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Teacher Persistence: Why Teachers Stay in the Profession

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Abstract: *This study looked at the reasons teachers cite for remaining in the teaching profession. Drawing from the literature on teacher persistence and retention, we conducted interviews with 30 teachers selected from graduates of one college's teacher preparation program who had volunteered to be part of a larger study. Teachers indicated they persisted in the profession for three reasons: (a) they enjoy the content they teach and the act of teaching, (b) they like their schedule and the cyclic nature of their work, and (c) they feel valued and supported. This research adds to the knowledge base on teacher retention*

Key Words: Teachers, Persistence, Retention

For many years, statistical data collected have shown a significant number of teachers leave their schools. This figure has been reported to be as high as 16% overall (Nguyen & Kremer, 2022) and higher for those in their first few years (Fantilli, & McDougall, 2009; Ingersoll, 2012). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported eight percent of teachers in public schools left the profession in 2021 and this percentage is consistent with the percentage who left in 2012 when NCES collected similar data (NCES, 2023). This same NCES report (2023) states an additional eight percent of teachers moved to a different school during the 2020-21 school year. For another perspective, one in every six teachers left the profession or moved to a different school during the NCES study of the 2020-21 school year.

Necessarily this leaves gaps in schools and contributes to the current teacher shortage. Further, teacher attrition is problematic for several reasons including the financial cost to schools when teachers leave (Fuchsman et al., 2023), impact on student learning (Palermo et al. 2021), and added stress for the school leaders (Cells et al., 2023). Looking globally, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics has indicated there will be a need for 44 million teachers within the next 5 years (UNESCO, 2023).

Review of Relevant Literature

The literature reports various reasons why teachers leave the profession or change schools. Some teachers, especially those newer to the profession, may have unrealistic expectations of what their work will actually entail (Simos, 2013). Others, including very experienced teachers, left due to low morale (Shannon et al., 2022), their own mental health challenges (e.g., Mack et al., 2019;

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Shannon et al., 2022), lack of support (Buchanan, 2010; Mack et al., 2019), less control over their work (Mack et al., 2019), and a workload that was too high (Buchanan, 2010).

Historically many studies have looked at reasons why teachers leave and fewer have looked at reasons why teachers stay. Understanding why teachers stay is just as important as understanding why they leave because understanding the key elements that keep teachers at their jobs may help us make needed systematic changes in our schools to better retain quality teachers. Of those studies that have looked at why teachers stay, studies such as Scott et al. (2022) report reasons teachers stay including those they termed "environmental" (p. 82) such as getting adequate support from administrators and reasons they called "personal" (p. 82) which includes being passionate about working with students. Other researchers such as Casely-Hayford et al. (2022) described factors including the teacher's motivation, personal health, and, "social support" (p. 6) received from colleagues.

Most studies that report on teacher retention used statistical data gleaned from surveys and other demographic data. Our work adds to the knowledge base on why teachers choose to stay in the teaching profession in their own words through interview methodology. As part of a larger study, we set out to answer the research question "What factors do teachers cite as reasons to stay in the teaching profession?"

METHODS

For this study, we interviewed 30 teachers selected from a sample of graduates of a teacher preparation program. Participant teachers ranged in experience from their first to 27th year in the teaching profession and taught a variety of grade levels including elementary grades, middle school, and high school. They taught a range of subjects including English language arts, mathematics, sciences, special education, languages other than English, and social studies. Those at the elementary and pre-kindergarten levels tended to teach multiple subjects. The majority of our participants taught in public schools with a few reporting they taught in private schools. In this paper we report on their responses to the interview question, "What keeps you in your job?" Interviews were transcribed and we followed a procedure where both researchers coded a selection of interviews independently prior to coming together to develop shared codes. We then used these shared codes to code the remainder of our data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The 30 interviews coded for this paper reflect a subset of a larger study and we are continuing to add data to understand this research question.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In general, we found participants stated three main reasons for staying in their teaching jobs. Teachers report staying because they: (a) enjoy the content they teach and the act of teaching, (b) like their schedule and the cyclic nature of their work, and (c) feel valued and supported.

The first reason cited by teachers for staying, is teachers report that they enjoy the content they teach and the actual act of teaching it to students. Examples of data coded in this way include this quote from an elementary teacher, "Working with the kids is what keeps me going." This is consistent with what Corbin et al. (2019) described as increased feelings of personal accomplishment when a teacher had a closer relationship with their students. This teacher appears to feel accomplished with the work she does with her students.

Similarly a high school English teacher reported:

> Like I said, the curriculum. I really love teaching it. I enjoy the... I guess I don't know how to say it other than like the scope of the job... it's exactly what I like to do. I like to give lessons. I like to public speak. I like to help other people problem solve. I like to go back and forth and have a conversation where at the end somebody has come out more knowledgeable, whether it's me or the kid or both. So, I think that generally just the nature of teaching is what I like to do.

Here we see how this teacher enjoys the various components of her job. Other teachers shared their enjoyment in working directly with their students such as this comment from a middle school math teacher, "So mainly I enjoy the interaction with students. Middle school especially….And helping them is a real big thing too. I know it sounds cliche but seeing them learn and have fun with math is very enjoyable and I enjoy seeing the smiles every day." This supports the finding by Scott et al. (2022) where the researchers described teachers being passionate about working with their students. In particular, this teacher enjoys working with middle school students.

The second reason teachers gave for staying in the profession was because they liked their schedule and what was referred to by teachers as the cyclic nature of their work. Teachers appreciated the chance to begin with a new group each school year and viewed this as being positive. For example, a fifth grade teacher who had been teaching 11 years stated:

> I love that teaching, for better or worse, offers you a chance for rejuvenation… You might have one year [where] you have a very challenging class and the next year you have a perfectly wonderful group of kiddos. It's never the same…

A high school math teacher described a similar idea this way: "...and then having summers…it helps…it really keeps me here not looking for something else to do because it's kind of a reset every single year. The reference to a "reset" every year speaks to this cyclic nature of the school year with each year having a defined beginning and end followed by a beginning again with a new group of students.

We did not find this idea mentioned specifically anywhere else in the literature although it may be contained in research on school structure. For example, Johnson and Birkeland (2003) discuss school structures that support learning. Although their main focus is on structures administrators can implement and control, it could be argued the school calendar is also included in structure if we take a wide view.

Finally, teachers reported feeling valued and supported and cited this feeling as the reason why they remain in the profession. An example of data coded in this category is this quote from a third grade teacher who said: "I love the team that I work with. I've worked with them for quite a few years so we're very close and we work well together." Meredith et al. (2023) found that teachers who have positive experiences with small group communities in their school have positive job experiences. They point out, this small group is not the entire school; rather it is a group of colleagues such as this teacher refers to when she speaks of her grade level team.

A similar idea was voiced by a middle school science teacher who commented: "… it's the community of people I work with." These comments are consistent with Dreer (2024) who found when teachers experienced "positive emotions" related to their profession they were more likely to stay (p. 61). Experiencing enjoyable interactions with coworkers certainly influences the day to day experiences of teachers. Palermo, Kelly, and Krakehl (2021) found teachers who stayed in

teaching positions tended to be older and report feeling less isolated than those who left teaching or moved schools. Having positive relationships with colleagues could almost certainly lead to teachers feeling less isolated than those who did not experience such positive collegial relationships. Finally, several studies described social support from colleagues as a factor that increases the likelihood a teacher will stay in the profession (e.g., Casely-Hayford et al., 2022; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Other teachers mentioned their relationship with the administrators in their buildings. This comment is from a pre-K teacher: "I love that my principal trusts me enough to teach how I want to teach. Being in private school, I have a little more leeway, you know, than public school teachers…" While her comment might be seen as specific to private schools, our research found other teachers who indicate their administrative team is a reason why they stay. For example an elementary teacher in a public school stated, "...our admin [administration team] isn't just saying you're going to deal with that. They're giving us the summer and they'll pay us over the summer to try and find a new curriculum that works for us." She made this comment when describing a situation where she felt supported when teachers were unhappy with a new curriculum the school had recently adopted. Here we see she felt the administration team was listening to her and her colleagues and was willing to work with them to resolve an issue. This is consistent with what Scott et al. (2022) placed under the category of "environmental" factors (p. 82) since it refers to support provided by administrators.

Implications and Conclusions

Understanding the reasons why teachers stay, such as enjoying the act of teaching, enjoying their schedule and feeling supported by colleagues and administrators are important for teachers, college professors, and policy makers to be aware of because keeping teachers in their jobs is important for the future of our society.

We need to better understand the factors that make teachers want to stay so these can be encouraged and replicated at other schools. While some of our findings mirror those found elsewhere in the literature, special attention should be paid to understanding those who stay due to the cyclic nature of the teaching profession; as that has not been reported elsewhere and would benefit from further investigation. The idea of teachers staying because they value an opportunity to start again each fall is one that inherently makes sense and there may be other ways to enhance this such as school schedules that allow for teachers to restart with a different group during the school year.

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