Teaching and Teacher Education 28 (2012) 791–805

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Teaching and Teacher Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tate

Motivations for choosing teaching as a career: An international comparison using the FIT-Choice scale

Helen M.G. Watt [a,*], Paul W. Richardson [a,1], Uta Klusmann [b,1], Mareike Kunter [c], Beate Beyer [d], Ulrich Trautwein [d], Jürgen Baumert [e]

[a] Faculty of Education, Monash University, Clayton Campus, Wellington Road, Melbourne, Victoria 3800, Australia
[b] Christian Albrechts University at Kiel, Germany
[c] Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, Germany
[d] University of Tübingen, Germany
[e] Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 5 February 2011
Received in revised form
28 February 2012
Accepted 5 March 2012

Keywords:
Teaching motivations
Beginning teachers
Sample comparisons
FIT-Choice scale
Expectancy-value theory

ABSTRACT

Motivations for preservice teachers' choice of teaching as a career were investigated using the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice scale (FIT-Choice scale; Watt & Richardson, 2007). This scale was initially developed and validated in the Australian context; our study applied it across international samples from Australia, the United States, Germany, and Norway. Support for strong factorial invariance implied the scale functioned similarly, and could fruitfully be employed in different contexts. Sample comparisons revealed that motivations for teaching were more similar than they were different across these samples; whereas, perceptions about the teaching profession tended to reflect country differences.

International research interest in what motivates people to take on a teaching career has resulted in a steady flow of studies and reports from many countries, with notably early investigations in Britain during the depression (Valentine, 1934) and at the close of the Second World War (Tudhope, 1944). Although teaching would appear to be an occupation considered central to a country's development and wellbeing, Australia, the U.S., Germany and Norway, among other countries including the U.K. and several European countries, report difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers (see Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Liu, Kardos, Kauffman, Preske, & Johnson, 2000; OECD, 2004a,b, 2011; Ofsted, 2001; Preston, 2000; Ramsay, 2000). A pattern of teacher shortages followed by surpluses is a long cycle in most countries. The onset of the global financial crisis since 2008 may be likely to impact the supply of teachers particularly in countries where they are classified as public servants, who are offered job security and a funded retirement pension, despite relatively lower salaries to other occupations. However, contexts adversely affected by the financial downturn such as the U.S. and several European countries, are consequently able to offer fewer teaching positions, or laying off teachers as has begun to be reported in the media in the U.S. Over the last decade there has been renewed research interest in understanding what motivates people to choose teaching as a career and what motivates them to persist in the profession, as teachers' daily job has become more complex and demanding, contending with increasingly "diverse student populations, higher social expectations of schools, expanding fields of knowledge, and new types of responsibilities" (OECD, 2005).

While there have been many studies of teacher motivation in different contexts over time, there has not been a reliable measure upon which researchers could draw which would permit comparisons across different settings and samples, or prediction of various outcomes over time. This has resulted in an abundance of findings which cannot be directly compared or synthesised. To understand how initial motivations impact teacher recruitment, retention and effectiveness, within and across different kinds of samples and settings, we need first to have a valid and reliable instrument encompassing comprehensive teaching motivations and grounded in motivational theory. Such an instrument would offer the opportunity to measure and compare motivations for different individuals, from varying settings, and to explore correlates and consequences of motivational dimensions.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +613 9905 3276; fax: +613 9905 5127.
E-mail address: helen.watt@monash.edu (H.M.G. Watt).
[1] These authors contributed equally to the article.

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doi:10.1016/j.tate.2012.03.003

The FIT-Choice (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice) scale was developed to assess the primary motivations of teachers to teach, and was demonstrated to be psychometrically sound in its initial use among a sample of 1653 Australian preservice teachers (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Further, it has been shown to predict both positive and negative outcome variables among beginning teachers: the motivations that related most strongly to high initial career satisfaction included the altruistic-type motivations most frequently emphasised in the teacher education literature, the intrinsic value individuals attached to teaching, and self-evaluations of their teaching-related skills (Watt & Richardson, 2007). For subsequent planned persistence, planned effort, professional development, leadership aspirations, and career choice satisfaction, similar patterns of correlation were observed. Beginning teachers' ability beliefs, intrinsic value, and social utility values demonstrated significant positive correlations with these later measures; positive prior teaching and learning motivations related significantly positively to later planned persistence in the profession; choosing teaching as a fallback career correlated negatively across all five later measures; personal utility values (job security, transferability, time for family) related negatively to later planned persistence and career choice satisfaction (see Watt & Richardson, 2007). Such findings resonate with earlier untested claims that such personal utility motivations are somehow "unworthy" (e.g., Yong, 1995).

We set out to test whether the FIT-Choice scale would function similarly among samples sourced from different settings. For the scale to be useful to researchers from a range of sociocultural contexts, it is necessary to test whether the instrument performs similarly across samples and settings; only in this case is it justified to compare teaching motivations from different contexts using the same instrument. We had the opportunity to sample preservice teachers from the U.S., Australia, Germany, and Norway, to firstly test the utility of the scale, and secondly obtain first indications of contextual differences. Before exploration of sample differences could be meaningfully undertaken, construct equivalence must be established which requires testing for strong factorial invariance. Measurement equivalence indicates that constructs are generaliseable to each of the contexts, that sources of bias and error are minimal, that cultural differences have not differentially affected the constructs' underlying measurement characteristics, and that between-culture differences in construct means, variances and covariances are quantitative in nature, such that sample differences on the constructs can be examined in a quantitative manner (Little, 1997; Meredith, 1993).

1. Motivations for teaching

Similar reasons for choosing teaching have surfaced in various forms, combinations, and rankings over the last five decades. In brief, a review of this body of research conducted up until the early 1990s suggested that "altruistic, service-oriented goals and other intrinsic motivations are the source of the primary reasons entering teacher candidates report for why they chose teaching as a career" (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992, p. 46). These researchers highlighted *intrinsic*, *extrinsic* and *altruistic* motivations as the most important groups of reasons influencing teachers' career choice. Identified motivations have included working with children and adolescents, making a social contribution, making a difference, job security, job benefits, enjoyment of teaching, compatibility with other interests and activities, compatibility with family life, and self-education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005). According to an OECD report (OECD, 2005), studies in France, Australia, Belgium (French Community), Canada (Québec), the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic, and the U.K. suggest that a desire to work with children and adolescents, the potential for intellectual fulfilment, and a means by which to make a social contribution, are the most frequently nominated reasons for choosing teaching as a career. On the other hand, studies conducted in very different sociocultural contexts such as in Brunei (Yong, 1995), Zimbabwe (Chivore, 1988), Cameroon (Abangma, 1981), and Jamaica (Bastick, 1999), have found what they term extrinsic motives to be more important, in the form of salary, job security, and career status.

Despite recognition that the demand and supply of teachers is cyclical in many countries, too little systematically collected and analysed data exists on what motivates people to choose teaching as a career. A significant proportion of the research on teacher motivations has been conducted in the U.S., mostly founded on surveys and with some studies incorporating a qualitative component (e.g., Alexander, Chant, & Cox, 1994; Bastick, 1999; Hanushek & Pace, 1995; Jantzen, 1981; Joseph & Green, 1986), although the methods of analysis and reporting of results have not always been as sophisticated as they could have been, frequently utilising single-item indicators, raw frequency counts, and the ranking of themes, resulting in a lack of consistency across studies. Researchers have developed and implemented survey instruments without information regarding reliability or validity, and results have at times been reported without inclusion of the survey instruments.

The absence of an agreed upon analytical and theoretical framework has meant researchers have not always concurred on what constitutes intrinsic, altruistic, extrinsic, or other motivations examined by individual researchers. Various operationalisations of intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic motivations have resulted in a lack of definitional precision and overlapping categorisations from one study to another. For example, the desire to work with children has been frequently nominated as a form of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Young, 1995) and has also often been referred to as a form of altruistic motivation (e.g., Yong, 1995). What is needed to investigate reasons for becoming a teacher is a scale that encompasses the array of motivations, which taps the underlying psychological processes, and that can be used to study different groups of people from different kinds of settings.

1.1. Theoretical background and initial scale development

Previously identified teaching motivations can be mapped to the main constructs in the expectancy-value motivational theory (Eccles, 2005; Eccles (Parsons) et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) on which the FIT-Choice scale is founded, allowing us to locate them within an integrative and comprehensive motivational framework to provide a theoretically grounded basis to approach the question of teaching as a career choice. The FIT-Choice model taps both the "altruistic"-type motivations that have been emphasised in the teacher education literature (e.g., Book & Freeman, 1986; Brown, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Moran, Kilpatrick, Abbott, Dallatt, & McClune, 2001; Serow & Forrest, 1994), as well as more personally utilitarian motivations, intrinsic motivations, and ability-related beliefs. It also taps individuals' perceptions about the demand and reward aspects of the teaching profession, and contains a measure of career satisfaction and commitment.

We have provided a review elsewhere (Watt & Richardson, 2007, 2008) of how the FIT-Choice factors, summarised in Fig. 1, map onto expectancy-value theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; see Lent, Lopez, & Bieschke, 1993) which also highlights the importance of ability-related beliefs, and to key findings within the existing teacher education literature. The model represents different psychological mechanisms which are involved in the choice of teaching as a career, and all parts of the model work together in individuals' decision-making. Individuals should be likely to pursue