



Teacher Retention: Issues in the Retention of Teacher in Europe and the impact of Collaborative Dialogue Tools

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Contribution

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This paper reports on an EU-funded collaborative Action Research study (RETAIN: Inclusive Environments to Retain Teachers in School), which aims to explore different facets of the problem of teacher retention across Europe, and to develop and test some supportive tools that could be adapted for different European contexts. The theoretical framework for our research was informed by a sociocultural perspective: we are interested in the breadth of social and cultural influences on teachers' career trajectories across Europe. Whilst initially interested in the influence senior leaders might have on the career trajectories of early career teachers, and how novice teachers who leave the profession early might be better supported, findings from an early scoping exercise suggested that mid-career teachers were amongst those most at risk of disillusionment in the profession. We therefore maintained an interest in these teachers within our research, keeping novice, experienced and senior leadership teachers within our samples.

We began with an exploratory phase to investigate teacher's perspectives on teacher retention across the five partner countries (Denmark, the UK, Belgium, Spain and Turkey). Our initial research question was:

1 What are the differences and similarities in the reasons teachers give for staying in or leaving the profession, and their perception of how teachers' 'quality retention' can be effectively supported, across five European countries with different educational, political and economic backgrounds?

Our findings showed a range of similarities and differences, with workload, stress, and 'top down' change being common across countries, despite differences in the way these issues affected the actual retention of teachers. In interpreting the findings, we frame the issues of teacher retention identified through the lenses of 'quality retention' (see Gu and Day 2007) and 'teacher resilience' (Mansfield and Beltmann, 2012). This is important because, as our research shows, 'quality retention' - the retention of engaged, motivated, effective teachers - is an issue in all the project partner countries, whereas actual retention of teachers within the profession was a much more significant issue in some countries (notably the UK) than others (Spain, Belgium, Turkey).

Our second research question was concerned with the impact of tools we designed to promote collaboration between novice and experienced teachers and thus teacher quality retention. Following the exploratory phase of the study, we designed a 'framework for collaborative dialogue' tool, based on the Exeter Model of Teacher Education (Skinner, 2010), to be used within a lesson study approach (Ylonen and Norwich, 2013). We asked:

2. What is the impact of the 'framework for collaborative dialogue' within a lesson study approach, for promoting teacher quality retention and resilience?

To explore this impact, we conducted two case studies, led by senior leaders within schools in both the UK and Turkey. In executing these case studies, we found that some schools did not continue within the project, and that these tended to be those with the greatest challenges in teacher retention. This led us to a third research question:

3. Why do schools with high rates of teacher turnover find it difficult to commit to using the teacher retention tools?

In a sense, the answer to this question is obvious, but it is important to consider since it appears to be the case that the schools that most need it find it the most difficult to commit time and energy to engage with supportive action such as that offered by the research team and the tools on offer, with obvious implications for the utility of the tools.

Method

The RETAIN project as a whole uses an Action Research design. Elliot (1991) described action research as 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of the action within it'. Action research usually involves the participation of those taking action within the system as researchers and the RETAIN project has taken an approach which combines Action Research with Case Study, where each school can be seen as an action research case study supported by the project researchers. The RETAIN project is designed to engage closely with school leaders as practitioner researchers who, as members of national project steering groups, had a key role in shaping the whole project from the exploration stage through to the design of the tools and interventions, the intervention itself and the evaluation of the project at each stage. Thus, each country can also be viewed as a case study within the project, with a set of teachers/researchers who are working together to effect change appropriate to each national context. The research reported here involved a survey of teacher attitudes within all five countries, which was analysed twice, initially using a grounded approach, and then again using a coding framework based in a literature review of teacher retention. These two approaches to coding the survey data were combined to identify key themes. We then looked across the data at how these themes were interpreted by novice and experienced teachers and school leaders. We sampled a total of 216 teachers in this exploratory phase.

The second phase of data collection involved case studies of the design and implementation of the tools. The teachers within the case study schools were involved in the design of the data collection, thus, this was not designed to be identical across all partners. The case studies reported here used brief attitude questionnaires with teachers before and after using the tools, observations of lessons and training, as well as interviews with senior leaders leading the research within their school.

Expected Outcomes

With respect to each of the three research questions described above, our findings in brief are:

1. Teachers in all partner countries identified a love of the job and a sense of vocation as key reasons keeping teachers motivated and committed to their job. All five countries also identified stress, poor behaviour and cultural changes in the relationship between schools and parents as reasons for teachers losing motivation or leaving the profession. However, there were clear differences between responses across the different countries also. Variety in the role, a sense of personal fulfillment, salary, security and pedagogical freedom were all positive reasons for teaching in some countries but not all, whereas top down reform, a lack of job security, salary, challenges of inclusion of all students and a poor school environment were identified as causes retention problems in some countries but not others.
2. The framework for collaborative dialogue was found to be effective, particularly in combination with a lesson study approach, so long as there was supportive senior leadership who were able to offer time for teachers to engage with the

activity and generate an environment in which it was seen to be alright to ask questions and raise issues and challenges. Interestingly, teachers found it very helpful to work across novice and experienced teachers within a setting with a deliberately flattened hierarchy so that all were able to learn together: this linked with a tool that was not explicitly explored within this paper, called reverse mentoring, with which some teachers became familiar during the project.

3. Schools struggling with teacher retention dropped out of the project as a result of losing key team members, and a lack of time. There was a sense that engaging with the research was an interesting 'extra' but not a core activity.

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