

**A**s Australia, and many other parts of the world, face a growing shortage of teachers, it is essential that all levels of governments, employing authorities, teacher educators and recruitment bodies better understand the different motivational profiles of those entering teacher education now and why people are not retained in the profession, suffer burnout or become disgruntled less effective teachers.

It is also critical to better understand the link between motivations, self-efficacies and the support networks and strategies needed to sustain teachers in the profession, particularly in difficult to staff regions, districts and schools.

The scale and design of FIT-Choice takes it beyond the province of previous smaller-scale studies. It is the only study in the world that has been able to obtain information from this number of beginning teachers, across several continents, and over this period of time. The project objectives are to:

1. illuminate those support structures that sustain teachers and allow them to thrive;
2. provide clear indications of how and why teachers become disengaged or lose commitment to their work; and
3. map the factors that predict job burnout versus psychological and physiological wellbeing.

Croatia. Cross-cultural comparisons provide wonderful “natural experiments” to contrast the impact of salient cultural features.

For example, teachers in Germany are better paid; and, there is an over-supply of applicants to teacher education in Turkey. We can explore how salary impacts decisions about teaching in Germany vs. Australia, and why teaching seems to be a more attractive career in Turkey.

#### Teaching in a new era

Policy measures designed to increase teacher accountability and provide comparative student achievement data have brought significant changes to teachers’ work. While schools have been given a level of self-managing autonomy, teachers and principals are faced more and more with achievement targets, out-of-class administrative duties and reporting

and intellectual and emotional rewards. Interviewees talked about wanting to “motivate them to learn” and engender “a love of learning”, so that students can “achieve the best that they could do at their own level”, as well as to have “confidence in themselves and in their ability to be able to learn.” These are exactly kinds of goals which ought to bring about optimal teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes.

#### ... and main concerns?

Many participants acknowledged “intense” and “daunting” work pressures, resulting in being “absolutely exhausted” and “stressed” by the competing demands of a heavy workload, too little time, and not being able to “leave work at work”. Main concerns clustered around issues which interact to impact job satisfaction: leadership support, time pressure, relations with parents, and autonomy.

Some spoke about what it meant to work in supportive school environments characterised by engaged leadership, collegiality, and a strong sense of community. Unfortunately, not all schools are supportive. Like other workplaces where there are not good relationships and respect among staff, this can undermine satisfaction and commitment. While individual teachers felt valued by parents and students, they felt that the wider society and media representations sometimes grossly undervalued and misrepresented their work.

#### Surviving and thriving

Within the first five years of teaching, many teachers leave the profession. This has been attributed to low engagement and wellbeing due to work overload, a target-driven culture, student behaviours and discipline. Teaching young people is complex and responsible work; it is very rewarding, but also very challenging.

Teachers who maintain their high motivations in situations where they cannot be attained, are likely to burnout. Under these circumstances teacher motivation is a double-edged sword, which can lead to reduced professional engagement if highly valued goals are not attained. Everyone feels stressed at times at work, the problem comes when we have trouble balancing resources with demands, and when stressors begin to chip away at our health, skills, personal, social, emotional and psychological resources.

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion from chronic work pressure and stress. It has been linked to teacher turnover, low work satisfaction and poor wellbeing. This can lead to dysfunctional teaching behaviours with obvious implications for student learning. Worn out teachers reduce their effort and occupational engagement in order to cope with chronic stressors, and are no longer personally invested in their work.

In contrast, motivated teachers, working in contexts which allow them to achieve their goals, positively promote student motivations and learning. A school climate reflecting feelings of unity, pride, cooperation, acceptance of differences, security, clear shared goals, and a supportive school leadership, promote teacher wellbeing and allow the space and opportunity for skilled and motivated teachers to be effective.

#### Policy implications

FIT-Choice is contributing to practical and policy debate for issues including teacher recruitment, retention, effectiveness, wellbeing, work conditions, and hard-to-staff schools. Policymakers and employers are most likely to be persuaded by cross-context, interdisciplinary, large-scale and longitudinal data, such as we are collecting.

Further information is available at: [www.fitchoice.org](http://www.fitchoice.org) ■

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# FIT-Choice

## Attracting and sustaining ‘fit’ teachers in the profession

By **Helen M.G. Watt** and **Paul W. Richardson**, Monash University.

#### Context and objectives

The Factors Influencing Teaching Choice “FIT-Choice” project was created by Australian researchers Associate Professor Paul Richardson and Associate Professor Helen Watt in 2002, who sampled 1652 commencing preservice teachers, and have been working hard to follow their trajectories since then. Participants provided data at several timepoints, through a mixed-methods design involving extensive surveys, follow-up interviews, and targeted observations. We are grateful to participants, without whom this work would be impossible.

The Australian Research Council began funding this work in 2006, and provided a second round of funding in 2009 to enable it to continue. Despite an insistent policy need for reliable data, there is a dearth of longitudinal studies regarding teachers’ career trajectories. Single timepoint small-scale studies do not allow us to address questions concerned with teachers’ motivations, aspirations and “fit” with their school environments.

#### Locally grown, internationally renowned

Many countries are having difficulties attracting and retaining teachers, especially in the sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, and in rural or remote areas. Beginning teacher attrition is up to one-third higher in disadvantaged schools; the realities of working in such contexts add a layer of significant challenge to the well-established demands of teaching, with the potential to fast-track the development of adverse consequences.

Although prevalence and demographic information is useful for understanding how many, and which, teachers leave the profession, these indicators tell us little about the underlying psychological processes.

FIT-Choice has grown to include collaborators from the U.S., U.K., Turkey, Germany, Switzerland, Canada, Belgium, China, Malaysia, Ireland, Estonia, the Netherlands, West-Indies, India, Kenya, New Zealand, the Philippines, and

requirements that have little to do with the relational work with students which many teachers continue to see as their “real” work. This has begun to create a disjuncture between why teachers want to teach, and the work they are required to spend their time doing.

Teachers who are committed and enjoy their work are able to better provide for their students. But, if teachers perceive pressures from above (e.g., curriculum and performance standards) and below (e.g., demanding students), the implementation of policies designed to improve teacher practice and teacher quality may backfire to promote more controlling teachers, and consequently less autonomous and motivated students.

#### What are teachers’ main goals?

What brings satisfaction and a sense of achievement to teachers and makes them want to stay in the job? FIT-Choice respondents focused on students and their development, enjoyment of developing and delivering the curriculum,