TEACHING
AND TEACHER
EDUCATION
An International Journal of
Research and Studies

How do early career teachers value different types of support? A scale-adjusted latent class choice model

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine supportive working condition preferences of beginning teachers.
- Two distinct groups of beginning teachers are identified as 'stayers' and 'leavers'.
- 'Stayers' and 'leavers' differ in valuing particular supportive conditions.
- The findings inform policies on supportive conditions for beginning teachers.
- First reported use in education research of Scale-Adjusted Latent Class Modeling.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Using a discrete choice experimental approach and associated Scale-Adjusted Latent Class Model (SALCM), we quantify the relative value early career teachers (ECTs) place on various types of support in the form of affirmation, resources, collegial opportunities, mentoring, and professional development. ECTs with intentions to depart the profession, place greater relative value on the sharing of resources, cooperative teaching and planning, offsite discussions about classroom management and programming with mentors, and having a greater professional voice. In contrast, those with intentions to remain, place greater value on observation from and conversations about teaching with more experienced teachers at their school.

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1. Introduction

Teacher attrition is recognized as an enduring problem internationally. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports concerns about the high rates of teacher attrition, particularly among beginning teachers, following its review of the profession across 25 countries (OECD, 2005). A large study of Chicago public school teachers found that only 30 percent of early career teachers (ECTs) remain at their original school after five years, consistent with average retention rates among beginning teachers reported for Illinois and the USA more broadly (Allensworth, Ponisciac, & Mazzeo, 2009). However, these figures do not distinguish between those teachers leaving the profession entirely and those teachers migrating between schools, the latter described by Ingersoll and May (2012) as 'movers'. Nonetheless, Abdallah (2009) cites work in the USA to suggest that 50% of certified public school teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching. In the UK, 27% of qualifying teachers employed in the maintained (or state) sector are no longer teaching in this same sector after five years (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012). In Australia, the setting of the current research, the figure for those leaving the profession within their first five years of teaching appears to be around 10%

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(Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2012; New South Wales Government, 2012). Departure rates within the first year of service among teachers employed in a permanent position have been relatively low and in decline in the Australian state of New South Wales, with resignation rates averaging 3.1% over 2006 to 2012 (NSW DEC, 2013). As such, this highlights how attrition rates can often be difficult to interpret because reports may refer only to departures of full-time employees, even though the majority of teachers may join the profession in a part-time or casual capacity (NSW CDE, 2012).

The literature identifies a relationship between forms of support available to ECTs and their intentions to stay in the profession (Boyd et al., 2011; Jones, Youngs, & Frank, 2013). A 2007 Australian House of Representatives inquiry found that a key factor contributing to attrition among ECTs is inadequate support (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). A follow up study by Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) revealed that more than 30% of survey respondents cited several factors as being very important in their decision to leave the profession, including: family or personal reasons; heavy workload; stress; student behavior; inadequate professional support; and, decisions to pursue employment outside the profession (QCT, 2013). Of particular significance was that respondents also indicated that the availability of certain forms of support may have influenced them to remain in the profession. Cited forms of support included planning and resource sharing with experienced teachers, an allocated and available mentor, access to online resources, and participation in an online community. It is unclear, however, which of these and other types of support are most valued by ECTs.

The aim of the current research is to understand what types of support are perceived as most desirable by ECTs. The study also investigates the preferred format, focus, and delivery for each type. Using a discrete choice experiment and associated choice model, we quantify the relative value ECTs place on various types of support such as affirmation, resources, collegial opportunities, mentoring, and professional development. Whilst all levels of support are likely to be nominated by ECTs as desirable if considered in isolation, the key outcome of the research approach used here is to understand which elements of a supportive teaching environment provide greater value to ECTs relative to others.

The systematic management of support systems for teachers, including those who are largely committed to the profession, can further minimize their negative experiences, including those that induce stress and emotional burnout (e.g., Hong, 2010; Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012). Similarly, Bascia and Rottmann (2011) argue that improved working conditions of teachers can lead to multiple and reciprocal outcomes, such as enhanced opportunities for students to learn, which further strengthens teacher efficacy and commitment. Weiss (1999) found that a supportive workplace environment promoting collaboration, inclusiveness, and socialization is essential in fostering morale and commitment to the profession among ECTs. Hence, insights into what types of support are valued by ECTs have a number of implications for many outcomes such as improving retention, efficacy and student learning, while minimizing attrition and burnout.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly review the main types of support presented in the literature as conducive to positive outcomes such as retention, efficacy, and student learning. Second, we discuss the methodological framework that was used to examine the relative importance of various types of support among ECTs. Third, we present the experimental design and manner in which the supportive environment that teachers evaluated was undertaken. Fourth, we present the results of our choice model. Fifth, we discuss these results in terms of the broader implications for theory and practice in our understanding of teaching and teacher education. Finally, we outline the limitations of the research and avenues for future research.

2. Review of the literature

Many factors are important in impacting retention and attrition among ECTs (for extensive reviews see: Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). However, many cited factors are beyond the control of the profession or employers, and therefore less open to organizational induced change (Jaramillo, 2012). These factors are particular to the teachers themselves, and include young people's needs to experience other career options (Mayer, 2006) and, particularly in the case of women, to start a family (Stinebrickner, 1998). Other factors that can be viewed as exogenous and impact retention relate to the sociodemographic characteristics of a school, student quality, as well as the affluence and crime rate of the surrounding area (Allensworth et al., 2009; Ladd, 2011). Some factors impacting teaching conditions and teacher retention are subject to external fiscal constraints, such as remuneration (e.g., Henry, Bastian, & Smith, 2012; Stinebrickner, 1998) and class size (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2006; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999). These factors are often subject to national or state policy agenda, and therefore difficult to respond to at the local school level.

Klassen and Anderson's (2009) comparison of teachers from 1962 to 2007 suggests that concerns about issues relating to teaching itself, such as workload and student behavior, have displaced issues pertaining to external sources, such as salary, buildings, and equipment. As a result, teachers are more likely to stay where they have supportive principals and cooperative colleagues who help them do their job well (Allensworth et al., 2009). For example, whilst beginning teachers report that their experiences are often influenced by their relationship with students and their ability to manage student behavior (e.g., Lukens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004), a supportive environment to hold conversations regarding such issues can determine an ECT's ability to cope (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010) whilst strengthening teacher efficacy, identification with their school, and commitment (Chan, Lau, Nie, Lim, & Hogan, 2008).

For this reason, researchers of the experiences of ECTs stress the influence of interactions with colleagues, including mentors, and how formal and informal programs can minimize negative experiences, such as those relating to isolation (e.g., Abdallah, 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Questions of teacher efficacy are often traced back to the positive influence of induction programs (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Johnson, 2007; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, Jones et al. (2013) emphasize that school commitment requires ECTs to perceive a fit between their beliefs and practices with those of their colleagues.

Principals play a significant role in developing an organizational climate that is perceived by ECTs to be supportive of their work and those of their colleagues (Jones et al., 2013; Pogodzinski, Youngs, Frank, & Belman, 2012). When the perceived organizational politics within a school appear to lead to the promotion of self-interests at the expense of organizational goals, teachers' identification with a school can be negatively impacted, which subsequently can impact teacher commitment (Chan et al., 2008). School leaders can be instrumental in shaping the experiences of ECTs by determining both their levels of participation in school management, and their potential to influence school climate and school effectiveness (e.g., Boyd et al., 2011; Johnson, 2007; Menon & Athanasoula-Reppa, 2011; Pogodzinski et al., 2012). A related source of dissatisfaction among teachers is their perceptions about increasing workload, particularly in non-teaching responsibilities