

Teacher Job Satisfaction and Retention: A Comparison Study Between the U.S. and China

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Through a literature review regarding teacher job satisfaction¹ in the U.S. and in China, in terms of community factors, school factors, and teacher characteristics, this paper finds that most teachers in both countries are satisfied with their jobs, but teachers cited various factors influencing their job satisfaction. This paper makes a comparison on teacher job satisfaction between the U.S. and China and proposes a framework for teacher retention.

Keywords: Job Satisfaction, Teacher Job Satisfaction, Teacher Retention

Teachers are always regarded as a powerful source in schools; however, teacher job satisfaction is rarely considered (Garrett, 1999). Teacher job satisfaction is a key factor in teacher's quality, in terms of the stability of the teaching force (Klecker & Loadman, 1996; Harris, Kazey, & Leichenko, 1991; Harris, 1992) and the commitment to the teaching organization (Klecker & Loadman, 1996; Shin & Reyes, 1991; Kushman, 1992). Teacher job satisfaction contributes not only to teachers' motivation and improvement, but also to students' learning and development (Perie, Baker, & Whitener, 1997).

Research on teacher job satisfaction has gained in popularity in the past decade, but few of them have made comparisons between different countries. With the spread of globalization, educators and researchers are calling for more comparative studies across the world. Therefore, this paper aims to make a comparison on teacher job satisfaction between the U.S. and China, in terms of community factors, school factors, and teacher characteristics, and to propose a framework for teacher retention. This paper will input some insights in comparison studies of teacher satisfaction and retention and hopefully, shed light on comparison studies of job satisfaction and retention in human resource development.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a multi-faceted concept, composed of a range of factors related to a job. As Mercer (1997) pointed out, job satisfaction is an affective reaction to an individual's work (Gerrett, 1999; Perie, Baker, and Whitener, 1997). It can be viewed as either an overall feeling or some specific facets about one's work, and can be tied to outcomes as well (Perie, Baker, and Whitener, 1997; Rice, Gentile, and McFarlin, 1991; Hevin, 2005).

Teacher job satisfaction, which is linked to teachers' work performance, includes teachers' involvement, commitment, and motivation to the job (Sargent & Hannum, 2005). It is not only important for teachers, but empirically influential on students and schools in general. According to Choy et al.'s research (1993), highly satisfied teachers, rather than their dissatisfied counterparts, are more likely to remain in their schools and keep on working in their teaching positions (Perie, Baker, and Whitener, 1997). Therefore, understanding teacher job satisfaction is helpful for, although not the sole factor accounting for, teacher retention.

Researchers in the past decade have considered different factors affecting teacher job satisfaction, and most of them can be categorized into three main clusters: community factors, school factors, and teacher characteristics. The following sections detail research in the U.S. and in China.

Literature on Teacher Job Satisfaction in the U.S.

Researchers in the U.S., since the middle of last century, have placed attention to topics concerning job satisfaction, but only a small proportion of them have focused on teacher job satisfaction (Garrett, 1999; Evans, 1997).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1997), both intrinsic and extrinsic factors have effects on teacher job satisfaction. Intrinsic factors, such as classroom activities, student characteristics,

¹ This study focused on elementary and secondary school teachers. Elementary school teachers are defined as those that teach in a school that has grade six or lower and no grade higher than eighth grade, in accordance with teachers that teach in primary schools in China. Secondary school teachers are defined as those in schools having grade nine or higher and no grade lower than seventh grade, in accordance with teachers that teach middle school and high school in China (Perie, Baker, & Whitener, 1997).

and perceptions of teacher control over the class, play a vital role in teachers' motivation (Lee, Dedrick, and Smith, 1991). Extrinsic factors, including salary, school safety, perceived support from administrators, availability of school resources, and relationship to others, influence teachers' satisfaction and performance as well (Bobbitt et al., 1994; Choy et al., 1993). Besides, school sector and size which are linked to school quality, also affect teachers' quality and satisfaction (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1996; Lee, 1991). Results from some researches demonstrate that salary and benefits are slightly or even unrelated to teachers' retention (NCES, 1997).

Marlow et al. (1996) conducted research in the Northwestern United States to examine the reasons for teachers' leaving, with specific focus on students (e.g. student discipline, motivation and attitude), emotional factors (e.g. lack of fulfillment, boredom, stress, and frustration), social respect, administrative and family support, working conditions, and salary. Their research showed that factors of students, social respect, working conditions and emotional aspects ranked highest as the reasons for teachers' leaving.

Klecker & Loadman (1996) explored the relationship between teacher empowerment and teacher job satisfaction, taking into account salary, opportunities for advancement, degree of challenge of the job, autonomy, general working conditions, interaction with colleagues, and interaction with students. With respect to job satisfaction, teachers were most satisfied with interaction with students, yet least satisfied with working conditions.

The research by the NCES (1997) analyzed teacher job satisfaction in terms of four clusters of variables: school characteristics (e.g. school sector, school level, community type, percent of students who are minorities, etc.), teacher background characteristics (e.g. age, sex, race/ethnicity, years teaching experience, education, etc.), workplace conditions (e.g. administrative support, student behavior, family support, routine duties, etc.), and teacher compensation (e.g. salary, benefits, etc.). In general, workplace conditions were connected with high level of teacher job satisfaction, while salary and benefits were far less associated with it. Teachers in private schools, in elementary schools, in urban areas, in low minority schools, with fewer experiences and, with administrative and family support, felt more satisfied than their peers. Moreover, female and younger teachers were more satisfied than male and older ones were.

The research by Mertler (2001) found most results similar to previous researches. On the whole, 77% of the teachers were satisfied with their jobs. Eighty-seven percent of the teachers aged from 26-30 years, and 86% of those aged over 56 years were more satisfied than average. Teachers with experiences for more than 20 years as well as those with experiences for fewer than 5 years were more satisfied. Additionally, middle/junior high school teachers felt more satisfied than elementary and high school teachers. Unlike previous findings, Mertler's research found that males had a slightly higher level of job satisfaction than females did.

Literature on Teacher Job Satisfaction in China

During the past ten years or more, a majority of research on teacher job satisfaction in China have mainly focused on urban areas rather than on rural areas (Xiao & Li, 2003). With more and more emphasis on education in rural areas, especially in areas of high poverty, recent studies have paid more attention to teacher job satisfaction in rural areas.

Feng's (1996) research can be regarded as a significant step in exploring teacher job satisfaction in China. In his study, five clusters of factors were taken into consideration: *zi wo shi xian* (self-fulfillment), *gong zuo qiang du* (job stress), *gong zi shou ru* (income), *ling dao guan xi* (relationship with administrators), and *tong shi guan xi* (relationship with colleagues).

In order to get a better understanding of teacher job satisfaction, Bao (2002) made a comprehensive survey on teachers' *xin tai* (feelings and thoughts) across the country, taking more social and cultural contexts into account. In general, most teachers (83.1%) in China thought of teaching as one of the best occupations. Less-educated, older, and primary school teachers were more satisfied than their counterparts. Concerning expectation of life, unlike 29.1% of those who claimed to enjoy a simple and humble life, 40.2% of teachers preferred pursuing a rich and superior life. Regarding job stress, 78.6% of teachers, especially younger, female, low-ranked teachers and teachers in urban areas, felt quite stressful. With respect to career development, most teachers were dissatisfied. In addition, most teachers were concerned with the national policy on teacher recruitment. On the whole, however, teachers participating in the survey expressed their satisfaction and *zhi ye ze ren gan* (responsibility) with teaching, although they felt not that satisfied in some aspects. This may be explained by the role of teacher and the meaning of education in Chinese culture rooted in Confucian, in which the teacher was highly respected and treated as an authority.

More recently, according to Xiao & Li (2003), teachers in urban areas in China tended to feel less satisfied with their salary, but more satisfied with their job security, working environment, and self-accomplishment.

Meng (2004) analyzed the difficulties of retaining teachers in public high schools, and he suggested that low salary and few benefits, job stress, lack of self-fulfillment, and familial factors (e.g. time to spend with family members, care for children's education, etc.) accounted for teachers leaving.

Sargent & Hannum (2005) conducted an in-depth research on teacher job satisfaction in rural Northwest China, in terms of community factors, school environment factors, and teacher characteristics. Their findings were mostly in alignment with previous studies, but contrary to their assumptions, however, teachers with greater workloads, felt more satisfied. Furthermore, economic development was negatively connected with teacher job satisfaction.

Liu & Tu (2005) conducted research in rural areas in Middle China, and they reported that the most negative factors that demolished teacher satisfaction were low salary, heavy duty, few opportunities of training and development, and difficulty to advance in teacher ranking.

Discussion

Recent research in both the U.S. and in China has provided a lens through which we can better understand teacher job satisfaction. Considering different social and cultural contexts between these two countries, researchers have examined various factors accordingly. There are some similarities as well as differences in the factors accounting for teacher job satisfaction in the U.S. and in China, and a comparison study might lead to a better review. As job satisfaction has been identified as an important factor for teacher retention (DeStefano, 2002), suggestions for future researchers to raise the level of teacher job satisfaction, from a perspective of human resource development, might be helpful for school administrators to improve teacher retention.

A Comparison of Studies Related to Teacher Job Satisfaction

Through a literature review regarding teacher job satisfaction in the U.S. and in China, most teachers in both countries were satisfied with their jobs. Variables affecting teacher job satisfaction and retention generally fall into three main clusters: community factors, school factors and teacher characteristics. According to the literature review, there are some similarities as well as differences in teacher job satisfaction between the U.S. and China, in terms of these three clusters.

Community Factors

In both the U.S. and in China, teachers were more satisfied in communities with greater economic and social resources. Teachers in the U.S. chose to teach in rural areas mainly because they enjoyed the rural lifestyle; whereas teachers in rural villages in China had to face a lack of access to transportation, cultural resources, or educational facilities. Unlike educational decentralization in the U.S., education in China had just started to leverage the degree of centralization, rendering huge gaps in education between different regions and areas. Due to the uneven social-economic development nationwide, Chinese teachers and schools that relied more on their local government and community had to face unequal salaries, opportunities, and so on.

Community factors may be analyzed under a broader social-economic background. From a cultural perspective, unlike teachers in the U.S. regarding teaching as one of regular occupations; teachers in China, viewed teaching not only as an occupation, but also as a *shi ye* (Bao, 2002), which won them a lot more than occupation. The significance of education and the authority of a teacher in China might be rooted in Confucian, which is unfamiliar to the U.S. China has been and is still in the process of transition since Chinese government started a variety of reforms ranging from economy to education (Tsang, 1996; Paprock, Lynham, and Cunningham; in press). With the transition from a centralized planned economy to a socialist market economy, the power of making decisions and allocating financial resources has been shifting from the central government to provincial and local government and community (Tsang, 1996; Bao, 2002). Teachers in China have to adapt to new policies, growing economy, quality education, competitive recruitment process, and so forth. Teacher job satisfaction differs a lot among groups and therefore, needs further research.

School Factors

School factors have attracted most attention in studies on teacher job satisfaction. These factors included salary, school economic resources and working conditions, workload, opportunities for professional advancement, collaboration with and support from colleagues, and quality of supervision (Sargent & Hannum, 2005).

Teachers in China were dedicated to their job, had to face dissatisfactory salaries, benefits, resources, etc. which tended to hinder their success. There were gaps between teachers in developed cities and those in poor counties, between teachers in *gongban* (public) schools and those in *minban* schools, and between certified teachers and *daike* teachers (Sargent & Hannum, 2005).

What's more, Chinese teachers had to deal with much stress from their daily work. Stress mostly emerged from their ranking and promotion, relationship with colleagues, and responsibilities on students' examination and graduation (Bao, 2002; Meng, 2004). In general, Chinese teachers taught less than their counterparts in other countries did, but they spent far more time on off-instruction activities, such as tutoring, class preparation, grading, home visiting, class administration, etc. (Tsang, 1996).

Regarding professional advancement, China provided an enormous system of in-service training for teachers. For instance, there were independent teachers' continuing education institutions, educational colleges and institutes, China TV teachers' college, regular higher education institutions, secondary specialized schools,

and other channels (Sargent & Hannum, 2005). In spite of so many resources, teachers in China still felt dissatisfied with their professional development, for lacking support from administrators or being unable to access to those resources.

Teachers in the U.S., on the other side, had little concern with salary and benefits but placed more importance on working conditions, including administrative support, school characteristics, interaction with students and colleagues, etc. Teachers in the U.S. also had to face the stress from their promotion and students' graduation, but their job satisfaction was less influenced by this factor.

Teacher Characteristics

Among the 5.8 million full-time teachers in China, most of them (65%) were in rural areas. More women than men took teaching as their jobs. China's teaching force is relatively young and less-educated (Sargent & Hannum, 2005; Ibid).

In the U.S., teaching ranked as the second occupation which employed most women, and earnings of teachers were above average (US Census, 2000).

Through the literature review in both the U.S. and in China, younger, male, less-experienced, and better-qualified teachers tended to be less satisfied with their jobs.

In a word, teacher job satisfaction has already attracted more and more attention in both the U.S. and in China, and it is associated with different variables at different levels. As discussed above, there are a great many differences in the factors influencing teacher job satisfaction in the U.S. and in China, and most of them are attributed to different social-economic conditions. However, with the global trend of educational decentralization as well as the development of educational reform in China (Sargent & Hannum, 2005; Paprock, Lynham, and Cunningham; in press), there are a lot of similar factors affecting teacher job satisfaction in both the U.S. and in China.

As mentioned earlier, teacher job satisfaction is strongly tied to teacher retention, which is helpful in solving the problem of teacher shortage (Klecker, 1996; Garrett, 1999; Meng, 2004). From my point of view, it is possible for these two countries to learn from each other on how to promote teacher job satisfaction and consequently, improve teacher retention. The following part is trying to propose a framework for teacher retention from a perspective of human resource development.

A Framework for Teacher Retention

Teacher job satisfaction provides a basis for determining changes that would improve teacher retention. On the basis of the literature review, specifically referring to the framework developed by Destefano (2002) for examining human resource systems in schools as well as the strategies summarized by Gonzalez (1995) for teacher retention, this paper proposed a framework for teacher retention. In accordance with the three clusters discussed above, the framework is supposed to include community factors, school factors, and teacher characteristics. Yet teacher characteristics, such as age, gender, race, etc., are not easy to change by nature and thus, the framework is more concerned with community and school factors, as presented in Table 1 (Destefano, 2002; Gonzalez, 1995; Tsang, 1996). Moreover, as discussed above, social-economic context is more complicated and can not be adjusted by any community or school itself, and therefore, this framework is developed mainly on a community and school ground.

Table 1. *A Framework for Teacher Job Retention*

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| <i>Community factors</i> | community conditions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • train principals, colleagues, and family members to support teacher • recruit and train community volunteers to take some off-class duties assigned to teacher • offer necessary facilities and materials • provide day care service for children of teachers during school hours |
| | community ties | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feature teacher activities in public • create partnerships with local industry, other schools and educational organizations |
| <i>School factors</i> | collegiality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establish teacher assistance teams or <i>jiaoyan zu</i> [teaching & research groups] • build up a network through which teachers could communicate with each other within the same district and beyond the community |

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|--------------------------|---|
| school environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enhance school security • create an equal and supportive atmosphere |
| stress reduction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allocate proper duties to each teacher • recognize signs of stress and burnout, and respond accordingly, e.g. hold stress reduction workshops |
| professional development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrate teacher professional development into the goals and objectives of schools • encourage teachers to pursue advanced degree from associated higher education institutions or programs • provide various in-service training programs, both formally and informally |
| career path alternatives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourage teachers to conduct researches and participate in academic conferences • allow highly qualified teachers to work as part-time mentors, trainers, etc. to reduce their time commitment if needed • offer opportunities of both horizontal and vertical job rotation, through which teachers can play different roles |

Conclusion

This paper aims to go through the literature focusing on teacher job satisfaction in both the U.S. and China, make a comparison between these two countries and consequently, propose a framework for teacher retention.

According to a literature review regarding teacher job satisfaction in the U.S. and in China, most teachers in both countries are satisfied with their jobs, but they have to deal with different factors that have impact – both positive and negative- on their jobs. Satisfying teachers' needs is essential for retention, and it should involve efforts of community and school, taking teacher characteristics into account.

Future Research

Although teacher job satisfaction is drawing more and more attention, there is still a lack of research on this topic, especially in the areas of poverty (Xiao & Li, 2003; Davis, 2002). This paper is aimed at proposing a framework for future research in both theory and practice.

First of all, there are a number of factors that influence teacher job satisfaction and retention, while the way and the degree of the influence vary under different circumstances. This paper is intended to provide a foundational framework, which can be used as a vehicle to explore how to improve job retention. What factors should be added or ignored need further consideration, depending upon different requirements.

Second, as compared above, there are a lot of differences in the factors affecting teacher job satisfaction in the U.S. and in China, thus this framework might not apply to any situation. Proposing this framework does not suggest to ignore the social-cultural contexts; on the contrary, however, it intends to provide a bigger picture for those who are involved in teacher job satisfaction and retention. How to apply the framework to different situations is based upon different needs.

Third, job satisfaction and retention play an important part in HRD, not only for teachers or teaching organizations, but also for any other organization. This framework is developed on the basis of general HRD practices as well as specific needs of teachers, but whether it can be applied to other organizations than schools remains in question.

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