

Pursuing a "Sense of Success": New Teachers Explain Their Career Decisions

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Within the next 10 years, there is an estimated need of 2.2 million new teachers. The projected need is based on attrition due to retirement and novice teachers leaving the profession within the first five years. A longitudinal study was conducted to answer the following questions: 1) What is attractive or unattractive about teaching today? 2) Why do some recruits stay in teaching while others leave? 3) What factors cause teachers to move to new schools? 4) What programs or conditions enable some schools to retain teachers and ensure that they can do their best work, while other schools repeatedly lose their staff and face the constant need to recruit and orient new teachers?

Teachers today are faced with increased pressure to improve student achievement on standardized test more so than ever before yet there is not always the support novice teachers need to meet those demands. Of the 50 teachers interviewed in this qualitative study, many did not have a support program to assist them. Based on the study, professional culture needs to be addressed and may provide public schools the leverage to retain new teachers.

There were originally 50 first and second year teachers from Massachusetts's public schools in the sample. The selection pool came from four areas: public university teacher education programs, private college and university teacher education programs, charter schools and recipients of \$20,000 signing bonus, offered in a state sponsored alternative certification program. The follow-up sample consisted of the 50 original participants.

Based on an interview, the participants were sorted according to their career decisions. The subgroups were "Leaver," "Mover," or "Stayer." There was a further breakdown of two of the subgroups. Mover was divided into "Voluntary" or "Involuntary." The Stayers were divided into "Settled" and "Unsettled."

At the beginning of this follow-up study, 11 of the original sample were Leavers (at end of 1st, 2nd, or 3rd year), 11 of the original sample were Movers (3 involuntarily and 8 voluntarily) and 28 were Stayers (working in same school they had started their teaching). Of the 28 Stayers 15 teachers (54%) were Unsettled Stayers indicating they might change schools or leave teaching in the future. The comparison between groups of teachers suggests that mid-career participants were three times more likely to change schools than first-career participants. Those who had obtained licensure in alternative programs were more likely to leave public school teaching than participants from a traditional program by a ratio of almost 3 to 1. The data suggested movement occurred because of a poor fit for the teachers and the schools.

A major factor in whether or not teachers stayed, moved, or left "teaching was whether they believed that they were achieving success with their students." The perception of achieving success was based on several school factors: the role and contributions of the principal and colleagues; teachers' assignments and workload; and the availability of curriculum and resources. These in turn played a role in deciding to stay or leave.

For the Leavers, two recurring themes were noted. These themes were career orientation (whether the participant regarded teaching as a long-term career or as a short-term career) and success in the classroom. Three of the 11 Leavers stated that teaching was a short-term career. It is notable that all three were in non-supportive environments for new teachers and they had difficulties succeeding in the classroom. Eight of the Leavers had long-term career goals. They left teaching because of job demands and lack of possibility of improvement or success in public schools or their schools. Reasons for leaving included ineffective principals, lack of support from colleagues,

inappropriate teaching assignments or excessive teaching loads, lack of curriculum and resources, and pay and prestige. The Leavers weighed each factor differently but they contributed to the overall feeling of dissatisfaction or disillusionment.

The Voluntary Movers felt ineffective in the classroom and felt the school was not supportive, however they did not perceive these problems to be the case in all public schools, but rather in their particular school. By changing schools they could give teaching another chance. The Movers were invariably searching for a good "fit" between themselves and their schools. Having that good fit was a major factor in their eventual satisfaction.

As with the Leavers, the Movers were desiring to be successful in the classroom. Factors that contributed to the moves were: teachers working in isolation and novice teachers not supported, and student disrespect and disruption was considered inevitable. These teachers moved to schools that had a support program in place for novice teachers, collegiality, norms for respect and effective discipline plans.

The Voluntary Movers also left schools where the assignment and workload were arbitrarily assigned with novice teachers usually getting the more difficult assignments and workloads. They moved to schools where knowledge and experience were factors in the assignments and workloads. The schools the Voluntary Movers left often lacked curricular guidelines and few resources. Principals' way of leadership also contributed to the Voluntary Movers changing schools. It is noteworthy that all of the Movers transferred to schools that served a wealthier population than their original school.

Of the 28 Stayers, 13 were Settled Stayers and stated satisfaction with their school and their assignments and 10 were somewhat satisfied with their schools but had doubts and reservations about making teaching their career. The Settled Stayers were confident and took advantage of opportunities for professional growth. They also had principals who were encouraging and realistic in their expectations of first year teachers. There was also a source of assistance from peers and a school-wide discipline plan in place. The Settled Stayers were in schools with diverse populations and various socioeconomic classes.

The Unsettled Stayers had various areas of dissatisfaction such as a greater interest in different lines of work, low pay, lack of public respect, students' lack of motivation and/or the exhausting demands of teaching. There were sources of dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction with five of the Unsettled Stayers with their school. There were unreasonable assignments and workloads, inadequate curriculum, lack of a working discipline plan, and little effort to involve parents. However, the level of dissatisfaction was not such as to prompt moving to another school. New teachers' source of satisfaction is mostly from the schools in which they work. If they do not find satisfaction or success they are more apt to change schools or leave teaching.

Implications of this study for school leaders include providing novice teachers with appropriate assignments, reasonable workloads, resources, a stable school and orderly work environment, and dependence on advice and support from principals and fellow teachers.

Implications of this study for policymakers at the local and state levels include decentralizing the hiring process, concentrating resources on high-poverty schools, fully funding high-quality mentoring programs for novice teachers, increasing teacher pay and providing career ladder incentives.

The novice teachers in this study needed to feel a sense of success with students day-by-day. Further, they needed to have support from their individual school.

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