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Selected North Carolina Beginning and Veteran Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing Retention and Attrition

Keywords

teacher retention, induction programs, mentoring programs, beginning teachers



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Marvin Steve McCoy, Linda Wilson-Jones, and Paris Jones

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine factors that impact teacher retention in public schools in the southeast region of North Carolina. Additionally, the purpose was to identify variables that influence beginning teachers' decisions to leave and veteran teachers' decisions to stay in the teaching profession. The 10 participants were former and current teachers employed in the State of North Carolina between 2008 and 2011. The research revealed that teacher support, working conditions, and student behavior were among the leading factors impacting beginning teachers' decisions to leave the profession prior to tenure. The emerging issues in this study were consistent with other research findings from previous studies. The results from this study suggest that district leaders need to create mentoring programs for beginning teachers.

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Introduction

Teacher attrition, retention and the turnover rate in schools ultimately impact the education of children all over the world. Some of the primary predictors of teacher attrition identified in the education research literature include: (a) demographics, (b) teacher background, (c) professional environment, and (d) lack of support systems. The reason most often stated by teachers for leaving the profession, are inadequate collegiality, professionalism and administrative support rather than insufficient salaries (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Metropolitan Life, 1986). While retirement and staff reduction contribute to attrition rates, additional commonly

identified justifications for leaving included, family and personal circumstances and job dissatisfaction (Voke, 2002). Increasingly, disruptive students, uninvolved parents, and invasive bureaucracy were identified as contributing to the demoralization of teachers and to influencing teachers' decision to leave the classroom (Inman & Marlow, 2004).

Other contributing factors are the demands that have been placed on teachers in recent years. Today, teachers are compelled to increase their knowledge and skills in such diverse areas as, portfolio assessment, technology, cooperative learning, and a wide variety of specific

instructional strategies (Inman & Marlow 2004). The current high stakes testing era and related reforms have also made the profession more complex and challenging. Consequently, according to Inman and Marlow (2004) initial classroom experiences become a reality shock for beginning teachers and the uneasiness is often mistaken as an indication that they have made the wrong career choice. If the positive aspects of teaching are not emphasized, a number of new teachers will resign. While many do remain in the profession and develop a career in teaching, others view teaching merely as a transition to other professional opportunities (Inman & Marlow, 2004). Similar problems are prevalent in North Carolina.

According to the 2010 North Carolina Teacher Turnover Report, there are multiple factors that impact teachers' decision to leave the teaching profession, such as child care, poor health, and relocation or other employment, retirement, salary, lack of support from administrators, and poor working conditions. Local Education Agency (LEA) officials in North Carolina are greatly perplexed when the unspecified reason for departure; "other" is listed under reason for leaving. The most frequently-cited reasons reported by teachers for leaving the profession are salary issues, working conditions, and lack of support. In fact, salary, administrative support, mentoring, and working conditions are among the leading factors influencing beginning teachers' retention and attrition rates in North Carolina. Although some teachers leave the teaching profession because of retirement, childcare problems, disability, or relocation, school leaders remain extremely concerned about the number of beginning teachers who decide to leave during their first five years of teaching. Although the 2009-2010 Teacher Turnover Rate showed a slight decrease in teacher turnover, there is still a notable

shortage in critical areas of math, science and special education. Furthermore, the attrition of beginning teachers does not just impact the teacher shortages in North Carolina, but across the United States.

Because of the severity of the problem, the purpose of this study was to examine the factors that impact teacher retention in public schools in the southeast region of North Carolina. A second purpose was to identify variables that influence beginning teachers' decisions to leave or remain in the teaching profession. A final purpose of this study was to examine the factors that persuaded veteran teachers to continue teaching despite the challenges associated with the profession. The results could be used to improve teacher retention in public school districts.

In North Carolina, education is commonly mentioned in conversations involving taxes and employment. Political advertisements commonly feature education and employment as reasons to vote for or against a candidate. Connecting education with employment and job creation places pressure on educational leadership at all levels to recruit and retain a highly qualified educational workforce to produce highly qualified graduates.

The North Carolina teacher turnover rate across the 115 local education agencies (LEAs) is increasing, as beginning teachers are leaving the profession. The teacher turnover rate for North Carolina was 11.17 percent for the 2010 - 2011 school year, a slight increase in the turnover rate of 11.10 percent reported for the 2009 - 2010 school year (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2010-2011). A minor factor influencing this statistic was visiting international faculty (VIF) members who were required to return to their home countries after a fixed three-year term. VIF teachers accounted for 108 of those teachers who left the teaching profession that year. Eliminating the VIF teacher exits would

lower the overall percentage rate to 11.05 percent (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2011). The national teacher turnover rate is 17 percent (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) teacher turnover statistics, some districts in North Carolina have relatively high five-year averages in turnover rates. Six school districts in the state of North Carolina experienced more than 20 percent teacher turnover in the 2009- 2010 school year. Two of those six counties repeated a higher rate during the 2010 - 2011 academic year. Those same statistics showed that among the school districts with the lowest five-year average turnover rates, they also experienced certain years of relatively high rates.

Method

This qualitative study involved teachers from two distinct groups: five Beginning Teachers and five veteran teachers from the southeastern region of North Carolina who agreed to share their personal teaching experiences (see Appendix A, Participant Descriptive Data Chart). The beginning teachers ranged in ages from 23 to 60 years old. Both groups had a passion for teaching and wanted to improve children's lives. The participants candidly shared experiences and viewpoints about administration, mentorship, and teacher support during their early years of teaching. Beginning teachers are defined as professional educators with fewer than three to five years of employment as a teacher. They are previously employed beginning teacher who voluntarily elected to end employment as an educator within the first three to five years of teaching. Veteran teachers are referred to those educators who have completed over 10 years of teaching as professional educators.

This study was limited to five beginning teachers who had left the

profession over the prior three years (from 2008 to 2011) and five purposively selected veteran teachers in the Southeast region of North Carolina public schools. Fourteen school districts were invited to participate; however, only four accepted. Therefore, the results may not be reflective of the attitudes of beginning and veteran teachers in each of North Carolina's school districts or across the United States.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from participants through face-to-face interviews at their site of employment or another setting of their choice. This was done in an effort to enter the participant's own environment (Creswell 2007). Additionally, it provided a setting with little distractions (Turner III, 2010). The tape-recorded interviews were conducted in two sessions for approximately 30-45 minutes each to ensure accuracy. The narrative data were transcribed and interpreted into textual data. As a validity and reliability measure, once the narrative data were transcribed into text, the participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcription by member-checking.

Research Questions

The participants were asked to respond to the following interview questions:

Beginning Teachers

1. What was the reason for you choosing the teaching profession?
2. What would cause you to ever regret the decision to teach? Explain your answer.
3. What are some factors that impacted your decision to renew your teaching contract?
4. Describe your initial relationship with your Mentor during your first year of teaching.
5. What impact did your Mentor relationship have on your decision to continue teaching?

6. How do you think your Mentor could have assisted you during your teaching experience?
7. What are some working conditions that contributed to your decision to leave or stay in the teaching profession? Explain.

Veteran Teachers

1. What was the reason why you chose the teaching profession?
2. What factors impacted your decision to renew your teaching contract after the first year?
3. Describe your relationship with your Mentor during your first years of teaching.
4. What impact did your mentoring relationship have on your decision to continue teaching?
5. How did your Mentor assist you during your teaching experience?
6. What are some working conditions that contributed to your decision to leave or stay in the teaching profession? Explain.

Results

The 10 teachers in the southeast region of North Carolina who participated in the study provided a comprehensive description of the experiences that caused them to either leave or stay in the teaching profession, and they shared stories about their challenges and successes. The participants shared valuable information about the factors that influenced their decisions to leave or remain in the teaching profession.

Reasons Why They Became Teachers

Eight of the participants indicated that they entered the teaching profession because of their love for children and desire to make a positive difference in their lives. They loved working with children, they wanted to make a difference, and they had positive teacher role models throughout their educational experience. They reiterated that

children should be the main focus in the field of education and for those entering the teaching profession. The success of children will depend on those who are willing to teach them. Those entering the teaching profession must have the right mindset and focus on the best interest of students and their success. However, four out of five beginning teachers who stated that they loved children and wanted to make a difference in their lives still left the teaching profession. On the other hand four veteran teachers, who entered the teaching profession was because they loved children and wanted to make a difference.

Reasons Why Teachers Leave

Based on the interviews, a major factor that impacted the Beginning Teachers' decision to leave the teaching profession was the lack of support from administrators, mentors and colleagues. The majority of the Beginning Teachers reported that if they had received better support from administrators, mentors and parents, they would have remained in the profession. Four out of the five beginning teachers felt that the lack of support from their administrators, their mentors, and the lack of support from parents were the major reasons for leaving the profession. In fact, there seemed to be a general sense of abandonment. Several said that they were not given mentors at all, which made their initial year difficult. These findings are congruent with much of the research pertaining to inadequate administrative and mentor support. Another problem was that in some cases, the mentoring had a negative effect. The beginning teachers felt that inadequate mentoring strongly contributed to their decision to leave the profession prior to tenure.

Two other problems that were related to teachers' decision to leave the profession were stressful working conditions and a lack of help with classroom management. Large teaching loads and

being required to perform non-instructional duties were specific workload problems that made the Beginning Teachers' initial teaching years more difficult. The impact of working conditions reverts back to support, primarily from school administrators. The Beginning Teachers in this study also stated that they needed more support with student behavior and discipline. This was another major factor that had an impact on three out of five beginning teachers' decision to leave the profession.

Reasons Why Teachers Stay

Contrary to the experiences of the beginning teachers, the veterans reported that during their early years, they received excellent support from their peers and administrators. Even though many of them did not have a formal mentor assigned to them, early in their career, some senior faculty voluntarily supported, advised, and assisted them. Some of these informal and voluntary mentoring relationships endured for twenty years or more, spanning across entire careers. This fostered the teachers' professional development. Some veteran teachers also said that in addition to this mentoring support, a family atmosphere existed at their school sites, and the combined factors contributed to the veteran teachers' decision to remain in the teaching profession.

Additional Findings

Only one of the teachers participating in the study mentioned salary as a factor that contributed to his or her decision to stay or leave the teaching profession. However, three of the five beginning teacher said that better critiques and effective feedback from administrators and mentors would have served to make them more effective teachers. Finally, one beginning teacher stated that the teacher education programs often fail to prepare new teachers for what they experienced in the classroom.

Discussion

Many teachers have chosen and are still choosing a career in teaching, largely because of economic times and loss of employment from the private sector. Therefore, school leaders often find it difficult to differentiate between motivated individuals who enter the profession because they have a passion for teaching children and those entering to merely seek a paycheck. There are several alternative licensure programs approved by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for the purpose of addressing teacher retention. Candidates, who enter the teaching profession for the wrong reasons, are not predicted to stay in the profession (National Commission on Teaching America's Future, 2002). Nevertheless, finding and retaining quality teachers remains a problem throughout the U.S. and in the southeast region of North Carolina where the current study took place.

Results from this study are congruent with the limited research findings pertaining to why teachers enter the teaching profession, and reasons why they leave. The main reason why the teachers in the current study became teachers was to help children. Similarly, as reported by Reuters in 2006, 81 percent of teachers who responded to the survey said they entered the profession because they wanted to make a difference for children and society.

According to Seldin (1995) individuals who enter teacher education programs may express a love for children and the desire to become teachers, yet if they lack the cognitive and affective skills needed to become good teachers, they will be unsuccessful. In the current study, four out of five beginning teachers who stated that they loved children and wanted to make a difference in their lives still left the teaching profession. On the other hand four out of five veteran teachers, who entered the teaching profession because they loved

children and wanted to make a difference, remained in the profession.

The results also indicated that inadequate mentoring relationships caused several Beginning Teachers to leave the teaching profession during a time of critical shortages (North Carolina Teacher Turnover Report, 2009-2010). Research from the recent Teacher Turnover Reports--both national and state--shows that over the past five years, nearly 50 percent of beginning teachers left the profession. Beginning teachers represent the fifth highest percentage of the overall teacher turnover rate (North Carolina Teacher Turnover Report, 2009-2010). Conversely, having a positive mentoring relationship was the main factor that inspired veteran teachers to remain in the teaching profession for more than 10 years. Collectively, studies on the impact of mentoring programs have provided empirical evidence that mentoring programs have a positive impact on teacher retention (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004).

The increased amount of paperwork requirements for teachers and the workload were issues that both groups in this study mentioned as sources of displeasure. According to the 2010 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey, nearly 80 percent of the teachers surveyed felt that school administrators consistently enforced rules for student conduct and supported teachers' efforts to maintain discipline in the classroom. However, fewer than 38 percent of all teachers felt that efforts were made to minimize the amount of routine paperwork teachers are required to do.

Recommendations

In North Carolina, district leaders with high teacher turnover rates among beginning teachers and who work in districts that have ineffective mentoring programs must collaborate with school officials in districts that have lower teacher turnover rates and seek advice about their program effectiveness. All stakeholders at the district

and site-based levels must be willing to change their Mentoring and Beginning Teacher Support Programs to align with the North Carolina Mentor Program Guidelines established September 2012, by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Educator Recruitment and Development Division. District site-based administrators must establish and provide effective local induction programs where all beginning teachers in their first three years are provided highly trained mentors, who are master teachers and not merely fellow classroom teachers at their school site. These mentors should be trained according to the North Carolina Mentoring Standards established by NCDPI. The mentors should be experienced teachers who have the potential to become a trusted friend, tutor, guide, helper, coach, and listener. The mentor would be a primary source of support for the beginning teacher. The mentor would provide support through (a) modeling instructional strategies, (b) providing professional development, (c) guiding lesson plan writing, and (d) providing strategies for effective classroom management. The mentor should also assist and support the beginning teacher in (a) learning to demonstrate leadership, (b) establishing a respectful environment for a diverse population of students, (c) knowing the content the beginning teacher is required to teach, (d) facilitating learning for students, and (e) reflecting on practices in accordance with the new teacher evaluation standards. Beginning teachers will only reach their fullest potential with systems of support from the state, LEAs, schools and mentors (NCDPI, Educator Recruitment and Development Division September, 2010).

Support or the lack of support is a leadership challenge. Higher education teacher preparation programs can improve instructional training by providing perspective teacher candidates with the best practicum environments while under the

guidance of master teachers during their internships. Teacher mentors can help keep teacher interns abreast of many of the changes that arise in the field of education. Every educational setting has its own unique culture and challenges and beginning teachers' practicum experiences might not match their actual assignment. This is where the support from administrators, veteran teachers and mentors are needed the most. State laws in North Carolina require that all beginning teachers have a designated mentor for the duration of their initial three years of employment. An effective induction program for beginning teachers is essential for teacher retention and higher student achievement outcomes (Ingersoll, 2011).

The rationale for induction programs is to make teaching more manageable and to provide all of the knowledge and skills necessary for successful teaching (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). District leaders must take the necessary role of providing an environment where beginning teachers are able to learn the teaching skills to survive and succeed as teachers. The goal of support programs is to improve the performance and retention of beginning teachers. Support programs both enhance the experience of teachers and improve students' academic growth and learning (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The beginning teachers in this study would have benefited from an effective induction program. A program with supportive administrators and mentors could have positively impacted their professional careers and could have influenced them to remain in the teaching profession.

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Appendix A

Participant Descriptive Data Chart

Participants BT (Beginning Teacher) VT (Veteran Teacher)	Race	Age	Sex	Licensure	Years In Teaching
Participant #1 (BT1)	African American	36	Female	Lateral Entry	3
Participant #2 (BT2)	Caucasian	26	Female	Traditional	1
Participant #3 (BT3)	Multi-Racial	28	Female	Traditional	3
Participant #4 (BT4)	Caucasian	63	Male	Traditional	4
Participant #5 (BT5)	African American	25	Female	Traditional	3
Participant #6 (VT1)	African American	38	Female	Traditional	15
Participant #7 (VT2)	African American	43	Female	Traditional	21
Participant #8 (VT3)	Caucasian	51	Female	Traditional	30
Participant #9 (VT4)	Caucasian	46	Female	Traditional	23
Participant #10 (VT5)	Caucasian	45	Female	Traditional	16

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