



# Urban teacher longevity: What keeps teachers of color in one under-resourced urban school?



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Participants are long-term math and science teachers at an urban public school.
- Eleven of the 16 participants are teachers of color.
- Participants enjoy instructional autonomy and student interactions.
- Lack of administrative attention to school discipline threatens longevity.
- Teachers' familiarity with the community improves retention.

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates reasons behind long-term urban teachers' longevity and job satisfaction. The study site is an under-resourced urban public school in the United States with high retention of long-term math and science teachers, many of whom are teachers of color. Findings suggest types of administrative support (e.g. for disciplinary issues) important and types of administrative support unimportant (e.g. instructional guidance) to longevity. Intrinsic social emotional rewards gained from interactions with students are influential to participants' satisfaction and retention. In addition, familiarity with the community may improve retention. Trends by teachers' race and suggestions for urban teacher retention are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Public schools in America often struggle to find certified teachers who remain in the classroom (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Murnane & Steele, 2007). Low teacher retention is not only a problem in the United States, but other developed nations are faced with similar challenges, such as Canada (Karsenti & Collin, 2013), the U.K. (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012), Australia (Manuel, 2003), and Belgium (Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014). As expected, developing nations encounter this dilemma as well (Moon, 2007; Mtika & Gates, 2011; Towse, Kent, Osaki, & Kirua, 2002).

The problem of teacher attrition is particularly acute in schools situated in urban areas (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Korstjens, & Volman, 2014; Hanushek et al., 2005;

Ingersoll et al., 2014; Jacob, 2007), and especially in the shortage areas of mathematics and science (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1999; Ingersoll & Perda, 2009; LaTurner, 2002). In fact, in the school district of the study site, 70% of the city's teachers leave within the first five years, and 13% of its teachers leave the district every year, twice the average attrition rate of its state (County Grand Jury Final Report, 2012–2013).

In the United States, teachers of color are more likely to choose to work in urban schools that serve predominantly students of color (Albert Shaker Institute, 2015; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2014), making their retention a potential strategy to resolve urban teacher shortages. Studies have also indicated that teachers of color can produce better academic results for students of color than white teachers, as measured by standardized tests, attendance, and advanced level course enrollment (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Dee, 2004; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Hanushek et al., 2005). However, in the 2011–2012 school year, teachers of color comprised only 17.3% of United States'

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teaching force, in comparison to a nationwide school population of 44% students of color (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Teachers of color also exhibit greater attrition rates than white teachers (Ingersoll & May, 2011).

The present study investigates mathematics and science teachers' self-reported reasons for longevity in one under-resourced urban public school in the United States with high retention rates. This study focuses on the following research questions.

1. What reasons do participants give for job satisfaction, and how does this differ by race?
2. What conditions, factors, and/or experiences influence longevity in the classroom based on teachers' perspectives, and how does this differ by race?

## 2. Literature

Urban public schools with high percentages of students from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds in the United States suffer from high teacher turnover (e.g. Ingersoll Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). As many as half of teachers in under-resourced schools in the United States leave within the first five years of teaching, and as soon as the first three years in some urban districts (Haberman, 2005). Teacher turnover is twice as high in under-resourced schools than in affluent schools (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001) and the most prominent reason for departure is job dissatisfaction, not retirement (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Attending to teacher turnover is important because of its negative effect on student achievement (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Teachers who remain in urban schools are better or as effective than those who exit (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2008; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010), and the novice teachers who often replace exiting teachers are less effective than those who left (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). Interestingly, the literature demonstrates a teacher transition trend of "white flight," where the percentage of students of color in a school is independently and significantly related to (white) teacher turnover, even when holding school poverty constant (Ingersoll & May, 2011).

For teachers of color, on the other hand, student demographics (as measured by the percentage of students of color) are not correlated with reasons for their transition to a different school nor their exit from the field (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Therefore, recruitment of teachers of color for urban schools with primarily students of color may be a potential solution to teacher attrition in these settings, coupled with appropriate supports for teachers and for the complex needs of students (Murnane & Steele, 2007). However, urban schools are associated with poor organizational conditions creating challenges to retention (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Because teachers of color are two to three times more likely to choose to teach in an urban school with these organizational challenges, they exit at greater rates than white teachers (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Ingersoll & May, 2011) and report less positive job satisfaction (Liu & Ramsey, 2008). In fact, turnover for teachers of color has increased by 28 percent, from the late 1980's to 2009 (Ingersoll et al., 2014).

High turnover rates for urban teachers of mathematics and science are also problematic because of the shortage of teachers in these subject areas. The data indicate that teacher shortages in these subject areas are not due to a limited cadre of new math and science teachers to replace retiring teachers. Rather, the shortage is due to math and science teacher attrition prior to retirement, where teachers leave primarily due to job satisfaction (Ingersoll & Perda, 2009; Ingersoll & May, 2011). Improving retention of certified math and science teachers is especially important to student

achievement because students with teachers trained in their discipline have higher achievement than those without, especially in mathematics and science (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Monk, 1994).

Much of the literature focuses on attrition, indicating reasons for teachers' exit, rather than exploring retention to uncover reasons long-term teachers remain in urban schools. Many of these studies are situated within human capital theory (MacDonald, 1999) and rely on survey data, where teachers select from a menu of factors that may be related to their exit (e.g. Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; MacDonald, 1999).

Freedman and Appleman (2009), Johnson and Birkeland (2003), and Olsen and Anderson's (2007) studies interview participants who are still in the classroom to investigate reasons behind longevity, finding that ongoing professional development and experiencing competence improves job satisfaction. However, they do not fully explain how or why teachers remain in the classroom because their findings indicate early career teachers' intentions to remain in the classroom, but participants had not yet actually done so.

## 3. Theoretical framework

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a theory of motivation, is useful to the present study to consider teachers' motivation to stay in the classroom. SDT explores how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are regulated by three basic psychological human needs – feelings of *competence, autonomy, and relatedness* (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which can be applied to motivation in the workplace (Gagné & Deci, 2005). When an individual is not inherently interested in an activity, it may require extrinsic motivation to engage in the activity. Researchers theorize that people turn extrinsic motivators into intrinsic motivators due to their psychological need for relatedness (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000), through *internalization*. Internalization refers to "taking in" a value or regulation from external to make it an internal regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71).

For example, a teacher may internalize external motivators when they align with his or her personal identity, goals, and values. If a teacher values his or her students' academic success, a teacher may feel autonomous when engaging in unpleasant or tedious tasks (e.g. grading papers, managing discipline) despite the lack of intrinsic interest in such tasks, creating feelings of intrinsic motivation. This is especially true when the teacher also has feelings of relatedness to students and receives positive feedback (fulfilling the need for competence), according to SDT. These feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness to students may influence teachers' intrinsic motivation to stay in the classroom. Gagné and Deci (2005) argue that when work climates foster the three psychological needs, intrinsic motivation is enhanced, leading to greater job satisfaction and persistence (p. 337).

Outside of psychology, studies in other fields have found that teachers identify intrinsic, social emotional rewards as meaningful to their work (e.g. Hargreaves, 2001; Howells, 2014; Le Cornu, 2013), aligning with the SDT concept of intrinsic motivation. Lortie's (1975) classic sociological study of teacher recruitment and satisfaction, utilizing survey and interview data, indicate that teachers overwhelmingly identify "psychic," or intrinsic, rewards as sources of professional satisfaction. Lortie categorized teachers' responses about rewards of teaching into three categories – extrinsic, ancillary, and "psychic," or intrinsic.

Nieto's (2003) study of teacher longevity also finds social emotional rewards most influential to teachers' satisfaction and longevity in the classroom. Nieto (2003) conducted both interviews and focus groups with practicing urban high school teachers, most with over twenty years' experience. She reports that participants

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