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Inquiry on early childhood teachers preparation and retention

Summary

The purpose of this study is to analyze early childhood teacher preparation and investigate the factors that motivated individuals to become early childhood teachers and that have kept them in the profession. This study reports the results of an online survey investigating motives of staying or leaving the early childhood profession. The results of this inquiry point to factors that influenced their choice, taking into consideration their professional preparation. Advice for new early childhood educators just entering the profession is also provided.

Keywords: early childhood, teachers, retention

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) united in 2014 as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) as the single accrediting body for educator preparation and serving educators. This is a new body that evaluates and assesses teacher preparation programs at Higher Education institutions.

According to Bornfreund (2012: 36), current teacher-training and licensure requirements leave many teachers of elementary students unprepared: *young children either have a teacher who understands how they learn but lacks subject-area expertise, or they have a teacher who understands what knowledge and skills they need but lacks insight on how they soak up new knowledge and skills.*

Ingersoll et al. (2012) research findings stressed the importance of adequate preparation in pedagogical methods and skills as well as in subject matter for retaining teachers for the second year. Their research findings demonstrated that the teachers that received more pedagogical training are far more likely to stay in teaching after their first year.

The new regulations from 2012 stipulated that starting 2013 to renew provisional certificate the new rules would be implemented (MDE-OPPS, May18). First, for the three-year renewal after graduating with a bachelor degree, teachers have a choice to pursue one of four options. They can take 6 semester credit hours in an approved Teacher Preparation Institution (TPI) or 180 clock hours of State Continuing Education in approved professional development activities appropriate to the grade level and content endorsement(s) of the certificate held or a combination of credit hours and State Education hours equaling 6 semester credit hours (30 clock hours equal 1 semester credit hour) or graduate with a Master's or higher degree within a K-12 area. For the Second Three Year renewal, teach-

ers can also choose from the same options as above. The Third Year Renewal must be district-sponsored, and teachers must directly apply to Michigan Department of Education (as an example in Michigan). The teachers can also apply for an Advanced Professional Education Certificate, which is optional. The applicant needs to hold a professional certificate, national board certification or to have completed an approved teacher leader training or preparation program and have received 5 consecutive effective or highly effective ratings on the annual teacher evaluation in the most recent 5-year period.

To renew this advanced professional certificate, the teacher has a choice of the same options as for the renewal of certificate described above or pursue the district provided professional development programs appropriate to the grade level and content endorsement(s) of the certificate. Another possibility is a combination of semester credit hours, state continuing hours 30 clock hours of the state continuing education hours of annual district provided professional development is equal (1 semester credit hour of 30 clock hours of state continuing education that equals 6 semester credit hours (http://www7.dleg.state.mi.us/ort/Files/SdminCode/980_2011-8ED_AdminCode.pdf). Teachers must pursue their education to renew license, as otherwise they would neither be able to teach nor receive tenure, but recently even tenure does not guarantee safety of their job.

The danger that a teacher may face in some states is the possibility of losing tenure. The Teacher Tenure Act established 50 years ago is challenged by some legislators like Governor Snyder in Michigan. In June 2014, California judges ruled that tenure and job protection for California teachers was unconstitutional. The other states that also tried to revise their tenure policy were Kansas, North Carolina, and Wisconsin (Carey 2014).

Cochran-Smith et al. (2016) stressed ongoing debates about how, by whom, and to what ends teachers should be prepared. There are four major national initiatives intended to improve teacher quality by “holding teacher education accountable” (1) the U.S. Department of Education’s state and institutional reporting requirements in the Higher Education Act (HEA); (2) the standards and procedures of the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP); (3) the National Council on Teacher Quality’s (NCTQ) Teacher Prep Review; and (4) the edTPA uniform teacher performance assessment developed at Stanford University’s Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE).

Rationale

As research demonstrates, the early years are the most important period in human development (Jensen 2001; Sylvester 2000; Nagel 2012). Beside the parents, the most important people that have influence on children’s development are early childhood teachers. As Weikart (1988) stressed, good early childhood programs are the solution to the prevention of major social and personal problems in adults. Morris-Surles (2002) emphasized that over 2 million teachers would be needed by 2008, but the retention and recruitment of teachers are hindered by factors relating to job stress. Cassidy, Lower, Kintner-Duffy, Hegde, Shim (2010) stated that the high rate of teacher turnover continues to be a concern for the child

care profession. Most poignantly, O'Connell (1993) points to the fact that early childhood education is perceived as "women's work" with concomitant low status and low pay.

Literature review

Reasons for leaving the profession

Darling-Hammond (2003) in Jalongo (2006) identified four main reasons for leaving the profession or transferring to another school: low salaries, unsatisfactory working conditions, inadequate preparation, and lack of mentoring support in the early years of teaching. O'Connell (1993) points to the fact that early childhood education is perceived as "women's work" with concomitant low status and low pay. McLauren, Smith, and Smillie (2009) identified a range of reasons that teachers leave. Among these are lack of sufficient teacher preparation, the mandates of No Child Left Behind, and the stresses upon today's teachers. Mentorship, supportive environments, and incentives were noted as factors in promoting teacher retention.

Studies demonstrate a big turnover rate in child care centers that affect as much as half the staff (Whitebook and Granger 1989; Whitebook and Sakai 2006; Cassidy et al. 2010). If programs for young children are to be of high quality, it is imperative to identify those factors that influence decisions to enter and to remain in the early childhood education profession. Majority of the research focuses on why teachers left their profession, but the purpose of our research is to investigate why they stayed.

Colker (2008) interviewed 43 early childhood educators to obtain their perceptions about the personal characteristics of effective early childhood teachers and the reasons people choose the field of early childhood education. The majority of respondents reported realizing that they wanted to work with young children very early in their lives. They wanted to make a difference in children's lives and teaching was a vocation for them. None of the 43 teachers expressed regret at their decision.

Morris-Surles (2002), after conducting a research project on factors associated with job satisfaction and job-related stress focusing on teachers of children ages three to nine years of age in alternative certification programs, recommended that studies be conducted addressing the retention of early childhood teachers.

Colker (2008) identified twelve characteristics of early childhood teachers that contributed to success. These are: passion, perseverance, willingness to take risks, pragmatism (understood as willingness to compromise), patience, flexibility, respect, creativity, authenticity, (integrity and conviction), love of learning, high-energy, and a sense of humor.

Research on retention

Research on retention conducted by Holochwost et al. (2009) with a large sample of 846 early childhood educators divided factors into two groups: personal factors, including marital status, age, experience and education and environmental factors such as setting, salary and benefits. The results demonstrated that the teachers in the 40–55-year-old age

range tended to stay in the job longer than younger teachers. The findings also suggested that teachers stay in the field if the benefits such as health, disability and pensions are good. These factors were even more important than salary. Also, opportunities for advancement like professional development, financial aid, tutoring or mentoring were very important.

In 1999 two counties in California implemented CRI programs providing graduated stipends to ECE staff with at least nine months experience in the field. The stipend allowed teachers to take training and professional development classes. However, the participants consistently restated that “although the CRI program made them feel more appreciated and recognized as professionals, they stayed in ECE field primarily due to their love of working with young children (Hamre et al. 2001–2002, p. 11).

Strategies for recruiting and retaining high quality teachers were identified by Hare and Harp (2001). Among the most effective are new teacher support programs that mentoring and professional development tied to curriculum standards. Often people who were dissatisfied with the corporate world or had lost their job chose teaching as a second chance in life. In the research project conducted at the National University in St. Jose (California), of the offerings in alternative on-line teaching certification programs (Dickenson, 2015), teaching is the fastest growing major. The research finding on what factors influence choices for teaching male choose teaching, males wanted a new identity and to make a difference, females also wanted some social influence and also to stay more with their own children.

Cross (2011) examined the role of principals/administrators in retaining teachers. She found that those who provided both physical and verbal support aided teachers in developing more self-confidence and feeling less isolated and overwhelmed, thus more apt to remain in the profession.

Perrachione, Rosser, and Petersen’s findings (2008) were similar to ours. Teachers remain in the profession because they enjoy their work, are “rewarded” by seeing their students’ progress, etc. Time and schedules were also identified as factors in retention.

Morgan and Kritsonis (2008) found that principals played a huge role in teacher recruitment and retention. Forming partnerships with universities for early recruitment and investing in full-time teacher mentors and ongoing professional development were key factors in both recruitment and retention.

A broad program for new teacher support intended to increase teacher retention was described by Tummons (2010). First and second year teachers were engaged in a combination of meetings and seminars that provided information, encouragement, and strategies for dealing with various duties/expectations of teachers.

Easley (2000) discussed the isolation and frustration that drive many new teachers from the profession. He argues that an investment in strong induction/mentoring programs and a variety of new teacher assistance programs are needed to stem the tide of teachers leaving the profession.

A summary of findings from the Education Commission of the States (2005) indicated that there is evidence that increases in compensation may have more of an impact on teacher retention than other strategies that have been implemented.

Caring teachers make places special

Minor et al. (2002) emphasized that effective teachers are caring. Goldstein and Lake (2000) emphasize that caring is widely believed to be a central facet of teaching. Mayeroff (1971), Noddings (1991), Freedman et. al. (2000), Rice (2001), and White (2001) stress the importance of developing caring as a necessary disposition for working with children. Freeman et. al. (2000: 16): “caring comes alive when students see, hear, feel, and then reflect on child and teacher functioning in the classroom”. Rice (2001): “A teacher may be perceived to know everything about the subject he or she teaches, but if he or she does not act in a caring manner, students in that teacher’s classroom may report learning less from that teacher”. There are many theoretical and practical research studies on caring. Many of them analyze the concept of caring, and some demonstrate applications in the field of teaching.

Research Hypotheses

1. Need of caring for others would be the central motivation to stay in the profession.
2. Taking a course, workshops or enrolling in/ or graduating with a master degree motivate teachers to stay in the profession.

Methodology

Qualitative research approach based on inquiry in depth and direct quotations capturing people’s personal perspective and experiences (Patton 1990).

Specifically, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influence individuals to choose early childhood education as a profession?
2. Are the motivations to remain in the profession related to the motivations to enter the profession?
3. What advice do early childhood professionals offer related for the recruitment and retention of future early childhood educators?

Data collection method

Questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was sent to 389 Early Childhood alumni and graduate students. To assure the validity of the questions, the researcher interviewed 16 teachers asking them to evaluate each question.

Analysis of data

Inductive analysis, described by Johnson (2009) was used in this study. This method enables researchers to look at a field or group of data and to create order by organizing observations/responses into relevant groups for analysis. In this study, responses to the stated research questions formed the fields of data that were analyzed.

Results

Demographic data

Out of 389 questionnaires, 40 were returned (11%). Most of the respondents were females 37 and only 3 were males. Most of them had a master degree 85% (34), few had bachelor 12.5% (5) and 2.5% (1) doctoral degree.

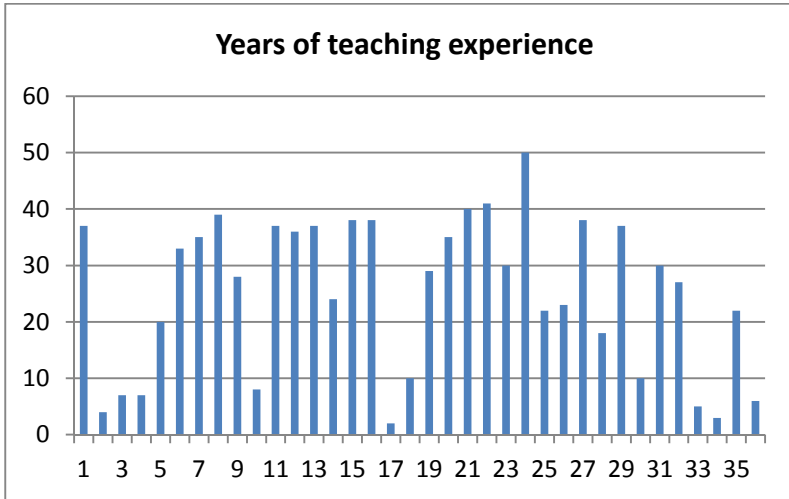


Table 1. Years of teaching experience for each respondent

Majority of respondents had more than 10 years of experience. The data shows that mostly teachers with long teaching experience responded to the questionnaire.

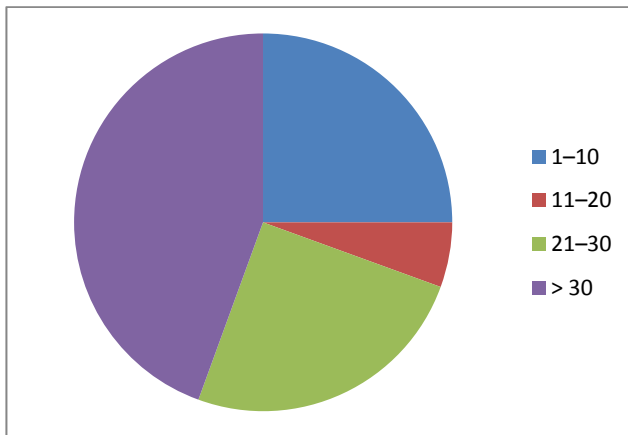


Table 2. Distribution of years of experience

The highest percentage of respondents had 30 years of teaching experience.

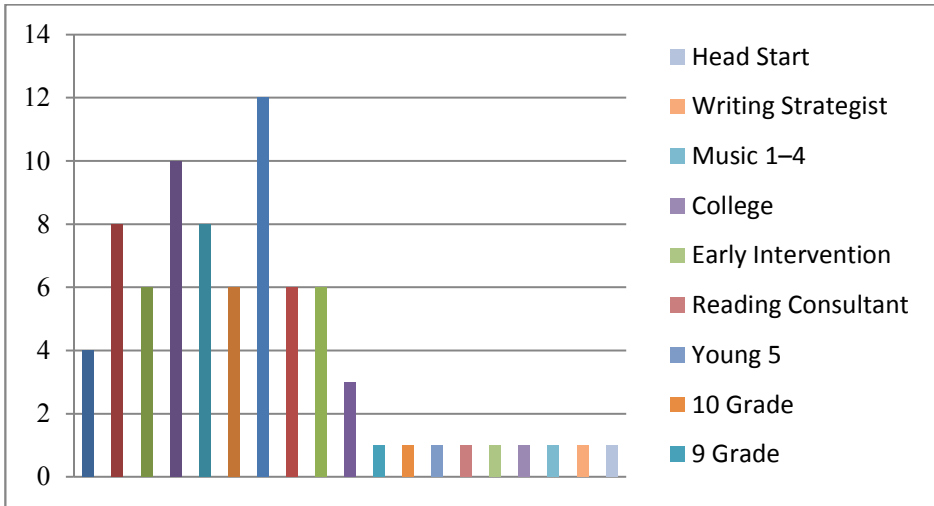


Table 3. Grades that the respondents taught

The respondents taught in many different grades, but all them taught in early childhood classroom. Many though P-K-5 or K-6 or higher grades.

Motives for staying in the profession

For 27 respondents the motives to stay are the same, they teach because they enjoy helping children learn. The reasons for staying in the profession most of the teachers described as the love of teaching the young children; an enjoyment of helping children learn; an enjoyment to *see their energy and their curiosity; love teaching them concepts for the very first time!*; the desire to *show children the world*. Many of them wanted to teach while they were in school and it has been their dream.

There were certain facts given by the teachers explaining why they stayed in the profession:

The challenge of meeting each of their needs each year and bringing out the best in each of them keeps me motivated and wanting to keep doing what I'm doing.

I found that I had a true passion for the age group and that I wanted to learn as much as possible about early childhood development.

I feel appreciated by families; have creative, engaging work, supportive partners to work with, part of my children's daily lives, integrated community life, and sense of doing something that is important.

If not for the excitement and desire to learn demonstrated by my kindergarten students, I do not think I could deal with the politics of education each day.

I spent 22 years in the early intervention field and felt I was making a huge difference in the lives of families and their children.

I stayed with early childhood education because each day I know I make a difference in the life of a child.

Every day at least one child brings a smile to my face, laughter, and pride in my heart to see the growth of these young children and knowing the role I played in that.

My students' excitement for learning keeps me going. I also know that many students depend on me each day for unconditional love and support.

The reasons why some left

20 individuals responded to this question. 16 respondents indicated that they have retired and are no longer teaching; of the 16, three stated that they substitute teach or help out in early childhood classes; one respondent moved into administration; one respondent moved into higher education; one respondent was laid off and then decided to remain at home and raise her children. The narrative helping to understand the issue:

Went to work for Social Security...teaching certification gone and getting it in a different state would have taken time and money, plus teaching is a whole new world today.

I am strongly considering leaving the profession at the current time.

The politics surrounding education have gotten out of control. There is little respect for the profession.

I left teaching before I intended to because of increased state mandates that were affecting my teaching.

I left to take care of my own children because I saw no reason to have someone else raise my children just, so I can be with other children.

Reasons for leaving: change of positions; more demands on teachers; possible future pay reductions; less parental support.

I'm very close to retirement or I would leave given the climate of cutting teachers' pay and benefits, along with requiring more from teachers. They think merit pay will make us want to do more. Now I have to document what I've always done before and what I will get for merit pay will not make up for what I now spend out of my pocket due to the loss of benefits. If I were starting all over, I would go into a business that truly rewards you for doing a great job.

I retired at 56 because there was a buy-out, I was getting tired, and teaching was becoming so political. Also, we were testing almost more than teaching.

For the ones that changed their minds, they left because they had their own children or the one that would like to leave but stayed believed that they did not have a choice: *I would like out. The only reason I am still here is I need to pay my bills. Unfortunately, when you become a teacher, you are not qualified to do much else as if you had a business degree or such.*

Another reason for leaving is the frustration with politics: *I am very frustrated with the politics of education, but I still love teaching.* For 2 teachers they discovered that they fit better in middle school: *I love middle level children.*

Advice to new teachers just coming to the profession of an early childhood teacher

Of the 29 responses to this questionnaire, the majority focused on several key points: Get as much experience as possible, continue to learn/keep up with the research, and don't be afraid to ask for help, keep your passion and enthusiasm, be creative and have fun. One respondent offered the following advice: *Knowing your content matter is important, but effective classroom management is one of the keys to having more successful days than discouraging ones in the classroom.*

...try to work on understanding/perfecting just one area. When you have almost perfected that dream then you can move on to another area.

Be organized in everything! Including your themes that you work on. Try to have a box for every month. When you are finished with what you have been working on, put it in the box. Then next year when you are planning, you will have lots of ideas to pick and choose from.

Leave yourself notes when you have field trips or big end-of-year parties.

Try to keep a journal – put those funny moments in the journal when you have a rotten day, pick up your journal and read a few pages. It will make you laugh!

Four respondents, however, urged those thinking of entering the profession not to do it, citing politics, pay, and lack of respect for teachers as inhibiting factors.

Conclusions

This research supported our hypothesis that caring for children and the pursuit of education are the major reasons to stay in the profession. However, it is difficult to generalize the results because the limitation of the study was the low number of respondents.

Most of the teachers that responded to our questionnaire had more than 30 years of practice and they did not mention their initial education and value of preparation for the profession as reasons to continue teaching. However, our investigation demonstrated that the motives of staying in the profession are the same as for why they chose teaching as their profession. The teachers simply love children and enjoy teaching them and helping them to learn. Therefore they continue teaching. Our suggestion is to focus in teacher preparation on reflecting on and developing caring dispositions in teachers.

The major reasons for leaving were educational politics and having own children. Also, some early childhood teachers from our research find that they prefer teaching older children. To solve this problem in teacher preparation, a new approach would be to offer one license for teachers from kindergarten through 3rd grade and another from 3rd or 4th grade and extend s into middle school that is practiced in some states (Bornfreud 2012). The retention

of teachers could be also affected by the current evaluation and recent legislators that try to abolish teacher tenure. The two new bills that have been passed by the House and approved by the Senate Education Committee based teachers' evaluation on students' growth as a measure of their effectiveness (Carey 2014). The bills also affect teachers' retention, especially in high poverty schools where many children are at-risk and the teachers could be evaluated as "ineffective" when we compare their performance to the teachers teaching in the most affluent environment where the tests scores could be higher.

Appendix 1

Inquiry on Early Childhood Teachers Retention:

Do you remember why you wanted to become an early childhood teacher?

Female Male

Highest degree.....

Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching? What grades?
2. What were your reasons for choosing teaching young children as your profession?
3. Are those the same reasons that help you to stay in the profession?
4. If you are not currently teaching explain why?
5. Point to some facts, events that help you to stay in the profession.
 - a. enrolment in master program (explain)
 - b. graduation from master program (explain)
 - c. taking workshops that helped you to implement new strategies (explain)
 - d. other fact /events (explain)
6. What advice would you give to new teachers who are just entering this profession?

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