Teacher retention in the time of COVID-19: A dive into pre and post-pandemic data

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Abstract

Teacher retention is a significant issue. The COVID-19 pandemic added significant stress to teachers already reporting high-stress levels and thoughts of leaving the profession. Teachers, required to teach online, found themselves in their students' homes, which was a completely new experience. Teachers were privy now to family dynamics, home environment, the stress in the home, ability to access resources, etc. Teachers were trying to navigate and create an online curriculum, find resources to support online learning, and support parents and families during a high-stress period. This created a pressure cooker effect for the profession. Did these experiences influence their thoughts about staying in the profession? This study explored the pre and post-pandemic experiences of teachers. In 2020, 358 teachers completed the pre-pandemic survey, and 145 of the original participants chose to complete the follow-up study in 2021. Findings revealed a significant number of teachers in 2020 considering leaving the teaching profession, but even more alarming was the increase by 2021.

Keywords: Teacher Retention; COVID-19; Teacher Burnout; Compassion Fatigue
Introduction

Teacher retention has been an important topic for many years. Pre-pandemic, it was widely reported that forty to fifty percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years of entering the classroom (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). In 2020, one in five teachers, regardless of years in the profession, reported their plan to not return to the classroom (Page, 2020).

Pre-Pandemic

Historically, teacher shortages were reported as early as the 1930s. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were widespread teacher shortages across the nation (Sutcher, et al., 2019). Schools often resorted to staffing these classrooms with teachers who do not hold teaching credentials (Sutcher, et al., 2019). In fact, “87,000 positions were filled by teachers who were not fully certified” (Sutcher, et al., 2019, p. 5). It is important to note that not all states report the number of hired, uncertified teachers; therefore, this number was likely much higher than 87,000 (Sutcher, et al., 2019). Math, science, and special education were the most understaffed areas (Sutcher, et al., 2019).

Dissatisfaction in the Profession

In 2014, research revealed “inadequate administrative support, isolated working conditions, poor student discipline, low salaries, and a lack of collective teacher influence over schoolwide decisions as reasons why teachers chose to leave the profession (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Teacher stress has also contributed to the decision to leave the profession. Teacher stress can contribute to staff absenteeism and turnover (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008).
In 2017, Morton and Berardi found that teachers were feeling stressed and worn out due to the growing needs of students in K-12 schools. Teachers reported emotional exhaustion, feeling inadequate to meet their students' needs, and questioning if they should remain in the profession (Berardi & Morton, 2019). In the 2017 survey of over 200 teachers, educational assistants, and administrators, participants identified significant changes in K-12 student needs in the last three to five years (Berardi & Morton, 2019). They identified an increase in poor classroom behavior, anxiety and depression, a marked increase in the mental health issues of their students, students with unstable housing or homelessness, lack of emotional control, difficulty focusing in class, declining academic achievement, and an increase in special education services for behavioral issues (Berardi & Morton, 2019). Teachers expressed frustration over students' behavioral challenges and lack of engagement yet simultaneously felt deep empathy and compassion for the experiences and situations of their students (Morton & Berardi, 2017). However, they overwhelmingly identified student behavior when asked what their most significant concern or challenge was.

The experiences of the 200 teachers were echoed in an Oregon Educator Association report. The report concluded that Oregon schools are in crisis. The report revealed that 32% of teachers worried about the safety of their students, and 25% worried about their safety (Oregon Educator Association, 2019). Furthermore, equally alarming, over 90% of survey respondents believed their school did not have the necessary resources to provide "safe, welcoming, and inclusive classrooms" (Oregon Educator Association, 2019, p. 9). Of those teachers who responded to the survey, more than 40% reported thinking about leaving the teaching profession due to the behavioral / classroom management issues they were facing every day and feeling helpless to change the home situations of their students (Berardi & Morton, 2019).
Post-Pandemic

A study by the National Education Association found that 55% of educators were considering leaving the profession as of February 2022, up from 37% in August 2021 (National Education Association, 2022). Of the 55% who said they were considering leaving the profession, 62% are Black, and 59% are Hispanic/Latino educators, two groups already underrepresented in education (National Education Association, 2022). Reasons noted for considering leaving included exhaustion, exasperation, having to take on more responsibilities, loss of planning time or lunch breaks to cover for colleagues out with COVID-19, and inability to give students the attention they need under-appreciation and underpaid. However, it is essential to note that teacher comments to this report showed teachers frustrated with student behavior, including unusual disrespectful student behavior, lack of accountability, and lack of consequences for student behavior. Teachers entered the new academic year, witnessing a significant increase in students' inappropriate classroom behaviors. Teachers have shared stories of children lying on the floor, under desks, throwing objects across the classroom, and exhibiting aggressive behavior toward peers. The loss of social interaction, chronic stress, and cumulative trauma has caused severe disruption to the fall 2021 classroom.

These comments concerning student behavior and emotional needs align with both Morton and Berardi's (2019) findings and the Oregon Educator Report. Darling-Hammonds and Hyler (2020) noted the significance of students' social and emotional needs and how they influence their learning ability. They called for teachers to "learn how to integrate these areas of development to be effective," including "trauma- and healing-informed practice" (p. 457).

Teachers were called upon to deliver high-level instruction in the most complex situations during and after the pandemic. Darling-Hammonds and Hyler (2020) noted that the
learning environment's complexities, including in-person, distance learning, and hybrid models, would stretch even the most proficient, skilled educators.

This study supports the Association of Teacher Educators Standard 3: Scholarship. Faculty in teacher preparation are obligated to both future and current teachers to explore current school events. One way to accomplish this is by conducting research and sharing the findings. Doing so strengthens preparation programs and supports current teachers and administrators. Exploring teacher retention pre and post-pandemic contributes knowledge to the field.

**Conceptual Framework**

In 1995 Figley developed the concept of compassion fatigue. He developed this concept after working with trauma workers and mental health professionals and observing their vicariously experiencing the effects of trauma. Figley noticed that a side-effect of working with traumatized individuals was compassion fatigue; this was especially true if the professional was exposed to a significant number of traumatized individuals and was strongly empathetic (Adams, Boscarino & Figley, 2006). Compassion fatigue is "...The natural behaviors and emotions that arise from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other, the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized person" (Figley, 1995, p. 2). He explained that "professionals who listen to clients' stories of fear, pain, and suffering may feel similar pain and suffering because they care (p. 1). Therefore, exposure to unmitigated stress and trauma can be an activating or triggering event, causing the recall of our painful memories (Berardi & Morton, 2019). This means that teachers connecting with their students are more than likely empathizing with them on a much deeper level than they are even aware of. Moreover, if/when the stories or situations students have been subjected to connect in some way to their own experiences, teachers experience compassion fatigue. Furthermore, untreated compassion
fatigue can result in "...disengagement, depression, mood swings, sleep deprivation, substance abuse, divorce, and problematic educator workforce turnover" (Lawson et al., 2019). School employees who cannot stop intrusive thoughts related to specific students' situations or events can cause the adult to experience traumatic feelings, leading to compassion fatigue and burnout (Lawson et al., 2019). Burnout, an element of compassion fatigue, is associated with workplace stressors such as manager unresponsiveness, lack of camaraderie and teamwork, staffing shortages, long hours, and intense workloads (Boyle, 2015).

**Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to (1) learn the intentions of Oregon K-12 teachers to either stay in the teaching profession or exit the profession; (2) learn reasons for considering leaving the profession; (3) explore what role, if any, compassion fatigue had on their decision. The initial study began in February 2020, and the follow-up in March 2021. A qualitative survey was used to capture the experiences of the Oregon educators. Quantitative scores were calculated using descriptive statistics. The research question that guided this study:

RQ1: What experiences cause teachers to consider leaving the profession?

**Participants**

Participants for the study were all alumni from the College of Education at a university in the Pacific Northwest. The alums included undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students from 2010 - to 2019. Each alum received an email describing the study and asking for participation. This yielded 386 alums who agreed to participate in the pre-pandemic study in February 2020. In March 2021, emails were again sent to the 386 who had agreed to participate in the 2020 study. Of the 386, 145 participated in the 2021 follow-up study. Interestingly, 14 emails were returned
as "undeliverable," indicating that in the last 13 months, the email they provided the university, overwhelmingly a K-12 school email, was no longer valid.

**Instruments**

For this study, three specific instruments were used. The first is the Adverse Childhood Experiences quiz. This is a 10-question quiz that requires a yes/no response. It measures adverse experiences that occurred prior to the participant’s 18th birthday. The second is the Empathy Quotient. This scores the participant’s overall empathy. The third is the Professional Quality of Life (ProQol), which evaluates compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary trauma. Last, the participants were asked to answer the following: How many years have you worked in education, primary role in education, have you ever considered leaving the profession, and what causes you to consider leaving the profession? These questions and the three instruments above were included in a Google survey.

**Procedures**

In February 2020, Institutional Review Board approval was received. I then emailed the university College of Education alumni informing them of the research and asking for their participation. I then analyzed the data. In March 2021, I took the email addresses of the 2020 participants and sent an email asking for their participation in a follow-up study. This data was then analyzed.

**Data Analysis**

In February 2020, 386 alumni received a link to the survey. Of those 386, 17 responses were duplicates (same email address listed twice in the responses), and 14 surveys were incomplete. This yielded N=358. The ProQOL and Empathy Quotient were hand scored and
verified by a trusted colleague researcher. Content analysis was used to code the narrative responses. Content analysis is "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 18).

The March 2021 study followed the same protocol. Emails were sent to the 358 who had completed the surveys. Of those 358, 145 agreed to participate in the follow-up; N=145. The follow-up survey included questions related to teaching during the pandemic, thoughts about leaving or staying in the profession, and the ProQol survey. They were not asked to complete the ACE quiz or the Empathy quotient.

**Findings**

**Summarized data**

**2020 Data**

- N=358
- 292 were teachers
- 20 were administrators
- 46 identified as “other educational professional”.
- 235 of the 358 considered leaving the teaching profession (65.6%)

**2021 Data**

- N=145
- 113 were teachers
- 12 were administrators
- 20 identified as “other educational professional”
- 111 of the 145 considered leaving the teaching profession (76.5%)

**Table 1**
ProQOL Scale Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ProQOL Scale</th>
<th>2020 Score</th>
<th>2021 Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compassion Satisfaction</td>
<td>38.28</td>
<td>38.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burnout</td>
<td>26.27</td>
<td>28.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Traumatic Stress</td>
<td>25.48</td>
<td>24.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are three specific scales: Compassion satisfaction, Burnout, and Secondary traumatic stress. Compassion satisfaction is defined as the professional satisfaction the individual receives from their work. Burnout scale measures overall feelings regarding effectiveness in your position. Burnout scores Secondary traumatic stress scale measures exposure to work related traumatic and/or stressful events. For each scale, the scoring is classified as: Scores of 22 or less are “low”; 23 – 41 “moderate”; 42 or more “high”. As reflected in Figure 1, Compassion Satisfaction for both 2020 and 2021 show an average score of “moderate”. Secondary traumatic stress for 2020 and 2021 reflect “moderate” average scores. Burnout scores also revealed “moderate” scores. However, there is a small jump in burnout in 2021.

Content Analysis Themes

The following themes were identified in 2020 and 2021 as reasons why the participants considered leaving education. For brevity, participant quotes are limited.

Teacher Stress / Burnout

Participants shared the stress they were under and feelings of exhaustion and burnout. One participant wrote, “It gets exhausting in my role (advocate/support/instructor for at-risk kids and teen parents) to hear the heartbreaking stories day after day and then have to battle teachers to support or have grace for my students over trivial things.” Another noted the inability to meet the growing needs of their students was causing them to "question my purpose." One participant
shared, “The stress of managing student behavior, exhaustion of working with high needs students, disengaged families, is causing a feeling of hopelessness about my ability to have any positive influence.” Several participants noted the mental exhaustion they felt due to the expanding role of the teacher to be “counselor, mentor, support system” in addition to teaching. They also noted feeling defeated from repeated disrespectful encounters with family and students.

*Trauma / Student Behavior Issues*

The majority of participants noted the significant needs of their students and families and how those needs were impacting the classroom and their role. Some of these comments were brief, stating simply, “overwhelming amount of trauma” and “the toll of mental health issues in students” were causing burnout. One said, "constant, daily exhaustion of working with countless students in each classroom who are severely trauma-impacted." They also noted a lack of social-emotional resources to meet student and community needs. Other participants connected the student trauma to behavioral issues manifesting in the classroom. One noted, "the needs are so great, and we can't meet them. Students are frustrated, and it is spilling over into the classroom." Another said, "I had a really tough class last year with many behavioral problems. I had wonderful support from my administration but each day was really tough to get through. It has definitely made me consider ways I can use my education degree outside of teaching in a classroom.” Last, one shared, “some days feel like 90% of my classroom time is spent restorative problem solving because students are fighting so much.”

*Lack of Support*
Participants shared positive experiences working with the administration, trying to provide support. However, resources were lacking that would have provided the strong support that was needed. One mentioned "lack of programming available to support our student's social/emotional well-being." Another pointed to “lack of support from administration by not holding students accountable for poor behavior." Others noted a "lack of funding to support students in crisis" and a "lack of behavioral interventions they could use." Moreover, others identified the need for lower-class sizes to make the new workload and role manageable.

*Quantitative Scores*

Quantitative scores were calculated using descriptive statistics. In 2020, 65.6% of teachers reported they were considering leaving the profession or had considered leaving the profession. That number took a sizeable jump in 2021 to 76.5% of teachers reporting leaving or considering leaving. The 76.5% finding is also significantly higher than the 55% found by the National Education Association, in their January, 2022 survey (National Education Association, 2022).

*Conclusion*

Teacher shortages have existed for decades, but the exodus from classrooms since the COVID-19 pandemic is cause for serious alarm. The information gained from these participants reveals the complex and expanding role of the teacher in the post-pandemic classroom and the toll it is taking on their mental health. Administrators are stretched; teachers are stretched. As schools grapple with plans to support students, the teacher's well-being must also be considered.

This research illuminates the need for social-emotional programs and practices in schools that support students and school personnel, as well as focused attention on the factors
contributing to burnout in teachers. As teacher educators, this information is critical to informing institutional programs. We must prepare teachers with the tools necessary to be effective, successful teachers, in-tune with and equipped to address their mental health care.

References


Alliance Report on Teacher Attrition and Retention Highlighted in the Hechinger Report


