

Quality Education: Critical Policy Considerations that Impact Teacher Retention in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are a critical factor in quality education. They contribute to the academic development and socialisation of students, and school improvement. Schools that attract and retain quality teachers can facilitate attainment of these broader educational goals. Teacher retention in education systems and schools entails the development of policies and practices to attract and retain high-quality teachers and leaders. It is not just about keeping teachers in schools, but also reducing attrition, especially among beginning teachers. If good teachers are to remain in the teaching profession and work best to support learners, they must have an endearing and supporting working environment that recognises and promotes their effort in multiple ways. In this paper, which employs a desk review research methodology, we review relevant research literature to identify key policy factors that affect teacher retention in schools and propose policy and practice recommendations that can minimise attrition in education systems, including special lessons for Ghana. Additionally, we define quality education and argue for increasing teacher retention and decreasing attrition.

Keywords: Policy Factors, Teacher Attrition, Teacher Retention, Quality Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

The role of teachers in schools is critical to the academic, learning, and social development of students. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017, p. 34) claim that “among in-school factors, teachers have the greatest direct impact on student learning”. Edwards *et al.* (2018) argued that “a principal’s impact on student learning is second only to that of a classroom teacher” (p. 1). Teachers, as the most important resource in schools, are central to school improvement efforts (OECD, 2011). We assert that teachers with demonstrable knowledge, skills, and attitudes, or the capacity to lead student learning, contribute to quality education and should be retained in schools.

Contextual factors such as school characteristics and teacher demographics can influence whether teachers stay in schools, move to different schools, or leave the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Nguyen *et al.*, 2019; Pivovarova, & Powers, 2022). As an international issue, teacher retention is conceptualised to include all activities and programs initiated at the school and system level to prevent good teachers from leaving the teaching profession for the wrong reasons (Kelchtermans, 2017). It concerns developing policies to attract and retain high-quality teachers and leaders, especially in low-performing schools (McLaurin *et al.*, 2009).

Kelchtermans (2017) succinctly define retention as keeping teachers in teaching. Teacher retention thus involves attracting, enticing, motivating, and empowering teachers to stay in teaching rather than leaving for other higher-paying jobs or travelling elsewhere in search of greener pastures.

The gamut of this paper is teacher retention and quality education. It also encompasses policy considerations and recommendations aimed at promoting teacher retention and minimising attrition. We first define quality education.

II. QUALITY EDUCATION

Quality and inclusive education for all underpin a range of fundamental development drivers (SDG 4, UN, 2016). Quality education would suffer if there was no significant increase in the supply of qualified teachers by 2030. Quality education focuses much on teaching, and not school facilities. This claim attempts not to diminish the invaluable role of school facilities or learning environment (structural quality), but we believe disinterested, disengaged, and demotivated teachers (process quality) can counter quality teaching and learning. Nafukho and Muyia (2021) explain that quality education is the kind of education schools provide that stresses the essence of focusing on five quality elements: quality learners, quality learning environment, quality

content, quality processes, and quality outcomes. However, without considerations to teachers' working conditions, inclusive of salary, working hours, retirement age and benefits and social benefits as well as availability of teaching resources and class size, this can impact teachers' commitment and motivation for student teaching and learning. As Brill and McCartney (2008) said, low salaries and a lack of critical support in areas like professional development and induction programs make teachers more likely to leave the teaching field. Quality teachers matter highly, which draws attention to issues of attrition and retention, particularly the need to understand the factors and conditions that contribute to teachers leaving or remaining in the teaching profession.

III. TEACHER ATTRITION AND QUALITY EDUCATION

Teacher attrition and its twin concept, teacher retention, impact quality education (Harris *et al.*, 2019). Teacher attrition means teachers switching schools from non-metropolitan areas or leaving the teaching profession altogether (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019; Mason & Matas, 2015). For Cooper and Alvarado (2006), attrition refers to leaving the teaching field, either to take another job outside of teaching, for personal reasons such as child rearing, health problems, family moves, and retirement. Broadly, Billingsley (2004) identified three types of attrition, namely teachers leaving the teaching profession, teachers transferring to other teaching positions, and teachers leaving to educational positions. Attrition means an exit from the teacher labour force (Pivovarova & Powers, 2022).

Some authors argue teacher attrition has potential benefits (James & Wyckoff, 2020) because it is a mechanism through which teachers gain a variety of experience, new ideas and talents are brought into schools, and productive teacher-school matches are formed. Conversely, teacher attrition imposes cost burdens on schools and education districts from which teachers depart, affecting not only a country's budget but also the social and academic outcomes of its citizens (Harris *et al.*, 2019; Mason & Matas, 2015; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). These burdens can take the form of recruiting, hiring, and training costs (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Teachers who leave schools may also create additional workloads for their former colleagues and replacement costs for schools and districts (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). It is costly for education systems and schools to lose knowledgeable, skilled, and committed teachers, so education leaders should understand the factors enabling attrition (Harris *et al.*, 2019).

IV. WHY TEACHERS LEAVE OR NOT?

Teachers leave education systems, schools, and teaching or not for several reasons. This makes considerations of teacher attrition and retention worthwhile. Studies show that teachers leave the profession due to job dissatisfaction associated with low salaries, lack of administrative support, lack of student motivation, student discipline issues and lack of teacher influence over decision making (Ingersoll, 2001). In a study, Podolsky *et al.* (2019, p. 6) identified in order of significance,

nine factors to explain why teachers leave: (1) Personal life reasons, including pregnancy and childcare; (2) Pursuit of a position other than that of a K-12 teacher (3) Dissatisfaction with school assessment and the effects of accountability measures on their teaching or curriculum; (4) Dissatisfaction with the school's administration; (5) Dissatisfaction with teaching as a career; (6) Dissatisfaction with support preparing students for assessments; (7) The need for a higher salary; (8) Lack of influence over school policies and practices; and (9) Lack of autonomy over the classroom.

Effort at addressing attrition is a way of retaining teachers and improving the quality of teaching. The factors that engender teacher retention revolve around issues of policy, organisational setting, and social/cognitive well-being of teachers (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). It is critical that we unpack the policy factors that influence teachers' retention or departure from the field, and how these impact on educational quality. Why promote teacher retention?

V. TEACHER RETENTION AND QUALITY EDUCATION

Teacher retention is an important education phenomenon, which is often associated with the quality of education (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Edwards *et al.*, 2018; Kelchtermans, 2017; Holmes *et al.*, 2019; Podolsky *et al.*, 2019). Holmes *et al.* (2019) noted that teacher retention is an issue of continuous concern but does not have a one-size-fits-all solution and approach, so individual schools must work purposely and distinctively based on peculiar local contexts to devise tailored plans to retain its good teachers. Teacher retention is a key determiner in a school's learning environment and student achievement (McLaurin *et al.*, 2009). One critical educational argument supporting the need to retain teachers is to promote continuity of essential and valued school development processes such as building and maintaining a particular school culture, reflecting a shared normative view on what counts as important educational values, norms, and goals for schools to achieve (Kelchtermans, 2017). Developing a sense of collective responsibility as a school team contributes to a school's quality as a powerful learning environment (Kelchtermans, 2017; McLaurin *et al.*, 2009).

Teacher retention plays an important role in enabling school performance. Nonetheless, it has become a source of concern for schools and educational systems around the world. McLaurin *et al.* (2009) consider this a crisis. Teacher retention poses an even greater threat to successful student outcomes (Holmes *et al.*, 2019). Based on its relation to school performance and quality education, it is imperative to address concerns and issues about teacher retention in schools. It is believed that addressing teachers' concerns will go a long way towards ensuring their retention in the teaching profession and their ability to contribute to student learning and academic achievement. Although some teachers are innately interested in teaching and will never leave, regardless of policy issues or other working conditions, educational researchers have conducted a number of studies to gain a better understanding of teacher retention and its multiple antecedents and factors.

VI. POLICY FACTORS: FACILITATING OR INHIBITING TEACHER RETENTION

The policy context is useful in analysing teacher retention and attrition. Towers and Maguire (2017) found that the policy environment influences teacher attrition decisions and that the normative pressure of a performance-driven environment has an impact on teacher professional identity. They further observed that the policy context fosters tensions and conflicts between the personal and professional lives of teachers, as this culminates in accountability pressure, an increased workload and imbalance between teachers' private and professional life. For Ball (2003), the increasing manifestations of the 'terrors of performativity' in many countries strongly impact teachers' work lives and eventually their decision to leave. Intensified work and high stakes testing, accountability procedures and pressures, and the obsessive and exclusive concern with instrumental issues of effectivity and efficiency (Kelchtermans, 2017) impact teachers' decision to leave teaching.

Extant studies in Australia, Norway and USA identify other policy issues influencing teacher retention. In Australia, teachers complained about increased sense of surveillance, lack of trust and non-payment of extra workload in their schools (Gallant & Riley, 2017). Same in Australia, Mason and Matas (2015) identified school-based procedures, processes, and policies, particularly regarding teachers' schedules, subject appointments, and the nature of classroom roles and routines, as influencing teacher retention and attrition rates. In a Norwegian study, Smith and Ulvik (2017) noted that teachers were critical of the driving policy logic in education and schooling, although the policies were less related to their teaching in classrooms. Policy factors, including lack of teacher preparation, absence of stress management skills, non-supporting environment, and administrators have specifically been found to impact teacher retention in the US (MacLaurin et al., 2009). In the United States of America (USA), The No Child Left Behind Policy accountability factors also contribute to teacher retention decision (Matthews, 2003). Jackson et al., (2019) outline policy factors that support teacher retention, including supportive leadership, professional development that is aligned with present teaching contexts, and reduced teaching loads.

One pressing issue facing policymakers, according to Podolsky et al. (2019), is how to recruit and staff classrooms with a stable teaching force capable of responding to complex student needs and the growing demands of the knowledge economy. Examining factors that influence teachers' decisions to enter, stay in or leave the teaching profession in general and specifically in high-need schools, the authors identified policy factors including salaries and compensation; preparation and costs to entry; hiring and personnel management; induction and support for new teachers; and working conditions including school leadership, professional collaboration and shared decision-making, accountability systems, and resources for teaching and learning. The effects of these policy decisions in the education system either facilitate or hinder teacher retention.

Researchers (Ingersoll, 2001a) over the last two decades have investigated the impact of teacher turnover and identified mixed consequences on teacher retention. In a

positive sense, Mobley (1982 cited in Mancuso et al., 2010) "maintains turnover disrupts poor performances, facilitates innovation, adds flexibility and adaptation, and ultimately creates a positive psyche because those who are unhappy are allowed to withdraw from an organisation" (p. 307). However, revealing the negative consequences of teacher turnover, Mancuso et al. (2010) note that teacher turnover has a variety of effects on student learning in schools. Ingersoll (2001b) and Darling-Hammond (2003) explained that high rates of teacher turnover can disrupt the quality of school performance and student learning outcomes. Organisational effectiveness can be disrupted if key individuals depart from the organisation. In the school setting, Mancuso et al. (2010) assert that the loss of key teachers or administrators can cause a loss of continuity to programs that can disrupt the work of a school.

Some researchers (Ingersoll, 2001a) reiterate the importance of teacher continuity and quality instructional programs in school settings as the essence of teacher retention. Because the negative impact of teacher attrition far outweighs the positives, there is the need to tackle the issue of teacher retention at the policy level. We argue that when governments, education systems, and schools propose policy solutions to address retention, they must be tactful because these can have an impact on other contextual factors such as teacher motivation, which affect teacher retention. As Mancuso et al. (2010) emphasise "curtailing teacher turnover to limit the purported negative effects on student achievement is of considerable importance to schools in the USA and abroad" (p. 307), including Ghana.

Ghana's current education and policy provide a context to situate and discuss issues about teacher retention, attrition, and quality education. As Boateng (2019) points out, teacher attrition rate in Ghana is high. Baah et al. (2009) found that about two-thirds of teachers were unhappy with their jobs and often abandoned their posts. According to a Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT) report, nearly 10,000 teachers leave the classroom each year to pursue other careers (GNAT, 2009). Issues such as trained teacher exam and licensure, extended teaching period, double track system for senior high schools, poor conditions of service and salary structures, poor image and prestige of the teaching profession and interrupted academic calendars are critical policy factors that impact teacher attrition rates and readily require special attention (Baah et al., 2009; Effah & Osei-Owusu, 2014; Cobbold, 2015). We believe teacher attrition is not fixed and can vary due to differing school level and system factors. Because teachers or individuals that are attracted to take up teaching positions remain in them (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012), it is necessary policies are directed at improving the retention of teachers in classrooms, school districts, and the education system for enhanced education quality. As Billingsley (2004) alerts, attrition is a major contributor to teacher shortages; therefore, efforts to improve retention must be informed by a contextual understanding of what policy factors and conditions contribute to attrition and retention.

VII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHER RETENTION: WHAT GHANA CAN LEARN AND DO

Obviously, teacher attrition affects teaching quality and quality of teachers in education systems and schools worldwide, including Ghana. To improve teacher retention, it is imperative to resolve policy issues promoting teacher attrition (Jackson *et al.*, 2019; Wronowski & Urlick, 2019). Policy strategies, including conditions of service, salary and compensation, teacher preparation and support, effective leadership, reasonable class size and lessening the ‘certificationalisation’ of teaching are useful to attract and retain teachers in education systems and schools. These strategies can mitigate the policy factors driving teachers from schools and help to improve the teacher workforce (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Edwards *et al.*, 2018; Jackson *et al.*, 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017; Podolsky *et al.*, 2019). We believe that these teacher retention strategies are timely for Ghana, given the government’s and Ministry of Education’s efforts to strengthen policy issues such as teacher licensing, free senior high school, and the promotion of a national teacher standards policy framework (MOE, 2017).

A. Enhanced Salary, Compensation, and Incentives

In lieu of economic trends, the base salary for all teachers must be substantial, appreciable, and competitive to attract and retain teachers in the profession. Increasing teachers’ pay would enable them to comfortably support themselves and their families, and meet other pressing demands (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers’ compensation must be statutory since they interact with children and parents with varied health conditions. Salaries must include compensation for health risks and other potential dangers associated with their work. Risk factor in teachers’ pay must cater for major and minor health conditions teachers are exposed to. COVID-19 is an example of a significant risk for which teachers must be compensated.

Special and practical incentives, offered timeously, must be given to teachers in remote or hard to staff areas (MacLaurin *et al.*, 2009). Social recognition and respect for teachers can enhance the image and status of the teaching profession because teachers often feel that their work is undervalued. Numerous studies concur that teachers historically cherished status, recognition, and prestige in developing countries, including Ghana, have waned, or ceased (Colthan, 2002; Iiiya & Ifeoma, 2015). Housing incentives for teachers is also proposed. For equity, inclusion and fairness, promotion should be based on years of service and merit, and a national policy on salaries and incentives that recognise risk factors must be sanctioned across the education system. Government must fully implement a uniform promotion system and salary policy as extra incentive and motivation to retain teachers. Because teaching is a demanding profession, low pay can leave teachers feeling undervalued and contribute to their attrition (Jackson *et al.*, 2019).

B. Teacher Preparation, Learning, and Support

The retention of teachers can be enhanced and sustained with effective teacher preparation, learning, and ongoing support. High-quality teacher education programs that meet

national standards must be designed for preparing teachers and sensitizing them to stay in the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Training must offer teachers knowledge, skills, and competence to enable them to succeed in the teaching profession. As a systemic and school policy, ongoing professional development activities and opportunities using blended learning approaches must be availed to teachers. Training should be commensurate with teachers’ contexts and classroom needs (Jackson *et al.*, 2019). The government can implement teacher preparation programs such as teacher residency and grow your own to attract more teachers. Teacher residency programs ensure teachers are trained for high-needs schools under the guidance and supervision of master teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). These programs define teachers’ academic progression and are useful in recruiting teachers for subjects for high-need communities. The grow your own model should involve creating a pool of potential teachers by recruiting high school students, paraprofessionals, after-school program staff, or other local community members into teaching. This model can potentially attract locally trained teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) and ensure their communities take up teaching positions. Research-based teacher induction programs provided at the school level to support and protect new teachers in the field are critical (MacLaurin *et al.*, 2009; Podolsky *et al.*, 2017).

To ensure sustenance and patronage, the government should offer financial packages such as service scholarships and low-interest loans for teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teachers could be bonded to ensure they serve a minimum of five years, and appropriate stipends and other allowances must be paid to teachers can encourage them to attend training programs and engage in agentive activities to augment their professionalism. Teachers that choose to work in high-need, low-performing schools should be renumerated.

C. Effective and Sustained Leadership

Effective school leadership is a crucial lever for providing high-quality support to teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Solid leadership from school leaders can play essential roles to foster teacher retention and lessen attrition rates (Holmes *et al.*, 2019). Governments must collaborate with higher education institutions to train cutting-edge educational leaders capable of providing leadership support for teachers to thrive and remain in the profession. Specifically, there must be rigorous training programs, accreditation, and principalship standards that are aligned with research on effective school leadership. This is expected to ensure school leaders have the knowledge and capacity to coordinate mentoring and professional learning of teachers and nurture conducive school settings and ethos that encourage teacher retention. Principals are key agents that create a stimulating environment for teaching and learning, so their leadership matters. Thus, it is advantageous to have capable principals in place to foster a culture of trust and belongingness, which can improve teacher satisfaction and retention.

To promote school leadership across the nation, districts and schools must be guided by national policies to recruit the right calibre of principals to enter leadership positions. Such leaders should possess the skills required to nurture positive school environments such as collaborating and working with teachers to identify their needs and providing appropriate support and opportunities for them to succeed in the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Principals, as gatekeepers, can buffer or filter policy influences from outside the school, so they should foster supportive environments for professional learning, feedback, reflection, and job satisfaction, which are critical for promoting teacher retention (Coldwell, 2016).

D. Reduced Accountability Measures

Policies that place enormous strain and stress on teachers in the field can be detrimental to their health and well-being, must be revised. Stress and anxiety associated with increased accountability requirements have been identified as a major cause of teacher attrition decisions (Kelchtermans, 2017; Towers & Maguire, 2017; Wronowski, & Urlick, 2019). Having an appropriate and manageable teaching assignment can ignite the success and satisfaction of teachers (Johnson, 2006). In some cases, pressure mounts on teachers because they are assigned tasks out of their subject areas, have split assignments that prove unworkable, or are responsible for excessively large teaching loads or classes.

The normative performativity-driven environment in which teachers work must be reduced to prevent unnecessary tensions and conflicts between teachers' personal and professional lives (Towers & Maguire, 2017). There is a need to minimise policies resulting in intensified work and high-stakes testing, accountability procedures, and pressure (Kelchtermans, 2017). Dealing with complaints about increased surveillance, lack of trust, and non-payment of extra workload in schools is also necessary to reduce dissatisfaction and attrition among teachers (Gallant & Riley, 2017). Necessarily, governments and education departments should involve stakeholders, particularly teachers, principals, and other school staff in formulating policies regarding accountability measures and teaching requirements.

E. Reasonable Class Size

It is beneficial to have policies requiring standard or reduced class sizes. Maintaining a manageable class size can serve as a motivator and increase teachers' proclivity to attend to the individual needs of students in the classroom (Ackah-Jnr & Fluckiger, 2021). Class size, a key element of workload and teaching assignments, has implications for teacher satisfaction, student learning, and quality education (Ackah-Jnr & Fluckiger, 2021; Johnson, 2006). Smaller class sizes can improve student achievement and interaction and lower attrition rates for schools (Johnson, 2006). According to research, large classes contribute to teacher dissatisfaction and complaints about the difficulties associated with teaching all children in schools. While attempts to reduce class sizes in developing countries such as Ghana exist, implementing free compulsory universal Basic Education stands in the way. The government must fund class-size reduction policies, such as hiring more teacher aides or supporting teachers to assist teaching and classroom management.

F. Lessen the 'Certificationalisation' of Teaching

As a major policy consideration, we propose the need to soften the 'certificationalisation' of teachers and teaching in developing countries, particularly Ghana. Debates exist as to whether teachers with high qualifications have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to meet the needs of all learners and stay in schools. New teachers with high qualifications may not have the dedication, experience, stamina, or passion to remain long in teaching. High teacher attrition rates, especially among new teachers, are evident with teachers with high qualifications. However, researchers claim that there is no empirical research documenting the value of existing entry requirements, licensing, or certifications (Ingersoll et al., 2014). The content and substance of teacher preparation programs and experience on the field is what matters when it comes to teacher retention.

Blending more qualified and certificated teachers with less qualified but experienced and dedicated teachers can be a cost-saving mechanism for governments and education ministries to sustain quality education. This approach is feasible because the learning and development of teachers must be viewed as an 'unending journey', where they transform and acquire new knowledge, skills, and attitudes or gain competencies to further enrich their professionalism and effectiveness in practice. This does not occur in a single dash. As teachers develop expertise, their return to experience grows over time (Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; Papay & Kraft, 2015) and they are less likely to leave teaching (Papay et al., 2017).

We do not deny that teacher education institutions produce high-quality teachers, particularly in high-demand subjects (OECD, 2011). But an education system with an appetite to employ only teachers with so-called 'high qualifications, for example, masters and bachelor to man teaching at the Basic Education level, may not yield the expected quality and retention outcomes. The large over-supply of qualified teachers in Ghana (OECD, 2011), does not mean they can readily replace those who have come through with years of experience and professional training. Doing so can be knee-jerk thinking and an exclusive and limiting approach to attracting and retaining a quality teaching workforce in schools. Such orientation can result in high prioritization of 'qualifications' over experience and is counterproductive for enhancing quality education. To play good music, white and black keys must blend. Teacher experience is a central factor in teacher attrition. Attrition is significantly higher among less experienced teachers (Pivovarov & Powers, 2022). Because experienced teachers have already invested their time and possibly forgone other employment opportunities, they may be less likely to leave than less experienced teachers.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Concerns about teacher attrition and retention are not unique to Ghana. These two key dichotomous terms, teacher attrition and teacher retention, are critical areas for schools and education systems worldwide because they affect educational quality and student attainment outcomes. We note that retaining teachers can critically ensure those that are

knowledgeable, skilled, and committed remain in our schools and education systems. Teachers stay and teach more effectively in schools, which is a foundation of quality education, especially when they are motivated and work in an environment that promotes teaching and learning. National and departmental policy issues, in addition to teachers' work settings and their social/cognitive personal well-being, impact retention and attrition rates. Policy factors critically impact teacher retention as they define government philosophy, resources, and support for teachers, schools, and the education system as a whole. However, these national, school, and teacher-level policy recommendations are interdependent and synergistically reinforcing. Implementing these recommended practices simultaneously can help to mitigate the factors that drive teacher attrition and contribute to the stabilisation of the teaching force in countries, including Ghana. But this must carefully consider local school and district contexts for desired and tailored outcomes.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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