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Teachers Who Left the Teaching Profession: A Qualitative Understanding

Lisa Gonzalez

Texas A&M University, dzlitttleliza@yahoo.com

Michelle Stallone Brown

Texas A&M University, kfmns00@tamuk.edu

John R. Slate

Sam Houston University, profslate@netscape.net

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Abstract

In this study, the researchers investigated public school teacher attrition in the State of Texas. The study examined the problem by focusing on the predominant reasons teachers give for leaving the profession after working only one year as a teacher. Eight persons who had left the teaching profession after one year teaching were contacted and interviewed concerning their reasons for leaving. The three most influential factors found were lack of administrative support, difficulties with student discipline, and low salary levels. Study findings and implications for policy are discussed.

Keywords

Teacher Attrition, Teacher Retention, and Teacher Shortage

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Teachers Who Left the Teaching Profession: A Qualitative Understanding

Liza Gonzalez and Michelle Stallone Brown

Texas A&M University, Kingsville, Texas

John R. Slate

Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas

In this study, the researchers investigated public school teacher attrition in the State of Texas. The study examined the problem by focusing on the predominant reasons teachers give for leaving the profession after working only one year as a teacher. Eight persons who had left the teaching profession after one year teaching were contacted and interviewed concerning their reasons for leaving. The three most influential factors found were lack of administrative support, difficulties with student discipline, and low salary levels. Study findings and implications for policy are discussed. Key Words: Teacher Attrition, Teacher Retention, and Teacher Shortage

A recent study examining the need for newly hired teachers in the United States reported that over 150,000 teachers are employed to meet the demands of growing school districts, retiring teachers, and replacing those individuals who have left the profession (National Center for Education Statistics: NCES, 2003). Additional researchers have reported that public school enrollment rose 21% between 1985 and 2002. The highest growth percent occurred in the elementary grade levels, showing an increase from 27 million to 33.8 million. Projections for the 2012 public school enrollment are forecasted to be slightly higher than that of 2002 with a 2% increase occurring every year (NCES). With these increasing numbers, it is imperative that researchers address the attrition rate of teachers who are leaving the profession, particularly within the first year of teaching.

Darling-Hammond (1998) stated that teacher attrition is at 30% within the first three to five years of entering the profession. According to the numbers and predictions for enrollment, the nation will soon be in dire need of educators to teach the increasing number of students in public schools. Due to the national increase of student enrollment and the increase of teachers exiting the teaching profession, due to retirement and career changes, the dilemma at hand becomes one that affects the nation.

The State of Texas is facing a severe teacher shortage (Fuller, 2002). The State Board of Educator Certification (SBEC) created a mentoring program called Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS) in hopes of encouraging teachers to remain in the classroom beyond the first year. According to Fuller, one out of every five beginning teachers leave the profession after the first year. Although the TxBESS program is no longer legislatively funded, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) provided money to SBEC so that they can continue to streamline the TXBESS materials and

provide training around the state. Currently they are providing “training of trainers” sessions around the state so that attendees can return to their programs and train mentors, administrators, beginning teachers, and the community. These sessions are being attended by ISD representatives, ACP programs, universities, charter schools, and regional service centers. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003) estimated that the nation will need between 1.7 and 2.7 million new teachers for the 2008-09 school year. New teachers will be replacing retired teachers, teachers leaving the profession, as well as meeting the increased enrollment demands (Hussar, 2000).

Much attention has been brought to the issue of our nation’s teacher shortage, but what must be addressed and examined is the retention issue. The National Education Association (NEA) reported that 20% of newly hired teachers leave the classroom within the first three years of teaching. In urban areas, the numbers are closer to 50% (NEA, 2003a). The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) reported that in the 1990s the nation increased its supply of teachers and continues to meet the demands that each year brings (NCTAF, 2003). The NCTAF went on to address the areas that are the exception such as mathematics, special education, science, and bilingual education. Between the years of 1984 and 1999, there were 220,000 new graduates annually. The problem is that the number of teachers leaving the classroom was increasing faster than they could be replaced (NCTAF).

Instead of asking from where the next batch of teachers will come for the upcoming school year, it is time to examine how many left the profession last year and why (NCTAF, 2003). The NEA reported that teachers feel overwhelmed by the scope of the job, while others feel that the expectations are unclear. Some teachers report feeling unsupported and isolated (NEA, 2003a). Other reports from the NEA stated that teachers are still underpaid in comparison to professions that require the same amount of education, and teachers are not respected or valued based on the contribution they make to society (NEA, 2002). It is time to take a serious look at retention and attrition and the reasons behind this phenomenon rather than continue to concentrate on the shortage problem.

The NEA believes that all retention issues should be addressed and should start with the recognition of the complexity of the teaching job. It has been acknowledged that teachers should be provided with mentors, professional development training sessions, reduced class sizes, and adequate planning time (NEA, 2002). The NEA is working with other organizations and policymakers to develop mentor programs, induction programs, and peer assistance programs, in an effort to keep teachers in the classroom beyond the first year and preferably beyond the fifth (NEA, 2003b).

A review of the literature at the national and state levels indicates the teacher shortages in other states have been caused by personal, monetary, teacher preparation, organizational, and emotional/social factors. Richard Ingersoll, in a report for the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), called teaching a “revolving door profession” (Ingersoll as cited in NEA, 2003b, ¶1). The NEA stated that according to the NCTAF, schools are losing about the same number of teachers each year as they hire. Turnover of teachers in high-poverty schools is higher than in any other area (NEA, 2003b). Adding to the shortage of teachers is the requirement of “highly qualified” teachers by the end of the 2005-2006 school year. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), better known as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,

added the challenge of “highly qualified” to ensure that all teachers are certified in the subject area they are teaching (NEA, 2003b).

In a report to the Senate Education Committee, Ingersoll stated that questions about teacher shortages inevitably lead to questions about teacher attrition, mainly because the high attrition rate is seen as a bigger influence on shortages than an insufficient supply of new teachers (Herbert & Ramsey, 2004). Though the decision to enter or stay in the classroom is a personal decision, Herbert and Ramsey identified salaries and incentives, working condition, professional development, and assignments to be contributing factors to the high attrition rate (Herbert & Ramsey). According to Branch (2000), Texas is facing a teacher shortage of about 45,000 teachers with only 14,000 new recruits to choose from. Additionally, Texas teachers are earning currently about \$3,000 below the national average of \$41,000. John Cole, president of the Texas Federation of Teachers has said that the state needs to do a better job in the area of teacher salaries (Branch).

With the ongoing teacher shortage and consistently high rates of attrition, the current study sought to determine the primary reasons certified teachers in Texas leave the profession. The researchers conducted interviews with certified Texas teachers who had left the teaching profession after one year. Researchers examined the predominant motivations for leaving the profession.

Methods and Procedures

According to Creswell (2003), qualitative procedures depend on text, have distinctive steps in collecting and analyzing data, and draw on varied tactics of questioning (p. 179). Qualitative research stresses a model of investigation that provides an in-depth understanding of intricate issues and focuses on an understanding of the narratives and observations obtained. Naturalistic inquiry provided the best means for exploring the role of the first year teacher and the reasons behind leaving the profession. Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), identified four sources for gathering data: interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts. Interviews are not the typical one-on-one question and answer sessions; rather they are more of a dialog or interaction (p. 85). Dexter (as cited in Erlandson et al.) described “interviews as conversation with a purpose” (p. 85).

Qualitative Inquiry Technique

The researchers believed in the importance of teacher voices; therefore, the interview process was selected as the data collection method to gather insight concerning the factors that contribute to teachers leaving the profession. As its purpose, the study sought to develop central themes about the factors that hinder teachers from remaining in the profession. The general interview guide approach was utilized to provide meaningful information on concepts central to the purpose of the research. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows the researchers to “explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject” (Patton, 2003, p. 343). The interviews required that participants reflect on the phenomena that took place in the past. Interviews provide attitudes and opinions as well as deeper insight into the reasons

behind why teachers are leaving the profession. Therefore, the qualitative inquiry technique of semi-structured interviews with former teachers fit well with the purpose of the study.

Participant Recruitment Procedures

Prior to contacting potential participants, Internal Review Board approval was sought through Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Once IRB approval was granted, the researchers attempted to locate appropriate participants by placing ads in several Texas newspapers, asking teachers who were certified and left the profession after one year to please call and set up an interview. Many calls came in, but most of the potential participants did not fit the criteria or did not want to participate in case they one day decided to return to the profession. Regional Service Centers were contacted as well as school district Human Resource Directors to enlist help in finding possible candidates for this portion of the study. Once an adequate sample member was located, recommendations for others were requested.

All of the participants were located through snowball sampling, but all were selected based on criterion sampling. According to Patton (2003), snowball sampling is when researchers “identify cases of interest from sampling people who know people who know people who know what cases are information rich, that is, good examples for study, good interview participants” (p. 243). Criterion sampling is based on selecting a group to study because they meet the necessary criterion, in this case, certified teachers in the state of Texas who left the profession after one year in the classroom (Patton).

Once a possible candidate was established, and initial communication was completed by the individual volunteering the former teacher, these researchers were provided with contact information, and then researcher contact was established with the possible participant to discuss more fully the scope of the study and willingness to participate. The initial communications occurred via telephone contact. After all preliminaries were secured, an interview time and meeting place were secured.

Ultimately, eight Texas certified schoolteachers who were no longer teaching were selected to participate in this study. Participants originated from various regions located throughout the state. Of the eight participants, six were female and two were male. Six of the participants were Hispanic and two were White, and their ages ranged from 25 to 56 years. The criteria for participation included being certified to teach, but leaving the profession after only one year of teaching.

Data Collection

For the purpose of the current investigation, former teacher interview narratives, as well as detailed field notes, constituted the data for the study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a natural setting convenient to the interviewee. This process allowed an opportunity to observe the surroundings and gather information on personal interests. Anonymity was ensured and an explanation of what the results would be used for ensued (Erlandson et al., 1993). Interview times ranged from 45 minutes to approximately two hours. Some of the interviews took place in the participants’ homes, while others took place at work, and still others preferred to meet at a restaurant. Follow-up questioning

and necessary clarifications were completed via phone conversations, and on one particular occasion, a second face-to-face interview was established. During the participant contact, field notes were taken to describe the participants' surroundings in detail.

This data collection method allowed for wording and the sequence of the questions to happen naturally through the interview process, while maintaining relevance to the predetermined topic. Patton (2003) claimed that the "interview guide approach" allows for the "interviews to remain fairly conversational and situational" (p. 349), while allowing the interviewer to explore, probe, and ask questions that will illuminate the topic at-hand. The goal of the researchers was to explore the problem of teacher attrition in a way that would probe spontaneously, with the problems uncovered in a naturally-occurring conversation to maintain the integrity of the data. The meetings with the participants remained open and conversational.

The lead researcher conducted the interviews with all eight participants. Once the interview began, the researcher began with non-threatening questions, broad enough to not be threatening, yet easy enough to answer that the participant began to feel comfortable. The conversations usually focused on their general experiences in the teaching field. Often, specific incidents or stories were shared. This approach helped to establish rapport. Once the relationship was established, questions centered on one main issue; the main reasons behind leaving the teaching profession and several sub-issues; what were the personal reasons, organizational reasons, and monetary reasons that influenced the decision. As respondents dialogued on experiences in the classroom, they were allowed opportunities to elaborate on their responses. Closure to the interview is as important as the start. The interviewer recapped or summarized the information obtained to make sure that the important parts were captured. This member-checking allowed the interviewee a chance to clarify or refine certain aspects of the interview (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Analysis of Data

Once the interviews had been conducted, the interview response data as well as field notes and observations were assessed immediately by accurately transcribing and storing the data in a word processing document to be analyzed qualitatively for conceptual and recurring common themes, with the ultimate hope of developing "grounded theory" (Patton, 2003). The researchers examined the transcribed interview narratives and field notes, looking for indications of categories. With each category, researchers coded them on the document, and after several read-throughs, the codes developed into a name that described the event or issue. Each code was then transferred into a separate document in which consistent categories could be again compared. For example, as former teachers mentioned instances in which they were disappointed by the administration in their former position, the instance would be labeled "administration," and the content would be transferred to the "administration" document. This process was completed several times, as the codes had to be re-organized and re-named after further comparisons with other events. Once the categories became more firm, then the core themes became the central focus of the researchers. The core themes were those on which

most of the conversations were focused. The results section of this manuscript was developed based on the categories of central focus.

Patton (2003) claimed that validity, in qualitative studies, relies on the credibility of the instrument, also known as the researcher. The instrument must be skilled, competent, and rigorous (p. 14). Validity and reliability were ensured and enhanced through the application of several techniques including careful review of interview questions and probes; single interviewer for all eight participants; peer examination; audit trails that recorded and described in a separate Word document how the study was conducted, how data were collected, and how concepts and categories were derived; and member-checking, in which individual responses were reviewed and checked with each participant. Open lines of communication with the respondents allowed these researchers to follow-up on clarifications through phone calls, electronic mail, and face-to-face conversations. Experts in the field of education assisted in reviewing the questions. Additionally, interview narratives were constantly compared for consistencies as well as differences, and constant comparisons of interview data, observations, and field notes were implemented to verify responses and to ensure congruence.

Results

Administrative Issues Influencing Teacher Attrition

Seven respondents agreed that administration was one of the biggest influential factors in not returning to the profession. Participants cited disrespect from administration as one of the biggest problems. Administrators, according to the respondents, tend to put teachers down instead of motivating them and encouraging them to try harder with the students. Corrupt administrations or administrators with reduced moral ethics were a large problem. One interviewee stated that her classroom was used as a “dumping ground” for students who needed a schedule change or were considered “problem students” (Respondent # 1). Another interviewee affirmed that the administration was corrupt when it came to grading. This interviewee was told to erase all zero grades in the grade book and average the grades without the zeros. In his opinion, “This makes the actual teaching and learning irrelevant” (Respondent # 4). Several of the selected participants mentioned that administrators tend to put a lot of pressure on the teachers and criticize them in front of the rest of the staff. One respondent mentioned that in a meeting, with a parent, her administrator stated that the child in question was misbehaving because she was a bad teacher (Respondent # 6). This was said with the parent and other professionals present. Specific examples of disrespect mentioned were having the teachers sign in at conferences in the morning and again after lunch. Professional courtesy is gone. Another teacher was reassigned without warning, after the Christmas break, to teach 4th grade science instead of the 5th grade like she was hired to teach. A retired teacher who was rehired to prepare the 5th grade students for the upcoming Science TAKS test replaced her. “I now have less respect for the public school system; I am aware of their dirty little secrets and want nothing to do with it” (Respondent # 8).

Student Discipline Issues Influencing Teacher Attrition

All eight respondents agreed that student discipline was another influential factor for leaving the profession. Students come with so many problems and issues that it is overwhelming to the teachers. Discipline is a weak area for most new teachers and handling situations that arise in the classroom become trial and error.

Behavior problems were beginning to develop and I just knew that it was because I was drowning in work and could not catch up. I was so behind, I never felt fully prepared in the classroom. I decided to leave the profession before I caused permanent damage in the way of students becoming behavior problems or worse yet, not learning. I would not be able to live with myself if students did not learn because I was not a good teacher. (Respondent #5)

Common complaints from the interviewees were that students are rude, lazy, use drugs, and have no discipline or self-control. One of the participants mentioned that the year she taught, one of her students committed suicide and several others suffered the loss of a parent or loved one. Also, many of her students (9th graders) became pregnant. These issues made teaching nearly impossible. She was always worrying about her students and found herself losing sleep at night over the stress and worry. All in all, this participant felt that high school students have “too many issues” and prefers working in higher education (Respondent #1). A middle school teacher who also contributed to this study pointed out that students with a bad attitude but good grades “got away with murder” (Respondent #3). They were never disciplined or corrected on their behavior because their good grades helped the desegregated data, especially if their race was one of the minority groups. When students are “too active” it make the job of instructor a lot more difficult stated one of the participants. Administration does not want to deal with any behavior problems, so they remain the educator’s problem and when parents are called in for a conference, again, it is blamed on the teacher, so it continues to be the teacher’s problem. Complaints were ignored by administration. These are the complaints recorded from several of the participants.

Teacher Salaries Influencing Teacher Attrition

Of all of the participants interviewed, seven of them believed that the teaching salary was low compared to the amount of hours put in. One of the interviewees commented that her salary was so low and the amount of hours she put in was so high that she figures she “made about .36 cents an hour” (Respondent # 7). Another stated that the “teaching profession is so stressful; the salary should really be much higher” (Respondent # 5).

As a teacher you need to plan when you are going to be absent, this is not something that other professions need to worry about. You also work too many hours after school, weekends, holidays, etc. the day never ends like

at other jobs. When the day is over you go home and the work stays, with teaching, the work must get done (Respondent #2).

An additional complaint was that the extra duties required were not paid or compensated for, such as bus duty, lunch duty, after school duty, etc. Most elementary campuses have cheerleaders and drill teams, and these organizations require sponsors, yet the teachers are forced to sponsor these events without any compensation or pay. The last complaint regarding salary dealt with the school administration wanting their staff to return to school for higher degrees, but the incentive to return to school is not there. For example, if an English teacher returned to school to obtain a Master's degree in English, the district would give her a \$500.00 to \$1,000.00 stipend for the year. But the fact of the matter is that while the teacher is pursuing this degree, she is paying college tuition and books that are much more expensive than what she will gain monetarily. "Texas does not offer enough of an incentive to return to school and obtain a higher degree" (Respondent # 3). The one participant who did not agree said, "the salary was great, but then again, I was coming from a job at a vocational school and the salary there was a lot lower, teaching for the public school system was a step up" (Respondent #1).

Interviewees noted that administrators were inconsistent when it came to rules and regulations. Administrators had favorite teachers, employees, parents, students, etc. If you were not among one of the favorites, it was understood that you would not be listened to or heard (Respondent # 4). Another point made was that if your class was not a course tested by TAKS, it was not perceived as important. Do your job and stay out of the way, TAKS took precedence over everything else, except maybe sports (Respondent # 1). Looking at schools where retention of teachers is high, revealed that the principals were visionary leaders, teacher-focused, stressed the value of leadership training, and were committed to and passionate about their jobs (*Education Week*, 2004).

Among the three most noted factors, student discipline was a big concern. Respondents mentioned that students who were discipline problems, but scored well on TAKS, were never appropriately disciplined. Administrators tended to be more lenient with those students, and those students knew they had the upper hand, which created a vicious cycle of behavior and classroom management (Respondent # 4). Also mentioned was that administrators did not want to deal with discipline, so it was up to the teachers to take care of it. When a parent conference was held, administrators never supported teachers; instead they blamed the child's behavior on the teacher and her being inadequate (Respondent # 6). Workshops and other trainings on conflict resolution have been suggested as possible choices for new teachers. Conflict resolution can also be incorporated at the university level so that new teachers take a course prior to graduation (Wrobel, 1993).

Discussion

Results of the study may have implications for lowering the teacher attrition rate of certified teachers in the state of Texas. The findings of the current study support the idea that it is organizational issues (including salary issues) that influence the decision of teachers to leave the profession. Lessons learned include the need for increased administrative support, consistent student discipline, and higher teacher salaries

considering the time invested. Given that this study was a qualitative study, and that a limited number of teachers who had left the teaching profession were interviewed, these findings are limited to the extent that they can be generalized. Public school district human resource directors, superintendents, principals, and administrators are encouraged to look at the findings and consider how they could be properly implemented. Many of the findings from the interviews were consistent from one former teacher to the next.

Summary

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) examined the need for new teachers and found that the United States employs over 150,000 teachers to meet the demands of growing school districts, retiring teachers, and replacing those educators who have left the profession (NCES, 2003). Growth projections appear to be increasing by 2% every year projected until 2012 (NCES). Based on these projections, research needs to be focusing on the attrition rate of certified school teachers. Linda Darling-Hammond (1998) indicated that teacher attrition is at 30% within the first three to five years of entering the profession. Although these numbers and predictions are national calculations, Ed Fuller of the State Board of Educator Certification has stated that Texas is facing a teacher shortage, and one out of every five beginning teachers leave the profession after the first year (Fuller, 2002). What are the reasons that our public school teachers are leaving the profession so soon? The answer to this question was the purpose of the current study.

The NEA reported that teachers feel overwhelmed by the scope of the job, feel unsupported and isolated, and still others are unclear on the expectations of the job (NEA, 2003a). Our findings concurred in that teachers experienced a clear lack of support. Other reports indicated that teachers are still underpaid in respect to professions who require the same amount of education. Teachers are not respected or valued based on the contributions they make to society (NEA, 2002). Salary levels were an issue that surfaced during the interview in this study. Texas is facing a teacher shortage of about 45,000 teachers, with only 14,000 new recruits to choose from. Texas teachers are earning about \$3,000 below the national average of \$41,000 (Branch, 2000). Besides salary or monetary reasons, other factors that have been identified as possible reasons for teachers leaving the profession are personal, teacher preparation, organizational, and emotional/social. The current study both supported and failed to support the reasons commonly mentioned in the literature (Herbert & Ramsey, 2004; NEA, 2002; NEA, 2003a) for teachers leaving the profession. Personal and emotional/social reasons were lacking, as the focus of responses related to organizational and monetary reasons for leaving the teaching field.

In the current study, eight Texas certified school teachers who left the profession after only one year in the classroom were selected and interviewed. Common themes were drawn from all of the data collected. Administration, student discipline, and salary were the most common reasons cited for exiting the profession so prematurely. Administrative factors included teachers feeling disrespected by their administrators, administration being corrupt, having reduced morals, and placing excessive pressure on teachers and staff. Student discipline was also mentioned quite often. A common complaint was that students have so many family problems and issues that they are overwhelming to an educator, especially one with no experience. Teachers perceived students to be rude, lazy, use drugs, have no discipline or self-control, bad attitudes, and

administrators refused to discipline the students. The last area most cited was the issue of salary. Seven of the eight participants mentioned that the teaching salary was too low in comparison to the amount of time put into teaching, the amount of stress and pressure that educators are under, and the number of extra-duties required of teachers. On the whole, this study's findings both supported and failed to support previous themes presented in the teacher attrition literature.

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Author Note

Liza Estella Gonzalez, Ed.D., is a first grade teacher for Vanguard Academy Charter School in Pharr, TX. Future goals include teaching in the higher education arena. Her primary research interests are on the retention and attrition of first year teachers as well as programs designed to alleviate this problem. The author can be contacted at 1317 Ridgewood Circle, Pharr, TX 78577; Telephone: Home (956) 496-3339, Work (956) 283-1700, Fax (956) 782-8119; Email: dzlittleliza@yahoo.com

Michelle Stallone Brown, Ed.D., is an Assistant Professor of Education in the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Her teaching focus is educational research and statistics. Her primary research interests are in the areas of NCLB, standardized testing, and student achievement. The author can be contacted at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, Department of Educational Leadership & Counseling, MSC 223; 700 University Blvd., Kingsville, TX 78363-8202; Telephone: Home (361) 384-9254, Work (361) 593-4224, Cell (361) 633-9448, Fax (361) 593-2136; Email: kfmns00@tamuk.edu

John R. Slate received his Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 1984. He is currently a Full Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Sam Houston State University. His research interests lie in the use of state and national educational databases and in the use of mixed analyses. The author can be contacted at Sam Houston State University, Box 2119 Huntsville, Texas 77341-2119; Telephone: (931) 710-5347; Email: profslate@netscape.net

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