

Why do long-serving teachers stay in the teaching profession? Analysing the motivations of teachers with 10 or more years' experience in England

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This paper examines the reasons why long-serving teachers remain in the teaching profession. Interest in teacher retention has grown in recent years, both in the UK and internationally, due to concerns over teacher shortage. However, most research on retention has focused on why teachers leave; this paper aims to fill the gap in our understanding of the positive reasons why long-serving teachers stay in the profession, and how these reasons change over time. We define 'long-serving teachers' as teachers who have taught for 10 years and more. We draw on a subset of data from an existing, broader study (Menzies *et al.*, 2015) on why teachers enter and stay in the profession. In this paper, we draw on questionnaire findings from over 900 teachers with 0 to over 30 years' teaching experience, and interviews with 14 long-serving teachers, to understand why long-serving teachers enter and, more importantly for our purposes, stay in teaching. We find that teachers' motivational patterns are highly complex and influenced by school-level and policy contexts. Nonetheless, two prominent retention factors are identified: teachers' perceived professional mastery and altruistic reasons. Perceived professional mastery is particularly important due to its mutually reinforcing analytic relationships with other reasons. We find that teachers' identification with intrinsic, altruistic and perceived professional mastery reasons become stronger with years of experience, but in some cases, paradoxically, so does their identification with extrinsic reasons. From our evidence, we suggest policy implications for enhancing the retention of long-serving teachers.

Keywords: long-serving teachers; teacher supply; teacher motivation; teacher retention

Introduction

Much research has been conducted on why teachers enter teaching (e.g. Richardson & Watt, 2006; Watt & Richardson, 2010), although recent years have seen a growing interest in retention. Research on teacher retention has focused less on long-serving teachers, partly because statistics on the high dropout rate of teachers within the first few years post-qualification (e.g. Ingersoll, 2003; OECD, 2005; Burghes *et al.*, 2009) detract from the significant problem of attrition amongst teachers with more years' experience (Gu & Day, 2013). Consequently, less is known about the challenges facing this group of teachers, and how they sustain their commitment to

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teaching (Day & Gu, 2009). Furthermore, within existing literature on teacher retention, issues of attrition tend to dominate (e.g. Smithers & Robinson, 2003, 2005), with less focus on the positive reasons why teachers stay; Stanford (2001) argues that it is critical to seek experienced teachers' insights before they exit the field. Thus, our research seeks to fill the gap by exploring the positive reasons why long-serving teachers stay in the profession, and how motivations change over time. A more in-depth understanding of long-serving teachers' motivational patterns can, we argue, help to refine strategies for retaining talent and experience in the teaching profession.

It is important to note at the outset that long-serving teachers are not necessarily more 'effective' than younger teachers. Day *et al.* (2007) found that 'veteran' teachers were more likely to experience diminishing commitment to the profession and effectiveness (both perceived and in terms of pupil attainment scores), although this contrasted with some teachers whose commitment increased over time. However, many other empirical studies suggest that much is lost when experienced teachers leave the profession (e.g. Rivkin *et al.*, 2005; Brill & McCartney, 2008). A House of Commons (2004) report suggests positive correlations between pupil attainment and length of service of headteachers and teachers, as new teachers' unfamiliarity with the National Curriculum and the extra time required to familiarise themselves with pupil needs has undesirable knock-on effects. Attrition also results in costs for schools, due to the need to recruit and re-train all over again (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). House of Commons (2004: 39) reports the loss of 'reservoirs of experience' when long-serving teachers leave. Thus, while a limitation of this study is that it deals not with 'quality' retention but with teacher retention per se, we judge that there is sufficient imperative for in-depth work on why long-serving teachers stay in teaching.

The importance of understanding the retention of long-serving teachers is also evident in demographic analyses of the teaching profession vis-à-vis student numbers, both in the UK and internationally. A report by the NFER (Worth *et al.*, 2015) argues that although teacher supply has kept pace with pupil numbers in the past decade, teacher supply is becoming an increasing problem. Following the post-war 'baby boom' in many industrialised countries, which led to high levels of teacher recruitment in the 1960s and 1970s, the demographic profile of the teaching profession is now skewed towards older age groups (House of Commons, 2004; OECD, 2005); across OECD countries, 25% of primary and 30% of secondary teachers are 50+ years old (Ben-Peretz & McCulloch, 2009).

In England, given that the number of secondary pupils in England is projected to rise (Worth *et al.*, 2015), and that the number of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) entrants has been below target level for the last four years (Department for Education, 2015), there is growing recognition of the need to enhance the retention of long-serving teachers (House of Commons, 2017). Worryingly, Small *et al.* (2017) note that the proportion of 'leavers' due to reasons other than retirement (e.g. to work in other sectors) has risen 18% in the last 5 years. While recent teacher-retention policy initiatives have focused almost exclusively on reducing workload (Department for Education, 2017; House of Commons, 2017), our study finds that a more multidimensional approach that also considers the positive reasons why long-serving teachers stay is missing in policy.

Defining the long-serving teacher

There is no scholarly consensus over the definition of terms such as ‘veteran’, ‘experienced’ or ‘long-serving’ teachers; these words are used interchangeably (Day & Gu, 2009). Definitions include:

- ‘Long-serving’ teachers have over 20 years’ experience (McIntyre, 2010).
- ‘Veteran’ teachers are those with over 10–15 years’ experience (Eilam, 2009).
- ‘Veteran’ teachers are those in their third and fourth decades of teaching (Day & Gu, 2009).
- ‘Veteran’ teachers are those who self-identify as veteran (Schonmann, 2009).

Furthermore, the term ‘veteran’ is contested, and may connote one who has not only spent a considerable number of years in the profession, but also has mastery of their craft (Ben-Peretz & McCulloch, 2009). Our use of the term ‘long-serving’ refers purely to years of service. Based on opportunities in our data, and the suggestion by Eilam (2009) that teachers with 10–15 years of experience tend to be in the middle to late stages of their career, we define the long-serving teacher as one with 10 years and more of teaching experience.

To nuance our findings, we grouped the teachers in our sample by decades of experience (10–19 years, 20–29 years, 30+ years). While we acknowledge the presence of alternative groupings used in teacher motivation research, such as career stage—e.g. Huberman’s (1993) delineation of career stages (entry, commitment, withdrawal, etc.)—we chose to group by decades of experience, as we found this approach provided the most straightforward, meaningful way of categorising data for our specific dataset, in offering clear patterns and trends. This was, we later found, probably because many in our sample within the same grouping of years’ experience possessed shared experiences of personal life stage and education policy reform. Moreover, delineations of career stage and what happens within each career stage often vary (Drake, 2002), and professional life stages tend to be nonlinear (Day & Gu, 2007).

More importantly, as our intention is to explore the retention of long-serving teachers—regardless of their seniority in leadership or career stage—we judge the approach we took as not only fitting more closely with our purpose of offering broad insight into the retention of long-serving teachers, but also providing the most appropriate, straightforward structure to reflect this study’s specific findings. Nonetheless, analytic explorations of alternative groupings (by primary and secondary teachers, by leadership roles) can be found in the initial study report (Menzies *et al.*, 2015).

Why do long-serving teachers enter and stay in teaching?

While the emphasis of this paper is retention, rather than recruitment, this section offers an overview of the literature both on why teachers *enter* and why they *stay* in teaching, as together these elucidate how motivations evolve over time.

Intrinsic and altruistic reasons

Intrinsic and altruistic reasons are discussed together, as important analytic interconnections between the two have been highlighted in wider research (Stanford, 2001;

Nieto, 2003; Cohen, 2009). The past three decades of research in the UK consistently suggest that current and prospective teachers' intrinsic motivations (i.e. finding the process of teaching and their subject enjoyable) and altruistic motivations (i.e. finding teaching socially meaningful) are the most important reasons teachers *enter* the profession—compared with extrinsic reasons such as holidays and pay (e.g. Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Kćreći & Grmek, 2005; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Heinz, 2015) and entering teaching as a 'fall-back' career (Richardson & Watt, 2006).

Several accounts connect intrinsic to altruistic motivations, since love of children and a subject (intrinsic motivations) can logically lead to a desire for students to develop academically and personally (altruistic motivations) (e.g. Stanford, 2001; Nieto, 2003). In contrast, Cohen (2009: 488) argues that 'doing good' was not necessarily a motivation for veteran teachers in her study. Although they generally liked their work, it was love of the 'self'—their personal passion for their academic subject, and the thrill of occupying centre stage in the classroom—that enabled them to 'derive pleasure and satisfaction from teaching *despite* the students' (Cohen, 2009: 488), who were sometimes difficult and disruptive.

Extrinsic reasons

Material benefits (e.g. job security, working hours, holidays, salary, availability of family time) are a relatively unimportant reason for choosing to *enter* teaching, compared with intrinsic and altruistic motivations (Watt & Richardson, 2010; Watt *et al.*, 2012; Heinz, 2015). In general, many pre-service teachers described the profession as one of high demand and low returns, yet felt that intrinsic and altruistic reasons were sufficient motivators for entering teaching (Manuel & Hughes, 2006).

However, the literature on retention typically reveals a greater role for extrinsic reasons in explaining why teachers *stay*. The top recommendation to boost retention, provided by teachers who left their jobs, was better salary (Ingersoll, 2003). Barmby (2006) found that after issues associated with pupil behaviour and workload, pay was the next most important retention factor identified by teachers, particularly in contexts where the cost of living is high. Furthermore, there are increasing career opportunities outside of teaching, and the status of teaching has fallen (Cochran-Smith, 2006); combined with the rise of the new public management culture, which emphasises performativity and policing of standards (Ball, 2003), teachers expect compensation for their efforts. Cochran-Smith (2006) concludes that intrinsic and altruistic reasons alone are not enough to sustain commitment in teachers' evolving, complex and demanding work environments; extrinsic motivations are increasingly important. However, the relative importance of extrinsic motivations can be influenced by job satisfaction, highlighting the interdependence of reasons whereby high extrinsic motivations compensate for low job satisfaction and vice versa (Sturman, 2002).

Perceived professional mastery and pupil achievement

Teachers' perceptions of their own ability to teach, alongside intrinsic and altruistic reasons, are amongst the top three reasons why teachers enter teaching (Watt &

Richardson, 2010). Increasing teachers' perceptions of their ability to meet students' learning needs can raise teachers' motivation (Cochran-Smith, 2006). Some studies suggest that the *key* to teacher retention is teachers' perceptions of their own professional mastery and pupil achievement (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008), or pupil progress (Stanford, 2001). Day and Gu (2009) note that pupils' progress was a main source of motivation, particularly for teachers with over 24 years' experience.

The role of context

The conditions and contexts of schools can affect teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2003; Gu & Day, 2013), particularly as positive working conditions can strengthen ties of affection and loyalty to places, which in turn preserves teachers' commitment to the profession (McIntyre, 2010). In this paper, 'context' includes school 'culture' and 'leadership'—two distinct, yet closely related concepts.

School culture refers to the broad, intangible ethos of the school: 'the way people act, how they dress, what they talk about or consider taboo, whether they seek out colleagues or isolate themselves, whether they work together. . .' (Deal & Peterson, 2016: 7). US studies suggest that school culture is likely to be the strongest influence in retention (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009).

School culture is heavily influenced by 'school leadership'. By 'leadership', we refer specifically to teachers' respect for, and affinity with, middle and senior leaders in their school. The role of leadership in retention has been widely evidenced. Positive, supportive relationships with school and department leadership (Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Day *et al.*, 2007) and colleagues (Day *et al.*, 2007) are particularly highlighted. Strong, supportive institutional leadership and management teams can improve teacher morale and job satisfaction (Spear *et al.*, 2000; Evans, 2001; Hood, 2001) and teacher commitment (Day *et al.*, 2011).

Less discussed in the literature is the influence of wider policy culture. Teachers who have spent many years in the profession are more likely to have experienced the vagaries of policy change, and may be more susceptible to feeling jaded by the frequency of change, or measures that clash with their sense of professionalism and autonomy (Day *et al.*, 2007). In particular, the expansion of high-stakes accountability and performance management mechanisms (Ball, 2003) are seen as threats to teacher retention (McIntyre, 2010; Gu & Day, 2013).

Thus, teachers' career decision-making is complex and differs between individuals (Cochran-Smith, 2006; Hughes, 2012); it is driven by a combination of personal, emotional, relational and organisational factors that interact dynamically (Gu & Day, 2013). Intrinsic and altruistic reasons, as well as perceived professional mastery reasons, are most frequently cited in the literature as reasons why teachers enter and stay in teaching. For long-serving teachers, the literature further highlights the importance of extrinsic motivators, positive institutional culture with effective leadership and strong community feelings, and the problem of dissatisfying policy contexts. In exploring complex issues, using multiple tools in a mixed-methods design is helpful (Meijer *et al.*, 2002). Our theoretical understanding of the retention problem informs our mixed-methods design, described in the next section.