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“Teaching...will it ever be all that we want it to be?": An exploration of preservice teachers' views of retention

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“Teaching...will it ever be all that we want it to be?": An exploration of preservice teachers' views of retention

Author Acknowledgement

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“I have always loved children and I knew that I would love to be a small part in their story. Watching students grow and succeed at things they set their minds to is so important to me. Being able to encourage the students, push them, and cheer them on is so rewarding.”

– Blake, Preservice Teacher Intern

Despite the ongoing battle with teacher retention in elementary schools nationwide, the intrinsic desire or “call” to teach still draws college students to choose education as a major. As described in the opening vignette, preservice teachers can provide insight into the mindset of the call to teach, and the beginning ideas of retention in educator positions. The following action research study explores the lived experiences of ten education majors, nine in the field of elementary education and one early childhood major. These education students reflected qualitatively through a journal writing to lend their voices to the conversation of longevity in the teaching field as a career.

Teacher Retention

In the Post COVID world, teacher retention and education student recruitment are part of big discussions in education. The conversations persist with researchers turning their focus to various aspects of school settings, faculty, and extrinsic factors affecting teacher turnover. Miller, Young, Perrone & Gronan (2020) detailed the level of teacher personality, teaching style, and overall fit to a school’s culture and environment in determining longevity in the classroom. In this study, the authors suggested school hiring of new teachers to take into consideration an individual’s overall fit before determining successful implantation into a school community. By assessing a teacher’s school fit, perhaps better retention could result in an aligned school environment relationship (Miller, Young, Perrone & Gronan, 2020).

In an international study, Perryman and Calvert (2020) found that despite the clear description of the heavy workload of teachers while interning, preservice teachers still cited the workload itself as a main cause of leaving the profession. In addition to workload, the authors (Perryman & Calvert, 2020) unearthed the reasoning that teaching itself may be harder than perceived, and the classroom itself a worse place than originally viewed by preservice teachers. These notions combined to paint a picture of why the statistics persist at home and internationally with new teachers leaving the profession in the first five years.

However, Kelchtermans (2017) offers a positive lens on teacher retention, outlining the trends in research already completed, which offer insight into what might encourage good teachers to remain in the classroom. He views teacher recognition amongst peers and within their community, as well as the bettering of daily work life as a few of the lessons learned from listening to practicing classroom teachers (Kelchtermans, 2017). His call to meet the challenge of teacher retention is a refreshing perspective on promoting change to support good teachers before they reach the point of frustration.

The following action research sought to begin exploration of ideas of retention within internship as preservice teachers start their careers. The springboard of internship launches

preservice teachers into their classrooms, ready to stand on their own as instructional leaders. This action research design seeks to ask preservice teachers about their career longevity as they are embarking on the first stage of independent teaching.

Action Research Design

This study implements an action research design which took place during internship semester for 10 female preservice teachers in a southern regional university's education program during the fall semester of 2023. An action research design allows for examination of a common problem in education, where all participants work to investigate a common theme in hopes to unearth a possible solution (Clark, Porath, Theiele & Jobe, 2023). The participants completed a guided journal entry, which included reflective questions to explore ideas of career longevity in their emerging education journeys during internship semester as preservice teachers. The results of this study will inform a larger qualitative case study design in future research regarding teacher retention through the lens of practicing elementary and early childhood interns.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative analysis of the journal writings allowed for the participants' own words and phrases to emerge and guide the creation of trends through In-vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). Line by line analysis allowed for emerging participant phrases to combine by similarity, with outliers and differences noted. Each coded trend in the data was supported by participant quotes in an organized table to communicate its origin and align quotes to participant's chosen pseudonyms.

Participants answered the following questions to reflect on their internship semester experiences through a written journal entry. The journal entry guided questions are outlined in Table 1. Each of the ten participants submitted their writing pieces with their chosen pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Questions

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| <p>Q1: Describe your growth in teaching during internship.</p> <p>Q2: Why did you choose teaching as a career path?</p> <p>Q3: Were there aspects of classroom teaching that surprised you during internship?</p> <p>Q4: Did your mentor teacher or others in your life share ideas with you for work/life balance in teaching?</p> <p>Q5: Where do you see yourself in five years in the teaching field?</p> <p>Q6: What types of support do you feel you need during your first few years of teaching?</p> |
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Each participant used the six questions outlined in Table 1 to create a reflective writing piece. The writing piece analysis used In-vivo coding to determine trends in the data which best communicate the participants' lived experiences during internship semester.

Results

The following sections highlight the four trends in the data analysis. These trends represent the reflections of ten preservice teachers beginning their careers. Each trend is discussed below through participants' words and phrases, beginning with the exploration of the reasons for choosing teaching as a career path.

Trend 1: The Choice to Teach, Despite

When asked why they chose teaching as profession, the participants outlined similar reasons surrounding the role of teacher as a motivator, nurturer, and leader of discovery in the school environment. Only two of the participants mentioned teaching as a family profession. All ten participants mentioned the difficulties of daily teaching, such as student behaviors, distractions, and systematic demands or micromanaging. However, the reflections returned to the idea of teaching as a choice, despite these hardships.

Participants described the hardships of teaching as an acceptable part of the job and role of an educator. Despite the negative aspects of classroom teaching, the participants persist in the quest to intern with the goal of following a teaching career path. Emma states, *"Little did I know that this would also be the most mentally challenging thing I have ever done."* Natalie's persistence to teach is noted in her desire to be like her mentor teacher in the field, even as she shows her the good and bad of the world of teaching.

Lizzy's internship experience included many challenging behavior issues. However, she still envisions her teaching career as seeing herself creating a daily routine and nurturing classroom environment that students enjoy following. She can visualize herself in a second or third grade classroom, singing songs while teaching, despite the shocking student behaviors she witnessed during internship.

"My internship experience has been rigorous, authentic, difficult, frustrating, yet fulfilling." - Virginia
"Throughout internship it was shocking--students' behaviors."- Lizzy
"I knew what I was getting into when going into the field. I wish a lot of those aspects that I knew about were not true, and would change...but unfortunately, they are true."- Blair
"...there have been many days where I have felt nothing but disappointment and frustration." - Emma

Table 2

The Choice To Teach, Despite

Table 2 describes the quotes following the trend of the choice to teach, despite the hardships that are present. Each participant mentioned hardships and frustrations, yet expressed the desire to persist in the teaching field, regardless of the negative aspects. Through this give and take of ups and downs in the role of an educator, the need for work/life balance persists.

Trend 2: Realities of Work/Life Balance

Preservice teacher participants noted that their mentor teachers offered advice for work-life balance, yet did not always exhibit the practice of balance themselves. Lizzy explained that her mentor teacher *“pours everything into her job. It is a good thing, but she always says that it consumes her life sometimes.”* Similarly, Blake noticed that her mentor teacher stayed late every day as she explains in her writing below:

“Yes, my mentor teacher stayed late every day. Sometimes past eight o’clock at night. As I know there is so much to do in the classroom, you must draw the line between work and home. I realized after seeing how late she stayed that it was not healthy or beneficial at all.”

Jennifer’s reflection included the advice of her mentor teacher to avoid taking work home with her, creating a boundary line between school and home life. Blair’s mentor teacher encouraged her to guard her personal contact number and to ensure she did not respond to emails after work hours or on the weekends. These snippets of balance are appreciated, yet the participants see the realities of their mentor teacher’s daily habits.

Natalie and Blake’s teaching relatives shed light on the need for a healthy work/life balance. The participants with educator family members have insight into the workings of the home lives of teachers. These interns describe a familiarity with the work/life balance, with some ideas of how to promote mental health and a productive family life as teachers.

Trend 3: Expectation to Remain, Yet Hopeful for Change

Five years from now, participants hope to see change in our education systems and in policies affecting teacher workloads and expectations. Two of the participants see themselves working on a graduate degree to further their educational pathways in the field. Three of the participants mentioned a goal of getting back to their hometowns, to teach in the elementary school they attended, or to work within their own communities. All participants state that they see themselves teaching in the classrooms in the next five years.

Emma describes her frustrations with the exterior pressures of teaching, stating the state standards and the expectations placed upon her students’ performance are unrealistic. *“The pressure is insane. I hope to still be teaching. I hope to see better improvements and changes to the system in the next five years.”* Similarly, Natalie describes the need for change in the feeling of support by administration. She notes that without support, she would not be able to enjoy what initially makes her happy in regards to day-to-day teaching.

Virginia wishes to pursue a masters degree to push herself in the areas of deepening pedagogy. She expresses a desire to work toward *“giving back in a greater way someday.”* This desire to achieve a higher level of degree opens pathways for instructional coaching and leadership within her future career pathway.

Trend 4: Desire for Authentic Encouragement

The desire for authentic encouragement is present in preservice teachers' reflections on their need for future support. Blair notes that sincere leadership check-ins would help her to feel more supported as she grows through her beginning years in the classroom. She describes a good first year mentorship as inclusive of a collaborative grade level team and administration who truly take the time to listen.

Lizzy also describes the desire for a “*close-knit school that is welcoming and willing to help.*” She expresses the need for a reciprocal faculty relationship, as new teachers also bring a lot of fresh perspective in ideas and pedagogical considerations. Participants expressed a desire for a strong mentor who would guide them and also act as a confidant, support, and judgement-free sounding board during the early days of figuring out a new grade level and school.

Diana and Jennifer, in addition to two other participants, wrote about a feeling of school staff and/or faculty leaving them to “*figure it out themselves*”. This phrase was repeated in a variety of reflective writings, as if many of their internship field experiences included an element of isolation or somehow being left to their own devices. Emma shed some light on her situation:

“...often, older teachers don't remember what it was like being a first-time teacher. They assume that you know more than them since you've just graduated. wrong. I know how to write a four-page lesson plan for one singular lesson, and that's about it.”

Virginia also asks for positive reinforcement, citing the need for encouraging, authentic mentorship, which would create a safe space for new teachers entering the field. This desire for authenticity and inclusivity shows the need for community and strong collaboration in a future school workplace.

Discussion

The results of this study have implications for further exploration of preservice teachers' ideas of retention. New teachers, starting out on their career paths, express an eagerness for longevity, if changes are on the horizon. It is imperative to note that all participants express the desire to remain in the classroom for a career in the field of teaching. Additionally, the results of this study will be shared with participants in hopes to encourage future interns and new teachers to acknowledge and confront their own expectations regarding teacher retention.

The interns in this study want to stay, despite the unearthing of negative aspects, such as a heavy workload, out of control student behaviors, and overwhelming feelings of uncertainty in day-to-day teaching aspects. As Perryman and Calvert (2020) suggest, the heavy workload teachers carry is a cause for leaving the field. The same issues of heavy workload and the realities of the classroom were also unearthed in the participants' reflections. Adding to the authors' findings (Perryman and Calvert, 2020), the participants express the desire to remain, as if the workload and realities are an aspect of teaching one must accept.

Participants viewed the realities of work/life balance, or lack-there-of, through daily shadowing of their mentor teachers. They are willing to overlook micromanaging and pressures from the outside, in addition to lack of support in behavior management within some school environments. Perhaps Miller, Young, Perrone and Gronan's (2020) suggestion to assess a new teacher's school fit aligns with the need for authentic administrative and faculty support. Similar to Miller et al. (2020) found that a teacher's fit must match for teacher retention, therefore new teachers in the first year should work to determine if a potential school's environment matches their need for support in maintaining healthy work/life balance.

Kelchterman's (2017) study highlighted the importance of nurturing and listening to practicing teachers as a means of avoiding losing quality teachers to other career paths. By amplifying voices of those who have just begun teaching as a career pathway, stakeholders and policy makers can explore supportive routes of meeting the needs of brand new teachers. As evident from the trends in their reflective writings, many of the requests and hopes for career longevity are not too taxing to consider.

Just as Kelchterman (2017) suggested implementing support before teachers meet frustration level, administration and citywide policy makers can intervene in the first year of teaching. Leaning in to the ideals and expectations of new teachers may help teacher retention efforts nationwide, as a new generation of developing educators are passed the torch.

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