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# Why do early career teachers choose to remain in the profession? The use of best–worst scaling to quantify key factors



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## ABSTRACT

Many countries report high attrition rates among beginning teachers. The literature cites many factors that influence a teacher's decision to remain in the profession. These include remuneration, workload, support, administration and parents. It is unclear, however, which factors matter most to teachers and, consequently, where best to direct limited resources. This study uses Best-worst Scaling (BWS) and complementary experimental design methods to quantify the relative importance of these factors. The results suggest that improving student engagement, experiencing professional challenges and enjoying collegial support are the most important factors influencing teacher decisions to stay in the profession. Beginning teachers nominate remuneration, recognition, and external factors (e.g., class size; location) as playing a lesser role in their decision to remain teachers.

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## 1. Introduction

Recruitment and retention of beginning teachers are important and challenging issues for the management of the education sector in many countries. It is an accepted wisdom that it is insufficient to focus on recruitment of new teachers; attention must be paid to retention and attrition as well (Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan, & Russell, 2012). Retention figures in a number of countries cause concern. Abdallah (2009) notes that 50% of teachers in the United States are likely to leave the profession within five years. Beginning teachers appear to be over represented in general figures relating to attrition, with Ingersoll and Smith (2003) reporting an attrition rate of 16% among the entire US sector based on National Centre of Education Statistics collected between 2000 and 2001. In the United Kingdom, figures suggest attrition rates higher than 50% (Fenwick & Weir, 2010; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2004). Fenwick and Weir (2010) note how complex it is to track teacher movements, and suggest that international comparisons are difficult to make in the light of variations in interpretations of teacher workforce data. In Australia, current information on attrition rates is ambiguous and

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not well documented. A government report (DEST, 2003, 87) noted that attrition rates of 25% among early career teachers were cause for concern.

Studies examining the stated intentions of beginning teachers to leave the profession in the future suggest dissatisfaction in the profession and the potential for higher attrition in future and indicate that high attrition rates are likely to continue. For example, a survey of 1351 beginning teachers reported that 24% stated an intention to leave the profession within five years (Australian Primary Principals Association, 2007). In another study, 1200 beginning teachers were asked about intentions to leave within 10 years; this figure almost doubled to 45% (Australian Education Union, 2006).

In contrast, Canada does not suffer from high attrition rates of beginning teachers. This situation is claimed to be a result of attention to and resourcing of induction into the profession (Gambhir, Broad, Evans, & Gaskell, 2008). This suggests that if factors that encourage retention are used to direct resources, attrition rates will decline. However, while the factors that encourage retention are generally known and articulated in the literature on teacher retention, the relative importance of these factors has not been studied, and knowledge of these factors does not appear to have stemmed the tide of departures from teaching in many countries. The figures noted above provide ample evidence of the need to further investigate teacher retention and the relative importance of the conditions and actions that may improve it.

This paper discusses a project which was developed in response to the need to further investigate teacher retention and attrition. The project was undertaken in New South Wales in Australia 2006–2010. The project's overarching research question was 'Why do some beginning teachers choose to leave the profession and why do others choose to remain?'

The subsidiary research questions were:

- What are the relevant experiences of beginning teachers in their first four years of teaching?
- What influences beginning teachers to remain in the profession?
- What influences beginning teachers to leave the profession?
- What strategies might assist in the retention of effective beginning teachers?

Accordingly, the focus of the research was on identifying the factors that led to teachers' decisions about staying in or leaving the profession.

## 2. Literature review

There is a substantial literature that discusses the factors that underpin teachers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with teaching. For example, the literature on teacher retention and attrition articulates the range of factors that can be better managed to support beginning teachers in their decision to remain in the profession. These factors are in addition to those that explain departures by beginning teachers as a result of various personal circumstances beyond the control of school administrators (e.g., child-rearing; sickness; opportunities of partner). For example, several studies highlight the value of formal support such as mentoring programs (e.g., Manuel, 2003; Marable & Raimondi, 2007) and induction programs (Patterson & Luft, 2002). Others note that stress, frustration, fatigue and high workloads are factors that contribute to high attrition rates (Stevens, Parker, & Burroughs, 2007). Liu and Onwuegbuzie (2012) found that 38.2% of the Chinese teachers surveyed were stressed and that 40.4% would consider leaving the profession if the opportunity arose. Whilst their study of 510 teachers was not isolated to beginning teachers, the study points to issues with salaries, breaks and holidays, workload, and student behaviour as being reasons for high levels of turnover experienced in this country.

A UK study of reasons for teacher attrition indicated several causes for unhappiness with teaching (Hancock & Scherff, 2010). The UK findings agreed with those from the survey by the Australian Education Union (2006), which indicated concerns about workload, behaviour management, pay and class sizes. These studies and others have identified factors that seem to be common across teaching contexts that are quite diverse, such as those in Australia, United States, Portugal and United Kingdom (for example, Australian Education Union, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Flores, 2006; Hancock & Scherff, 2010). Teacher pay is often cited as a potential barrier to entering the profession among school leavers (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Richardson & Watt, 2006). Even in the context where salaries are less of a concern, the impact of principals, other teachers and support is substantial in determining the overall job satisfaction of beginning teachers. For example, Lam and Yan (2011) examine the experiences of teachers in Hong Kong where salaries are significantly higher than the median income. The authors find that the satisfaction levels of teachers is attributable to factors directly controllable by schools including volume of non-teaching workload, equity in the distribution of work and professional autonomy (Lam & Yan, 2011). Other researchers point to the isolation of teachers from their colleagues, even in programs where formal mentoring is in place (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Marable & Raimondi, 2007). McCoy (2003) interviewed 105 teachers in their first three years of teaching to establish that teachers have various needs and wants that, if properly managed or introduced, will improve their experience. Factors highlighted include: higher pay, smaller classes, support personnel, release from teaching, adequate supplies, active mentors, a supportive administration and the involvement of parents.

In general, McCoy's research findings exemplify the literature on teaching attrition and retention; the factors that influence teachers to see value in their roles and remain in their chosen profession are extensive and stretch across a number of themes. They also appear to be common to teaching contexts across the world. A critical question therefore arises: if understanding of the factors that influence teachers to stay in teaching is so extensive, why does attrition continue to be such a vexed issue?

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