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Listening to Teachers' Voices: Challenges and Attitudes Toward Teaching

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Abstract: *This small scale study looks at the challenges teachers face and their attitudes. Drawing from the literature on teacher attrition, teacher burnout, and teacher collective efficacy, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a group of five teachers selected from a convenience sample. Three themes emerged: teachers struggle with students' apathy, they are challenged by the hierarchical nature of school decision making, and how they define their community appears to impact their attitude toward their work. Teachers who feel they have a place in the community of their school report more positive attitudes toward their work. This research adds to the knowledge base on teachers' experiences and may help us address challenges teachers face.*

Keywords: Teachers, Challenges, Attitudes, Retention

Around the world a large percentage of both novice and experienced teachers leave the field each year. In the United Stated some sources indicate up to 50% of teachers leave teaching within the first five years they are practicing (Ingersoll, 2012) and 16% of all teachers leave their schools each year (Nguyen & Kremer, 2022) . While disturbing, it is even more important to keep in mind this problem is worldwide and American teachers represent a small fraction of the teachers around the world. This global exodus of teachers has led to a worldwide teacher shortage (UNESCO, 2023) and points to major issues with the current systems of education.

As teacher educators, it is imperative that we are able to speak on the reality of working in a k-12 school. This includes honest conversations about certain structures or expectations that encourage or discourage a strong and supportive work environment. Understanding teachers' attitudes toward their jobs is key to making systemic changes that may keep teachers in the profession for the long term.

Review of Relevant Literature

While the study of teachers' experience is long and extensive, new issues have emerged recently. It appears in many locations, teacher attrition has increased due to the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Rosenberg and Anderson (2021) report "almost half of the public school teachers who left the profession since March 2020 cite COVID-19 as the main reason." Many teachers report feeling burned out and those who experience these feelings often choose to leave the profession for other careers or seek early retirement. This has caused a worldwide teacher shortage with many school districts struggling to fill teaching vacancies. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports 44 million teachers will be needed worldwide by 2030 including over 22

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million who are necessary to fill gaps left when existing teachers leave (UNESCO, 2023). Understanding why this is happening is key to addressing it.

Studies have documented teachers feeling burned out and demoralized (e.g., Russell et al., 2020; Santoro, 2018). These feelings cause teachers to look to other careers. Teachers in crisis leave the profession adding to the world's teacher shortage and a dearth of experienced teachers to both induct new teachers and guide pupils. Maslach and Jackson (1981) posited burnout has three parts: emotional exhaustion, experiencing depersonalization, and feeling a lack of personal accomplishment.

The existing literature on teacher burnout can be grouped into several categories. Some studies have looked at the reasons why teachers experience burnout and tie this to characteristics of the teachers themselves that appear to lead to burnout (Richards et al., 2018). Personal factors such as whether a teacher works at a public or private school can influence if they experience some components of burnout. For example, teachers who reported they are working in public schools experience higher levels of depersonalization than those working in private schools (İlhan et al., 2021). Teachers' personalities can also impact their experiences. Those who had lower levels of personal resilience experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Vicente de Vera García & Lambrate, 2019).

Other studies have looked at the connection between burnout and the teachers' role or position and have concluded that teachers in some content areas, such as special education or mathematics, have higher rates of burnout than other areas (e.g., Garwood et al, 2018; Nguyen & Kremer, 2022). In looking at the views of teachers and how they describe their experiences, researchers cite multiple reasons why teachers experience burnout including high workload, job satisfaction, and stress (Caudal, 2022; El Helot et al., 2016; Preechawong et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2019).

Finally, a third group of studies looks at why teachers leave by considering their school culture and how this impacts them. This literature reports on the decisions teachers make to leave based on how they view their school community. Teachers must feel their work is important and valuable (Doherty, 2020). Researchers have found teachers who perceive a lack of support from their colleagues and appreciation from students may lead to feelings of burnout (Gavish & Friedman, 2010).

In addition, a set of literature looks at teacher attitudes toward their profession. We used the definition developed by Bizer et al. (2005) who describe attitude as "…a global and relatively enduring evaluation of a person, object, or issue - a representation of whether we think the target is generally good or bad, desirable, or undesirable" (p. 247). Attitude is traditionally thought of as having three components including affective, behavioral, and cognitive (Ostrom, 1969) and Pickens (2005) defines these components as follows: "an affect (a feeling), cognition (a thought or belief), and behavior (an action)" (p. 44). Understanding teacher attitudes toward their jobs has implications for teacher retention.

This is related to teacher retention in that teachers who are more positive toward their work are those who tend to stay in the profession (Ruhland, 2001). Retaining teachers involves a variety of factors such as working conditions (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018), administrative support (Shell et al. 2023), positive relations with colleagues (Schiller et al, 2023). In fact, Gimbert and Kapa (2022) found that for teachers with five to 20 years of experience, the level of satisfaction the teacher experiences is the key to retaining them in their position. Thus, we argue investigating teacher attitudes toward their jobs is important because those who have a positive attitude toward their work are more likely to stay.

Teacher collective efficacy is important to consider. Nordick, Putney, and Jones (2019) found the principal was central to the teacher collective efficacy at the school. They described the role of the principal in the school as one of "facilitative leadership" (p 252) leading to teacher collective efficacy. They noted opponents of this facilitative leadership include "supportive relationships," "scaffolded collaboration," and "advancing expertise" (p. 252). They identified schools where teachers have high teacher collective efficacy are those where the principal (a) includes teachers in making decisions on the school curriculum, (b) involves teachers in selecting the professional development trainings offered, (c) offers feedback in a supportive manner, and (d) focuses on the community by celebrating. Salas-Rodríguez & Lara (2023) further supported the idea that high teacher collective efficacy is found in schools where the principal develops a community of professional trust within the school. There is evidence that schools with higher teacher collective efficacy experience less burnout among teachers (Yurt, 2022).

While there is extensive research in teacher burnout, few studies have looked at the challenges teachers experience and asked teachers about their attitude toward their work. The challenges teachers report experiencing potentially lead to burnout and teacher attrition, while the positive experiences may help to mitigate burnout. Our work adds to the literature by including both of these components.

We sought to answer the research question: 'What are the challenges and attitudes toward their work reported by teachers?"

METHODOLOGY

We conducted semi-structured interviews with a group of five teachers selected from a convenience sample that was chosen by approaching teachers involved in another project at a local college and inviting them to be a part of this work. Participants included elementary, middle, and high school teachers and all had been teaching less than 10 years. Table 1 shows the participant demographics including the teacher's pseudonym, gender, content area taught, the percentage of students who are classified as economically disadvantaged at their school, and the number of years the participant has been teaching (at their school and in their career).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant [a]	Gender	Content area	Percent students who are economically disadvantaged [b]	# Years at current school	# Years total in teaching
Erin	Female	Elementary	18	2	4
Heidi	Female	Math	39	1	9
Katie	Female	Elementary	30	7	7
Susan	Female	Elementary	72	7	8
Zeke	Male	English	32	2	8

[a] All names are pseudonyms
[b] Source: US News Education https://www.usnews.com/education/k12

Interview questions were open-ended and designed to elicit responses about teachers' attitudes toward their jobs. Questions included the following: "What makes you feel good about what you do?" "Have you faced any struggles this year?" "Do these struggles affect your ability to teach?" "Are these occasional moments of adversity or do you feel this is a continuous struggle?" and "What keeps you in your job?"

Interviews were recorded and both researchers worked together to analyze them qualitatively for patterns in the data following the tradition of qualitative methods to code for themes (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). Both researchers listened separately to each interview and developed preliminary codes. Inter-rater reliability was approximately 85% at this point. Following this, both researchers discussed the codes and came to an agreement on the major themes found in the data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes emerged: teachers struggle with students' apathy, they are challenged by the hierarchical nature of school decision making, and how they define their community appears to impact their attitude toward their work. Teachers who feel they have a place in the community of their school report more positive attitudes.

Examples of data coded as teachers struggling with student apathy include this comment from Zeke, a high school English teacher:

> I think the most difficult is the student apathy. It's very difficult to teach students who don't want to be there. 'I don't want to read this book; I don't want to read this poem or do this project'. It's time consuming and draining.

Similarly, Heidi, a middle school math teacher spoke of the challenges she faces with students' apparent lack of motivation. She stated:

> You're still dealing with the post covid learning gap…their stamina has just been so low and their desire to just get an answer… not try to solve the answer, not try to work it out. It's like, 'can you just tell me how to do this?'

Heidi went on to explain other days where students show a lack of engagement in the learning process. She commented, "The miscommunication or just like, there's the days where the kids don't get engaged and you're just like 'oh my…, I feel like I'm failing. Like the wheels have just come off the bus.' " Katie, an elementary school teacher shared her view on how "[There's] not enough time. Everyone just seems really negative right now. The overall vibe [in the school] is negative. Morale is down." This may tie back to findings in the literature where teachers who perceived they had a higher workload were more burned out and dissatisfied (Caudal, 2022). In this case, high workload may be felt by those teachers who feel they need to engage students who are apathetic and have low morale. Working with apathetic students is certainly more challenging than engaging those who are more motivated.

Our second finding is that some teachers feel they must deal with the structure of how decisions are made in their schools. Several participants indicated they do not feel involved in decision making and that decisions are made by principals and district leaders with little input from teachers. Examples of data coded in this category include this comment from Zeke, "There's a lot

of new initiatives all at once. The morale is really bad and the leadership isn't the best at that. Our faculty conferences are just us being berated, instead of them [school and district administrators] leading." Zeke then described pressures of multiple administrators walking through his classroom and his perception of how each administrator was looking for something slightly different, making it challenging to have his teaching be what they were looking for and also true to his style. He stated, "In my entire career, I've had multiple walkthroughs a year, but there's a different perspective of what is being looked at…there's different pressures of meeting standards."

Susan, an elementary teacher, described struggles with her administration, "We have new administration so it's a little bit of a learning curve right now. They're definitely… they're the type of people where they want to reinvent things so it's their version or their spin." She went on to explain an example of top down decisions made without consulting teachers:

> So for things that aren't broken, they want to fix them. Like for class lists for next year; there's always been a process. We set up the spreadsheet and we get together as a team… And [this year] it's like, 'no, this is how we're doing it' and it's different for no reason.

Here we see teachers struggling to meet standards and follow policies that are being defined by leaders who have a vision for the school that is not necessarily made clear or shared by practicing teachers.

The third theme of our findings is how teachers define their school community, which appears to impact their satisfaction. For example, when asked: "what keeps you at your job?" Erin, an elementary school teacher commented on the importance of the community atmosphere in her school led by her principal, "I would say my school community. I have the best principal in the entire world. He is absolutely amazing. He really cares about his staff and cares about how we are as a community and as a whole school." This is consistent with how teacher collective efficacy impacts a teacher as we see Erin's perspective; that her principal is invested in her and her colleagues as people further developing the collective efficacy within the school (e.g., Nordick, Putney, & Jones, 2019; Salas-Rodríguez & Lara, 2023).

Erin's comments are echoed by Zeke, who noted his colleagues are the reason he stays in his job. He said, "My colleagues [keep me here]. This year we have PLC [professional learning community] and the whole English department is off for one period and we get to meet…seeing them and working with them keeps me there." This is constant with Schiller's (2023) discussion of the importance positive relationships with colleagues has on teachers.

Heidi stated she feels like she is part of the community both inside and outside of her school, "I feel integrated into the community, and that's what I've always wanted. I have a mentor, but there's people that I can go to [who] also mentor me and help me." Overall, teachers who defined their school community in positive ways and saw themselves as part of the community, appeared to have more positive attitudes toward teaching. While Gavish & Friedman (2010) found teachers who perceived a lack of support felt more burned out, our research indicates the opposite is also true; teachers who felt supported reported more positive experiences. This further ties into the ideas of teacher collective efficacy as Heidi appears to be working in a school where the teachers have high teacher collective efficacy seeing herself as part of a group where teachers work together to achieve high goals (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk, 2000).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although this was a small scale study, the more we listen to current teachers describe their experiences in terms of their challenges and the positives they experience; we may be able to determine more about teacher burnout. Teachers who have negative experiences that they feel are not outweighed by the positive experience they feel in their work, may reasonably choose to leave. When they do so they take their wisdom with them leaving holes in our educational system. As a society, we need to listen to teachers and find better ways to support them.

Further, our work demonstrates how the school community and actions of the school principal impact teacher attitudes and are likely to impact teacher retention. The importance of teacher collective efficacy are reinforced through our work.

As noted above, teacher burnout can be prevented by increasing teacher collective efficacy (Yurt, 2022). Teachers who do not feel burned out or demoralized are more likely to remain in their profession. The implications are clear; future generations depend on quality teachers who feel enthusiastic about what they do. This leads to recommendations for school principals and teacher educators. School principals should be aware that they have a vital role in preventing teacher burnout by helping to increase teacher collective efficacy. Simply put, the actions of the principal matter and have tremendous impact on the attitudes of teachers in their building and subsequently on their retention. We recommend principals focus their efforts on increasing teacher collective efficacy in their schools through helping their teachers develop a shared sense of collective responsibility for decisions and attitudes.

Teacher educators also have an important role in the development of future teachers and principals. We recommend teacher educators who are involved in educational leadership programs, ensure future school leaders understand the important role they have in creating the kind of community where teachers feel a positive attitude and want to stay. Teacher educators working with pre-service teachers must help them understand how their attitude will likely impact their feeling of burnout and their desire to stay in their school. Understanding the realities of teaching is key while also understanding how they can be empowered to take charge of their attitudes and request specific support from their administrators.

This paper is a step toward understanding how teachers view their work at the current time. This research adds to the knowledge base by helping us better understand teachers' experiences and may help us address challenges and lead to higher retention.

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