

Leave the Light on When You Go

An Inquiry into the Factors that Contribute to Persistent Teacher Attrition

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May 10, 2010

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Statement of the Problem

Teaching is often referred to as a noble profession. Inherent within the world of education is the opportunity to change or give a child's life direction. There is also the chance to share something very personal – a passion for learning. The moments of self-discovery represent blessings to both teacher and student. If this is true, then why do teachers leave? There are likely few who enter the profession unadvisedly. The researcher recalls a friend that was persistent in telling her of the perils of teaching. This teacher did everything she could to dissuade the writer from entering into the halls of instruction. So, the chances of a teacher leaving because of the unexpected rigors of the profession are limited, however much they may exist. There must, then, be more esoteric reasons that compel a teacher to leave the profession or switch schools. Likewise, there must be factors that compel a teacher to select or remain at a particular location.

Researchers have identified such factors as school climate, location, student body demographics, socioeconomic status of students, the ethnic makeup of the faculty, classroom management and administrator involvement to name a few. However, at least two of these factors depend upon input from teachers (climate and classroom management) and their peers. Others have cited collegiality, or the interaction amongst the professional staff at the school site. In addition, what role does the input, or lack thereof, at the district level play into decision-making on the part of the educator to stay or go?

There have been numerous studies on the subjects of teacher turnover and retention. Most of these have contemplated the reasons teachers leave the profession and some have examined the factors that cause teachers to move from school to school. The data has been

disaggregated according to teacher gender, ethnicity, race, experience, and education. It has been noted that there is not a shortage, per se, of teachers, but, instead, an inability to retain teachers. Teachers leave the profession just as individuals leave other professions.

Unless an individual is in a position of authority, life goes on as before in most cases when an employee leaves and is replaced. Someone simply picks up their job where they left off and they fit themselves into the structure of the organization. This seemingly smooth transition does not often occur in the school setting. Teachers come into classrooms with some built in autonomy. There is rarely, if ever, anyone else of authority in their classroom. They set the tone, control the climate, establish parameters, lead the lessons and mete out the rewards; whether it is grades or something else.

When teachers leave school climate is affected regardless of their role in the school community. Other teachers wonder why they left. Is there some insidious problem they are not aware of? How many others are leaving? In most cases, the students are greatly impacted. The continuity of education is disrupted and it can have an emotional impact on children. In many cases, it is like losing a parent or another adult of consequence in their lives; particularly if it occurs during the course of the school year. The organizational structure of the school may be undermined. New teachers must be hired and collegiality, if it exists, reformed. If the school functions on the team teaching concept, a new teacher must be integrated into the team and its framework. Teacher teams develop personalities and a collegiality within the structure of the school's overarching ones. A new teacher has to find their place or be fitted into this group. In some cases, hierarchy is disturbed and new roles must be established or old ones reinforced.

Purpose Statement

Teacher mobility, whether it is internal to a district or external to education, has an immediate impact on student achievement and behavior. Although teachers are part of a system, they are neither replica of one another nor do they desire to be. They bring diverse personalities and styles into the classrooms. They may teach the same subject using the same materials and do so in entirely different ways. Teaching is very personal. Therefore, the reasons why teachers teach are also very personal. Their reasons for being at a particular school site, or in a particular district have personal import. Therefore, discovering uniform reasons for a teacher staying at or leaving a particular school should provide valuable insight. The purpose of this quantitative study was to identify the various factors contributing to teacher attrition at Alston Middle School and the ones that may reduce it.

Justification for the Study

An examination of the factors that influence teachers to remain at a school or to leave it, or a district may, hopefully, provide insight allowing for increased teacher retention within a school. This should have a direct impact on issues that concern educators and policymakers alike; such as, increasing student academic achievement, developing more effective teachers and creating a more stable education environment. Ultimately, all of this has an impact on the reason why teachers are there to begin with – educating students.

Research Questions

This study is intended to address three specific research questions:

- 1) What reasons are cited as the factors in a teacher leaving a school site?

- 2) What internal (site) or external (off-site) issues generate high levels of dissatisfaction, stress or frustration for teachers causing them to consider a change of venue or career?
- 3) What internal (site) or external (district) factors could contribute to an increase in the level of job satisfaction and a willingness to remain on site, if any?

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

Teacher Attrition

As previously stated, extensive research exists on the subject of teacher attrition. The problem has at various times been classified as an increased demand for teachers, high turnover rate, teacher shortage, teacher mobility and attrition. It is clearly understood that as the student population grows there is increased demand for teachers in the elementary and secondary classrooms. Ingersoll (2002) observed that the demand for teachers is due not so much to increased student enrollment as to a high turnover of teachers pre-retirement.

The questions that researchers are seeking to answer are “why do teachers leave and what leads them to do so?” The answers, like the studies themselves, are varied and differentiate between teachers who leave the profession altogether, those who leave a district or state and those who simply switch schools within a district. The reasons why each of these groups leaves may overlap, but the reasons why they choose their particular course of action is where clearer examination is necessary.

The mistake that some observers of the problem make is in viewing teaching as decidedly different from any other profession. Teachers choose their particular jobs for the same reasons other individuals choose theirs. There may be notable factors that on the surface make it appear otherworldly, but ultimately it is still a job for which people are paid and garner benefits. The choice to teach, in most cases, includes similar considerations as the choice to, say, work in an

office. Strunk (2006) stated that the choice to teach is made based upon “preferences for wages, working conditions, and other unobservable factors (68).” As this researcher can attest, having held other jobs besides that of teacher, this is a true statement. The difference between teaching and other jobs exists in those “unobservable factors.”

Those factors, though, just as with any other job are encased primarily in the working conditions. A laborer will work at a job that affords him/her the opportunity to pay the bills, put food on the table, et al, even if it is not the highest paying available position if all other factors relevant to that laborer generate high levels of esteem or return of value. It is a running joke amongst teachers who remain in teaching that they do so in spite of the salary. The return on their investment is high; either because the reward gained from the students they teach and/or the environment in which they work make it beneficial. According to Strunk (2006) there is a greater payout for these teachers in remaining in education; otherwise, they leave.

Reasons teachers leave or stay in education

There is much data regarding the reasons teachers leave the classroom. There is also evidence that most attrition takes place during the novice period, or the first five years. Kukla-Acevedo (2009) examined three aspects (administrative support, behavioral climate, and classroom control) of workplace conditions to identify why this is the case. The study encompassed a more general sampling of teachers; however, the researcher pulled out data on novice teachers and made comparisons. These teachers were more affected by workplace conditions than their more experienced counterparts. The most significant impact was from behavioral climate, which is not surprising. Young teachers are taught before you can actually

teach students you must be able to manage them. If a teacher either cannot, or believes they cannot, do this, then they will become overwhelmed and will likely leave.

Novice teachers' perceptions of the behavioral climate at their school will more often than not factor into their decision to leave or stay. Feng (2005) in an examination of attrition in Florida public schools found that "student misbehavior continues to increase the likelihood of teacher departure (14)." Kukla-Acevedo noted similar findings, particularly as relates to 1st year teachers. Gonzalez (2008) documented that "students come with so many problems and issues that it is overwhelming to the teachers (7)." Most of them will leave education altogether, but some will simply switch schools in hopes of finding a better environment.

Classroom management, however, was not the overriding factor in novice teachers leaving in this particular study; administrative support held that honor. Kukla-Acevedo (2009) found that increased support from administration decreased the likelihood that teachers would leave, but this finding was reversed when 1st year teachers were identified. There is a fine line that administrators must walk when dealing with 1st year teachers. It is generally taught that, as a new teacher, the less you have to rely on an administrator to maintain control in your classroom the more authority you retain. An overzealous or overly concerned administrator may detract from a 1st year, or novice, teacher establishing their authority.

Interaction with administrators plays a significant role in whether teachers' stay or leave. At first glance, or first interview more precisely, they are the face of the school. Interviewees for teaching positions take the pulse of the school based on insights gained from and about the administrator. This is not unlike anyone else sitting down for an interview with an office or personnel manager. Per Strunk (2006) it is a rational act of a professional looking for the best employment fit. However, first impressions are not always accurate. There is a grace period for

most employees where the employer determines whether or not they made the right decision in hiring them. Employees are conversely engaged in examining whether or not accepting the job was the right decision. Teachers are no different. For some, the decision could be an inability to teach or simply not to work for that particular administrator and they will look for a better fit. This is not an uncommon labor practice.

Thornton (2008) examined teacher transfers within a large district and discovered that leadership issues, including respect, response and provision, was the most significant factor in teachers' decisions to leave. Any professional will tell you that they want to feel valued, be empowered and receive all that they need to complete the job at hand. Gonzalez (2008) had many research participants cite "disrespect from administration (6)" as an influential factor in their electing to leave. Teachers' are professionals and expect professionalism and support from their "supervisors." Otherwise, the teacher may lack the motivation to fulfill their tasks. This detracts from the overall mission of the school that is promulgated by the administrators and adversely affects the students whom they are there to serve.

Kukla-Acevedo (2009) found that classroom autonomy bore little significance in the decision of a teacher to leave. This is an anomaly. Prior research has shown a connection between a lack of classroom autonomy and teachers leaving. Kukla-Acevedo makes note of this and posited that "current federal and statutory accountability policies may constrain teachers' classroom autonomy more than the individual policies and practices (450-1)."

This may be true for a couple of the aspects of classroom autonomy. Classroom autonomy, as identified by Kukla-Acevedo, includes choosing textbooks, instructional techniques, grading policies and classroom discipline. All are considered paramount to most teachers, but each is not experienced by all teachers. Teachers may, in general, be given the

opportunity to examine textbooks, but, how often is the decision theirs versus having already been made at the district level. As well, grading policies are more frequently established at the district level so as to be uniform. Therefore, if autonomy as regards instructional techniques and classroom discipline is removed it begs the question – what exactly are teachers expected to do in the classroom? The nature of the question makes classroom autonomy a factor not to be ignored.

Ingersoll (2003) noted that “after just five years, between 40 and 50 percent of all beginning teachers have left the profession (31).” The evidence points to workplace conditions or organizational factors as the causes of primary causes of these departures. A small percentage of the teachers in the survey, about 19 percent, left as a result of personnel decisions that were beyond their control, i.e., cutbacks due to decreased enrollment and they were the last one hired. A larger percentage identified traditional reasons teachers leave the profession, such as family considerations. Almost the same number of teachers left for a better yield on their personal investment; but within this group was a large percentage that left because of job dissatisfaction.

Those teachers were asked to identify the source of their dissatisfaction and the results confirmed what previous researchers have reported. As with any job, salary was a consideration for 75 percent of them – not enough return on their investment. They were asked to do immeasurably more, in the way of extra duties, for which the compensation was woefully inadequate. However, still more indicated reasons related to working conditions that superseded salary as a consideration for leaving. The reasons include some previously identified here as behavior (student discipline), administrative support (lacking), and autonomy (school wide and classroom decision making).

In addition, teachers in high-poverty schools frequently cited the effects of parents' socioeconomic status upon students as contributing to factors that influenced them to leave. Among the effects noted by Elfers (2007) were an increase in disciplinary issues, level of participation of parents and community in the school, responsiveness of students to learning and the ease of communication with parents about that learning. Feng (2005) also found that teachers in Florida were more inclined to leave high-poverty schools. For some teachers, the threat of violence (Smith, 2006) led to stress that caused them to leave.

A more infrequently articulated, but no less significant, factor in moving teachers out the door is the lack of opportunity for professional growth or development. A third of the teachers surveyed by Elfers (2007) indicated that time allotted for professional learning and the resources or financial incentives, for the same, was a consideration in their departing for a different school. Oft-mentioned in multiple studies, but to a lesser degree than other factors, was district and state emphasis on testing. Many teachers recognize that this focal point stems from directives built into the No Child Left Behind Act.

Reasons teachers move between locations

Teachers who choose to remain in the classroom, but who elect to change their location, essentially consider the same reasons as do teachers who leave education. They also seek support from their administrators, autonomy in their classroom, a shared interest in the mission of the school and strongly enforced student discipline. However, here is where those unobservable factors mentioned by Strunk (2006) become more conspicuous. Those factors tend to be immeasurable; although attempts have been made to measure them and will be again.

Elfers (2007) sought to elicit differing results on teacher mobility from that of prior research based on national data sources by using databases and teacher surveys in the state of Washington. The major difference, per Elfers, was that scholars have tended to base their understanding of mobility issues largely upon national data, which does not take into consideration mobility that occurs within a state system, or more specifically, at the school and district levels.

Elfers (2007) administered a survey that asked teachers to identify reasons why they would choose to stay or leave their current school. Some of the reoccurring reasons were teaching assignment, collegiality, school location, administrative support, school climate and personal or family considerations. Swars (2009) reported similar themes as essential to keeping teachers at their school. Administrative support and personal or family considerations have been addressed to varying degrees in this review. Two of the remaining reasons stated, teaching assignment and collegiality, warrant further analysis.

Teachers often cite having the opportunity to procure a better teaching position as a reason for leaving a school. Feng (2005) identified class assignments as an important factor in teachers' choices; whether it is to leave or stay. First and foremost, is the assignment in line with their expertise; essentially, are they working in their field or out of it. Secondly, is the assignment a consistent one or does it change? Again, using general labor practices as an example, if an employee at a rental car company likes the work they do but they are constantly pulled away from it to do something else, they may seek a lateral move to another rental car company that does not utilize this business practice. This translates into either a different school or district for teachers.

By the same token, if they enjoy their job, but not the people they work with, a determination is made that a change is in order. It might be great to keep their job and not have to find another place to work, but the impracticality of trading in their coworkers for better ones negates this option. A key factor in any job being satisfactory is the ability to peacefully and cooperatively coexist with coworkers. The inability to do so can make for very unproductive working conditions.

Teachers currently entering the profession have been exposed to collaborative work practices with their collegiate peers and been introduced to learning communities, team teaching, and literature on all of the above. They have an expectation of building community with their colleagues and working for the success of each other and ultimately, for that of their students. When this is absent, they may become soured on teaching and leave.

Teaching is a job accomplished primarily in isolation. The teacher is often the lone adult in the classroom. This means the majority of their workday is spent independent of interaction with coworkers. So, when the opportunity exists to do so, they want it to be meaningful, productive and pleasant. Instructional practices and strategies are used in different ways from one teacher to the next. The ability to gain insight from a colleague on what works for them when little seems to work for you is of tremendous benefit to both the teacher and the students they seek to reach. This benefit is lost when fellow teachers do not share values about teaching and educating students. There are many teachers who have cited the inaccessibility of their peers or unwillingness to collaborate as a determinant in their departing a school. The high stakes federal and state testing environment has increasingly placed more emphasis on team work amongst educators.

Summary of Major Themes

The majority of the literature reviewed provides evidence that teachers leave the classroom and/or switch schools, districts for similar as well as differing reasons. Just as with any working professional, they want to feel supported by their administrators; have the resources they need to succeed; and, enjoy a pleasant working environment. They may leave for salary considerations, family or personal issues, or teaching simply is not for them. There are ancillary reasons why a teacher may choose to switch versus leave. These reasons include intangible working conditions, such as behavioral climate, school location, teaching assignment, and collegiality to include teachers and administrators.

Novice teachers, who represent the largest sector of teachers leaving the profession, move within a district more than outside of it. This is the type of movement identified by most studies that were reviewed. However, when you take into consideration normal labor practice, in essence it represents a professional who knows the career path they wish to pursue, but has yet to identify the environment in which they wish to do so. This begs further study – why do teachers move within a district; particularly early in their career?

Intent of Study to Extend the Literature

The intent of this study is to extend the literature on the reasons teachers switch schools or districts as well as identifying if these teachers eventually leave the classroom or remain. The focal point is mobility within a district from a particular school. The research will examine the factors that teachers identify as keeping them at a location versus those that will cause them to seek a change. The hope is to add measure to the intangibles noted above: behavioral climate,

location, teaching assignment and collegiality. In addition, what do these factors say about the community, literally, and those within the district at large and the school itself?

Chapter 3

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were fourteen teachers presently at Alston Middle School in Summerville, South Carolina. An examination of teacher demographics identified sixty percent holding advanced degrees, fifty-nine percent under continuing contract and only four percent with emergency or provisional certificates. Approximately seventy-one percent of the teachers returned to the site from the previous year; this was down from seventy-five percent the preceding year and sixteen percent below the average of schools with similar students. It was also twelve percent below the median middle school. Teachers were working with a student body that included four percent who were older than usual for their grade level, which was nearly two percent higher than schools with similar students and one percent higher than the median middle school. Students also received out-of-school suspensions or expulsions for violent and/or criminal offenses at a rate six percent (6.7%) higher than schools with similar students and the median middle school. Teacher attendance was at ninety-four percent the preceding year, which was slightly (1%) below the average for schools with similar students and

median middle schools. In addition, approximately forty percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, which identifies the socioeconomic status of their parents.

Research Design

The quantitative study identified factors that cause teachers to leave the classroom or a particular school. It generated qualitative data as to which factors carry the most weight in decision making and the numbers of teachers inclined to choose them. Teachers that were employed at Alston during the 2009 to 2010 school year were asked to voluntarily participate in taking surveys on factors that would cause them to either stay or leave the school site. In addition, they were queried on their morale at various points during the school year.

Permission

Permission to carry out the research study at Alston Middle School was requested of and granted by the Principal (Appendix A). The informed consent letter guaranteed that the identities of the participants and their responses would remain anonymous. Teachers were also provided with a letter (Appendix B) indicating the anonymity of their participation. However, they were also informed that data analysis would be available to administrators upon completion of the study.

Instrumentation

Instruments utilized were teacher exit data collected annually by the district. This included data on induction teachers (first three years in the district or classroom) required by the

state. In addition, a Likert-type scale survey (Appendix C) was administered in February of the school year.

Validity

The Likert-type scale survey was modified from a survey used by Swars (2009). Modifications to the instrument were validated by an expert group (Appendix D).

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter presents the findings of a quantitative study examining the factors that serve as determinants for a teacher leaving or remaining at a particular school or district. The study specifically targets Alston Middle School located in Dorchester Two School District in South Carolina. The study focused on factors that teachers place import on when determining whether or not to remain at a particular location; specifically, which factors motivate them to either remain where they are or to seek positions elsewhere, either within the district, the state or beyond. Teachers in the study were presented with both positive and negative condition statements and asked to rate them on a Likert scale. The mean results follow as well as demographic information on the participants.

Table 4.1:

Likert-Type Scale Survey Items and Mean Scores

<u>Survey Item</u>	<u>Mean Scores</u>
1. The school emphasizes academic success.	4.57
2. The administrators are visible around the school during instruction.	4.50
3. The professional caliber of the teachers at the school is high.	4.07

4. Administrators are role models for teachers.	4.29
5. The procedures for teacher performance evaluation are satisfactory.	3.50
6. I am satisfied with the grade level I am assigned to teach.	4.14
7. I feel comfortable voicing my concerns to administrators.	3.86
8. Teachers are treated fairly by the administration.	3.86
9. I am satisfied with the subject I am assigned to teach.	4.36
10. Student behavior is a problem.	4.00
11. Student mobility (transferring in and out) makes it difficult to teach.	3.29
12. Most of the students in the school are motivated to learn.	3.07
13. Most of the students submit to the school behavior program.	3.29
14. I am able to establish meaningful relationships with other teachers.	3.71
15. I am willing to establish meaningful relationships with other teachers.	4.57
16. Teachers treat one another in a respectful manner.	4.00
17. There are many opportunities for teacher collaboration in the school.	3.57
18. I collaborate with other teachers.	4.21
19. There is adequate time available for planning and preparation.	1.86
20. I am satisfied with the level of autonomy and control over my classroom.	3.50
21. I do not have enough influence over the school's policies and practices.	3.43
22. I often feel that my teaching workload is too heavy.	3.71
23. There are sufficient computers and technology available for instruction.	3.21
24. Some of the classes I teach are too large.	3.71
25. Extra duties increase my workload to a burdensome amount.	3.71
26. Required professional development is usually in line with my professional goals.	2.36
27. I am pleased with the opportunities for professional development offered at Alston Middle School.	3.29
28. Resources and materials/equipment for my classroom are sufficiently available.	3.50
29. The school facilities (buildings, grounds) are in need of significant repair.	3.14
30. The school is located in a safe neighborhood.	3.21
31. The school receives too little support from the community.	2.91
32. I feel safe at the school (e.g., physical environment.)	4.07
33. I receive too little support from parents.	3.07

34. The school climate feels safe and empowering.	3.71
35. I have gained tremendous benefit from the Professional Learning Communities.	2.93
36. I feel that responsibility for student success is a collective one (communal).	3.64
37. There is strong support (for me as an educator) from the district.	3.14
38. The burden for student success is placed primarily on the teachers.	4.86
39. My job satisfaction level is high.	3.29
40. Considering all the factors that influence my satisfaction with teaching at Alston Middle, overall, I am satisfied.	3.57

There were several statements in the survey that by their nature, either the situation being referred to or a qualifying word such as adequate or sufficient, could have elicited responses leading to a low mean. The purpose of the specific statements posed to respondents was to identify which factors result in positive versus negative affectations. Those items with possible negative affect include items 10, 19, 21-25, 28-33, and 38. Two of the statements offset each other in terms of addressing the actual environment, or location of the school and how the teacher felt about it. Although the participants on average were neutral as to the safety of the neighborhood in which the school is located, item 30; they felt safe at the school, item 32.

Further review of the survey will indicate many response means fell in the neutral category (3), or viewed another way, neither agree nor disagree. Additional discussion of this will follow in the succeeding chapter. At the lowest end of the spectrum, in terms of how the teachers viewed the factor, were items 19 and 26. Both of these earned a response of disagree with means of 1.86 and 2.36 respectively. At the opposite or agreeable end of the spectrum were items 1 and 15, which deal with the school's emphasis on academic success and participants' willingness to establish meaningful relationships with other teachers. These items produced means of 4.57 or near strongly agree. Slightly above these two was item 38, one of those with

potentially negative affectations, which stated the burden for student success is placed primarily on the teachers. This scored 4.86 - highest of all responses.

Table 4.2: Survey Category Analysis

Scores per Question							Mean
Category /							
Admin Support (1-5)	4.6	4.5	4.1	4.3	3.5		4.19
Teacher/Admin Relations (6-9)	4.1	3.9	3.9	4.4			4.06
Student Relations (10-13)	4	3.3	3.1	3.3			3.41
Collegiality (14-18, 35)	3.7	4.6	4	3.6	4.2	2.9	3.83
Instruction (19,23-25 28)	1.9	3.2	3.7	3.7	3.5		3.20
Influence (20-22)	3.5	3.4	3.7				3.55
Prof. Development (26-27)	2.4	3.3					2.83
Environment (29-32, 34)	3.1	3.2	2.9	4.1	3.7		3.41
Community (33, 36)	3.1	3.6					3.36
District Support (37-38)	3.1	4.9					4.00
Job Satisfaction (39-40)	3.3	3.6					3.43

The items in the survey were categorized according to their focal point. A few statements could fall within more than one category, but were placed according to conversations with the participants. All of the categories scored means within the neither agree nor disagree or agree range with Professional Development nearly falling into the disagree category. The highest favorable response in the categories was for Administrative Support. However, the

preponderance of “neither agree nor disagree” responses both here and in the survey itself warrant further examination in a succeeding chapter.

Table 4.3: Participant Demographics

Years	<1 to 4	5 -9	10-14	15-20	21+
Teaching	3	4	2	2	3
Avg. years in DD2	1-4	5-9	1-4	12	5-9
Avg. years at Alston	1-4	5-9	1-4	7	5-9
Avg. no. of Districts	1	1	2	2	3
Avg. no. of schools	1	1.5	2.5	3	4

The respondents, though minimal in number (14), were varied in experience. As shown above, they ranged from new to nearing retirement in terms of years in the classroom, new to the district and Alston Middle School or long-term in both. The more experience they had the more likely they were to have been mobile and moved from district to district, state to state, or school to school. The average number of schools taught at increased exponentially with the number of years in the classroom. This movement was one of the behaviors seeking to be identified through this study. More specifically, the goal was to identify via the survey items what concerns generate satisfaction or dissatisfaction within a teacher and compels them to seek a new position inside or outside the classroom/district or to simply leave education altogether.

Table 4.4: Projected Transitions

Years in Education	<1 to 4	5 -9	10-14	15-20	21+	Totals
Total teacher/participants	3	4	2	2	3	14
Expects to retire from teaching	0	0	1	1	3	5
Intends to remain in education, but leave the classroom	1	3	2	1	0	7
Unsure about future	1	0	0	0	1	2

Of the participants, nearly one-third (5) expect to retire from teaching. Another half (7) intend to remain in education but leave the classroom. Most of those expect to do so within 2-10

years with the latter being the respondent nearest to retirement (15-20 years in service). Only two stated they were unsure about their future, but were leaning toward leaving the classroom.

The following chapter will more closely examine and discuss the findings of this quantitative study. The researcher will then draw conclusions based upon the study and propose suggestions for further study.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this quantitative study was to identify factors that motivate teachers to remain or depart a particular school, district or state. The researcher sought to answer three questions: 1) What reasons are cited as the factors in a teacher leaving a school site? 2) What internal (site) or external (off-site) issues generate high levels of dissatisfaction, stress or frustration for teachers causing them to consider a change of venue or career? 3) What internal (site) or external (district) factors could contribute to an increase in the level of job satisfaction and a willingness to remain on site, if any?

In this study, teachers at Alston Middle School were asked to voluntarily participate in a survey to identify factors that impacted their level or lack of job satisfaction. The survey review indicated that teachers were content with administrative support and their relations with the same. They stated emphatically (strongly agreed) that the school emphasizes academic success and almost nearly as much that administrators are visible around the school during instruction. They were also agreeable to the support proffered by the district. However, they were dissatisfied or disagreed with the opportunities offered for professional development by the

district and by extension their school site. They also rated collegiality as a positive factor in their present satisfaction with working at Alston Middle School. They were only slightly less agreeable, but agreeable nonetheless, with their influence, which included autonomy in their classrooms (agreed they had that), school policies and practices (neither agree nor disagree that they have influence), and that their teaching workload is too heavy (agreed).

Teachers were neutral, or responded “neither agree nor disagree” (3 on the Likert scale) for several groups of questions (categorized in Table 2) including Student Relations, Instruction, Professional Development, Environment, Community Support, and overall Job Satisfaction. This was somewhat alarming and only slightly mitigated by their responses to individual questions within the categories. When taken into consideration along with their attitude in the workplace as observed and heard by the researcher, it becomes a cause for some concern. Teachers felt strongly that student behavior was a problem and affected instruction. They felt less strongly about student mobility in and out of the school and about their motivation to learn. However, they also were not sure of the students’ willingness to submit to the school’s behavior program. This raises the question that if the teachers are unsure of the student commitment to the program, how committed are the teachers?

The survey statement that received the lowest rating was included in the Instruction category. When asked if there was adequate time available for planning and preparation, teachers responded with a resounding no (1.86), or disagreed. They believed some of the classes they taught were too large and that extra duties increased their workload to a burdensome amount, but were amenable to the resources and materials/equipment that was available for instruction. The problem here appears to be time to plan for instruction that is interrupted by extra duties and other expectations, such as the Professional Learning Communities that were

instituted during the current school year. The statement on the survey pertaining to PLC's received a rating of 2.93, neither agreed nor disagreed, that they gained tremendous benefit from them. This item was included in the collegiality category, which teachers rated strongly with the exception of that statement. Their low rating may have been impacted by the belief that they already had too much going on and their workload or tasks were being increased without balance being addressed.

Teachers were divided as to the degree of community support as indicated by their uncertainty regarding the level of parental support and feeling strongly that the responsibility for student success is a communal one. This latter factor was offset by the item receiving the highest rating (4.86 – strongly agree) in the survey – the burden for student success is placed primarily on the teachers. Teachers expressed that they feel this burden and find it extremely unfair. Of course, their belief that student success is a collective responsibility directly supported this finding. Teachers stated that if the burden were truly shared communally it would lead to greater student success and less stress for those who, on paper, are “responsible” for educating them.

In the area of school environment, teachers were non-committal on three of the five statements. They expressed neutrality regarding school facilities being in need of repair, the school's location and its support from the surrounding community. However, they indicated that they felt safe at the school and its climate was empowering. This taken in consideration with collegiality indicates that teachers draw a lot of comfort from their peers and administration. They were not too sure about the students, but they hold each other in high esteem and this enhances their work experience. This correlates with an earlier sentiment expressed in this research that teachers remain in the classroom if the return on their investment is high and this

will either come from the students they teach (not a decisive factor in this study) or the environment in which they work (strong factor in this study).

The overall job satisfaction for teachers garnered a rating of 3.43 indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed that they like their current job. There were two statements assigned to this category, 39 and 40 in Table 1. The former elicited a response of neutral (3.29), or essentially they were undecided and the latter a response of agree (3.57). Item 39 states “my job satisfaction level is high” and item 40 states “considering all the factors that influence my satisfaction with teaching at Alston Middle school, overall, I am satisfied.” This is a curious dichotomy. On the one hand their job satisfaction is neither here nor there, but on the other they are satisfied with teaching at Alston Middle. There are different inferences that can be culled from this seeming contradiction. Either the teachers are truly not sure where they stand on this topic or their job satisfaction is not high, but it would be even lower if they were not at Alston Middle School. Apparently, there are mitigating factors that make the job more bearable because they are at Alston as opposed to somewhere else. As indicated by the positive affect of collegiality at the site, in addition to that gained from administrators, this contradiction makes more sense. Teachers at Alston are greatly impacted by the support they gain from their peers and the administration. If either of these were lacking, it is likely their job satisfaction level would drop considerably.

Also of note, there was a tendency of the majority of the respondents to rate many statements in a “neither agree nor disagree” fashion with a neutral response. As discussed earlier when examining the categories this caused concern for the researcher. This neutrality infers one of two things; either the responder either has no opinion about the subject or they do not wish to express one. Since the survey was anonymous and respondents stated they felt free to be honest,

this means, for the most part, teachers were neutral about these items. This may also indicate apathy, which is a condition best left out of the classroom. This analysis may be supported by the noncommittal response regarding job satisfaction, which may be an indicator that teaching is losing its luster juxtaposed with the high level of satisfaction in being at Alston, hinting at an acceptable working environment. Teachers may be saying I do not like my job, but I like where I work. In an age where education is increasingly under the microscope and teachers more so than any participant in the process, having lukewarm educators does not bode well for progress.

There is, however, a downside to the disparity of “I am not sure about my job, but I like the people I work with and the environment in which I work.” The participants indicated this one-sided honeymoon would not last indefinitely. Table 3 shows varied experience levels of the teachers surveyed as well as time spent in service both at Alston and in the district. Table 4 shows their view of their own future in education. The majority of those who responded are not near retirement but indicated a desire to leave the classroom and do something else in education. Most of those stated they would do so within 2-5 years. This means on average they would have spent anywhere from 5 to 15 years in the classroom.

The majority of them cited limited return on their investment as the ultimate reason as to why they would change positions. Their workload is too heavy, not enough time to decompress within the school day because of extra duties and meetings, limited opportunity to grow as a professional in the manner in which they would like to or poor student commitment to education. All of these are factors over which they have little to no control and those who indicated an intention to leave at some point prior to retirement cited these factors as the impetus for their decisions. Even if they are not planning on leaving in the immediate future, many of the participants already know that they will not retire from education.

Implications

There are some serious implications from this study for Alston Middle School and education in general. The overarching response that the teachers neither agree nor disagree as to whether they like their job is an apathetic one. This may mean that they are in the midst of selecting a path to take regarding their future. In an environment of change, where jobs are being lost and industries are being restructured, security in one's employment is crucial. If there are teachers who are at a crossroads as to whether or not they wish to remain in the classroom and they choose to remain, what level of commitment is there to instruction? What level of commitment is there to the vision of the school or the goals for learning? Are they simply going through the motions? This could be the signs of second-degree burnout, where mood changes occur, an increasingly cynical attitude toward the job develops and there is persistent irritability. The latter characteristic is often evident at the end of the school year, when teachers just want it to be over and have already begun planning their down time. This stage of burnout is occurring earlier in the careers of educators and something must be done to stem the tide. The rising level of apathy that exists among educators who remain in the classroom and causing others to leave must be addressed.

Teachers evidenced increasing dissatisfaction with factors over which they have no control but directly affect their willingness to remain in the classroom. If the goal is to limit the amount of teacher turnover, does it not behoove the powers that be to make a concerted effort to address these concerns or are they satisfied with the status quo? One suggestion is to adhere to the principle of less is more as a means of limiting the increasing stress experienced by teachers. Specifically, the district should cease the practice of bowing to each and every trend that occurs

in data generated in the classroom and focus on one improvement at a time, instead of addressing multiple ills all at once and taxing the time and patience of teachers. Time that is set aside for planning instruction should be sacrosanct. It should not be superseded by the next fad coming down the pipeline; such as PLC's that is supposedly just a better way of doing what is already in practice. Teachers still need to be able to plan their lessons and, although strategizing with peers is beneficial, losing valued time to meet the needs of the students they teach, who are different from the students someone else teaches, is critical.

Not to mention, that the increasing burden of taking loads of work home and intruding upon the quality time spent with one's own family does not endear the process to the educator. Some would say that for those who work a traditional school year that having summers off is the trade-off for the workload incurred during the school year. The person who believes this has little concept of the rigors involved in educating today's children or the sacrifices made by those who attempt to do so. Many teachers work during the summer, either teaching, because their income is not adequate enough during the regular year or planning for the upcoming school year because they know their official planning time will often be usurped by meetings or conferences. On the other hand, an educator who expects not to take any work home is idealistic, but working two to three hours per evening and often giving up at least one weekend day is not going to keep many teachers in the classroom. If teachers everywhere and not just select places in the United States, were viewed and treated as professionals who are required to obtain varying levels of education to teach, then working the kind of hours that those who receive much higher compensation and more varied benefits do might be justified.

In addition, state legislators need to know that increasing class size that would require increased input from the teacher and still higher output from the students they teach is the

equivalent of insanity – doing the same thing the same way you have always done it and expecting to get different results. A teacher instructing 20-25 students is capable of providing more individualized instruction than the same teacher with 25-30, or 30-35 students in the classroom. The expectation that specialized instruction will take place with large numbers of students in the classroom and generate the required output (meeting the demands of No Child Left Behind), specifically, increasing test scores, is ludicrous at best. The teacher as marionette will not work.

A teacher by definition is one who teaches or instructs, especially as a profession. However, teachers today are being asked to focus on the newest strategy that will cure all that is ailing their particular school or district, or the newest way to disaggregate data so that their instruction will generate at least the same, if they were good, or better results it did before they had this new *thing*. Schools are not moving any further forward than they were five to ten years ago and placing the burden of this lack of movement upon teachers is not the solution. Expecting teachers to shoulder the majority of the burden is not working as they are continuing to leave the classrooms through a revolving door and this stagnates or retards growth in education overall.

Instead of doing everything possible to keep pushing them out the door, a suggestion for states such as South Carolina is to give teachers a real voice in what takes place in the classroom. Soldiers on the front line who simply follow the instructions of the strategists who are behind the lines without taking into consideration immediate realities will find their mission unsuccessful, but possibly their lives endangered as well. Teachers are on the front lines of education and need to have a voice in the process. They are expected to know their students, including how they learn and how best to reach them. Yet they are continually expected to teach every student the

same things in the same way while also addressing their differences. It is a losing battle when those who are on the front lines are not consulted and the battle plan needs to be reworked. Unfortunately, teachers have no voice in South Carolina and as long as that is the case, the solution may remain out of reach. New ideas are continually being proposed by those at the district and state level, who may or may not have been in the classroom. However, very few of these ideas take into consideration an ever changing culture and students who adhere to that culture that enter the classroom. Again, teachers are at the forefront and have a view to the nature of the participants and should be consulted with regularity as to how best to instruct them. By the same token, teachers should be tireless in their pursuit of education so that they are better equipped to meet the demands of a growing society that is entering their classrooms.

Limitations

There were some limiting factors that may have affected the reliability and validity of this study. The limited number of participants may not have allowed for adequate data to identify or support a trend as to why teachers leave the profession or switch schools or districts.

As well, the general climate that existed throughout the survey caused by a financial downturn in the nation may have impacted teacher dispositions and their responses in the survey. There was a general malaise that certainly encouraged teachers to participate, rather enthusiastically, and likely contributed to others not participating.

Recommendations for Future Study

Additional studies could be performed based on the results of this study and resources accessed during the study. The researcher was privy to data from the district on teacher attrition that could augment a deeper study as to why teachers exit the classroom. The data was not teacher specific, but very generalized and did not provide supporting information for this study. However, it did illuminate similar factors as noted in this study and those referenced in the research for the same, as having an impact on teacher mobility.

This study concentrated on one middle school within a district and could be expanded to include all middle school within the district to analyze the impact of working with children in the middle who it has been suggested present a challenge to educators. In addition, comparisons could be made between levels of education and identifying if the rate at which teachers leave one versus the other is significantly different. Does it matter if you are teaching elementary, middle or high school students? What impact does the degree of collegiality truly have on whether or not an educator remains at their position? The researcher posits that this area of study will provide a dearth of opportunities for examination in years to come.

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Appendix A

Letter Requesting Principal Permission to Conduct Study

Mr. Sam R. Clark

August 10, 2009

Alston Middle School

Summerville, SC 29483

Dear Mr. Clark,

I am currently pursuing my Master's Degree at Southern Wesleyan University. As a requirement for my education research course, I am to complete a research study. I would like to conduct this study at Alston Middle. As you are aware, there is significant teacher turnover on a yearly basis at the school site. I would like to investigate the factors which facilitate this attrition and, perhaps, identify factors that would alleviate it. I will be asking teachers to complete a survey that will identify those factors that influence their decision to stay or go and conduct informal interviews on the state of their morale. I will maintain the anonymity of participants at all times during the survey. I would like to obtain your permission to conduct this research study.

Thanks in advance,

Carla M Salley

Appendix B

Letter to Teachers Guaranteeing Anonymity of Participation

August 10, 2009

Dear Teacher,

I am currently pursuing my Master's in Education at Southern Wesleyan University. As a requirement of my educational research course, I am to conduct a research study. I have elected to examine the factors that influence teacher decisions to stay at or leave Alston Middle School. I would like for you to complete a survey during the school year in November/December and be willing to respond to informal interviews. The survey will indicate those factors which are important to you at any school site and the interviews will determine the level of your morale and feelings of support here at Alston. At no time will you be identified as participating in this survey. The names of teachers who agree to participate in this study will be kept confidential by me. However, the results of the survey may become public and, therefore, available to administration.

Thanks in advance,

Appendix C

Likert-scale Survey

Identify Possible Factors that Influence Teacher Mobility

Please rate each statement based upon the following scale: strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1.

<u>Item</u>	<u>Rating</u>				
1. The school emphasizes academic success.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The administrators are visible around the school during instruction.	1	2	3	4	5
3. The professional caliber of the teachers at the school is high.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Administrators are role models for teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The procedures for teacher performance evaluation are satisfactory.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am satisfied with the grade level I am assigned to teach.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I feel comfortable voicing my concerns to administrators.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Teachers are treated fairly by the administration.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I am satisfied with the subject I am assigned to teach.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Student behavior is a problem.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Student mobility (transferring in and out) makes it difficult to teach.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Most of the students in the school are motivated to learn.	1	2	3	4	5

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 13. Most of the students submit to the school behavior program. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I am able to establish meaningful relationships with other teachers. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. I am willing to establish meaningful relationships with other teachers. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Teachers treat one another in a respectful manner. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. There are many opportunities for teacher collaboration in the school. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. I collaborate with other teachers. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. There is adequate time available for planning and preparation. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. I am satisfied with the level of autonomy and control over my classroom. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 21. I do not have enough influence over the school's policies and practices. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 22. I often feel that my teaching workload is too heavy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 23. There are sufficient computers and technology available for instruction. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 24. Some of the classes I teach are too large. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 25. Extra duties increase my workload to a burdensome amount. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 26. Required professional development is usually in line with my professional goals. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 27. I am pleased with the opportunities for professional development offered at Alston Middle. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 28. Resources and materials/equipment for my classroom are sufficiently available. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 29. The school facilities (buildings, grounds) are in need of significant repair. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 30. The school is located in a safe neighborhood. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 31. The school receives too little support from the community. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 32. I feel safe at the school (e.g., physical environment.) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 33. I receive too little support from parents. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

34. The school climate feels safe and empowering. 1 2 3 4 5
35. I have gained tremendous benefit from the PLC's. 1 2 3 4 5
36. I feel that responsibility for student success is a collective one (communal). 1 2 3 4 5
37. There is strong support (for me as an educator) from the district. 1 2 3 4 5
38. The burden for student success is placed primarily on the teachers. 1 2 3 4 5
39. My job satisfaction level is high. 1 2 3 4 5
40. Considering all the factors that influence my satisfaction with teaching at
Alston Middle, overall, I am satisfied. 1 2 3 4 5

Appendix D

Expert Group

Collins, Cobay Practicing Educator, B.A., Music, MEd Candidate, graduate training in research, conducted research

Finley, Chantille Practicing Educator, B.A., English, MEd Candidate, graduate training in research, conducted research