



## “Once hired, seldom gone”: The deliberation process of beginning teachers in Taiwan in deciding to stay in teaching



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring how Taiwanese beginning teachers deliberate on the pros and cons of teaching in making the decision to stay.
- Both intrinsic and extrinsic factors matter in contributing the “once hired, seldom gone” phenomenon.
- Perceptions of the competitive entry into teaching serve as a buffer to prevent them from leaving.
- Implications for mitigating the “hired today, gone tomorrow” trend include: raise teacher salary, build a centralized system with flexibility and raise the prestige of teaching.

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### ABSTRACT

High attrition of beginning teachers is a long-standing issue for many countries. While in some countries, beginning teachers tend to be “hired today, gone tomorrow,” in societies such as Taiwan, they are more inclined to stay. This study investigated how beginning teachers in Taiwan deliberate on the pros and cons of teaching in making such a decision. The results showed that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors count for their retention. In the deliberation process, facilitative and discouraging factors are both taken into account and coping strategies are developed. Implications of these findings are further discussed within a broader international perspective.

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### 1. Introduction

Difficulty in retaining beginning teachers has long been a serious problem in the field of education (Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1995; MacDonald, 1999). A comprehensive review of teacher attrition patterns found that worldwide, attrition rates are highest in the early years of a teacher's career (MacDonald, 1999). Such high attrition may reflect the fact that, on the one hand, many beginning teachers do experience great challenges in the process of “learning to be a teacher”; on the other hand, they tend to quit teaching more easily during this initial period, before they are too invested in the career (Cole, 1995). Beginning teachers who are just starting out in the profession can face challenging situations (Cole, 1995). For them, these challenges include knowing how to transmit content knowledge through the selection of appropriate pedagogical strategies (Rothenberg, 1993), managing an effective classroom environment (Klepper & Barufaldi, 1998), and establishing

rewarding relationships with students (Heath, 1994). These additional challenges may exacerbate the attrition problem among the newer teachers and prompt them to leave. Thus, one of the critical issues for educators and policy makers worldwide has been determining how to reduce the hindrances and strengthen the incentives for teaching so as to enhance beginning teachers' intentions to stay in the profession.

#### 1.1. “Hired today, gone tomorrow” vs. “once hired, seldom gone”

Some countries have high attrition rates for beginning teachers. For example, in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, there is a “five-year slide” in teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2002; Manuel, 2003; Sturman, Lewis, & Morrison, et al., 2005). In the United States, it is found that an alarmingly high percentage (39–46%) of beginning teachers depart within the first five years (Ingersoll, 2002, 2003). In the United Kingdom, approximately 35 percent of new teachers plan to leave the job within five years of teaching (Sturman et al., 2005). In Australia, it is reported that 20 to

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50 percent of teachers choose to leave teaching for good in their first three to five years of service (Manuel, 2003). Moreover, those teachers with the highest levels of ability are the ones most likely to leave, as they are more likely to secure jobs with better financial rewards and career opportunities than teaching (Davis, 2001; Gold, 1996; Sanders, 2001). This disturbing trend of “hired today, gone tomorrow” has raised great concern in the field of teacher education and prompted continuous investigations into the causes of this problem (Feng, 2005; Marvel, Lyter, & Peltola, 2007).

In contrast, some countries have attained great success in retaining beginning teachers. For instance, beginning teacher attrition rates are all at negligible levels, below 7 percent, in Japan (3%), South Korea (3%), Finland (7%), Germany (5%), and Taiwan (1.3%) (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Ministry of Education, 2008; OECD, 2005a, 2005b). Among these more successful countries, Taiwan, which stands out for its ability to retain the majority of its beginning teachers over the past six decades, has maintained an attrition rate of less than 2 percent in recent years, which can be described as a positive phenomenon of “once hired, seldom gone”

### 1.2. Factors influencing beginning teachers' retention

Given the above contrasting trends in the retention of beginning teachers in different countries, it is important to examine what factors contribute to the retention of these teachers. Research suggests that teachers' decisions on whether to remain in their schools and in teaching are influenced by a combination of the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that they receive in their work. Intrinsic factors include the pleasure of being with children, the exhilaration of contributing to students' learning, the enjoyment of teaching a subject that one loves, continuous growth in intellectual creativity to improve student learning, and the sense of contributing to society by having a positive impact on students (Eren & Tezel, 2010; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 1998).

Extrinsic factors can be divided into school, government, and cultural levels. School factors include both conducive circumstances such as administrative support, collegial relationships, and opportunities for professional development (Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1996; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) and unfavorable conditions such as workload, stress, and poor student behavior (Elfers, Plecki, & Knapp, 2006; Poppleton & Riseborough, 1990). Government factors include the compensation package provided for the teachers and level of professional autonomy enjoyed by the teachers. A favorable compensation package featuring job security, a handsome salary, and good benefits is conducive to teacher retention (Watt & Richardson, 2007), while an inadequate income and poor benefits may drive teachers away (Murnane, 1995). As to cultural factors, a favorable socio-cultural climate with a high value placed on education, strong parental support, and respect for teachers is conducive to teacher retention (Wang, 2011, Wang, 2012a), whereas negative conditions such as a lack of parental support and relatively low social status tend to make teachers frustrated and vulnerable to quitting (Murnane, 1995; Poppleton & Riseborough, 1990).

### 1.3. Factors behind the “hired today, gone tomorrow” phenomenon

In countries such as the United States and United Kingdom, which have difficulty recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, it has been found that governmental provisions for teacher salaries are below the international average ratios relative to GDP (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001), and societal respect for teachers in these countries is relatively low due to lack of parental support and heightened community criticism (Johnson, 2006a; Poppleton & Riseborough, 1990).

Under such unfavorable conditions, those who are still willing to enter the teaching profession tend to be motivated by intrinsic/altruistic factors and hold a more “idealist” view of school. They tend to view school as a place where they can engage in teaching, fulfill a sense of achievement in teaching, grow professionally, and exert an impact on students as a way to contribute to society (Marilyn & John, 2010). They are often “lovers and dreamers” of education (Cochran-Smith, 2006). When these idealistic beginning teachers enter the “real world” of classroom teaching, they tend to experience great “reality shock” and realize that schools are not as “rosy” as they expected due to mounting difficulties and problems in school (Elfers, Plecki, & Knapp, 2006; Heath, 1994). Research has shown that in the United States and United Kingdom, beginning teachers leave primarily because of unfavorable school-level extrinsic factors such as excessive workload and heightened stress, disruptive student behavior problems, lack of administrative support, inadequate resources/facilities, and insufficient opportunities to grow (Davis, 2001; Johnson, 2006b).

Studies focused on beginning teachers' transition from pre-service to in-service teachers also revealed that beginning teachers tend to experience difficult time in “getting the piece together” in acquiring professional knowledge due to a lack of mentor support and guidance in school setting (Pietsch & Williamson, 2010), shaping and reshaping their new identities as a teacher (Flores & Day, 2006), adopting appropriate actions based on individual career interests in school micro-political environs (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), and being re-socialized from prior idealistic and creative approach to teaching into a more traditional and routinized one (Flores, 2006). These struggles they experienced in the induction period may also erode their intentions to stay in teaching.

### 1.4. The Taiwanese context of the “once hired, seldom gone” phenomenon

Taiwan, an island nation off the coast of continental China with a dominantly Chinese population, has been able to retain a large majority of its teachers for the past six decades (Wang, 2004; Wang, 2012a, 2012b). From 1950 to 1994, when only a handful of normal universities were allowed to prepare teachers, teacher trainees received a fully subsidized education and were automatically assigned to teaching positions upon graduation. They were required to teach a minimum of five years after graduation in return for the free education received. After five years of teaching, most teachers chose to stay in the profession (Wang, 2004; Wang, 2011).

After the teacher education reform of 1994, many regular comprehensive universities joined the efforts to train teachers, and the job market became much more competitive. Under the current system, teacher trainees have to pay for their pre-service education, and job placements are no longer guaranteed. The teachers from normal universities compete with qualified candidates from other universities for teaching positions, and due to keen competition for teaching positions, only those who are highly qualified are able to enter the teaching profession (Wang, 2010). With competition, however, has come freedom of choice. The five-year service period is no longer mandatory, and new teachers have the right to leave at anytime.

Still, very few beginning teachers choose to leave. According to the official statistics published by the Taiwan Ministry of Education, in 2012, the attrition rate of new teachers (under the age of 30) was a negligible 1.25 percent (Ministry of Education, 2012a, 2012b). Because most teachers regard teaching as a “lifelong” job, most of them plan to stay in the profession until they are eligible for retirement (Xie, 1996; Zhuang, 1998). This phenomenon is quite suitably described as “once hired, seldom gone.” With such a long-standing stable, high-quality teaching force, Taiwan has been able

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