

3-15-2007

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Recommended Citation

Haar, J. M. (2007). Retaining Experienced, Qualified Teachers: The Principal's Role. *The Rural Educator*, 28(2), 28-34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v28i2.483>

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Retaining Experienced, Qualified Teachers: The Principal's Role

Jean M. Haar

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One process for retaining experienced, qualified teachers is to provide them with opportunities to grow professionally (Blasé & Blasé, 2001). The intent of this paper is to provide information about meeting the needs of experienced, qualified rural teachers, especially in the area of professional development. A story line of one rural science teacher's journey with professional development opportunities and experiences is shared. Her principal's role is also described. Also included is a comparison between the teacher's experiences and research about professional development. The paper concludes with recommendations for those involved in rural schools, especially in administrative positions will be shared. The recommendations focus on strengthening professional development opportunities and experiences for teachers.

“Effective teachers constitute a valuable human resource for schools—one that needs to be treasured and supported” (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 7). Research has demonstrated that teacher effectiveness has a direct effect on student achievement (Carey, 2004; Darling-Hammond and Skyes, 2003). According to Carey, “Some of the earliest and best analysis has been done in Tennessee, where researchers found that all else equal, students assigned to the most effective teachers for three years in a row performed 50 percentile points higher—that’s on a 100-point scale—than comparable students assigned to the least effective teachers for three years in a row” (p. 4).

The importance of effective teaching brought to attention the ignored issue of retaining high-quality teachers. As researchers and others interested in education analyzed the issue of retention, key factors for retention were identified. Factors that kept good teachers included a sense of appreciation and support for their work, an environment that allowed them the opportunity to learn from their colleagues and an environment where accomplished teaching could flourish and grow (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Barth (2001) noted,

We teach and lead better when we constantly learn how to teach and lead...with learning comes replenishment of body, mind, and spirit—and of schools. These days, schools and the educators who reside in them are depleted. Replenishment comes from either leaving the exhausting work of the schoolhouse or from remaining there and coming alive as a learner. In order not to lose educators from the schools as dropouts, they must be restored as learners. (p. 28)

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this article is to examine one teacher's experience as a rural science teacher in comparison with what the literature identifies as essential components to retaining effective, qualified teachers. The

study is a single case study and involves one structured interview, a timeline of professional development experiences, and informal conversations between the teacher and the researcher. The researcher served as the teacher's principal for seven years. As the teacher shares her journey of teaching, information about the internal and external challenges of teaching, relevant professional development experiences, and administrative support are addressed.

Beginning Lessons

Ramona's decision to make teaching her profession was based on two essential points: “My life started out as somebody who loved to be outside and loved my school. I felt comfortable and safe in my high school and [because of issues in my private life] I needed the comfort and safety that my high school gave. I needed the caring from my friends, but particularly the caring from my teachers.” Once she entered college, it was her love of the outdoors that most influenced her direction. She stated, “[W]hen I got to college I liked biology better than I liked the people and when I started teaching, I felt a lot of pressure to be knowledgeable. People were important, too, but in the beginning I was so stuck on being right, that it wasn't until later that I realized the opposite is true.” Then, “biology became the medium to make kids feel competent and better than competent, to feel good about themselves.”

Ramona began her teaching career in a small, rural school district. She taught science. She also coached two different sports and taught German and photography. Two different encounters with students during her first year of teaching impacted Ramona's perspective on teaching. Both encounters convinced her that she needed a solid understanding of her content; however, just as important was the ability to relate to the students. One involved a freshman:

He was a freshman, and I didn't have any freshmen. He would be standing in the window at night watching me. He would just pop his head up and go down again so I couldn't see him, but I could feel

somebody watching what I was doing. I didn't have any idea of who he was. It went on for a couple of weeks and then I finally just went to the door and said, "Whoever you are out there, come in and help me. I need help; don't be afraid, come and help me." It was interesting because I had a sense there was nothing bad about it; that he was just interested. He and I spent quite a bit of time together. The phrase that I think of often is what he said to me probably a year later: "You are about the only adult who I can think of that I have ever had fun with who wasn't drinking."

Ramona's gift of time to this student taught her that in order for students to learn, it was important for the teacher to know the students. She recalled, "We talked a lot about coaching and a lot about being put down. He would tell me about anything—a lot about how school made him feel and how it didn't make him feel."

The other incident that affected Ramona's teaching came from a group of seniors. She noted:

At the time students had to take one year of science to graduate. I had nine seniors who had not even completed a general science class. They had been in it and flunked; so they were seniors and needed to take science. They were particularly large farm boys; two of them were especially burly. We did mostly field study stuff, which I didn't know well, but it was something to do. The superintendent said we could, and we went outside. We had an hour and a half. They had a real funny old International Harvester Travelall. We all packed into that and drove different places. I got them hooked; then I just let them choose topics they wanted to learn about. That's what we did all year. They made a lot of comments about, "This is halfway fun." "What are we going to do today, teach?" "What do you want to know today?" I didn't expect to be as liberal as I was but it was positive.

Lessons Learned in the Classroom

During the course of her twenty plus years of teaching, Ramona continued to reflect on her teaching. Her love and understanding of science continued to serve as a solid foundation for her exploration with the pedagogy of teaching. She observed, "I was so comfortable with biology. I don't think I ever felt particularly threatened or

that I didn't know something. If I didn't, I knew I could just go read the book, or brush up; if I didn't know it, I could figure it out. I never had any formal training on invertebrates of any kind, and we did that."

She realized early on that textbooks should serve as a resource rather than as the crux of a course:

Textbooks have way too much material. When I first began teaching chemistry, I followed the book pretty closely, because I wasn't as comfortable [with chemistry as with biology]. But I would only get through chapter six and there were eight chapters. I realized that by spending so much time on details in the chapters that students really didn't an overview of how the key concepts of chemistry fit together. So, if you only get to chapter six you never get to the "heart" of it. It's kind of like never really learning to write formulas or to write equations. You never get to make a full meal. You get out all the ingredients you need and you mix it up, but you just stay on the main course. You don't ever get to make a dessert. That to me is what teaching six chapters is like. I didn't think that way right away; I had to try to figure adjustments that wouldn't be cheating kids.

Ramona's comfort with her content knowledge coupled with her willingness to take risks provides her students with continuous opportunities to learn. She is real "interested in how a new idea will work or how it might generate a different conversation." She may ask herself, "What can get kids to think about what we're talking about? What can get kids truly interested?" She elaborated,

Right now, we're talking about plants. It is the first time in my career that I went ahead and talked to them about the eggs and sperms in plants. I just said, "I think you guys can handle this." It was like even that phrase gave them the confidence and interest to become engaged. I set a tone of expectations. Typically, textbooks note that students aren't ready to address this yet. We can talk about these structures but not what they really do. Sure, every kid did not know the answers; but I have found that if key concepts are repeated enough times and if enough examples are given, students can grasp them.

Principal's Role

The support or the lack of support Ramona has experienced during her career has influenced her views on the role the principal plays with establishing an atmosphere of professionalism for teachers. The principal also plays a key role with the retention of qualified teachers. She noted:

Some of the best parts of having [a supportive principal] were the conversations and the feeling of trust. The sense that the principal trusted in my judgment, that she knew very well that I might screw up on occasion, but on the whole I would make the right decision, and that I was trying to make the right decision for students. She respected the fact that we, as teachers, were trying to be fair, realizing that kids are all different and that my perceptions of a kid might be different than the teacher across the hall, and, actually the way they act in my room might be different. She recognized that having a room full of books, having a room full of animals is not a way of entertaining me, but a way of trying to find new hooks. In the past I felt the opposite, particularly with two male principals I had whose backgrounds were heavily in coaching. It was difficult for me to work for them. They had no idea why I would want to use anything other than a single textbook or why I would want to go to a conference.

The supportive principal arrived at a time in Ramona's career when she was contemplating the value of teaching as a profession. According to her, "I had about had it. I was ready to see if someone [at a regional university lab] would hire me to do rat dissecting, because I had had enough of feeling misunderstood and unappreciated."

One of the positive actions the principal did was to provide teachers with "a sense of governance and a sense of voice." Ramona stated, "I didn't realize until she was gone, how good it felt to know that she understood and respected us. For instance, she understood that I found it ridiculous that a student had to be out of class for three days because he squirted a water gun in the hall; and that because he has been out for three days, he is that much further behind. We really messed up for that kid." She continued, "It's a different issue than my content. There are things—parents, testing, content, and then there is the whole other realm of what goes on out in the hall that really affects kids' lives. The support of the principal plays a big part in how frustrating that becomes for a teacher. The support of the principal plays a big part in the survival of the challenges of teaching."

Another example of the principal's effort to support teachers was to provide teachers with additional time to plan and prepare. Ramona stated, "She recognized that teachers would use their time wisely and try to have that time be positive not just waste the time."

Ramona also appreciated the times that someone recognized and appreciated her teaching skills. She noted, "I can't think of anything that [a past professor and National Science Foundation grant coordinator] ever said to me that was any more uplifting than, 'Well, you're not afraid to do these open-ended things because, for one thing, you have good enough rapport with kids. They are not just going to blow it off or blow up your room.' He also said, 'And you are not worried about the questions they ask you, or how you can get in helping them.'"

Her principal also recognized her teaching ability. Ramona recalled, "If the principal came into class and kids didn't have all the answers, she didn't write on my evaluation, 'Nobody understands what's going on.' She knew that we would hopefully work on that before we went on. I never felt that before."

Growth Experiences

The majority of professional development experiences for Ramona were individual endeavors or requests. She is a self-motivated, continuous learner in constant search for new knowledge and skills that can improve student learning. When asked what have been the most rewarding experiences she had encountered, Ramona commented, "Being a writer for the [state level] benchmarks; being a state level grant reviewer. No one had ever before asked for my opinion. I just taught in a relatively unimportant, small school. I was never as important as the biology teacher from a relatively large school system, and certainly not as knowledgeable or important as a biology teacher from the largest school district."

Ramona views the time she was actively involved in the National Science Foundation Grant as a time of tremendous professional growth. She credits the professional experiences she was involved with during the grant for "finding out about alternative assessment and being courageous enough to try to do something with it and learning a little bit about open-ended labs."

There were also connections made and resources shared that impacted her teaching. Because of the grant, she had the opportunity become acquainted with Hans Anderson from the University of Indiana. His knowledge of science and how it should be taught affected Ramona's teaching: "We talked a little bit about the fact that I have some

understanding of we can't do the whole book, but for fifteen years in my teaching I mulled around with, 'Well then, what are we going to do?' and tried to find the 'right' book, so to speak. Hans talked about framing the course around 'big ideas' and also about the importance of helping students 'go deep' with their understanding of those big ideas."

Later, when Ramona was involved with the Rural Challenge, she had the opportunity to listen to Vito Perrone. Perrone valued the concept of "getting kids not only to think but think deeper." Ramona commented,

Hans and Vito both used the word "deeper" and made me realize that it is absolutely true that you can address the big ideas, the big curricular ideas, in all kinds of different ways. For instance, I can teach kids ecology, structure and function, life cycle, that's enough. We could do two more but...with the minnow study, we could spend a whole nine weeks and the kids were running out in the field having a riot identifying these minnows and they are learning about three or four of the big ideas. The deeper we go, the more those ideas come into play, the more they mesh together and they get a wonderful handle on all kinds of scientific habits of the mind.

She continued, "I would not have been able to justify in my mind how could we possibly spend nine weeks learning to measure streams. That is not in a biology book. How can we do that? Vito said this is how you should teach in any discipline—to the customer. It was all about the customer, the kids, not about the content particularly. The customer and coming up with a way of developing content that does go deeper."

Sharing with Students

Ramona received the National Presidential Award for Excellence in Science Teaching. From that experience Ramona noted:

I really have learned over the years to say more to kids about [my experiences]. That, in itself, going out of here to learn things is important to kids—more important than I realized. Until I went to Washington, D.C. and said quite a bit about that to kids, I really didn't realize that they liked that. I think most kids want you to do something to get to be better. I used to think kids would think that was bragging or what did that have to do with them. So I decided since we went to Washington, D.C., because kids thought that was cool, when I go

somewhere I come home and I tell them. I told them quite a bit about the No Child Left Behind. I took part of a period in each class, and I really think that's okay. They need to know what I'm thinking about and what I was learning. I'm hoping that it will get to be when I come home, they will ask, "What did you learn?" That'll be cool. I think way more with kids; I think kids are more interested than colleagues.

Benefits of Rural

Another essential component of Ramona's teaching career has been the rural setting. Teaching in a rural setting began as an unintentional choice. The decision to remain in a rural setting was very intentional. Ramona shared the following:

"I originally aspired to be one of those respected people who teach in a big school. I practice taught in a larger school; I always thought of the place I student taught at as a cool place to teach. It was a place where academics were very important. However, my first teaching position was in January at a small school. From there, I moved here. Now this is home. I'm proud of here and I care about here."

One of the school's grants, the Rural Challenge Grant also affected her feelings about the school and the community. "[The grant] made me realize that it does take a lot of people working at it to keep a community alive. Part of that sense of community also came from my dad who owned a car dealership in a smaller community; part came from the years spent teaching here." What parents and community members say and do also provides Ramona with a sense of appreciation for teaching in a rural setting. She stated,

It can just be, 'They're having a good time. Thank you.' I think the sense of community and people, just a few people who say things, acknowledge something in the paper or say something so you know that you're respected. I walked out of the building last night, and two people who have never waved to me who have kids in my class for the very first time, their sophomore is the oldest kid in their family, waved to me. One made me feel like, just the way she waved, my kid is glad to have you. It was so neat.

There are also personal preferences that have now become an engrained part of her teaching. Ramona shared, I like the freedom I have. I don't want to teach opposite two other chemistry teachers. And I want to have my space. I don't want to move from room to room. Those are the physical things. There are other things that have been

established—everybody knows I don't teach from a book. Nobody says a word to me. A new teacher comes in and doesn't follow the book and they are in hot water. I know I can do things the way I believe they should be done. Nobody questions that I take kids on a bus and go do something. I can go ten times out of my room, and they know we do something; but that's the key, they know we do something productive. The grant gave me a voice—a stronger voice, I think, than I would have had without it. Money talks. It gave me opportunities. What else has kept me here? I think I know the last names of students who get treated rotten and I'll be darned if I'll let that be. That's not to say I haven't mistreated some waifs in my day, but I try hard not to. I know who they are, not just by how they look. We have some kids who are probably dressed pretty decent but they are not treated decent.

Thoughts on Professional Development

Reflecting on her past professional development experiences, Ramona determined that the most effective experiences for her were connected to grants. However, she also shared thoughts about how schools need to improve both the teaching and the learning environment:

The way we deal with kids and the way we deal with hassles and parents, it's more important than the content. There has to be professional development, but there has to be follow-up. That's where the principal can provide the follow-up, the depth, the opportunity for reflection. What about having lesson plans be reflective journals? And how do you get people to be trusting enough to expose themselves, because that is what a reflective journal does. For me it was 100 times more productive. There isn't even a scale of how much more productive and worthwhile a conversation about what is going on in my room is. That's ten minutes. The interesting thing, to me, is that a leader who really has a handle on professional development could put teaching for understanding in the context of any subject area. In the Rural Challenge we weren't talking about math or science. In the Rural Challenge we were talking about people.

The fact that your school cares enough to send you, to pay for the sub, to let the community know that they care enough to do that, that has big impact, too. I really think that is one of the reasons kids don't question me that much. I laughingly say because I am getting grey hair it is more

important – I think it is true. The kids who are now seniors are the kids who know that I went to the State Department – that's a big deal.

Concerns

Even after years of teaching and numerous professional development experiences, Ramona questions the stability of her career. Having explained how she shares her experiences with students and the respect and interest they demonstrate in response, she asked, "What's going to be my next act? I'm getting old. How do I continue to stay connected with kids? Part of retaining older, people 50 and past, let's say, even 45, is how do they stay "with it"? Another concern she has is a time commitment. She stated, "I hate to admit it but I will honestly say that I dread the very first Sunday [after school begins]. Here is a whole other year of giving up Sundays. There has to be something exciting for me, too. It can't just be another year of giving up Sundays."

Promoting Professional Growth

What types of professional growth experiences help to retain high-quality teachers? Experiences that stretched Ramona's teaching included (a) the National Science Foundation—which exposed her to assessment and big ideas as curricular themes; (b) the Coalition of Essential Schools—which introduced her to student learning and thinking deeper; (c) the Rural Challenge—which informed her on curriculum of place; and (d) the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science Teaching—which encouraged teacher leadership and candidacy for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

In more general terms, Ramona identified the following as importance aspects for promoting her growth: (a) a culture that encourages growth and collegiality, (b) growth that relates to students, (c) growth that is relevant and long-lasting, (d) decisions/choices that are respected, and (e) growth that stretches thinking and is professionally challenging.

Ramona's description of what her needs for feeling a sense of professionalism and encouragement to grow mirror Blasé and Blasé's study on what teachers want from their principals. According to Blasé and Blasé (2001), school leaders need to (a) emphasize the study of teaching and learning, (b) support collaboration among educators, (c) develop coaching relationships, (d) encourage and support program redesign, (e) apply principles of adult learning, growth and development, and (f) implement action research to inform instructional decision making.

Retaining Teachers

Retaining high-quality teachers can be a challenge. According to Ramona the things that would keep her in the

profession include (a) having opportunities to grow, (b) feeling competent and appreciated, (c) being challenged, (d) connecting to students, and (e) sharing experiences with others.

The literature on retaining teachers addresses some of Ramona's needs as well as others. Darling-Hammond (2003) determined that (a) salary, (b) working conditions, (c) teacher preparation, and (d) mentoring support affected teacher retention. With salary, teachers were more likely to quit when they worked in districts that offered lower wages and when their salaries were low compared to alternative opportunities, especially in high-demand areas such as science and math. Working conditions were more important to experienced teachers than beginning teachers. Teacher's feeling about administrative support, resources and their input with decision making were crucial in determining whether or not they stayed in teaching. Teachers who lacked adequate initial preparation for teaching were more likely to leave the profession. The amount of mentoring support received in the initial stages of teaching also affected retention for beginning teachers. Mentoring also served to invigorate and challenge veteran teachers, thus providing them with an incentive to remain in teaching.

In a study that involved seven urban teachers in the Boston Public Schools, Nieto (2003) asked them what kept them teaching. Their responses included (a) autobiography—the teachers' identities were deeply implicated in their teaching; (b) love—the teachers' expressed a genuine love for their students; (c) hope and possibility—the teachers demonstrated their hope and faith in their students, in their own abilities, in their colleagues, and in public education; (d) anger and desperation—the teachers expressed anger at the injustices their students encountered such as poverty and racism; (e) intellectual work—the teachers engaged in curriculum development, research, and other professional growth opportunities; (f) democratic practice—the teachers were committed to social justice and the idea of democracy, fair play, and equality; and (g) ability to shape the future—the teachers realized the greater consequence their words and actions had on students. Nieto summarized, "If we are concerned about education as we say we are, then we need to do more to change the conditions faced by teachers, especially those in underfinanced and largely abandoned urban schools" (2003, p. 18).

Keeping Good Teachers

Keeping good teachers should be at the crux of administrators' efforts to improve student achievement. Nieto (2003) offered specific direction for those interested in retaining high-quality teachers. She believed we must (a) find ways to achieve promise of public education, (b) rethink teacher education, (c) prepare teachers for public service, and (d) rethink professional development. She also believed we need to (a) support teachers who love their

students, (b) support teachers who find creative ways to teach under difficult circumstances, (c) celebrate teachers who are as excited about their own learning as they are about the learning of their students, and (d) champion teachers who value their students' families and find respectful ways to work with them.

Conclusion

In the Education Trust publication, *Thinking K-16* (2004), Director Haycock, commented,

Sadly, as a nation we actually do *none* of the things you do when you value something as highly as most people say they value good teachers. We don't recruit them aggressively. We don't celebrate their accomplishments or compensate them in accordance with their value. We don't support their further development. And we don't create vehicles for them to share their expertise. Even more alarming, we don't even put into place the simple systems that could reliably identify which of our teachers are terrific at moving students from wherever they are academically to higher levels of achievement, and which teachers still need help to attain that level of effectiveness. (p. 1)

Principals can play a key role in recruiting teachers, celebrating teachers' accomplishments, supporting teacher professional development, and providing opportunities for teachers to share their expertise. In many ways because of the size and personalization of rural schools, principals in rural settings can establish an atmosphere that values good teaching. For instance, in support of her teaching, Ramona wanted her principal: (a) to establish a culture "for kids"—a culture that included respect, support, and a passion for students and student learning; (b) to provide opportunities for teachers to "have a voice" in teaching and in governance; (c) to create an atmosphere where all personnel are treated as professionals; (d) to provide and support purposeful professional development experiences; (e) to maintain ongoing conversations with teachers; and (f) to create an environment that reduces teacher isolation.

Blasé and Blasé (2001) identified a similar set of suggestions for principals: (a) avoid restrictive and intimidating approaches (administrative control gives way to collegiality); (b) believe in teacher choice and discretion; (c) integrate collaboration, coaching, inquiry, study groups, reflective discussion; (d) embrace growth and change; (e) respect teachers' knowledge and abilities; and (f) commit to school improvement and professional community.

Rural principals can do much to retain high-quality teachers; the actions needed do not involve extensive

training or finances. In general, they can pay attention to teachers' needs, establish a culture of trust and support, and provide teachers with opportunities to grow. They can also gain insight and additional solutions by listening to experienced, effective teachers and providing them with opportunities to share their expertise.

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