerson, 1985; Landa, 1990; Veevers, 1980). However, demographic surveys conducted in the United States in the late 1980s showed rates of voluntary childlessness to be declining or at least no longer increasing (Houseknecht, 1987; Jacobson & Heaton, 1990; Jacobson, Heaton, & Taylor, 1988). An analysis of family growth data in the United States in 1990 indicated a continuing low rate of voluntary childlessness among ever-married women (4.3 percent) and never-married women (9.4 percent) between the ages of 15 and 44 years (Abma & Peterson, 1995).

Conversely, a recent Toronto newspaper article asserted that the rate of voluntary childlessness among American women aged 35 to 39 has increased to 19.7 percent, up 10.5 percent from 2 decades ago (Richard, 1998). Bachu (as cited in Richard, 1998) attributed this increase to women’s postponement of marriage and childbearing, higher education, and satisfaction with occupations. Richard (1998) reported that researchers predict a continuing increase in the rates of voluntary childlessness among women due to effective birth control, various occupational opportunities, and a lessening of pronatalist pressure (a topic to that will be discussed in detail later in this chapter).
Correlates of Voluntary Childlessness

Much research has been conducted in an attempt to identify characteristics that are related to voluntary childlessness in order to determine what makes these adults deviate from this Western society norm. The most often cited correlates of voluntary childlessness, that is, high incidence of firstborns and only children, parents’ unhappy marriages, lack of religion, and high educational status are discussed in this section.

Firstborns and Only Children

Investigations into the characteristics of the childless by choice have shown a high incidence of firstborns and only children. In a sample of 52 married females, Veevers (1973, 1977) noted that the number of firstborn and only children was higher than would normally be expected. Similarly, Nason and Poloma (1976) found an unusually high incidence of firstborn females and only child females in their exploratory study of 30 voluntarily childless couples. Although Ory’s (1978) sample of 54 parent couples and 27 voluntarily childless couples contained a high incidence of firstborns in both groups, there tended to be more only children among the childfree group. Kiernan (1989), too, reported that a statistical analysis of data from a British national survey revealed that among her sample of married couples, women who were only children were more likely than women with siblings to chose childlessness. However, among Campbell’s (1983) Scottish male and female respondents who chose to avoid parenthood, the number of husbands, not wives, as only children was unusually high. As well, Veevers’s (1980) subsequent investigation of 120 wives and 36 husbands described a large proportion of both female and male respondents as
firstborns and only children. Citing research that linked the decision not to mother with sibling size, Burgwyn (1981) also described and quoted a firstborn respondent but did not state the prevalence of such women in her sample.

Veevers (1977, 1980) explained that firstborns, especially females, are likely to be required to assume the childcare responsibility of younger siblings. This experience gives the firstborn a realistic idea of parenthood and she (or he) may consequently be unwilling to take on such responsibilities later in life. Conversely, Veevers (1977, 1980) stated that only children have no experience with caring for siblings and have not even observed their parents in the role of caring for another child. Thus, only children lack the opportunities to identify with a parenting role and, therefore, are more unfamiliar with children which leads them to avoid having their own children.

The prevalence of firstborns and only children among the voluntarily childless continues to be described in some contemporary research. In her investigation of women who were childless for a variety of reasons, Lang (1991) found that many who chose not to mother spent their childhoods taking care of other siblings or had no siblings at all. Among Ireland’s (1993) sample of 105 childless women, the group consisting of voluntarily childless women consisted of more firstborns than the involuntary and the childless by delay groups (that is, those who postponed pregnancy until an age when conception became impossible). Similarly, Landa’s (1990) clinical interviews with 16 voluntarily childless women revealed a common theme of caring for younger siblings during childhood.

Based on the apparent finding of a correlation between an only child status and
voluntary childlessness as an adult, Landa (1990) predicted a significant increase in voluntary childlessness in North America in the next century due to the increasing number of one-child families. This prediction was made despite the fact that Landa (1990) did not describe any of her own respondents as being only children. Although recent reports have shown that one-child families are growing (Spivak, 1997), a corresponding increase in childfreedom is not necessarily inevitable. In fact, much of the current research detailing the lives of the childless by choice no longer describes an association between voluntary childlessness and family size or birth order in the natal family (Bartlett, 1995; Jacobson & Heaton, 1990; May, 1995; Morell, 1994). Instead, researchers have found that those who chose childlessness were such a diverse group that commonalities among them, such as family size, were not easily found (Bartlett, 1995; May, 1995).

Parents’ Marriages

Another characteristic that often has been attributed to the voluntarily childless is an unhappy marriage of their parents. Veevers (1977, 1980) reported that, although most of her respondents came from “intact” nuclear families, they perceived their parents’ marriages as unhappy. Veevers (1977, 1980) believed that children who observed their parents’ marital dissatisfaction learn that having children does not always make a marriage happy and, in fact, may cause a marriage to be unhappy. They may also learn that children might be the reason parents are not willing to leave the unhappy marriage. Veevers (1977, 1980) felt that this experience led a child (especially girls) to opt for childlessness.
Parents' marriage also was linked to a deliberate avoidance of parenthood in a study of Scottish wives and husbands. Campbell (1983) noted that most of the childfree men and women she interviewed, who had not expected to become parents before they were married, came from families that were non-nuclear. However, if the group of men and women who chose childlessness after marriage also were considered, then those whose natal families were non-nuclear represent only a small portion of the entire sample. Despite apparent contradictions between the family backgrounds of Campbell's (1983) respondents and Veevers's (1977, 1980) female sample, most of whom were from nuclear families, findings were similar in that respondents from both studies viewed their parents' marriages negatively. In addition, Veevers's (1977, 1980) participants reported that their mothers were unhappy with their homemaker role.

Burgwyn (1981) also described the link between unhappy marriages, in which mothers of the childfree felt trapped, and voluntary childlessness in her book on childless marriages. However, she did not offer evidence that this was prevalent in her own sample of childfree couples. Landa (1990) also noted that many of the women in her sample came from homes marked by parents' divorce, separation, or desertion. It is important to remember, though, that Landa (1990) is a psychologist and her data were based on clinical interviews with a small number of women who were seeking the help of a professional, perhaps because of their disrupted childhood homes.

Current research has failed to find higher than average incidents of unhappy parental marriages among women who forgo motherhood. Although Lang (1991) did describe some of her 63 female respondents as coming from "broken" homes, some also
came from happy, intact homes. A similar description was given of Ireland’s (1993) sample of 100 childless women. Ireland (1993) noted that only a small percentage of her sample of women who were childless by choice had divorced parents or described their families as dysfunctional, while most had “normal” families. Bartlett’s (1995) exploration of the lives of 50 voluntarily childless British women also revealed that while some interviewees did have difficult family backgrounds, an equal amount came from secure happy homes.

While contemporary research no longer emphasizes the connection between a non-nuclear family upbringing and voluntary childlessness, perception of childhood homes may influence the decision of some individuals to choose childlessness. For instance, May (1995) found that the majority of the childfree respondents who wrote to her were baby boomers raised in nuclear families. Several women from this group wrote stories of how they saw their mothers carry out the prescribed domestic role while sacrificing their aspirations. Whether or not the mothers were happy with their lives was not important to these childfree women. What was important was that these childfree baby boomers were not willing to be as constrained as they believed their mothers to be.

Thus, although the quality of parents’ marriages may influence the fertility choices of their offspring, there is little evidence of a strong association between voluntary childlessness and divorce or separation in the natal homes. Generally, research findings indicated that the incidence of parental marital disruption among the voluntarily childless was no higher than among persons who chose to parent
Religion and Education

Two correlates of the voluntarily childless that appear to be consistent over time are education and religious affiliation. Researchers, past and present, qualitative and quantitative, consistently found that women who chose to be childless tended to be both highly educated and not religious (Abma & Peterson, 1995; Gerson, 1985; Houseknecht, 1979; Jacobson & Heaton, 1990; Lang, 1991; Veevers, 1973, 1980). Some researchers noted only the high educational status of their samples (Burgwyn, 1981; Jacobson, Heaton, & Taylor, 1988; May, 1995; Morell, 1994; Nason & Poloma, 1976) while others described the lack of religious identification as a salient feature of their samples (Bartlett, 1995; Ory, 1978). One earlier work that did not find a correlation between religion and voluntary childlessness was Jacobson, Heaton, and Taylor's (1988) analysis of women's interviews for an American survey of family growth in 1982. However, in a later examination of the same survey for 1987 and 1988, Jacobson and Heaton (1990) did find that those without a religious preference were more likely to be childless by choice.

Houseknecht (1987) contended that voluntarily childless women tended not to be involved with religion because most Western religions prescribe procreation. Therefore, it seems logical that women who reject the traditional pronatalist beliefs of society also reject traditional pronatalist beliefs of many religions. Concerning education, Houseknecht (1987) believed that the decision to forgo a major role in life such as motherhood was either the result of, or the impetus for, a commitment to a
different life goal via education.

Rationales and Decision-Making Processes

Another commonly researched area of voluntary childlessness is the rationales provided by those who intended to remain childless. A related, and also often researched topic, is the process through which the childfree reach their decision. Research conducted in these two areas is described in this section.

Rationales

Among studies of voluntary childlessness, one of the most common reasons found for choosing and remaining childless was freedom (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Campbell, 1983; Hawkins, 1984; Lang, 1991; May, 1995; Morell, 1994; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1977, 1980). Both men and women, over the decades and across geographical locations, cited a desire for freedom from childcare responsibilities as an important motive behind their choice of childlessness. For instance, in a 1976 American study, Nason and Poloma found that freedom was cited most often as the reason for the sample of married couples to remain childfree. Veevers (1977, 1980) also found that Canadian men and women felt freedom was an important rationale for being childless. In a Scottish study of motives for initially choosing childlessness and for remaining childless, Campbell’s (1983) frequency tables showed that many freedom-related reasons were given by couples who decided early on to avoid parenthood. In-depth interviews with 50 British women also revealed that the concept of freedom was central to their childfree choice (Bartlett, 1995). Finally, a more recent American examination of how 34 childfree wives challenged the procreative
norm revealed that the majority of the sample remained childless to maintain their sense of freedom (Morell, 1994).

Freedom, as described by many of the researchers cited above, included not only freedom from the responsibilities and concerns of raising children but also freedom from the financial restraints that often accompany children (Lang, 1991; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Nave-Herz, 1989). This monetary advantage allowed the childfree enough resources for consumer goods (Burgwyn, 1981; May, 1995) or enabled them to be less committed to work (Burgwyn, 1981; Lang, 1991; Veevers, 1980). Having freedom also meant being able to pursue careers, hobbies, and creative interests, being able to travel, having more time, solitude, and the ability to be spontaneous (Bartlett, 1995; May, 1995; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1977).

Another consideration for permanent childlessness described by some researchers was women’s commitment to their jobs or careers (Gerson, 1985; Lang, 1991; Montgomery, 1989; Nave-Herz, 1989). However, other studies could not present this as a definitive reason for childlessness. For example, Burgwyn (1981) noted that among her sample of married couples from the United States, women’s careers were not necessarily the major reason for their fertility choice. Embarking on a career was, in fact, often the result of, not the cause for, childlessness. Similarly, Campbell (1983) concluded that the desire to pursue a career emerged from the desire to be childless as described by the Scottish wives interviewed. Also, Ireland (1993) and Morell (1994) reported that the majority of their American female interviewees linked their childlessness to being highly devoted to their work. Nevertheless, none of
these women described their careers as the sole reason for their choice to remain childless. In fact, Morell (1994) found that the wives in her sample identified a great many factors that influenced their decision. In addition, both Bartlett (1995) and May (1995) found that respondents who gave work commitment as a primary motive for their voluntarily childless status were rare.

A rationale for choosing childlessness that has been disputed in the research is a dislike of children. Veevers (1980) reported that while only some of the Canadian husbands and wives she interviewed said they disliked children, most were disinterested in children. Veevers (1980) also noted that some who expressed a positive view of children may have been conforming to a cultural norm that everyone should have a general appreciation for children. Conversely, American researcher Burgwyn (1981) found that most of her voluntarily childless couples claimed to enjoy children and many worked with children. These couples wanted to experience close contact with children but did not want the full-time responsibility of caring for their own children. Only a few of Burgwyn’s (1981) childfree respondents disclosed an indifference toward children. Some of these participants described feeling uncomfortable around children while others described only liking children of specific ages. An intolerance of children also was recorded by Campbell (1983) as a motive for Scottish couples to avoid parenthood, although this was the motive for more men than women. In-depth interviews with 13 voluntarily childless women conducted by Hawkins, an American researcher, in 1984 also revealed commonly expressed feelings of unease around children. Finally, a German study of reasons why married couples remained childless
showed a negative attitude toward children as the most common rationale (Nave-Herz, 1989).

More current, in-depth studies of voluntary childlessness have shown that a dislike of children was the rationale for only a few of those who avoided parenthood. For example, among Morell's (1994) sample of 34 voluntarily childless wives only 7 women believed themselves not to be "child-oriented" or described feeling uncomfortable around children while the rest were very involved with children (p. 119). May (1995) found that a dislike for children was the third of three reasons most frequently given by her American respondents for their choice to be childless. However, May (1995) also noted that she received many more letters in which the childfree declared a liking rather than a disliking for children. Bartlett (1995) described quite a few of her British participants as having a dislike for children and wanting to avoid children altogether, especially young ones. However, similar to May (1995), Bartlett (1995) reported that many of her interviewees were very interested in children.

Other, more infrequently found rationales for childfreeness were concerns about disrupting harmonious partnerships (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Campbell, 1983; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980), the population growth (Burgwyn, 1981; May, 1995) and the physical aspects of pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent health status (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; May, 1995; Veevers, 1980). Landa (1990) mentioned each of these three motives in her work on voluntary childlessness but did not make it clear whether or not these motives were given by her own respondents. Furthermore,
every one of the rationales described in this section were found among the childfree women interviewed by Lang (1991). However, she did not offer specific examples of her participants describing these reasons. Some women in Bartlett’s (1995) sample of voluntarily childless females did express a concern for overpopulation, although they said it was not a factor that dissuaded them from having children.

**Decision-Making Processes**

Earlier works in the area of voluntary childlessness attempted to create conceptual models of the processes individuals underwent when making their decision to remain childless. For example, based on Canadian research focusing on 52 voluntarily childless wives and a subsequent study of 120 wives and 36 husbands, Veevers (1973, 1980) discovered that the decision to remain childless was made either relatively early in life, before marriage, or after marriage by postponing the decision until having children was no longer desired. Veevers’s 1980 study of childfree husbands and wives revealed that the majority of the sample decided to remain childless after postponing the decision once they were married. Veevers (1973, 1980) believed these postponing couples progressed through four stages before arriving at their decision. In the first stage the couple put off having children until a specified time, assuming that they would have children one day. The second stage of this process involved the shift from a specified time for parenthood to indefinite postponement. The next stage was characterized by the couple’s recognition that permanent childlessness was likely. In the fourth and final stage the husband and wife concluded that childlessness was definite and permanent.
Nason and Poloma (1976) also interviewed 30 voluntarily childless couples to determine their level of commitment to childlessness and how they made their decision. Nason and Poloma (1976) found that couples followed three different routes to arrive at their decision to not parent. The first route, taken by 4 couples, involved making the decision before marriage and in each case the wife initiated the decision. Fourteen couples followed the second path and decided to remain childless 2 to 3 years after the marriage. Most of the couples made their decision after 3 years of marriage as a result of continual postponement. Thus, the majority of Nason and Poloma’s (1976) sample, like Veevers’s (1973) sample, made the decision after they were married. Also, like Veevers’s (1980) Canadian couples, Nason and Poloma’s (1976) American husbands and wives assumed they would have children when they were first married but gradually changed their minds. Similar conclusions were drawn from questionnaire data collected by Ory (1978) for her American study of the components involved in making fertility decisions. Ory (1978) found that male and female voluntarily childless adults were more likely than males and females with children to have made their childbearing choice after marriage.

In 1986, American psychologist Carole Wilk analyzed the childbearing decisions of 24 childless wives in dual-career couples who were either uncertain about having children, intended to have children in the future, or had decided to remain childless. Wilk (1986) developed a theoretical model that reflected the elements involved in the decision-making process of each of these groups of women. Wilk’s (1986) analysis argued that a woman’s individual intrapsychic factors, such as her
relationship with her parents and her personality characteristics, interact with marriage, career, and lifestyle factors to influence her childbearing decision.

In a review of the research on voluntary childlessness, Houseknecht (1987) found two common pathways to the childless decision that also were found by Veevers (1973). Houseknecht (1987) described those who took the first path, which involved making the decision before marriage, as "early articulators" and those following the second path, who decided to remain childless after marriage, as "postponers" (p.379). The studies Houseknecht (1987) analyzed showed that most of the voluntarily childless were postponers who had made their decision after they became comfortable in their childless marriages.

Although conceptual models are useful for guiding research, many recent works have abandoned typologies of the decision-making process because they were limiting (Houseknecht, 1987) and because routes that led to the non-reproductive decision varied considerably for each individual (Bartlett, 1995; Morell, 1994). The process is now viewed as very complex involving many social and emotional factors that may be reconsidered many times during a person’s reproductive life (Bartlett, 1995; Landa, 1990; Morell, 1994).

Some contemporary researchers have found that their samples of childfree respondents were so diverse that they could not fit into clear-cut categories of early articulators or postponers (Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; May, 1995; Morell, 1994). For example, American psychologist Mardy Ireland (1993) attempted to reconfigure these categories after interviewing 100 childfree and infertile women. Ireland (1993)
categorized all women who chose childlessness as "transformative" (since they were creating new meanings of what "woman" entails) regardless of whether their decision was made before or after marriage (p. 70). The women who postponed making a decision until bearing a child was impossible were classified separately as "transitional" women, that is, women who wanted a family but also wanted careers (p. 41). The problem with Ireland's (1993) model is that the diversity of women within both of these categories is simplified.

Bartlett's (1995) and Morell's (1994) examinations of women who were childless by choice revealed that diverse decision-making processes made it impossible to classify the women in their samples. For example, some respondents did not make the conscious choice to avert motherhood, rather a series of temporary decisions against motherhood resulted in a permanent decision once the women reached menopause. In addition, both of these researchers interviewed women who at one time tried to have children (but were infertile, had abortions, or became divorced) and then later chose to remain childless. Some researchers also have interviewed women who decided not to have children until they were married and where there were no prospective husbands the women chose to remain childless (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Gerson, 1985; Lang, 1991). A recent article in a Toronto newspaper described a similar situation in which a single woman chose not to have children until she was married. However, as she was nearing the end of her childbearing years this woman predicted that by the time she met and married a man she would likely be an age at which reproduction would be difficult if not impossible (Dhooma, 1997). Another group of women, whose decision
was influenced by a man’s unwillingness to have or raise children, was described by researchers. Morell (1994) and Ireland (1993) talked with women who had chosen childlessness because they were married to men who did not want children or who had had vasectomies. Ireland (1993) grouped these women in the same category as women who chose childlessness independent of a man’s influence. Gerson (1985) and Lang (1991) interviewed childless wives who chose not to have children because they felt their husbands would not be very involved fathers and these women were not willing to raise children alone. Morell (1994) argued that the use of the term “choice” to describe how some women came to be childless was too simplistic and did not reflect the complicated life decisions that resulted in these women’s childless state. However, Morell (1994) further maintained that these women did in fact “choose” childlessness although in many cases it was an indirect or “second-order choice” (p. 51).

A review of research on the decision-making processes of the voluntarily childless illustrates the diversity that exists within this group. Categories created by researchers to classify the childfree according to how they arrived at their decision are too narrow and tend to overlook important distinctions between these individuals and the complexity of the process itself. That many contemporary researchers have abandoned attempts to categorize the voluntarily childless based on their decision-making process is evidence of the complex nature of this process.

Relationships of the Voluntarily Childless

The relationships of voluntarily childless individuals have received much attention from researchers in this field. The relationship most often studied is the
marital relationship of the childless heterosexual couple. However, relationships with children and with friends who were parents also have been examined. Research findings in each of these three areas are discussed in this section.

**Intimate Relationships**

Generally, the research on the marital adjustment of childfree couples has described these couples as enjoying a close, satisfying relationship. Nason and Poloma's (1976) interviews with 30 voluntarily childless couples revealed that most of these couples' social needs and need for companionship were fulfilled by their spouses. A related finding was discovered by another American study through in-depth interviews with married couples without children (Burgwyn, 1981). Burgwyn (1981) found that many childfree spouses fulfilled their need to nurture by nurturing each other. Repeating Veevers's (1980) argument, Burgwyn (1981) maintained that focusing on a spouse for psychological and social needs can lead to problems in a marriage when spouses become too dependent on each other.

In Veevers's (1980) detailed analysis of the marriages of voluntarily childless couples, three common themes emerged. First, the relationships of the childfree couples appeared to be quite intense due to the fact that they only had each other to attend to and did not have to share their attention with their offspring. The second theme Veevers (1980) uncovered in her investigation of childfree marriages related to the high morale experienced in these marriages. Veevers's (1980) general impression of these couples was that they were happier than most couples. In fact, these couples reported that they believed they were happier than couples with children. Finally,
Veevers (1980) found that the childfree husbands and wives she interviewed seemed to have more egalitarian relationships than did most couples. What is questionable about these findings is how Veevers (1980) came to conclusions based on comparisons to other (that is, parental) couples when she only interviewed childfree couples.

Houseknecht’s (1979) quantitative study examining the marital adjustment of the voluntarily childless in the United States concluded that childfree couples had high marital satisfaction. Houseknecht (1979) compared the scores of 50 childfree wives to 50 mothers in the areas of marital cohesiveness, satisfaction, agreement, and expression of affections. The findings showed that wives who were childless by choice scored significantly higher in the area of marital cohesion than the wives who were mothers. The high score in marital cohesion scored by the childfree resulted in a higher score of overall marital adjustment. Inferences based on this study should be made with caution as Houseknecht’s (1979) data were taken only from wives and not husbands who may have rated each area of marital adjustment differently. In addition, in order to eliminate other explanations for marital adjustment, Houseknecht (1979) matched the 2 groups of women with regard to their religion, education, and employment. Houseknecht (1979) admitted that while this created internal validity, it diminished external validity thereby making generalizations impossible.

A similar, more recent American study was conducted by Somers (1993) who compared the marital satisfaction of 74 voluntarily childless men and women with 127 fathers and mothers. Survey results revealed that the 2 groups did not differ in the areas of marital agreement and expressing affection. However, the voluntarily
childless group scored higher in the areas of marital satisfaction and cohesion than did the parental group.

Many current qualitative investigations of intimate relationships of the voluntary childless have confirmed earlier conclusions that these couples tend to have close, stable, egalitarian relationships (Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; Landa, 1990; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994). In addition, some contemporary researchers echoed the warnings of Veevers (1980) that childfree couples’ reliance on each other and not on other persons (such as children) can at times become overwhelming and isolating (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994). However, each of these researchers did not find examples of uncomfortably intense marriages among their samples. Conversely, some researchers described an independence enjoyed by many women in childfree marriages (Bartlett, 1995; Hawkins, 1984).

Relationships with Children

Despite the previous discussion pointing to a dislike of children as a reason for some to remain childless, research has shown that many childfree individuals maintained close relationships with children. Perhaps the assumption that those who chose a childless life did so out of a dislike for children prevented earlier researchers from investigating relationships of the childfree with children. As a result, only one of the studies analyzed for this review prior to the 1990s discussed positive relationships between the voluntarily childless and children (Burgwyn, 1981). Although Veevers (1980) noted that half of her sample said they liked children, she believed they responded this way because it was a social taboo to admit having a dislike for children.
Thus, she pursued respondents' negative experiences with children and failed to examine any positive relationships.

One common finding in the recent investigations into the lives of the childfree was that many of these individuals worked with children on a regular basis. For example, of the childfree women Ireland (1993) interviewed, some chose child-oriented careers for the purpose of incorporating children into their lives. Morell (1994) also asserted that one half of her sample of voluntarily childless women had worked or were working with children (as therapists or educators) or were working for the benefit of children (for example, one respondent was an author of a book on children's language problems and another was a lawyer working with child custody cases). In the letters that May (1995) received from voluntarily childless men and women, many described themselves as teachers and professionals who worked directly with children.

Outside of working relationships with children, many childfree individuals were found to have close ties to nieces, nephews, godchildren, and friends' or neighbors' children (Bartlett, 1995; Lang, 1991; May, 1995; Morell, 1994). These childfree persons formed special bonds with children and were involved in every aspect of their lives. The childless by choice in these studies were able to nurture, love, and be responsible for children without having the demands of parenthood. Just as children made the lives of the childfree richer, the childfree also made important contributions to the lives of the children. May (1995) noted that not only did some of her childless male and female respondents take seriously the responsibility for the children in their lives, they also felt accountable for the well-being of all children, working to fulfil the
needs of their community's youngsters.

**Relationships with Friends who are Parents**

Other relationships that have been detailed in the current research are the friendships between the voluntarily childless and persons with children. Burgwyn (1981) noted that childfree couples can have difficulties maintaining relationships with those who seem to be preoccupied with issues concerning their children. Some of Hawkins's (1984) 13 childfree women interviewees described having trouble initiating and maintaining relationships with females who were mothers. These participants felt excluded from a domain occupied by mothers who shared and talked about experiences they believed the childfree could never understand. Woollett (1991) also described a world of experiences and knowledge in which women shared the common identity of mother and to which access was denied to those who were not mothers. As discussed earlier, Nelson (1996) described this domain or world as the "culture of motherhood" (p. 98) and the knowledge shared by mothers as a "maternal epistemology" (p. 99). Nelson (1996) found that entry into the culture of motherhood was gained only through bearing and rearing one's own biological child.

Many of the childfree women in both Bartlett's (1995) and Morell's (1994) samples reported feeling left out and left behind once their friends became mothers. These childfree women felt their mother-friends no longer had the time to socialize. In addition, as Burgwyn (1981) discovered, childfree women also were uninterested in what they perceived as the limited interests of mothers such as a focus on child-rearing matters. The women in Bartlett's (1995) and Morell’s (1994) studies also spoke of
feeling as though their thoughts and input into discussions about children were discounted by their friends who were mothers. The lack of common interests and feelings of exclusion from mothers' lives caused many of these friendships to drift apart. In such cases, researchers found that the childfree women tended to surround themselves with other childfree women with whom they shared a common interest and who also validated their choice to remain childless (Bartlett, 1995; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994; Ory, 1978). In addition, Ory (1978) found that many childfree couples distanced themselves from friends who were parents in an effort to minimize pronatalist pressures. Nevertheless, friendships with mothers were not lost forever. Burgwyn (1981) and Lang (1991) reported that once the children were older or moved out of the home, women with children and childfree women found they had much in common once again.

Social Pressures, Stigmas, Stereotypes, and Sanctions

One area of voluntary childlessness that continues to receive a great deal of attention is the pronatalist pressures experienced by those who have chosen to deviate from the reproductive norm of Western society. Direct and subtle pressures in the form of stigmas, stereotypes, and sanctions function to encourage adults (especially married adults) to adhere to society's prevailing norm that prescribes children (Polit, 1978). The research findings regarding the pronatalist pressures, stigmas, stereotypes, and sanctions as perceived and experienced by the childfree have remained fairly consistent over time despite the nature of the investigation. A review of these findings is the focus of this section.
In Veevers's (1973) study of 52 childfree wives, every one of the women felt she was stigmatized and believed that she was stereotyped as selfish, immature, unsatisfied, unfeminine, and not normal. Some of these women reported receiving direct pressure to become mothers in the form of comments regarding the importance of having children. Some women received less direct pressure when asked to explain their decision. Veevers (1973) found that these pressures did not exist in the first year of marriage but slowly increased as the marriage progressed. By the fifth or sixth year of marriage, Veevers (1973) noted that these pressures diminished as the couple avoided those who pressured them, handled negative responses better or experienced more acceptance from others.

By contrast, Nason and Poloma (1976) reported that the majority of the childfree couples they interviewed did not perceive being pressured to have children. However, they did find that those who were "reasonably committed" to their decision were aware of pressures from friends and family, especially their parents (p.31). In addition, while those who were labeled "irrevocably committed" did not perceive pressure from friends and family, they did receive pressure from acquaintances (p. 31).

In 1978, Polit examined stereotypes relating to various family sizes. One hundred ninety-two Boston area residents responded to questionnaires in which they were asked to list traits that best described six fictitious families that varied in size. Individuals who chose not to have children were described least favorably. The voluntarily childless were perceived as more self-centered, immature, rebellious, and less friendly than persons who had children or who could not have children. In
addition, Polit (1978) found that childfree women were viewed more negatively than childfree men. Ory (1978) drew similar conclusions from the questionnaire data of 27 voluntarily childless couples and 54 couples with children. When differences between the 2 groups were reported, parents described voluntary childlessness more negatively than did the childfree. Parents judged the childfree as selfish, missing out and having mental problems. The voluntarily childless couples in this sample were aware of the stereotypes and most felt some kind of pressure to have a family. The childfree couples also believed they were often perceived by others as being selfish, mentally unstable, and immature.

In 1980, Veevers maintained her previous position of the early 1970s and reported that the childfree continued to be viewed by society as deviant and were therefore stigmatized and negatively stereotyped. Many of the couples she interviewed for both her 1973 and her 1980 study were required to defend their childless decision and also were subjected to pronatalist pressures that came mostly from their parents. In addition, many of these wives reported being pressured by their doctors to start a family.

Some researchers in the 1980s claimed that voluntary childlessness was no longer stigmatized (Burgwyn, 1981; Gerson, 1985). Researchers during this time seemed to believe that society was ready to embrace those who were childless by choice. For instance, in 1981, Burgwyn introduced her book on childless marriages by discussing North American society’s acceptance of the choice to be childless and the greater visibility of childfree individuals. However, later in her book Burgwyn (1981)
recounted the common criticisms and pronatalist pressures experienced by the childfree couples in her sample. Burgwyn (1981) noted that these individuals most often were accused of being selfish and told they had only loneliness to look forward to in their old age. The pronatalist pressures these couples received ranged from subtle to not-so-subtle comments and even included a type of flattery such as pointing out that the childfree person would make a wonderful parent. Another researcher studying women’s fertility and employment choices in the 1980s, also described an environment more supportive of women’s childless choice (Gerson, 1985). Gerson (1985) also noted a lessening of pronatalist sanctions experienced by women who were ambivalent about motherhood and pursued their career aspirations.

If there existed, in fact, a growing social acceptance of voluntary childlessness in the 1980s, it is apparently unique to the decade preceding this one as contemporary literature has reemphasized a societal intolerance of anti-parental choices. Although Lang (1991) noted that the attitudes of the late 1980s made choosing childlessness easier, the women in her sample argued that cultural approval was still a long way off. The childfree women in Lang’s (1991) study described being viewed by others as selfish, hating children, and prone to be lonely in their old age. These women told stories of having to deal with both casual comments and outright criticisms regarding their childlessness. Many of these pressures and sanctions came from friends who had children and who tried to persuade the childfree to do the same. Also in 1991, Woollett found that many of her childless, both voluntarily and involuntarily, female interviewees felt that they were viewed negatively by others and frequently were asked
to account for their failure to fulfill their traditional role as mother.

These themes emerged repeatedly throughout current inquiries into the lives of the voluntarily childless. Morell (1994) offered a detailed analysis of the explanations her interviewees were frequently required to give. She noted that these childfree wives were pressured into relaying mothering-type activities in an effort to compensate for the lack of their own mothering experience. Each of Morell’s (1994) participants experienced, to some extent, the influence of the negative portrayals of the voluntarily childless. The women in Bartlett’s (1995), May’s (1995), and Morell’s (1994) study were well aware of the prevailing stereotype that described them as selfish. While few of Morell’s (1994) sample held this view of themselves, many of Bartlett’s (1995) and May’s (1995) participants conveyed this common stereotype by labeling themselves as selfish.

The interviews Bartlett (1995) conducted and the letters May (1995) received also contained descriptions of remarks directed at the childless respondents similar to the ones presented by Lang (1991). Bartlett’s (1995) respondents frequently dealt with comments ranging from polite conversation openers inquiring if they had children to more intense pressures insisting they should settle down and begin a family. Bartlett (1995) found that the married women participants experienced more pressure than unmarried women because of the dominant belief that marriage is intended for heterosexual couples to reproduce. Bartlett (1995) also found that the pronatalist comments directed at married women began to fade as the women neared the end of their childbearing years. Similarly, May (1995) reported that several of her childless
respondents said dealing with the probing questions and comments of friends, family, and strangers was the most difficult aspect of being childless. Both May (1995) and Veevers (1980) noted that sometimes these remarks were quite rude, insinuating that the lack of children was due to sexual difficulties such as a lack of trying or incorrect positioning.

The area of sex also is the basis for two inconsistent stereotypes. Veevers (1980) explained that since sexual intercourse is associated with reproduction, those who do not reproduce are seen as not wanting or not having sex. Thus, childfree couples are stereotyped as frigid, impotent, having no sex drive, or having difficulty performing (Burgwyn, 1981; Veevers, 1980). However, according to Burgwyn (1981) and Veevers (1980), a contradictory stereotype also exists. Couples who choose not to have children also are believed to have an overactive sex life. Their alleged overindulgence is seen as immoral as they never achieve the traditionally intended goal of procreation.

Current quantitative research uncovers similar findings to those made by Ory in 1978 regarding the negative views of the childfree. For instance, Somers (1993) conducted a statistical analysis of survey results to compare the perceptions of childfree adults with adults who had children. Results revealed that voluntarily childless individuals felt more stereotyped, especially by friends and relatives, because of their fertility choice than did individuals with children. Stereotypes of childfree couples are reinforced even in popular culture. In a recent Ann Landers column (Jan. 8, 1997) a sarcastic piece translated society's disapproval of the childfree lifestyle into envy and
highlighted some of the dominant stereotypes. It characterized the childfree as lonely, empty, not normal, and selfishly wrapped up in their own concerns.

Despite the 60 years that have passed since Popenoe’s (1936) research characterized the childfree as selfish, immature, and neurotic, contemporary research has shown that there remain similar views today by Western society. It is apparent from the relatively consistent findings that as long as pronatalist norms exist those who do not conform to them will be stigmatized, stereotyped, and forced to cope with sanctions and pressures to become parents. Bartlett (1995) and Morell (1994) argued that such pronatalist pressures have made it difficult for women to make the childless choice.

Occupations and Voluntary Childlessness

Within the research on voluntary childlessness, an association has been made between women’s paid employment and their fertility status. Many of the quantitative studies focused merely on establishing a correlation between childfreeness and occupational categorization or commitment. Other research in this area has looked at women’s paid work as a motive to remain childless. Also, there is a portion of the qualitative research on voluntary childlessness that has more closely examined women’s feelings about their job and/or career commitments. However, these investigations have comprised only a small part of the literature on childfree women.

Gaining more knowledge about the relationship between voluntary childlessness and women’s occupations requires referring to research regarding women’s careers and their childbearing choices. However, much of this research has focused on mothers in
paid employment. If the childless woman is included in these works she may be temporarily, involuntarily, or voluntarily childless. In these cases, little analysis is conducted as the childless woman is believed to have few difficulties in the paid work world due to the absence of the added responsibility of childcare (e.g., Gerson, 1985; Krishnan, 1992; Lewis & Cooper, 1987; Marlow, 1993; Rossi, 1993; Wilk, 1986).

Since women's work as a motive for childlessness has been discussed previously, this section addresses the quantitative and qualitative research that examined a relationship between childfree women and the categorization of and commitment to their occupations. As well, Gerson's (1985) study regarding the childbearing and career choices of women is reviewed since she is one of few researchers in this field who has conducted a relatively close examination of voluntarily childless women.

Categorization and Commitment Level

Comparative studies found that women who planned never to have children had a higher rate of labor force participation (Carrier, 1995; Houseknecht, 1979; Landa, 1990; Ory, 1978; Veevers, 1980), higher status jobs (Ory, 1978) and were more involved in their work than were employed mothers (Carrier, 1995; Montgomery, 1989). Research that focuses only on the voluntarily childless also has indicated that childfree women tended to work in high status jobs (Burgwyn, 1981; Ireland, 1993; Kiernan, 1989; Lang, 1991; May, 1995; Morell, 1994) and expressed high levels of work commitment (Burgwyn, 1981; Ireland, 1993; Jacobson & Heaton, 1990; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980).

Research on voluntarily childless women's relationships to paid employment has
revealed a common finding. Many childfree women felt that because of their commitment to their occupations they could not possibly have given the devotion to a baby that they felt was necessary to make a good mother (Gerson, 1985; Hawkins, 1984; Ireland, 1993; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994; Nave-Herz, 1989; Veevers, 1973, 1980). Many of these childfree women believed that achieving success in both motherhood and employment was not possible and some said if they had chosen to be mothers they would have stopped working outside the home (Gerson, 1985, May, 1995; Morell, 1994). Veevers (1973, 1980) described this either/or attitude toward paid work and childbearing as surprisingly conventional considering the unconventional fertility choices made by these women. Such an attitude has been found by researchers to be the manifestation of the high standards childfree women had with regard to their paid work and their approach to mothering (Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994). In order to adhere to such standards, these childfree women gave all of their attention to their occupations instead of lowering their standards to enable them to mother in addition to being employed.

**Childbearing and Career Choices**

This section will review the findings of Kathleen Gerson (1985) that relate to women’s career decisions and the decision to remain childless. Gerson (1985), an American sociologist, interviewed 63 women, with and without children, born during the baby boom era whose ages ranged from 27 to 37 years old. Gerson (1985) found that these women’s childhood aspirations about becoming mothers had no bearing on their choices as adults. Many of the voluntarily childless women believed when they
were youngsters that they would one day have children. Gerson (1985) outlined various factors that pulled these women away from motherhood and pushed them toward careers. Men played a large part in the women’s decision to remain childfree. Lack of stable relationships, men’s opposition or indifference to children, and their unwillingness to share in childcare responsibilities made having children appear undesirable for these women. Without stable relationships in which men were willing to have children and contribute to their care, many of the women began to veer away from motherhood and develop stronger career commitments.

Another factor Gerson (1985) found to influence the women’s decision to not mother was the women’s belief that having children would hinder their chances for professional advancement. Bartlett (1995) and Veevers (1980) also found this to be true for many of the women they interviewed who believed that having children would disrupt career progress. Furthermore, the voluntarily childless women Gerson (1985) interviewed felt their devotion to their careers would result in them failing as mothers. They feared that their offspring would be somehow damaged as a result of their work commitment and that society would blame them for raising a troubled child. The final factor that led these women to choose childlessness was their concern that having children meant that they would lose their own identities. Some women expressed concerns that adding the responsibility of children to their work responsibilities would have led to them to experience mental and physical health problems.

Although Gerson’s (1985) research was intended to highlight the association between childbearing choices and career commitments, this narrow look at the career-
related reasons for deciding against having children leads to the impression that these are the only motives for childlessness. The reader is left believing that those who choose not to have children do so because of factors relating only to their paid work and relationships with men. However, research reviewed earlier indicated many rationales for the childless choice of which women's career commitment is often not a primary motive (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Ireland, 1993; May, 1995; Morell, 1994).

Veevers (1980) described the relationship between voluntary childlessness and career commitment as complicated and interdependent. Although careers were not the reason for childlessness, once childfree women became successful at their work they became more committed to both their careers and childlessness. Veevers (1980) explained this relationship as reciprocal rather than the uni-directional one implied by Gerson (1985). In addition, Veevers (1980) and other researchers (Burgwyn, 1981; Lang, 1991) cited voluntary childlessness as a cause to lessen work commitments, especially for married couples. Since the couple did not have the added financial burden of children, one or both partners were free to reduce their occupational responsibilities by working sporadically, part-time, or quitting altogether.

Gerson (1985) also tended to focus much attention on the women who chose to be mothers and to work either inside or outside the home. As a result, only a small portion of the book examined those women who were voluntarily childless. While Gerson's (1985) work contributes to an understanding of how women make career and fertility choices, a closer look at these women's (especially the childfree) work-related
experiences as a consequence of their childbearing choices also would have been valuable.

Summary of Review

A review of the literature on voluntary childlessness reveals that the areas of childfreeness that are most often investigated include the trends and rates, correlates, rationales and decision-making processes, relationships, pronatalist pressures, and occupations. As has been shown in this review each of these areas is multi-faceted and research findings within them often are inconsistent. Earlier quantitative studies offer a somewhat limited view of the childless by choice by reporting statistics related to the childfree. However, more recent qualitative explorations have covered a myriad of issues experienced by a diverse group of childfree persons resulting in a lack of depth in any one area.

This study attempted to focus on a particular aspect of the lives of a specific group of the voluntarily childless, notably the work-related experiences of childfree female teachers. While researchers have studied the area of childfree women's paid work, they have either presented information such as commitment levels and occupational classifications or analyzed the childbearing and job considerations of all women, both with and without children. Missing are investigations into the types of occupations held by childfree women and how their fertility choice influences their experiences in these jobs.

Since women from a young age are encouraged to adopt the feminine values of caring and nurturing, they tend to seek out employment in which they can utilize these
values (Jacobs, 1989). Thus, female-dominated occupations such as nursing, social work, and teaching require women to nurture others, often children. Given this association, it is surprising that researchers examining women's childfree lives have neglected to probe more deeply into the lives of those women with child-centered careers. An inquiry, such as this study, into the experiences of women who have chosen not to bear and rear children but have chosen to teach children is much needed. These teachers have experienced unique relationships, pressures, and occupational issues that resulted from their childfree status. It has been the purpose of this study to uncover these women's complex experiences. This research widens an understanding of the lives of female elementary school teachers. Furthermore, examining the experiences of voluntarily childless female teachers is in response to a call for feminist researchers to further investigate the lives of childfree women in an attempt to adequately reflect and support the diverse experiences of all women (Ireland, 1993; Letherby, 1994; Morell, 1994).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Overview

This chapter describes the procedures of the research. The purpose in presenting a detailed outline of the methodology is to enable other researchers to replicate the study. Thus, the procedural information is organized into the following categories: (a) research approach, (b) pilot study, (c) selection of participants, (d) research design, (e) data analysis, (f) dissemination, (g) feasibility, and (h) ethics. In addition, the methodological assumptions and limitations of the research are discussed. The chapter begins with a brief outline of the reasons for having studied a specific group of voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers.

Conceptual Framework

This study explored the experiences of a selected sample of 7 voluntarily childless women who taught young children. A focus on voluntary childlessness was an attempt to contribute to research on childlessness that has neglected to examine the occupational experiences of childfree women, to contribute to feminist research on the diverse experiences of women, especially with regard to the childfree experience (Letherby, 1994; Morell, 1994), and to widen the scope of research regarding the experiences of female teachers. A sample consisting of all females is consistent with much of the existing research on voluntary childlessness (e.g., Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994). Researchers of the childfree commonly focus on females since parenthood most often is seen as the basis of the female identity (Bartlett, 1995; Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980; Woollett, 1991).

A focus on teachers at the elementary level allowed for an examination of an
apparent contradiction. The notion of choosing a personal life without children apparently contradicts the idea of choosing an occupation in which one is responsible for the daily care of young children. Interviewing childfree women who taught young children enabled an inquiry into whether or not they disliked children and/or lacked knowledge about and experiences with children or felt they were perceived as such (Bartlett, 1995; Hawkins, 1984; Lang, 1991; Morell, 1994; Nave-Herz, 1989; Veevers, 1980; Woollett, 1991).

Research Approach

The methodological approach taken in research on the voluntarily childless appears to have come full circle since Veevers's work in the early 1970s. While much of the early research was exploratory in nature, studies conducted in the 1980s tended to take a quantitative approach. In 1987, after reviewing several studies on voluntary childlessness, Houseknecht insisted that, "the need for exploratory and descriptive studies has diminished" (p. 389). Houseknecht (1987) believed qualitative methods were useful only for gathering information in order to develop more "sophisticated" experimental research designs (p. 389). Despite Houseknecht's (1987) appeal for more statistical studies in the area of voluntary childlessness, the tendency today is toward qualitative inquiries similar to the approach taken by researchers almost 30 years ago.

Qualitative investigations into human experiences allow for the complexity of social interaction to be revealed. The qualitative researcher seeks to learn about others by understanding and interpreting how participants construct the world around them. This requires researchers to conduct in-depth inquiries into the multiple perspectives of participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). In order to gain a rich understanding of the
diverse realities experienced by voluntarily childless female teachers, a qualitative methodology, specifically, face-to-face interviews and a focus group interview, were employed for this study.

Pilot Study

In March of 1997 in preparation for this research and in an attempt to refine the topic and methods used, a pilot study was conducted aimed at understanding one childfree teacher’s experiences in relation to other teachers.

The researcher met the pilot participant during a teacher training session. The participant was teaching a Grade 3/4 class and had taught at the primary level for her entire 8 years of teaching. Over the month the researcher spent in this teacher’s school, the teacher’s personal life, including her fertility status, became known to the researcher. The participant was 32 years old, married for 8 years, and voluntarily childless. Several months after the teacher training session was completed the researcher met the teacher again at a local fitness institute where they were both members. It was during this time that the teacher expressed an interest in participating in the pilot study.

Although the participant was voluntarily childless when first met, she became pregnant prior to the pilot interview and was on maternity leave at the time of the interview. The change in her fertility status, however, did not change the focus of the interview since all of her years of teaching to that point were as a childfree teacher. However, this did raise questions, that were examined in the larger study, about the “choice” to be childless as this term implies a one-time and, therefore, permanent decision.

The interview took place in the participant’s home at her request. It was tape
recorded with her permission and it lasted approximately 1.5 hours. It was intended to be a semi-structured interview that followed a prepared interview guide enabling the researcher to pursue topics not included in the guideline but were related to the participant’s experiences as a childfree teacher. However, as the interview progressed, the predetermined questions were followed quite closely as no new topics emerged. After the pilot interview was transcribed, it became obvious that the participant could have been asked to clarify and expand on many areas discussed.

The data collection for this pilot study also brought to light a technical problem. A newly purchased micro-cassette audiotape recorder was used to record the pilot interview. Before the interview it was decided that the tape/power saving feature on the recorder would be utilized. This feature stops the machine from recording when there are pauses in the conversation. In using this feature any interruptions in the interview caused by having to change the tape and/or the batteries would be avoided. However, minor interruptions would have been more desirable than the poor quality of the recording that resulted from using the tape/power saving feature. The first words that began segments of talking were not recorded. Fortunately, the tape was transcribed shortly after the interview when most of the missing words could be recalled. As well, according to Nelson (1996), feminist researchers contend that pauses and hesitations in women’s conversations can be very revealing. For instance, a pause may indicate that there are no words available that adequately express a woman’s experience. To avoid technical difficulties and to include telling pauses, the interviews for the larger study were tape recorded without the use of the voice activation feature.
The following interview guide for the pilot study contained questions that, at the time, were believed to best reveal the experiences of this voluntarily childless teacher:

**Pilot Interview Guide**

1. What is your age and marital status?
2. How long have you been teaching? What grade(s) do you teach? What grades have you taught in the past?
3. Why did you become a teacher?
4. What do you enjoy most about teaching?
5. What is the hardest thing about teaching?
6. What qualities do you have that make you a successful teacher?
7. Do you feel your experiences as a teacher are any different than teachers who are mothers? Explain.
8. Do you know any male childless teachers? How do their experience as teachers compare to yours?
9. Describe any comments made by someone at your school about your childlessness. How did you handle the situation?
10. Describe any situations in which you had to explain or justify your childlessness to someone associated with your work.
11. Describe any time you felt excluded at work because of your childlessness.
12. How do you think your experiences as a teacher would be influenced if you had children?

Since the pilot study, the researcher gained more knowledge about voluntary
childlessness from the literature and, therefore, changed and expanded on many of these questions. In addition, the pilot study sought to learn about the experiences of childfree teachers by having them compare themselves to other teachers. While comparisons with other teachers did emerge in the interviews for the larger study, it was no longer the focus and, thus, questions about teachers who were mothers or males were eliminated in the final interview guide.

Once the pilot interview was transcribed verbatim, the transcript was read and reread for salient themes. The issues that were repeated several times throughout the interview were recorded on a separate piece of paper. Each issue was designated with a different color. On a copy of the transcript each issue was identified by highlighting the information units with the corresponding color.

Two major themes emerged from the highlighted transcripts. One issue that the participant discussed in detail was the idea of having more time (a theme that also emerged in the larger study). She felt that she had more time to spend extra hours in school than did teachers with children. Although she insisted that she, too, had many responsibilities outside of school, she viewed her colleagues who were mothers as more pressed for time because of their childcare duties. This theme was evident in the following quotes:

[I have] more time at school. If I wanted to stay late or if I wanted to phone parents from home, not having to rush back [home] to take care of my own little toddler. That way I have a bit more time [than teachers with children].
She [a female teacher with children] is always rushing at the last minute because her child had to be dropped off at daycare. She has to leave [school] because her child is sick. Or she has to leave exactly at 3:30 because of daycare again.

I'm there [at school] at 7:30 in the morning and they're [teachers with children] just running in at twenty after eight. I really don't know when they get some of their work done because I find I need that extra forty-five minutes in the morning. I don't know whether they're doing it at home after the kids are in bed or while dinner is being prepared by somebody else. I don't know how they do it.

A second recurring theme was related to mothering and parenting. Both of these terms were continually used by the participant when describing herself as a teacher and when discussing her teaching techniques (a finding that also was evident in the larger study). This teacher described her parenting approach to her students as one that not only allowed her to show the children affection but also one that gave her the authority to form and enforce strict guidelines. The following quotes illustrate this theme:

As a non-parent it sounds funny but I take more of a mothering attitude with the kids. Whereas maybe as a male teacher he would be more afraid to give that hug that the kid needs in the morning.

I associate a hug with a mother. . . . You know the kids know if they want to talk
to me I’m there. If they need an extra ear I’m willing to listen. Sometimes they just say, “Can I hold your hand at recess?” That’s fine.

And the kids, they want to know what the rules are. And they know if I reprimand them there’s a good reason for it. As long as they know I will always like them. I may not like their behavior but I will always enjoy them. They need expectations. And they will push and push and push. So if you say, “If this happens you will have to stay in at recess” if you say that you make sure you follow through. As a parent that is the same as I would do at home.

The pilot study revealed that a great deal of data about the experiences of childfree female teachers can be gained from interviews. Thus, a qualitative approach using interviews was used in the larger study. However, because much information can result from a single interview, as was the case in the pilot study, the sample size for the study was limited to 7 voluntarily childless women teachers. Furthermore, the pilot study showed that research questions needed to be more detailed, therefore, probes were used in the final study to encourage participants to expand on and clarify their responses.

Selection of Participants

The sample for the study was recruited through a purposive sampling procedure. To be considered for inclusion into the sample participants were: (a) women who were teachers at the elementary level (from junior kindergarten to Grade 8) in any capacity (e.g., resource teacher, librarian, physical education teacher, special education teacher,
etc.); (b) voluntarily childless, that is, had never been in a parenting role either as a biological or social parent such as a step-parent or adoptive parent as a result of the intention not to have children; and (c) 33 years old or older, and, therefore, likely to remain childless since they were nearing the end of their childbearing years.

Finding a sample of 7 women who fit the above criteria was a challenging task. Not only was the population small with low visibility but also the research topic was sensitive. Since membership lists, such as the list of members on the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, do not include the fertility status of individuals and no Canadian organizations for the voluntarily childless exist, the sample was recruited by advertising in Southern Ontario public schools, through the network sampling and snowball techniques. With regard to advertising, 11 public elementary schools in a city in Southern Ontario were visited and with the written permission of four principals (see Appendix A) advertisements (see Appendix B) were posted in the teachers' staff rooms describing the study and seeking the participation of voluntarily childless female teachers. Those principals who were not available when the researcher visited their school were left the advertisement, a permission notice and a stamped envelope in which to return the signed permission notice to the researcher.

In addition to advertising, participants were recruited through networking. Many of the researcher's friends and acquaintances who worked in schools or knew people who worked in schools were contacted about the study. They were asked to speak to any teachers they knew who fit the above criteria and who were interested in participating in the study. Interested participants were asked to contact the researcher for more
information. When interested teachers telephoned the researcher, they were informed about the study and interview dates were arranged when the teachers agreed to participate. Once some of the participants agreed to participate in the study, they informed other female childfree teachers they knew about the study who also contacted the researcher and were included in the study.

Although a sample of 7 women was admittedly a small number, it allowed for rich, detailed data. The purpose of this research was to gain deep insights into the experiences of a small sample of individuals rather than to generalize about the experiences of all voluntarily childless female elementary teachers.

Research Design

To explore the social realities of a selected sample of 7 voluntarily childless female teachers the study employed two interview methods. Face-to-face, individual interviews were conducted in the first stage of the study while a focus group interview was the source of data for the second stage of the study. This section describes both of these procedures in detail.

Stage One: Individual Interviews

The first stage of research consisted of an in-depth interview with each teacher. Participants were fully informed of the study and asked for their written consent to participate in both the individual and focus group interview and to use the data in subsequent reports of the study (see Appendix C). After an interview date was arranged with the participant, the researcher mailed her a copy of the questions intended to be discussed in the individual interview (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted in
places that were chosen by the participants. Thus, some of the interviews occurred in the participants’ homes, the researcher’s home and in a coffee shop. Semi-structured interviews followed a two-part format as reflected in the interview guide (see Appendix D). The first part of the interview addressed the participant’s background, such as demographic information and how she came to choose childlessness. The second half of the interview focused on the participant’s experiences as a teacher that were related to her childfree state. Although an interview guide was used, relevant issues that evolved that were not on the guide also were pursued and those issues contained in the guide that turned out to be less important were not pursued. Participants were given the opportunity to refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. They also were informed that their real names would not be used in the final copy of the study and that they could contact the researcher if they wished to discuss any issues that arose after the interview. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours in length. Interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the interviewees and were transcribed verbatim.

Prior to leaving the interviews, a potential date was set for the focus group interview. Teachers were notified of the confirmed focus group interview date by telephone and in a letter that also outlined their interview themes (a further explanation of this letter is given below). Following the initial telephone conversations with the participants and the individual interviews, the researcher’s thoughts, feelings, ideas, and impressions were recorded in a journal. Morell (1994) explained that this process of journal writing helped her to reflect more consciously on her own assumptions and judgements about her respondents.
A member check was conducted once the interviews were transcribed. This gave the participants an opportunity to have a final say about the data that were analyzed and included in the final report. Copies of the transcripts were mailed to the teachers approximately a week after they were interviewed. Participants were informed about receiving a copy of the transcript for a member check at the end of their individual interview. Teachers were instructed, in a letter (see Appendix E) as well as verbally, to read over the transcript, record their comments with regard to the accuracy and completeness of the responses and return the transcript as soon as possible. Self-addressed stamped envelopes were included with the transcripts to facilitate prompt returns. In addition, participants were told they could bring the reviewed transcript to the focus group interview. Participants who did not return their transcripts by the time of the focus group interview occurred were contacted by phone and told that unreturned transcripts meant that no changes were necessary. Of the seven transcripts, six were returned and edited.

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, a list was comprised of the elements the researcher felt were the most important to each teacher’s “story.” The lists contained brief points of topics discussed during the interview that emerged as significant to that teacher. The lists were mailed to the teachers 1 to 2 weeks before the focus group interview with a reminder of the interview date. These synopses served as references for the teachers during the focus group interview. In addition, based on the transcripts, a list of areas that needed further development, clarification, or confirmation was composed for the moderator’s use during the focus group interview.
**Instrumentation.** Although the one-on-one interviews in the first stage of the research were not rigidly structured, discussion was facilitated through the use of an interview guide (see Appendix D).

**Stage Two: Focus Group Interview**

The second stage of the study consisted of a focus group interview for the purpose of exploring themes in greater depth, confirming findings, and clarifying ambiguities in the data gathered from the individual interviews. Although focus group interviews traditionally have been associated with advertising and marketing research, they are increasingly being employed by researchers and practitioners in the field of education (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). The main assumption underlying the focus group interview is that a group of individuals, in a supportive atmosphere, discussing a specific topic with which they are all familiar, are more likely to speak openly (Vaughn et al., 1996). Vaughn et al. (1996) explained that focus group interviews can encourage more disclosure than individual interviews because a group environment allows participants to feel more at ease since they are not required to respond to every question or comment.

The focus group interview took place in the researcher’s home at a date and time that was convenient for the participants. Since it was difficult to find a date on which all 7 participants were available the focus group interview consisted of 3 of the 7 participants. In fact, the original focus group interview failed as 2 of the women who planned on attending were ill and, while one woman was on time, she left before the fourth participant arrived late. Although 4 of the women could not attend the final focus group interview because they had prior commitments, all of them did express an interest in participating in
such a forum. The teachers who did participate were told that each would be asked to begin by giving a brief outline of herself as a voluntarily childless teacher in order to generate group discussion. As a form of reference, the teachers were mailed a list of the issues that the researcher saw as important in their individual interviews. Teachers used this list during the focus group interview to guide them through the descriptions of their experiences as childfree teachers. Copies of these lists also were available at the focus group interview in the event that a participant forgot to bring her own copy. This session was informal and the teachers were encouraged to make constructive comments about the stories of others after each had been told. The group interview was taped using an audiocassette recorder with the participants' consent and with the promise that confidentiality would be maintained through the use of pseudonyms and through the destruction of the tape once the research project was complete. The group discussion lasted 2.5 hours as the participants were enthusiastic and had much to discuss. The focus group discussion was transcribed shortly after it had taken place.

According to Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) the moderator of a focus group interview has many functions. For instance, as the moderator it is the researcher's duty to greet participants and make introductions, create a comfortable atmosphere, open the discussion, control and facilitate the discussion, and close the interview. The teachers were introduced to each other using first names only to ensure partial confidentiality and to afford each participant equal status. Although participants gained some knowledge about each other during this session, making complete confidentiality impossible, the group remained confidential in relation to the larger society. A supportive environment
was established by having refreshments available to the participants, by arranging the seating comfortably around a round table, and by the moderator serving as a congenial host. The discussion opened by welcoming the teachers and thanking them for attending. The moderator then outlined the topic for the focus group interview (i.e., to discuss their experiences as childfree teachers), obtained verbal consent to tape record the session, explained the format of the interview (i.e., each teacher tells her story followed by constructive comments and questions from one person at a time), described how confidentiality would be achieved and maintained (i.e., no real names would be used in the written report and the audiotape would be kept confidential and destroyed after the research project was complete), stressed that there were no right or wrong ideas, that contradictory ideas also were valued as the goal of the group discussion was not to gain a group consensus, and reminded the teachers that they were free to participate as they wished and could withdraw from the interview at any time.

The moderator's role is to facilitate the focus group discussion by using probes to have participants clarify and expand on their comments, by encouraging a quiet respondent to participate, by discouraging a talkative participant (by avoiding eye contact), and by keeping silent when the discussion is flowing. However, the moderator was generally quiet during this focus group interview as the discussion was enthusiastic and did not need to be directed. The moderator interjected only to ask participants to further expand on their comments. As a result, the list comprised of areas that needed to be developed further, clarified, or confirmed based on the findings from the individual interviews was not addressed during the focus group interview. To end the focus group interview, the
moderator requested that the details of the discussion be kept confidential, asked if there were any final questions, and thanked the participants for their valuable input.

**Instrumentation.** During the focus group interview, a guide outlining the moderator’s roles was used to direct the moderator through the interview (see Appendix F).

**Data Analysis**

Once the data from both stages of the research were collected and transcribed and a member check of the individual interviews was complete, an analysis of the data followed a similar procedure as outlined in Morell’s (1994) *Unwomanly Conduct*. A master file for each participant was developed that contained the entire first interview for that participant. A file on each teacher allowed each woman’s story to remain intact enabling the researcher to get a better understanding of that woman and her experiences. Each file included the teacher’s first name and a pseudonym that was used in the thesis. In addition, a complete, intact copy of the focus group interview was kept on file. A second copy of the individual and group interview transcripts was marked with analytic statements in the margins and cut up according to categories that emerged as the transcripts were read and reread. Separate files were made for each emerging category.

Findings were presented in the themes that emerged during the data analysis. Furthermore, to ensure that the participants were heard and that accurate reflections of their experiences were reproduced, many verbatim quotes were included. According to LeCompte and Preissle (1993), a heavy reliance on direct quotes strengthens the internal reliability and validity of a qualitative study. Thus, the interpretations and explanations of
the research findings were framed around the participants' words. The discussion that followed the detailed description of the findings highlighted and summarized the major findings in relation to relevant research and were organized according to the research questions.

Dissemination

Since this research was intended to fill a gap in the literature on voluntary childlessness as well as to contribute to the field of education and to the goal of feminism to acknowledge and respect the diversity of the female experience, it is very important that this study and its findings be made known. It is the intention of the researcher to lecture to students of child studies, family studies, education, and/or women studies about this research. In fact, a lecture already has been given to child studies students enrolled in a course entitled “Children, Youth and Families” to introduce to them the topic of voluntary childlessness and to describe the research process. In addition, the researcher has presented some of the study's findings at a Canadian conference for the study of education and is scheduled to present this research at the annual conference of the American Anthropological Association. It is also the goal of this researcher to have a form of this study published in a refereed journal and/or a scholarly book.

Feasibility

This section outlines the costs to the researcher in conducting this study, the time frame in which the events of the study were carried out, the accessibility of the data with regard to the geographic location of the participants, and the inconvenience to the participants for participating in the study.
The Cost Factor

Resources needed to complete the study were:

1. Micro-audiotape recorder, tapes, batteries.

2. Photocopying fees for recruitment notices, letters of permission, transcripts, journals, proposal, thesis.

3. Stamps (for mailing copies of permission forms to principals who did not respond promptly, questions to participants prior to the individual interview, transcripts for member check, lists of themes to participants for reference during the focus group interview and the summary of findings to participants), stamped envelopes for return (in which principals could return permission forms and participants could return reviewed transcripts) and envelopes (legal and letter size).

4. Refreshments such as coffee, donuts and juice for the focus group interview.

5. Name tags for the focus group interview.

6. Transcriber machine rental.

7. Gas (to travel to schools for posting advertisements and to interviews).

The Time Factor

The final draft of the proposal for this research was completed in early November 1997. After it had been read by the thesis advisor and final adjustments were made, copies were distributed to the three members of the advisory committee in mid November 1997. While the members were reviewing the proposal, a date for the proposal hearing was set in early December 1997. Also during this time documentation for the Brock University ethics committee was completed. Following the proposal hearing in early December,
required revisions were made. A copy of the revised proposal was given to the graduate department secretary in mid December 1997.

As soon as the research proposal was approved by both the advisory committee as well as the ethics committee (see Appendix G), advertisements describing the study were posted in schools. Once participants contacted the researcher, individual interviews were set for mid January 1998 to early February 1998. Participants received, through the mail, a copy of their interview transcripts approximately 2 weeks after their interview. Revisions based on participants’ remarks were made when transcripts were returned in late February 1998. A list of each teacher’s major themes was compiled and sent to the teachers before the focus group interview. Also, a list was created of the topics from individual interviews that needed to be clarified, developed, or confirmed at the focus group interview. The focus group interview date was discussed at the individual interviews and participants were notified of the confirmed date by telephone and in letters sent with the list of themes. Although the first focus group interview failed as the result of only two people attending (at different times in the evening) the second interview occurred on February 20, 1998 and was transcribed in the days immediately following the interview.

The month of March 1998 was devoted to data analysis. Part of April 1998 and all of May 1998 was spent on writing a first draft of the findings, the conclusion and reworking the first three chapters of the thesis. In early June 1998 a copy of the entire thesis was reviewed by the advisor and revised. Also in early June 1998 copies of the thesis were given to the advisory committee. Revisions were made shortly thereafter and the thesis defense hearing was booked for early August 1998. Also in mid June 1998 a
copy of the thesis was sent to a proofreader. Once the recommendations of the proofreader were carried out copies of the thesis were distributed to the members of the examining committee in early July 1998. The balance of July was spent preparing for the defense hearing. One month after the examining committee members received the thesis a defense hearing was held. The month of August 1998 consisted of making modifications to the thesis based on the suggestions offered during the thesis defense hearing. After these corrections were made, final copies of the thesis were sent to the graduate secretary to be bound. Also in August 1998, summaries of the study's findings were prepared and mailed to participants who requested a copy.

An overview of this detailed time-line is as follows:

Nov. 1997  complete proposal
            copy to advisor
            revise proposal
            copies to advisory committee
            file documents with ethics committee

Dec. 1997  proposal hearing
            revise proposal
            copy of proposal to graduate secretary

Jan. 1998  ethics approval
            recruit sample
            begin interviewing

Feb. 1998  complete interviews
member check

revise transcripts

prepare lists for focus group interview based on themes from interviews

mail lists to respondents

focus group interview

Mar. 1998  data analysis

Apr. 1998  first draft of findings and discussion

May 1998  copy to advisor

revise

rework proposal

June 1998  copy of entire thesis to advisor

revise

copies of thesis to advisory committee

meeting of the advisory committee

revise

book thesis defense hearing for early August

copy to proofreader

revise thesis

July 1998  copies to examining committee

prepare for defense hearing

Aug. 1998  defense hearing

revise
copies to graduate secretary for binding

copies of summary of findings to interested participants

Accessibility of Data

Since the sample was from two geographically separated cities the researcher traveled to meet the participants who did not live close to her. The participants who did live close to the researcher chose to travel the short distance to her house.

Inconvenience to Participants

Research participants were not expected to travel unless they chose to have interviews conducted in the home of the researcher or in a neutral location such as a coffee shop. Those who attended the focus group interview at the researcher’s home had only to drive a short distance. Also, individual interviews took up only 1 to 2 hours of the participants’ time, while the focus group interview required approximately 3 hours of the women’s time.

Research Ethics

Due to the sensitive subject matter of this research, participants were exposed to questioning about highly personal issues that might have been beyond that of normal daily exposure. However, as research on voluntary childlessness has shown, childfree women were frequently asked to explain their decision to deviate from Western society’s reproductive norms (Bartlett, 1995; May, 1995; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980; Woollett, 1991). Thus, responding to inquiries about issues relating to childfreeness was not a unique experience for these women. What was different, though, was the respectful and empathetic manner this inquiry took.
There was a possibility that the interview questions may have aroused deep feelings in the participants such as anger over being treated unfairly or fear of being lonely as a result of choosing not to have children. Therefore, the women were informed at the beginning of each interview session that they did not have to answer questions or discuss issues that made them uncomfortable and they were free to choose not to participate or withdraw at any time. Participants chose to answer all questions and none requested to withdraw from the study. If emotional distress had arisen during the interviews, participants would have been reminded of their right to withdraw from the interview or redirect the conversation. Furthermore, as a voluntarily childless certified teacher, I felt that I was able to empathize with my participants regarding any upsetting feelings that may have emerged. Often just knowing that someone understands and has experienced similar feelings helps one to better cope with one’s own feelings. My hope was that my sensitivity and understanding based on my own experiences as a childfree woman would ease any disturbing feelings that might have emerged during the interviews. However, such a situation did not arise.

Finally, one of the participants was concerned about the lack of confidentiality that occurred during the focus group interview in which she participated. While the participants learned about each other throughout this interview, they were asked to keep the information confidential. In addition, only first names were used during this session and participants were told that pseudonyms would be used in the thesis. Also, participants were reminded that the interview tapes would be destroyed once the research was complete. Despite the unavoidable breach of confidentiality, the focus group interview
enabled the participants to discuss their experiences as voluntarily childless teachers with other women who shared similar experiences. It was obvious from their enthusiasm that these women had never had the opportunity to communicate with others in similar positions since the voluntarily childless constitute a small percentage of the population. Thus, offering these women a supportive environment they might not have experienced before may have been more important to them than their concerns about confidentiality.

Methodological Assumptions

The methodology for this research operated on many assumptions that could have or did influence the outcome of the study. A major assumption of both the individual and focus group interviews was that people are valuable sources of information about themselves. In asking women about their own experiences as childfree teachers, the assumption was made that they had more knowledge than anyone else about what they experienced. Another related assumption of both types of interviewing techniques was that people are able to discuss and articulate their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perceptions. The quality of the data gathered using these methods was dependent on the capability of the participants to express in words their experiences as voluntarily childless teachers.

Several assumptions also were specific to the focus group interview procedure. The first was that the focus group interview would solicit information from participants that expanded on and clarified data obtained in the individual interviews. The second assumption underlying focus group interviewing was that due to the effects of group dynamics, a group setting would increase the likelihood that participants would speak
candidly about their experiences as childfree teachers (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). A final assumption of the focus group interview was that the information given by each participant accurately reflected what she felt rather than reflecting what the group felt (Vaughn et al., 1996).

Limitations

Despite attempts to produce a methodologically sound study, some limitations did exist that must be addressed. For instance, the small sample size meant that the sheer amount of data was limited. The data also were limited by the homogeneity of the sample as all participants were white women with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, the researcher's lack of experience as a moderator for the focus group interview was a potential weakness. While Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) maintained an effective moderator is one who is trained in moderating group discussions, they also described the characteristics and skills of an ideal moderator of which the researcher possesses many. For example, she has knowledge about the research topic, she understood the position of the participants as she also is a childfree teacher, she is approachable and friendly, she listens well, and possesses leadership qualities. In addition, reading literature on the responsibilities and techniques of moderators and the researcher's experience as a seminar leader in which she facilitated and directed the discussion of university students helped her in preparing for this role.

Identifying which teacher was speaking when transcribing the tape recorded focus group interview might also have proven to be difficult. However, after interviewing each teacher and listening to a tape recording of that interview several times, the researcher
came to know each participant’s voice well enough to identify her on the focus group interview tape. However, to ensure that all participants were identified correctly, notes were taken during the focus group interview that indicated who was talking about what topic and participants were requested to speak one at a time.

A further potential limitation that must be acknowledged was my own preconception about the experiences of voluntarily childless female teachers of young children. My social location being similar to that of the women in my study, in that I am a voluntarily childless female certified to teach elementary-aged children, meant that I had an idea of what I believed my participants would have experienced. For instance, since I have experienced negative reactions to my fertility choice and have felt excluded from conversations about children, I believed these teachers also would have experienced similar situations in their schools. By recognizing any preconceived notions I had about the topic of study and by monitoring my own verbal and nonverbal behavior during the individual and focus group interviews, I was able to be aware of any responses that appeared to be influenced by my own preconceptions.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter reports on the salient themes that emerged from an analysis of the data gathered during seven face-to-face interviews and one focus group interview with voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers. These findings are organized into four main themes: Factors Contributing to the Childless Choice, Conventionality, Childfree Teachers Like and Unlike Mothers, and Pronatalist Pressures. To begin, the characteristics of the participants as a group are described. This is followed by an overview of each participant’s background.

After a description of the sample, the findings that comprise the first main theme, "Factors Contributing to the Childless Choice," are examined. Under this main theme are three sub-themes: the women’s “decision” to be childless, their rationales for their decision, and the high standards they held with regard to paid work and parenting. The second main theme describes the women’s conventionality with respect to their beliefs about marriage, childbearing and child-rearing, family configurations, importance of family and gender roles.

The third main theme discusses the ways in which the data revealed the childfree teachers to be like mothers as well as the ways they were unlike mothers. The first sub-theme of “Like Mothers” includes the topics: the nurturer, a mothering attitude, and parental support. The second sub-theme of “Unlike Mothers” consists of the topics: parental advice, objectivity, time/energy/patience, lack of leniency, and lack of “benefits.”

The final main theme of this chapter outlines the direct and indirect pronatalist pressures that the participants described experiencing outside and inside the school. The
discussion of the main theme of pronatalist pressure begins with the first sub-theme of pronatalist pressures experienced by the participants outside of the school environment. This section describes both the direct pressure to have children and the indirect pressure the women experienced outside the school from the media, others with children, and disappointed parents. The second sub-theme discusses the pronatalist pressures inside the school and begins with a description of the direct pressures the teachers described receiving from students, staff, and parents of the students. This is followed by a description of the indirect pressures experienced by these women such as their credibility as childfree teachers being questioned, envy from others in the school, the expectation to work long hours and participate in staff conversations about children. Finally, the description of the main theme, “Pronatalist Pressures,” concludes with a third sub-theme that describes the finding that these women were pressured to employ “strategies” in order to counter the pronatalist pressures they said they experienced as childfree teachers. This chapter ends with a summary of the findings.

The Sample

This section describes the characteristics of the women as a group followed by a brief outline of each of the 7 women’s background in order to contextualize the quotes that make up the findings for the subsequent four main themes.

Sample Characteristics

Seven voluntarily childless female teachers comprised the final sample. The women ranged in age from 33 to 49 years. All participants were white, lived in Southern Ontario and described their socioeconomic status as middle class or upper middle class.
The participants were not asked to identify their sexual orientation. Only one woman described a strong identification with a specific religion. Two women were single and had never married, one woman was single after having been in a long-term common-law relationship, 2 women were married and 2 women were divorced. One of the latter was considering entering into a common-law relationship at the time of the interview. Each woman described growing up with both parents in the natal home. Most of the women were born in Canada while some emigrated to Canada when they were young. Four of the 7 participants were the eldest child in their families. None of the participants were only children. Only 2 women, one a firstborn and the other a middle child of many, recalled being responsible for a great deal of housework and for the care of younger siblings. All of the women described having close relationships with children of friends and relatives.

Professionally, all participants had a university degree, two had a Master’s degree in education and two others were in the process of completing an M.Ed. All of the women taught at the elementary level (from kindergarten to Grade 8) in both regular and special education classes. The women’s years of teaching experience ranged from 7 to 30 years. While some teachers held positions of added responsibility, such as union jobs, none of the women expressed a desire to advance to administrative positions.

Participants' Backgrounds

To gain an understanding of what these women were like, a brief overview of each woman’s background is provided starting with the eldest in the sample and proceeding through to the youngest.

Leslie. Leslie, the oldest woman in the sample at age 49, was raised on a small
farm by both parents as the eldest child of three. Fulfilling the expectations of her parents and especially her mother, she left home to pursue a career in teaching. Once Leslie adapted to living on her own in the city and having an “all-encompassing” job, she returned to school part-time while still working, then took a year off work to complete her Bachelor’s degree and subsequently earned a Master of Education degree. Leslie became so involved in her career that it infringed on her social life. Leslie never married and as a result became even more committed to her work because as she explained, “I have to have some strong identity in my career because I didn’t feel strong identities in a lot of other areas.” At the time of the interview Leslie was in her thirtieth year of teaching and was teaching special education students from kindergarten to Grade 8. Leslie described having close relationships with the children of her siblings and friends and emphasized the importance of family in her life. Leslie also was a child advocate volunteering her time to an organization for special children.

Peggy. Peggy, 47 years old, grew up in a large family with both parents. Since she was always good with children and enjoyed working with them as a teenager, she felt it was “natural” for her to become a teacher. Peggy began teaching mainstream elementary children but at the time of the interview was working with intermediate level special education students. She had deliberately chosen to work with “difficult” children because she enjoyed the challenge. Peggy completed her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Education degrees after she began teaching and during the summer breaks. Peggy was involved in a long-term relationship in which her partner resisted having children. After the relationship ended, Peggy acquired two cats that kept her company and “perfectly
happy.” Peggy, like Leslie, described close relationships with her siblings’ and friends’ children. Peggy also was very active in union and community work some of which involved children.

**Joan.** Joan, 45 years old at the time of the interview, was brought up in a family home with both parents, a younger sibling and a grandparent. From the time she was a young girl, Joan enjoyed being with children. She taught children at her church, babysat often, played school with the neighborhood children and even wanted a dozen of her own children. However, due to restrictions placed on her by her church, she found it increasingly difficult to meet never-married men of the same denomination. At the time of the interview, Joan believed she was voluntarily childless since she felt she could have adopted children on her own but chose not to. When she was interviewed, Joan had been teaching for 23 years and was teaching Grade 3 children whom she described as “my kids.” Joan continued to participate in her church, spent a great deal of time with her mother, and spoke of close relationships with children of friends and cousins and even past students.

**Anne.** Forty-five year old Anne was the oldest of four children and was responsible for caring for her younger siblings as well as many household chores. Anne’s parents owned a cottage and Anne and her family spent much time there with aunts, uncles, and cousins. As a young adult, Anne traveled, then attended university after which she married. While she was married Anne and her husband, under much pressure from family, tried but did not have children. After Anne and her husband divorced, she quit her job and went back to school to pursue a second career in teaching. Anne had been
teaching for 7 years when she was interviewed and was teaching a Grade 3 class as well as visual arts to Grades 4, 5 and 6. After a lifetime of caring for her siblings and later being very involved in their children’s lives as a “favorite aunt,” Anne decided to take more time for herself, her art, and her hobbies. In addition, at the time of the interview Anne was considering entering into a common-law relationship. Although Anne described herself as voluntarily childless during the interview, she did not want to entirely discount the option to have children in the future, with or without a partner.

Marie. Marie was 40 years old when she was interviewed and had been married for 20 years. She grew up with a younger sibling, a mother, and an elderly father. She left home when she was quite young relying on the income from various jobs and on the support of her friends. One of the main sources of this support was her husband whom she met when she was 17 years old. Marie began working with developmentally delayed children while taking university courses. Once she received her Bachelor of Arts degree, a co-worker, who was a teacher, encouraged her to get a teaching certificate. Marie followed this advice and when she finished Teacher’s College began working with special children in different capacities for the Board of Education. At the time of the interview, Marie was a resource teacher working with special education students from kindergarten to Grade 8 and had been teaching for 9 years. Marie explained that she never wanted children as she never experienced a “maternal pull.” However, the closest she ever came to experiencing such a feeling was when two of her beloved animals were hurt.

Chris. Chris was 35 years old at the time of the interview. Chris emigrated to Canada when she was a young girl with her parents and her younger siblings. As a
teenager Chris remembered not liking children as she found them too dependent and "annoying." However, once she started teaching at the age of 25, she began to like children although she preferred to teach intermediate level children. Chris married when she was 20 years old and in her mid twenties "desperately" wanted children as a result of an unhappy marriage. Looking back, she was glad that her husband refused to have children as the marriage eventually ended and she believed she would have stayed in the marriage had there been children. When she was interviewed, Chris did not anticipate having children as she explained, "I love my life the way it is." Chris's childfree status allowed her to travel, be involved in her school's union, pursue her Master of Education degree and have close ties with her friends' children, one of whom was her godchild.

**Deb.** Deb, the youngest participant at 33 years of age, also was the youngest child of four. Deb's parents met and married after they emigrated to Canada and both worked while Deb was growing up. Deb began teaching when she was 25 years old and was newly married to a high school teacher at the time of the interview. Even though she said she could have been happy remaining single, she was eventually persuaded into marriage. Never having wanted children, Deb made it clear to her partner before they were married that there would be no children. However, both Deb and her husband were close to their siblings' children. At the time of the interview Deb was busy pursuing her Master's degree, enjoying her hobbies and adapting to teaching Grade 7 and 8 special education for the first time in her 8 years of teaching.

Despite being a small sample, much diversity existed among the 7 women, for example their ages, grades taught, and marital status. In addition, how each of them came
to the “decision” to be childfree and the reasons for their decision varied considerably.

However, one aspect in which the women were quite similar was that they held high
standards with regard to paid work and parenting. Each of these three areas, the decision
to be childfree, the women’s rationales, and their high standards will be discussed in the
following section.

Factors Contributing to the Childless Choice

This section describes the first main theme by first examining the women’s decision
to be childless through a description of the complexity of the circumstances in which this
decision was made. Following this is an overview of the rationales for the childless choice
offered by the women. This section ends with a discussion of the findings that these
women held high standards with regard to teaching and parenting. Such high standards
have resulted in the women’s conventional view that paid work and parenting cannot be
achieved successfully simultaneously.

The “Decision”

When asked how they arrived at the decision to be childless, most of the women
explained that it was not a “decision” per se. The word “decision” implies making a clear-
cut, one-time, permanent choice and many of the women either had the “choice” made for
them, for example, by husbands or lack of husbands, or made the “decision” several times
throughout their childbearing years. Thirty-five year old Chris explained, “It wasn’t like a
conscious decision early. Like it’s the timing.” Not only had some of the women made
the decision many times, they will continue to decide whether or not to have children until
menopause makes the choice to have children more difficult.
Most of the participants described becoming voluntarily childless as the result of a series of circumstances in which they put off having children for various reasons until they realized that they no longer wanted children. At one time, these women had assumed that they would have children yet changed their minds as their lives evolved. Some of the women had even attempted to conceive without results and were later thankful that they had averted motherhood. Only 2 of the 7 women, the only married participants at the time of the interview, described making an early conscious decision to remain childfree. The other women felt that they had not made a clear-cut choice to be childless initially but due to complex situations they remained childless and at the time of the interview did not want children. Within the complicated series of events that led these women to be childfree, no one factor emerged as the sole reason for choosing childlessness. In fact, each woman cited many rationales and many life events as influencing her fertility status. The complexity of the decision that was evident in many of the participants’ stories is illustrated by Anne:

When I went to university all my friends would say, “Why aren’t you a mother? You’d make a fabulous mother.” And I thought, “Well I’d love to be a mother” . . . if I had met the right person but I decided to travel then. And I had met the right person but when I came back from traveling. . . . this fellow that I knew had met somebody else. So then I just continued to work and do several other things and became educated and I thought, “Well maybe I’ll be a single mom. Maybe I’ll just adopt and be a single mom.” And that never came through because I took up
other activities. . . So when I was married it wasn’t to have children, it was for
the companionship, for the best friend thing. . . And you had this underlying
pressure to have kids. . . and I thought . . .”I’m ready to have kids now,” you
know, thinking that I’d have them. . . So we tried, nothing happened. . . In
retrospect I look back on it now and I’m very glad we didn’t have kids. (Anne, 45
years old, divorced)

The complexity of circumstances surrounding Anne’s “decision” calls into question
whether or not she did in fact directly “choose” to be childless. In fact, the labels “choice”
and “decision” may be deceiving in that they connote a conscious choice or a clear-cut,
one-time decision to be childless. What the data revealed was that these women did not
always make the choice themselves. For some women the choice was made for them by
the male partners they chose or by the lack of choosing a partner at all. In addition, the
women described having to make the “decision” over and over again as different periods
in their lives caused them to rethink their choices. As a result of the complex
circumstances surrounding the decision(s) to be childless, the women could not give one
single reason for their childlessness.

Rationales

The women discussed many motivations for their childlessness including: an
unhappy upbringing or one in which they were responsible for the care of siblings; their
partner’s unwillingness to have children; the lack of a husband (or at least a suitable one to
father a child); a lack of confidence in their own ability to parent; not having experienced a
“maternal pull;” a desire for freedom from childcare and ensuing monetary responsibilities; a desire for the freedom to pursue other interests such as art, community work, travel, education, or solitude; and the demands of their job.

Although many of the women felt that being a teacher played a part in them being childless, no teacher felt that her occupation was the primary reason for her childlessness. All of the women believed that either the amount of time they put into their jobs left little time for parenting (a theme that will be discussed in detail later) and/or felt that working with children, especially the difficult children, affirmed their childless choice. The following comments illustrate the latter theme:

if there’s anything that’ll put you off children [chuckles] it’s an eleven-year-old mouthy kid who’s farting and spitting and swearing and ripping and kicking and tearing and doing all those things that only eleven-year-old boys can do so well. Even when I was younger I would get my fill of them [children]. I would want to go home, shut the door and kick off my shoes and go, “Oh thank you, Lord.” (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

I did feel the longing to have kids in my twenties and early thirties but you see too much and you hear too much in the classroom. . . . Your eyes get opened too much when you teach. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

While none of the women believed their job was the major reason for their
childlessness, many did link their childlessness to being highly devoted to their occupation.

This common sentiment is expressed in the following quotes:

I think I wouldn't have the energy to be the type of teacher I am if I had to go home to my own kids. You give one hundred and fifty percent of yourself and there's nothing left. You need to go home and get recharged. . . . I don't know how other people do it, 'cause you give one hundred and fifty percent of yourself. Unless they don't do that in the classroom and then they do half again at home but I give everything I've got. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

So I think I had a lot of coping and adapting to do just living on my own and having the job. . . . You know, somebody would call and say, "Do you want to go to a movie?" "Oh no, I've got marking to do." What I did was that I think I took it not just more seriously but as a vocation or a fulfilling kind of thing. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

I give 'til I drop in the day. I give 'til I drop knowing that I can do that. . . .

Again, people say, "If you have your own [children] it's different and you would do both [teach and mother], you have to." 'Cause I say to people, "I don't know how you can teach all day and go home." And they say, "Oh you do it if you have to." But I would be miserable and I know that. (Marie, 40 years old, married)
For these women, being committed to teaching and giving their all at work meant that they had nothing left to give a child so they chose not to have children. Such a view apparently stems from the high standards these women held with regard to occupational and parental responsibilities.

High Standards

The data revealed that many of the women had such high standards for both their job and parenting that achieving success in both would have been unlikely. This attitude is illustrated in Peggy’s response when she was asked how not having children allowed her to take on extra responsibilities at school:

if you’re going to do the job you don’t play around. You don’t do the extra things [if you have children], you go home, you spend time with your children. Don’t have them if you’re not going to take care of them. (47 years old, single)

Leslie, a 49-year-old, never married teacher expressed similarly high standards when discussing her occupation:

You get absorbed very quickly and you are at the helm sort of thing. And I think other teachers would say that too, that there isn’t time to dwell on anything. When you’re there you have to be all there. And if you can’t then you shouldn’t be there.
Such high standards also were described when the women predicted their own ability to parent:

Anything could happen and maybe you’ll be a great parent and maybe you won’t. Like I really don’t think I’d be a very good parent actually. And that’s part of it too. I think that’s one reason why I’m okay with not having kids ’cause I don’t think I’d be that great. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

you run out of patience during the day, you got to come home, you have no more patience left for the child. And that scared me too, that I wouldn’t have been as loving and patient at home after a day at work as I could have been. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

Although the women realized that being a good parent is not an easy task, they expected high standards of parenting to be achieved by those who were parents. They spoke of how their expectations of child-rearing were not met by the parents they knew:

She really, really wanted children. Here’s an example of a woman. The cutest little kids in the whole wide world and where is she? She’s at twelve-hour shifts. . . while the babies are living with grandma. . . . So when does she spend her quality time with the babies? In the car, back and forth [from grandma’s house]. And what do babies do when they’re in the car? They sleep. And I said to her, “Have
you thought about, a) going part time, b) changing [jobs] to something closer, c) giving up [your job] altogether?” (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

I also see people who keep having kids for the wrong reasons. Because then they get a welfare check or they get so much mother’s allowance. And I would get angry thinking, “But I’m the one that would make a good mother for the right reasons.” And I’ve got to deal with their kids in the classroom. So why am I doing their job? (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

As I said, I’m finding it more difficult to relate, not so much to their [parents of students] concerns, but their methods of parenting. And even not having parented I think I can see some common sense things that [the parents cannot see]. And it’s harder for me to relate to their way of raising children because some of it to me is common sense. Even without having children I think I could have figured that out. But then I’m not in the middle of it every day either. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

With the standards for parenting and teaching being set so high, it is not surprising that these women believed it was not possible to give equal devotion to both children and work, simultaneously. The following exchange among three women during the focus group interview demonstrates this point:

Peggy: There’s something to that, that I’m beat [at the end of the work day] and
I figure if I had children somebody would be robbed, you know?

Leslie: It could be you.

Joan: I could never understand . . . in my younger years, teachers that had families, took courses and taught full-time and took courses in the evening, getting their B.A.s or Masters or whatever. Something’s got to go.

The women went on to talk about a female principal who took on many occupational responsibilities and who also was divorced and had a child. It is clear from this conversation that these women did not approve of her lack of total commitment to one area of her life:

Peggy: Well, she certainly has something to prove to somebody and it ain’t me because I’m not impressed.

Leslie: She was criticized actually, strongly, for the fact that I think her daughter lived with her grandparent during the weekdays.

Peggy: It’s good for us that we all know this one woman. She is the example of the stretched out woman who is the mother and a teacher.

Joan: Wonder woman.

Peggy: And like I hung up my cape a long time ago!

These women also saw being a good teacher and a good mother as mutually exclusive:
I just think, "How the heck do they [teachers with children] make it into work? Like drop off [the children] at daycare at three in the morning [laughs] and you know, pick them up at midnight?" I don't know [laughs]. I don't know how people do it. Teach and have kids. I don't know how they do it. I can't see at this point, you know, four or five o'clock going home to children and making their dinner and driving them to hockey. I don't have the energy. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

But when I watch people who have children as teachers what I see is that they do not have the energy and time, like mental energy, to devote to the kids in the classroom because they're thinking about their own kids. And really that's where they should be devoting their time. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

This either/or attitude toward teaching and child-rearing is a conventional view that challenges the hard won feminist philosophy that asserts women, like men, can have a career, be a parent, and be successful at both. Such a conventional attitude can be considered another factor that has contributed to these women's childless choice as the women believed that their commitment to teaching necessarily meant that they could not also mother or at least not to their own high standards.

This section examined the first main theme by describing the factors that contributed to these women's decision to be childfree. Findings described in the first sub-theme of "The Decision" showed that the reasons for the women's choice were numerous
and complex. In fact, since it seems as though many of the women’s childless decision was the indirect result of other life decisions, it becomes problematic to use such labels as “choice” and “decision” as these words tend to simplify a complex process. However, the women did describe having many rationales for their childlessness. Although the women did not name their job as the sole or primary motivation for their childlessness, teaching did affirm their childless choice and the commitment to their work left them feeling unable to raise children. The participants’ high standards with regard to teaching and mothering led them to believe that reaching these standards in one area resulted in a substandard performance in the other area. This either/or stance coincides with the conventional beliefs these women also held with regard to family and gender.

Conventionality

Despite the unconventional fertility choice made by the women in this study, they held many conventional beliefs reflective of the nuclear family ideology with regard to marriage, childbearing and child-rearing, family configurations, importance of family, and gender roles. This second main theme describes the conventional attitudes expressed by these childfree teachers.

Marriage

Some of the women’s views on marriage were conventional in that they believed a legal marriage to be the only appropriate form of a long-term commitment. For instance, despite her reluctance, one woman described her decision to marry her boyfriend because she believed a common-law relationship was not a valid option:
I didn’t really want to get married either. I just couldn’t figure out, “Why [get married]?” And I know people say that the bond is different and [my husband] wanted that. He wanted to be married. I also knew that financially I wouldn’t feel comfortable like putting things together unless we were married. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

Deb’s motivation for marriage can be viewed as unconventional as it seemed to be based on finances rather than romantic love. Despite her unconventional reason for marriage, Deb ultimately rejected a common-law arrangement for the more conventional legal arrangement.

The same woman also described a gendered division of labor within her household that was characteristic of the conventional nuclear family except that she also worked outside of the home. Although this woman expressed discontent with her husband’s contribution to the housework, she seemed to have accepted the notion that chores, including childcare, are assigned according to gender:

That’s the problem with having kids, I think. ’Cause it’s no skin off any guy’s back. Like, who does most of the housework and cleaning at your house? [She does not wait for an answer.] [My husband] and I have pretty much the same life. I mean he does more coaching and stuff. But I do professional development kind of stuff. I feel like I’m carrying the bulk [of the housework].
Again, even though Deb had taken a critical view with regard to gender roles, she did describe performing the conventional female role of being responsible for the housework.

Other women expressed conventional beliefs when it came to the bearing and rearing of children.

**Childbearing and Child-Rearing**

In addition to the critical yet conventional beliefs about marriage, many of the women assumed that raising children meant they would have to conform to conventional gender roles within the household that place mother in the domestic role and father in the breadwinner role:

> If I had kids I know exactly what’s expected of me. If I were married my husband would know why he’s working. He’s working to make money to pay for these [kids]. As the relationship stands now, my boyfriend, if we were to marry, would have to look at other reasons as to why he’s making money. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

One teacher implied her preference for the conventional model of the stay-at-home mother when it came to rearing children:

> And the option of staying home wasn’t there because I’m the only breadwinner. So I couldn’t have spent home time with the kid. And I like it when the parent is home for the child at the end of the day or whatever. The kids love it too. (Joan,
Other women expressed the conventional belief that a child needs a father in order to be reared properly:

I know a few people who have children as a single parent and raise them, you know, intentionally. . . . I would have problems with the child not having a strong male figure and I really wouldn’t be sure that my brother and my father could have provided that. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

I want somebody who’s going to respect me in the household and then have children. Well I hadn’t met anybody like that yet. So it’s really this guy thing, meeting the right one. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

Many of the women held the view that children should be borne only into a legal relationship:

Well I wouldn’t have had kids without being married, first of all. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

I know for me, whether or not I had a baby was kind of touch and go. I wasn’t certainly in a full position ’cause we weren’t legally married for those . . . years.
(Peggy, 47 years old, single)

One childfree woman expected other couples to have children after they were married even though she herself did not have children during her marriage:

I’m sure if I was married then people would say to me, “So when are you going to have babies?” And you know what the terrible thing is, is that I say to people who are married, “So you going to have kids soon?” And I think, “I shouldn’t say that.” Like I shouldn’t pressure them. If they don’t want to have them they don’t want to have them, you know, big deal. At the same time I think babies are so neat and the whole idea of being pregnant and having a baby is very exciting so there’s part of that too. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

Similarly, Anne assumed her students would necessarily have children as adults regardless of her resenting others who had articulated their expectations that she would reproduce:

You know what? I’m actually giving them [my students] the wrong stuff here because I’m saying, “Save this [schoolwork] because someday you’ll show your grandchildren.” But hang on! I’m doing the very same thing to them that people do to me. And [I usually say], “Write a story because someday wouldn’t it be great to show your grandchildren this story?” Well I shouldn’t be saying those things. I never thought of that! “Save it because you want to save it. You might
I want to show your nieces and nephews sometime.” I’ve got to rectify that.

(Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

For Anne, the interview apparently prompted her to critically reflect on her own pronatalist attitude. In fact, both Chris (in the previous quote) and Anne expressed an assumption that others would or should have children even though they did not assume this of themselves. That a pronatalist attitude was imparted by these women who chose not to have children illustrates the pervasiveness of the norm to reproduce.

Another teacher relayed to her students similar conventional and pronatalist beliefs with regard to the order of life events:

And I’m encouraging my students to, this is the rule: “Go to school, get a job, fall in love, get married, have a baby. That’s the way you do it!” So if I say anything it’ll be about the order. So many of the parents in our community are not married. I know one woman who’s had, I guess, five different children from five different fathers. And I’m thinking, go to school, get a job, fall in love, get married then have your babies! And they sure don’t do that. (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

It is interesting to note that Peggy, herself, did not follow her own “rule” as she chose not to be legally married or have children and continued her education after she was already teaching. In addition, Peggy apparently disapproved of the woman she described who did not conform to the conventional family configuration.
Family Configurations

Given that these women held conventional attitudes regarding marriage, childbearing, and child-rearing, it is not surprising that many of them were opposed to family configurations consisting of single parents, especially by choice:

I think it definitely is a problem that fifty percent of many classes are from single parent homes now. We’re getting kids that are more broken and that’s not being acknowledged. The kids are struggling through these single parent homes. They are having a hard time with it. And it shows. It affects their learning. It affects them emotionally. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

And I’m very suspicious of single parents because I think, “You’re having that baby for really selfish reasons.” And, I mean, everyone has babies for selfish reasons but I really don’t think single parents that do it by choice understand what it means to be a single parent. They obviously [have] never seen someone bringing home the baby from the hospital and then seeing what it means for the next eighteen years. So I kind of look at them and think they’re kind of deluded, people like that. Really. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

But there’s too many [children] out there who come from split homes. I’m biased here but I’ve seen it. They end up just choosing the same loser their mom chose. Or they get abused by the abusers their mom brings in. I see kids in my classroom
that have four or five in a family, their father's gone. The mom's not there, can't listen to all their little concerns 'cause mother can barely deal with herself. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

You also see single family situations [as a teacher] which are extremely difficult. Any single family situations, single-parent family situations are extremely difficult. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

What is surprising is that even though these women did not approve of single family structures some of these same women had, at one time, considered adopting a child and raising the child without the help of a partner.

Outside of single family configurations, the women placed much importance on the families of those around them which were typically conventional nuclear families.

**Importance of Family**

Despite not having a family of their own (i.e., their own children and/or a husband), the women in this sample placed a great deal of importance on the idea of family. Some spoke of the significance of their own extended family and others their friends' families:

I'm trying to think [about the image I would like to portray to my nieces and nephews]. Okay, what I would want to portray to them, someone who believes very strongly in family ties, family history. I was certainly raised to have respect
for great aunts and whatnot. And I can see me, for those of them [nieces and nephews] who do have children, I can see me all over again, being more involved in their lives with the next generation. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

Now interestingly, that friend who has the kids, I mean her family and sense of family is very important to my husband and I. We have, in the past, gone from my family situation [or] his on a holiday and just gone to theirs that same evening. Just for rejuvenation and to be flies on a wall to see what their family is like. . . . We depend on them, very much, for our sense of family and belonging somewhere. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

Not only was the conventional attitude that family is important expressed by these women, but the families they described were nuclear in form coinciding with their general conventional attitude. This attitude also emerged when the women talked about gender roles.

**Gender Roles**

The final way in which these women displayed a conventional attitude was when they relayed gender role stereotypes that saw men as heavy drinkers, controllers, and wanting children only for the sake of boosting their egos. These women also believed women's "natural" role was to procreate. These stereotypes are evident in the following comments:
Peggy: I really like having [the female teachers get] together. That’s great. But I don’t know about those boys [male teachers]. We’ll see. But they always get drunk at their parties and they spoil it.

Leslie: And they have to barbeque and eat red meat. They do all kinds of disgusting things.

Peggy: When we have a party we get silly and very rarely get drunk to stupid.

I just think it’s very important to have a healthy male [teacher] who’s not going to react sexual in any way, sexual innuendos or “Don’t you look pretty in that nice little dress.” Like talk to the intelligence of the child. That happens way too much and it makes me sick. And then I have . . . female teacher friends that have female daughters in high school who have to just play the game until they get out of that class with that male teacher. But they stand up, they’re assertive . . . they’re pro-active and the male teacher just would rather have control, his own control.

(Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

I think for men it’s more ego, being a parent. They love having kids. It’s not the maternal nurturing quality. It’s having a kid and doing stuff with them and being proud of them. That’s the male more. And it’s the females that bond with them [the children] ten times faster and ten times stronger. Okay Father may be at home more, Father may take a more active role but Mom is still the one they [the children] want. (Joan, 45 years old, single)
The same woman, as well as others, also believed that it was the “natural” role of women to want to have or be with children:

Like I said in my twenties it was a very big feeling. It’s a maternal instinct within you. You don’t need to feel fulfilled but you want it. It’s natural. It’s biological. Hormones and emotions stir. Especially at that age like with childbearing. That’s the natural of events. That’s what’s expected. It’s the birth cycle. Like “Lion King,” it’s the cycle of life. And it’s the natural order of events.

He [my first boyfriend] said, “the first image I had of you was you sitting on the hill with five or six kids hanging off you and crawling over you and holding your hand and singing to you and talking to you.” That just has always been the case. I’ve always been swarmed with children. So it’s natural for me to be around children. (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

I think other women do feel that, “I’m not a woman if I don’t [have children].” So I think women do feel that. I think it’s a biological thing. I think they feel it. Truly. You know, I don’t just, I think it’s also societal but, I don’t feel that [need to have children]. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

It is interesting that Deb saw wanting children as the result of some innate biological urge yet she herself is an exception in that she described not having such a need.
This second main theme has described the conventional attitudes these childfree women held with respect to marriage, childbearing and child-rearing, the family, and gender roles. This conventionality may seem contradictory considering these women have made unconventional choices. For example, only 2 women were legally married, none had their own conventional nuclear family, and all failed to conform to Western society's conventional female role of motherhood. Despite deviating from the tradition of marriage, children, and family, these women tended to hold conventional views.

In addition to holding conventional views about marriage and family, these women conveyed the traditional belief that associates teaching young children with a mother’s nurturing role in the household.

Childfree Teachers Like and Unlike Mothers

The third main theme examines the findings that showed these teachers were like and unlike mothers. This section’s first sub-theme describes how the women portrayed themselves as mothers in terms of nurturing their students, having a mothering attitude as teachers, and providing support to parents. The second sub-theme outlines the ways in which the women described themselves as different from mothers in terms of their role as purveyors of “expert” advice to parents; having greater objectivity and more time, energy, and patience yet less leniency toward students than parent-teachers; and lacking work-related “benefits.”

Like Mothers

The data showed that the women in the sample saw themselves as similar to mothers in many ways. This first sub-theme begins with a discussion of the nurturing
aspect of teaching including how the women defined “nurturing,” how they believed they acquired nurturing skills, and their belief that men also could nurture. This is followed by a description of the mothering attitude the women expressed in their responses and the support they said they offered to parents.

The nurturer. Although every woman in the sample believed that teaching involved nurturing, each had a different definition of what “nurturing” entailed. The following quotes illustrate the diverse descriptions of a nurturing teacher:

Like the nurturing of them [students] as a person. Yea, I think that’s a big part [of teaching]. And that’s kind of what I was talking about when I was saying, you know, [I am] trying to help them reach their full potential, or get to some of that potential. I think that comes through the nurturing of them as a person. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

I have to make sure they’re dressed to go outside. I have to make sure their meds [medication] get taken. I have to make sure they’ve had breakfast. I have to make sure their feelings are dealt with. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

Um, care-giving. . . . being sensitive to their emotional state when they’re in time of need, finding out the little things that turn them on and relating to them on that level. So more of a nurturing to them as a human being I guess or as a, relating on a more personal level. (Marie, 40 years old, married)
In addition, some of the other women defined nurturing as being an advocate for children's well-being.

All of the women explained that they were comfortable performing a nurturing role despite not having had the experience of nurturing their own children. However, how they developed the ability to nurture their students differed for each woman. Here are some examples of how the teachers described acquiring nurturing skills:

You choose to be with kids so you like kids, hopefully. Because you're choosing to be with them and you're willing to do that kind of nurturing of kids. It's something you learn to do. If you want to do it then you learn how to do it better.

(Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

I know it [how to nurture] very well because of my upbringing. I also know it very well because of a friend's mom, who I'll just say is like my second mom. . . . So I guess the nurturing qualities I have [are] from this woman who I knew growing up. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

I don't feel [uncomfortable nurturing my students] because I had the nurturing instinct to begin with. I know teachers with children who I think aren't nurturing, of a nurturing nature, to their own kids. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

While all of the women believed they performed a nurturing role as a teacher, not
all of them believed this was a skill exclusive to female teachers:

But he’s [a male teacher] like, he’s quick to make conversation with them [students], talks about their interests, praise them, tease them. So he’s not gushing over them or, you know, giving them candies but, um, there’s a connection. And it I think that’s a sort of nurturer. ( Deb, 33 years old, married)

It [nurturing] could be a teaching thing, any care-giver, or like I see [my husband] as being very nurturing to me in our relationship. Or teacher to student. I don’t think it has to be a mother thing. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

However, most of the women, even the ones who believed male teachers could be nurturing, equated teaching with mothering.

A mothering attitude. Despite the belief that male teachers have the ability to nurture, many of the participants described teaching as mothering and identified themselves as “mothers” when teaching young children. This mothering attitude is further evidence of the ways these childfree teachers were like mothers:

Yea, I think there’s this whole care-giving idea, like women care for children. Like elementary children. Especially in the younger grades, you don’t see men doing that ‘cause they’re not comfortable. A lot of men aren’t comfortable with that or they can’t give of themselves in the way that, like, kindergarten, Grade 1, Grade 2
need. Or even Grade 3. I mean they [young children] need that [care] more.

(Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

Mothering, it’s part of the curriculum too, social skills part of the curriculum. Actually it’s supposed to be the parents’ role [to teach social skills] isn’t it? I do see it more as a mother’s role. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

I think teaching itself, um, primary kids, you have to have to be a mother. You cannot be in this profession if you cannot deal with a child as a motherly image or kind image or a nurturing image. The profession is such that it demands that kind of behavior. They won’t learn if they’re not happy. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

I try to be their [my students] best defense. And I think a good mother is the best defense for a child. (Peggy, 47, single)

A mothering attitude toward teaching also was evident in some of the women’s responses in which they described their students as their children:

I really see them [students] all as my kids for the time I have them. They are mine to nurture, to love, to parent, whatever, during the time I have them. A lot of times . . . in my classes, many, many of the kids call me “Mom.” It slips out. It’s amazing how often it happens to many of the different kids. (Marie, 40 years old,
married)

I’ve got my kids in the classroom. And when they come back to see you five years down the road they remember you. And I’ve had some really nice comments. They’re tall, they’re going places and you had a bit of an impact on them. I don’t have my own children to give that to . . . so this way I can impact on [my students]. It’s like a need. It’s my career too. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

I consider those [students] my kids during the day. During the day I am tied. I am tied to them. And you do bond to a certain degree. The end of the year is terrible ’cause you lose your class every year. I mean you molded them, you’ve been with them, you almost slept with them, you’ve almost eaten with them, you’ve done everything with them. . . . These are your kids. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

Not only did the women relate teaching to mothering, they felt competent enough as substitute parents to have offered support to parents both outside and inside of school.

Parental support. Some of the women, realizing the difficulties parenting entails, described their ability to be of assistance to parents of students and relatives in rearing their children:

Well I think they [extended family] miss me when I don’t hang around. Like having a boyfriend now, I’m not there as much. I mean I’ve given them so much
of my time. When I look back at how much I cared for my sisters and my brother, then I have to look at, I’m doing the same thing with my nieces and my nephews as if they’re mine. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

Because I’ve been a good aunt and I phone up the kids and I take them out, I give my sister relief. We’ll go to the movies, we’ll go to “McDonald’s,” she’ll [my niece] play, we’ll have a little visit, she’ll come pat my kitties, we’ll go visit Grandma, then we’ll go back and my sister will have had four or five hours apart from her. A little bit of a holiday. (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

The other thing too, I’ve come to the realization that for many people it’s very, very difficult to raise children. So I think I would like to be seen as a support in that. . . . And I’ve always found it to be very important [that I be] more involved [because of my childlessness] emotionally with the students I had and with their parents and their family situations. I saw the need to work with parents long before it sort of became a given. . . . I must have sensed that it [parenting] wasn’t an easy job. I just saw it [helping parents] as part of my role. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

At the same time the childfree teachers were like mothers in that they described themselves as nurturing their students, viewed their students as their own children and discussed offering support to parents, they also felt they were unlike mothers in many
other ways.

Unlike Mothers

This second sub-theme describes the ways in which these teachers felt they were different from mothers with regard to objectivity, time/energy/patience, leniency, and occupational “benefits.” This section begins with the women’s descriptions of offering advice to parents which further illustrates how they differed from mothers.

Parental advice. Despite their descriptions of their teaching in terms of mothering, the women in the sample described taking a more professional role when they offered or were asked to give parenting advice to the parents of their students:

But some of them [parents] call me for advice. You know, “What should I do about this and this?” Or they come in and tell me, “Here’s what we’ve done, okay?” (Deb, 33 years old, married)

I think I came across like, “This is a suggestion” and tried not to be really dogmatic, “He must do it this way” or you know. So I think that helped. Even though I didn’t have children I had some flexibility and hopefully sensitivity that I didn’t bring on that clash and confronting. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

I am perfectly honest about it. I say, “I can tell you [a parent] what works with this child or what I think but I’m objective.” I have the liberty to be objective. I don’t think liberty is the right word, but to be objective. (Marie, 40 years old,
married)

Marie noted that even friends have called upon her to advise them about dealing with their children because this was her area of expertise:

But also because of my . . . background . . . I often am called in confidence with friends for ideas and suggestions. And again, I approach that by saying, "I can tell you what works in a classroom, I can tell you what works in the books, I can tell you what will work with your child, but when you factor in the emotions it's harder to follow through on all that stuff." Or they'll say, "Can you come over. Can you watch what so and so is doing?" And, "What do you think of it?"

Typically, those disseminating "expert" advice to parents are removed from the experience of motherhood. That these women were asked for and offered their advice on parenting because of their professional position demonstrates their distance from mothers. The women further distanced themselves from mothers when they described themselves as being more objective than a teacher who also was a mother.

Objectivity. The lack of a strong emotional attachment to children as described by some of the childfree women, led them to believe that they were more objective than mothers and therefore in a better position to teach and guide children:

I think it has something to do with the fact that as someone without kids
sometimes you look at how parents are with their kids and I don’t know if we see more clearly or what. But, you say, “What are you doing? Don’t treat them like that.” Or you see the mistakes they make more clearly. But I think parents have this love they have to deal with. Like they love their kids so much and they have to deal with that and still be firm and consistent and guide their kids and all that. Whereas, as a teacher, I don’t know what that feels like. Like I don’t have that, it’s not a buffer, I’ll use the word buffer. I don’t have that buffer of love that parents have. And maybe teachers who have kids, they know what that feels like.

(Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

Because I don’t have the emotional involvement with them [students] that I would have if I were a mother to them. So I can say, “I’m going to do it differently.” I can try different techniques with them without the emotional hooks. Because I know that mothers, they feel guilty, they feel shame, they feel fear and as a professional adult I can be more clinical. So I can experiment with techniques in relating to these children and say, when it doesn’t work, I can say, “Oh darn, that didn’t work. I’m going to try something different.” Whereas if I were a mother I’d say, “Oh that didn’t work! I’ve destroyed them! I’ve ruined them for life!”

(Peggy, 47 years old, single)

I’m on work mode. I’m detached. Again, I love them [my students] but in a bit of an emotionally detached way. For instance, I have to draw again, tonight [when
dealing with an out-of-control student and his upset teacher]. . . . I saw the beyond of what the child was doing and I was able to separate myself. I don’t know that I would do it that positively [if I had my own children]. I think I’d do it more neurotically. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

As well as being objective, these women felt that not having children of their own allowed them to have more time, energy, and patience for their students than if they were also mothers.

**Time/energy/patience.** In addition to having offered parenting advice and being more objective, the women believed they differed from mothers in that they felt they had more time, energy and patience for their students than would be the case had they had children:

Probably I have more energy for them [students], more patience for them. I’m sure that I wouldn’t be quite so tolerant myself if I had children to worry about, their clothing, their shoes, their food, their nutrition, who they’re dating, what they’re doing to their hair. (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

Like I think I have more energy, mental energy and mental time to give to my students than someone that has kids. Like they can barely hold it together ’cause they’re trying to do everything and be like super mom, right? So I think as a teacher it just means I have more time and energy to give to the kids. (Chris, 35
years old, divorced)

And then I can also work with children who come from, where I work now, who come from all sorts of backgrounds which are so awful, so dysfunctional that I think it’s good to have a positive role model. And I believe I have the energy to do that because I don’t have my own kids at home. I don’t think I’d have the energy if I had my own kids. If I had my own kids I would not work at the place I’m working at now. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

While the teachers felt they had more time, energy, and patience, they also felt they were less lenient with their students than were teachers who were mothers.

Lack of leniency. Not only did the women believe they were unlike mothers in that they had more objectivity, time, energy, and patience, they also saw themselves as less lenient with their students than they would have been had they had their own children. This lack of leniency was described in different ways for each woman. For example, some women felt that they were less lenient than mothers when they required their students to meet their expectations:

I think it [my childlessness] makes me [less] ambivalent about discipline. I know what I want and I expect and I go for it. I’m not ambivalent about their behavior. I hear some pretty mushy people always equivocate and back off. . . . I think they [mother-teachers] would back down. I think because they’re tired. I think they
settle for less. (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

It's kind of like I said before, that maybe if I had my own kids I'd be a little bit more forgiving and understanding of kids [in my class]. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

Another woman described how she felt she could not be lenient when it came to her students' health and well-being:

Now one thing that always worries me is health and safety. I don't know that I would be as [concerned if I had my own children]. I may be over-protective of students. Like I have to be right out on duty, bang. Whereas other people [teachers] aren't. Now whether that's because they've had children and they've all survived [chuckles], I don't know. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

In addition to the women believing that they lacked the leniency of mothers, they also thought they lacked certain "benefits" received by mothers in the paid work force.

Lack of "benefits." In comparing themselves to mothers, the childfree teachers were similar in that they described themselves as performing motherly duties as a teacher yet some of the women felt that teachers who were also mothers received more "benefits" than did the childfree teachers. These "benefits" included time away from teaching due to maternity leave and sick children:
I don’t get maternity leave [laughs]. I don’t get any of that stuff. We should get childless leave of some sort. Fathers have something. Mothers have something. We don’t get anything. And I’m there more with the kids [students]. I need a break from it too. Having a maternity leave to do your thing with your child is your thing. I would like to have some time off to do my thing with my hobby. I don’t know. I just threw that out. I hadn’t even thought of that. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

I have a really hard time with parents taking time off work for kids that are sick; from a worker’s point of view. You know you lose that and you think, “Man, you know, I’m working, plugging day after day after day and they’re taking off when they’re not sick and their kids [are].” But what alternatives do they have? Where do you send your child when they’re sick? (Marie, 40 years old, married)

And again, I totally believe that, parents should be home with their kids if they’re sick. It’s not that. But just to be the devil’s advocate. Or even, you know, maternity leaves and stuff. Where people get paid for that sort of thing. It’s like, “Hm, do I get some time off too?” Just kind of equalizing things. I don’t know if there is a way to equalize those things. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

These women’s contradictory comments suggest that while they felt some tension as a result of mothers taking time off work, these childfree teachers also acknowledged the
difficulties experienced by mother-teachers in terms of balancing their paid and unpaid work. In fact, married women teachers and women teachers with children have a long history of fighting for the right to be allowed to continue teaching after marriage and childbearing and to receive maternity leave. These childfree teachers seemed to be perpetuating this historical view that women with children are less than professional because of their time away from work.

This section outlined the study’s third main theme by describing the data that revealed the ways in which the childfree teachers were like and unlike mothers. The first sub-theme described the findings that the childfree women were like mothers in that they spoke of teaching as nurturing and mothering and described giving support to parents in rearing their children. However, the second sub-theme revealed the ways in which the women were unlike mothers in that they offered parenting advice as would a professional. The women also described being different from mother-teachers in that they had more objectivity, time, energy, and patience, were less lenient with students and lacked certain occupational “benefits.” It is interesting that, as childfree women, these teachers described easily performing a mothering role when teaching. Perhaps these voluntarily childless teachers were simply evoking and enacting an attitude that is prevalent in North American society, that which links teaching with mothering. However, in an occupation in which teachers are expected to act as substitute parents, those who are not parents can experience various forms of pronatalist pressure.

Pronatalist Pressures

Taking a mothering stance when teaching did not mean the women in the sample
were exempt from the pronatalist pressures that apparently accompanied the choice not to mother their own children. This pressure went beyond just the direct pressure to have children as these women described experiencing forms of pressure in their occupations that were indirectly related to their childless choice. This section discusses such pronatalist pressures as the fourth and final main theme.

The description of pronatalist pressures begins with the first sub-theme which discusses the data revealing the direct and indirect pressure experienced by the women when they were outside of the school environment. Next, the second sub-theme of the pronatalist pressure that the women described experiencing within the school is discussed which includes both direct and indirect pressures. This section concludes with a third sub-theme which outlines the “strategies” the participants described using in an effort to counter the pronatalist pressures they experienced at school.

Outside School

The women in this sample described experiencing pronatalist pressures outside of their occupational environment. This section first outlines the women’s accounts of the direct pressure to have children and to defend their choice not to have children. Those who described feeling the most pressure outside of work were or had been married. This may not be surprising since despite the changes in family structures, society still expects married heterosexual couples in their childbearing years to have children. A discussion of the direct pressure is followed by the women’s descriptions of experiencing indirect pressure such as media messages, being with others who have children, and a sense of failing their parents who desired grandchildren.
**Direct pressure.** Mostly the married and previously married women in the sample described experiencing direct pronatalist pressure from relatives, close friends, and mere acquaintances:

And everybody in my family was saying, first Christmas [after we were married] would come by, I was given a baby blanket, I was given a book on baby names. And you had this underlying pressure to have kids. . . . I remember some friends saying to me, “There must be something wrong with you.” “What’s wrong with you?” “Why don’t you have any kids?” And that was at the time I wanted to have them and nothing was happening. And I was very hurt by that. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

Some family [questioned my choice], years ago. A lot of friends, close friends whose opinions I respect who really wanted to understand and wanted to make sure that I was making the right decision. So those I respected. And then a lot of people on the outside of that circle too. A lot of people that I’d meet, let’s say through a friend. . . . They couldn’t figure it out. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

The direct pronatalist pressure described by these women came in many forms such as asking the women to explain their childless choice, persuading them to have children, threatening that they would regret their choice, accusing them of wrong-doing, and even insisting that they should have children:
You know when people always say, “Oh, it’ll happen” or “It’s better when you have the kids” and “It all sorts out.” And sorry to the tape but I call bull shit on that [laughs]. . . . I really take offense to people saying that because I think, “I’m not asking you why you’re having them. Why are you invading that personal space and how do you have the right [to ask me why I don’t have children]?” I’ve been often asked the question, “Don’t you have this intense need to reproduce yourself?” And I think, “My God! That’s the last reason that I would [have children].” (Marie, 40 years old, married)

Just people say, “You’ll be alone when you’re sixty.” Or, “What if [your husband] dies?” And I think that can happen though even if you do have kids. I guess I’m scared people perceive that I’m cold or something. . . . Because an acquaintance of mine said to me, “Blah, blah, blah, oh but you don’t like kids. I mean you don’t want kids.” It’s like, there’s a difference. I like dogs but I don’t want one in my home [laughs]. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

Lots of pressure. Innuendos, like, “Why haven’t you had kids? Is something wrong?” Or, “You don’t really love your husband if you don’t have children.” [I] even heard that one. People are so insensitive they just figure that women are baby machines. . . . This other fellow that I’d gone out with . . . his mom was very intrusive to the relationship. And I’d call up and she would answer the phone and she’d say to me, “Look, he’s the last to carry on the name. I want grandchildren.”
(Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

Some of the women said they continued to feel pressure to have children even after their marriages had ended:

So I was glad [I didn't have children when I was married]. I didn’t regret it. . . . People always ask me that, “Would you ever consider [having children]?” I’m like, “No, ’cause I love my life the way it is.” (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

She [my friend] said to me, “You have yours [children] and I’ll help you.” So really most of my friends have said to me, “You’re still not too late. There are women out there in their fifties having them.” (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

The direct pronatalist pressure that expects women of Western societies to procreate and treats them as deviants if they do not has been described by these participants who have received such pressure from family members, friends, and acquaintances. In addition to the direct pressure to have children, these women also described experiencing indirect pressure.

Indirect pressure. The women in the sample, married, single, and divorced, also described experiencing indirect pronatalist pressure by way of media messages, being around others with children, and through a sense of failing their parents who were hoping to become grandparents:
I keep getting these messages from television and from other people out there, “What’s wrong with you? You don’t have kids.” We talked about these T.V. shows. This “Coach” and “Murphy Brown” and “Mad About You.” I mean they’re all great. They’re independent women. . . . Well it just seems like everybody I know, to fulfill themselves have to have your own kid. And same with those T.V. shows, dammit [laughs]. Each one of them [the female character] has had a kid. So every time I look at them I say to myself, “Gosh, am I a weirdo? I don’t have any kids. What are people going to think?” (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

You reach a stage in your life when your friends are all getting married. Everybody has babies and you try to make a social gathering and you’ve kids all around, right? Couples and families and things. So I was considering it [adopting a child] at that point. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

The only thing that bothers me is that I think that my mom doesn’t understand and she’s really good with kids. I think that she’s maybe not insulted but I think she maybe kind of takes it personally. Like if I don’t want kids it must have some reflection on her. My mom will give me a break for a little bit and then it’ll be [pressure to have children]. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

This section outlined the direct and indirect pronatalist pressures the women in the
sample described experiencing outside of the school environment. The women also
described receiving similar pressures inside of their schools.

**Inside School**

The women talked about the direct and indirect pressures they experienced within
the school as a result of their childfree status. This section describes the direct pronatalist
pressure that the women in the sample said they received from students, school staff, and
parents of students. This discussion is followed by the women’s descriptions of the
indirect pressures they experienced at work in that they sensed a questioning of their
credibility by parents and teachers, envy from others in the school, an expectation to work
long hours and to participate in staff conversations about children.

**Direct pressure.** The women in the study described experiencing direct pronatalist
pressures as a result of their childfree status from many different people within the school
environment. This pressure came from such people as students, a school secretary, a
father-teacher, principals, and parents of students who suggested that these women’s
capabilities as teachers were lessened because they did not have their own children.

Students were a major source of direct pressure in that all of the women in the sample said
they had been questioned by their students about their fertility status. This line of
questioning is viewed as a “direct pronatalist pressure” as it forced the women to defend
their choice by discussing how they compensated for their lack of children (a topic that
will be discussed in the “Strategies” section below). The following quotes describe the
questions the women received from their students:
Oh yeah. Students will ask or find it hard to understand that you don’t have children. Even the old ones will. It didn’t seem to make sense to them that you would work with children all day but not have your own. I never quite figured that out. But it just seemed in their mind a bit of a contradiction. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

Sometimes students [have asked about my childlessness]. I think I’ve been asked, “Why don’t you [have children]?” Like once or twice. I’ve been asked many times, “Do you [have children]?” And a couples of times, “Why don’t you?” And you can tell the curiosity in their faces or how they work it through because in their minds you’re children, you get older, you have children and it goes. So they question that. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

And yeah, they [my students] would ask me [about my having children]. Now I think some kids, there are always some bold kids, once you start those kind of conversations, that ask you, “Why don’t you have kids?” (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

The following women also described receiving direct pressure to have children and/or explain their childless choice from a school secretary, another teacher and principals:
A secretary just kind of asked me about wanting to have kids and I said, “No.” And she just kind of, “How come you don’t want kids?” kind of thing. Like she didn’t mean it to be mean, it’s just the way she talks. And you know, “Of course you do” and “You’ll change your mind” kind of stuff. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

And there was a teacher at school . . . and we were quite good friends. And he was about in his forties and he had three boys. And he was just talking about how nothing was like having these kids. And the love that he felt for them was just something he’d never experienced. And he said, “You know, you’re going to miss all that.” And I said, “Yeah but you’re going to miss all the stuff that I do as a person without kids.” (Chris, 33 years old, divorced)

When I started work as a teacher, now I know principals don’t have any right to ask any personal questions, but it’s amazing what they can ask you. Maybe it’s because they see how I interact with kids. They want to know do I have my own. I guess they heard through the grapevine. Then they’d preface it by saying, “I know I’m not supposed to ask you this but do you have any of your own children?” And that doesn’t hurt me any more ’cause I’ve learned how to deal with it. I say, “I’m a favorite aunt.” (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

Such questions not only hurt Anne but also forced her to give a response in which she compensated for her childlessness. Although Anne said she did not know what this
one male principal was insinuating when he made such a comment, it could be interpreted as the principal believing that having children was a prerequisite for teaching children. It was not unusual for the women to sense that others at their school also conveyed similar underlying messages (a theme that will be discussed later). In fact, some of the women described experiencing direct pressure from parents of students in which the parents outright questioned the professional credibility of the teacher because she lacked experience with her own children:

Like the first couple of years, yeah sure they [parents of students] would have said that. You know, “How do you know, you’ve never had kids?” and stuff. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

Oh yeah, I had one [parent]. “You don’t have any kids so how would you understand? How would you know?” In not those exact words. . . . [It happened] more than once. . . . I had one parent go up and down me. . . . I would be able to understand her child more had I had kids. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

Yeah, I think your [a childless teacher’s] credibility, not so much authority, is sort of more questionable [by parents]. “How do you know that that’s the way it is?” Or, “How do you know such and such?” (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

While not all teachers described experiencing such a direct challenge to their
credibility as childfree teachers, some did perceive this to be the general, unspoken attitude of others at school. This pressure can be described as an indirect pronatalist pressure believed by the women to exist in the school environment.

*Indirect pressure.* In addition to experiencing direct pronatalist pressure, the women interviewed also discussed experiencing indirect pressure in that they believed their credibility as a teacher was being questioned by parents and teachers, others in the school were envious of them and they were expected to work longer hours than teachers with children. A final indirect pressure occurred when childfree teachers described their ability to conform to conversations about their co-workers’ children.

The following quotes illustrate the indirect pressure the women experienced as a result of their belief that parents were questioning their professional credibility because of their childfree status:

> There was questioning, I’d say, but never undermining or it never became a focus of the discussion. It never became, you know, “How can you do this ’cause you don’t have kids of your own?” from the parents. . . . It’s sometimes been on the borderline of that kind of thing, years ago, where it became like a gray area and you could see what people were thinking, maybe not able to put into words. . . . At times I was always prepared and warned to be prepared for parents asking that [of me] as a teacher. And I think someone once said to me years ago to respond to that question . . . “In order to be a good doctor you don’t have to have the disease in order to prescribe the cure.” Right? So it’s the same. (Marie, 45 years old,
I always expect parents to say something like, "How can you give me advice when you don't have kids?" I'm often expecting that at interview time, "How can you judge this and this?" I've never had it. I don't think so. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

While some of the women said they had experienced both direct and indirect pressure from their students' parents due to their childlessness, all of the women asserted that they typically had good relationships with the parents of their students. In fact, parents were not the only source of an indirect pressure that lessened the teachers' professional credibility. Some of the women described receiving similar indirect pressure from other teachers:

I've heard a lot of teachers say that they are better teachers since they became parents. A lot of teachers say that. So I thought, "That's interesting. Does that mean that I could never attain their full teacherness as a childless person?" (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

Peggy: When I was quite young the teachers would say to the parents . . . say they're having an interview, [the teachers would say], "Oh that's the kind of teacher [one with children] I would like my child to have." And that would tweak
because I don't believe that's a professional comment. But they [teachers] said, "Oh she's just the kind of teacher I want my little Joey to have." I thought, "Oh brother, give me a break." . . . Because I'm of the belief that if you expose your child to as many different personalities and personal situations then you will get a more rounded child. So you don't always want them [teachers] to be squishy, mushy, lovey.

Researcher: Were the teachers insinuating that a teacher who is a parent is better with their children because she is more loving or nurturing?

Peggy: Yeah! Now this was a good twenty years ago when she made that comment. She's still teaching and so am I, so there you go. I remember it very well.

One woman's awareness of the existence of a general notion that childless teachers are incapable of handling students because of their lack of experience with their own children became evident when she recounted this story:

I had a student disclose some information today. . . . She was quite upset. But I felt really good because our principal said [to me]. . . "In your teaching situation," which is [special education], "because of the size of the groups [of students], they're a little more, well a lot more likely to speak up there, than in their [regular] class." . . . So I felt really good about that, that he [my principal] actually asked me to deal . . . with her. I was kind of pleased that he didn't, because I was single,
that he didn’t sort of overlook me and ask someone else [to deal with the student].
You know, somebody who’s had children or, I don’t know. That didn’t seem to
be an issue for him. It seemed to be who she could relate to. . . . So I felt kind of
good about that. That I didn’t have to be a mother or whatever to do that [handle
the situation]. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

Leslie seemed almost surprised by the attitude of her principal. She apparently did not
expect to be viewed as qualified in dealing with difficult situations involving students
simply because she did not have her own children.

In addition to receiving the indirect pressure that suggested a lack of professional
credibility, the teachers also described experiencing indirect pressure from mothers (both
teacher-mothers and mothers of students) at school when the teachers felt they were the
product of envy because of their childfreeness:

the situation I’m in now [special education], an older classroom teacher might
envy because I feel I put in hours differently. . . . And I think there’s certainly a fair
bit of envy there. But my way of my rationalizing it is, I went out and got higher
education. I put in whatever it took. And the other thing is, reality is, “When the
postings come up, you’re not applying for it [teaching positions that require less
time in the classroom].” . . . You can’t have it all. Life’s a tradeoff. You can’t be
off fifteen years raising your family and being at home and having a pool in the
backyard and then come back into teaching at a later time and expect to be on par
with everyone else. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

I think sometimes I can’t help feeling that other people, other parents, envy us [childfree women]. You know, I get that a lot from my situation, “You don’t have kids. You can do this, this, this.” And I’ve said sometimes, “Look, don’t punish me because of my choices. It wasn’t necessarily an easy choice. There are always tradeoffs.” (Marie, 40 years old, married)

The other thing, I have to tell you, when you’re working with some women [teachers] who are doing the best to diet after having all these kids, when I was teaching [in my earlier years] I was a lot thinner than I am now, they would take one look at your figure and they would just hate you. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

[One teacher] . . . has three [kids] and she’s single. I feel some tension from her. . . I think she’s a little bit jealous and thinks I’ve got it pretty good. That I think I’m great or something. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

Other than experiencing indirect pressure when they believed their teaching ability was being questioned and when they perceived themselves to be the subject of jealousy, the childfree women also described feeling an underlying pressure to work longer hours than teachers with children because being childfree meant they did not have the
responsibilities of a family at home:

I think there's a bit of an expectation in terms of extra curricular activities, that when you don't have kids you might be expected to do a little bit more. But that's never verbalized. No one ever says that because, you know, it's supposed to be voluntary. But certainly people with young families, people understand that they're not going to be doing a lot of extra curricular things. Whereas someone like me, I think if I didn't do extra curricular things people would probably be looking at me going, "Why don't you do anything? You don't have any responsibilities outside of school." . . . It's a feeling that I get that I think is there, definitely. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

I have found that sometimes, you know, the moms with kids get to go at 3:30 and nobody bats an eye and I feel guilty leaving before five. Now that could be my own thing. (Deb, 33 years old, married)

One thing I noticed, now this would not be acceptable now, but thirty years ago it was, "Oh well, there's a meeting and such and such, you're single you can go." And it was like, "I have to go home and make the dinner and rock the baby." (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

Although the women did admit, as was described earlier, that they felt they had
more time (as well as patience and energy) than a teacher with children, the participants made clear that their "extra" time did not mean they could spend more time at work than teachers with children as the childfree women described having lives and responsibilities outside of teaching:

Okay, there's been a time at a staff meeting when they suggested having a breakfast program for the kids. And at that time there was someone else that I was working with that was childless as well, married but without children. And she'd worked much longer than I have and piped up right in there and said, "I want to make it known, just because I don't have kids, I don't want to be the one who's expected to be here at the school earlier than anybody else." And I learned a lot from her because I kind of felt that maybe there would be a lot dumped on me because they know I don't have kids. I'm going to learn, if that happens I'm going to say, "No. No. And no." Because I don't want to be taken advantage of that way. [Not having children] doesn't mean I have any more or any less time than anybody else. I have more responsibilities [at home] because I don't have anyone to delegate those to. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

People also think because you're single you have more time on your hands so you [can] get involved. I mean, these guys [teachers with children] have to cart their kids off all over the place like, meetings. . . . And cooking and basic responsibilities. I'm free of those. I have others, mind you, that keep me just as
busy. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

I did find, as I said, I learned to sort of resent this attitude, “Well you’re single and it’s like you have nothing better to do so you can go to the meeting or take on whatever.” I came to stand up a little more to that. And, in fact, just recently, which was really hurtful, one staff member said to another, “She [meaning me] needs to get a life.” I guess [the teacher who was a mother said it] because, “You don’t have a life like the rest of us and we’re not creative enough to think what you do do with your time.” But I think . . . you sort of take a back seat because its talking about children and these are the day-to-day kind of things. And I don’t talk about what I do day-to-day. I think they find topics difficult to [discuss] outside [of children] and the job. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

This situation, in which Leslie’s colleague was unable to understand what a single, childfree woman does with her personal time because she does not talk about it, also illustrates another indirect pressure due to childfreeness, the “pressure” to conform to informal conversations of staff members that frequently focused on their children. Although none of the women described feeling “pressured” to participate in these conversations, in reality they had no choice but to become involved or to withdraw from the conversation altogether. While only one woman described feeling excluded from such conversations, the others explained that they willingly joined in staff conversations about children. However, in order to participate the childfree described having to refer to their
experiences with other people’s children such as nieces and nephews and students or even their own experiences as a child:

Oh absolutely, [I] have all kinds of participation [in conversations about children]. I’ll whip out the pictures of my niece and nephew anytime. We talk about the babies. And they always come up and they [other teachers] ask me, “How are the niece and nephew?” Almost as if they were mine. (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

It’s funny because friends used to come in [to the staff room] and talk about little kids and all the problems and stuff and I’m right in there ’cause I’ve got kids in class. Like I mean you’ve got little kids just as much. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

Because usually what they’re [teachers] saying, they’re exasperated. They’re saying, “Oh, you know, my kid did this and my kid did that.” And I can sometimes say, “Oh yeah, I remember when I was a kid and I did that kind of thing.” I don’t have a problem with contributing [to the conversation]. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

Some women even initiated conversations about children with another teacher and then simply talked about that teacher’s children:

Like I would be the one that would ask, “Is your son feeling better today?”
Whereas some people wouldn’t. And I would show more interest. And I think it’s just a courtesy kind of thing. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

You know I like to ask [people about their children], and I like to make a point of following up on that conversation. If they’re saying, “My kids are into this and this and this,” I’ll ask them a couple of days later, “So how did that go?” (Marie, 40 years old, married)

But I’m interested in people’s kids and I understand that people love their kids and that they’re very important so I always ask about them. Like I’ll make a point of saying, “So how are your kids?” So then people talk about them. Most people are focused on their own kids. You know, their own kids are the most important. And they don’t want to hear so much about someone else’s kids. . . . I don’t usually talk about other people’s kids that much. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

The one topic to which some women could not relate or in which they were simply uninterested was other teachers’ newborns:

At my school there were about four women that just came back from maternity leave. And yeah, it’s [the conversation] all about, you know, changing diapers. . . . Diapers gets kind of boring. I don’t know. . . . I do remember a few times it getting kind of boring. (Deb, 33 years old, married)
I think [I feel excluded from conversations] mostly when they’re [teachers] talking of newborns and it’s a large part of the person’s life. In fact, it’s all-consuming in their lives, understandably. And then they recognize that they don’t know how to relate to you nor you to them. It becomes a still, like a dead stop in the conversation. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

Like I mean you’re not out of it [the conversations in which teachers talk about their own children]. You’re dealing with the stuff too. Babies, okay, I could never relate. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

In order for these women to participate in conversations about other teachers’ daughters and sons the childfree described talking about other people’s children such as siblings’ and friends’ children or students, their own experiences as children and/or the other teacher’s children. In fact, knowing the importance of children in people’s lives, and perhaps knowing that “children” is an interest that most people share and are ready to discuss, these women often initiated conversations about children, despite perhaps not being as interested in the topic as were the parents. This form of indirect pressure is evident in that these women likely suppressed other topics that were of interest to them yet might have been uninteresting or even offensive to people with children such as how being childfree has enriched their lives. Thus, the voluntarily childless teachers had to conform to discussing a topic that the majority of the teachers had in common or else the childfree teachers risked being excluded from this social activity as was often the case
when the discussion turned to infants.

Two other indirect and less salient pressures described by participants that resulted from the teachers being childfree were the expectation to spend money on students and the belief that a childfree teacher who makes physical contact with her students is more suspicious than a teacher with children:

Because I don’t have kids I tend to spend more money on the kids in the classroom. You tend to think more in terms of them being your kids and you spend your money on them if you don’t have your own family. (Joan, 45 years old, single)

It took me several years but once I realized it was a bottomless pit and it would take as much money as I wanted to give I decided to stop doing it. Although today . . . it was one of my boys’ [student’s] birthday and there were only four kids in the room at the time, I said to him as a special treat he could take everybody’s order for a donut. So he took orders [and] went over [to the donut shop] with my little three dollars. (Peggy, 47 years old, single)

I’m terrified of either touching a kid the wrong way. . . . And I’m physical, like I’m a very touchy person, I’m very huggy. . . . I don’t think they [teachers who are mothers] even think about [touching students] because they have their own kids. Because I’m single that can be, oh, like people will immediately be wary of you
and suspect [you of wrong-doing] ten times faster than if you’re married with kids.

(Joan, 45 years old, single)

Although these two indirect pressures regarding money and touching were not commonly expressed by the women in the sample, they do illustrate that the pronatalist pressure described by these women reaches far beyond the direct pressure to have children and is manifested in many ways.

In order to deal with the direct and indirect pronatalist pressures in school described in this section, the women were further pressured to create and employ various coping mechanisms or “strategies.”

“Strategies”

Some of the same strategies that allowed these women to contribute to conversations about children also were used to prove to others that they were personally and professionally capable of caring for and teaching children in spite of the lack of experience with their own children. These teachers discussed a myriad of ways in which they compensated for their childlessness in response to pronatalist pressures. To demonstrate their personal credibility to students who asked about the teachers’ fertility choice the women described responding by drawing on their close relationships with others, including relatives’ children, pets, and even the students themselves:

These kids [my students] are terrific. “Do you have any kids, Miss?” I said, “You’re my kids.” And then I bring my nieces and nephews in [to school]
sometimes. Like they’ll be up in the area and I’ll have one come in and they’ll [the students] see how I care for them [my nieces and nephews]. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

And a couple of times [my students would ask], “Why don’t you [have children]?” And I think I may have just said something like . . . “Mr. [Jones] and I have animals instead,” or something. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

Oh yeah, [my students ask], “Do you have kids, Miss?” I say, “Yeah! I have twenty-five. You guys.” (Joan, 45 years old, single)

When the women felt their professional credibility as childfree teachers was being questioned by the parents of their students, they not only asserted their personal capability by describing their mothering-type experiences, they also pointed to their professional training:

Yeah, I did [worry that parents wouldn’t think I was competent as a childless teacher] but I let them all know I’ve got nieces and nephews. Actually, I have pictures of my nieces and nephews in my room, letters from them. Just to show them [the parents] that I’m real, down to earth. You know, next year I may not have any pictures in the classroom because you are who you are. I don’t have to prove myself to anybody. It was, I felt I had to. The other thing is you look in
everybody's classroom and they've got pictures up on their desk of their families and stuff, eh? What am I supposed to do? Put a picture of myself up there with my house and my car [laughs]. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

Yeah, I'm always expecting that [from parents] at interview time, "How can you judge this and this [when you don't have your own children]?” It's like, “Well, I am the professional. I am trained to do this. I have a degree in psychology and I've studied a lot and I'm interested and I've got eight years of experience.” (Deb, 33 years old, married)

[I would respond to parents who questioned my credibility], “Teaching is sort of my realm and parenting is yours.” It's like, as teachers we can't give a diagnosis, you know, “You have an A.D.D. child.” The doctor does. But then I don't like the doctor making educational recommendations. So I guess it's more like a realm. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

Other than when proving their personal and professional capability to students and to parents, the women in the sample described in a general sense what experiences they had that they believed made up for not having their own children. Again, the women pointed to personal experiences such as modeling their parents' parenting, remembering what it was like to be a child and babysitting. In addition, they also discussed their professional experiences such as studying children through academic courses and excelling at their jobs:
I don’t know this but they say you often do a lot of things your parents did. So you tend to be the same kind of parent. And I think teaching’s the same. I tend to be, because you’re like a parent, I tend to be the same kind of parent as my parents would have been but in that teaching role. (Chris, 35 years old, divorced)

When I see them [my students], I may not have the advantage of seeing my own kids, but it’s like I’m a kid there. Like I feel them as the kid in me. So that allows me to relate to them. And that must work because, as I say, I seem to be able to connect [with my students]. (Marie, 40 years old, married)

I understand children. I was one myself. I understand more than they [people at school] will ever know. I had to raise my own brothers and sisters. Babysat. I was a kid once. I’ve taken child psychology courses. Like I said, just my own upbringing [which taught me how to nurture] and just my own things that I’ve had to do, babysitting and that. (Anne, 45 years old, divorced)

When I sort of realized I wasn’t going to have both [teaching and parenting], then I think I tended to think, “Well then if I don’t have a family and a house, whatever, not providing any grandchildren, then I need to excel more than other teachers who have that.” I have to have some stronger identity in my career because I didn’t feel strong identities in a lot of other areas. (Leslie, 49 years old, single)

Both the direct and indirect pressures these childfree women teachers described
experiencing inside of the school from students, teachers, principals, parents of students, and even a secretary further pressured these women to employ strategies in which they described compensations for their childlessness. The women referred to their personal and professional capabilities such as their upbringing, experience with children outside of school, occupational training, and teaching experience as giving them the knowledge to be capable of teaching and caring for their students despite the lack of experience with their own children.

Findings discussed under the final main theme of pronatalist pressure revealed that the married and divorced women in the sample experienced the most direct pronatalist pressure outside of their occupations. These women described receiving from families, friends, and acquaintances direct pressures to have children by being asked to explain their choice, persuaded to have children, told what they will be missing, accused of doing something wrong, and even told that they should have children. The women in the sample, whether ever married or not, also described experiencing indirect pronatalist pressure from the media, by being with people who had children, and by sensing that they failed their parents who expected grandchildren.

The pronatalist pressure the women said they experienced inside school also was both direct and indirect. Direct pressure came from inquisitive students, staff members and parents of students who questioned the women’s credibility as teachers without their own children. The indirect pressure the women described experiencing was a result of their perception that their professional credibility was being doubted by others in the school, that others in the school envied them, and that they were expected to work longer
hours than teachers with children. Finally, although the women did not describe participating in staff conversations about children as a pressure, it was seen as such since the women really had no choice but to join these discussions or withdraw from them completely thereby missing this social interaction and perhaps even being deemed by others as anti-social.

To counter the pronatalist pressures experienced within the school, the women in the sample were forced to devise and utilize many "strategies" that enabled them to compensate for the lack of experiences with their own children. When these women were asked by others at school about their childlessness or when they felt their professional credibility was being questioned, they were pressured to discuss both their personal and professional experiences such as their upbringing, relationships with other people’s children and pets, education, teacher training, and teaching experience to prove their capacity to care for and teach young children.

Summary

This chapter reported the findings from the data gathered during seven individual interviews and a focus group interview with three voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers. The chapter began with a description of the characteristics of the sample followed by an overview of each woman’s background. This information provided a context within which the findings could be better understood.

The findings revealed four main themes. The first main theme that emerged from the data was that the factors that contributed to the women’s choice to be childless were numerous and complex. Findings showed that the "decision" to be childfree was not
always made directly by the women but was often the indirect result of other life choices they had made. The rationales given by these women further illustrated the complexity of the choice to be childless as the women offered several reasons for their fertility choice. One rationale described by the women was their job which reaffirmed their childlessness and/or took them away from the possibility of parenting due to the difficulty in meeting their own high standards in both their occupation and as a mother. This either/or attitude toward teaching and parenting that likely contributed to the childless choice was evidence of the conventionality of these women. This conventionality was further discussed in the second main theme that emerged from the data. The women tended to hold conventional beliefs, reflective of the nuclear family ideology with respect to marriage, family configurations, importance of family, and gender roles. In fact, they even chose a conventional, female-dominated career in which they did not wish to advance to administrative positions. The women also were conventional in that they relayed a traditional view of teaching as mothering.

The data that showed the ways in which the women teachers’ teaching identity was both similar to and distinct from mothering comprised the third main theme. The women were similar to mothers in that they described nurturing their students, equated teaching with mothering, referred to their students as their “own” children, and offered support to parents in rearing their children. The women appeared to be unlike mothers when they gave parenting advice as a professional. Furthermore, the women described being different from mothers in that they believed they had more objectivity, time, energy, and patience for their students yet were less lenient on students than they believed a mother
would be. The participants also felt they lacked occupational “benefits” that were related to having children. Although the childfree women in some ways differed from teachers who were mothers, they described fulfilling this mothering role without any discomfort.

The final main theme that emerged from the data was the pronatalist pressures described by the women which they experienced outside and inside the school environment. Outside of the school the married and divorced women received the most direct pressure to procreate which came from relatives, friends, and acquaintances. This pressure varied in form from asking the women to explain their childless choice to asserting that they must have children. Indirect pressure from television, being surrounded by people with children, and the desire of parents to be grandparents also was described by both ever-married and never-married women in the sample.

Inside of the school, the women described experiencing direct pressures from students, staff members, and parents of students who questioned the credibility of these teachers because of their childfreeness. The pronatalist pressure inside the school as discussed by the women came from others who inquired about the women’s childless choice, pointed out what the childfree women would be missing, and/or questioned their professional credibility. The pronatalist pressure within the school as described by the women also extended beyond these direct pressures. The women described indirect pressures when they perceived that others in their occupation saw them as lacking credibility as a teacher since they did not have their own children. As well, the women described feeling envy from teachers with children and parents of students and felt they were expected to work longer hours than teachers with children because such teachers had
family responsibilities that took them away from their jobs. Finally, the women seemed to be “pressured” to participate in the frequently occurring conversations of staff members about their children. Although most of the women said they enjoyed such conversations except when the topic was infant children, they actually had no choice but to participate or to they would be excluded altogether.

The discussion of the main theme of pronatalist pressures ended with a description of the “strategies” the women were pressured to recite in order to prove their ability to take care of young children and to discount the claims that they were not credible teachers. These strategies were similar to the life experiences they drew on when they were participating in staff conversations about children. The women described referring to such personal experiences as their upbringing and close ties to children and pets. As well, they pointed to their professional capability based on their education, teacher training, and years of teaching experience.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Overview

This final chapter begins with a summary of the entire study by reviewing the study’s purpose, methodology, and findings. This is followed by the research conclusions with an elaboration of the four research questions and a presentation of findings in relation to the literature reviewed. Following this is a discussion of the characteristics of the sample in relation to the literature. Further research findings are then presented along with a discussion of the contradictory nature of some of these findings. This chapter concludes with an outline of the implications of the study for practice, theory, and further research.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of the work-related experiences of voluntarily childless female teachers that result from their childfree status. A review of the literature on voluntary childlessness revealed that although the trends and rates, correlates, rationales and decision-making processes, relationships, and pronatalist pressures have been well studied, little attention has been given to how the childfree status of women has influenced their occupational experiences. Research in the area of voluntary childlessness that examined these women’s occupations generally focused on their commitment levels to their work or to the classifications of their occupations.

Voluntarily childless female elementary teachers were of particular interest as these women made seemingly paradoxical choices in that they chose not to bear and rear their own children yet chose an occupation in which they were surrounded by and responsible for the daily care of many young children. In addition, they had taken on an occupation that is often associated with mothering yet they had not mothered their own children.
By studying the occupational experiences of childfree teachers, this study not only contributes to a knowledge about voluntary childlessness, it also broadens educational research on the experiences of women teachers and is a step toward the feminist goal of reflecting and supporting the diversity of women’s experiences. Given that femininity has been and still is equated with mothering, it is not surprising that much feminist literature has focused on the experiences of women with children. Contemporary feminism would benefit by revisiting childfreeness (Letherby, 1994; Morell, 1994) as well as issues of reproductive “choice” and women’s control over their fertility.

Seven voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers were gathered for the study through advertising the study in elementary schools, networking, and by way of the snowball technique. Participants had to fit the following criteria to be included in the study: (a) teach at the elementary level, (b) voluntarily childless, and (c) age 33 years or older.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the 7 women. The women were asked about their backgrounds, including demographic information and how they came to be voluntarily childless. In addition, the women were asked about their experiences as childfree teachers. Individual interviews ranged in length from 1 to 2 hours. Following the completion of these interviews, a focus group interview, lasting 2.5 hours, also was conducted with 3 of the 7 women. The focus group interview was included to give the participants an opportunity to discuss their experiences as childfree teachers with women in similar positions in a supportive environment and to collect further relevant data.
Tape recorded interviews were conducted at a location determined by the participants and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts of the individual interviews were sent to participants to review for accuracy and completeness. The transcripts were adjusted to reflect changes noted by participants and were then analyzed along with the focus group interview transcript for salient themes.

In general, four main themes emerged from the data: the complexity of the women’s decision to be childless, the conventionality of the women in the sample, the ways in which they were similar to mothers yet also distinct from mothers, and the pronatalist pressures they experienced at work as a result of their childfree status.

The complexity of the women’s decision to be childless was evident in that some of the women did not directly choose childlessness and all of the women gave more than one rationale for their childless choice, whether it was a direct or indirect choice. The women in the sample were conventional in that their beliefs with regard to marriage, childbearing and child-rearing, family configurations, the importance of family, and gender roles reflected the nuclear family ideology. This conventionality also was evident when the women described themselves as fulfilling a mothering role as teachers. These women described nurturing their students, demonstrated a mothering attitude when talking about their students, and described how they offered support to parents. However, the women in the sample differed from mothers in that they gave “expert” advice on parenting and they felt they had the objectivity, time, energy, and patience that some mother-teachers lacked. Furthermore, they believed that as childfree teachers they were less lenient than they would be had they had their own children. Also, the women were concerned that
they did not receive the occupational “benefits” given to teachers with children, such as maternity leave and time off work to care for sick children.

The data revealed that within the school environment these childfree female teachers experienced both direct and indirect pressures related to their fertility choice. They described being pressured to have children and to defend their childless choice. The women also discussed experiencing a questioning of their professional credibility and being envied by some mother-teachers and parents of students. Also perceived by the teachers was an expectation to work longer hours than mother-teachers. Finally, the women described their participation in staff conversations about other teachers’ sons and daughters. Such direct and indirect pressures came from students, parents of students, and school staff, including principals, teachers and a secretary.

Conclusions

This section describes the conclusions of the study by addressing each of the research questions and presenting the findings in relation to the literature reviewed for the study.

Research Question One

The first research question asked, How did these female elementary school teachers come to be voluntarily childless? The findings of the study revealed that each of the 7 participants arrived at the “decision” to be childless in a different manner. Each woman cited a unique set of complex circumstances and many motivations surrounding her choice to be childless. This result is similar to the findings of Bartlett (1995), May (1995) and Morell (1994) who found that the decision to be childfree made by the women
in their studies varied to such an extent that it was impossible to categorize the women based on how they arrived at their decision.

The complexity of the situation in which the childless decision was made by the participants in this study was evident in all of the women's stories. For instance, some of the women put off having children for various reasons until they realized it was too late. Other women described trying to have children or at least wanting to have children at one point in their lives and later being glad that they had remained childless. Some of the women “chose” not to have children because they viewed their male partner as an unsuitable father. Some described the reluctance of a partner to have children, and still other women explained that not marrying was what led them to “choose” childlessness. At least one woman in the study stated that although she did not want children at the time of the interview, she was not going to discount the possibility of having children later on in her life.

Similar circumstances under which women made their childless “choice” were described by Bartlett (1995) and Morell (1994). Some of the participants in their samples explained that being childless was a result of a series of temporary decisions against motherhood that resulted in a permanent decision once they reached menopause. Also, both studies found that some participants had at one time tried to have children and then later chose childlessness. Women who decided against children because of not having a husband also were interviewed by Bartlett (1995), Burgwyn (1981), Gerson (1985) and Lang (1991). Studies also have described women who chose not to have children because they felt their husbands would not make good fathers or because they were married to
men who did not want children (Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Lang, 1991).

This study found that the women’s route to childfreeness was often related to their partner, or their inability to conceive when they wanted and thus they often did not have the complete control over their reproduction as is implied by the words “decision” or “choice” to be childless. These words also imply that not having children was the result of a one-time, clear-cut, conscious effort. The findings revealed that these women’s life situations evolved in such a way that they indirectly chose childlessness as a result of making other life choices.

Bartlett (1995) and Morell (1994) questioned whether the women in their samples freely “chose” childlessness. Similar to this study, Morell (1994) found that the word “choice” did not adequately describe how her participants arrived at the childfree state. The women in Morell’s (1994) study, even the ones who said they made a clear-cut choice, recounted ongoing processes in which complicated social and personal circumstances often caused their choice to fluctuate. Among Morell’s (1994) sample of voluntarily childless married women, some had husbands who did not want children. Morell (1994) described these women as making “second-order” choices in that they did not directly choose childlessness yet they did choose to marry a man who would not have children (p. 51). Similarly, some of the women for this study not only chose men with whom they would not have children, but some chose not to marry at all, which for them was a prerequisite for having children. Thus, through these women’s life choices they also chose childlessness. Furthermore, just as some of the female teachers in this sample had tried to have children earlier in their lives, so did some of the women interviewed by
Bartlett (1995) and Morell (1994). Again, these researchers argued that this was evidence of the limitation of the terms "choice" and "decision" since being childless was at first unintentional before it was a choice. This example illustrates a blurring of the distinction between "voluntary" and "involuntary" childlessness. Thus, the findings of Bartlett (1995) and Morell (1994) as well as this study have highlighted the problem with the words "choice" and "decision" which fail to reflect the complex life events that have led these women to the childfree outcome.

Adding to the complex circumstances surrounding the childless decision and the inadequacy of the terms that simplify the childfree decision are the multiple rationales offered by women when asked why they chose to be childless. In this study, in addition to the reasons already discussed (such as a partner's unwillingness to have children, the lack of a husband and/or a good father, and the inability to conceive children when they were desired), the women gave many other rationales for their childlessness. Among these were: an unhappy upbringing; being responsible for the care of siblings when young; not having experienced a "maternal pull;" a desire for freedom from childcare and related monetary responsibilities; a desire to pursue other interests such as art, community work, travel, education, or solitude; a lack of confidence in their ability to parent; and the demands of their occupation.

A review of the childfree research found that many females also cited freedom from the responsibilities of raising children and the freedom to be able pursue other interests as a primary reason for their childless choice (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Campbell, 1983; Hawkins, 1984; Lang, 1991; May, 1995; Morell, 1994; Nason & Poloma,
Researchers also have found that caring for siblings was what deterred some of their firstborn female participants from motherhood (Lang, 1991; Landa, 1990; Veevers, 1977, 1980). However, other rationales given in existing studies such as a dislike of children (Campbell, 1983; Hawkins, 1984; Nave-Herz, 1989; Veevers, 1980), fear of disrupting harmonious relationships (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Campbell, 1983; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980), concern about overpopulation (Burgwyn, 1981; May, 1995) and concern about the physical aspects of pregnancy, childbirth and later health (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; May 1995; Veevers, 1980) were not cited by the women in this study. Conversely, rationales given by the women in this study such as their discontent with their upbringing, having no “maternal pull,” and fear of being unable to parent (without considering their occupations) were not evident in the studies reviewed.

Another rationale offered by the women in this and other samples was their occupation. The women in the study not only believed that working with children reaffirmed their choice to be childless, they also associated their job commitment to their childlessness. Similar to Ireland (1993) and Morell’s (1994) findings, this study revealed that while the women linked being devoted to their jobs with being childless, they did not cite their jobs as the sole or primary reason for choosing childlessness. However, as they explained, being highly devoted to teaching left little time or energy for raising children. This finding is consistent with that of other studies that have shown that childfree women view devotion to their paid work as having prevented them from being equally devoted to children which they felt was essential in order to be a good mother (Gerson, 1985;

This either-occupation-or-children attitude can be viewed as the result of high standards these women set for themselves in their paid work and their views of proper parenting. Being highly committed to their job was necessary for the women to be able to reach their own standards but meant that similarly high standards in the realm of parenting would be impossible to attain. The women felt that because they could not possibly give the same total commitment to both their occupation and children, that one, the other, or both of these areas would suffer. Whether occupational commitment was a factor that led these women to avoid motherhood or whether choosing childlessness led these women to be highly committed to their work is unclear. Similar high standards also were held by the childfree women interviewed by Gerson (1985), Ireland (1993) and Morell (1994) who felt that their complete attention had to be placed in either paid work or mothering in order to achieve their standards. Moreover, some of the women interviewed by Gerson (1985), Morell (1994) and Veevers (1980) said that if they had chosen to have children they would have stopped working outside of the home. Veevers (1980) described this either/or attitude as a conventional stance which seems to contradict the chidfree women’s unconventional fertility choice.

The conventionality of childfree women was further illustrated in the study by the women’s conventional beliefs with regard to marriage, family, and gender roles. For instance, some participants believed that committed heterosexual relationships should be legal, children should be borne only into legal marriages, women should be primarily
responsible for rearing children, single parent families are cause for concern, family is of utmost importance, and men have children to boost their ego while women have children to satisfy a biological urge. In addition to these views, the women also were conventional in that they had chosen a traditionally female-dominated occupation and maintained that they were satisfied to remain as classroom teachers rather than pursue administrative roles.

In sum, the findings suggested that these voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers were childfree as a result of a myriad of rationales and complex circumstances. Furthermore, their conventional attitude with regard to meeting their high standards in either work or parenting was a contributing factor to these women’s childfree status.

**Research Question Two**

The second research question asked, How do voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers deal with the nurturing aspect of teaching young children?

When asked about the nurturing aspect of teaching young children, all of the women in the sample said they believed they fulfilled a nurturing and mothering role when teaching. Each of the participants described nurturing their students in different ways. For example, they described how they dressed their students for recess or helped them achieve their personal best. Whatever form their nurturing took, each woman maintained that she was comfortable in this nurturing role despite not having nurtured her own children. Studies that have examined the relationships of voluntarily childless women with other people’s children also have found the women to be nurturing and loving toward children (Bartlett, 1995; Lang, 1991; May, 1995; Morell, 1994). Not only did the women
enrich the children's lives, the childfree women also felt responsible for the well-being of these children (May, 1995).

Even though the women in this study had never nurtured their own children, they explained that they were easily able to nurture their students. Thus, determining how these women acquired their specific nurturing skills became an important line of inquiry for the study, one that was not examined by researchers in the studies reviewed. The voluntarily childless teachers in the study offered different explanations of how they came to be nurturing. For instance, one woman said she learned how to nurture by modeling the nurturing skills of her own parents and a friend's parent. Another woman explained that she had a natural instinct that enabled her to nurture her students, while a third woman believed her experience as a teacher taught her how to nurture. Regardless of how they came to be nurturing, each of the women believed she performed a nurturing role when teaching.

While the women in the sample believed that male teachers also had the ability to be nurturing, they described teaching as "mothering" and themselves as "mothers" when in their teaching role. Biklen (1987), Clifford (1991), and Schmuck (1987) described how teaching young children has been viewed both historically and at present time as professional mothering. The women in the study also were similar to mothers when they referred to their students as their children. Furthermore, the women resembled mothers when they described how they offered child-rearing support to parents of their students and to friends and family members.

While the women identified with mothers in many ways, they also distanced
themselves from mothers in many other ways (a topic discussed in the “Findings” section). However, to specifically answer the second research question, the women in the sample were comfortable carrying out the nurturing aspect of teaching. Each woman associated teaching with nurturing and mothering and described nurturing her students in a different way. Also different were the women’s explanations of how they came to be nurturing in spite of not having had the experience of nurturing their own children.

Research Question Three

Research Question three asked, What is the relationship between voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers and parents of students?

Although all of the women described having good relationships with the parents of their students, findings revealed that students’ parents were a source of direct and indirect pronatalist pressure. The women described receiving direct pressure from parents who suggested that the childfree teachers were less than credible because they did not have experience with their own children. The childfree teachers believed they were being accused of not understanding their students simply because they were not mothers. Furthermore, the childfree teachers described experiencing indirect pressure from parents of students as the teachers sensed that even parents who were not vocal believed childfree teachers lacked credibility. While the research reviewed did not specifically focus on the relationships between childfree teachers and the parents of their students, it examined the friendships between the voluntarily childless women and women with children. Studies consistently have revealed that childfree women feel excluded from the lives of their mother-friends (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Hawkins, 1984; Morell, 1994; Woollett,
1991). These researchers reported that the childfree women in their samples felt they were perceived by their friends who were mothers as being incapable of understanding the experiences with and of children. Nelson (1996) found that the lesbian mothers in her sample who had not borne children were made to feel that the only way to become a part of this “culture of motherhood” in which mothers share a common knowledge is for women to bear and rear children. Similarly, the childfree teachers in this study also described having their knowledge of children questioned by parents of students who suggested that not raising children meant not knowing about children.

In sum, despite the women’s positive descriptions of their relationships with parents of students, these parents, as described by the women, were the source of both direct and indirect pronatalist pressures regarding the childfree teacher’s credibility.

Research Question Four

The fourth and final research question asked, What, if any, social pressures do voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers experience as a result of their childfree status?

In addition to the pronatalist pressure the teachers in the study experienced from parents of students, they also received direct pronatalist pressure from students, coworkers, and principals. Such direct pressure typically took the form of inquiries into whether or not the women had children and why they chose childlessness which in both cases caused the women to defend their choice and/or explain how they compensated for their childlessness. In addition, some women experienced direct pressure when staff members attempted to persuade the childfree women to have children or insisted that the
women would regret their childless choice.

A substantial portion of research on voluntary childlessness has described the pronatalist pressure experienced by the childfree. However, these works do not specifically examine those pressures that were experienced in the workplace. Nonetheless, studies have consistently shown that women who have chosen to defy the Western cultural norm of having children were subjected to direct pronatalist pressure. Participants in such studies also described experiencing similar pressure to that outlined by the women in this study in the form of being asked to explain their choice (Bartlett, 1995; Morell, 1994, Veevers, 1980; Woollett, 1991), convinced to become parents (Burgwyn, 1981; Lang, 1991, Veevers, 1973), and told that loneliness in their old age would cause them to regret their choice (Burgwyn, 1981; Lang, 1991). In addition, these studies reported other direct pressures that childfree women received that were not revealed in this study, such as assertions that a lack of children was the result of sexual problems (May, 1995; Veevers, 1980). Similar to this study, existing research has found that pronatalist pressures come from family (Bartlett, 1995; May, 1995; Nason & Poloma, 1976), especially parents who desire grandchildren (Bartlett, 1995; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980), friends (Bartlett, 1995; May, 1995; Nason & Poloma, 1976), friends with children (Lang, 1991), and acquaintances (Nason & Poloma, 1976). Unlike this study, these researchers noted that direct pressure also came from doctors (Veevers, 1980) and even complete strangers (May, 1995).

Aside from the direct pronatalist pressure experienced by the voluntarily childless female teachers in their occupations, they also experienced indirect pressure as a result of
their childfree status. The women felt that, in addition to parents of students, other
teachers and principals viewed childfree teachers as less than credible, although not all of
the women had this verbalized to them. The women in this sample also believed that
others at work were envious of their childlessness and that their voluntarily childless state
led to the unspoken expectation of others that teachers without children should work
longer hours than those with children. Furthermore, although the women did not describe
being pressured to contribute to conversations about staff members' children, they only
had one other option, to appear antisocial by not participating. Similar indirect pronatalist
pressure has not been uncovered by the research reviewed for the study which focused
primarily on direct pronatalist pressure as described by participants.

The study also revealed that in response to the pronatalist pressure experienced at
work, these childfree teachers were under further pressure to "prove" that they were
credible teachers despite their childlessness. The "strategies" employed by the women in
response to pronatalist pressure and to prove they were capable of teaching included
describing their personal and professional capabilities. To prove their credibility as caring
persons, the women said they would describe their close relationships with children of
family members and pets, remember what it was like to be a child, and recall their
experiences of raising younger siblings. In addition, the women said they illustrated their
professional capability by describing relationships with students, referring to their
education before and after they became teachers and to their experience teaching, and by
modelling their parents' parenting when teaching. Morell (1994) found that her
participants also attempted to make up for not having children by discussing such
experiences as relationships with pets. Morell (1994) called this phenomenon “compensatory discourse” and asserted that childfree women are pressured to compensate for their childlessness by discussing the mothering-type activities they perform (p. 89).

However, Morell (1994) argued that such experiences are seen as inferior to the real mother experience.

In summary, the childfree teachers in this study described experiencing direct and indirect pronatalist pressure in their occupations as a result of their childfree status. The women’s descriptions of their experiences demonstrated that pronatalist pressure can include more than just the pressure to have children or to explain the childless choice. These pressures extended into the workplace and both directly and indirectly affected interactions with students, parents, other teachers, office staff, and principals. In addition, the women were pressured to produce experiences that resembled the mothering experience in order to counter the pronatalist pressure. What is not clear from these findings is whether or not such direct and indirect pressure is more intense in a child-centered environment.

This section has presented the study’s conclusions in relation to the research questions. This discussion found that these voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers had multiple rationales for and complex circumstances surrounding their childless “choice,” held high standards regarding work and parenting and relayed conventional beliefs about family and gender. The women also believed that they performed a nurturing and mothering role as teachers. Also, parents of students were found to be a source of pronatalist pressure. Finally, the childfree teachers described experiencing further direct
and indirect pressure from school staff and students as a result of their childfree status.

Discussion

This section describes the sample in relation to the literature reviewed. In addition, the findings not addressed by the research questions are described followed by a discussion of the findings that are seemingly contradictory.

The Sample

Some research on the characteristics of the voluntarily childless found that childfree women tended to be firstborns who often cared for younger siblings or only children who had no experience at all with children (Ireland, 1993; Lang, 1991; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980). The sample for this study did not include any participants who were only children, yet 4 of the 7 participants were the eldest child; however, only one of these firstborns described being responsible for the care of younger siblings. Another woman in the sample described having to care for siblings but she was the middle child of a large family.

Some researchers have found that many of their voluntarily childless participants had, at one time, assumed they would reproduce (Gerson, 1985; Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980). Similarly, most of the women in this sample said that when they were younger they expected that one day they would become mothers.

Like the majority of respondents interviewed by May (1995) and Veevers (1977, 1980) who came from conventional nuclear homes, all of the women in this sample had married parents who never divorced. While May's (1995) childfree participants attributed their childless choice to not wanting to be like their homemaker mothers, this was not
articulated by any of the women in this sample. Neither did the women in this sample describe their parents' unhappy marriage as a reason for their childlessness as was the case with Veevers's (1977, 1980) female participants.

Consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g., Abma & Peterson, 1995; Gerson, 1985; Jacobson & Heaton, 1990; Lang, 1991, Veevers, 1973, 1980), this research found that all of the women were well-educated, which is not surprising considering their occupation, and that all, except one woman, claimed no specific religious affiliation. While many of the women had in the past identified with a particular religion, they no longer had strong ties to one religion. With regard to education, although a Bachelor of Arts degree is now necessary to teach, two of the women had continued their education beyond what was required and received a Master's degree while two other women were in the process of completing a Master's degree.

The voluntarily childless women in this study, like many in other recent qualitative studies, described having close relationships with children outside of their work environment. Similar to the women interviewed by Bartlett (1995), Lang (1991) May (1995) and Morell (1994), these childfree teachers viewed the children they were close to, such as siblings' and friends' children, as being an important part of their lives. None of the childfree teachers in this study expressed a dislike for children.

Findings

This section reviews the findings that were not directly related to the research questions but did emerge as significant. The first such finding is the ways in which these voluntarily childless female teachers were distinct from mothers. By being asked to give
and by having offered advice to parents about their children, these women assumed a professional stance that distinguished them from mothers. The women in this sample described being unlike mothers in that they believed they had more time and energy for themselves and their students than they would have if they were mothers. The women not only talked about devoting a great deal of time and energy to their jobs that might otherwise have been spent on their own children, they also described having personal time after work to replenish their energy. Other studies have similarly found that the primary reason women chose to be childless was to be free of childcare responsibilities which allowed them the freedom to pursue their own interests and to have solitude (Bartlett, 1995; May, 1995; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1977).

While the women believed they had more time than a mother-teacher, they insisted that this did not mean that they had endless, unoccupied time. Many of the women resented the attitude of others that because of their childlessness they had fewer responsibilities outside of work and more down time than mother-teachers. In fact, the single women in this sample felt they had more personal responsibilities than mothers because the single women did not have anyone, that is, children or husbands, with whom they could share such responsibilities as housework, yard and building maintenance.

Some of the childfree women felt that they differed from mother-teachers with respect to the amount of patience they possessed. The women believed that having children would wear down their patience leaving little for their students. Thus, without children they felt they had the advantage of being more tolerant of their students than mother-teachers. Finally, some participants explained that not having an emotional
attachment to their own children was unlike mother-teachers and meant that as childfree teachers they could be more objective than teachers who were mothers. These participants believed that being objective enabled them to clearly see their students' weaknesses and to work on them in a positive fashion without an emotional element that might have been distracting.

The women further described being different from mothers in that being childfree resulted in them being less lenient on their students than a mother. One woman described that she was never lax about students' health and safety and would always watch out for and worry about their well-being. Other women explained that they were not lenient with regard to the expectations they had set for their students. These women said they expected their students to meet the academic and disciplinary standards set by the teachers as they would not lower these expectations. Perhaps this finding is an extension of that described in the studies reviewed that found childfree women set high standards with regard to their occupations and parenting (Gerson, 1985; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980) both of which include expectations of children.

This study's participants also believed that they differed from mother-teachers in that they lacked the "benefits" given to teachers who were mothers and who received maternity leave. Furthermore, the participants believed they had more time at work than mothers who took days off for sick children or who came to work late and left early in order to care for their children.

Another finding of the study that was not addressed by the research questions yet emerged as significant is the direct and indirect pronatalist pressures experienced by the
participants outside of the school environment. The women who experienced the most
direct pressure to have children were married at the time of the interview or had been
married and were divorced when interviewed. Bartlett (1995) also found that the married
childfree women she interviewed received more pronatalist pressures than the unmarried
childfree women. Bartlett (1995) argued that childfree women who are married receive
the most pressure because society in general still believes that the purpose of marriage is
to procreate. The direct pressure the teachers experienced outside of work came from
relatives, close friends, and acquaintances and like the direct pressure experienced at
work, it took the form of asking the teachers to defend their childless decision, persuading
them to have children, threatening that they would regret their decision, accusing them of
doing something wrong, and insisting they should have children.

In addition to receiving direct pressure outside of work, the married, divorced, and
single women in the sample experienced indirect pronatalist pressure. The indirect
pressure came from television shows in which the long-time childfree female character
inevitably conformed to the norm of motherhood, socializing with friends who all had
children, and a sense that the participants’ parents wanted grandchildren although this was
not verbalized. Morell’s (1994) research in which she briefly described the role of the
media in creating pronatalist pressure, supports the finding of this study that the media is a
form of pressure experienced by some childfree women. However, although the
friendships of childfree women with mothers (Bartlett, 1995; Burgwyn, 1981; Hawkins,
1984; Morell, 1994; Woollett, 1991) as well as the direct pressure from friends with
children (Lang, 1991) and participants’ parents (Bartlett, 1995; Nason & Poloma, 1976;
Veevers, 1980) were described in the literature, none of these works discussed such indirect pressure described by this study's participants as simply being around mother-friends or failing to meet their parents' expectation of grandchildren.

This section described the study's significant findings that did not answer the research questions. Data revealed that the participants were unlike mothers in that they gave advice to parents, believed they had more time (but were not without responsibilities) and energy for themselves and their students, were more patient and less lenient with students and overall, worked more than they would have had they had their own children.

The study also found that these voluntarily childless female teachers experienced pronatalist pressures outside of their occupations. Direct pressure, described mostly by the married and divorced women, came from family, friends, and acquaintances who asked the women to explain their choice, tried to persuade them to change their minds, told them they would regret their choice, accused them of wrong-doing, and insisted they have children. Indirect pressure was the result of media messages, being around friends with children, and realizing that parents wanted grandchildren. As these findings emerged it became apparent that many were contradictory in nature.

Contradictions

This section briefly outlines the findings of the study that are seemingly contradictory. Describing the contradictions in the data and in the lives of voluntarily childless female teachers exemplifies the complexity of these women's experience and of human behavior in general.

The first contradiction served as the premise of the study. The study sought to
understand the paradoxical choices of voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers who chose not to bear and rear children yet chose an occupation in which they were surrounded by and responsible for the care of many young children. It may seem contradictory that women who did not want their own children wanted to work, on a daily basis, with many children. On the other hand, their choice of occupation is consistent with that of many females.

The next contradiction uncovered by the study is that the participants identified themselves as voluntarily childless or childless by choice yet many of them were childless by circumstances and some were childless by chance first and by choice later. However, their childlessness can still be viewed as a choice, albeit a secondary one, as it was the result of other direct life choices.

Findings also showed the women to be conventional in their attitudes toward marriage, child-rearing, family and gender roles, their choice of job, their association of teacher with mother, and their unwillingness to advance in the workplace. Regardless of such conventionality, the women in this sample were unconventional in that they ultimately chose to deviate from the prevalent definition of female, motherhood.

Also discovered through their conventional attitudes was that these women did not approve of single female parent families. However, many of the same women recalled a time in their past when they had considered having a child out of wedlock as there were no prospective husbands or fit fathers.

Probing into the nurturing aspect of teaching young children uncovered a further contradiction. Data showed the women in this sample to be like mothers in many ways yet
also unlike mothers in other ways. The childfree teachers’ descriptions of themselves in
terms of mother illustrates the pervasiveness of the Western cultural norm that views
mother as central to the female identity including females who teach young children.
Furthermore, during the interviews, some of the participants revealed that despite
resenting others’ expectations that they reproduce, they still assumed procreation would
be the outcome for other people. Again, this shows that even these childfree women have
perpetuated the dominant norm of motherhood and reproduction.

Another contradiction was evident when the women discussed their empathy for
parents because of the difficulty they faced in raising children, but these participants also
expressed their disapproval of parents who were not fulfilling the parental role as the
childfree women believed a parent should.

Participants also talked about having more free personal time than women teachers
with children. Nonetheless, when the women in the study were disclosing their belief that
they were expected to work longer hours than mother-teachers, they asserted that their
personal time was filled with as many, if not more, responsibilities than mothers.
Furthermore, although these women felt they had more personal time than mothers, they
felt they should have more time away from work to equal the time mother-teachers
received for maternity leave and sick children.

Finally, the women described being asked for and giving child-rearing advice to
parents of students and friends with children. However, the women also discussed
instances in which parents of students suggested the childfree teachers knew little about
children because they did not have experience with their own children.
In addition to demonstrating the complexity of these women’s experience, the contradictions described in this section illustrate the ambiguity of the role of women who are not mothers but perform a mothering duty and who are childless in a child-centered environment.

Implications

This final section of the chapter outlines the implications of the study’s findings for practice, theory, and future research in the fields of voluntary childlessness, feminism, and education.

Implications for Practice

The findings and conclusions discussed in this chapter revealed that this sample of voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers experienced pronatalist pressures in their occupation due to their childfree status. Based on this finding it would be in the best interest of the childfree teachers as well as schools for schools to implement ways in which this pressure could be alleviated. For example, any diversity training offered to administration and staff might include a discussion of the discrimination against women teachers without children which, in this study, has taken the form of questioning their professional credibility. Once made aware of this phenomenon, teachers, principals, and other staff members might refrain from making comments about a teacher’s lack of experience with her own children. In addition, school administrators might encourage and/or support childfree teachers to come together to discuss their common experiences. The women that attended the focus group interview conducted for the study noted that they had never shared their experiences as childfree teachers with others in the same
personal and professional position. In fact, the women left the almost three-hour interview half jokingly and half seriously promising to get together again which is evidence of the need for such a forum. Perhaps a supportive environment in which childfree teachers can share their experiences would help them to deal with the pronatalist pressures they encounter at work. In addition, once other staff members are made aware of this support group, it might become obvious to them that pronatalist comments are not only inappropriate but also can be hurtful and stressful enough for the childfree women to need the support of one another. These strategies might not only decrease pronatalist pressure from school staff thus helping existing childfree teachers to cope with the pronatalist pressure and to feel more confident in their capabilities as a teacher without children, but also might encourage new highly-qualified women without children into the profession of teaching where their skills as a teacher would be valued despite their fertility choice.

A final implication for practice is based on the participants' belief that they should receive time off of work that parallels the time that mother-teachers receive and to which father-teachers are entitled. Since these women described having close relationships with other people's children and helping parents rear their children, it would not be inconceivable that these women also might require time away from work to babysit a niece or pick up a sick godson from school when the child's parents are not available. Policy-makers and employers might consider giving time off of work to those who are not parents so they can help with the care of children. Many childless people play a significant role in the lives of non-biological children but are not recognized for this important contribution by employers and society at large. Allowing the childfree time away from
work to assist in the rearing of other people's children not only would give the childless an
opportunity to increase their participation in the lives of children with whom they are
close, but also would lighten the burden of responsibilities for parents, especially single
parents.

Implications for Theory

The findings in the study support feminists who theorize that reproductive choice
is not within the complete control of the individual woman (Bartlett, 1995; Morell, 1994).
Complex life situations, choice of partners, physical capacity, and pressures from a
pronatalist society all make it difficult for women to be able to freely choose their
procreative outcome. The fact that many women do not even consider the alternatives to
motherhood and simply assume that having children is inevitable leads to a questioning of
their ability to consciously "choose" their fertility state. Most of the women in this sample
also expected to become mothers which is not surprising considering North American
society's dominant belief that female is synonymous with mother. However, due to
circumstances, partners, physical inability, upbringing, and multiple motivations, these
women indirectly chose childlessness. For many of them, the childless "choice" was a
result of other life choices they had made. Thus, even these women who considered
themselves "childless by choice" had not directly chosen childlessness. Some feminists
believe that only when a patriarchal society ceases its attempts to keep women in the home
through the promotion of motherhood, when pronatalist pressures that insist women
conform to the norm of having children no longer exists, and when the female role is
separated from the mother role will women truly be able to choose their reproductive
outcome (Bartlett, 1995; Morell, 1994).

Historically, school boards have attempted to control the reproduction of female teachers by allowing only single and, therefore, childless teachers to be employed. In the mid 1920s Ontario school boards implemented a policy that barred married women from teaching (Labatt, 1993; Reynolds, 1987). Thus, women who wanted or needed to work were forced to remain single and childless. During the teacher shortage of World War II, married female teachers were allowed to work only until the War was over at which time the marriage bar was reinstated (Reynolds, 1987). Although the policy banning married women from teaching was lifted when teachers were in demand during the post War baby boom, married women teachers were not viewed as permanent and devoted employees (Labatt, 1993). Furthermore, married teachers had to resign when they became obviously pregnant which meant those wanting to continue teaching after childbearing would have to reapply for a position and if hired would receive beginning level salaries. It was not until the early 1970s that female teachers finally won the right to statutory maternity leave (Labatt, 1993). However, pregnant teachers were expected to begin their leave as soon as their pregnancy became visible. In addition, women with children were often passed over for promotions and those without children who wished to advance had to forgo motherhood for the sake of their career (Labatt, 1993).

The experiences of the voluntarily childless female teachers in the study have shown that an opposing attitude currently exists as more and more women with children are teaching. While it was once believed that a married woman’s duties as wife and mother meant she was incapable of teaching well, there now exists a widely held belief that
a mother’s experience enables her to better understand her students than a teacher without children (Reynolds, 1987). The women in this sample described receiving comments suggesting they lacked professional credibility because they did not have children. In fact, some of the childfree teachers felt that they were missing out on certain occupational “benefits” as they did not receive the time off that mother-teachers were given for bearing and caring for their children. Thus, there continues to be an attempt on behalf of the school community to control the reproductive behavior of teachers. Evidence that schools play a part in promoting motherhood was given by the childfree teachers who described experiencing a questioning of their credibility and who felt they did not receive certain “benefits” because they chose to be childless.

Implications for Further Research

The findings of this research contribute to knowledge in the fields of voluntary childlessness, feminism, and education. Based on the finding that voluntarily childless women’s fertility status does influence their experiences in the workplace, it is important for researchers studying the lives of childfree women to further the study’s understanding of the work-related experiences that result from childfreeness. Such research might probe into the occupations of childfree women that are both child-centered and do not include children. In order to determine whether childfree women who work with children receive more pronatalist pressure than those who do not, studies also could use larger sample sizes and include a more diverse sample of women with a variety of socioeconomic statuses, educational levels, racial and ethnic backgrounds, marital statuses, and sexual orientations.
While the results of the study contribute to the feminist goal of representing and supporting the experiences of all women, especially those who have chosen childlessness, much more research on the childfree in general is needed in order to reflect and affirm their experiences. Such a body of research would facilitate in diminishing the negative connotation related to the childless choice so it would be as acceptable as the mother choice.

Feminists also have been called upon to create a term that appropriately defines those who are voluntarily childless (Letherby, 1994; Morell, 1994). Such a term would not imply a lack as “childless” and “non-mother” do, nor would it denote a total absence as does the term “childfree.” Morell (1994) suggested that just as the term “single” refers to those who are not married, a positive word that is not formed by using the opposite of “children” or “mother” is needed to describe those who choose not to have children. Furthermore, feminists could elaborate on the research with regard to the social control of women’s reproduction and their ability to freely choose their fertility outcome by applying it to the childless “choice” of female teachers. Such research would pay particular attention to the problematic nature of the words “choice” and “decision” and perhaps devise new terms that adequately represent the complex circumstances that often lead to the childfree outcome.

In addition, further feminist research might focus on the ways in which women, and specifically teachers, both with and without children are impacted and constrained by North America’s notions that reproduction should be the outcome for most people and femininity is defined in terms of mothering (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994; Woollett, 1991).
The study found that even these childfree teachers were influenced by and perpetuated the norm of reproduction as they expected others to procreate. Furthermore, these women were seemingly affected by the “woman equals mother” notion as they identified themselves as mothers when teaching. This notion also is evident in the dominant view of female elementary school teachers as mothers (Biklen, 1987; Clifford, 1991; Schmuck, 1987). Perhaps continuing research might challenge this view of teaching as mothering as such a model excludes both women without children and men. Research in this area could construct a new model of elementary school teachers that is not based on the mother-child relationship.

Educational research is enriched by a greater understanding of the experiences of voluntarily childless female elementary school teachers. Researchers in the field of education must continue investigating the lives of female teachers without children to better understand the diverse experiences of all teachers. Such research might examine the experiences of childfree female teachers who teach at the intermediate and senior levels. In addition, the experiences of childfree women principals and administrators would be worthy of investigation. Further studies also might observe whether childfree female teachers actually teach differently than mother-teachers as was suggested by the women in this study. Such studies might learn about childfree teachers through the students’ perspective to reveal how students regard childfree female teachers compared to mother-teachers. Finally, inquires into whether or not childfree male teachers encounter similar pronatalist pressure as experienced by childfree female teachers also would contribute to a knowledge of the relationship between gender and parental status.
Whatever the nature of the investigation, it is crucial that research on voluntarily childless female teachers and the work-related experiences that result from their childfreeness continues to be conducted not only to fill a gap in research in the areas of voluntary childlessness, feminism, and education, but also to support and promote their lives as valid and acceptable.
References


Lifestyle 42.


Appendix A

Permission Form

As the principal of __________________________ I have given permission
(name of school)

for Linda Rees's notice describing her MEd study and seeking the participation of

voluntarily childless female teachers to be posted in the teachers' staff room.

________________________________________
(principal's signature)

* * *

I do not wish to have the notice posted in the staff room of this school
(check here)

________________________________________
(name of school)
Appendix B

Recruitment Notice

Interview participants needed for student’s MEd study:

Childlessness in a Child-Centered Environment: The Experiences of Voluntarily Childless Female Teachers

"We decided not to have kids ... after having yours over for the day."

Anticipated time required: 2-3 hours
(At a location of your choice)

Confidentiality ensured

Criteria for participants: a) a female teacher
b) 33 years or older
c) intentionally childless

If you wish to participate or would like more information contact:

Linda Rees at (905)547-2095 before January 31, 1998

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Cecilia Reynolds, Brock University, (905)688-5550, ext. 3354
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Childlessness in a Child-Centered Environment: The Experiences of Voluntarily Childless Female Teachers

Researchers: Professor Cecilia Reynolds and Linda Rees

Name of Participant: (Please print) ________________________________

I understand that this study in which I have agreed to participate will involve discussing my experiences as a teacher that result from my choice to be childless. I understand this study will include two interview methods, one in which I, alone, am questioned by the researcher and the other in which I, along with other female voluntarily childless teachers, will discuss my experiences as a teacher who is deliberately childless.

I understand that the audio tape recorded private interview will take place in a location outside of my school, on a day (in January or early February 1998) and at a time of my choice and will last approximately one hour. I understand that I will have the opportunity to review and edit a transcribed copy of my interview in mid February 1998. Furthermore, I understand that the audio tape recorded group discussion will take place in a location, outside of my school, on a day (in late February or early March 1998) and at a time that is agreed upon by myself and the other 5 group participants and will last between 1.5 and 2 hours in length.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty. I understand that there is no obligation to answer/participate in any aspect of this project that I consider
invasive.

I understand that all personal and identifying data will be kept strictly confidential and that all recorded information will be coded so that my name is not associated with my answers. I understand that only the researchers named above will have access to complete data base and that pseudonyms will be used for the MEd thesis of Linda Rees which will be available in the Brock University library upon completion of this study. Furthermore, I give permission for the data to be used in subsequent publications by the researcher in which pseudonyms will also be used.

Participant signature ____________________________ Date __________________

If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in the study, you can contact Linda Rees at (905)547-2095 or Professor Cecilia Reynolds at (905)688-5550, extension 3354.

The researcher will send you a transcribed copy of your interview in mid February 1998 so that you may comment on the completeness/accuracy of your responses. Details regarding the date, time and location at which you will receive the transcripts will be made over the telephone in early February 1998.

A summary of the research results will be available in September 1998. A copy of this report will be mailed to you upon request.

Thank you for your help! Please take a copy of this form for your reference.

***

I have fully explained the procedures of this study to the above volunteer.

Researcher signature ____________________________ Date __________________
Appendix D

Individual Interview Guide

Part one: Respondent’s background:

1. What is your age? religious affiliation? highest level of education achieved?
2. What is your marital status/relationship situation? Do both partners work?
3. How did you arrive at the decision to remain childless?

Part two: Experiences as a childfree teacher:

1. Do you think being childless shapes your experiences as a teacher? In what ways?
2. Describe any comments made to you about your childlessness by someone in your school (e.g., teachers, students, principals, administrators, parents/guardians, custodial workers).
3. Describe when/if you have ever felt excluded at work because of your childlessness.
4. Describe your relationship with the parents/guardians of your students.
5. Describe your relationship with your students.
6. Describe your relationship with other teachers.
7. What are the advantages of being a childfree teacher? What are the disadvantages of being a childfree teacher?
8. What are your views on the relationship between teaching and motherhood?
9. What are your views on the relationship between femininity and motherhood?
Appendix E

Member Check Letter

Date ___________________

Dear ____________________ (Participant’s first name):

I would first like to thank you again for your participation in the individual interview. Your experiences as a voluntarily childless elementary school teacher provided me with valuable information with respect to my research. I hope the interview was a positive experience for you as well.

I have enclosed a transcribed copy of your interview. Please take the time to carefully read this transcript. If you feel there is any information that you think would make your responses more complete and/or more accurate please record these comments on the transcript. If you have any questions or when you have completed reviewing the transcript and would like me to pick it up please contact me at (905)547-2095. A stamped envelope is also enclosed so that you may return the transcript as soon as you have finished reviewing it.

I will be contacting you shortly to remind you about the group discussion set for ___________. A week before the group interview you will receive, through the mail, a copy of your list of themes that you may refer to in the group discussion.

Thank you again for your time and contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

Linda Rees
Appendix F

Moderator’s Guide

Introduction:

1. Introduce participants.
2. Hand out name tags.
3. Offer refreshments.

Open Discussion:

1. Welcome and thank participants for coming.
2. Describe topic of discussion (i.e., experiences of childfree teachers).
3. Obtain consent to tape-record interview.
4. Describe format of interview (i.e., constructive comments and questions after each teacher tells her story; one person speaks at a time).
5. Describe confidentiality (i.e., no real names will be used, interview tape will be destroyed).
6. Explain that there are no right or wrong answers/ideas and contradictory answers/ideas are accepted.
7. Allow participants to participate as they wish and to withdraw at any time.

Teachers’ Stories:

1. One teacher at a time tells her story.
2. Following each story encourage the teacher to elaborate and clarify and encourage discussion, constructive comments and questions from other teachers.
3. Interject my own predetermined questions to elaborate, clarify and expand on
themes from individual interviews.

End Discussion:

1. Request the discussion remain confidential.

2. Ask if there are any questions or further comments and address these.

3. Express thanks.
The Brock University Standing Subcommittee on Research with Human Participants has reviewed the research proposal:

**Childlessness in a Child Centered Environment: The Experiences of Voluntarily Childless Female Teachers**

The Subcommittee finds that your revised proposal conforms to the Brock University guidelines set out for ethical research.

DB/tar