

Job Satisfaction: A Survey of Teachers in a Midwestern Public School District

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Abstract

Teacher shortages are becoming a reality in most states across this nation. Some of the challenges teachers face include low pay, accountability for student achievement, and low public confidence in the education system. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of teachers in a Midwestern school district with a high number of students who come from at-risk backgrounds. This study examines their beliefs about the teaching profession and identifies the stressors that might result in their seeking other career options. Teachers in this study felt valued by the community and their administration which would relate to high job satisfaction, however, teachers report low morale, pressure to teach to the test, feeling that teachers were viewed in a negative way, and an insecurity about their job. While most of the teachers believed they were making a lasting impression on their students, only thirty-five percent would recommend teaching as a profession to family and friends.

Keywords: job satisfaction, attrition, legislation, assessment, stressors

Introduction

Teacher shortages are becoming a reality in most states across this nation. Some of the challenges teachers face include low pay, extreme accountability, and low public confidence in the education system. Teachers find it difficult to embrace a career that has little to no input regarding student achievement, teacher evaluations, and teacher pay. Even teachers in high performing school districts are becoming disillusioned with the profession because of low morale and high stress due to the accountability measures that blame them for low student achievement (Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011) The Occupational Handbook (2018) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicted an average of 8% increase in the number of elementary and high school teachers needed nationwide between 2016 and 2026.

According to Westervelt (2015), Bill McDiarmid, Dean of the University of North Carolina School of Education states that several big states have seen alarming drops in enrollment at teacher training programs. The numbers are especially staggering for some of the largest producers of new teachers such as California, New York and Texas. For example, in California, enrollment is down 53% over the past five years. This steady downturn shows no signs of self-correcting.

According to The Associated Press, the number of teaching license applicants in Indiana has decreased by 10,000 applications in a five year period from 2009-2014 (IndyStar, July 12, 2015). According to this report, this is alarming to superintendents in the state who report their pool of applicants for positions in their schools are dwindling. Each year the demand for classroom teachers exceeds the number of returning teachers (Aaronson & Michel, 2009), that factored in along with the 17% attrition rate during new teachers' first five years of teaching (Fensterwald, 2015), the shortage of qualified teachers could reach crisis proportions nationwide.

As federal and state legislatures and State Boards of Education enact bills and reforms that change what happens in the classroom, it is important to seek out the opinion of teachers in the field. The purpose of this study was to capture the perspectives of teachers in a high poverty public Midwestern school district concerning the teaching profession and the stresses that might be making them seek other career options.

Literature Review

Political and Media Factors that influence Teachers

According to Carr (2012), many believe that this generation's civil rights movement is to preserve high-quality public schools for all children. High quality education cannot be achieved by politicians, who look only at standardized test scores, but by trained educators in the field.

One factor that often makes political headlines is when federal and state governments pass legislation to increase student achievement on standardized tests. Educational change in the United States began in 2001 with No Child Left Behind and continued with The Race to the Top in 2009 and still continues to make political headlines today as we read about teacher strikes, budget crisis resulting in layoffs, and teacher shortages in our education system. Teachers have little to no voice as State and Federal governments pass laws to increase student achievement. Teachers often feel defeated and beaten down when the news media makes inaccurate and mean-spirited statements about teachers and public education Carr,(2012).

The attrition rate among teachers is high and in some cases teachers feel they have limited options to express their concerns .Stelloh (2019) reported that the teachers in the United States 3rd largest school district with 600,000 students may strike. The union which represents more than 30,000 teachers is asking for increases in salaries, decreases in class size, and increases in school personnel like counselors, librarians, and nurses. Negotiations between the school district and the union broke down after the district filed an injunction accusing the union of not giving the required notice to call a strike.

According to Nolan and Stitzlein (2011) "the media continually portrays American's 'failing schools' (such as in the 2010 NBC *Education Nation* series or the ABC *Stupid in America* series), giving teachers the impression that they are never good enough and feeding public assumptions that teachers are not professionals worthy of commensurate respect or salary" (p. 2). Willis and Varner (2008) reported that extrinsic sources that are controlled by the media can make teachers lose motivation because decisions about education are based on some arbitrary criteria-not by educators or teachers in the classroom.

Lumsden (1998) found that low teacher morale lowers overall student achievement, increased teacher burnout, and increased stress on teachers and students. Teacher morale has been a concern for some time and was evident in Parks' (1983) report that stated: "morale is so low that over 40 percent of survey respondents would not again select teaching as a profession and 57 percent are definitely planning to leave, will leave if something better comes along, or are undecided about staying" (p. 11). In light of these factors, it is no wonder that teacher job satisfaction is the lowest it has been in 20 years. A MetLife Survey (2012) reported that the percentage of teachers who would like to leave the profession had increased from 17% to 29% since 2009 because 34% of the teachers surveyed did not feel their jobs were secure.

Like all employees, teachers perform better when they feel appreciated for the work that they do. The MetLife Survey showed that teachers with the highest job satisfaction were more likely to feel that they were treated as professionals by students, parents and district administrators.

The MetLife survey found that greater job satisfaction was attributed to high levels of teacher optimism about students' achievement which created better interactions between teachers and parents.

Low Job Satisfaction

"The single greatest effect on student achievement is the effectiveness of the teacher" (Wong, 2018, p.2). Willis & Varner (2010) found a positive correlation between student achievement, teacher morale, and job satisfaction. "Teachers with low morale took personal and sick days at a high rate because of their state of mind, which could possibly have been linked to a decrease in student achievement" (paragraph 2). The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: (2012) reported the following about teachers:

Teachers are less satisfied with their careers; in the past two years there has been a significant decline in teachers' satisfaction with their profession. In one of the most dramatic findings of the report, teacher satisfaction has decreased by 15 points since the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher measured job satisfaction two years ago, now reaching the lowest level of job satisfaction seen in the survey series in more than two decades.

This decline in teacher satisfaction is coupled with large increases in the number of teachers who indicate that they are likely to leave teaching for another occupation and in the number who do not feel their jobs are secure. Along with that 60% of teachers report that their class size has increased and 33% indicated that technology and other resource material have not been kept up to date. Twenty per cent reported that their classroom and/or school has not been updated or kept in good condition. Also the report stated that the percentage of teachers who do not feel job security has increased since 2006 from eight percent to 34% (p.45).

Clavel (2004) stated there is low morale and apathy among teachers, especially in public schools that are failing. He believes teachers are crushed under bureaucracy, are not treated like professionals, and have little power. According to Liu and Meyer (2005), teachers in some school districts deal everyday with poor or difficult teaching conditions, student discipline issues, low pay and the lack of resources which contributes to low morale and job satisfaction.

Changing Teacher Evaluations

Most states are changing the way they pay teachers. No longer are pay increases or salaries based on higher education degrees but solely on the results of new teacher evaluation assessments. These new evaluations are using student achievement on a state mandated standardized achievement test as a key indicator of effective teaching. "Yet the validity of using standardized assessments aimed to assess student learning at the aggregated school level has not been well researched (Rutkowski & Wild, 2015 p. 175) and according to Darling-Hammond (2015), most teacher evaluations that contain student achievement have consequences for low performance like shaming and firing and contain little if any ways to improve practices.

Georgia has confirmed a three-tiered system that includes benchmarks on passing scores on the K-12 Teacher Keys Effective System (TKES) of which fifty percent of the assessment is based on student growth and academic achievement (Croft & Roberts, 2015). In North Carolina's educator evaluation system part of the teacher's evaluation is based on student growth. Ratings for teachers will be determined from a set of value-added models known as the Education Value Added Assessment System which uses a three-year rolling average of students' scores (Hewitt, 2015).

In Indiana, teachers are evaluated on an assessment called RISE Evaluation and Development System (2012) that links job stability with student and school performance. This new evaluation tool came with a decrease in collective bargaining rights (including tenure) and the end of pay increases for teachers who complete advanced degrees. The evaluation tool rates teacher effectiveness not only on classroom instruction observed and evaluated by a designated administrator, but also on students' scores on a standardized test factoring in at the percentage of 20-25% in all teacher evaluations (RISE Handbook, 2012).

As states enact new teacher evaluation procedures, teachers may be rewarded financially if students perform well on a standardized test (merit pay); meanwhile low test scores can result in a teacher’s dismissal (Issues & Controversies On File, 2000).

According to Ravitch (2010) merit pay is not effective and also minimizes the significance of earning advanced degrees. According to Croft & Roberts (2015) teachers must rely on attaining high student test scores as a means to advance in pay instead of receiving quality salaries for their already high stakes job.

Methods

This research study examined the perspectives of teachers about the teaching profession in light of the current culture. The participants for the study were P-12 public school teachers in a mid-sized Midwestern school district with a total of 16 schools: 3 high schools, 3 middle schools, 10 elementary schools, and one alternative high school. Slightly more than ten thousand students were enrolled in Grades P-12. This district exceeded the state-wide pass rate on the required standardized test scoring nearly 90% passing versus the state’s passing rate of 74.4%.

A quantitative method was chosen for this study and data were collected from surveys submitted to a data collection source, assuring anonymity to participants. The survey instrument consisted of 21 researcher-designed questions. This was an appropriate methodology because the researcher sought to understand how teachers felt about their profession and if teacher morale and job satisfaction was a factor.

In order to gain the “insider perspective” (Suter, 2012, p. 344), the researcher designed a survey to delve into the beliefs and opinions of teachers about the teaching profession including morale and job satisfaction. Questions were designed around current teacher evaluation standards as well as written and oral statements of teachers enrolled in graduate courses at the researcher’s university. Approval was granted from the researchers’ university Institutional Review Board prior to the start of data collection. The survey link was emailed to all teachers in the school district by one week after the end of the school year. No rewards or compensation were given for participation, and participants were assured of their anonymity in the consent form. The survey took approximately 10-15 minutes for each participant to complete.

Participants

One hundred and forty (22.4%) teachers invited to participate that were employed in the school district responded. There is no consensus in the literature as to what is an acceptable rate (Truell, 2003). According to Schuldt & Totten (1994) acceptable rates of response are as low as 19% and as high as 76%. Higher response rates are generally reported when an incentive, such as cash, is offered to respondents. No incentives were offered for completing this survey.

Results

How long have you been teaching?					
I have never taught in an elementary or secondary school 6.52% (6)	I have taught in an elementary or secondary school for 1-3 years 25.00% (23)	I have taught in an elementary or secondary school for 4-6 years 34.78% (32)	I have taught in an elementary or secondary school for 7-10 years 18.48% (17)	I have taught in an elementary or secondary school for 11-20 years 13.04% (12)	I have taught in an elementary or secondary school for more than 20 years 2.17% (2)
Which best describes your teaching experience? (You may select more than one.)					
public elementary school 31.36% (37)	private elementary school 5.93% (7)	parochial elementary school 7.63% (9)	public middle school/junior high 11.86% (14)	private middle school/junior high 1.69% (2)	parochial middle school/junior high 5.08% (6)
public high school 27.12% (32)	private high school 1.69% (2)	parochial high school 2.54% (3)	N/A 5.08% (6)		

Most of the participants in the study had been teaching 4-6 years in a public elementary or high school. One-fourth of the participants had 1-3 years of experience in the classroom. So 55% of the participants had been teaching from 1-6 years.

As a teacher, I feel valued by the community.					
strongly agree 10.87% (10)	agree 58.70% (54)	not sure 15.22% (14)	disagree 14.13% (13)	strongly disagree 1.09% (1)	
Teaching is a profession that is highly respected today.					
strongly agree 2.17% (2)	agree 30.43% (28)	not sure 20.65% (19)	disagree 41.30% (38)	strongly disagree 5.43% (5)	

Most of the teachers (69,57 %) strongly agreed or agreed that they felt valued by the community while almost half (46.73 %) disagreed or strongly disagreed that teaching is a profession that is highly respected today.

I have thought about changing professions.					
strongly agree 11.96% (11)	agree 36.96% (34)	not sure 9.78% (9)	disagree 22.83% (21)	strongly disagree 18.48% (17)	

Almost half of the participants (48.96%) had thought about changing professions.

I feel valued in my position as a teacher.					
strongly agree 4.40% (4)	agree 50.55% (46)	not sure 27.47% (25)	disagree 14.29% (13)	strongly disagree 3.30% (3)	No response 1.09% (1)
I feel valued by my school administration.					
strongly agree 28.26% (26)	agree 39.13% (36)	not sure 16.30% (15)	disagree 11.96% (11)	strongly disagree 4.35% (4)	

Over half of the participants (54.95%) felt valued in their position as a teacher but almost 28% were not sure. Nearly 52% felt valued by their school administration which would make up those who evaluated them like a department chair, the principal and the assistant principle(s).

If I could go back in time, I would still choose teaching as a profession.					
strongly agree 31.52% (29)	agree 29.35% (27)	Not sure 29.35% (27)	disagree 7.61% (7)	strongly disagree 2.17% (2)	

It was interesting to see that over half of the participants (60.87 %) would still choose teaching as a profession while 29.35% were not sure.

Stress from my job is adversely impacting my health or my quality of life.					
strongly agree 7.61% (7)	agree 43.48% (40)	not sure 16.30% (15)	disagree 27.17% (25)	strongly disagree 5.43% (5)	

Over half of participants (51.09 %) strongly agreed or agreed that stress from their job was adversely impacting their health or quality of life. Only 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Maintaining discipline is my job in the classroom.					
strongly agree 25.00% (23)	agree 57.61% (53)	not sure 1.09% (1)	disagree 14.13% (13)	strongly disagree 2.17% (2)	
I receive little help or support from school administration in handling discipline problems.					
strongly agree 6.52% (6)	agree 26.09% (24)	not sure 11.96% (11)	disagree 35.87% (33)	strongly disagree 19.57% (18)	

In this school district 82.61% of teachers felt that maintaining discipline was their job. Fifty-five percent of participants disagreed or strong disagreed with the statement that school administration did not help in handling discipline problems while 32.61% agreed with this statement.

In my school, teacher morale is generally quite high.					
strongly agree 7.69% (7)	agree 28.57% (26)	not sure 20.88% (19)	disagree 25.27% (23)	strongly disagree 17.58% (16)	n/a 1.09% (1)
The teaching profession has changed in a negative way, putting too much emphasis on standardized testing.					
strongly agree 48.91% (45)	agree 42.39% (39)	not sure 4.35% (4)	disagree 3.26% (3)	strongly disagree 1.09% (1)	

Interestingly, nearly 64% answered not sure, disagree, & strongly disagree with teacher morale being high in their school. Almost all (91.3%) strongly agreed or agreed that the teaching profession has changed in a negative way, putting too much emphasis on standardized testing.

Overcrowding in my classroom impacts/lowers my ability to succeed as a teacher.					
strongly agree 20.65% (19)	agree 29.35% (27)	not sure 4.35% (4)	disagree 14.13% (13)	strongly disagree 7.61% (7)	n/a 23.91% (22)
Student behavior gets in the way of my teaching.					
strongly agree 11.96% (11)	agree 39.13% (36)	not sure 7.61% (7)	disagree 39.13% (36)	strongly disagree 2.17% (2)	

Fifty percent of participants strongly agreed or agreed that overcrowding in the classroom impacts or lowers their ability to succeed as a teacher. It is interesting to note that the second question was perfectly split. Thirty-nine% agreed that student behavior got in the way of their teaching while the same percentage disagreed.

The emphasis on standardized testing results in my teaching to the test rather than focusing on content and skills I know my students need to be successful in life.					
strongly agree 18.48% (17)	agree 40.22% (37)	not sure 14.13% (13)	disagree 23.91% (22)	strongly disagree 3.26% (3)	

More than half the participants (58.70%) felt that they needed to teach to the test because of the emphasis on standardized testing.

I feel prepared and qualified to teach all students, including those with learning disabilities and those who are gifted and talented.					
strongly agree 14.13% (13)	agree 51.09% (47)	not sure 13.04% (12)	disagree 18.48% (17)	strongly disagree 3.26% (3)	

In looking at their teacher preparation and professional training from the school district more than 65% felt prepared and qualified to teach all students, including those with learning disabilities and gifted and talented students.

I believe I am making a lasting impression on my students.					
strongly agree 29.35% (27)	agree 58.70% (54)	not sure 9.78% (9)	disagree 2.17% (2)	strongly disagree 0.00% (0)	
How would you rate your personal satisfaction in your teaching position?					
very satisfied 19.78% (18)	satisfied 58.24% (53)	not sure 12.09% (11)	unsatisfied 8.79% (8)	very unsatisfied 1.09% (1)	No response 1.09% (1)

It was good to see that almost all of the participants (88.05%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were making a lasting impression on their students which would relate to being personally satisfied with their teaching position which was just slightly lower at 78.02% strongly agreeing or agreeing.

I would recommend teaching as a profession for friends and/or family members.					
strongly agree 6.59% (6)	agree 28.57% (26)	not sure 37.36% (34)	disagree 18.68% (17)	strongly disagree 8.79% (8)	No response 1.09% (1)

Participants in this study were split on whether they would recommend teaching as a profession to their friends or family. Thirty-five percent strongly agreed or agreed, 37.36% were not sure, and 27.47% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

I feel uncertain about my future as a teacher.					
strongly agree 15.22% (14)	agree 32.61% (30)	not sure 16.30% (15)	disagree 28.26% (26)	strongly disagree 7.61% (7)	

Nearly 48% of participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt uncertain about their future as a teacher while 16.30% were not sure. Nearly 36% participant disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Discussion

In this study, more than half of the participants had 1-6 years of teaching experience. More than half of the teachers felt valued by their community while half felt valued in their teaching position and by their school administration. Most of the teachers felt that maintaining discipline in the classroom was their job and that the administration did help or support them with discipline problems. The MetLife Survey(2012) showed that teachers with the highest job satisfaction were more likely to feel that they were treated as professionals by students, parents and district administrators. Even though it appears that the teachers in this study felt valued by the community and their administration which would relate to high job satisfaction, teachers report low morale, feeling the need to teach to the test, and feeling insecure about their job. Almost half of the teachers in this study felt that teacher morale was low in their respective schools. The same amount of the teachers felt uncertain about their future as a teacher. Almost all of the teachers in this study felt that the teaching profession has changed in a negative way, putting too much emphasis on standardized testing.

Student behavior did not seem to be a problem with most of the teachers responding. Most of the teachers felt prepared and qualified to teach all students, including those with learning disabilities and gifted and talented students. A little more than half would still choose teaching as a profession. Almost all of the teachers believed that they were making a lasting impression on their students and over half indicated personal satisfaction in their teaching position.

Teachers are the most important resource in the field of education yet most of the teachers in this study felt teaching is a profession that is not highly respected. According to Ravitch (2016), “American education needs a different paradigm, one that minimizes the importance of standardized testing and punitive accountability. We need to respect and value those who choose teaching as a profession. We need to pay them as professionals” (p. xxxix). Over half of the teachers stated that stress from teaching was adversely impacting their health or their quality of life. As stringent accountability measures continue to increase for teachers in our nation’s public schools, analysts report that teachers are under enormous strain (Issues & Controversies On File, 2000). Over half of the participants felt that overcrowding in the classroom impacts or lowers their ability to succeed as a teacher. The MetLife Survey (2012) reported that most teachers had experienced an increase in class size making teaching and managing students more difficult. According to Kyriacou (1989) stress can cause teachers to feel depressed, nervous, and frustrated which can result in a sense of powerlessness. Kelly (2012) stated that teachers have a right to be disappointed because prospects are limited and morale is grim.

Workplace effectiveness has a direct correlation to the way an individual feels about his or her job (Denton, 2009). Teaching is a challenging profession and coupled with standardized testing and scrutiny by politicians and the media, it has become discouraging and insecure. The percentage of teachers surveyed in the MetLife Survey who would like to leave the teaching profession had increased mainly because of teachers surveyed did not feel secure in their jobs (2012). More than half of the teachers in this study had thought about changing professions.

The teachers in this district are evaluated on the RISE Evaluation and Development System (2012) which links merit pay with student and school performances. Their effectiveness as a teacher is not purely based on successful classroom teaching but also on 20-25% of their students’ test scores. More than half the teachers felt that they needed to teach to the test because of the pressure of students to perform well on standardized tests. Only thirty-

five percent of the teachers would recommend teaching as a profession to family and friends. Mandates from our state and federal legislatures hold teachers accountable for a single test score. These test scores are also included in their merit pay raises. As the shortage of teachers increase and enrollment in teacher education programs decrease, the future of the American education system looks grim. Until we begin treating teachers as the professionals that they are, paying them appropriately, giving them voice in standardized testing, and respecting the huge responsibility they have of educating our children, many more teachers who feel insecure about the teaching profession may contemplate a career change and exit the teaching field.

Limitations of this Study

This study took place in one public school district in the Midwestern United States and cannot be generalized to the larger population of public-schoolteachers in America.

However, when the results are coupled with what other researchers in other parts of the country report about teachers in the field, the current state of the teaching profession seems to be hurting rather than benefiting from public scrutiny and legislative mandates.

Conclusion

This study examines their beliefs about the teaching profession and identifies the stressors that might result in their seeking other career options. Teachers in this study felt valued by the community and their administration which would relate to high job satisfaction, however, teachers report low morale, pressure to teach to the test, feeling that teachers were viewed in a negative way, and an insecurity about their job. While most of the teachers believed they were making a lasting impression on their students, only thirty-five percent would recommend teaching as a profession to family and friends. In conclusion teachers found that stressors such as the pressures of standardized testing of students, the way teachers are portrayed by the media and the pressures for meeting unrealistic expectations from administrators are all areas which could benefit from further examination.

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Using survey research methodology, I randomly surveyed 150 public-school teachers from districts in a midwestern state. Multivariate analysis procedures were used to analyze the data. Results of the study indicated that work orientation was related to the degree of job satisfaction among teachers. Teacher job satisfaction is a multifaceted construct that is critical to teacher retention, teacher commitment, and school effectiveness. Interviews and questionnaires from 92 teachers in 4 urban middle schools were used to assess the importance and satisfaction they assigned to various aspects of their jobs. Teacher-pupil relationships ranked highest overall in terms of importance and satisfaction. Parent-teacher relationships commanded respondents' highest concern. Teacher job satisfaction questionnaire (tjsq). Directions: The following statements refer to factors that may influence the way a teacher feels about his/her job. These factors are related to teaching and to the individual's perception of the job situation. When answering the following statements, circle the numeral which represents the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statements. +10 pts. Answered. A superintendent of a school district conducted a survey to find out the level of job satisfaction among teachers. Out of 53 teachers who replied to the survey, 13 claim they are satisfied with their job. $z = \frac{\hat{p} - p}{\sqrt{\frac{pq}{n}}}$ The superintendent wishes to construct a significance test for her data. She find that the proportion of satisfied teachers nationally is 18.4%. In which X is the found proportion, p is the expected proportion, and s , which is the standard error is. Out of 53 teachers who replied to the survey, 13 claim they are satisfied with their job. This means that.