

Listen and You Shall Hear

A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of retired African American teachers who choose to work in an urban environment with primarily African American students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the article was to share the results of a study that critically examined why teachers choose to work in urban environments. The researcher focused on talking to retired urban teachers and allowing them to tell their stories about motivation, incentives, and rewards. Talking to the teachers confirmed teachers were not motivated by extrinsic factors alone. Instead, they were highly motivated by intrinsic and altruistic factors. Money and vacation time, then, may not adequately serve as incentives for urban teachers. Recruitment and retention personnel may benefit from extended conversations with teachers as a means of discovering what motivates teachers to stay in urban environments. Listening to teachers could prove the most beneficial data collection tool for future researchers.

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Introduction

In 2006, on an average, elementary and secondary school teachers made \$33,000 per year (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of labor statistics). With the exception of law professors (who were listed as number 37), teachers were not included in a survey of the 50 top paying jobs in the United States (Career One Stop: Pathways to Career Success). In light of the data, teachers' commitment and devotion to education can be attributed to something other than money. In some cases, teachers report intrinsic and altruistic reasons for choosing to stay in urban environments. Determining teachers' reasons for staying in urban environments could reveal important information about what kind of teachers elect to work in urban schools throughout the United States. Such information could prove vital in creating incentive, recruitment, and retention programs designed to attract and keep highly qualified educators in urban schools.

One way to determine teacher motivation is simply to ask the teachers themselves. In the current study, retired teachers were questioned about what made them enter the teaching profession and what made them stay in urban environments in and around Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The retired teachers were questioned about their goals, dreams, and accomplishments. They were encouraged to tell their own stories about their teaching experiences. Giving teachers a voice to express themselves was important because to learn from them, they must be heard. The study is a motivation study designed to assess the motivation of successful retired teachers with regard to working in urban environments.

The Need to Listen

In modern educational environments, there is a need to listen to retired teachers. Current trends tend to emphasize the preferences of political advocates, private industry, and community partners. Teachers, however, are in the field. They can tell us why they stayed in their respective environments. They can tell us what it took to be a good teacher in challenging times. Recruiters could learn how to appeal to the motivational needs of educators who are similarly aligned with retired teachers. Moulthrop, Calegari, and Eggers (2006) provided the opportunity for teachers to tell their stories in their own words. The stories were used to describe the lifestyle of a teacher and to eradicate any myths about why teachers choose teaching.

Similar to the teachers in Moulthrop, Calegari, and Eggers' book, the retired teachers in the current study told stories of how they lived, taught, and survived in urban schools. Some teachers provided great insights as to how teaching was done and could be improved upon. Some merely provided interesting stories about their own journey into education. No matter what the story, we can learn from it. Whitaker (2004) contended, "From effective people, we learn what to do; from ineffective people, we learn what not to do" (p. 3). Unlike other motivation studies, the focus of the current study was upon talking directly to the motivated retired teachers and allowing them to tell their own stories about teaching, motivation, and rewards.

Motivation studies often involve observing the effects of extrinsic motivators upon behavior. Partially because extrinsic motivators are the easiest to observe, their effects are well documented (Kohn, 1999; McGregor, 2006; Taylor, 1998). However, researchers do not agree as to whether extrinsic motivators are helpful as a means of

encouraging a desired behavior. Kohn strongly discouraged the use of extrinsic rewards. He contended the use of extrinsic rewards would eventually undermine any effort to motivate long-term changes in behavior. Taylor (1998), in direct opposition, posited extrinsic rewards were highly effective in motivating a desired behavior. McGregor (2006) purported managers must come to an understanding about behavior to motivate their workers to perform at high standards. McGregor wrote, “Many managers would agree that the effectiveness of their organizations would be at least doubled if they could discover how to tap the unrealized potential present in their human resources” (p. 6). McGregor went on to name things such as good salary and incentive plans as possible means of motivating behavior.

The retired teachers in the study identified intrinsic and altruistic reasons for teaching urban children. Instead of being motivated by vacation time, money, and other tangible benefits, the retired teachers were motivated by a sense of what they could contribute to society by helping children learn. Many of the retirees were pioneers in their field. Some were the first African American females in their district. Others were the first teachers in their field to set high educational standards for students in music, English, science, or math. Each was inspired, by a greater sense of contributing to the study, to share her story by helping a student (the researcher) learn more about teachers. Even in their responses, participants were concerned about telling the whole story behind their motives.

Altruistic motivators create in a person a sense they have been *called* to a task or profession (Wadsworth, 2001, p. 24). The calling is altruistic in that it is motivated by a need to serve others or a need to improve society at large. Altruistic motivators are

observable in the field of education. Nieto (2005) posited, “Most people who enter the profession do so for unselfish reasons: they want to contribute to society and they view teaching as a good way to do so” (p. 10). The unselfish teachers choose teaching in response to internal forces which are considered altruistic in nature. Nieto added, “They view teaching as a *calling* and they are driven by a sense of service” (p. 3).

In terms of educators, altruism is a significant motivator, whereas extrinsic motivators are often not enough to encourage young people to go into teaching. Wadsworth (2001) reported, “Most young teachers are highly motivated professionals who bring a strong sense of commitment and high morale to their work. New teachers see themselves as talented, hardworking professionals who have responded to a calling” (p. 25). In her study, Wadsworth interviewed young teachers and determined the third most important attribute to the teachers was their sense of making a contribution to society (p. 26). Bastik (2000) explained that a contribution to society was the primary motivator in metropolitan countries such as the United States. His findings confirmed altruistic motivators are strong sources of teacher satisfaction.

The Survey

Studying young teachers as they enter the teaching profession provided Wadsworth (2001) with valuable information that could be used to entice young adults to become teachers. However, studying young teachers only gives a view of the type of person who could enter into the profession. Studying veteran and retired teachers may provide a more complete picture of the type of individual who stays to experience longevity in their chosen profession.

Eleven retired urban teachers were asked to participate in an interview and mail-in survey. The interviews were conducted in person at the convenience of the respondents. The mail-in surveys contained 11 questions pertaining to demographics, professional goals, and attitudes toward education as an art or science. The surveys were distributed at the conclusion of the interview. Each respondent was given a self-addressed, stamped envelope to expedite the return of the survey. In each case, the survey was returned within five days to the interviewer.

The 11 retired teachers chosen for the study worked in urban environments in Wisconsin. Each educator worked in a classroom for a minimum of 3-10 years, with the majority of them working for more than 31 years before retirement. One of the respondents was a college professor but the other 10 all worked in elementary, middle, and high school environments. Ten of the 11 identified themselves as African American; one participant opted not to answer the question on a mail-in survey. Nine of the 11 surveys were returned by mail to the interviewer.

In terms of age, one respondent was 31-40 years old; one respondent was 41-50 years old; one respondent was 51-60 years old; and four respondents were 71 years old or older. Two respondents did not answer the question regarding age. All nine survey respondents were female. Eight of the nine indicated they lived in urban environments during the time they were teaching. Living in an urban environment is believed, by Wisconsin legislators, to contribute to a greater sense of altruism for educators because they live in the environments in which they teach.

None of the nine surveys indicated extrinsic motivators when participants were asked about their professional goals when they began teaching. Instead, both intrinsic and

altruistic reasons were listed: “I wanted to teach in high school. However, I spent 34 years in the middle school as a teacher and administrator” (Respondent 050101); “I thought I would go to law school. I later earned a graduate degree in elementary education” (Respondent 050202); “I wanted to reach students who were considered to be un-teachable and unreachable” (Respondent 050805).

Teachers were also asked whether they believed teaching was an art or science. Many of the respondents indicated it was both. Following are examples of responses: “Teaching is a science that can be developed into an art if you work at it with commitment” (Respondent 050101); “I believe it is an art. It’s something that you take your time to prepare for, so that you create a great picture (teacher)” (Respondent 050303); “It is clearly both. One must learn the method but have a natural skill for the art of teaching” (Respondent 050504); “Teaching is an art. You must engage your client completely in order to get your ideas across” (Respondent 050805); “Teaching is an art that requires scientific principles” (Respondent 051108). One participant indicated,

I think it is both. Teachers need to understand basic principles of human development and learning as well as the impact of race, class, gender, etc., on individual behavior. That’s the science. But, there is also that personal connection and being able to use one’s own intuition—the art. (Respondent 050907)

Teaching, according to most of the survey respondents, cannot easily be divided into art or science. It involves elements of both. Teaching requires knowledge based on science, but skills that are based on art. The blend of science and art is not precise; one cannot give a percentage of each to determine success in the classroom. However, it was

clear from the interviews that each teacher was innovative and knowledgeable about their content, students, and culture.

As a result of the belief that teaching involves art and science, the retired teachers spoke of the skills and talent required to be successful in their jobs. Some noted the job was fun, whereas others indicated it was a blend of knowledge and skill. Almost all teachers reported they were supported by their district's continued education initiatives. One teacher explained the perpetual requirement for continued education in her district:

I go to so many classes every year and in-services. Teachers have to go to school all of the time. Either you have to go to in-services to learn something new like when they put in a new system or whenever they change a rule in special ed about writing IEPs. I'm in in-services up the whazoo. Then, you have to take classes to keep your license. I've had to learn so many different things. I don't understand; we don't get paid but we have to be in school all the time. It's a 24:7 thing. You're always taking classes and learning new things all the time. (Respondent 050504)

The Interviews

All the retired teachers worked in urban environments. Some reported extrinsic reasons, such as salary or vacation time, but most of the retirees reported altruistic or intrinsic reasons for choosing to work in urban environments: "I chose the public school district because I was a graduate of public schools. I wanted to teach where I would be most needed" (Respondent 050303); "I wanted to work with African American children. That's why I went to the city" (Respondent 050805); "I wanted to work in the city

because it's the district that offered variety in population and the children needed me” (Respondent 050202). One participant responded,

It was very important for me to work in the city with primarily African American children because I wanted to see my race do better. I wanted to see those who are not the majority do better and to survive. (Respondent 050108)

The idea of working toward a greater good (altruism) outweighed the need for greater salaries or designated vacation times. The responses fell clearly along the lines of established research that stated teachers were called to the profession by a need to improve society at large (Wadsworth, 2001). The idea of teaching being a calling lends credence to the concept of teaching being more an art than a science that can be studied and taught. Instead, teaching is more of an inherent skill that can be enhanced by further education and knowledge.

The interviews also revealed another important observation. The retirees were all proud of the service they provided. All of them believed the system supported their teaching efforts and they were encouraged, in many cases, to do pioneering work to help children learn. Many of the retirees reported being the first in their field or their district to use certain techniques. Others were exemplary teachers and mentors for new teachers. Some reported being rewarded with incentives (specialized training, trips, or newspaper articles) to continue doing great things in the classroom.

When asked how the system supported their professional development, one retiree responded as follows:

Well, when I worked in Los Angeles and you were traveling during the summer, you could use your travel credits as far as like when you wanted to move up. Like

when you could take University credits at a college but also at that time, you could use travel credits. So . . . I went to Europe and I did a little write up about what I did and I got a couple of credits. They had lots of in-service credits at that time. You didn't just have to go to the University; you could take an in-service on Saturday or after school. That was good because sometimes people didn't have the money to go . . . you know, but they could move up across the steps. You couldn't get all of your credits to move across a step that way but you could get a certain amount. (Respondent 050805)

Another respondent indicated,

As far as being a math teacher, at my school we got a lot of support. We got extra money as far as grants for professional development. We would meet an extra hour (and we were compensated for an extra hour) monthly. We would meet at least two Wednesdays every month for an extra hour each to get things done. Actually, our math department was the most progressive department in the school as far as making gains so, um, being able to go to workshops and adopt a new series for next year. We got a chance to vote on that and give our input about which book we wanted. I think that really supported us. All the materials we needed came with it. Like the DVDs, overheads already printed, test prep materials, test materials already on disk. I mean the whole . . . you know. I felt we were very supported. (Respondent 050303)

A third respondent noted, "The system let me become a participant in anything that I needed to grow professionally" (Respondent 051108).

Similarly, the respondents felt positive about the systems supporting their teaching styles. Many indicated they were pleased with the support they got from the district, parents, and coworkers. They felt the environment was collegial and they grew from it. Support was not merely limited to attendance at higher education opportunities. Sometimes support involved rewards for a job well done. When asked how the system supported her teaching style, one of the respondents replied,

They [the district] liked my style. They gave me all of the equipment that I needed. They rewarded me by making me the teacher of the year. The paper honored me; the chamber of commerce. So I had a lot of things happen to me that were so great. (Respondent 050806)

Another respondent felt she was not supported by the system. She taught on a grant and indicated without the grant she probably would not have been in the school at all. She was proud of the work she did and reported she enjoyed working as a grant-funded teacher. Being funded by a grant provided her with certain freedoms to do what she thought was best for her students without worrying about reprimand from the district in which she taught. She contended being employed by the district would have limited what she could do in the classroom. When asked whether she would change anything about her experience, the respondent stated she enjoyed it too much to change anything.

Even in a situation in which she felt unsupported, the grant-funded teacher was able to find enough purpose and meaning to validate her experience:

In the city, the system didn't support my pedagogy at all. If that school hadn't had a grant, I would not have been there. When the grant ran out, I was out. We had a really bad principal and the school was located right in the middle of a seriously

problemated neighborhood. There were gang issues which he totally ignored. The kids would go out to play on the playground and the gang members would just come on in. He was really bad. They didn't support anything that we did.

(Respondent 050907)

One of the most interesting facts about the interviews was the level of commitment exhibited by each respondent. Many worked in newly desegregated schools where race was an overwhelming obstacle. Instead of giving up, the retirees reported a kind of determination that could only be attributed to intrinsic and altruistic motivators. They saw in their jobs the opportunity to impact African American children positively. They believed they were role models for children who would otherwise see no way out of difficult situations. The retirees were proud to have persevered in difficult times. One respondent reported,

I grew up in segregated school systems. All my schools were African American and all my teachers were African American. I didn't have a White teacher until I went to college so I didn't find out I was deprived until I went to college [Laugh]. Prior to that I thought I was okay because they kept telling me I was. I just think my teachers were so nurturing, caring, and considerate. I wanted to do the same thing for kids. (Respondent 050805)

Another respondent indicated she chose her teaching environment:

Because not too many people do [work with African American children] and we have a shortage of African American teachers. Even in my darkest days, I told someone that I can relate to a lot of what kids are going through and their dysfunction. And they said, "you know you have one common denominator—that

you can relate on the Black experience because they are going to be Black forever. You can relate to that.” So I wanted to teach them. I remember the struggles I had with teachers who were not Black in one of the most segregated cities in the world. (Respondent 050504)

For these two teachers, working with African American students was a necessity. They had to work with inner city kids to justify their work. They would not have had the same kinds of experiences with other students. Both teachers reported not being able to influence other students in the way they influenced African American students. The retirees believed they had a greater purpose in teaching African American students. The belief was expressed best by the youngest respondent in the group. She stated,

Today, kids need to see African Americans in professional roles. They see all the violent things but urban kids, today, don't have those role models at home. They don't have those professionals and kids need to see that they can become professionals if they see someone else in that position so that was important to me. Just really trying to help and give back. I felt was important. (Respondent 050303)

Conclusion

Research demonstrated many teachers quit during the first 3-5 years. If we take the time to listen to teachers, they may tell us important information about motivation. In today's educational climate, it is important to understand what motivates teachers to remain educators past the crucial first 3 years.

Motivation studies are highly sophisticated. There are many measures to compute motivation. Still, the simplest way to determine what motivates teachers is to ask them.

Given a chance, they will explain, in their own words, what keeps them in the profession. Armed with information from teachers, recruitment and retention efforts could focus on what really motivates urban teachers to choose and stay in urban environments.

It seems like such a simple way to get information. Talk to the teachers. Give them a voice. Look for themes in their stories. Report their words. Devise ways to meet their needs and wishes.

The teachers in the study were adamant about their devotion to African American students. They believed they served a greater purpose in working with urban youth. All but one of the retirees stated they were supported by their districts, the parents, and the administrators to do good work. The work they did was important to them because they believed nobody else could do the work they did. So strong was the support that some teachers received that they remained in the schools as volunteers after retiring.

The study limited itself to the lived experiences of African American urban retired teachers who worked in environments with urban children. Future studies could examine the lived experiences of other racial groups, other socioeconomic groups, and other environments such as suburban or rural school districts. The views of male teachers versus female teachers may reveal differences in self-reported motivators. Similarly, data from in-service teachers may reveal the retrospective view of retirees represents current attitudes about teaching. Future studies could attempt to identify patterns or create a profile of the type of person who enters teaching and stays the course. Longevity is desired in a field that strives to confront social problems such as poverty, illiteracy, and crime.

The implications for social change are vast. Understanding the self-reported preferences of teachers could result in the development of incentives that align more closely with what teachers need to inspire them to stay in the profession. Teachers who stay in the profession have the chance to develop better skills as they achieve longevity. Retaining qualified teachers by providing appropriate incentives could help improve the quality of education in schools throughout the world. In essence, motivated teachers would be more likely to stay in the profession.

This study revealed that teachers must feel a sense of empowerment. They must feel supported by their districts. A greater sense of purpose must be experienced if teachers are to stay in education. Money and vacation time are nice perks, but they may not be the main motivators for inspirational, talented, and creative teachers. Because teaching may be both an art and a science, recruiters must devise ways to retain highly trained and highly motivated prospects for teaching. It is not enough to send teachers to in-services and schools of higher education; opportunities for experiences outside the classroom are essential to the maintenance of a healthy attitude toward teaching.

Listen to the teachers and we shall hear what motivates them most, what encourages them through tough times, and what keeps them coming back year after year. We will only learn if we allow them the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. Do one simple thing to obtain the information needed to recruit and retain good teachers—listen and you shall hear!

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