Enduring in an "Impossible" Occupation: Perfectionism and Commitment to Teaching

Brady K. Jones[1]

Abstract

Very little is known about the role of person-level qualities, or personality, in the teacher labor market. This study explores the role of *perfectionism* in teacher occupational commitment and retention. One hundred eighteen graduates of a competitive teacher preparation program with widely varying levels of total years commitment to the job completed a measure of three dimensions of perfectionism—*standards* (holding oneself to high standards), *order* (valuing neatness, tidiness, and being disciplined), and *discrepancy* (perceiving a gap between ambitions and abilities)—and gave information about their personal backgrounds and work histories. Results suggest that none of the dimensions of perfectionism predict teacher commitment in the sample as a whole, but that the *order* dimension significantly predicts long-term commitment to struggling urban versus affluent suburban schools. These results imply that long-term urban teachers may be adept at overlooking difficult and sometimes chaotic circumstances to sustain themselves in the occupation.

Introduction

A stable teacher labor force is important for a number of reasons. Teacher attrition is expensive for schools and districts (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaeffer, 2007; Benner, 2000; Milanowski & Odden, 2007). It disrupts school routines and makes it difficult to create a strong school culture (Guin, 2004). It also hurts student achievement—even students whose teachers do not leave the job do worse if their school has, in general, high rates of teacher turnover (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012). These consequences are especially severe for the most disadvantaged children (Barnes et al., 2007; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & May, 2012) who face higher rates of turnover, as their teachers often leave for opportunities in more affluent schools as they become available.

Thus far, most research on teacher retention has focused on school or district level conditions that incentivize people to stay. For example, we know that teachers tend to gravitate toward schools populated by affluent, high-achieving students with small class sizes and plenty of resources (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). They also prefer positive work contexts (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012) and schools that are not under heavy accountability pressure (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Diaz, 2004; Day & Gu, 2010). These findings are quite important. However, they leave out an important piece of the teacher retention puzzle. The role

of person-level factors, or personality variables, has been largely overlooked. A few researchers have recently begun to delve into teacher personality and commitment. Robertson-Craft and Duckworth (2014), for example, point to the importance of grit in teacher retention, and Cano-García, Padilla-Muñoz, and Carrasco-Ortiz (2005) explore the role of several personality traits in teacher burnout, noting in particular the importance of neuroticism as a risk factor and agreeableness as a protective factor. For the most part, however, the role of personality variables in teacher retention is a new and unexplored area of study that has the potential to shed new light on this issue.

It is especially important to consider these variables within social contexts. Studies focusing on "personality" can easily bring up rigid, essentialist connotations—the idea that people are born a certain way, and that those temperaments are hard to change (McAdams, 1992). A more modern view of personality, and one more well regarded among personality psychologists, acknowledges both the basic, innate traits with which individuals are born as well as the parts of personality that change and grow based on the contexts in which

[1]Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Brady K. Jones, 2120 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.
Email: BradyJones2014@u.northwestern.edu

an individual lives. McAdams, for example, argues that we can think of the construction of personality in three layers: (a) basic traits—temperaments that are more and less stable over the life span, (b) characteristic adaptations—the typical and changeable ways an individual takes action to get what he or she wants in a variety of social situations, and (c) personal narratives—how people think and talk about important life events and experiences (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006).

While it might be interesting to study the inborn traits that make one person inclined to commit long term to teaching and another to quickly leave, a more hopeful angle to take when approaching this issue involves looking at personality variables that can be developed over time through coaching, observing others, and reflecting on one's experiences. In this study, I look at *perfectionism*, or the tendency to pursue idealized standards, a personality variable that falls squarely into McAdams's "characteristic adaptations" layer. While individuals might have some innate tendencies that predispose them to different dimensions of perfectionism, I approach this topic with the assumption that people can learn to think about goals and challenges in different ways. I believe that teachers and those who train and support them may be able to use this study's findings to cultivate coping strategies and mind-sets that make staying in the job long term a bit easier.

Teaching and Perfectionism

Theory and scholarship on what teaching is like, as an occupation, suggests that perfectionism might be a particularly important personal quality to consider when attempting to improve rates of teacher retention. Previous work has established teaching as a job that can be difficult, stressful, and unpredictable (Cano-García et al., 2005; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Kyriacou, 2001). In his classic text *Schoolteacher*, Lortie (1975) argues that there are several fundamental reasons for this. First, he argues that teaching suffers from a culture of high ambition—that is, produce as much learning as possible in students, make students critical thinkers and good citizens—with a low level of shared technical knowledge. This means that teachers often find they cannot meet the high expectations others hold for them and that they hold for themselves. This difficult reality exists for two main reasons. First, the goals of teaching are often long term and intangible, so teachers cannot know right away, if ever, if they are successful. This also means they get little usable feedback and find it difficult to adjust their practice as they go. Second, teachers find themselves in a leadership role that is hard to manage. They desire and are expected to build warm relationships with students but are also charged with controlling them, to ensure that students behave as they are told and do the work they are assigned.

Cohen (2011) echoes these sentiments. He lists particular "predicaments" those in the "human improvement" occupations like teaching face. Like Lortie (1975), he argues that a low level of shared technical knowledge makes daily work stressful and difficult for teachers. Even long-term, expert teachers regularly confront problems that are difficult for them to solve. This is an unavoidable reality of the occupation, Cohen argues, because the goals of schooling, the methods of achieving those goals, and the best way to measure progress toward them are nearly always in dispute. There is no general consensus as to what a "good" teacher should look like, so practitioners are left to muddle through these larger societal debates on their own in their day to day work in classrooms. Cohen (2011) also acknowledges that the student–teacher relationships make the occupation not just difficult, but "impossible" (p. 14). First, teachers depend on their "clients," the students, who are often compelled to attend school and to take classes in which they have little interest. Furthermore, the higher the ambitions teachers hold for their students, the more they ask of them, the more likely they are to face pushback and opposition.

Other scholars have named other reasons the occupation can feel overwhelming. Acker (1999), for example, argues that teachers can find the work hard to manage because they are responsible for working with many children—all with their own needs and agendas—at once and making rapid-fire decisions as they go. And Lipsky (1980) draws attention to teachers' role as "street-level" implementers of the public's agenda. Because of this position, they often bear the brunt of policy swings that can feel capricious and are regularly asked to meet sometimes overwhelming demands from multiple stakeholders.

These pressures may be particularly strong in disadvantaged contexts. For example, in the United States, teachers in urban schools can face large class sizes, chaotic working conditions, and limited resources (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Urban students are also more likely to face a variety of challenges in their lives outside of school—for example, neighborhood violence, family transiency, and financial issues—than suburban students. Furthermore, disadvantaged urban schools are often under greater pressure from lawmakers and the public (Kraft et al., 2014). All of these variables likely exacerbate the difficulties inherent in teaching.

Because teaching is such a complex, difficult, and unpredictable job, we might expect *perfectionism* to be an important personality variable that distinguishes those who commit long term to teaching and those who quickly leave, as well as those who commit long term to urban versus suburban contexts. Perfectionism is the tendency to hold and pursue idealized standards. Individuals who focus too much on attaining such standards might be more likely to become overwhelmed and leave an occupation in which the day-to-day work involves pursuing ambitious but intangible goals, working with sometimes unwilling "clients," making many quick decisions, pleasing multiple stakeholders, and reacting to unpredictable developments in the work or policy environment. Alternatively, they may gravitate toward schools where

demands are not so great—from less affluent to more affluent settings.

Perfectionism has been linked in previous studies to negative career-related outcomes, such as an inability to create a satisfying work–life balance (Beauregard, 2006; Mitchelson, 2009) and to workaholism (Clark, Lelchook, & Taylor, 2010). And while no studies have examined the role of perfectionism in teacher commitment, it has been linked with teacher stress (Flett, Hewitt, & Hallett, 1995; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008) and burnout (Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). Finally, Haberman (1995) argues that a key characteristic of teachers who are able to persist and succeed in impoverished settings is the ability to choose one's battles and protect oneself from investing too much in unimportant conflicts and challenges.

Hypotheses

Perfectionism was once conceptualized as a largely negative trait, a maladaptive tendency to focus too much on attaining an idealized standard (Flett, Hewitt, Blankstein, & Gray, 1998). More recently, however, scholars have begun to view perfectionism in a more nuanced way, acknowledging that it can have both positive and negative outcomes for an individual. Specifically, Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, and Ashby (2001) argue that there are three dimensions of perfectionism: the extent to which one endorses high (a) *standards*, values tidiness, discipline; (b) *order*; and perceives a (c) *discrepancy* between her high standards and what she feels she can actually achieve. Perfectionism is normally maladaptive only when *discrepancy* is high.

Among teachers, there is no reason to expect differences in the *standards* dimension of perfectionism. There is neither theory nor research to support the idea that people who stay long term in teaching will have set higher or lower standards than people who quickly leave the occupation, nor that urban teachers will have set higher or lower standards than suburban teachers. Rather, we might expect *order* and *discrepancy* to predict retention outcomes. First, working with a large number of students in a busy and ever-changing environment might be especially difficult for people who value *order*— who place importance on organization, tidiness, being disciplined, and who aim, in general, to have everything go according to plan. Second, we might expect attrition to be higher for teachers who set high standards for themselves but feel as though such standards are difficult for them to achieve—who perceive a large *discrepancy* between their aims and abilities. As Lortie (1975) and Cohen (2011) emphasize, teaching is a job with abstract goals. Many teachers profess high ambitions, such as wanting to produce as much learning as possible in students or give students the best possible start in life (Jones, 2016). At the same time, there are few external markers of success in teaching, like promotions or raises (Lortie, 1975). There may be more room in teaching, then, for the maladaptive dimension of *discrepancy* to creep in. Goals can be sky high, and clear indications those goals

have been reached are few and far between. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) lend some support to the idea that this dimension of perfectionism might be important in the teacher labor market. They find that the ability to find a "sense of success" was instrumental in the retention of new teachers, that those teachers who felt efficacious were more likely to stay in the occupation.

We might also expect to see differences in *discrepancy* and *order* between teachers who have committed to more affluent suburban schools versus resource-strapped urban schools. As city schools in the United States tend to face greater challenges than their suburban counterparts, they can often be difficult and disorderly places to work (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Kraft et al., 2014; Lankford et al., 2002). Teachers who highly value order may have a difficult time working there long term. As for the *discrepancy* dimension, because many students attending urban schools come from disadvantaged backgrounds, it may feel even more critical to teachers to make a difference in their lives. Individuals who tend to set very high goals in these contexts and then doubt their ability to reach them may find themselves frustrated and prone to burnout.

To summarize, this study's hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The *standards* dimension of perfectionism will not predict commitment to teaching.

Hypothesis 2: Teachers with a longer term commitment to teaching will score lower in the *order* and *discrepancy* dimensions of perfectionism than those with a shorter term commitment to teaching. That is, they will value order less and perceive less of a discrepancy between their standards and what they feel the can actually achieve.

Hypothesis 3: Teachers with a long-term commitment to urban schools will score lower than teachers with a long-term commitment to suburban schools on the *order* and *discrepancy* dimensions of perfectionism. That is, they will value order less and perceive less of a discrepancy between their standards and what they feel they can actually achieve.

Participants

A total of 118 graduates of a competitive teacher licensure and master's degree program in the United States completed various self-report psychological measures and gave information about demographics, commitment to teaching, and work history. Participants were recruited through the program's alumni email listserv. Of the 125 who expressed interest in participating in the study, 118 completed study participation. Eleven of these individuals were excluded from these analyses because they were teachers who had transitioned into administrative positions—a group fundamentally different from those either staying long term in the classroom or leaving work in schools altogether, but not large enough to analyze on its own.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Years Commitment to Teaching.

Variable	% participants
Gender	
Female	77
Male	23
Race	
White	77
Asian/Pacific Islander	11
Black	4
Latino	3
Other race/no answer	5
Age	
24-29	44
30-39	40
40+	16
Years commitment	
Up to 3	13.6
Up to 5	25.4
Up to 8	43.2
Up to 10	52.5
Up to 15	62.7
Up to 20	66.9
Up to 25	78.8
Up to 30	92.4
Up to 36	100

Participant demographics and their commitment to teaching, in years, are reported in Table 1.

These data reflect national trends in the United States for gender breakdown in the teacher labor force (77% female, 23% male). The racial breakdown in this sample also mirrors relatively closely the racial breakdown of U.S. teachers as a whole (77% White, 11% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% Black, 3% Latino, and 5% as biracial, multiracial, or nonreporting). They range in age from 24 to 57: 44% in their 20s, 40% in their 30s, and 16% in their 40s or older. The participants report a wide range of years of commitment to the occupation, from 0 to 36. About 25.4% plan to leave or left teaching after 5 years, 52.5% after 10 years, 66.9% after 20 years, and 92.4% after 30 years.

Important to note is the elite nature of the teacher preparation program from which the sample was recruited. This program is competitive and rigorous. To be accepted into it, an individual had to have a high score on the Graduate Record Examination. (The average verbal GRE score for an accepted candidate is in the 90th percentile, quantitative GRE score is in the 68th percentile, and writing in the 80th percentile.) This academically elite sample is especially interesting as studies indicate that teachers who score high on tests like the GRE, especially on the verbal section, produce higher achievement gains in their students (Goldhaber, 2002; Jacob, 2007). The individuals in this sample, then, are more likely to be the kind of teachers schools and districts especially hope to retain.

Measures and Methods

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is measured using the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised (Slaney et al., 2001). Participants answer questions across three dimensions of perfectionism: *standards* ("I try to do my best at everything I do."), *order* ("I like to always be organized and disciplined."), and *discrepancy* ("I often worry about not measuring up to my own expectations."). A growing body of research attests to the usefulness, validity, and reliability of this measure across a variety of contexts (Mobley, Slaney, & Rice, 2005; Nakano, 2009; Park, 2009; Slaney et al., 2001; Vandiver & Worrell, 2002; Wang, Slaney, & Rice, 2007).

Teacher Commitment

Teacher commitment is calculated by adding together the number of years the participants had already taught at the time they completed the survey plus the number of years more they planned to teach. Measuring commitment this way captures commitment better than total years teaching (which means little for very new teachers) or planned years teaching (plans can easily change) alone. When participants were asked how many more years they planned to teach, they marked one of a range of years, for example, "I plan to teach for . . . 0 more years, 1-2 more years, 3-5 more years," and so on. The lowest number in the range they chose was added to the number of years they had already taught to obtain their total teaching commitment score.

School Advantage

School advantage is included as a control variable in some analyses. A proxy measure for school advantage is the percent of White/Caucasian students who attend the school. Although a somewhat crude measure of advantage, this variable is used over other potential measures of advantage, such as the percent of students who receive free or reduced priced lunch, because it is available for almost all schools—not just public ones—through the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data. Furthermore, because of racial inequalities in the U.S. education system, school racial breakdown is highly correlated with socioeconomic status. In this study's sample, for example, school percent White students and school percent of students on free/reduced lunch show a very strong relationship ($r = .864$, $p < .001$).

Age

Because teacher commitment is calculated in part by how many years a person has already taught, it is highly correlated with age ($r = .385$, $p < .001$). Therefore, participants' self-reported age is included as a control variable in many analyses.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations Between Key Study Variables.

	Commitment to teaching	Standards	Order	Discrepancy	School % White students	Age
Commitment to teaching						
Standards	.119 (.230)					
Order	−.059 (.558)	.208 (.301)				
Discrepancy	−.057 (.580)	.019 (.848)	−.144 (.151)			
School % White students	**.270 (.009)**	.154 (.128)	**.204 (.047)**	−.071 (.506)		
Age	**.385 (.000)**	−.129 (.191)	.007 (.941)	−.139 (.177)	−.041 (.697)	

Note. All values significant at .05 or less are in bold.

School Urbanity, Demographic Makeup, and Perceived Environment

All study participants listed the name and location of the school where they currently work or, if they had already exited the occupation, the name of the school where they last worked. Whether a school was classified as urban or suburban was determined by a school's classification in the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data and, in a few cases in which the school was not listed, by author determination based on the school's website and other available information about the school online. Teachers were relatively settled in their current school contexts. As part of their study participation, they were asked to briefly reflect on any future plans to stay in or leave teaching and to reflect on their experiences at their school. No teacher explicitly expressed a desire to switch from an urban to a suburban school, or vice versa, and the vast majority of teachers still in the occupation expressed satisfaction with the school where they have "landed."

Demographic information about each school, specifically the percentage of students of different races, student/teacher ratio, percentage of students on free and reduced priced lunch, and percentage of students with limited English proficiency, was collected by searching for each school in the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data Public and Private School Search. In a few instances, when then the school was not listed, this information was collected from the school's website.

Finally, teachers were asked to rank their current school or the school where they most recently taught on a number of work environment measures. Specifically, they were asked to rank their schools on how high they perceived teacher turnover, administrator turnover, and administrator support to be (1 = *high*, 2 = *somewhat high*, 3 = *moderate*, 4 = *somewhat low*, 5 = *low*), how satisfied they were with the quality of their administrators (1 = *very satisfied*, 2 = *somewhat satisfied*, 3 = *neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*, 4 = *somewhat dissatisfied*, 5 = *very dissatisfied*), on the quality of material resources available to them (1 = *excellent*, 2 = *good*, 3 = *fair*, 4 = *poor*, 5 = *very poor*), and on whether student challenges (behavior problems, special needs, poverty) made their work more difficult (1 = *yes*, 2 = *somewhat*, 3 = *only a little*, 4 = *no*).

Results

Correlations between key study variables are listed in Table 2. Pearson correlation values as well as *p* values of significance are reported. In addition, correlations significant at least the .05 level are highlighted in bold.

None of the three dimensions of perfectionism are significantly correlated with teacher commitment. However, order scores are positively correlated with the percentage of White students in a school ($r = .204$, $p = .047$). In addition, none of the three dimensions of perfectionism are significantly correlated with each other.

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, linear regressions were run using the entire sample. Age was included as a control variable in all analyses, as it is highly correlated with the number of years a participant had already taught and therefore with the teacher commitment variable. In addition, a second set of analyses controlling for school advantage (operationalized by the percentage of White students in a school) was run. Table 3 reports these results.

Hypothesis 1 is supported. The linear regressions demonstrate that the *standards* dimension of perfectionism does not predict commitment to teaching under neither the model without a school advantage control ($\beta = .159$, $p = ns$) nor the model with a school advantage control ($\beta = .089$, $p = ns$). Hypothesis 2 is not supported. The *order* ($\beta = −.019$, $p = ns$; $\beta = −.162$, $p = ns$) and *discrepancy* ($\beta = −.037$, $p = ns$; $\beta = −.081$, $p = ns$) dimensions fail to predict a teacher's commitment to the occupation under any model.

To approach Hypothesis 3, I first reduced the sample to teachers in urban and suburban schools who reported a relatively long-term commitment to the occupation. Each participant included in this subsample had at least a 10-year total commitment to the occupation. Defining the subsample in this way reduces the sample size considerably ($n = 55$), but it is necessary to tackle the question of differences in perfectionism among teachers who have settled into urban versus suburban schools.

Tables 4 and 5 provide important background information about the individuals in this subsample and schools where they teach. Table 4 shows demographic information and years commitment for this subsample. Here, we see that the urban and suburban teachers look relatively similar when it

Table 3. Linear Regressions Predicting Commitment to Teaching.

	β (p)	β (p)	β (p)	β (p)	β (p)	β (p)
Standards	.159 (.103)	.089 (.363)				
Order			−.019 (.845)	−.162 (.101)		
Discrepancy					−.037 (.716)	−.081 (.425)
Age	.391 (.000)	.434 (.000)	.395 (.000)	.441 (.000)	.388 (.000)	.428 (.000)
School % White students		.350 (.000)		.409 (.000)		.387 (.000)
Adjusted R^2	.147	.280	.138	.319	.136	.314
n	94	81	93	78	87	73

Table 4. Urban and Suburban Teacher Demographics and Years Commitment to Teaching.

Variable	% urban teachers	% suburban teachers
Gender		
Female	76	67.6
Male	24	29.4
No answer	0	2.9
Race		
White	70.8	85.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	8.3	11.8
Black	12.5	0
Latino	0	0
Other race/no answer	8.3	2.9
Age		
24-29	28.6	40.6
30-39	47.7	37.5
40+	23.9	21.9
Years commitment		
10-15	24	26.5
16-20	16	5.8
21-25	24	20.6
26-30	24	29.4
31-36	12	17.5

comes to gender, race, age, and the breakdown of their total years commitment to the occupation.

In Table 5, however, we see that the long-term urban teachers in this sample do seem to work under objectively more difficult circumstances. They have significantly more non-White students, higher student–teacher ratios, and more students on free and reduced priced lunch, all by a large margin. In addition, the urban teachers report that their schools provide them less rich material resources and that there are higher rates of teacher turnover at their schools.

Finally, to test Hypotheses 1 and 3, *t* tests were run comparing the means for *standards, order*, and *discrepancy* for urban and suburban teachers with a long-term commitment to the occupation. Results are reported in Table 6.

Hypothesis 1 is supported in these analyses as well. Long-term urban and suburban teachers do not differ on the *standards* dimension of perfectionism. Hypothesis 3 is partially

supported. The *t* tests show that teachers with a long-term commitment to urban versus suburban schools do not differ significantly in the *discrepancy* dimension, $t(52) = 0.428$, $p = ns$. They do, however, differ in *order*, $t(50) = -2.718$, $p = .009$. Suburban teachers with a long-term commitment to the occupation value tidiness, organization, and discipline more highly than urban teachers with a long-term commitment.

Discussion

Teaching can be a difficult, stressful, and unpredictable occupation. In this study, I tested whether three dimensions of perfectionism—*standards, order*, and *discrepancy*—predict an individual's commitment to the occupation of teaching generally. I also tested whether these dimensions might predict commitment in struggling urban versus affluent suburban schools.

As predicted, *standards* did not predict retention either in the occupation in general or based on urban/suburban school context. Teachers with a long- and short-term commitment, and teachers with a long-term commitment in urban and suburban schools, set equally high standards for themselves. This is not a surprise, as neither research nor theory would predict differences in this adaptive dimension of perfectionism.

Contrary to predictions, *discrepancy* also failed to predict commitment to teaching under any model. I hypothesized that this maladaptive dimension of perfectionism would negatively predict commitment in general, as several influential theorists have noted that teaching is an "impossible" occupation in which workers often have difficulty reaching the lofty goals they set for themselves and that others set for them (Cohen, 2011; Lipsky, 1980; Lortie, 1975). Furthermore, I expected *discrepancy* would negatively predict long-term commitment in urban contexts versus suburban contexts, as these schools can be more difficult places to work (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Lankford et al., 2002) and sites at which goals set by and for teachers can be even more ambitious (Kraft et al., 2014)—where it can feel even more urgent to make a difference in students' lives.

Why does *discrepancy* fail to predict teacher commitment, either in general or based on school context? Lortie (1975), one of the very few scholars who first articulated why a discrepancy between goals and abilities could be

Table 5. Comparing Long-Term Urban and Suburban Teachers on Demographic and School-Level Variables.

	Urban		Suburban		
	n	*M*	*n*	*M*	*p*
School % White students	**20**	**14.69**	**33**	**61**	**.000**
Student/teacher ratio	**20**	**16.39**	**33**	**13.10**	**.001**
School % Free or reduced priced lunch	**16**	**68.19**	**23**	**23.70**	**.000**
School % limited English	16	6.81	25	4.31	.346
Perceived teacher turnover	**21**	**3**	**34**	**4**	**.001**
Perceived admin turnover	21	3.95	34	3.68	.331
Perceived admin quality	21	2.52	34	1.94	.100
Perceived admin support	21	2.76	34	2.15	.088
Perceived student challenges	21	2	34	2.41	.094
Perceived school resources	**21**	**2.19**	**34**	**1.62**	**.030**

Note. All values significant at .05 or less are in bold.

Table 6. The *t* Tests Comparing Long-Term Urban and Suburban on Three Dimensions of Perfectionism.

Dimension	*n*	*M*, urban teachers	*M*, suburban teachers	*p*
Standards	54	45.33	44.88	.670
Order	**52**	**20.81**	**23.77**	**.009**
Discrepancy	48	39.90	38.50	.768

Note. All values significant at .05 or less are in bold.

important in teaching, may also provide the best potential explanation for why it ultimately does not predict commitment to the occupation. Lortie argues that because most Americans spend many years of their young lives in schools, they have a solid understanding of what the work of a teacher is like. Individuals who go into teaching, then, may be entirely prepared for the lack of easily measured objectives. They may simply expect and accept that this is part of the job. The abstractness of the aims of teaching may even be an attractive quality of the occupation for some individuals. Indeed, teachers often resist policy movements toward highly tangible outcome measures such as standardized testing (Clotfelter et al., 2004; Day & Gu, 2010; Taylor & Rich, 2015). Even the Johnson and Birkeland (2003) study that points to the importance of a "sense of success" to teacher retention focuses not on whether teachers actually attain difficult aims but on practical institutional issues that enabled feelings of efficacy, like whether study teachers felt they had a manageable workload and plenty of material resources. Finally, Lortie stresses that teachers have historically relied heavily upon "psychic rewards" like positive encounters and warm interactions with students. Relationships and small, personal successes, then, may be what teachers turn to in order to feel a sense of fulfillment in their work. In other words, although the occupation of teaching has some built-in qualities that can make it difficult to feel successful, prospective teachers may come with built-in expectations that guard them from feeling too much of a gap between their goals and accomplishments.

Unlike *discrepancy*, the dimension of *order* did produce significant findings. It did not predict commitment to teaching in the full sample but did significantly distinguish urban teachers with a long-term commitment from suburban teachers with a long-term commitment. Long-term urban teachers scored significantly lower than long-term suburban teachers on this dimension, suggesting that factors like tidiness, discipline, and whether everything goes according to plan are less important to them.

There are several ways to interpret the significant finding for *order*. First, it is possible that individuals who tend, in general, to be less order-focused might gravitate toward urban school settings to begin with, and conversely that individuals who know they prefer a very organized, predictable work environment self-select out of urban school opportunities and into suburban ones. Another possibility is an environmental or contextual argument. It may be that individuals in urban and suburban schools are no different at the outset, but those who find themselves in urban schools and decide to stay there learn, over time, to cultivate a more laid-back attitude. Haberman, for example, writes that highly successful, long-term teachers of children in poverty become good at choosing their battles. When it comes to pointless bureaucratic fights or struggles that will not directly benefit their students, he argues that urban teachers with longevity "spend little or no effort tilting against these windmills" (Haberman, 1995, p. 40). The highly committed urban teachers in this sample may learn this adaptive tendency over their time working in city schools.

Most likely, the results we see here for *order* may be the result of a virtuous cycle produced by a good personality/school context fit. Teachers who are inclined to let go of small annoyances and disruptions, to tolerate moments where all does not going according to plan, may be more likely to pursue work in urban schools. Over time, they may rely on and develop this quality more and more, making it stronger, like a muscle. Likewise, individuals who know order is important to them may be more likely to choose affluent suburban schools and may come, over the years, to value discipline, tidiness, and predictability even more.

Limitations

Two limitations of this study are important to mention. First, the study's sample is unique. In several ways, it does not mirror the general teaching population in the United States. Participants were recruited through an alumni email listserv, which may mean the people who volunteered for the study are different from those who did not on a variety of personality measures, including perfectionism. Furthermore, all participants are graduates of an elite teacher preparation program. As I argue above, that the sample is high achieving is in some sense an advantage, as it represents a group of people who may be more likely to excel as educators. However, future work should certainly explore the role of perfectionism in retention in different populations of teachers.

On a related note, despite evidence that the sample was made up of high academic achievers and research that suggests that high academic achievers may be more likely to produce larger learning gains in students, this study cannot tell us whether, in fact, all of the participants are or were good teachers. Neither can it tell us whether the teachers who have made a long-term commitment to the occupation are any better than the ones who did not. There is some evidence that teachers who find a good "match" with a school perform better (Jackson, 2013), lending support to the idea that better school/personality fits might lead not only to better rates of retention—as the current study suggests—but also to higher levels of student achievement. However, these are new and tentative findings and the links between them are weak. Whenever possible, measures of teacher effectiveness should be included in future studies of teacher retention to ensure we understand who, exactly, is leaving teaching or moving into urban and suburban schools and whether those labor market movements are healthy or unhealthy.

Finally, self-report data are somewhat limiting. We are relying on teachers' own analyses of their levels of perfectionism, not on an arguably more objective behavioral or experimental measure. A promising next step in work on the role of personality, specifically perfectionism, in teaching would be to bolster self-report scores with such complementary data. In particular, it could be illuminating to use observations of teachers in their classrooms. Examining the ways more and less "order-focused" teachers respond to questions, decisions, and unexpected events during their day would not only help us better understand the role of personality in teacher retention but might also yield useful tools and strategies teachers anywhere could employ to manage the challenging conditions that are an inevitable part of their work.

Implications

This study's findings suggest important directions for future research. Again, the small and unique sample is a limitation, so future work should focus on replicating or expanding these findings with bigger and different groups of teachers. In particular, it is important to note that all four of the Black teachers in this study's sample were committed long term to urban schools, and that a disproportionate number of the long-term teachers in suburban schools were White (85% suburban vs. 71% urban). The number of teachers of color in this sample was too low to run any meaningful analyses testing either race as a confounding factor or whether the three dimensions of perfectionism play out differently among teachers of different racial backgrounds. However, these numbers drive home the importance of further investigating the role of perfectionism and other personality variables in the occupational commitment of teachers from different backgrounds.

Furthermore, future work should ensure that valuing order less is not associated with better or worse teaching. This study is agnostic as to whether being disciplined, tidy, and organized should be considered desirable in a teacher. There is certainly merit to this personal quality, but it would seem that there might also be benefits to flexibility, passion, and following one's instincts in the moment—especially when one's work involves children or adolescents. Indeed, Getzels and Jackson (1963) lay out how difficult it has been, historically, to find reliable connections between aspects of teacher personality and teacher effectiveness, citing the complexity of various combinations of teachers' personal qualities, students' preferences, and the social contexts of schools. It may be the case, however, that teachers higher in order do tend to benefit their students more. A finding like this would, of course, makes it problematic to celebrate teachers in urban schools who sustain themselves by taking a more laid-back approach to their jobs.

Without knowing the details that these future studies will reveal, this study does suggest some interesting implications. First of all, it suggests that personality variables like perfectionism may play a role in the teacher labor market. This is an important finding as most research on teacher retention focuses on factors external to educators, like school conditions and salary structures. These external factors will, of course, continue to be important to consider, but the findings from this study suggest that taking into account person-level variables as well as how school environment and personality interact advances our knowledge about why some teachers stay long term in the occupation and other quickly leave.

These findings might also encourage teacher candidates and those that prepare them for this work to take two actions. First, they might consider their personal qualities when choosing student teaching and job placements. Some individuals may be better suited than others for different kinds of schools, and teachers may find greater satisfaction in their work and stay in the occupation longer if the school environment/teacher personality fit is strong. This is not to say that personal qualities like perfectionism cannot be changed or shaped. Rather, this suggestion simply acknowledges that teachers are individuals with their own preferences and styles, not robots that will perform in a standardized way in every circumstance. When school/teacher fit is strong and the work environment provides a way for teachers to thrive, students stand to reap benefits (Jackson, 2013).

Second, even while acknowledging how much there is to learn about perfectionism, good teaching, and teacher retention, teacher educators and mentors might cautiously consider how their training programs can coach teachers to develop a more flexible attitude in response to some of the less predictable aspects of working in schools. Teachers who feel committed long term to urban schools, which are historically hard to staff, might be particularly well suited to take the lead in designing or leading the programs described above. They may have important lessons to teach about how to sustain oneself in the field of education, like how to let go of a need for perfect order in the classroom. More than once, thoughtful scholars who have studied teaching in depth have noted, often rather hopelessly, the characteristics endemic to this occupation that make teachers prone to burnout and attrition (Cohen, 2011; Lipsky, 1980; Lortie, 1975). While undertaking sweeping policy changes to make teaching a more humane job can be difficult, individual teachers and those who support them may be able to take small steps at the person level that make retention in this "impossible" occupation more likely.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

References

Acker, S. (1999). *The realities of teachers' work: Never a dull moment*. London, England: Cassell.

Barnes, G., Crowe, E., & Schaeffer, B. (2007). *The cost of teacher turnover in five school districts: A pilot study*. Washington, DC: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Retrieved from http://nctaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/NCTAF-Cost-of-Teacher-Turnover-2007-full-report.pdf

Beauregard, T. A. (2006). Predicting interference between work and home: A comparison of dispositional and situational antecedents. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *21*(3), 244-264.

Benner, A. D. (2000). *The cost of teacher turnover*. Austin: Texas Center for Educational Research.

Borman, G. D., & Dowling, N. M. (2008). Teacher attrition and retention: A meta-analytic and narrative review of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, *78*(3), 367-409.

Cano-García, F. J., Padilla-Muñoz, E. M., & Carrasco-Ortiz, M. A. (2005). Personality and contextual variables in teacher burnout. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *38*, 929-940.

Clark, M. A., Lelchook, A. M., & Taylor, M. L. (2010). Beyond the Big Five: How narcissism, perfectionism, and dispositional affect relate to workaholism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *48*(7), 786-791.

Clotfelter, C., Ladd, H., Vigdor, J., & Diaz, R. (2004). Do school accountability systems make it more difficult for low-performing schools to attract and retain high-quality teachers? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *23*(2), 251-271.

Cohen, D. K. (2011). *Teachers and its predicaments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Day, C., & Gu, Q. (2010). *The new lives of teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Flett, G. L., Hewitt, P. L., Blankstein, K. R., & Gray, L. (1998). Psychological distress and the frequency of perfectionistic thinking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*(5), 1363-1381.

Flett, G. L., Hewitt, P. L., & Hallett, C. J. (1995). Perfectionism and job stress in teachers. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, *11*(1), 32-42.

Getzels, J. W., & Jackson, P. W. (1963). The teacher's personality and characteristics. In N. L. Gage (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (pp. 506-582). Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

Goldhaber, D. (2002). The mystery of good teaching. *Education Next*, *2*(1), 50-55.

Guin, K. (2004). Chronic teacher turnover in urban elementary schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *12*(42), 1-30.

Haberman, M. (1995). *Star teachers of children in poverty*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Ingersoll, R. M. (2003). *Is there really a teacher shortage?* (Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy Document R-03-4). Retrieved from http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/Shortage-RI-09-2003.pdf

Ingersoll, R. M., & May, H. (2012). The magnitude, destinations, and determinants of mathematics and science teacher turnover. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *34*(4), 435-464.

Jackson, C. K. (2013). Match quality, worker productivity, and worker mobility: Direct evidence from teachers. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, *95*, 1096-1116.

Jacob, B. A. (2007). The challenges of staffing urban schools with effective teachers. *The Future of Children*, *17*(1), 129-153.

Johnson, S. M., Berg, J., & Donaldson, M. (2005). *Who stays in teaching and why: A review of the literature on teacher*

retention (Project on the Next Generation of Teachers). Cambridge: MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Johnson, S. M., & Birkeland, S. E. (2003). Pursuing a "sense of success": New teachers explain their career decisions. *American Educational Research Journal*, *40*(3), 581-617.

Johnson, S. M., Cooper, C., Cartwright, S., Donald, I., Taylor, P., & Millet, C. (2005). The experience of work-related stress across occupations. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, *20*(2), 178-187.

Johnson, S. M., Kraft, M. A., & Papay, J. P. (2012). How context matters in high-need schools: The effects of teachers' working conditions on their professional satisfaction and their students' achievement. *Teachers College Record*, *114*(10). Retrieved from http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16685

Jones, B. K. (2016). *A special kind of ambition: The role of personality in the long-term retention of academically elite teachers*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

Kraft, M. A., Papay, J. P., Charner-Laird, M., Johnson, S. M., Ng, M., & Reinhorn, S. K. (2014). *Educating amidst uncertainty: The organizational supports teachers need to serve students in high-poverty, urban schools*. Retrieved from http://scholar. harvard.edu/files/mkraft/files/students_paper_complete_ draft_091414.pdf

Kyriacou, C. (2001). Teacher stress: Directions for future research. *Educational Review*, *53*(1), 27-35.

Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2002). Teacher sorting and the plight of urban schools: A descriptive analysis. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *24*(1), 37-62.

Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York, NY: Russell Sage.

Loeb, S., Darling-Hammond, L., & Luczak, J. (2005). How teaching conditions predict teacher turnover in California schools. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *80*(3), 44-70.

Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

McAdams, D. P. (1992). The five-factor model in personality: A critical appraisal. *Journal of Personality*, *60*(2), 329-361.

McAdams, D. P., & Olson, B. D. (2010). Personality development: Continuity and change over the life course. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *61*, 517-542.

McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new Big Five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist*, *61*(3), 204-217.

Milanowski, A. T., & Odden, A. R. (2007, April 6). *A new approach to the cost of teacher turnover* (Working Paper No. 13). Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from http://media.digitalarchives.wa.gov/WA.Media/do/D3DE DEB1349D6688E752522AA5965F8B.pdf

Mitchelson, J. K. (2009). Seeking the perfect balance: Perfectionism and work-family conflict. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *82*, 349-367.

Mobley, M., Slaney, R. B., & Rice, K. G. (2005). Cultural validity of the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised for African American college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *52*(4), 629-639.

Nakano, K. (2009). Perfectionism, self-efficacy, and depression: Preliminary analysis of the Japanese version of the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised. *Psychological Reports*, *104*(3), 896-908.

Park, H. (2009). Validation of the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised. *Korean Journal of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, *21*, 131-149.

Robertson-Craft, C., & Duckworth, A. (2014). True grit: Trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals predicts effectiveness and retention among novice teachers. *Teachers College Record*, *116*(3). Retrieved from http://www.tcrecord. org/ExecSummary.asp?contentid=17352

Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2012). *How teacher turnover harms student achievement*. Washington, DC: The National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research.

Slaney, R. B., Rice, K. G., Mobley, M., Trippi, J., & Ashby, J. S. (2001). The revised Almost Perfect Scale. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, *34*(3), 130-145.

Stoeber, J., & Rennert, D. (2008). Perfectionism in school teachers: Relations with stress appraisals, coping styles, and burnout. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, *21*, 37-53.

Taylor, K., & Rich, M. (2015, April 20). Teachers' unions fight standardized testing, and find diverse allies. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/21/ education/teachers-unions-reasserting-themselves-with-push-against-standardized-testing.html?_r=1

Vandiver, B. J., & Worrell, F. C. (2002). The reliability and validity of scores on the Almost Perfect Scale–Revised with academically talented middle school students. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, *13*(3), 108-119.

Wang, K. T., Slaney, R. B., & Rice, K. G. (2007). Perfectionism in Chinese university students from Taiwan: A study of psychological well-being and achievement motivation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *42*(7), 1279-1290. doi:10.1016/j. paid.2006.10.006

Author Biography

Brady K. Jones is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University.