

Beating the Odds: Discovering Why Novice Teachers Returned to the Campus after Year One

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Abstract

Teachers exiting the teaching profession within their first five years of teaching are a critical problem. Factors such as student outcomes, high stakes testing, mentoring support, monetary incentives, and administration are factors contributing to this problem. The present study used narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of novice teachers during their first year of teaching and what factors led to their decision to return for a second year. The findings demonstrated that campus principals were a critical factor influencing novice teachers to return, and novice teachers did not have a paradigm with which to compare teaching outside of the influence of the pandemic. Additionally, some veteran teachers experienced greater difficulties coping with the pandemic than novice teachers. Nonetheless, novice teachers did experience stress which was mitigated by mentoring, support, and other experiences that have proven essential to the success of first year teachers.

Keywords: new teachers, attrition, retention, teacher mobility

1. Introduction

The teaching profession has become a revolving door for teachers entering and leaving the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). Nationwide, teacher attrition costs the United States roughly \$4.9 billion annually (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). In the 2018–2019 school year, the state of Texas had a 16.5% teacher turnover rate according to the Texas Academic Performance Report (2020). The learning curve for novice teachers comes at a high price, and districts lose money every year when they are not able to retain teachers.

2. Statement of the Problem

In the state of Texas, the mobility rate of teachers was approximately 19% in the 2011–2012 school year (Texas Education Agency, 2020). That number rose to 22% in the 2015–2016 school year and has risen slightly every year since (Sullivan et al., 2017). In the 2018–2019 school year, the state of Texas had a 16.5% teacher turnover rate according to the Texas Academic Performance Report (2020). Teacher turnover has a negative effect on student achievement because it also impacts teachers who remain at the school. The findings of this study may help the school district and the educational community understand the phenomenon of teacher retention during a pandemic.

3. Theoretical Framework for this Study

The teacher self-efficacy theory states that a teacher's belief in himself/herself springs from student outcomes and student achievement (Milner, 2002). This theory demonstrates how self-efficacy as derived from relationships, successes in the classroom, and stable administrative leadership could impact teacher retention decisions. Teacher self-efficacy is a strong determinant of instructional quality, job satisfaction, job commitment, and eventually the retention decision of teachers (Perera et al., 2019).

4. Review of the Literature

4.1 Student Outcomes and Teacher Self-Efficacy

Teacher self-efficacy is an important link to the retention of teachers and student achievement. Klassen and Chiu (2010) examined teacher self-efficacy, job stress, and job satisfaction while accounting for experience level, teaching level, and gender. The findings from this study showed younger teachers had lower self-efficacy as well as teachers at the end of their careers. Further, teachers who managed the stress of their classrooms had higher self-efficacy, while teachers who managed their stress poorly had lower self-efficacy.

4.2 Mentoring

Mentor programs include support, guidance, and orientation programs that aided new teachers in the transition to their new jobs (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Mentoring is a means to nurture a resource in such a way as to impact the professional practice of novice teachers. The investment in mentoring had a particular impact on teachers in Texas with the passing of House Bill 3 in 2019. House Bill 3 set up the teacher incentive allotment to prioritize and monetarily reward teachers who succeeded in high need and rural areas of the state (Texas Education Agency, 2019e, 2021).

4.3 The Principal's Role in Teacher Retention

Research has consistently shown that administration was the most important aspect involved with teacher retention, for both novice and experienced teachers (Bennett et al., 2013; Boyd et al., 2011). All teachers, regardless of experience, required strong leadership to be successful and stay in their job. Leadership is an essential aspect of student and teacher success, and without the principal being a positive force, the school would suffer. For schools to be effective, the principal is a positive influence and efficacious leader on the campus (Hallinger, 2005).

4.4 COVID-19 Pandemic

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on the 11th of March 2020 (Alzoubi et al., 2020; WHO, 2020a). Overnight, the world changed. In the United States alone through the month of January 2021, the number of people infected with COVID-19 soared past 24,700,000 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). School closures presented problems for education on multiple levels. The inability to be face-to-face with their students and the basic need for relationships made this an otherworldly experience and ran counter to their entire purpose for entering the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2020).

5. Methods

The purpose of this study was to gain a fuller understanding of how novice teachers' experiences influenced their retention decisions. Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research design, allowed the researcher to describe the lived experiences of individuals through stories and first-person accounts (Creswell & Poth 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through a series of semi-structured interview questions, the researcher collected rich depictions of the novice teacher's first year in the profession. The open-ended questions developed in the interview protocol allowed the teachers to fully delve into their experiences and gave the researcher a deeper insight into those experiences.

6. Sample Selection

For this study, the researcher selected participants from three specific middle schools in a large suburban school district. This suburban school district was comprised of 10 middle schools with 69 novice middle school teachers from which the sample was chosen. Continuity of campus leadership was the main factor that distinguished these schools from other middle schools in the district. Principals had each been at their school for at least three years which was a noted important factor in teacher retention. Criteria for participants included the following:

- Participants must be in their first full year as a teacher,
- Participants must have participated in the district mentoring program, and
- Participants must have made the decision to return to their campus for their second year

7. Data Gathering and Analysis

A series of narrative interviews lasting 60 - 90 minutes provided the primary data for this study. These interviews were conducted via Zoom. Participants were provided a transcription of the interview to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data. In narrative inquiry research, data are revealed in categories and themes as a part of the research process (Clandinin, 2016). The researcher used MAXQDA for coding and categorization of the data collected from the interviews.

8. Summary of the Findings

Many teachers enter the profession because they want to make an impact on children (Gadson, 2018; Hoppey & McCleskey, 2013). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on every aspect of the novice teachers' experiences was evident throughout the study. In terms of mentoring, even experienced teachers struggled, and some did a poor job of mentoring. In terms of administration, many administrators had more on-the-job duties than they would in a normal school year.

8.1 Mentoring Novice Teachers

What became evident through the coding process was the impact that mentorship and administrative support have on novice teachers. Novice teachers who had a strong mentor had a better year overall because they trusted their mentor and the guidance provided. In addition, the impact of indirect mentorship cannot be underestimated. Many novice teachers, whether their direct mentor impacted them or not, had others around them who guided them, listened to them, and helped them through their first year.

8.2 Campus Administrator Support for Novice Teachers

Administrative support was an important aspect of the novice teachers' retention decisions. Each teacher felt they worked at a school with strong administrative support, whether it was solely the principal or one of the assistant principals. These administrators in some cases served as a mentor for these young teachers, and in other situations helped them study for a certification exam, gave them necessary resources, checked on them, or were simply someone who had an ear to listen after a hard day. Having strong administration was a solid indicator of positive teacher retention.

8.3 The Impact of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic complications caused novice teachers to develop resiliency. As a result of the novice teachers' experiences due to the pandemic, they gained a sense of purpose and a belief that they could now conquer anything the education profession cast at them. Novice teachers did not have another paradigm from which to work during this experience. As some stated, novice teachers only saw teaching through the pandemic lens at that time. These novice teachers had so much to balance professionally after their first year, it gave them a sense of satisfaction not only to finish the year but understand they could succeed no matter what the future of the profession holds going forward.

8.4 Student Relationships and Engagement

Finally, while a direct theme did not develop during coding, the relationship between the novice teacher and student cannot be underestimated. Most of these teachers described their reason for becoming teachers in terms of developing relationships and engaging students. The novice teachers wanted to make an impact. While the COVID-19 pandemic dampened many of these experiences, these positive interactions with students were what fueled teachers during hard days. In the interviews with novice teachers, they continually expressed concerns as to whether they were doing enough for their students, wanting to be better for their students, and enjoying it when their students came back to face-to-face learning with them.

9. Implications for Practice

The use of mentoring is vital for the success of novice teachers. Principals must ensure that mentoring programs at their schools are intentional, and that they have mentors that want to be mentors. School districts should ensure continuity in district level and campus level mentoring programs to give teachers commonality across the district. In addition to mentoring programs, it is essential to the success of those programs that the mentors themselves were trained. The support for a novice teacher was entirely reliant on the ability of the mentor to give the proper support to the novice teacher. Schools and districts must have a curriculum, professional learning, or plan in place to train mentors, and then monitor their progress throughout the mentoring program. Finally, forcing teachers to teach both in person and virtually resulted in both students and teachers making only menial gains. The relationship between teachers and students is vital to instructional success. Requiring teachers to use both virtual and in-person instruction simultaneously created a disservice to that relationship. For the prospect of teaching during a pandemic, teachers should be designated for either in-person or virtual instruction solely, so that the relationship between teachers and students is consistent and constant.

10. Conclusion

The results showed the COVID-19 pandemic brought about changes both in education and the world that no person could have imagined. It touched every aspect of life, and the teaching profession was not exempt. Novice teachers were thrust into the profession, many with little prior experience because the pandemic did not facilitate normal avenues of an internship. Even with so many factors working against novice teachers, they survived—some thrived—and they chose to return for a second year. The campus administrators were the most important predictor of whether teachers would return, but a mentor was the most important predictor of whether a teacher would be successful (Bennett et al., 2013; Boyd et al., 2011).

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