

A study investigating ways to entice teachers who have left the teaching profession to return¹

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ABSTRACT

Early departure from the profession may result in a shortage of qualified teachers and may negatively affect learner performance. The loss of teachers from the profession before retirement age is a challenge faced by developed and developing countries across the world. This study seeks to determine the conditions under which teachers who had left the profession might consider returning. A qualitative study framed within the Self-Efficacy Theory, was conducted. The participants consisted of 14 qualified teachers who had left the teaching profession within their first ten years of teaching. The research instrument used constituted in-depth interviews conducted in-person and online. A thematic data analysis was conducted and the themes and categories that emerged from the data were interpreted. The results indicated that teachers who had left the profession would return if their concerns regarding provision of a supportive environment, adequate remuneration, manageable workload, a more desirable curriculum and sufficient resources, were addressed. Findings are that teachers who return to the profession should be phased in with regards to their workload and the number of administrative duties. The value of this study lies in answering a paucity in recent research and literature on prerequisite conditions for teachers to return to the profession.

Keywords: self-efficacy, teacher attrition, return to teaching, supportive environment, adequate remuneration

INTRODUCTION

The loss of teachers from the profession before retirement age, is a challenge faced, in varying degrees and due to various reasons, by developed and developing countries across the world (Ngala & Nyakwara, 2017). This is substantiated by Craig (2017) who refers to Canada, Sweden, Ireland, and Finland as well as Ngala and Nyakwara (2017) who reported on attrition in Kenya. The early departure of teachers from the profession may result in a shortage of qualified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), often negatively affecting learner performance (Nguyen et al., 2019) and may be detrimental to the performance of schools (Shibiti, 2019).

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There seem to be differing opinions on the shortage of qualified teachers in South Africa. According to a statement released by the South African Department of Basic Education- ‘...there are more teachers in the country than the system can accommodate’ (SA News, Apr 2021). The statement was released after Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, responded to a parliamentary question by presenting a table that indicated a teacher shortage of approximately 24 000, which has since been clarified as the number of teacher vacancies in the country. The statement also indicated that sufficient numbers of students graduate annually to fill the vacancies. More recently however, during a presentation to the South African Parliament, the National Treasury and the South African Teachers Union warned of possible teacher shortages due to natural attrition and unsatisfactory compensation (*Business Tech*, 2021). Simkins (2015:4) states that an important result from his study on the ability of South Africa to produce sufficient qualified teachers for learner needs, is

that pumping more new qualified educators in at the bottom of the system will not in itself suffice to improve the average level of qualification among employed teachers. Every effort needs to be made to retain qualified teachers as well.

It thus would seem that though there may be sufficient graduates entering the profession, effort needs to be made to retain teachers in the profession.

Although ample research has been conducted in recent years on the causes of teacher attrition (Ngala & Nyakwara, 2017; Den Brok, Wubbels & Van Tartwijk; 2017, Ramos & Hughes, 2020), there seems to be less research on how to entice teachers who have left the profession, to return. Given the recent effect of COVID-19 on the South African education system, specifically the death of approximately 1650 teachers between March 2020 and February 2021 (Ndaba, B, 2021), an important consideration to make concerns how to entice qualified teachers who have left the profession to return.

This study seeks to determine the conditions under which teachers who had left the profession might consider returning. The study is conducted through the lens of the self-efficacy theory and seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Under which conditions will teachers who have left the profession return?
2. Is there a relationship between self-efficacy and the requirements to return to the profession?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is positioned within a theoretical framework of Alfred Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory. The theory surmises that individuals’ perceptions of their self-efficacy have an effect on what activities they engage in, how much effort they exert, as well as how long they will persevere when facing obstacles (Bandura & Adams, 1977). The decision to engage or avoid a challenge or task could be influenced by the notion of one’s self-efficacy (Paradewari, 2017). When conducting the research through this lens the focus shifts to whether qualified teachers who have left the profession have sufficient belief in their ability to succeed in the profession in order to re-engage with the profession (Odanga, Raburu & Aloka, 2018).

Teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs stem from four sources of information, namely, performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological states (Bandura & Adams, 1977). Performance accomplishments are based on teachers’ perceptions of their mastery of experiences and the degree to which they were successful as well as the way in which they relate past experiences to their expectations of the future. During this study the participants evaluated their own past performance accomplishments and determined what is needed in order to increase the likelihood of producing mastery experiences if they

would return to the profession. Vicarious experiences, being witness to others' success within the profession, increase self-efficacy. In teaching, this is the observation of other teachers 'modelling successful teaching practices' (Bautista, 2011:333). In this study vicarious experiences, and their effect on self-efficacy, are viewed in terms of the participants' requirements that involve, for instance, training or mentoring in order to return to the teaching profession. Social persuasion, in the form of teachers being persuaded that they 'possess the capabilities to cope successfully' in the profession, is implemented in schools when superiors or fellow teachers provide positive feedback and encouragement (Bautista, 2011:334).

As in vicarious experiences, mentoring, for instance, may play a role in social persuasion. The final way to increase self-efficacy is through physiological states during which teachers are able to determine 'their level of anxiety and vulnerability to stress (Bandura & Adams, 1977:287). Positive feelings, such as enthusiasm and confidence, may strengthen self-efficacy, while negative ones like anxiety and fatigue lower self-efficacy because they provide the individual with physiological evidence that they are 'not ready to perform the task' (Van Rooij, Fokkens-Bruinsma & Goedhart, 2019:271). The requirements provided by the participants to return to the profession relate to their self-efficacy beliefs. It is, however, important to determine why teachers leave in the first place.

Teachers leave the profession for a number of reasons. Common causes for global teacher attrition mentioned in the literature are job dissatisfaction, remuneration concerns, organisational challenges, a lack of resources, burnout, issues related to classroom discipline and social interactions (Den Brok et al., 2017; Zach et al., 2020). More specifically, some teachers in African countries suffer from burnout due to poor job conditions coupled with high job demands (Fouche, Rothmann & Van der Vyfer, 2017) which may lead to attrition. Qualified teachers in South Africa leave the profession for a number of reasons such as lack of support, burnout, workload, salary concerns, and curriculum issues (Palm, 2020). Although there is ample research on the causes of teacher attrition, there is less research on how to entice teachers who have left the profession to return. The literature, however, does indicate a number of reasons why teachers remain in the profession (Chiong, Menzies & Parameshwaran, 2017; Ismail & Miller, 2020).

Research (Chiong et al., 2017; See & Morris, 2021; Kelly et al., 2019) indicates that there are a variety of reasons why teachers remain in the profession. Altruistic motivation specifically making a difference to pupils' lives, as well as professional mastery, were the most common reasons why teachers remained in the profession (Chiong et al., 2017). More specifically, teachers who were interviewed by Chiong et al. (2017; 1083) provided statements that were interpreted and related to the 'perceptions that they felt skilled and capable at teaching as indications of perceived professional mastery'. The presence of a supportive collegial environment and the presence of supportive leadership are also reasons why teachers remain in the teaching profession. When individuals are supported for their accomplishments and mastery experiences, their efficacy beliefs increase and may improve the desire to remain in the profession (Eginli, 2021). Idealistic factors, such as a love for children and the opportunity to instil values in them, as well as a love for the teaching profession, have been provided as reasons why teachers remain in the profession (Zach et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study, with a phenomenological design, in that the focus was on gaining an understanding from the participants' reflections about their own experiences (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). The study seeks to determine if teachers who have left, will return, and whether or not their perceived self-efficacy level has an effect on their decision to return to the profession. The study was conducted in urban schools in Gauteng and the Western Province in South Africa. These provinces were selected due to the researcher's access to information-rich participants in these areas.

The inclusion criteria for this study were that the participants were qualified graduate teachers and that they left the teaching profession within their first 10 years of teaching. Potential participants were excluded when they had plans to return to the teaching profession. The participants were selected from teachers who taught at urban schools in Gauteng and the Western Cape using purposeful and snowball sampling. The participants who were identified using purposeful sampling often provided access to other information-rich participants, during snowball sampling, whom they had previously worked with or knew during their teaching careers.

Purposeful sampling, commonly used to identify information-rich participants related to the phenomenon of interest, was used and a number of participants who met the inclusion criteria were selected (Patton, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015; Luciani et al., 2019), some of whom provided access to more participants. In total, 14 participants were involved in the study. The participants were predominantly located using social media, specifically Facebook and Instagram, after which the researcher gained informed consent from the participants. They were provided with pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity (Allen & Wiles, 2016). The University of South Africa's Research Committee provided ethical clearance for the research. Given that the studied phenomenon was investigated from the participants' perspective, the information was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

The semi-structured interviews allowed the 'participants the chance to explore issues they felt were important' (Longhurst, 2010:104) in that they were afforded and encouraged to provide in-depth responses of their own understanding of their experience with the phenomenon (Jackson et al., 2007). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher and participants greater flexibility to respond to the themes that emerged during the interview (Jackson et al., 2007). The interviews took place in-person or online using WhatsApp Video or Skype, depending on where the participants were located, and each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Follow-up interviews were conducted with select participants to broaden understanding and to provide clarity. The interviews were guided by a number of questions, eliciting responses, upon which the participants were probed to provide deeper responses. The questions focused on determining the conditions under which the participants might consider returning to the teaching profession.

Prior to the participant interviews, the researcher conducted a pilot study to gain feedback on the clarity of the questions and to determine if the information gathered during the interview fit the scope of the study (Codo, 2008). During the pilot interview, the researcher interviewed a prospective participant and asked and adapted the interview questions by rephrasing a few of the open-ended questions to better suit the purpose of the study. The information gathered during the pilot study was not included in the study findings.

The interviews were recorded as the stance held by the researcher was that 'the data is naturally occurring conversation and a feature of social life, and the use of tape-recordings and transcripts is a practical strategy for apprehending it, and making it available for extended analysis' (Tessier, 2012:447). The researcher manually transcribed the interviews from the recordings, which allowed immersion in the data and assisted in the thematic data analysis. During the transcription, themes emerged after which categories for the data were formed.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

As there was no significant difference between the findings in the two provinces, the findings from both provinces are discussed together. The categories that emerged during data analysis were school environment, remuneration, workload, curriculum issues and resources as being conditions that need to be addressed before participants would consider returning to the teaching profession. The requirement that was mentioned most often related to the school environment.

School environment

More than half of the participants stated that aspects relating to the school environment would be a condition influencing whether or not they would return to the teaching profession. The participants specified factors related to the school environment such as a positive morale, a supportive environment and agreement between management and staff on discipline.

A number of participants elaborated further by stating that they would require mentorship and/or training to return to the profession. Statements such as the following were made:

I would need someone who would support me by identifying what I need and then providing assistance.

A mentor or someone to bounce ideas off would be a requirement.

A mentor, a backup, even only for emotional support, would be enticing.

Training, and the provision thereof, was mentioned by a few participants as a condition for their return. The participants provided the following motivation

As I have been out of the profession for a number of years, I would need Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) training.

As I struggled with classroom discipline when I taught, if a school offered to provide me with additional training, I would definitely consider it.

The statements provided by the participants may relate to self-efficacy in that having the said requirements met could have the potential to increase their levels of self-efficacy. The presence of a supportive school environment, whether in the form of the provision of a mentor or training, unity amongst staff or positive morale, could increase self-efficacy. This may be during the provision of vicarious experiences or social persuasion. Mentoring, in this instance, is considered as a relationship between an experienced and inexperienced teacher where the less experienced teacher, is guided by the more experienced teacher (Palm, 2020) and relates to the provision of vicarious experiences during the process of mentoring. Studies have indicated that the school environment, specifically the role of school leadership and relationships amongst staff, influence teachers' self-efficacy (Wilson, Woolfson & Durkin, 2020). Similarly, in a study conducted by Odanga et al. (2017), teacher self-efficacy was increased when teachers were exposed to a facilitative style of leadership that supported and encouraged teachers. Training was also provided as a tool to increase self-efficacy by 'increasing content mastery with new pedagogical skills'. The training could provide knowledge as well as improve their beliefs in their own abilities or improve their attitude towards their profession (Shahmohammadi, 2013:183), which has an effect on their physiological and emotional states and in turn enhancing their self-efficacy (Van Rooijens, Fokkens-Bruinsma & Goedhart, 2019).

The second most mentioned requirement for the participants to return to the profession was remuneration.

Remuneration

There was only one participant who provided remuneration as her only requirement for returning to the profession. The remaining participants, who said that higher remuneration was a requirement, did so in conjunction with other requirements in order for them to return to the profession.

One participant mentioned that

...well-paid maternity leave will make me consider returning to the profession

whilst the remainder of the participants who mentioned remuneration stated that they would require an increase in salary in order to return. Higher remuneration may increase teachers' self-efficacy (Hameed, Maqbool et al., 2013; Odanga et al., 2017) by increasing their level of motivation (Abror et al., 2020), which positively correlates with a greater self-efficacy.

Following remuneration was reduced workload as a matter that would need to be addressed in order for the participants to return to the profession.

Workload

Nearly half of the participants mentioned the workload, in the form of fewer administrative duties, smaller classes and reduced co-curricular activities, as a requirement for returning to the profession. The requirements all related to a decreased workload. Statements such as the following were made:

Having more time to get through marking would encourage me to return to the profession.

The number of Saturdays and evenings I will be required to work will influence whether or not I will return to the profession.

If the school gave me the content and the classroom and reduced the administrative duties, I will return to the profession.

If I am required to return to the profession as a teacher only and not a coach and advertiser, I will consider returning.

The prospect of returning to the teaching profession, with a decreased workload as a condition for their return, could inadvertently increase self-efficacy. It is possible that the likelihood of successful teaching or the possibility of mastery experiences increases with a decreased workload. Congruently, studies seem to suggest that there is a negative correlation between the level of self-efficacy and the magnitude of the workload (Van Rooij et al., 2019).

Curriculum

'Curriculum' was the fourth most frequently mentioned requirement to return to the profession. The participants, who stated that curriculum was a requirement to return to the profession, mentioned that they would return to a school with a curriculum other than the current national curriculum, or return to teaching in a school in a foreign country. One of the participants elaborated by stating that she would

return to a more innovative school where they challenge the traditional ways of thinking

whilst another participant stated that she would return to the profession if she could teach at a school where she did not feel as if she is

part of a system that is unjust to the vast majority of the country.

Teaching a curriculum that the participants support or believe in may increase their physiological and emotional states by increasing the likelihood of their own enthusiasm about what they are teaching. Positive emotions have been related to an increased self-efficacy (Van Rooij et al., 2019).

The final requirement mentioned by the participants was the provision of resources.

Resources

A few participants stated that they would need to be provided with adequate resources, in the form of physical resources and training, in order to return to the profession. One of the participants specifically mentioned that she would need 'proper facilities, equipment and resources' in order to return to the profession, whilst another stated that she would need sufficient textbooks in order to assist her in 'teaching in an engaging way' by reducing the time spent on making notes for her learners. The availability of physical resources may increase self-efficacy by promoting the likelihood of mastery experiences, thereby increasing self-efficacy.

Training, as a resource and as mentioned previously, may increase self-efficacy by increasing the likelihood of mastery experiences. Odanga et al. (2017) also found that the provision of resources enhanced teachers' self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

Attracting and encouraging former teachers to return to the teaching profession is an admittedly complex challenge faced by the South African education system. Apparent from this study, however, is that the possibility exists to entice teachers who have left the profession to return.

Considering that the results of this study indicated a number of requirements that would need to be met for the participants to return to the teaching profession, the following recommendations were made. It is, firstly, recommended that the South African Department of Basic Education should further investigate the possibility of a mentorship programme during which teachers who return to the profession are mentored by a more experienced teacher. Secondly, it is recommended that teachers who return to the profession are phased in with regards to their workload and the number of administrative duties. Remuneration incentives in the form of signing bonuses should also be considered and further investigated to entice teachers back to the profession.

Finally, this study highlights the relationship between self-efficacy and the requirements that former teachers have in order to return to the teaching profession. It necessitates further research into the effect of self-efficacy on challenges faced by South African teachers, both in rural and urban settings

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