"We Need to Be in the Classroom More": Veteran Teachers' Views on Teacher Preparation and Retention

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Annual teacher attrition hovers around 8% and causes of teacher attrition have been studied widely. However, more needs to be known about specific aspects of teacher preparation that can foster retention. The goal of this study was to understand the perspectives of veteran teachers regarding retention. This investigation employed semi-structured interviews with teachers who graduated from a south western university and who have persisted in their teaching careers in a large, urban school district. Our analyses conveyed that rich field experiences and particular characteristics of mentor teachers can foster retention; however, these persisters also persevered through inauthentic teacher preparation experiences.

Keywords: teacher retention, teacher preparation programs

Introduction

In the United States, national teacher attrition has been on the rise since the 1990s when it was less than 6% (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Today, attrition hovers around 8% and translates to an annual national cost between $1 and $2.2 billion or approximately $4.9 billion when teacher transfers are included (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). The cost to student learning is more difficult to calculate, since teachers are more effective with successive years in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2000). This attrition is disproportionately high in schools serving traditionally disenfranchised students (Berry et al., 2008; Ingersoll, 2003). Although some researchers have demonstrated that traditionally-prepared teachers remain in the classroom longer than alternatively certified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutcher et al., 2016; Zhang

& Zeller, 2016), more information needs to be learned about what teacher preparation programs can do to foster teacher retention in light of current and impending shortages (Sutcher et al., 2016). The purpose of this study was to learn more about the retention of graduates of one teacher licensure program at a large university in the south western United States. Specifically, we wanted to understand their perceptions of program-level factors that may have contributed to their retention.

In this study, we use the language of *movers*, *stayers*, and *leavers* which is derived from the national teacher attrition work in the United States conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). Specifically, *movers* are those teachers who move between schools, *stayers* are teachers who remain in the same school, and *leavers* are those who voluntarily or involuntarily leave the profession. In our study, we focus on movers and stayers to learn from the expertise of those teachers who have remained in teaching beyond the first five years. We focused on teachers with five or more years of experience since much teacher retention literature has studied the attrition rates of teachers during this critical period (e.g., Gray & Taie, 2015). We asked these participants about the strongest aspects of their preparation programs and solicited recommendations regarding measures the teacher preparation program can take to foster retention. The research questions for this study were: (a) What characteristics of the Western University[1] teacher preparation programs do veteran teachers

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[1] All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

recognize as contributing to their retention? and (b) What actions do movers and stayers recommend that the Western University program take to retain teachers in the profession?

Literature Review

Our review of teacher retention literature uncovered the following themes: (a) factors that influence teachers to leave teaching, and (b) factors that influence teachers to stay in teaching. We then discuss the research on teacher preparation and retention specifically.

Factors that Influence Teachers to Leave Teaching

Extant literature on teacher retention often highlights reasons why teachers leave the classroom. Traditionally, these reasons have included stress (Howard & Johnson, 2004), inadequate or inappropriate training for specialized areas (e.g., special education; Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011), holding a part-time or itinerant position as opposed to a full-time teaching position (Gardner, 2010), a lack of job satisfaction (Shaw & Newton, 2014), and school performance on standardized assessments (Ingersoll et al., 2016). In a study on language teachers, Swanson (2012) found that attrition may be related to how well a teacher's personality is supported by the school environment. Elementary and humanities teachers have lower attrition rates whereas mathematics, science, English for speakers of other languages, and special education teachers have higher turnover rates (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Dee & Goldhaber, 2017; Sutcher et al., 2016). School-level factors for attrition include administration, testing and accountability, and dissatisfaction with the career (Sutcher et al., 2016). Title I schools (those with a high percentage of students from low income families) also experience higher turnover rates than non-Title I schools, which may be linked to resources. Teacher turnover is the highest in the South and lower in the Northeast where salaries tend to be higher. Struyven and Vanthournout (2014) found that a lack of future prospects (i.e., leadership positions) was a leading cause of teacher attrition. Dee and Goldhaber (2017) noted that where a teacher grew up exerts influence on retention as well, and teacher licensure may constrain labor markets.

Factors that Influence Teachers to Stay in Teaching

Among studies that focused on why teachers persist, school-based factors were most influential. Strong professional learning communities and relationships with colleagues are essential for retention (Rhodes & Brundrette, 2012). Specifically, having the support of another adult in a classroom can positively influence retention (Martinez et al., 2010). Consistent, diverse professional development (Rhodes & Brundrette, 2012; Shaha & Ellsworth, 2013) and participation in an induction program (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011) have also been linked to higher teacher retention. Additionally, Rhodes and Brundrette (2012) found that teachers were more likely to persist if they felt a sense of belonging, respect, and appreciation. A survey of over 1,000 teachers in a southern school district suggested that schools should increase salaries, reduce teacher workloads, and focus on improving parent and student cooperation and participation (Hughes, 2012). In a small study of two teachers who left the profession and later returned, Harfitt (2015) found that the teachers missed their relationships with their students. Thus, students may help to retain teachers as well.

Teachers who persist also have common dispositions—for example, resilience (Doney, 2013). Resilience is the ability to positively adapt "within the context of adversity" (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 554) and "to manage the unavoidable uncertainties inherent in the realities of teaching" (Gu & Day, 2013, 39). Teachers who possess this trait are more committed to the profession and have a deeper sense of self than those who do not (Doney, 2013). Developing a personal identity (Hochstetler, 2011) and high self-efficacy (Elliott et al., 2010) were also shown to increase teacher retention. These traits contribute to building resiliency and, thus, commitment to the profession (Doney, 2013).

Teacher Preparation and Retention

Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2011) found that research has neglected to connect retention and three significant areas: teacher education, teacher quality, and academic ability. However, some evidence shows a link between school-university partnerships and teacher retention. The review also shows consistent evidence that after teachers have two years of experience, traditionally prepared and certified teachers who complete an undergraduate or master's level teacher preparation program remain in teaching at higher rates than alternatively certified teachers (Cochran-Smith et al., 2011; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). National data sets demonstrate that traditionally-

prepared teachers remain in schools longer than alternatively certified teachers—particularly in Title I schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutcher et al., 2016). Studies on teacher residency programs have demonstrated retention rates of 90-95% in the first three years of teaching (Berry et al., 2008). In their study of the Boston Teacher Residency, Papay, West, Fullerton, and Kane (2012) discovered that graduates' retention rates exceeded that of their peers by 20 percentage points. However, none of this research looked at the characteristics of these programs, specifically, to learn more about what fosters retention. Berry and colleagues (2008) hypothesized that the partnerships between teacher preparation providers and community members are crucial to supporting teacher learning over time, whereas Sutcher and colleagues (2016) noted that quality clinical preparation tied to school districts buoys retention rates.

We recognize that veteran teachers who have persisted in teaching have a wealth of expertise that can provide insight into the elements of teacher preparation that may help new teachers to remain—and thrive—in teaching. As a result, we examined the perspectives of these veteran teachers to learn what they viewed as the strongest elements of their own preparation, and what one teacher preparation program can do to encourage new teachers to remain in the profession—thus addressing the void identified by Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2011) and building on the work of Sutcher and colleagues (2016). The current study consisted of eight comprehensive interviews with teachers who chose to remain in a large school district.

Methods

The current study explored what graduates of an urban teacher preparation program perceived as the strongest aspects of their preparation and their recommendations for how the program can contribute to teacher retention. A qualitative design was deemed most appropriate to exploring our research questions since relatively little is known about any links between teacher preparation and teacher retention. The research questions guiding this study were: (a) What characteristics of teacher preparation programs do veteran teachers recognize as contributing to their retention? and (b) What actions do movers and stayers recommend the Western University program take to retain teachers in the profession?

Research Context

Each of the eight participants graduated from an undergraduate- or graduate-level teacher preparation program at a mid-sized university (over 25,000 students) in the south western United States called Western University. The University serves Western School District, which is large and urban, and the College of Education aims to prepare teachers for urban schools. According to the American Community Survey Profiles ([ACS]; 2006-2010) in the Western School District, 40% of students identified as Hispanic or Latino, 38% as White, 12% as Black, and 7% as Asian; other students identified as American Indian and Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, another race not listed, or two or more races. Approximately 75% of schools in this district are considered Title I schools. The participants in this study taught at 5 different schools located throughout the district that serves over 200,000 students. Based on data from 2004-2016, annual teacher attrition in this district ranges from 5.4% to 9.5% (citation withheld to preserve confidentiality).

Participant Selection and Data Collection

The sample for this study included eight secondary teachers who completed a teacher licensure program at Western University and who remained in the local school district as teachers of record (see Table 1). We chose to focus solely on secondary teachers because of the differences in the elementary and secondary programs at Western University and most national teacher education programs (e.g., different courses and/or field experiences). Each participant had between 5 and 19 years of teaching experience at the time of their interview. All of the participants taught at a middle or high school; two participants taught in special education classrooms, and six were general educators. All participants except for one had switched schools or moved into a new position within their school (e.g., history teacher to special educator; see Table 1). Snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) was used for this study to identify a wide variety of movers and stayers with various levels and years of experience in public education.

Data collection began in January 2015 and concluded in October 2015. Interview data were collected to address the strengths of the teachers' preparation programs and included questions like, "What were the strongest aspects of the program?", "What were the weakest aspects of the program?", and "What do you suggest that [Western University] do to reduce teacher attrition?" Semi-structured interviews

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Teacher	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Discipline	Grade Level	Years Teaching	Status
Alice	31	Female	White	Social Studies, Autism	6 – 8	7	Mover
Andrew	37	Male	White	English, Computers	6 – 8	5	Mover
Kate	47	Female	White	Art	9 – 12	19	Mover
Kelly	35	Female	White	Math	8	10	Mover
Megan	30	Female	White	Social Studies	7	7	Mover
Mekenna	28	Female	White	Math	7 & 8	5	Stayer
Rick	28	Male	White	English	7	5	Mover
Wendy	59	Female	White	Special Education-Math	6 – 8	5	Mover

facilitated the collection of similar data across participants but provided the flexibility to ask follow-up questions to cull complete, rich data (Merriam, 2009). Interviews lasted between 33 and 64 minutes. In all, 6 hours and 30 minutes of audio data and 199 pages of transcript data were collected.

Data Analysis

Two rounds of qualitative data analysis were conducted (Saldaña, 2009). During the first round of analysis, the research team chose one transcript on which to conduct open coding simultaneously in the process of analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002). Once consensus was reached on this interview, each team member coded subsequent transcripts independently. Next, the research team used these codes to draft a narrative about each participant. After sharing this narrative with each participant for member checking (80% of narratives were member checked), we conducted a cross-case analysis on the narratives to identify important themes and ideas. Finally, the major themes uncovered in these initial rounds of analysis were compiled in an Excel matrix to indicate patterns of beliefs across participants (Stake, 2006).

Findings

Our analyses uncovered a detailed explanation regarding what veteran teachers believed the Western University program could do to foster teacher retention. Our findings centered on field experiences, and our participants provided nuance regarding what they believed to be the most effective elements of these experiences. Additionally, these participants cited the need for greater alignment between universities and school districts.

Robust Field Experiences

Our participants consistently mentioned field experiences as either a factor in their own retention or as a possible area for teacher preparation programs to develop to foster teacher retention. For example, when we asked Alice—a veteran special educator—what the Western University program could do to reduce attrition she noted, "We need to be in the classroom more." Kate concurred with this sentiment, "The practicum teaching was an eye-opener to whether you wanted to continue or not, and that was early enough in the program." Although she had been in the classroom for 19 years, Kate recognized the importance of having a practicum early on in her teacher preparation program to determine her fit for teaching. Within the theme of field experiences, two subthemes emerged: field experience coordination and mentoring.

Field experience coordination. Within this subtheme, participants noted the importance of authentic field experiences, the coordination of placements, and the sequence of placements as useful in retaining teachers. First, several participants noted the importance of "authentic" field experiences, which they mainly located in urban schools. Their definition of authentic seems to relate to the diversity of students in their classes and to the behavior management concerns that they faced. Mekenna, a fifth-year math teacher, explained,

I can go to a school up in [the affluent suburbs] and not necessarily deal with those particular issues that we discussed in class, and then I come here [to Central Middle School] and it's like, oh the issue may be 10 times worse than the issues we discussed.

Thus, Mekenna felt that the urban school where she student taught and was later hired was more authentic than some of the affluent, suburban schools. Andrew, a veteran English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, expressed a similar opinion,

I think working in the inner city is a really authentic experience. I think we need that. I needed that because I grew up in a suburban setting. I went to suburban schools. I only dealt with people who generally looked like me and talked like me … for newer teachers, especially, kids who are coming right out of high school into college to be teachers, demographically they tend to be White, middle class females, and they need the experience of being around people who are not like them.

Megan, a social studies teacher in her 7th year of teaching, added nuance to Mekenna and Andrew's sentiments when she noted, "I feel like if new teachers were put downtown for instance like at [Central] they [would] fall in love with it because … that's where they feel like they can make the most difference."

Our participants also cited other specific elements of field experiences as important to retention. Megan, a veteran social studies teacher, thought that consistent practicum and student teaching placements were important,

I think it's the best way of doing it—having your [practicum] in the classroom and getting familiar with the classroom and students and then going into your student teaching in that same classroom. I feel like that is what keeps teachers in the classroom.

Mekenna, however, expressed a different view, "I think more experience [in the field] is beneficial because then [PSTs] see it and making them be placed at a different dynamic versus another dynamic so they can see where they fit." Thus, Mekenna thought that a variety of field experiences would help PSTs better determine what kind of school they wanted to work in. The issue of multiple field placements versus stable field placements should continue to be explored as calls for deepening clinical teacher preparation proliferate (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2015; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] Blue Ribbon Panel, 2010).

Like Kate, Alice also noted the importance of scheduling field experiences early on, I had already done a full year of classes before I'd even set foot in a classroom to see if this is really what I want to do. Luckily I'd grown up around classrooms. A lot of my classmates, like that's the first time they ever were on that end and *not* as a student. So I think putting the undergrads in the classrooms sooner is important because they change their minds in year one instead of year four. (original emphasis)

Mentoring. Mentoring was an important support system for our participants for a variety of reasons. Kate, the sole art teacher in our sample, explained how an exceptional mentor influenced her during student teaching,

It was perfect. I mean, I'm still friends with those two people to this day. One of them is now my best friend … Totally felt like I was ready to go the next time when I was on my own.

Andrew, a veteran ELA teacher, echoed Kate's sentiments,

I had a phenomenal mentor teacher. I was his second student teacher, and he was still in the process of learning how to be a mentor teacher. But from day one, when he described his class, it lined up *exactly* with what they were saying was cutting edge, state of the art, best practices in English… And he had a great knowledge of the *school*, of the neighborhood, the history. (original emphasis)

Indeed, Andrew advocated that the value of his mentor in teacher preparation should not be taken lightly—that there were three other teachers on their campus who had all been his student teachers and who were enjoying the longevity in teaching that Andrew had. For Kate effective mentoring referred to an experience that lined up with what she needed to know as a teacher of record while Andrew appreciated his mentor's pedagogical content knowledge.

Andrew also mentioned his mentor's understanding of the school and community context as valuable. Andrew was hired at Central Middle School, a professional development school (PDS), and noted the benefits of having his mentor on campus, "when I had a question it wasn't like I send an email or do a phone call or make arrangements to meet him. I just walk." Since the two men were now teaching at the same school, they developed a "very rich history of collaboration." Thus, their relationship evolved from one of mentoring to one of peer collaboration—a relationship that Kate also alluded to. Thus, a local mentoring situation—i.e., the PST is prepared to teach close to home or is prepared for relocation to a specific district—may provide additional opportunities for continued support into the first few years of teaching.

School-University Alignment

The second and final theme that our participants mentioned was alignment between schools and universities. Our participants cited weaknesses of the Western University program that they felt did not assist them in their development as teachers, including inauthentic (i.e., not matching their experiences as teachers of record) and redundant course work. Alice, a veteran special educator, felt unprepared for her first year of teaching, and she described her teacher preparation coursework,

> I felt like it was a lot of fluff kind of stuff that they made you do to fill time when they could have actually used it to show you reality in the classroom … I would say that my first year of teaching—no, I was not prepared. I went into a high school, and taught history, and it was a hot mess. And I had no behavior management … I didn't know how to lesson plan, I didn't know how to give a standardized test. I didn't know how to even open a grade book let alone navigate it enough to put in grades *on* time. (original emphasis)

Other participants' responses afforded variations on this inauthenticity. Mekenna, the math stayer, elaborated on how this inauthenticity cropped up at their PDS by explaining that lesson planning was done according to the University's template rather than using the school's method. Something as simple as a lesson plan template caused concern for student teachers who were still learning the complex process of lesson planning. Megan, the social studies teacher, noted, "I took lesson planning courses. But do I write my lesson plans like that? No. I learned the basics … I learned the pedagogy but I learned how to apply the pedagogy in the class." Thus, her field experience offset this inauthenticity. Kelly, a veteran math teacher, also felt that "all we did was learn how to do lesson plans. I don't feel that we really talked about much else." Rick, a veteran ELA teacher, noted that, "a lot of classes repeated themselves." This was a sentiment that Andrew noted as well; thus, there may have been an issue with the alignment of these courses. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) has critiqued teacher preparation for distributing "easy A's [*sic*]" (2014, p. 1) and utilizing inauthentic and watered-down coursework. Feedback from our participants confirmed that they felt that their teacher preparation coursework was not always useful to their growth as educators. Although NCTQ's methods are questionable (i.e., analysis of teacher preparation syllabi against arbitrary guidelines generated by NCTQ), our participants have lent credence for this critique of one program.

Andrew, the ELA mover, provided a recommendation for amending this issue by flipping the structure of school-university partnerships so that the program begins with P-12 students and families and is built around their needs rather than the University dictating the program from the top down. Wendy, a veteran special education teacher, also noted the need to align teacher preparation better with the local district,

> It could be called [Western School District] management. So the latest and greatest now is [scripted curriculum]. The latest and greatest a while back was something else, and something else. And I understand that as knowledge is gained practices will change. But things were put into place so fast and so much change and almost like a do-or-die or you're in trouble.

Again, Wendy seems to be calling for the Western University program to be flipped to focus on the demands and needs of the school district.

Limitations

The value of the current study is analytic generalization (Yin, 2009). Although Yin was addressing case study specifically when he coined the notion of analytic generalization, we feel it is applicable to the goals of our study. Graduates of the Western University program cannot speak for teacher preparation programs broadly; rather, their beliefs and perspectives have been shaped by the Western program alone. Thus, our initial exploration is just that: it provides value in understanding veteran teachers' beliefs about what aspects of a teacher preparation program, including field experiences, influenced movers' and stayers' retention in the classroom. Additional research should be done within other programs to build upon this work and to understand nuance and context within other programs.

Although the current study sheds light on what movers and stayers believe teacher education programs can do to foster teacher retention, it also suffered from several limitations as any study does (Patton, 2002). First of all, the sample in this study was predominantly White and female even though there are many male teachers and teachers of color in the school district, and the students enrolled in the teacher preparation program are more ethnically and linguistically diverse than those represented here. In privileging the voices of movers and stayers, it is important to ensure that the voices of ethnically and linguistically marginalized teachers are highlighted.

Conclusions and Discussion

This investigation provides new insight into the connection between teacher preparation and teacher retention through exploring the views of movers and stayers. These participants highlighted the importance of field experiences and elaborated on what aspects of field experiences could be most valuable to fostering teacher retention. Although there is a body of research on clinical field experiences (e.g., Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005), one point raised by our participants that should be explored further is the benefits of multiple field placements over a solitary placement. Although both methods provide benefits and challenges to PSTs, a better understanding of each would help programs design these experiences to better meet the needs of their PSTs and P-12 students. Our participants also conveyed the importance of scheduling field experiences early on in teacher preparation programs to allow candidates to better determine their fit for the profession.

Our participants' emphasis on authentic teacher education experiences should be troubled. Both Mekenna and Andrew believed that working in an urban school was an "authentic" experience. Mekenna believed that this was because of issues she saw in her school environment, and Andrew felt it was because the school was more diverse than his own experience growing up in the suburbs. However, neither of these teachers conveyed critically conscious views that demonstrated their understanding of the assets of their students and their own positionality as White teachers in these schools. Although Andrew mentioned the demographic misalignment between teachers and students, he did not articulate how he had benefitted from his students or whether he had acknowledged his privilege at all. Megan noted that PSTs would fall in love with urban teaching because that is where they could make a difference which reinforces a savior view (Chubbuck, 2010) of White teachers working in urban environments. Teacher preparation programs must not only prepare teachers for retention, but ensure that these teachers are considering their own positionality within their schools and how to serve all students equitably. This issue should be addressed in future studies of teacher retention and teacher preparation; however, preliminary studies of social justice views of in-service teachers have conveyed how difficult it is for teachers to enact and maintain these beliefs (Agarwall, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2010).

Our participants also noted the importance of training PSTs in PDSs where the administration and faculty have experience in teacher preparation. This seems to be an important finding that should continue to be explored as a link is made between teacher preparation and retention. Indeed, at least two mentors provided longitudinal support to movers and stayers and one of these taught at a PDS site with their mentee. This longitudinal mentoring should be explored further, and PDS sites provide unique access for such studies.

Finally, teacher preparation programs such as Western University may need to prepare PSTs to be resilient—a quality that has been demonstrated to buoy teacher retention (Doney, 2013). These participants described experiences with inauthentic and redundant coursework which is not a new critique of teacher preparation (i.e., NCTQ, 2014). Although this coursework could have inadvertently fostered resilience in some PSTs, teacher preparation curriculum could be revamped to more intentionally foster resilience. Programs could evaluate their curricula to note where redundancies exist and work with districts to identify relevant topics to be incorporated. There are other considerations for fostering resilience in PSTs as well.

First, although teacher movement between schools or districts is costly, it may be comparable to losing a teacher from the profession altogether. Thus, teacher preparation programs may want to coach candidates to look for signs of positive school climate and culture during interviews and how to know when they should move schools. Indeed, Sutcher and colleagues (2016) have recommended a national teacher supply as one answer to localized shortages. Additionally, teacher preparation programs may take a more holistic approach to preparation and demonstrate the possibilities for growth and renewal across the teacher preparation continuum. Finally, it has long been recognized that teaching children in poverty requires navigating schools that function as bureaucracies (Haberman, 1995). Providing candidates with this capital may help them thrive in difficult environments.

Teacher shortages are a "coming crisis" (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 8) in teacher education. The issue is most persistent in underserved urban and rural schools with a significant amount of traditionally marginalized students. Thus, it is imperative to address not only issues of teacher retention, but also teacher beliefs and practices related to a student body who is diverse in ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. This study is one effort toward this goal.

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