

Retain Teachers by Listening To Their Wants and Needs

Katherine A. O'Connor
East Carolina University

Abstract

This research study investigated the wants and needs of upper elementary (grades 3-5) teachers to distinguish what makes them successful and satisfied in their current positions. When people are satisfied and feel success at their workplace, they are more willingly to stay in their position. Wants and needs can be perceived differently; however, for this research wants and needs will be treated as the same. This blended research study included a random, stratified, sample.

Introduction

Ten years ago I was a first year teacher in North Carolina. I taught a first and second grade multiage class in a quaint town called Hillsborough. Each time I left the monthly grade level meetings my principal would ask our team, "What do you need? What is on your wish list?" Questions like these gave us an opportunity to express our wants and needs. Yes, of course, there were some needs that the principal could not meet, like higher pay, but there was always an effort and follow-up on his behalf. For example, even though he could not raise our salaries, he would pass along information about National Board Certification and Masters Degree programs. On the other hand, there were many needs that he was able to meet. When I needed a piece of children's literature for a lesson, I would find the book in my mailbox or added to the library list for everyone's use the following week. And that is why I stayed. Someone was listening to what I wanted and needed to be more successful and satisfied in my job. But more importantly, someone asked me in the first place! This article describes some of the wants and needs of third, fourth and fifth grade teachers in North Carolina. When was the last time you listened to a teacher's wants and needs? More significantly, when was the last time you asked a teacher what he/she wanted or needed to be more successful in his/her current position?

Purpose of the Study

It is vital to all children being taught and children who are yet to enter schools that we nurture and retain dynamic and committed teachers who think systematically about their practice. This is a changing environment: technological innovations, increased standardized testing, more working parents/guardians and a more diverse population to teach. The wants and needs of teachers should be heard to enhance the overall teaching and learning experience in every school. Listening to and documenting teachers' wants and needs gives the teaching profession the respect it deserves, improves the working environment and helps retain teachers before a teaching shortage crisis

begins. Dr. Kathy Sullivan from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction confirmed that over 90,000 teachers will be needed in North Carolina in the next ten years (Dagenhart, 2002; Petty, 2002; Sullivan, 2001). Not only are we losing veteran teachers, we are losing beginning teachers at an alarming rate as well (Konanc, 1996). According to McCoy (2003) beginning secondary teachers are leaving because of low salary, job demands, stress, immense workloads, and school working conditions including a lack of administrative support. Teacher recruitment and retention are receiving a lot of attention. Additional reasons that make this study inherently important to educators, administrators, professors, Boards of Educations, policy makers, parents and state pre-service programs include: teacher shortage issues, retirement issues, turnover issues and increased enrollment issues (Broad, 1999).

The survey instrument used in this investigation allowed teachers a voice to express their wants and needs to the educational community and policy makers. Nationwide, according to prior studies, 75% of teachers are not satisfied with the administrative support they receive in their schools, 50% are not satisfied with their professional lives and 40% are not satisfied with their salaries (Orsini & Day, 2001; Sclan, 1993). Previous research completed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reported that North Carolina teachers wanted and needed higher salaries, reduced class sizes, increased allocated planning time and respect as professionals. (Day, Yarbrough, & Brader-Araje, 1997).

Sample

This study utilized a random, stratified sample of 800 North Carolina teachers. The sample was stratified by National Board Certification and region of the state. An equal number (n=400) of National Board Certified and non-National Board Certified teachers were selected from separate sampling frames. Four hundred teachers were randomly selected from the all National Board Certified Middle Childhood Generalist teachers in the state. An equal number of third, fourth and fifth grade teachers (n=400) were randomly sampled from a frame of all eligible teachers provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Quantitative Findings

Administrative Needs

Almost all surveyed teachers shared similar administrative support needs. An important need was defined as one that received a “4” or “5=Contributes Significantly” rating on the Likert scale used on the survey. The following needs were rated a “4” or “5” (5=“Contributes Significantly”) by 90% or more of teachers who responded to the item:

- Safe environment for teaching and learning 95%
n=350
- More quality time in the classroom 91%
n=336
- Adequate materials and supplies 91%
n=349

- More planning time 90%
n=349

Other needs that were also considered important to most respondents included the following: smaller class size (88%), fewer/more efficient meetings (87%), less interruptions (85%), and increased salary (83%). Respondents were more evenly split on how important a telephone in the classroom or an office was in meeting their needs as a teaching professional.

Parental/Home Environment Needs

Not surprisingly, a strikingly high percent of teachers indicated a rating of a “4” or “5=Contributes Significantly” for parental support for the teacher (90%), students come to school well-rested and fed (90%), and respect as a professional have high percentages (89%). These aforementioned results send the message that teachers need and want support from parents, guardians and family in the areas of supporting decisions and activities, making sure children are well fed and rested at home, and providing simple respect to the teacher.

Professional Development Needs

While some professional needs were fairly common across the surveyed upper elementary school teachers, there appeared to be more variability in professional development needs as compared to the administrative needs discussed previously. The five professional development needs that were mentioned as contributing significantly or rated a “4” or “5” by more than 3 out of 4 respondents were the following:

- Direct experiences as a teacher 89%
n=355
- Teacher control of topics, needs and time 82%
n=357
- Teacher control of professional development 78%
n=358
- Time to meet with support group of teachers 78%
n=356
- Technology training 78%
n=358

A substantial majority of the surveyed teachers also reported that professional conferences/workshops, information about the latest curriculum innovations, and graduate courses in their field of specialization were important needs. These professional development opportunities were rated a “4” or “5” by 75%, 74%, and 69% of respondents respectively.

Professional and Personal Characteristics

Teachers in general identified with a number of the professional characteristics that were listed in the survey instrument. Respondents almost uniformly rated the following characteristics as a “4” or “5=Describes Accurately”:

- Committed to ongoing professional growth and development 98%
n=356
- Committed to ongoing personal growth and development 97%
n=356
- Task oriented about my work 90%
n=357
- Passionate and enthusiastic about my work 91%
n=358
- Self-reflective 89%
n=357

Three other characteristics that many surveyed teachers also felt accurately described their professional or personal life, included: work long hours (87%), feel productive (86%), and have a personal spiritual relationship that is based on faith (86%).

Teachers tended to share a number of common personal characteristics as well. Almost all teachers, more than 90% of those who responded to the item, tended to rate themselves a “4” or “5=Describes Accurately” on four characteristics:

- Caring 98%
n=347
- Cooperative 96%
n=357
- Focused 94%
n=357
- Sense of Humor 92%
n=358

Flexible, resourceful, and independent were three other characteristics that most surveyed teachers also felt accurately described them. The percent of teachers self-reporting a “4” or “5” for these items was 90%, 89% and 89% respectively. On the other hand, surveyed upper elementary school teachers on the whole did not identify with a few personality traits such as low-key, compulsive and shy.

Qualitative Findings

A brief set of open-ended questions were included in the self-administered questionnaire. Surveyed teachers were asked the following: “Overall, list your three most important professional needs as a teacher.” It should be noted that since respondents were asked for three needs, they may be counted more than once in the count of responses. The most commonly mentioned answers by the teachers were the following:

1. Professional Development Opportunities

2. More Planning Time
3. Administrative Support
4. Adequate Materials, Supplies and Resources
5. More Time for Teaching (i.e. Decrease in Paperwork, Fewer Interruptions) ranked fifth for the National Board Certified Teachers and Higher Salary ranked fifth for the non-National Board Certified Teachers

Professional Development Opportunities

Professional development was the number one mentioned professional need. Upon further examination of written responses that addressed the need for professional development opportunities, four trends related to professional development emerged. Teachers wanted (1) quality staff development, (2) control/choice in staff development, (3) technology training as part of their staff development and (4) time and funding for graduate work.

Teachers mentioned repeatedly that they need “useful,” “valuable,” “quality” and “meaningful” staff development. Others said they did not want to waste their time in workshops that did not apply to them. More specifically, one respondent cited the need for the “removal of inconsequential CEU workshops” and another wanted to see fewer “workshops not applicable to teaching.” Teacher time is precious. Teachers do not want their time wasted on bureaucratic issues or bandwagon workshops. Teachers want to be able to learn new ideas applicable to their teaching and be given time to implement these fresh innovations in their classrooms.

Teachers commented that they wanted choice in their staff development activities. A teacher said, “I want to pick my staff development.” Other teachers’ comments were “I want the ability to choose staff development vs. cookie cutter (development) that we all must attend,” “I want control of (my) professional development,” and “give us choice on what staff development is needed.” If given choice, teachers requested the following kinds of staff development, “training about special needs students in the classroom,” “time to observe other professionals,” “time to observe seasoned teachers,” “workshops related to testing reading,” “classroom management skills,” “differentiation strategies,” “learning styles,” and “language/cultural training.”

A number of surveyed teachers reported a need professional development in the area of technology. Teachers identified needing “in-house technology training,” “more time for technology training” and more opportunities “to attend technology workshops.” Technology is an area in which teachers feel they need support, help and more time to develop their skills to be able to effectively utilize technology in the classroom.

Teachers were interested in opportunities for professional development in the area of graduate coursework. They wanted “graduate courses,” “financial assistance for furthering your career,” “time off to study,” “financial support and time for graduate work,” “time for graduate work in areas of specialization,” and to “have state funded

credit hours apply to a higher degree.” Given time and funding or reimbursement for graduate school opportunities, teachers would have choice about which courses they want to take and when to take them. In addition, teachers would be able to continue teaching and be able to bring what they learn into the classroom while earning credit hours toward a higher degree that would advance their careers professionally.

More Planning Time

More planning time, protected planning time and uninterrupted planning time were listed over and over again when teachers were asked about their most important professional needs. As discussed in the quantitative section, when asked to rate the importance of more planning time, this item received a “4” or “5=Contributes Significantly” by 90% of all the respondents. Teachers want time to plan lessons and gather the materials for their lessons. Comments about the need for additional planning time included, “we need time to plan and integrate ideas from workshops into lessons,” “we need time to plan meaningful learning activities,” and “we need more time to plan and prepare without having to take so much home to do.” One teacher bluntly stated that “planning time in elementary schools is nil.” Two teachers each mentioned that they only have three 45-minute planning periods per week. “I spend hours after 3:00pm working. I don’t need more time away from my students, but ways to efficiently utilize every minute with them or without them.” Teachers asked for “protected” planning time that they could have without interruptions and without scheduled meetings. Based on feedback provided by survey respondents, it is clear that planning time needs to be seen as and treated as sacred time for teachers to consult, evaluate, prepare and assess lessons for students and there should be an administrative effort to give teachers quality protected planning time every day of the week.

Administrative Support

The third most commonly mentioned professional need was administrative support. The most frequently cited type of support needed was for discipline issues. Teachers stated that they needed “back up on discipline and with parents,” “consistent consequences for disciplinary problems,” “guaranteed discipline from office,” “support with discipline,” “discipline enforced,” and one teacher highlighted the need for a “discipline system to get extremely difficult students out of class.” Teachers also felt that administrative support was needed for the following: new ideas, efforts, recognition, supplies, materials, professional development, academic decisions and support with students who are academically low functioning. Teachers clearly look for strong, effective and organized administrations. One teacher wanted an administrator “that philosophically understands and supports my teaching and methods.” Another teacher commented that she wanted “classes equally created. I have 11 repeaters (and I) have on the kitchen table an application for a job not in education.”

Some teachers remarked that they were frustrated with their administrators, “lack of administrative support, low morale at work place,” “I’m not planning to leave, but if I did it would be because my LEA doesn’t support us. We have a ridiculous dress code

and (12) early dismissal days are a waste,” “incompetent central office do nothings,” “I don’t believe administration has any idea the amount of non-teaching duties they’ve assigned,” and “more professional treatment from administrators.” Conversely, other teachers felt supported by administrators, “My administration, at the local and county level, are as supportive as the state will allow them to be,” “We have great support from the superintendent down,” “I have A+ support from my principal which makes me care and want to do my best teaching,” and “My administrators are extremely supportive and have created a happy, safe school environment.”

Obviously, teachers look toward their administrators for assistance in discipline, parent involvement, staff development, teaching methods, academic decisions and positive recognition for efforts. Telephone interviews also yielded comments about the need for administrative support. One telephone interviewee stated that principals have gotten so wrapped up in their paperwork and their responsibilities for closing the gap that they forget to see what the individual teacher is going through. Support from the administration can play a role in classroom, student and teacher success.

Adequate Materials, Supplies and Resources

The fourth most frequently mentioned professional need was adequate materials and supplies. Repeatedly, teachers said they needed funds, current materials and technology resources. Respondents’ funding comments included the following: “I spent my own money on copies at times,” “I need funds,” “Money for texts,” “Money for adequate supplies,” and “Money to do projects.” While commenting on funding, teachers also referred to the need for appropriate materials, including “more up-to-date books and resources,” “current child friendly materials,” “access to up-to-date materials,” “access to new materials” and “resources congruent to curriculum changes.”

Technology tends to be a key part of the conversation when the issue of adequate materials and supplies was discussed. “Computers that work,” “access to computers in the classroom,” “adequate technology equipment,” “a phone” and “a technology teacher” were all specific technology needs that surveyed teachers noted. With a push in North Carolina for differentiated instruction, teachers seem to be looking for a variety of materials to meet the needs of all children. These qualitative data results sustain the quantitative result on the first question of the survey regarding adequate materials and supplies. As mentioned earlier, nine out of 10 of all respondents marked the Likert item, “adequate materials and supplies” with a “4” or “5=Contributes Significantly.”

More Time for Teaching and Higher Salary

For the fifth item that was the most frequently mentioned a difference does occur between National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) and non-National Board Certified Teachers (non-NBCTs). Board Certified teachers said they wanted more teaching time and less paperwork, whereas non-Board Certified teachers said higher salary was an important professional need. It is important to note that these differences may be

particular to the group of respondents surveyed in this study. Another study might produce different results.

The need for more teaching time and less administrative paperwork was conveyed by NBCTs in the following responses: “less red tape,” “quality time in the classroom,” “more emphasis on constructivist or student centered learning,” and “more focus, we try to do too much so learning isn’t deep, it’s scattered.” During one of the telephone interviews, one of the Board Certified teachers said, “I think there either needs to be less paperwork or more time to get paperwork completed because I don’t like taking my academic time.” Another Board Certified teacher summed it up this way, “leave me alone in the classroom with children and supplies.”

While reporting on the need for a reduction in administrative paperwork seemed to be particularly prevalent among NBCTs, a subgroup of non-NBCTs were concerned about another issue, salary. Two comments cited often were a “salary competitive with other professionals with college degrees,” and “a salary commensurate to other professions related to the importance of the job.” In North Carolina, Board Certified teachers receive a 12% raise affixed to each annual salary for ten years, the length of the initial certification. Although, several Board Certified teachers cited higher salary too, this may be a reason that salary appeared slightly more often among responses from non-Board Certified Teachers.

Reasons for Leaving the Teaching Profession

Another open-ended question asked, “If you plan to leave within 5 years, list the 3 most important reasons for your decision.”

- | | |
|---|-----|
| • Salary/Benefits
n=216 | 41% |
| • Job Demands/ Stress
n=216 | 38% |
| • Retirement
n=216 | 26% |
| • Increased Standardized Testing
n=216 | 19% |
| • Behavior of Students
n=216 | 14% |
| • Lack of Respect
n=216 | 14% |
| • Lack of Administrative Support
n=216 | 13% |

The salary/benefits and overly demanding nature of the job were the top reasons most often given by teachers who planned to leave the profession. Teachers focused on the stress and the low salary as they commented, “daily stress is not what I should be feeling,” “stress is very prevalent,” “frustration over not being able to get everything

done even though I work 60-70 hours each week,” “not being able to take a day off because it is more trouble to write everything down (for a substitute),” “stress, stress, stress, no one cares what I do and if they did, we’d get paid more,” “monetary salary reasons” and “(I will) soon have a family to provide for, unless changes occur, I will not be able to stay in teaching due to the average cost of living.”

Several teachers conveyed a sense of irritation and frustration with administration and increased standardized testing. Some of their comments as excerpted from the open-ended responses included, “Administrators who talk out of both sides of their mouths. They should be running for political office, not running schools,” “this is my last year...too much pressure from principal about test scores,” “administration not aware of classroom life,” “excessive bureaucracy,” and “administrators who are uptight about testing and make teachers miserable.” Other teachers remarked, “I’m glad I got to experience teaching before test-o-mania took over. With 20 years almost completed, I’m looking forward to leaving the public schools.” The issue of too many demands and too little time is one that appeared several times in analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data from this study.

Conversely, a number of teachers were committed to remaining in teaching. “If you plan to remain in the teaching profession more than five years, list the 3 most important reasons for your decision.” Teachers will remain in the profession for the love of teaching (84%, n=278), the love of children (71%, n=278) and for the benefits and job security (43%, n=278).

Findings Stratified by National Board Certification Status

Thirteen tests were run comparing National Board and non-National Board Certified Teachers. When compared to non-National Board Certified Teachers, National Board Certified Teachers:

- tend to have the need for autonomy (p=.03)
- tend to have a need for time to pursue study and pursue research independently (p=.008)
- tend to have a need to read/use professional journals (p=.05)
- tend to have a need to serve in leadership roles (p=<.0001)
- tend to describe him/herself as a risk taker (p=.004)

According to this research study, it is evident that National Board Certified Teachers have different wants and needs than non-National Board Certified teachers in the areas of autonomy, research, professional journals, leadership and taking risks.

Conclusion

Currently, my wants and needs as an assistant professor are simple: adequate supplies, reasonable class sizes, support from my administrators, and time for planning

and research. My wants and needs have not changed very much since I was a first year teacher ten years ago. We need to do a better job at asking teachers what they want and need to be satisfied and successful in their current positions. What if we were able to give teachers what they needed? What if we could hire a science teacher or a foreign language teacher in an elementary school to allow for an extra planning time? What if we could have parents or guardians chaperone lunch while teachers ate in peace? What if teachers could pick their own professional development? What if we could support teachers in graduate programs? What if teachers felt consistently supported by their administration? My hunch is when we can better meet teachers' wants and needs, they will think twice, or better yet, not at all, about leaving our profession.

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