What Can We Learn About Retaining Teachers from PDS Teachers' Voices?

Practices that may retain more good teachers longer in the profession include (a) increased support for teaching grounded in standards of best practice, (b) increased teacher voice and power, and (c) reconfiguring the teacher role to include more collegial professional growth within a learning community.

Focusing on students motivates well-prepared middle grades teachers.

By Holly J. Thornton

The Teacher Shortage

As we seek to increase the quality of individuals entering and remaining in the teaching profession, we are simultaneously faced with a teacher shortage, often leading to fast track certification and lateral entry programs circumventing teacher preparation. A high quality teacher is more than just well prepared in content. "Highly qualified" teachers demonstrate proficiency in pedagogical knowledge, skills, dispositions, classroom management, and overall effective teaching practices. Finding such individuals without thorough formal prepara-

tion may be difficult. Students of fully prepared and certificated teachers out perform students of under-certified (emergency, temporary, and provisional certificated) teachers on standardized tests (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). Cultivating standards of practice within the school and classroom is key to high quality teaching and student performance (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2000). Doing so with a lack of qualified teachers is a conundrum.

Coupled with the current emphasis on recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in the field is a growing emphasis on standards-based

education. Multiple studies indicate that nearly 50% of teachers drop out of the profession within the first five years (Colbert & Wolf, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 2003; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2003). In the middle grades, teacher shortages tend to be even more severe than at other certification levels. Accompanying such statistics is the ever-growing emphasis on holding both teachers and students accountable for "standards." Increased pressure on teachers to get students to perform on standardized or state level competency tests coupled with the rewards and sanctions associated with student performance may cause teachers, both novice and veteran, to question the wisdom of becoming or remaining a middle grades teacher.

Whose definition of standards?

Recently, in response to assuring quality teaching and learning, multiple states and districts have mandated a focus on "standards," largely defined by content knowledge and specific content objectives as encompassed and determined by each state's core curriculum and related testing practices. The *No Child Left Behind Act* defines a highly qualified middle level teacher as one possessing a subject matter content major (or its equivalent) or who can pass the content portion(s) of PRAXIS II. In response to this content emphasis, middle level teacher prepara-

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tion programs have been required to increase the number of "pure content" hours within a teacher preparation program, often at the expense of content pedagogy courses and courses related to classroom management and developmentally appropriate instruction.

Despite the push for a content knowledge-based definition of standards, teacher preparation and professional development continue to embrace and build programs on pedagogical standards. Within teacher preparation the term "standards" is not just a list of content knowledge and skills, but is directly related to standards of practice. Such standards are grounded in research on teaching relevant to new (INTASC)[1] and experienced (NBPTS)[2] teachers. Standards exist to "illustrate the wide range of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that contemporary educators believe competent teachers must possess and demonstrate in the classroom" (Mitchell, Robinson, Plake, & Knowles, 2001, p. 31). These standards of practice do not refer to a list of topics and materials, but rather ways of knowing and acting that effective teachers demonstrate. Standards guide teachers' problem solving and decision making processes to bring *all* students to high levels of achievement.

Quantity vs. quality and teacher retention

These two needs—increasing the number of teachers in the classroom and holding teachers to high standards of quality—at times seem oppositional. We need efficient ways to get teachers into the classroom, yet we want them to exhibit the qualities of an effective teacher who can help all learners achieve. An investigation of the cause of the teacher shortage may help us to examine the issue from another angle. Research suggests that the problem is not a shortage of prepared teachers, but rather the exodus of teachers from the classrooms once they get there. America produces enough teachers but too many are leaving the profession for other jobs (Hunt & Carroll, 2003). The mistaken belief that the teacher supply is the core problem leads to compromising the quality of teachers in an effort to recruit a sufficient quantity of teachers (NCATE, 2003). An examination of teacher retention may provide us with another potential solution without watering down the definition of quality teaching, but instead strengthening it.

The Study

Job dissatisfaction is a major predictor of teacher retention (Woods & Weasmer, 2002). This dissatisfaction is typically related to a lack of materials and resources, lack of parental support, lack of administrative support, student misbehavior, time pressures, limited input into decisions, and low salaries. (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Gonzalez, 1995; Jensen, Meyers & Mortorff, 1994; Shann, 1998). Beyond this focus on basic survival issues, what are other sources of job dissatisfaction that veteran teachers may be experi-

encing, especially in light of the current teacher shortage and the accompanying reductionist approach to defining quality teaching? How has the accountability and high stakes testing push of current school "reform" affected teachers and teacher retention? Do affiliations with teacher preparation programs such as collaborative partnerships make any difference related to teacher job satisfaction, retention, and how teachers view the challenges they face in the field?

To answer these questions, a survey was randomly distributed to 40 middle level teachers in a county-wide school district. Follow-up focus group interviews were conducted over a period of two years. These participants were veteran teachers who had *not* been involved with the local university, professional development school partnerships, or other aspects of teacher preparation. The survey and focus group interviews were also administered to a random sample of 36 veteran middle school teachers who *were* actively part of a Professional Development School (PDS) network.

The network consisted of 28 schools (K-12) working in partnership with one university. Among these 28 schools, six middle schools had worked collaboratively to redesign the teacher preparation program, cultivate new approaches to preservice field experiences, and redefine participants' roles and evaluation processes. These middle schools worked together to identify paths of collaborative inquiry and professional dialogue across the six school sites. Teachers within these schools applied to become "master teachers" who took on the role of mentor and coach for student teachers. These teachers had been actively involved over a period of three years in working with university counterparts to build a partnership aimed at improving teacher preparation and professional development for all participants. They regularly engaged in dialogue and inquiry into improving the profession and ultimately the learning of middle level students.

The schools in the study mirror the range of ethnicity and socio-economic patterns of the district. The findings reported from both groups, those involved with the university as a PDS site, and those not, follow. Finally, the implications for teacher retention are examined.

Findings

Three categories of job dissatisfaction emerged across both of the respondent groups: meeting individual learners' needs, student motivation, and collegiality. All of these categories were inherently linked to issues of assessment and accountability, a major source of job dissatisfaction within both respondent groups.

Although the categories across both groups were similar, the nature and the framing of the responses illustrated two different perspectives. The PDS teacher perspective on job dissatisfaction was more

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student centered, and focused on the lack of connections between theory and practice in their classrooms. A major source of dissatisfaction was the lack of empowerment to engage in quality/standards-based teaching practices. The non-PDS teacher perspective was grounded in issues of compliance caused by the accountability focus in their schools. These teachers viewed their roles as complying with decisions, especially those related to assessment and accountability, and then in turn requiring students to comply. A related source of dissatisfaction for non-PDS teachers was the lack of student motivation to comply with teachers' requirements coupled with a lack of support from parents and administration.

Individual learner's needs

The PDS teachers were concerned about meeting the needs of individual students as learners and ensuring that each student both understood and mastered the concepts and skills within the curriculum. While the curriculum was being covered efficiently to keep up with mandated pacing guides and benchmark tests, they felt that many students were left behind. They felt the students had limited opportunities to engage in meaningful learning where they could actually understand and apply knowledge and skills. They tried to find "detours" around the "barriers of testing." The more constraints and mandates were "pushed on them from the state and the district,"

the more they thought about leaving the profession because they were not "permitted to teach."

> It doesn't seem to matter whether students are really understanding what they learn. We just go through the program or the texts. It goes along with the thinking that anyone can teach, and if it's just about these programs and pacing guides, anyone can.

> This isn't real teaching. Maybe it's like this because of the teacher shortage; they want to get anyone with any degree, as long as they know content, to teach. This way they can "teach" without having the skills and knowledge we do. It's frustrating to those of us who know how to teach and can't do what we need to do.

This was a trend they viewed as running counter to all they learned and embraced as teachers, and a primary factor in their future decisions about remaining in the teaching field. Assessment had become a "black box" that had been opened up where what teachers teach and students learn had become a matter of public scrutiny, debate, and inspection (Elmore, 1999). This was a recurring source of discontent.

The non-PDS teachers defined individual student needs as a source of frustration that often lead them to question their career choice. They felt like they were charged with keeping pace with the curriculum, faced with a range of students, many lacking the prerequisite skills and knowledge for the grade level. Concerns and deficits were seen as lying within the students, rather than within teaching practices, although "regardless of the level of preparation students bring into the classroom, decisions that teachers make about classroom practices can either greatly facilitate student learning, or serve as an obstacle to it" (Wenglinsky, 2002, p. 7). They found themselves struggling with teaching whole class lessons as many students continued to fail to meet expectations. These teachers expressed the view that the demands to meet the increasingly diverse and complex needs of their students were a factor in long-term career decisions. They stated that students were less and less prepared over the years and exhibited an increase in disruptive behaviors in the classroom.

> I really need to make sure that I am keeping up with the bench mark tests. There is just so much to cover and I want the kids to be ready for each test. I'm afraid many aren't.

> Sometimes it feels like I am just babysitting. They just don't know what they need to be able to learn the curriculum. It is way over some of their heads, and others are completely bored; it is so dull and easy for them. You just can't win.

This coupled with a perceived lack of parental and administrative support lead to much frustration. Students were typically homogeneously grouped based on test scores, often math. This limited the opportunity for peer tutoring and cooperative learning, so much that these teachers did not even consider these strategies as options. They expressed a desire to have students "behave" and "do their work." They had begun to internalize the belief that the state competency and national standardized tests were indeed "the" measure of student learning and their competence as teachers. They expressed fear and anxiety over student test scores, especially in light of the fact that they felt students were not really learning. They seemed at a loss as to what to do about it.

Student motivation

The PDS teachers typically viewed the lack of student motivation as directly or indirectly related to the over-emphasis on state, district, and school-wide accountability testing. Students were not engaged in learning or they were forced to learn things in a manner that had little relevance or connection to their lives beyond school. They were often provided with limited opportunities for success. Students did not get to experience the challenge, control, collaboration, and integration of student autonomy into the classroom that would increase student motivation (Turner & Meyer, 1995).

> The kids are bored and frankly so am I. I used to be able to do these great labs in science class and the kids really got into it and learned so much. They remember what they do too, especially if you can apply it to the real world. But now I feel so pressured to cover material, it's a real battle to get my labs in and cover what I am supposed to. Mostly I do what I know works for my students and find ways to get around the other stuff. Sometimes I'll say, "I know this isn't the most exciting lesson, but we have to do it for the test."

They reported widespread use of pre-packaged materials, which gave both the teachers and students no sense of ownership in the learning process, hence negatively affecting motivation on the part of both.

There was a push to teach lessons that were not very engaging and meaningful to students, for the sake of efficiency. The best practices that they knew would lead to student understanding, learned through their PDS experiences, were often left out of their repertoire in the name of mandates.

Lack of student motivation was also a major source of frustration for the non-PDS teachers. In contrast to their PDS counterparts, this was largely viewed as inherent in students and their families, rather than a result of limited curriculum and assessment. Teachers stated that students were listless in class, many falling asleep or socializing instead of "paying attention."

> I tell them *exactly* what is going to be on the test tomorrow. We go over it in class, they read in the text and answer the questions, they copy the definitions, we take notes on the overhead, and still they don't do well on the test. They just don't try. They just don't care.

They stated that there was limited parental support leading students not to care about their grades or their behavior. They cited the current lifestyle of many Americans, which focuses on television, video games, and the Internet as "interfering with proper emphasis on studying, homework, and study habits." These teachers exhibited little ownership of student motivation problems and tended not to examine their own practices in terms of how motivation might be related. The problem was within the students, the parents and society, rather than within the classroom and the school. Student motivation had become a battle between the teacher and the students, and a main reason reported for questioning whether to remain a classroom teacher in the future.

Collegiality
The PDS teachers reported their participation in the Professional Development School initiative was a crucial means of support for remaining in the classroom and continuing to find ways to implement standards-based practices, especially given the current context of school. As PDS members the focus was on developing their teaching practices and thinking of how collectively teachers could make schools better places for students to learn.

> When we get together to focus on teaching and we learn more about what the rest of the field says about it, it gives us a sense of belonging to a greater commu-

nity of educators who are all working for the same goals and all frustrated by the lack of opportunities to teach in ways that our profession should embrace. We as teachers know from experience it helps students not only to regurgitate information, but really understand and enjoy what they are learning.

Overall both groups reported a sense of increased competition among teachers and schools due to the "testing push." Rather than viewing this as a healthy competition that made teachers better, they saw it as a barrier to developing a culture of collective problem solving (Jorissen, 2002) and innovation. The non-PDS respondents did not focus on collegiality and professional peer relationships. An occasional reference to the isolation of teachers due to "how busy we are preparing students to achieve on tests" was mentioned, but the need for collegial support was not. Colleagues were mentioned as valued in terms of personal relationships and friendships, but a focus on professional relationships was noticeably absent as compared to the PDS participants. Teachers were concerned about doing what was expected and required of them. They did not want to "rock the boat."

Implications for Changes

Develop a community of learners
What can we learn about retaining quality standards-based teachers from the illustration of the two different "paths" teachers chose to take? The PDS teacher group identified the choice of paths as being directly related to participation in a learning community. They had opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue about standards of practice built into their roles as educators and members of the master teacher cohort group. They continually engaged in inquiry into practice, collegial and dialogic professional development, and developing exemplary practice in a safe and open environment (Middleton, 2000).

As a community of learners these middle school teachers developed their own use of standards-based pedagogy, defined by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The PDS teachers had even worked to develop and adopt a peer review process for selecting PDS master teachers based on a combination of NBPTS Early Adolescence Generalist standards and Danielson's (1996) framework for teaching. These teachers engaged in ongoing discussion about theory, practice, research, standards, and application within the current context of schooling.

They saw a direct link between teacher quality and student performance and realized that the greatest influence on student achievement comes from classroom practices and the professional development that supports these practices (Wenglinsky, 2002). Together, they were able to engage in the reflective decision-making that is critical to successful teaching (Danielson, 2002). These teachers expressed a desire to "fight for" best practices in the school. Such collegiality and collaboration promote job satisfaction and feelings of professional involvement (Leithwood, Leonard & Sharratt, 1981) and efficacy. Such efficacy is central to teacher retention (Jorissen, 2002).

The non-PDS teachers did not have collegiality and collaboration built into their roles. Such collegiality and professional development was limited and often on top of all of the other things they were required to do. Participants reported that it was not viewed as a top priority. There was a reported sense of isolation from colleagues, which increased the sense of frustration and job dissatisfaction. Teachers who leave the profession report a sense of isolation as they attempt to address the complex demands of teaching (Britzman, 1991; Lightfoot, 1983; Rozenholtz, 1998). This sense of isolation can be lessened by establishing meaningful learning communities within schools and between schools and universities, (Graham, Hudson-Ross, Adkins, McWhorter, & Stewart, 1999) much as the PDS teachers had reported. Without such a community the non-PDS teachers' responses indicated that standards-based practices were not viewed as a potential reality in the school.

The most frequently cited reason for teachers leaving the profession is the difference between expectations about life in the classroom and the reality of that life (Jensen, Meyers, & Mortorff, 1994). For teachers on both paths to feel more positive about their lives as teachers, the tension between current practices and what we know works, as a research-grounded profession, must be addressed. Many current structures and mandates of schooling caused the PDS teachers to continually struggle with the chasm between quality teaching standards and current "reform." The non-PDS teachers were equally dissatisfied as they became tired of forced compliance on their part and the part of their students.

Teaching grounded in standards of best practice

The definition of standards-based teaching exhibited within the teachers' responses can be contrasted across the two groups. The PDS-based teachers were student centered and focused on standards of pedagogy. They clearly articulated the connection between theory and practice and saw learning from each as a cyclic informative process. They were concerned about engaging students in meaningful learning to develop student understanding, not only to increase retention of concepts and skills for testing, but also to make connections across the curriculum and to the world outside of school. They saw student motivation as directly related to pedagogical strategies, and embraced effective teaching as a way to address or at least circumvent the motivational challenges of students with a difficult home life.

The non-PDS teachers defined standards in a content based, teacher centered way. They experienced "standards-based" reform as having greater specificity and systemic alignment, providing "certainty" for teachers as what to teach and how to teach it (Schmoker & Murzano, 1999). But this specificity led to concern about covering material and students who could not keep up with the pace for a variety of reasons. This was complicated by the lack of flexibility to meet students' needs. This definition of "one size fits all" instruction via mandated materials, programs, and pacing guides, lead to much frustration and job dissatisfaction with teachers who continually struggled to get all students to learn the same way at the same pace to be ready for bench mark tests. Standards-based teaching in this case was defined by detailed, prescriptive content coverage, which constrains teachers from operationalizing standards of best practices and ignores the intrinsic rewards of teaching (McNeil, 2000). Their responses typically used a "school as work" metaphor. The challenges resided in doing what you had to do and getting students to do the same. Enabling this group of respondents to learn about and employ a variety of student centered and standards-based teaching practices via embedded professional development, such as modeling, coaching, and reflective dialogue, could help them to address this source of frustration. A means to do so, such as establishing a learning community or critical friends group, would need to be established.

Embracing our knowledge base as a profession and supporting it within the schools, and within school

policies and mandates, is vital to teacher retention. Teacher preparation and expertise account for the greatest variance in student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2000). We know what works; it is not a matter of personal preference. We are not a knowledge-void profession. Helping teachers to have better access to the knowledge base and support via coaching, mentoring, and critical dialogue as part of the teacher role and day, is a largely untapped source of increasing student understanding and achievement, not to mention teacher job satisfaction.

Increase teacher pedagogical power

Issues of empowerment were implicit within the PDS teachers' responses. These teachers stated they felt like they knew how to bring diverse groups of learners to high levels of achievement, but were powerless to do so. This was perhaps the greatest source of discontent within their lives as educators. They lived in a state of dissonance, as standards of best practice ran directly counter to practices being used and often mandated in the schools. They felt that their expertise and advanced degrees were discounted when decisions were being made. They lacked outlets for capitalizing on their expertise to promote student learning. Lateral entry and emergency licensure sent them additional messages about the lack of value placed in their expertise, not in content knowledge, but in the skill of teaching. This often led to a sense of disenfranchisement and powerlessness.

The non-PDS teachers also made statements related to power. They viewed decisions as being mandated from the top down, with little regard for the classroom teachers' reality. Although they did not express a desire to be in a position of decision making beyond the classroom, they did feel that changes needed to be made to help them "deal with students" and all of the new mandates.

Empowered teachers view themselves as agents of change and begin to become more active and involved as advocates for their students, colleagues, and their profession (Feimen-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Teachers need to become stakeholders in the educational process, so that they can contribute to the culture of the school, not just acclimate to it (Lortie, 1975). Sarason's (1991) *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* illuminated the problematic nature of school and pedagogical transformation should a shift in power to grassroots ownership and teacher decision making not occur. Professionalizing

teaching is a goal of the NBPTS, yet these very standards of practice are being prohibited from being employed, according to the teachers in this study. Teacher voice and empowerment are pivotal issues related to teacher recruitment and retention, yet little is being done to promote this within the current wave of education "reform."

Conclusion

As the teacher shortage increases and demands for accountability and increased student achievement continue to be pervasive, a thorough examination of how to attract and keep effective, qualified teachers is critical. The dominant policy response to the teacher shortage has been centered on recruitment initiatives such as alternative entry programs, signing bonuses, loan forgiveness, housing assistance, and tuition reimbursement (Hirsch, Koppich & Kapp, 2001). Job satisfaction may be the real issue in which to invest. Listening to teachers' voices within this study revealed substantive issues that can be addressed within the school organization. Developing an increase in support for teaching grounded in standards of best practice, increased teacher voice and power, and reconfiguring teacher roles to be collegial, based on professional growth within a learning community are elements that may begin to address teacher needs. "Investigating" ways to do so within current budget constraints and school structures may be more fruitful means for legislators and top-level administrators to increase student achievement, rather than solely relying on testing to do so. This can be done via thoughtful redistribution of funds and teacher time, and an innovative restructuring of decision-making practices within the states, districts, and schools. Teachers are the ones most intimately involved with the real life challenges of being and remaining enthusiastic, dedicated, and effective teachers. Listening to their voices may be a better place to begin to address the teacher shortage over the long haul rather than focusing on short term, quick fix solutions.

Notes
[1]Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC)
[2]National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)

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