Fostering Relationships to Increase Teacher Retention in Urban Schools

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Abstract

Wong (2003) purports that it takes between five and seven years to develop an effective teacher, yet the attrition rate of teachers in urban schools implies that over half the teachers leave before they are fully developed. Consequently, many students in urban schools are denied the opportunity to learn from master teachers. This study examines critical components that cause teachers to remain teaching in urban schools past the five year attrition mark. The results of this qualitative study indicate the need for school leaders to draw from occupational research and provide environments in which teachers are supported and regarded as valued decision-makers in their schools. The results reveal the importance of human relationships in the retention and growth of urban teachers.

In recent years the issue of teacher attrition has become paramount in the minds of many urban educators. The teacher attrition rate is one of the highest of all professions, with teachers leaving at twice the rate of nurses and five times the rate of lawyers (Ingersoll, 1999). Annually, nearly one third of the teaching force is in some kind of job transition and 15% of all teachers leave their schools (Ingersoll & Perda, 2009). In urban districts, the annual teacher attrition rate grows to 19-26% (Ingersoll & Perda, 2009) and, over the past decade, the five year attrition rate has remained constant at 50% or higher (Nieto, 2003b; Sachs, 2004; Saffold, 2003; Voke, 2003). As a result, urban school districts spend millions of dollars every year on recruitment and retention practices aimed to identify, hire, and retain exceptional teachers (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; Shen, 1997).

Beginning teacher attrition causes many urban students to encounter a revolving door of inexperienced teachers that can impede student achievement and school reform (Cooper & Alvarado, 2008; Ingersoll, 2007a, 2007b; Ingersoll & Perda, 2009; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Ingersoll (2002a) eloquently framed the problem as "holes in the supply bucket" (p. 42). School districts are continually spending human and fiscal resources on teacher recruitment when the emphasis should be on retaining those teachers who have the skills and dispositions to teach successfully in urban schools.

The literature provides a number of recommendations for teacher retention including supporting new teachers through the development of professional learning communities, mentoring programs, and systemic induction (Billingsley, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Glaser, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Kardos, 2002; Olson, 2003;

McCarthy & Guinney, 2004; Scott, Stone, & Dinham, 2001; Scherer, 2003; Sparks & Keiler, 2003; Waddell, 2007; Wong, 2003). In professional learning communities, supportive principals, teacher influence over decisions, collegial relationships, focused professional development, and collaborative work toward goals have all been shown to reduce teacher turnover by increasing job satisfaction (Darling-Hammond, 2003; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Glaser, 2003; Ingersoll, 1999; Lambert, 2002; Lambert & Walker, 2002; Scherer, 2003; Sparks, 2003). While these recommendations have proven results for increasing teacher retention, their downside is that they frequently require increased financial and human resources and/or can take years to develop to the point of effectiveness. The author supports the development of the above mentioned initiatives. However, in the absence of such initiatives, there are actions principals and school leaders can take immediately that will increase the likelihood of teacher retention; actions that require nothing more than the willingness of educators to learn and model effective retention practices from business and industry.

Occupational research asserts that employees who feel valued, supported, and needed are likely to exhibit organizational commitment, which in turn, positively impacts employee retention (Bentein, Vandenberg, Vandenberghe, & Stinglhamber, 2005). When employees experience feelings of competence, personal responsibility, opportunities for growth, and personal relationships, they feel indebted to their organization and/or supervisor which can lead to longevity with the organization (Stinglhamber & Vandenberghe, 2004). Furthermore, when employees identify with their organization, feel cared about by the organization, and feel ownership within the organization they become more loyal and committed, which leads to increased employee retention (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Ng, Butts, Vandenberg, DeJoy, & Wilson, 2006; Rousseau, 1998).

Likewise, human capital theory states that a person will make a decision to leave a job or career based on how much he or she has invested in it (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Ingersoll (2007c) credits the teaching force with being a source of human capital in schools and Shen (1997) found that the more a teacher has been involved and has invested in teaching, the more likely he or she is to stay in the profession. Yet, teachers are often not given opportunities to truly invest in their schools through involvement in significant decisions and school governance. Ingersoll (2007c) asserts that "schools in which teachers have more control over key schoolwide and classroom decisions… have a more committed and engaged teaching staff and do a better job of retaining teachers" (p. 24). In writing about developing effective and sustainable businesses and school communities, Fullan (2001) adds that "relationships are paramount" (p. 76) in helping teachers feel empowered, valued and committed to the school. Therefore, principals can increase teacher retention through building professional relationships in which teachers feel valued, encouraging teacher-teacher interaction and involving teachers in school decisions.

Teacher Retention

Much of the research regarding teacher retention has focused on the reasons that teachers are leaving urban districts and transferring to suburban districts or leaving the profession altogether. Commonly cited reasons for urban teacher attrition include lack of adequate preparation, lack of adequate mentoring support, working conditions, low salaries, and lack of influence in school decision-making (Cooper & Alvarado, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll, 1999, 2002b, 2007a, 2007b; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Voke, 2002). Although this research is comprehensive and much of it is valid, strong, and interesting, it has done little to stem the tide of teachers flowing out of high-need districts.

Nieto (2003a) brought our attention to reasons for retention rather than attrition when she considered the converse of the teacher attrition question; instead of asking why teachers leave, she asked why teachers stay. In a study of veteran high school teachers in the Boston Public Schools, Nieto identified characteristics that "keep teachers going" (p. 6). She identified internal characteristics such as love, hope and possibility, anger and desperation, intellectual work, and the belief in the ability to shape the future. Other studies have found similar results when looking at intrinsic factors shaping teachers' decisions to remain teaching (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Waddell, 2007).

Although there have been studies linking personal characteristics to teacher retention, the influence of external factors on urban teacher retention has been most prevalent in the literature. Teachers in urban schools face more difficult working conditions than teachers in suburban areas, often resulting in high teacher turnover (Jacob, 2007; Louis & Ingram, 2003; Manning & Kovach, 2003; Orfield & Eaton, 2003; Prince, 2002). However, research shows that working conditions in urban schools do not have to be a detriment to teacher retention. Within urban schools, professional environments, administrative support and teacher collegiality are indicators of teacher retention (Allen, 2000; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Holcombe, 2009; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; McCarthy & Guinney, 2004; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; Nieto, 2009; Swars, Meyers, Mays, & Lack, 2009; Waddell, 2007). Additionally, schools and districts with support systems in place for new teachers, including high quality induction programs, boast increases in teacher retention rates (Allen, 2000; Billingsley, 2004; Beerer, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll, 2007b; Moir & Bloom, 2003; Pardini, 2002; Wood, 1999; Youngs, 2002).

In supporting new teachers, it is recommended that principals be open, warm, and supportive (Allen, 2000). Carver (2003) suggests that the principal "[m]aintain regular personal communication with the beginning teacher" (p. 35). Lambert (2002) and Sergiovanni and Starratt (2002) agree that the principal should practice

professionalism and build relationships with the teachers, knowing that these two factors are keys to establishing a culture of professional respect and collegiality.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine critical components that cause teachers to remain teaching in urban schools past the five year attrition mark. This qualitative study was approached using grounded theory in an effort to inform urban school retention and recruitment practice and policy (Patton, 2002).

Methods

Participants

Participants were selected from a pool of all elementary teachers with four, five, or six years of teaching experience (N = 378) in an urban district in a large, Midwestern city. The sample provided the opportunity for relevant data, as these teachers were able to reflect on their first one to five years of teaching, which provided information about the years beginning teachers are most at risk of leaving (Ingersoll & Perda, 2009; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Nieto, 2003b). Participants were selected representing a variety of backgrounds that resembles the ethnic and cultural diversity of the teachers in the larger sample. Although demographics of the school district were not reported, at the time of this study, 92 percent of elementary teachers in the state were female (State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005) and nearly 90 percent of the national teaching force was White (Howard, 1999). The five-year teacher attrition rate of beginning teachers in the selected district was reportedly just over 50%, consistent with national statistics (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; State Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2004; Nieto, 2003b; Saffold, 2003; Voke, 2003).

The larger sample population was reduced through typical case sampling, whereby the author attempted to choose cases that were typical, normal, or average with respect to the larger sample population. In an effort to create a sample representative of the larger teaching population, the district Office of Human Resources granted the author permission to solicit participation of teachers from nine schools. The author was told that the identified schools all employed teachers who met the sampling criteria of (a) being an elementary teacher in the fourth, fifth or sixth year of teaching and (b) having spent the entire teaching career in the same urban school district. To avoid potential bias or conflict, two buildings were eliminated because the author had previously had contact and/or had an ongoing professional relationship with the principal. From the remaining seven elementary schools, nine potential eligible participants were identified. One of the nine potential participants was eliminated because the principal in the building wanted to be present during the interviews, risking bias in the results. Therefore, the final sample consisted of eight teachers, six White

females and two Black females in six different schools; resulting in a sample representative of all beginning teachers in the chosen district. Within the sample, six teachers were in the fifth year of teaching and two were in the sixth year of teaching. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper in order to protect the anonymity of participants.

Data Collection

Prior to any data collection, an initial meeting with each participant occurred as a means to build rapport with the teachers and answer any questions about the study. Data were then collected from each participant five times over the course of one school year via four avenues: individual interviews, focus groups, written documents, and observations. Interviews occurred at the school site (by choice of each teacher), focus group interviews took place at a neutral location outside of the district and observations were carried out at the school site in faculty meetings. Interviews were conducted by the author and were used to generate open-ended responses to study-based questions.

Interviews. Each participant was individually interviewed two times during the study. The interviews followed a semi-structured format designed to probe for participants' feelings, perceptions, experiences, and opinions (Patton, 2002). The interviews followed a model that allowed flexibility in the sequence and wording of questions in a manner consistent with the unique flow of each interview. An interview guide approach was utilized to ensure that "the same basic lines of inquiry [were] pursued with each person interviewed," (Patton, 2002, p. 343). All individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The first interview focused on the participants' experience as a teacher in the district and the possible reasons the teacher chose to return to the district for each school year, including the study year. This interview served as a baseline for the study and informed the design of the second interview (Charmaz, 2000). The second interview occurred after the observation and written documents were collected and analyzed. The second interview served to gain additional data and pursue lines of inquiry that developed during data analysis and/or through the observations.

Observation. To help gain a better understanding about the conditions of, and experience working in each building, the author observed a faculty meeting at each school. The author arrived at each faculty meeting 20 minutes prior to the start to be able to record observations of teacher-teacher interaction, teacher-principal interaction and seating patterns prior to and during the meeting. Field notes were recorded (Patton, 2002) regarding agenda items, timeframes for discussion, and interactions between and among teachers and administrators.

Written documents. In preparation for the observation each participant was asked to describe, in writing, her perceptions of the purposes and structure of school

faculty meetings. These perceptions helped the author gain an understanding of the school leadership and climate. The written document helped provide clarity about the teachers' perceptions of the school culture.

After the observation of the faculty meeting, the written document was used to either verify the author's perceptions of the faculty meetings and culture of the school or to raise questions about these perceptions. Additionally, the written document was used to gain clarification regarding the research questions.

Focus groups. As a final method of data collection, the participants were divided into two groups for focus group interviews. The focus groups were facilitated by the author, but were based on constructionism in which the participants spoke freely to one another and meaning was constructed through social interaction and sharing of experiences (Patton, 2002). Conducting focus groups allowed the author to ask questions that helped clarify the themes that had been identified through analysis of the individual interviews and the observations (Charmaz, 2000). The focus groups were audiotaped and the author recorded field notes of the conversation. The author then created a bulleted list of the focus group conversation points and utilized member-checking to ensure accuracy by sharing the list with each focus group participant.

Data Analysis

As previously noted, all data collected were in the form of interview transcripts, written documents, or field notes; for that reason, content analysis was the analytical process used for this study (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Before any analysis occurred, the author reviewed the data from each data source to become familiar with the data. Each data set was then analyzed separately using inductive analysis. The open-coding approach, in which the researcher is open to the data and the possible themes that emerge (Charmaz, 2000; Patton, 2002; Ryan & Bernard, 2000), was used for the initial data analysis. After each data set was coded and preliminary themes identified, a comparative analysis was completed to arrive at common themes present in the data (Charmaz, 2000). Peer-debriefing, by a colleague trained in qualitative research, and member-checking concluded the data analysis test for completeness.

Results

Although each teacher reflected on different experiences, had worked in various school cultures, and encountered variation in the leadership styles of the principals, each of the teachers in this study experienced many influences causing her to affirm her commitment to teach in urban schools. The data analysis procedure revealed two major categories of influence: external and internal. Three external influences and four internal influences emerged from the data. External themes included (a) relationships with coworkers, (b) relationships with principals, and (c) relationships with students. Internal

themes that emerged were (a) perseverance, (b) self-efficacy, (c) service, and (d) a sense of ownership. Of the external themes, the two that were experienced by all participants were relationships with coworkers and relationships with principals. Each of these themes has strong implications for school policy and working conditions.

Relationships with Coworkers

Close relationships with coworkers was one prevalent external influence on the teachers' job satisfaction. Teachers spoke passionately about the relationships, support, and collaboration of fellow teachers, as evidenced in the following quotes:

"Somebody helps you whenever you need help. You know, if you're struggling with something and you need to go….you know, what can you do to make me better? Um, and it's like that's what support is….Those are the two main reasons why I would stay. The people in the building and the building atmosphere." (Karen)

"[We are] a shared learning community. We are very involved with each other in planning, learning….lots of team preparation. We all hold the same vision. We believe in our mission and work together to achieve that." (Kelly)

"We all work really well together. We share ideas. Everyone is open to share and support you. I mean we do that all the time. You know, really help each other out a lot." (Heather)

"My [grade level] partner keeps me going." (Brenda)

Teachers highlighted both the personal and professional nature of the relationships, often commenting that the coworkers were their source of energy and strength as they met the challenges of teaching in urban environments. The teachers commented that their fellow teachers helped them experience a sense of belonging, ownership, and satisfaction in their jobs, even when district mandates and bureaucratic pressures were mounting.

Relationships with Administration

Each of the teachers also spoke passionately of the professional relationship she had with an administrator. Each teacher held the belief that it was a supportive principal that influenced her decision to remain teaching in an urban school. The teachers all felt well-regarded and appreciated by a principal. They shared stories of principals valuing their work and treating them with professional and personal respect. As previously indicated, there were a variety of leadership styles present within the school principals of the teacher participants, and the author would not consider all of the principals in this

study instructional leaders. However, each had a significant relationship with the teacher in the study and that relationship influenced the teacher's decision to remain teaching in the school. In some instances the teacher no longer worked with the same principal but was able to share the significant impact a principal had on her early career success and plans for continuing.

> "My principal, I considered her my resource…and she gives you conversation, she gives you feedback. My principal, who is able to bring out the best in me, I can honestly say I consider….I actually said to her one time, 'I consider you my mentor.'" (Jill)

> "She's someone who helps you whenever you need help…our principal is very willing to help and make [you] a better teacher." (Karen)

> "I feel like we have a good working relationship…she is a good listener, and I mean we have a good relationship. I feel like it's very open with her…and any time you do need help….So, I mean, she supports her teachers…she sees me as a professional that I do my job and I'm good at what I do." (Heather)

> "She views me with a lot of, uh, respect and….She really pushes me. She's had a lot of one-on-one conversations with me about my future and where I want to go. She's really included me in a lot with a lot of her decisions." (Kelly)

> "She expected much—and she gave as much as she expected from us. But she really pushed. She was around; she was there…she would recognize you for what you were doing, too." (Brenda)

Each teacher also postulated that if anything were to cause her to leave the district it would be if she worked with a principal who was not supportive. Some were able to comment on being in situations in which they did not have a positive relationship with a principal and how that caused them to consider leaving.

> "When I was at my other school, um... not a lot of shared leadership. Not a lot of, 'I respect where you are coming from. I respect that you are an intelligent decision maker who does what is right for children.' More you're about…the mentality was more I have to have somebody in that classroom….we weren't trying to make this school great." (Jill)

> "Basically at the end of my second year, if I had not found and been transferred to a new school, or gotten a job in a different district, I would have quit. I would have gone back to the business world. I mean, that's how…I mean, that's the effect that this man can have on people." (Karen)

As stated previously, all of the teachers in this study cited significant relationships with a principal as a primary influence on the teacher's choice to remain teaching in urban schools. Each of these teachers felt valued, respected and supported by a principal early in her career. It was only when speaking of negative relationships with previous principals that the teachers linked attrition to the influence of the principal. The prevalence of this theme highlights the critical role that principals play in the career decisions of beginning teachers.

Internal Themes

Internal themes that emerged from the data were (a) perseverance, (b) self-efficacy, (c) service, and (d) sense of ownership. Two of these themes, self-efficacy and ownership, were cited in the data by all eight teachers and are intricately related to the common external themes. Both self-efficacy and teachers' sense of ownership are heavily influenced by the actions of principals through valuing teacher input and interacting with teachers. Bandura's (1982) theory of self-efficacy indicates that the first few years of teaching are critical to the development of self-efficacy (Hoy, 2000). Hoy references Bandura's work around social persuasion and asserts that efficacy can be influenced by social persuasion or specific feedback from supervisors, implying that principals can play a critical role in fostering self-efficacy of teachers.

> "I was very active…my principal had faith in me…she viewed me as a good teacher... I am a good teacher." (Brenda)

> "[T]hings that make me stay everyday…a desire to be in a place where I am valued and empowered that keeps me here. My opinion is not just respected, it's actually needed." (Jill)

The internal themes can be directly related to the role of principals and coworkers in the retention of beginning teachers. Perseverance, self-efficacy, service and a sense of ownership can be influenced and nurtured through significant and supportive relationships with principals and coworkers. The themes that emerged in this study indicate the need to give attention and priority to the relationships and human capital that exist in urban schools.

Implications

When individuals feel valued, supported, and needed by the organization, and feel ownership within the organization, they become more loyal and committed to the organization (Bentein et al., 2005; Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Ng, Butts, Vandenberg, DeJoy, & Wilson, 2006; Rousseau, 1998). Research has shown that great leaders put people and relationships first (Collins, 2001) and that

effective principals value relationships and help teachers feel individually valued (Parkes & Thomas, 2007).

This study contributes to the literature by examining teachers' perspectives and showing that even in the absence of specific initiatives (e.g., professional learning communities, induction programs), principals and administrators can improve teacher retention. The results of this study demonstrate that principals can influence the retention of teachers in their schools with actions that are uncomplicated, require no external resources, and incur no financial cost. The principals in the buildings within this study created the necessary factors to retain teachers. The external and internal themes that were derived make it clear that principals can increase teacher retention by (a) valuing teachers, (b) fostering relationships, and (c) nurturing the internal characteristics that can help create occupational commitment.

Finally, the results of this study add to the literature by placing special emphasis on the human side of school reform. We know that significant relationships are often cited as the reason many urban students choose to stay in school and achieve success. It is time we applied the same philosophy to retaining urban teachers by creating school communities that support the growth and learning of all learners with leaders who value teachers as critical members of the school community. The results of the current study demonstrate that relationships are central to employees' satisfaction, productivity, professional growth, and retention. Therefore, as we search for ways to increase teacher retention, it is imperative that we recruit and train principals who can foster environments wherein teachers feel valued, invested, and have ownership of decisions within a school. While we wait for the creation of professional learning communities, comprehensive mentoring programs, and systematic induction programs, each of us can do something now that will change the rates of teacher attrition in urban schools. School leaders, principals, and fellow teachers can each develop professional relationships with teachers that convey value, support, and empowerment. We can each help nurture the growth and retention of teachers by showing them they are needed, valued, and vital to the success of our schools. As Nieto (2003a) states, "The children in our public schools deserve no less" (p. 129).

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