

An examination of teacher attrition: intrinsic motivation factors

may offer a solution

by

Charlese Brown

Author

Abstract

Approximately 17 percent of teachers leave before completing four years in public school classrooms (Duncan, 2017). During a span of 40 years, between 1975 and 2015, college education majors have decreased by 11 percent (Passy, 2018) The current teacher shortage is not meeting the demand of 51.4 million public school students expected in 2025 (Passy, 2018). What are the underlining causes forcing teachers to leave the profession? Can this trend be reversed? Teachers who leave the classroom cite reasons such as lack of administrative support, disrespect from students, and low pay as factors (Mulvahill, 2019). These reasons may provide a glimpse into why teachers leave the classroom while general solutions regarding recruitment and retention remain stagnant. If we understood what initially attracts a person to the classroom, we may have a better grip on what adjustments are needed to fill future educational demands. This paper suggests developing a method which would tie data obtained from teacher surveys to intrinsic motivation inventories. Since intrinsic motivation gives us insight into behaviors, it provides that qualitative missing piece. Until now, there is no evidence of any research connecting these two variables.

Keywords: teacher retention, intrinsic motivation, teacher recruitment

An Examination of Teacher Attrition: Intrinsic Motivation Factors may offer a Solution

Education is an essential bridge for connecting potential to opportunity, and teachers act as conduits between content delivery and student performance. Teachers, more specifically *great* teachers, are critical influencers of student improvement and healthy school climates (Maxwell, Reynolds, Lee, Subasic, and Bromhead, 2017). Without these components, schools may suffer from lack of student growth, serious teacher attrition, discipline concerns, and a host of issues which stem from a weak school core. At the very center of thriving schools are teachers who build student capacity and contribute to friendly school cultures where students respond positively.

Undeniably, students who receive a good education receive that education from competent teachers. Central to a thriving economy are students who excel in reading comprehension and critical thinking. Employers seek to hire problem-solvers. The education and training of a country's workers is a major factor in determining just how well the country's economy will do. Consequently, it makes good economic, political and social sense to have a strong educational system; such a system can improve how we live, think, and solve future societal problems. When thinking about education, most people do not connect economic consequences with what goes on inside the classroom or inside schools. In fact, schools can be viewed as the primary training ground in preparing students for the workforce. A productive workforce is essentially a cost-saving strategy. Simply stated, a good educational system is an investment in the future of our country's economy.

Over the past 12 years, teacher preparation programs have seen a decline in education majors. Between the 2007-08 and 2015-2016, there was a 23 percent decline in the number of

people completing teacher-preparation programs (Will, 2018). To compete globally, our teacher preparation programs must ready teachers to meet the demands of the classroom. If we continue losing teachers to other professions, this mission cannot be accomplished successfully. At the heart of the achievement and wealth disparity gaps is this serious loss of human capital, also severely affecting the economy.

In a survey conducted by Mulvahill (2019) teachers were surveyed in order to understand why they choose to leave the profession. A list of highlighted reasons from these surveys includes:

Physical conditions	Emotional stress	Unrealistic expectations
Lack of administrative support	Low pay	Paperwork
Lack of basic supplies	Health and personal	Large classroom sizes
Loss of family time	Regulations	Ineffective administrators
Overwhelming expectations	Lack of respect	Micro-managed
Test pressure	Discipline problems	No support 1 st year teachers
Opinions do not count	Vulnerable to parents	Old buildings
Fear	Physical attacks	Frivolous meetings

(Mulvahill, 2019)

Literature Review

Of particular concern is the presence of violence in the classroom. The following body of evidence provides quantitative data normally examined when thinking about causes for teacher attrition. However, analyzed in isolation, these numbers only speak to a problem. In order to address teacher shortages and attrition, both qualitative and quantitative data must be considered.

According to a joint report by the National Center for Educational Statistics and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 220,300 public school teachers were physically attacked during the 2015-2016 academic year (2019, April 25). This paper will concentrate on two categories: teachers who were threatened with injury and teachers who were physically attacked.

Table 1

Year	Teachers Attacked (%)	Number Teachers
1993-1994	4.4	112,400
2011-2012	5.8	197,400
2015-2016	5.8	3,827,100

Abbreviated data taken from National Center for Educational Statistics. Table 228.80. October 2013.

Table 2 Number and percentage of public school teachers who reported that they were threatened with injury or physically attacked by a student from school during the previous 12 months, by selected teacher characteristics: Selected years, 1993–94 through 2015–16

[Standard errors appear in parentheses]

Year	Total	Sex		Race/ethnicity				Instructional level ¹	
		Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Other ²	Elementary	Secondary
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Number of teachers									
Threatened with injury									
1993–94	326,800 (7,040)	111,200 (3,830)	215,600 (5,380)	281,300 (6,220)	23,400 (1,360)	15,100 (1,770)	6,900 (650)	128,000 (4,450)	198,800 (5,150)
1999–2000	287,400 (7,060)	89,600 (3,680)	197,800 (5,370)	237,100 (5,630)	27,200 (2,170)	16,300 (1,940)	6,700 (840)	138,000 (5,480)	149,300 (4,360)
2003–04	242,100 (7,840)	75,300 (3,640)	166,800 (6,840)	189,800 (6,310)	31,900 (3,120)	11,800 (1,760)	8,600 (1,170)	108,800 (6,990)	133,300 (4,970)
2007–08	276,600 (10,570)	85,200 (5,800)	191,500 (8,220)	223,200 (8,760)	27,600 (3,000)	17,400 (3,230)	8,400 (1,580)	123,800 (7,670)	152,800 (7,090)
2011–12	338,400 (17,290)	79,800 (5,400)	258,600 (15,480)	266,800 (13,430)	33,400 (4,400)	26,600 (4,660)	11,600 (2,200)	184,000 (13,400)	154,400 (7,750)
2015–16	373,900 (9,470)	94,100 (4,540)	279,800 (7,500)	298,500 (8,880)	29,800 (2,160)	28,600 (2,080)	17,100 (1,610)	205,100 (7,240)	168,900 (6,510)
Physically attacked									
1993–94	112,400 (3,730)	28,700 (1,780)	83,700 (3,710)	96,300 (3,720)	7,600 (860)	5,900 (1,270)	2,600 (430)	71,600 (3,120)	40,700 (1,850)
1999–2000	125,000 (4,630)	29,100 (2,010)	95,900 (4,230)	103,100 (3,590)	11,000 (1,550)	8,400 (1,640)	2,500 (450)	94,400 (4,180)	30,600 (2,240)
2003–04	121,400 (7,180)	21,700 (2,420)	99,700 (6,100)	95,500 (5,450)	14,800 (2,320)	6,400 (1,820)	4,700 (1,050)	85,100 (6,380)	36,300 (3,310)
2007–08	146,400 (8,200)	33,400 (4,750)	113,000 (6,250)	124,100 (6,990)	11,600 (2,330)	7,800 (1,990)	2,800 (1,230)	109,100 (7,940)	37,300 (3,090)
2011–12	197,400 (11,730)	29,500 (3,310)	167,900 (11,200)	160,700 (10,880)	18,000 (3,590)	11,300 (2,890)	7,400 (1,940)	153,800 (10,100)	43,600 (4,380)
2015–16	220,300 (7,060)	35,100 (2,250)	185,200 (6,160)	177,400 (6,350)	14,600 (1,640)	16,600 (1,580)	11,700 (1,430)	174,700 (6,710)	45,600 (2,580)
Percent of teachers									
Threatened with injury									
1993–94	12.8 (0.26)	16.0 (0.44)	11.5 (0.28)	12.7 (0.28)	12.4 (0.64)	13.9 (1.42)	14.5 (1.14)	9.6 (0.35)	16.2 (0.30)
1999–2000	9.6 (0.22)	11.9 (0.44)	8.8 (0.23)	9.4 (0.22)	11.9 (0.91)	9.7 (1.12)	9.1 (1.12)	8.6 (0.34)	10.7 (0.29)
2003–04	7.4 (0.24)	9.3 (0.43)	6.8 (0.28)	7.0 (0.24)	12.4 (1.03)	5.8 (0.90)	9.6 (1.24)	6.3 (0.39)	8.7 (0.29)
2007–08	8.1 (0.30)	10.4 (0.68)	7.4 (0.31)	7.9 (0.30)	11.5 (0.99)	7.3 (1.34)	8.7 (1.54)	7.2 (0.43)	9.1 (0.41)
2011–12	10.0 (0.48)	10.0 (0.56)	10.0 (0.57)	9.6 (0.47)	14.5 (1.84)	10.1 (1.70)	9.9 (1.69)	10.7 (0.76)	9.3 (0.38)
2015–16	9.8 (0.21)	10.5 (0.43)	9.6 (0.22)	9.7 (0.25)	11.7 (0.72)	8.5 (0.58)	10.3 (0.94)	10.7 (0.30)	8.8 (0.26)
Physically attacked									
1993–94	4.4 (0.14)	4.1 (0.24)	4.5 (0.20)	4.3 (0.17)	4.0 (0.43)	5.4 (1.09)	5.4 (0.82)	5.4 (0.22)	3.3 (0.15)
1999–2000	4.2 (0.15)	3.9 (0.25)	4.3 (0.18)	4.1 (0.14)	4.8 (0.63)	5.0 (0.92)	3.4 (0.59)	5.9 (0.26)	2.2 (0.15)
2003–04	3.7 (0.22)	2.7 (0.29)	4.1 (0.25)	3.5 (0.21)	5.8 (0.84)	3.2 (0.93)	5.3 (1.16)	5.0 (0.37)	2.4 (0.21)
2007–08	4.3 (0.24)	4.1 (0.57)	4.4 (0.24)	4.4 (0.25)	4.9 (0.95)	3.3 (0.79)	3.0 (1.09)	6.3 (0.44)	2.2 (0.18)
2011–12	5.8 (0.33)	3.7 (0.39)	6.5 (0.41)	5.8 (0.38)	7.8 (1.52)	4.3 (1.05)	6.3 (1.53)	8.9 (0.57)	2.6 (0.24)
2015–16	5.8 (0.17)	3.9 (0.24)	6.3 (0.19)	5.8 (0.19)	5.7 (0.61)	4.9 (0.45)	7.0 (0.84)	9.2 (0.30)	2.4 (0.13)

National Center for Educational Statistics. Table 228.80 (October, 2013).

Teachers threatened with injury

The number of teachers threatened with injury are strikingly different comparing white teachers to Black teachers. In 1993/94, white teachers experienced injury at a rate of 281, 300

compared to 23,400 of Black teachers (NCES, October 2013). Approximately 15,100 Hispanic teachers demonstrated the lowest numbers for being threatened, especially compared to 177,400 white teachers (NCES, October 2013). More female than male teachers are threatened with injury across all years surveyed. Elementary school teachers experienced more threats with injury over secondary teachers.

Teachers physically attacked

The number of female teachers physically far outweighed male teachers. For instance in 2015 – 2016, 185,200 female teachers were physically attacked compared to 35,100 male teachers (NCES, October 2013).

Table 3

Year	White	Black	Hispanic
1993-1994	93,300	7,600	5,900
2015-2016	177,400	14,600	16,600

Note: Black teachers attacked in 2015-2016 returned to 2003-2004 levels (14,600 and 14,800 respectively).

Abbreviated data taken from National Center for Educational Statistics. Table 228.80. October 2013.

Mental health

Besides violence in the classroom, teachers experience a host of mental issues which ultimately affect quality of performance and positive student outcomes. The literature suggests stress as a key factor to teachers relying on alcohol, prescription drugs, or illegal drugs to cope with daily tasks. Without question, the mental status of teachers should remain a high priority. Apparently, the 4.7 percent rate of heavy alcohol drinkers fall significantly under the average worker who reportedly stands at 8.7 percent (Bush and Lipari, 2015). Stress is assumed the culprit behind this statistic (Kilpatrick, 2015). In this survey, teachers stood at a 4.8 percent rate

for illicit drug use and 5.5 percent substance use disorders (Bush and Lipari, 2015). Teachers come in at a 10 percent for depression, which fall within the average of 8-16 percent for other professions (Wulsin, Alterman, Bushnell, Li, and Shen, 2015).

The primary causes for alcohol and drug abuse among teachers are stress, sleep issues, and depression (Editorial Staff of Alcohol.org, 2019). Is teaching satisfying and rewarding? A novel approach to resolving teacher burnout, high teacher attrition rates, or low performing teachers might lie in adopting an alternative method to identifying people who truly belong in the classroom. It is important to identify people who are driven by internal rewards and who find teaching naturally satisfying.

New idea: Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to behavior that is driven by internal rewards. Is teaching satisfying and rewarding? Because teaching requires constant contact with other individuals, it is reasonable to suggest this type of work demands tolerance. Teachers who decide to leave within 3-5 years have expressed burnout as a significant factor. So, how are some teachers surviving the profession for 20+ years? It is also noteworthy to examine the difference between these groups. Is it possible that the second group has an internal driver motivating their passions? What if we had a way to measure someone's internal drive to teach? There is no denying the fact new teachers as professionals are faced with numerous challenges. Underlying influences may play a role in determining their staying power. Considering the validity of these factors, the need to utilize and standardize measuring tools for this purpose becomes even more significant. If we can figure out, at earlier ages, what motivates a person to teach we may be on the road to improving how teacher candidates are recruited, trained, and retained (Brown, 2012).

The Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (Ryan, 1982, Ryan, Koestner, and Deci, 1991) uses six basic components to testing motivation. Alongside each component is its relevance to teachers.

1. Interest/enjoyment (Are teachers happy?)
2. Perceived competence (Realistic goal-setting)
3. Effort (Positive environment/persistence)
4. Value/usefulness (Teamwork)
5. Felt pressure and tension (Regular program monitoring)
6. Perceived choice (Teacher surveys)

People gravitate more toward positive stimuli and avoid the negative (Markman and Brandl, 2005). Developing metrics which concentrate on intrinsic motivation may provide the “extra” information needed to understand which persons make great teachers.

Developing this tool would help identify true teachers in advance of entering college. It would also decrease the number of people entering the profession and leaving. Knowing such information could drastically reduce the amount of money some districts spend to train teachers – upwards of \$18,000 per teacher (Layton, 2015) before teachers decide to leave

Conclusion

Teacher attrition rates can be resolved. Along with regular routines of teacher preparation programs, including intrinsic motivation assessments add another dimension for analysis. Statistics, such as student-teacher violence and teacher dependence or external substances for help, are certainly alarming enough and should inspire us to create a training structure which address these challenges head on. However, this is not enough. There is definitely a call to examine more closely what draws a person to the classroom. If we are serious about making a difference in the classroom, it is important that we force research concentrating on qualitative

data. Furthermore, sole reliance on qualitative data will not allow us to explore possible practical solutions ultimately meeting the future needs of classroom teachers.

Currently, districts are spinning in circles trying to attract teachers and maintain a healthy number of highly qualified or certified teachers. Districts cannot continue hemorrhaging by almost 30% teacher shortage each year (Garcia and Weiss, 2019). University and college teacher preparation programs must strongly consider offering questionnaires to teacher candidates probing their internal compass. Retention and recruitment should be based on results from the Intrinsic Motivation Index. Using this tool may help provide new insight as to the kinds of adjustments which would make a significant difference in supporting teachers. Physical attacks, verbal attacks, and threats are only symptoms of deeper issues. Additionally, problems, such as lack of sleep, alcohol consumption, and stress lend themselves to more worrisome concerns. None of these issues can be eradicated if attention is not focused on deeper more internal factors.

Questionnaires and personality tests have existed for a long time, but they are not being used to assess teacher capacity or quality. Imagine a school filled with people who are gifted and motivated. Utopia? Having a stronger sense for the psychological factors influencing teachers will save districts money, improve the quality of teachers in the classroom who truly make a difference, and produce an innovative workforce prepared for global competition.

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