Solutions for New Chinese Teachers' Quitting

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the issue of new Chinese teachers' attrition and some resolutions. Chinese novice teachers' leaving results from professional and personal factors, among which the excessive workloads caused by the current curriculum reform and new teachers' lack of self-efficacy, together with unrealistic career expectations, are the pushing factors. Building a cooperative and supportive environment is an effective way to solve that issue, wherein collaborative partnership and supportive leadership have a positive effect on new Chinese teachers' intention to stay in the career. Sufficient academic and emotional support from colleagues and school leaders empowers new Chinese teachers to overcome the challenges during the early years of their career.

As an educational issue, the attrition rates of new Chinese teachers have drawn increasing attention. For example, of the 510 teachers who participated in a survey in Jiling Province of China, 40% expressed their intention to leave the teaching profession (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012, p. 160). Being exposed to new roles and workplaces, new teachers start teaching but then choose to quit, which is a cumulative and lingering process, and is not triggered by one specific event (Gallant & Riley, 2014). Among the various reasons for Chinese novice teachers' leaving are both professional and personal factors. In terms of solutions, sufficient support from colleagues and school leaders has a positive effect on new Chinese teachers' intention to stay in the career. Collaborative partnership functions well with new teachers, especially in knowledge sharing and reflecting on colleagues' feedback. Supportive leadership is effective to enable new teachers to overcome challenges in the workplace by setting up workshops and offering emotional support. A cooperative and supportive school culture has a significant and sustained influence on new teachers.

Why the Teachers Quit

The pushing factors that cause Chinese beginning teachers' quitting can be narrowed down to professional and personal factors. Professional factors that push new Chinese teachers out of the door are the challenge from the current curriculum reform in China and the heavy workloads caused by that reform. The latest curriculum reform emplaced in 2001 aims to change the traditional system, which overstressed knowledge delivery by promoting student-centered methodology (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). Meanwhile, the current educational system in China remains examination driven. Most teachers struggle with a balance between preparing students for examinations and encouraging students' participation in the classroom. It is overwhelming for new teachers, because they are not equipped with sufficient teaching experience. As a result, they feel lost in excessive workloads with various responsibilities, which affect new teachers' physical and mental health. Under such circumstances, most new Chinese teachers experience a high level of work pressure, 42% of whom are reported to be under an extreme stress (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012, p. 160). Complex teaching tasks, in conjunction with mental health problems, are unmanageable for new teachers, because they are in the process of turning from "student teachers" to "real teachers." Becoming stuck in paperwork and accountability tasks decreases teachers' motivation and leaves them worn down (Pells, 2017). This is when teachers' burnout occurs. Being unable to handle workloads to meet the curriculum reform's requirements, Chinese teachers tend to leave early during their career.

Personal factors consist of unrealistic career expectations and lack of self-efficacy, which play an important role in novice teachers' decisions to quit. Embracing unrealistic career

expectations is a dominant factor that wears new Chinese teachers down. The moment they start to teach, many new teachers wrongly match their ideal with reality (Gallant & Riley, 2014). Those teachers who leave later expand their responsibilities, often with the purpose of making a difference in teenagers. Some teachers compare teaching with successful experiments of their teaching training and teaching practice at university (Harfitt, 2015). When they are preoccupied with what they expected, they have little flexibility in adjusting themselves to the real situation. Being idealistic during their early teaching days causes some beginning teachers to quit because there is a gap between reality and idealism.

Weak self-efficacy is another personal factor that contributes to early career attrition in China. Self-efficacy is strongly associated with teacher burnout (Larrivee, 2012). Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy treat difficulties as challenges and devote themselves to reverse adversities in order to solve problems actively and positively (Hong, 2012). However, new teachers with weak self-efficacy perceive tough problems as impassable obstacles, and they choose to shrink back. They convince themselves that it was their personality that brought about problems (Hong, 2012). Weak self-efficacy exacerbates their frustration, and gradually they come to the point where they suffer depression and leave.

Taking a deep insight into those pushing factors, we find that isolation and lack of support lie in the consequence of both professional and personal factors. Novice teachers start to teach, hoping to make a difference, but they find it disappointing that it is impossible to obtain adequate support to fulfil that goal (Buchanan, 2012). Without adequate professional and emotional support in the workplace, new teachers possess weak self-efficacy and limited resources to conquer challenges, which range from classroom management to teaching approaches. Therefore, they are hindered by a lack of confidence and job satisfaction.

How to Keep the Teachers from Quitting

The effective solution for that issue new Chinese teachers' quitting is to set up a cooperative and supportive school culture in which new teachers have access to collaborative partnership and supportive leadership. Teachers need collaboration and support, but new teachers experience isolation (Burke, Aubusson, Schuck, Buchanan, & Prescott, 2015). Collaborative partnerships inspire teachers to create powerful ideas and enable them to handle school-based problems with effective methods (Ado, 2013). Sharing knowledge with colleagues and reflecting on feedback from colleagues are two highly valued forms that embody collaborative relationships between new teachers and other colleagues. Growing into a skillful teacher requires more than knowing the theory of teaching (Zhang, Zhou, & Zhang, 2016). Sharing knowledge with experienced teachers is desirable for most new Chinese teachers to obtain practical knowledge. Set in the Chinese educational system, beginning teachers are at the phase when they need time and practice to perceive teaching in a complicated situation. It indicates a transition from pre-service to in-service, which implies that teachers are developing into professional educators with positive attitudes toward teaching and objective perspectives of education. The hands-on experience from veterans is of great help to accelerate this process, because sharing knowledge enables new teachers to fit into the new environment quickly, and build up their confidence. Sharing knowledge provides direct assistance for new teachers and contributes to collaboration among teachers of all experience levels, which is vitally important to retain new teachers in schools (Ado, 2013).

Reflecting on feedback from colleagues is an effective way to enable new teachers to improve teaching skills continuously. Being reflective is a core benchmark in the teaching profession (Ng, Murphy, Mccullagh, Doherty, & Mcleod, 2014). It is important for teachers to develop self-awareness and be ready to change through reflective practice. Following planning and teaching, reflective practice provides myriad evidence for teachers to assess their daily practice. Critical feedback stimulates teachers to rethink, challenge, and refresh the quality of their teaching practice (Daniel, Auhl, & Hastings, 2013). Feedback from colleagues is beneficial

for novice teachers to realize what they need to explore in teaching. Positive feedback conveys evaluation to new teachers, which helps to enhance teacher efficacy (Hoi, Zhou, Teo, & Nie, 2017). It empowers new teachers to become professional educators, which represents that they have gone through the initial years of frustration. Preeminent teachers are those who undertake reflective practice, during which they estimate and identify their own abilities, and address vulnerabilities in order to achieve professional development (Ng et al., 2014). Reflecting on feedback from colleagues contributes to a strong sense of job satisfaction and a low rate of novice teachers' departure.

Supportive leadership is closely linked with building a positive and collaborative school culture. New teachers are more sensitive to school culture and principal leadership (Hong, 2012). School leaders are the key drivers to foster growth and job satisfaction among early career teachers. Academic and emotional support from school leaders reduces new teachers' work-related stress, and facilitates their participation in professional development opportunities. Regarding academic support, principals are responsible for developing programs for new teachers to attain assistance from colleagues. One main duty that principals demonstrate is to create an environment wherein teachers have access to continuous and collaborative support (Meador, 2016). Being engaged in academic programs, new teachers have more chances to experience successful teaching practice, which in turn improves teachers' self-efficacy. Academic programs vary in forms, such as action research workshops, co-teaching, and observing partners. Partnership in action research empowers new teachers to improve themselves by learning actively. The advantages of co-teaching include working with a friend giving critical advice, enhancing confidence, developing the learning environment, and improving teaching methodology by means of taking more drills (Ng et al., 2014). Observing partners' behaviours is a valuable method to strengthen new teachers' reflective practice. By providing academic support, principals are instrumental in decreasing new teachers' isolation and anxiety.

Sufficient emotional support from principals positively affects new teachers' personal and professional well-being. Emotional support from the school leadership appears to have a significant and sustained influence on new teachers (Gallant & Riley, 2014). The reason lies in the fact that the first years of teaching are stressful for novice teachers. Most of them are struggling to become involved in school culture, hoping that they have access to professional advice and humanistic care from the school leadership. Authentic and humane communications between principals and new teachers are valued by many beginning teachers. School administrators' verbal persuasion and acknowledgment of teachers' devotion are effective ways to boost teachers' sense of efficacy (Hong, 2012). An open-door policy is beneficial for both school leaders and teachers, which indicates the first step to develop a healthy and professional relationship between leaders and new teachers. School leaders create an atmosphere in which teachers feel comfortable to talk about their concerns and confuse. It is particularly necessary for principals to give advice and guidance to beginning teachers (Meador, 2016). In this case, principals are instructional leaders. Regular personal communication is inspiring, and it accelerates novice teachers' engagement with confidence in the new environment. Emotional support from leaders strengthens new teachers' feeling of being supported and responded, which increases their willingness to stay in the profession.

Conclusion

New Chinese teachers are leaving schools in alarming numbers for a variety of reasons. Two leading professional factors are the latest curriculum reform and burdensome workloads. Two personal factors relate to unrealistic expectations and a weak sense of self-efficacy. New teachers are isolated without sufficient support. Mental health concerns caused by heavy workloads and lack of support could force teachers to leave (Pells, 2017). The solutions involve setting up collaborative partnerships and supportive leadership, which root in a positive and

cooperative school culture. Valuable support for early career teachers contributes to teachers' efficacy and lower rates of attrition due to burnout (Burke et al., 2015). Collaborative partnerships involve giving new teachers enough time and space to share knowledge with experienced teachers. Being reflective on feedback from colleagues is another useful way for early career teachers to gain support from colleagues. Principals who are engaged in supportive leadership develop academic programs to ensure that new teachers do not work in isolation but work collaboratively. Emotional support from leaders, which includes communicating frequently with new teachers, is an effective way to ease new teachers' anxiety. When new teachers become capable to overcome challenges with adequate support from colleagues and principals, they will have a strong sense of job satisfaction, and they will strive to become professional educators.

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