

The Decline of K-12 Candidates: A Qualitative Study From Teacher Candidate Perspectives

Darcey Gray, Barbara Vaiana, Michelle Davis, Raymond Holmes
University of Phoenix, United States

Over the last six years there is a considerable decline in individuals wanting to pursue a teaching degree or individuals exiting the profession for various reasons. The decline in teachers highlights the importance of continued investigations in multiple contexts. This research investigates through a qualitative phenomenological research design, themes which contribute to teacher attrition across the United States. The research question to address is, “What are the determining factors of the decline of teacher attrition to be addressed at the district and school administration levels?” The conceptual framework reviews the narratives from surveys, which provides a theme on the rationale why teacher candidates are not staying in the profession. Data sample consisted of new teachers and graduates of teacher preparation programs in the last two-five years who responded to open-ended survey questions in which their responses contributed to the investigation and results. Results revealed three major themes stemmed from the survey questions; support, administration, and management were used interchangeably. The survey questions did not directly identify which city or state participants reside in which could play a factor in the type of resources or issues that could determine the response of participants. The loss of teachers affects not only the instructional aspects, students, and educational communities, but also the financial aspects such as initial training, recruitment, hiring, and professional development. Results of the study can assist in determining how to provide support to current and future educators. Also, the results can aid school administration and districts to assess if the proper supports are in place to ensure the decline of teacher attrition.

Keywords: teacher decline, teacher support, teacher attrition, school administration, school districts

Introduction

A growing concern in education is that the teaching profession is becoming less attractive and teacher shortages are becoming a trend (Dupriez, Delvaux, & Lothaire, 2016). Garcia and Weiss (2019) asserted a high teacher attrition and pool of dwindling applicants in the profession, which have become the most troubling dynamics of the education labour market today. A teacher shortage creates a concern with costs on teachers themselves, students, schools, and our U.S. education system. Retaining teachers is important to making sure there are enough well-prepared and committed teaching staff in our U.S. schools. Teacher attrition impacts the achievement of all students by disrupting school stability, relationships, collaboration, and institutional knowledge (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Those four areas as some potential reasons for the

Darcey Gray, Ed.D., Education Department, University of Phoenix, United States.
Barbara Vaiana, Ed.D., Education Department, University of Phoenix, United States.
Michelle Davis, Ph.D., Education Department, University of Phoenix, United States.
Raymond Holmes, DM, Education Department, University of Phoenix, United States.

disruption of student achievement can create a standstill in a school and the students from moving forward with creating an atmosphere for success.

According to the results from their study, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found teachers serving in schools of low-income students were more likely to leave the profession due to accountability measures and administrative support. Teacher attrition rates were about 70% greater in low-income or minority district schools than those teaching in higher-income districts. Whereas, Feuer, Floden, Chudowsky, and Ahn (2013), asserted data from teacher preparation programs, which tracks whether new teachers remain in the profession, indicating graduates' leaving the profession after the first few years is a sign that something is not right in teacher preparation programs. However, further research on why teachers leave the profession does not indicate teachers' preparation programs have any connection to their decision.

Identifying and addressing key factors to teachers' leaving the profession is vital (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Prior research has attempted to determine variables that influence a teacher's reason for leaving the profession; the decline in teachers' entering or teachers' leaving the field in the U.S. is higher than any other profession (Karsenti & Collin, 2013), with approximately 46% of new teachers leaving the field within the first five years of service. Karsenti and Collin (2013) found that several contributing factors leading to teachers' leaving the profession and through prior research are demands on time, management of difficult classrooms, unsatisfactory work conditions, low salaries, and restrictive administration, whereas Leech, Haug, and Nimer (2015) asserted there are contradictory findings in research concerning contributing factors for teachers' leaving the profession.

With new state and federal mandates for teacher preparation programs questions remain whether these programs are effectively supporting a teachers' transition into the profession (Leech et al., 2015). Few studies have systematically examined teacher attrition over time and contributing patterns in which With (2017) found the reason is a lack of appropriate available data. Teacher attrition among U.S. teachers has increased since the mid-1990s. With (2017) researched on motivation and revealed that teachers emphasize intrinsic and social aspects of work as motivating factors for entering and remaining in the profession, whereas, workload, government initiatives, and lack of administrative support influence a teacher's reason for leaving the profession.

With a continuous increase in teachers' leaving education, this research focus was to investigate contributing factors to teacher attrition. The importance of high-quality preparation programs is also imperative for future teachers to provide the basis of what to expect their first few years in the classroom, and to grow a network of peers as support after graduation. In this study, graduates from various universities who obtained a K-12 teaching degree from an accredited teacher education program were the target samples. The graduates reside throughout the United States.

Open-ended questionnaire surveys from 13 new teacher graduates in the last two-five years were analysed through this qualitative phenomenological research study. An open-ended questionnaire survey allowed for new teacher education graduates to provide a narrative to questions on their experiences during and after receiving their teaching degree and entering the profession. An analysis of the narrative responses provided an insight into reasons teacher candidates leave the K-12 education profession or the struggles (lack of support or interventions) encountered in the classroom. Analysing the responses can determine what areas need to be addressed by districts, universities, and K-12 schools to ensure teachers have the support to become successful in the classroom.

Significance

The growing concern within the K-12 teaching profession is a decline of individuals pursuing a teaching certification or exiting the profession within the first five years of teaching (Dupriez et al., 2016). Years of research has shown teachers are an important school-based factor. Teacher loss affects not only the instructional aspects, students, and educational communities, but also the financial aspects such as initial training, recruitment, hiring, and professional development. According to Krasnoff (2014) research studies found that 14% of new teachers leave by their first year; 33% by their second or third year, and close to 50% leave within five years in the profession. Research on teacher attrition continues to grow and remains a salient issue for schools, especially in economically disadvantaged school districts (Nguyen & Springer, 2019).

Coffey, Putman, Handler, and Leach (2019) asserted teacher shortages begin with the diminishing enrolment in teacher preparation programs, and Cowan, Goldhaber, Hayes, and Theobald (2016) found the decline in teachers stems from more stringent requirements for obtaining teaching credentials when entering (or re-entering) the profession. Thibodeaux, Labat, Lee, and Labat (2015) asserted contributing factors for leaving the teaching profession were the demands by administrators, policy makers, high-stakes testing, and needs of students. Dewey, Sindelar, Bettini, Boe, Rosenberg, and Leko (2017) investigated into the decline of U.S. special education teachers and indicated that between 2005-2012, the number of special education teachers declined by greater than 17%, and state, federal, and administrative support contributed to the decrease.

According to the Learning Policy Institute (2017) and through studies across the nation, administrative support and leadership are major components of a teacher's decision to stay or leave. Nguyen and Springer (2019) asserted research evidence suggests teachers may remain in the profession if they are provided with a sense of empowerment, professional development improvements, and positive reinforcement from administration. Whereas, Green, Eady, and Anderson (2018) noted that it is imperative to consider the quality and effects of teacher preparation programs. The importance of institutions is reviewing their teacher preparation program and determining what additional support can be provided after graduation. Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller, and Thompson (2016) asserted teacher preparation programs, along with state certification requirements vary greatly, and are vague, overlapping, or non-existent.

In research on urban novice teachers through inductive analysis, Albright, Safer, Sims, Tagaris, Glasgow, Sekulich, and Zaharis (2017) found teachers felt their universities' programs were effective for preparing them but did not feel supported enough once they entered the profession. Teacher preparation programs support the individuals pursuing a degree in education throughout the teaching internship. The teaching internship allows for support and feedback on teaching practices, but once the teacher candidate graduates then the university does not provide the same support. Research by Dupriez et al. (2016) indicated that the decline of teachers was not a lack of graduates or educational programs, but within the educational systems they were employed. Whereas, Leech et al. (2015) examined the relationships between teacher characteristic, teaching programs, and work environment with results indicating high quality preparation programs were critical to retaining teachers.

According to a study on teacher attrition in the first five years, Gray and Taie (2015) found that high-quality mentors and competitive salaries were primary factors to why teachers stay in the profession. Whereas, Krasnoff (2014) noted teachers are attracted to school systems with a focus on supporting them, and although higher salaries may be necessary for recruitment, they are not sufficient to attract or retain quality teachers. It is important to use the findings of current research into why teachers leave the profession early and determine major factors for improvements.

This study investigated further into the areas of teacher education programs, administrative support, and job satisfaction as it relates to a teacher's intention for remaining or leaving the profession. Since the focus was on education graduates, the overall benefit of the study is for school districts and teacher preparation programs within universities to determine what changes need to be made to ensure teacher candidates have the necessary tools to succeed in the classroom. For administration from K-12 to university level, this will allow everyone involved in teacher preparation programs to ensure proper support systems are in place, so teacher candidates will stay in the long-term profession. This information could also be imperative to retaining unified teachers and preventing continuing shortages.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative method, incorporating the phenomenological technique was used for this study. This approach was appropriate as qualitative research aims to define ways in which people experience, understand, or perceive a phenomenon. Hunter-Johnson (2015) asserted that individuals experience phenomena differently and it depends on culture or context. To address the research inquiry and keep the participation anonymous, open-ended survey questions were developed through an online survey program. The questionnaire provided clear and precise questions to produce valid meaningful results. Regmi, Waithaka, Paudyai, Smimkhada, and Teijlingen (2016) asserted using an emerging data collection approach based on internet or e-based technology strategies allows respondents complete anonymity, collects data within a shorter time frame, and is cost effective.

An introduction letter and link to the survey questionnaire was posted to social media platforms in which participants could respond without identification or use of their personal information. The online survey allowed respondents the option to complete on their own time and place. The survey consisted of six open-ended questions, allowing for narratives to the questions on lived experiences from 13 participating new teacher graduates in the last two-five years, and from various universities who obtained a K-12 teaching degree from an accredited teacher education program. The 13 participant narratives were filtered by themes and trends in the survey program and then uploaded into NVivo12 program for further analysis.

Participants

In this qualitative phenomenological research study, the focus was on the review of the narratives from surveys in which K-12 educators who graduated from an accredited teacher preparation program in the last two-five years provided their perspectives. Participant responses to the open-ended questions were collected through complete anonymity. A collection of data through anonymity refers to data collected in which respondents were completely unknown.

Responses included 13 anonymous participants who contributed to the narratives analysed in this study. The review of the narratives helped to determine if there was a theme or trend. The conceptual framework was developed by summarizing the narratives and capturing something that was real and could easily be applied. The narratives helped to provide insight on specific reasons individuals leave the teaching profession and an understanding of the support systems that are lacking.

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework uses a "Y" spectrum to paint a picture of the lived experiences of educators from their interest of becoming a teacher leading up to their potential departure. Six research questions were designed

to capture key pivotal moments within their journey of becoming a teacher to their final decision either to remain in the educational profession or to choose another one.

The participants' journey of answering the research question begins at the bottom of the "Y" Spectrum (Figure 1) and splits towards the middle of the "Y". The first four research questions will provide the information needed to answer the primary research question involving allocated resources. The last research questions explain which career path participants chose.

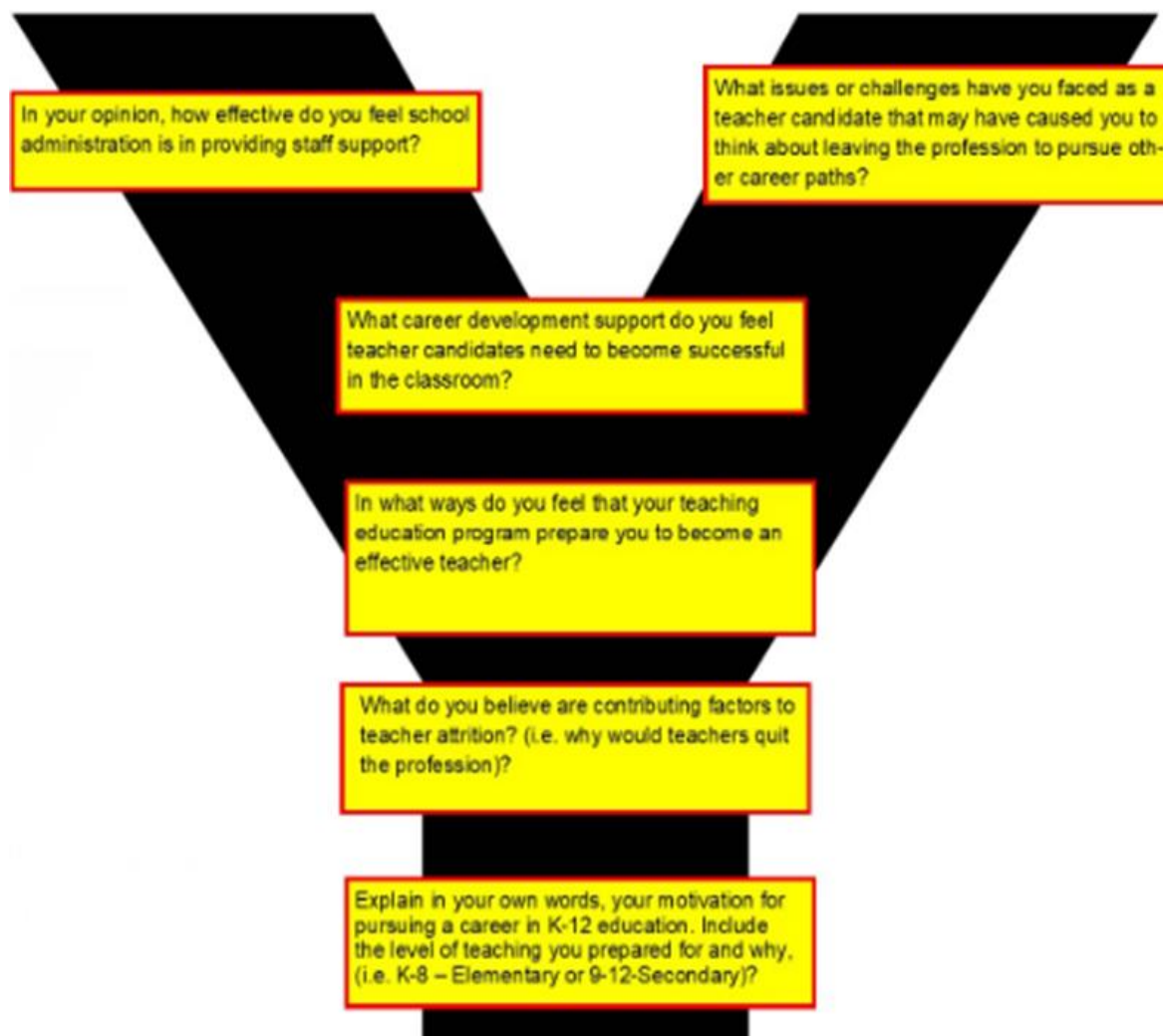


Figure 1. Diagram of "Y" spectrum.

Survey Questions and Rationale

- Explain in your own words, your motivation for pursuing a career in K-12 education. Include the level of teaching you prepared for and why (i.e., K-8—Elementary or 9-12—Secondary).

According to Heinz (2015) individuals who have chosen teaching as their profession did so because they could shape their students' social and emotional growth and their preparedness to life, work, and contribution to the community. The purpose of this question is to uncover those factors that motivated participants to teach and to determine whether there are any correlations with potential factors for leaving the profession.

- What do you believe are contributing factors to teacher attrition? (i.e., why would teachers quit the profession?)

Several studies including Tippens et al. (2013) suggested that socio-demographic factors including age and gender were key factors contributing to teacher's attrition. Thibodeau et al. (2015) suggested the focus on higher accountability, and administrators taking desperate measures to ensure their schools are meeting expectations, places strains on teachers' time, health, and long-term commitment to the profession. Whereas, Krasnoff (2014) asserted salary levels, student discipline, and poor working conditions highly contribute to new teacher attrition. This question was designed to identify any patterns to past studies.

- In what ways do you feel that your teaching education programs prepare you to become an effective teacher?

Research evidence suggests that of all the school resources, well-prepared teachers were among the most important determinates of student achievement (Krasnoff, 2014). Whereas, Leech et al. (2015) asserted program courses, and teaching environment are amongst some factors affecting the quality of the educational program. According to research, novice teachers characterize the initial years in the teaching profession are most challenging and intense period of their career, and Dupriez et al. (2016) found through a bivariate and multivariate analysis of teacher data over five-year period, job conditions contributed to a high risk of teachers leaving the profession. This question is useful in determining the effectiveness of the education that new teachers receive.

- What career development support do you feel teacher candidates need to become successful in the classroom?

Albright et al. (2017) revealed that while teachers were satisfied with the education they received, they did not feel supported once they started the profession. According to researchers Tippens, Ricketts, Morgan, Navarro, and Flanders (2013), teachers are generally satisfied during their first year of teaching and the lack of administrative support or opportunities was their reason for leaving. Researchers in this study were interested in learning if the concept of "administration support" emerges in this study.

- In your opinion, how effective do you feel school administration is in providing staff support?

According to Dewey et al. (2017), school administrations, state and federal government bureaucracy contributed to the decline in teacher by more than 17%. An analysis of survey data for 167 novice teachers completed by Karsenti and Collen (2013) indicated 80% of teachers leave the profession due to the amount of work, while 50% agreed it is their relations with administration, and 56% noted students and parents as factors. This question is essential in uncovering if a pattern exists.

- What issues or challenges have you faced as a teacher candidate that may have caused you to think about leaving the profession to pursue other career paths?

According to Karsenti and Collin (2013) over 46% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Hunter-Johnson (2015) found through analysis of randomly selected teacher interviews, factors influencing teacher's decision to leave are compensation, career advancement, and negative student behaviour. This question will assist researchers in determining if any of these reasons are related to the profession.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological research design helped to examine the feelings and thoughts of new teachers to discover patterns and themes in teachers' responses regarding the decline of K-12 candidates. Thematic analysis, typically known as content analysis, was used to quantify the occurrence of certain words, phrases, subjects, or concepts in text (Kuckartz, 2019).

The research questions addressed new teacher experiences, supports, challenges, and concerns with their teacher education programs, and similar words and phrases were extracted from the results to determine the

formation of categories or themes. Presenting main characteristics and simple examples of the process allows the reader to access whether its method might be useful in future research. Categories in the research are crucial important effective research, and became the building blocks for determining the themes.

Research by Feuer et al. (2013) on teacher preparation programs indicated although competence in teaching is highly shaped by on-the-job experiences, educational programs that prepare teachers can be important contributions to the quality of their instruction. It is relevant to note that although teacher education programs were addressed in this research and questions, dissatisfaction or concerns with educational programs did not emerge as a theme in the analysis.

The primary theme emerging from the data clustering centered the support from the administration within participant's school districts. A saturation point was discovered after the sixth survey response (merely 50%). The data revealed that participants referenced support from the administration in most of their answers as a main factor in addressing the research. To validate this pattern, three more survey responses were examined maintaining the consistency. The text search and word frequency queries using NVivo12 provided similar results with the term support supporting the saturation point after the sixth survey response.

Emergent Themes

Learning Policy Institute (2017) stated that administrative support and leadership were major contributing factors in teachers' leaving the profession. Through a study on teacher attrition in the first five years, Gray and Taie (2019) found that lack of high-quality mentors and competitive salaries were primary factors to why teachers leave the profession. Krasnoff (2014) asserted that to be successful, teachers need supportive school environments where they are valued and highly supported by administration. It is important to note that while 100% of the survey respondents expressed their concerns about the school's administration providing a better support structure for teachers, neither teacher mentioned that they were planning to leave the profession.

During the discussions on the support structure, two other themes emerged including administration and management. Results revealed that the three themes including support, administration, and management were used interchangeably. Krasnoff (2014) found through research on teacher recruitment and retention, good teachers are attracted to school systems that focus on teacher supports, mentorship, professional development, and effective leadership. Because teachers look to the school administration for support, as identified in this study, it is also plausible that classroom management and professional development supports should come from the school's administration (Figure 2). Since these terms were used in conjunction with support, these themes were condensed as primary themes. Table 1 illustrates the primary theme and percentage used throughout the study.

Table 1

Frequency of Responses for Support

Theme	No. of respondents endorsing theme	Frequency of response	% of respondents endorsing theme
Participant's responses references to support	13	33	100%
Participant's responses references to administration and management	9	15	69%

Sub Themes

Two sub themes followed the core theme of "support" from the administration. These themes included teachers' issues about the "classroom" and concerns about the "students". Nine participants (69%) discussed the

need for more classroom management support especially because the teachers must structure their class to mirror the book opposed to customizing the content in the books to meet the learning needs of that student. Gray and Taie (2015) asserted teachers who spent the first year in higher-poverty schools, are more likely to leave the profession due to lack of classroom supports and resources. Teachers who did not receive opportunities in high-poverty schools during their teacher preparation in college will have a harder time to adjust to those first few years in the classroom.

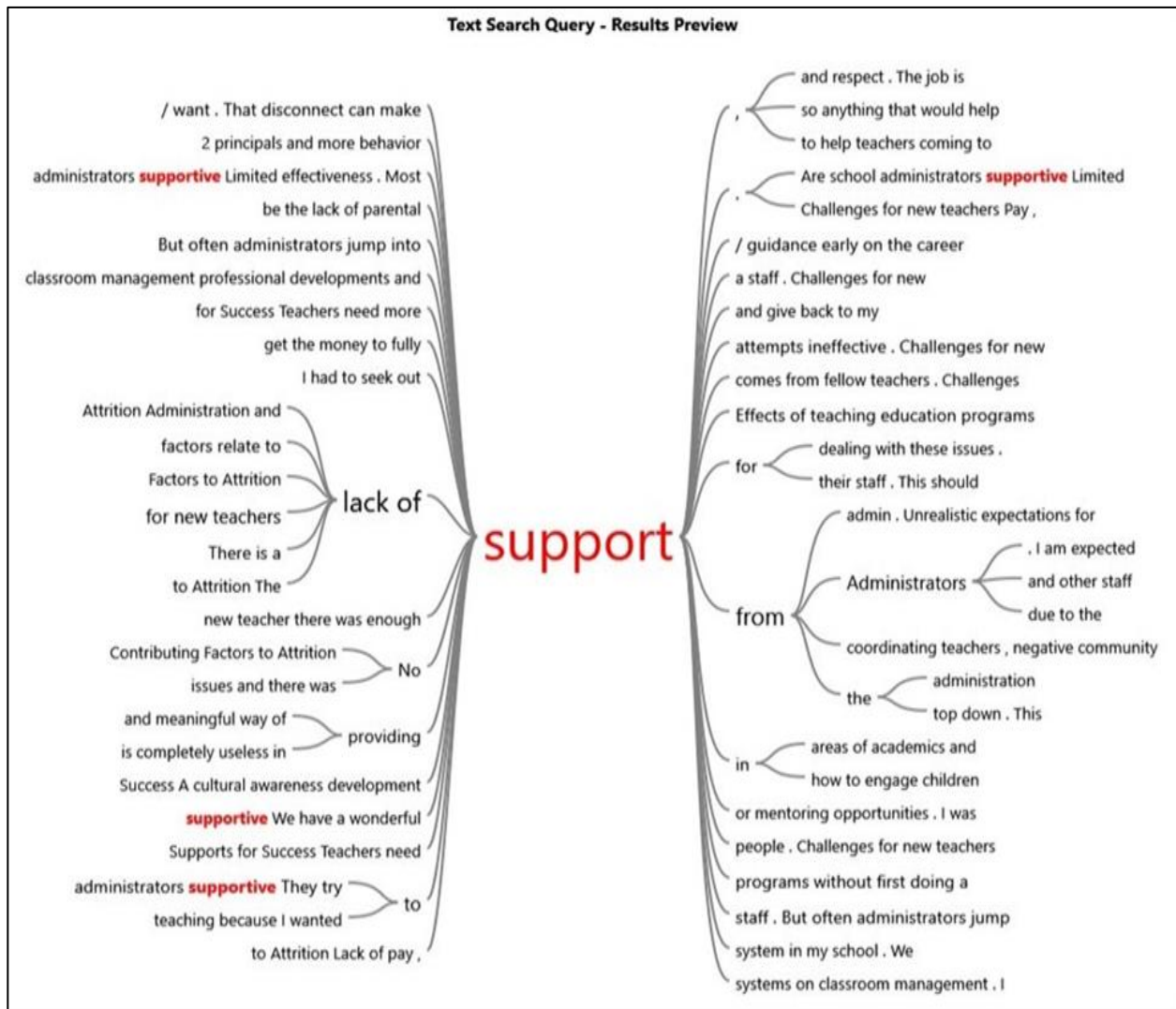


Figure 2. Displays several examples of how the term “support” was used, using NVivo version 12 to analyze the data.

Most teacher respondents felt that administration is reactive and classroom dynamics are changed every year, which is counter-productive for teachers. For example, two participants mentioned that they might have a student with behavior issues. This student’s grades may be a result of their behavioral issues however, as teachers they are still responsible for teaching the lessons and improve his grades opposed to providing extra support for the student.

Seven participants, 54% of participants in this study focused on how student behaviors prohibited the teacher from providing quality education. An overwhelming number of students have mental health or behavior issues

that are disruptive. It was evident in the study that the classroom dynamics and student concerns topped the list of the areas they needed the most support on by the school's administration. Most teachers alluded to the weak policies to address classroom challenges even when students become violent.

According to Krasnoff (2014) underpaid teachers are under prepared and unsupported. These teachers are confronted with lower levels of resources, poor working conditions, and the stresses of working with students who have wide ranges of needs. Majority of teachers who graduate from a teacher preparation program are offered positions in higher-poverty areas without the proper training. It was worthy to note that while eight participants (61%) mentioned "pay" in their responses concerning the lack of support from the administration. Some teachers mentioned that they do not feel that the pay was not worth the stressors they had to face. According to Viadero (2018):

U.S. teachers make less than 60 cents for every dollar paid to people with the same level of education in other professions, according to a 2017 report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. That ratio puts the United States at the bottom of the more than two dozen industrialized nations in the study. (Viadero, 2018, pp. 4-5)

Krasnoff (2014) asserted major factors in teacher attrition need to be addressed which highly influence teacher retention. These include working conditions, supports, and better compensation. However, pay did not emerge as a major theme in this study and no teacher (100%) mentioned leaving the education system because of pay. Individuals wanting to pursue a degree in teaching know that their pay is low, but overall they want to make a difference in the minds of youth.

Conclusion

The loss of teachers affects multiple aspects of the profession which leads to two major questions: How to ensure support is provided to teacher candidates to become successful and to make teaching a long-term profession, and, how institutions with a teacher preparation program can provide additional support after graduation for teachers in their first two-three years in the classroom. Teacher attrition has been noted as a complex and interdependent crisis (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Studies have revealed that teachers' leaving the profession happens for any number of reasons. Garcia and Weiss (2019) asserted teacher shortages have a negative effect on students, administration, and the education system at large. According to Dupriez et al. (2016), the teaching profession is no longer a career of choice and a teacher shortage is evident.

The teacher shortage is demonstrating to be more difficult each year with full-time substitutes covering classes who are not state-certified nor certified in the content. This leaves students sitting in classrooms without a full-time teacher which then leads into issues with behaviour, lack of attendance, and students not receiving the required education. Previous attempts have been made to determine the cause of individuals leaving the teaching profession. However, research presents contradictory findings, not providing a definitive answer. Not being able to have definitive answer then stems from other factors such as demographics, individual state educational mandates, and the growing concern of individuals not going into the profession.

This study with the use of six open-ended survey questions helped to share the lived experiences of new teachers and determine a theme or trend. Participant response to the research questions revealed a concern with administration and the need for better supports. Additional themes emerged in which teachers identified classroom management and professional development as part of these necessary administrative supports. Although administrative supports did emerge as a primary theme through the results, no participants' response noted they had left the profession.

The loss of teachers affects multiple aspects of the profession, which leads to one major question: How to ensure supports are provided to teacher candidates to become successful and to make teaching a long-term profession. As this study concludes the realization, this is the foundation for opportunities on further research. This study can assist not just teacher preparation programs at the university level, but the K-12 sectors and at the state level. These three entities can review what is working and not working how each can truly then work together to determine the gaps. These gaps can slowly begin to shift to retain teachers for long term. Other recommendations on areas to conduct future research is, to focus on demographics, determine urban to non-urban schools, or complete a correlational study on the special education teacher population against other teachers. Depending on the future researcher will determine the direction to continue and gather additional data in a centralized area of study.

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