Teacher embeddedness

Turning the tables for turnover contagion

Much is known about the impact of teacher turnover on schools and students – but how does it affect teachers themselves? In his research, Dr Matthew McCluskey at the University of Vermont, USA, has found that turnover causes considerable strain on teachers' work lives and has a contagion effect. In short, turnover begets turnover. McCluskey has identified key factors that reduce teachers' feelings of embeddedness and offers recommendations to improve embeddedness, bolster retention, and slow the contagion effect.

Teacher turnover is at an all-time high, and this is a major problem for providing a stable educational experience for young people, and indeed teachers, in schools throughout the United States. Teacher turnover carries with it significant costs. While some turnover can be beneficial, the research on teacher turnover overwhelmingly points to its deleterious impact on students, schools, and economic resources. For instance, we know that high rates of teacher turnover come with increased class sizes as well as reduced class offerings. It also leads to schools increasingly hiring unqualified teachers, increased discipline referrals, and decreased student achievement.

What's more, we also know that the financial costs are massive – with estimates as high as $20,000 for each teacher who leaves, totalling billions of dollars annually. Despite our vast knowledge of the costs of turnover, we know relatively little about how teachers themselves are actually impacted by turnover. This begs the question: what impact do high levels of teacher turnover have on educators themselves?

CASE STUDY

Dr Matthew McCluskey, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Vermont, USA, has tackled this very question. He examines the impact of turnover on teachers themselves and the factors that bolster and reduce feelings of embeddedness for teachers. In his latest research, McCluskey has built on the vast body of literature on teacher turnover. Particularly, in part one of a multi-site, multi-part case study, McCluskey explores teacher turnover through the concept of trust in schools and the potential contagion effect of turnover. In part two of the study, McCluskey explores teacher turnover through the concept of job embeddedness and, specifically, teacher embeddedness as proposed by Douglas Larkin and colleagues. This theory suggests that teachers are more embedded in their school communities when they have a strong sense of fit, strong links with others, and perceive that the assets of their work have value. Building on the work of Larkin and colleagues, McCluskey argues that better understanding of these factors can help us to support teachers as long-term professionals in schools and communities.

In part one of his case study conducted at urban high schools, McCluskey found that turnover caused considerable strain on teachers due to increased demand on their expertise and diminished trust

High teacher turnover causes considerable strain on other teachers; as a result, they are more likely to leave their positions.

among members of staff, who as a result may be more likely to leave their positions in their current school or in education entirely. To put it another way, teacher turnover, in turn, begets turnover.

Between focus groups of veteran and early-career teachers, as well as interviews with departed teachers, the 32 teachers interviewed by McCluskey spoke unanimously to the deleterious impact of teacher turnover. While teachers reported negative ramifications on students, they also spoke of the adverse impact on teachers; teachers bemoaned the diminished quality of teaching due to departures. For instance, one teacher shared that she 'saw the talent and calibre steadily decreasing,' while another said that her 'blood was boiling because we are doing such a disservice to students with the teachers we had.'

Because of this constant and growing stream of new colleagues cycling through schools, teachers felt as though each year they were 'always starting at ground zero.' Teachers were stressed by having to constantly coach new teachers and frustrated by the endless need to cover for departed teachers. Even newer teachers were burdened because they were not receiving the appropriate support. For example, many reported that they were not receiving coaching, or they were tasked with inappropriate responsibilities, such as writing college letters of recommendation for students who they had only just met.

Turnover also negatively impacts staff culture. Teachers lamented that 'not enough people stay long enough for

meaningful relationships' to be formed among staff, and turnover threatened the ability to be a 'tight-knit staff where everyone had each other's back. We lost our psychology safety […] and sense of belonging.' Psychology safety refers to the belief that an individual will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.

Simply put, turnover negatively impacted teachers' trust in each other, which research shows is a cornerstone of an effective educational community. This lack of trust extended to leadership, as teachers described losing trust in their principals and in their larger school network or district. As one teacher shared, teachers 'don't feel valued. They were means to a product, not ends in themselves. They feel disposable.'

With diminished trust in each other and the larger school community, the teachers McCluskey interviewed found a sense of belonging in a counter-culture. Rather than viewing their school as a benevolent being, they saw them as a distant 'specter of Big Brother' whose aim was to 'burn them out' and replace them. Ultimately, these negative feelings facilitated compounded departure for teachers. Like a contagion of illness, turnover spread.

CONTAGION AND EMBEDDEDNESS

In his multi-part case study, McCluskey offers insights that point to potential sources of teacher retention by looking

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at the role of contagion – the idea that organisational factors, both positive and negative, can spread like a virus – and embeddedness, the concept that represents the accumulated reasons why an employee would not leave a job. In other words, we have a decent understanding of how to reduce turnover and improve retention. Part one of McCluskey's study demonstrates the importance of vtrust in schools and districts as a key school cultural factor for school leaders to prioritise. While there is quite a bit of research on trust in schools, McCluskey demonstrates the entanglement of trust and turnover in better embedding educational professionals and improving educational outcomes.

TURNING THE TABLES FOR TURNOVER

In part two of his case study, McCluskey's findings add empirical support for the value of effective professional development, autonomy, and strong teacher-to-student and teacher-to-student relationships for improving teacher embeddedness within their schools and communities. Again, teacher embeddedness is a construct proposed by Larkin and colleagues and derived by job embeddedness theory that posits links, fit, and assets are central to a teacher's embeddedness within their school community. Professional development, for example, emerged as a key source of teacher embeddedness, consolidating all embeddedness factors when done well, or diminishing the strength of all three embeddedness factors if not.

Professional development, autonomy, and teacher–student and teacher–teacher

relationships have been widely studied and this literature base offers school leaders and policymakers a powerful knowledge base from which to draw for reform, especially as educators seek to navigate the teacher retention and the various short- and long-term repercussions of COVID-19. Of course,

there are also key school-based factors that researchers should continue to investigate in studies of embeddedness and turnover.

Finally, while there is no shortage of scholarship on teacher turnover, the vast extent of research in this field has not alleviated the challenge of teacher

turnover, perhaps due to the well-documented research practice gap and the ways larger market forces have impacted public education. McCluskey believes that teacher embeddedness may offer a beneficial framework of inquiry, again as educators and policymakers navigate increased teacher turnover rates and turnover intention in the wake of COVID-19.
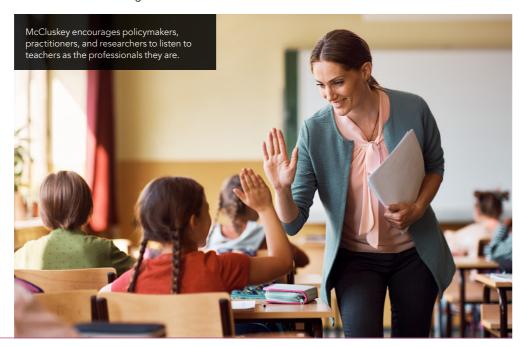
Echoing innovative researchers in the field, McCluskey also suggests that 'interventions that are carefully targeted at supporting the reasons that teachers remain (either in a specific classroom or in the profession) may be more effective, and that teacher embeddedness shows potential as a theory with demonstrated predictive power that may be used to guide such efforts.'

To combat the contagion effect and better support teachers' embeddedness

in schools as long-term professionals, McCluskey encourages policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to listen to teachers as the professionals they are; teachers are well placed to tell us what links, assets, and factors of fit will allow them to remain in their enormously important work of educating our students.

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> ## McCluskey's findings add empirical support for the value of effective professional development, autonomy, and strong teacher–student relationships.

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Behind the Research
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Research Objectives

Dr McCluskey has explored the factors that most reduce teacher embeddedness within schools and the impact teacher turnover has on teachers.

Detail

Bio
Dr Matthew McCluskey is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at the University of Vermont. His research and teaching centre on educational leadership and the cultural and organisational dynamics that shape educational practices and policies. Dr McCluskey earned his doctorate from Vanderbilt University and both his MEd and BA from Boston College. Prior to his work in higher education, he served as an English teacher and School Leader.

References

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The University of Vermont

Personal Response

What obstacles did you encounter when previously working as an English teacher?

In my first few years as a high school English teacher in the USA, I was surrounded by incredible educators and students, with whom I developed strong links. I felt a considerable sense of fit within my school community. Despite working 80+ hours per week sometimes, the assets I gained from the work felt worth it. However, in subsequent years, with higher levels of turnover around me, it felt increasingly harder to enact my important pedagogical work, and I no longer felt supported by the important links I once had. As a professor and researcher now, I can look back and see how the turnover contagion effect yielded turnover for so many of my colleagues (and perhaps myself). I still long for those early years; they were some of the most joyful and most important professional work of my career.

How can we stay optimistic about the future of education?

There is evidence all around us that the future of education *demands* optimism: one need only step inside the classroom of a teacher enacting the incredible alchemy of teaching with their students, observe a seminar with brilliant students, or see a transformational leader empowering their staff. This optimism allows us to dream and see a pathway forward – it is essential for fully realising the tremendous potential of public education. This required optimism, however, is not passive. Battling turnover contagion and the many challenges facing public education demands collective action and social movement from educators, parents, and students; we can truly enact our optimism by mobilising to protect this sacred space.

What upcoming research are you currently working on?

I am working on multiple exciting projects. First, I am continuing my work on teacher turnover by specifically examining how principals attempt to reduce uncertainty in a 'dry' teacher labour market. I also am working on multiple projects aimed at better understanding charter management organisations (CMOs) in the US, a school-type that is increasingly coming to dominant market share in many urban centres. For instance, I am looking inside these schools through centering the experiences of Black teachers in these spaces, which in interviews they classify as white spaces, despite serving almost exclusively Black and Brown (BIPOC) students. In a similar but separate project, I am conducting content analyses of counter-stories of student and teacher social media protests of these schools. One manifestation of this project will be published in the forthcoming book *Race, Africana Communication, and Criminal Justice Reform: A Reflective and Intersectional Analysis of Adaptive Vitality*. Last, I am looking outwardly from these schools to examine the proliferation of their practices across the globe. For instance, a colleague and I conducted a critical policy analysis of the diffusion of practices and publications of the CMO Uncommon Schools, eg, *Teach Like a Champion*. We found evidence of their proliferation at the state, local, private, and university levels in all fifty states and across the globe.