

Teacher Rewards: Going beyond the Stickers: Moving beyond Extrinsic Motivation

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Evelyn has been teaching Medical Studies, Sports Medicine and Biology at Hunting Hills High School in Red Deer, Alberta for the past 6 years.

Abstract:

Studies have shown that teachers appreciate intrinsic rewards, such as student achievement, positive relationships with students, self-growth, and mastery of professional skills, far greater than extrinsic motivators, like holidays and salary (Plihal, 1981; Plihal, 1982; Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012). This paper presents the findings, regarding rewards of teaching, from a qualitative study conducted with a cohort of beginning graduate students in Red Deer, Alberta, in the summer of 2014.

The study used an electronic online survey to gather information regarding the rewards teachers associate with the profession and what drives their decision to stay within in the

profession. Participants in the study were current teachers in both rural and urban K- 12 schools. Similar to the Dinham & Scott (1997) and Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd (2012) studies, we found that intrinsic motivators are the primary rewards for teachers and these motivators “had most influence on intention to stay in the profession.” According to the results of our research, participants valued building relationships, making a difference in the lives of their students, life-long learning and working in a dynamic environment within a fulfilling occupation as the main rewards of teaching. Findings from our study indicated that intrinsic rewards were key factors contributing to teacher retention and longevity within the profession. Our study conclusions lead us to further question whether or not teachers who are motivated by intrinsic rewards are also those teachers who experience teacher burnout.

Key Words: Teacher rewards, Teacher attrition, Job Satisfaction

Introduction:

With any occupation, inherent factors attract or deter people from their jobs. Dinham & Scott (1997) found , regardless of experience and job retention, most teachers identified the same intrinsic motivators attributed to positive teacher satisfaction. As potential future administrators and new graduate students, we wanted to test this finding with a cohort of beginning graduate students. Many studies suggest a number of common motivators in teacher retention. Due to the repetition of common factors found in our research, we chose to use an open-ended question in order to reach our own conclusions. The question posed to our cohort was:

“We all know that money is not one of the rewards of teaching; and, the public’s oft-held belief that teachers get holidays and summers off is, well, not so true as people might think. Yet, most teachers find teaching rewarding. So, what are the rewards of teaching?”

Literature Review:

Teachers in Alberta are known to leave the profession within the first five years of teaching, in fact only 49% indicated that they see teaching as a lifelong profession (Alberta Teachers’ Association [ATA], 2013). Teachers listed intrinsic motivators as reasons to enter the teaching profession and, even more so, why they stayed within the profession long-term (Plihal, 1981; Plihal, 1982; Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012; ATA, 2013).

“Lack of existential fulfillment was an important burnout determinant” (Tomic, W. & Tomic, E., 2008). Emotional exhaustion, the feeling of total mental and emotional loss,

cynicism, or a mental distance are factors that attribute to the lack of existential fulfillment (Tomic, W. & Tomic, E., 2008). This point further strengthens the fact that intrinsic motivation for teachers needs to be sustained in order to retain teachers within the profession.

Intrinsic motivation correlates with teacher longevity, and teachers are more likely to burn out if they were not intrinsically motivated (Tomic, W. & Tomic, E., 2008). Two intrinsic reasons for teacher motivation are enjoyment of working with children and the intellectual fulfillment of feeling that they make a difference (as cited by Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Reid & Thornton, 2000; Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, Commonwealth of Australia [CRTTE], 2003; Skilbeck & Connell, 2003; Ornstein & Levine, 2006 in Ashiedu, & Scott-Ladd, 2012). In addition, Plihal (1981) reports there is a positive correlation exists between teacher enjoyment and student achievement.

Purpose:

The purpose of this research was to examine what working teachers indicated as the rewards of teaching. We believe humans are motivated by rewards - both internal (intrinsic) and external (extrinsic). Furthermore, we believe teachers who are unable to find rewards in their work will burn out quickly or will leave the profession prematurely. Although the public seems to believe most teachers enter the profession because of extrinsic motivations - such as longer “summer vacations,” most research on teacher motivation and rewards in teaching suggests that teachers are intrinsically motivated (Plihal, 1981; Plihal, 1982; Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012). Our goal was to seek more specific insight into what these intrinsic or extrinsic rewards might be. To discover what teachers identified as their rewards, we asked participants of the University of Alberta Masters of Education Red Deer Cohort, in July 2014, to list their top three rewards of teaching.

Participants

Participants in this study included a cohort of beginning graduate students; specifically, participants included fifteen [15] Masters of Education graduate students taking part in a cohort in Red Deer, Alberta, in the summer of 2014. The study included fifteen [15] teachers in the study, thirteen [13] females and two [2] males. The average teaching experience for these teachers spanned between four [4] to twenty-nine [29] years with a mean of 13.9 years, a mode of four [4] and twenty-two [22] years, and median of sixteen [16] years (Table 1.1). Seven of the teachers taught in a rural setting and eight [8] in an urban setting. Eight were elementary teachers, two [2] taught elementary and

middle school, two [2] taught K-12, one [1] taught middle school and two [2] taught high school (Table 1.2).

Table 1.1 Teaching Experience Demographics:

Teaching Experience	Years
Range	4 - 29
Mean	13.9
Mode	4 & 22
Median	16

Table 1.2 Teaching Environment Demographics

Demographic (n=15)	Value
Females	13
Males	2
Elementary	8
Elementary, Middle / Junior	2
K- 12	2
Middle / Junior	1
Secondary	2
Rural	7
Urban	8

Research Methods:

We used Google Forms to survey participants anonymously, where we posed the following question to the cohort:

“We all know that money is not one of the rewards of teaching; and, the public’s oft-held belief that teachers get holidays and summers off is, well, not so true as people might think. Yet, most teachers find teaching rewarding. So, what are the rewards of teaching?”

List what you believe are the top three rewards of teaching – in the order you think is important – from 1-3, with 1 being the greatest reward. After you list the rewards in a phrase, write no more than 3 sentences that might suggest why you believe this reward is “rewarding.”

Based on common themes found in our data, responses were grouped into the following categories: making a difference, building relationships, fulfillment, lifelong learning, and dynamic work environment (Table 1. 3).

Table 1.3 Identified teaching rewards

Criteria	Tally
Making a Difference	10
Building Relationships	8
Fulfillment	8
Lifelong Learning	7
Dynamic Work Environment	6

Analysis of Data:

In our study, we chose five main themes that stood out as being the “top rewards” of teaching, based on the frequency of teachers’ responses.

Making a Difference:

Our research showed teachers’ perception of their ability to make a difference in the lives of their students to be highly rewarding. Teachers find their position more satisfying because they feel pride and ownership in the achievement and personal growth of the students, as they are able to contribute to the process of helping a child achieve their full potential. Key factors in teachers feeling they are making a difference in a student’s life include their ability to help develop a student’s self-confidence, as well as to set and achieve personal goals. Participants also found satisfaction in seeing students grow and mature, academically as well as personally.

Building Relationships

We found that most of the teachers had an innate desire to help children in their overall development. The reward teachers received from watching their students “shape themselves and learn about who they are” is a far greater reward than any extrinsic one (pay, holidays, working conditions, etc). Teachers have the ability to build meaningful relationships, fostering a culture of family and belonging with staff, students, parents, and community members. As much as students matter to teachers, teachers matter to students. “[Our] actions are more powerful than [we] ever realized” (Parsons, 2009, p. 19). There are moments “when teachers can make or break their relationships” and, as teachers, it is important for us to realize when these moments are happening, and be aware of our impact on our students.

Fulfillment

Although the demands and the requirements of teaching can be great, or even overwhelming, teachers state the intrinsic rewards received as educators far outweighed the stressors of the position. One such reward discovered within our research was that of gaining a sense of personal fulfillment within their position, stating that teaching is the “difference between a job and a vocation.” Furthermore, our research revealed that teachers found their role to be rewarding and meaningful when they had impacted students’ lives in a positive manner. As noted, “Teaching makes me feel like I am spending the time I have in this world purposefully, doing something that really matters.” This intrinsic reward cannot be predetermined or guaranteed when one embarks on a new position as a teacher. However, the payback and long-term benefits of feeling fulfilled and satisfied within one’s profession are immeasurable.

Life-Long Learning and Professional Growth

21st century teaching demands the need to be knowledgeable and flexible in thinking about good practice and pedagogy. From our research data, there was a direct correlation between teachers who were intrinsically motivated and teacher retention. Life-long learners are those who strive to keep up to date on educational research and current practices in order to better themselves within their craft. Hence, the teacher who is intrinsically motivated by learning new and innovative ideas experiences longevity within education.

Dynamic Work Environment

Our research indicates that allowing teachers to work within a dynamic work environment fosters creativity. There is freedom for teachers when given the latitude to design their own lessons. As a result, there is always something new and exciting to learn. Working with kids, parents, and colleagues, allows teachers to experience, on a daily basis, unique and challenging situations. Working in a dynamic environment is highly valued and is one of the main reasons why educators remain within the teaching profession.

Results

Upon reflecting on our research it became apparent that the five areas where teachers felt they were the most rewarded within their profession were: making a difference in the lives of their students, building relationships, working within a fulfilling occupation, being a lifelong learner, and working within a dynamic work environment. The common public perception is often extrinsic, pointing to weekends off and summer holidays as being the motivators for teaching. However, our findings indicate that the rewards of teaching are opposite those of the public's perception, being intrinsic in nature.

Further research

An area of interest is that of the connection between teachers who are intrinsically motivated and teacher longevity. Is there a link to teacher burnout? If so, what can be done to maintain intrinsic motivation in a manner that prevents teacher burnout?

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