Study reveals beginning teachers have differing career plans

Australia is facing retention difficulties in the teaching profession which will increase staffing and financial burdens on the educational and wider community, according to Monash University researchers.

Dr Paul Richardson and Dr Helen Watt from Monash's Faculty of Education are documenting the experiences of early career teachers to establish their levels of personal wellbeing and professional engagement.

They hope their Australian Research Council funded project will provide valuable evidence to assist government and early career policy makers in supporting early career teachers and reducing attrition from the profession.

In the following article Drs Richardson and Watt discuss their research and reveal some interesting findings about the different planned career trajectories of beginning teachers.

This shows that, across the different cultural settings, there is something ‘cos’ and robust about teachers’ work and characteristics.

We also investigated factors which may deter people from a teaching career.

When commencing teacher education, participants tended to rate teaching as highly demanding but offering low rewards of salary and social status. They also stated others had tried to dissuade them from a teaching career.

It is worth emphasising these new teachers had still chosen teaching as their career – despite clearly recognising its high demand, low reward structures and social status.

It may seem obvious there would be different types of beginning teachers, although this has not previously been examined. We have identified three main types who have different career plans and goals. We call them the ‘highly engaged beginners’ (45%), ‘highly engaged switchers’ (27%) and ‘lower engaged dreamers’ (28%).

Highly engaged beginners mostly intend to spend their entire career in teaching, and score highly in terms of their planned effort, personal development and leadership aspirations.

Highly engaged switchers are more likely to indicate future career goals other than teaching. Nevertheless, their scores for planned effort, personal development and leadership aspirations are similar to those of the highly engaged beginners.

Lower engaged dreamers are the least likely to intend to persist with a career in teaching and have the lowest scores on the planned effort, personal development and leadership dimensions.

Teacher education and employing authorities need to take seriously the different planned career trajectories of people who come into the profession.

The success of our project depends on maintaining contact with participants in the study over the long term. If you were involved in the Fit-Choice program but have lost touch with us, please email your name and contact details to fitchoice@education.monash.edu.

Further information on our research project is available at www.fit-choice.org.

Professional Practice

Teacher education and employing authorities need to take seriously the different planned career trajectories of people who come into the profession.

It is critical we better understand the links between individual motivations, perceived abilities, professional engagement, and the support networks and strategies needed to sustain teachers – particularly in difficult to staff regions, districts and schools.

In an ongoing study we now have data that will allow us to examine the environmental and organisational components of schools that have the potential to impact negatively on teachers’ job demands, perceived stress, and levels of psychological and physical health.

We aim to shed light on the current early career demands associated with the teaching profession, the persistence plans of early career teachers and their general health and wellbeing, and provide a more accurate picture of why people remain in or leave the teaching profession.

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