

TALENT RETENTION OF EDUCATORS IN SELECTED PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The shortage of and demand for teachers in South Africa are well published. Despite some efforts to improve educator numbers, a massive shortage of qualified educators still prevails. The retention of educators is vital as the flow of teachers into the educational system is not enough to cope with the demand for teachers in our growing school population. Several international studies have shown that it is much more economically sound to retain staff than trying to replace good quality staff members. The need therefore exists to explore the factors relating to the retention of quality teachers in selected private schools.

A qualitative research approach was followed using semi-structured interviews to gather data from educators (N=22) of selected private schools in Johannesburg. Theme analysis was applied.

The findings show that, currently, there is no single factor that affects staff retention in private schools. Educator retention is subject to several factors,

including remuneration, flexibility in work hours and environment, as well as managerial influences.

The results of this study could assist private educational institutions to recognise the importance of creating a broader strategy for talent management and retention which will influence institutional performance on all levels, and to understand the implications of using said strategies to facilitate an improved client service. A sustainable business model is vital amidst the volatility in the external environment and increased expectations of parents and learners for value education in an environment where personal care and attention is the norm. Private schools need to become more efficient to improve their return on investment.

Key Words: Educators, Private Schools, Talent Management, Talent Retention

JEL Classification: J24

1. INTRODUCTION

The educational sector in South Africa has undergone many transformations since 1994. It has evolved from the introduction and failure of Outcomes-based Education to Curriculum 2000, Curriculum 2005 and the introduction of the current Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (South African History On-Line (SAHO) 7 September 2017). Through all of this, the clamour for quality schools and educators remains unappeasable. With every curriculum change, the demand for training outweighs the capacity to provide it. The changing landscape and dynamic agenda of education requires the development of a refined holistic and integrated framework to implement and manage change as a talent value proposition within the educational sector. Quality education calls for quality educators.

Unfortunately, South Africa is facing a drastic shortage of qualified school teachers (Simkins, 2015). There are, according to a 2016 statistical study released by the Department of Education, roughly 435 000 educators across the country and more are needed. Retention strategies for educators are vital as the flow of teachers into the educational system is not enough to cope with the demand for teachers in our growing school-population. The loss of good quality educators and the resultant unsettling of learners when replacing these educators results in a substantial loss of teaching proficiency. This has a negative impact on the learning

success of the learners, especially in subjects requiring more intensive teacher-learner interaction.

Private schools in particular are faced with a myriad of obstacles, but the greatest threat that they face is poor service delivery through a lack of suitably qualified teachers (Savides, 2017). Qualified teachers are a scarce commodity that needs to be looked after and retained. Educator shortages are rife in the labour market because demand is greater than supply. Replacing educators within the private school environment is becoming increasingly difficult, as the pool of available talent with appropriate experience is shrinking significantly annually. Retaining quality educators is therefore vital for the survival of any private school. It is, however, not a simple matter of finances, but a mixture of different performance measures that determines a school's desirability as a preferred teaching institution for teachers. The private school environment is highly competitive, resulting in financial performance measurements not being sufficient to measure organisational success because financial data are historical and lack predictability.

The main objective of this research was to explore the factors relating to the retention of quality teachers in selected private schools in Johannesburg. South Africa has seen a boom in the private educational sphere, making the retention of qualified, dedicated educators progressively difficult. The significance of educators in a school calls for the retention of their qualified educators over a prolonged period of time for the sake of stability. In reality, a great amount of movement is evident in the educational sector as educators repeatedly move in and out of the system or between different schools. Identifying factors that contribute to educator retention at specific private schools in order to analyse causal factors of staff churn have to date not been widely explored in the South African context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Importance of retaining qualified teachers

The retention of valuable staff members is becoming increasingly difficult in today's competitive environment. Voluntary employee turnover as an organisational occurrence is prominent in a number of inauspicious organisational consequences. For example, researchers argue that workforce instability prevents employees from developing long-lasting interpersonal relationships and maintaining continuous knowledge transfer, both in a domestic (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005:146) and an expatriate setting (Lazarova & Tarique, 2005:361).

According to Phillips (2008:208), there are twelve categories of costs related to turnover that need to be taken into account. These include costs for: exit, recruiting, employment, orientation, training, wages and salaries paid while training, lost productivity, quality problems, customer dissatisfaction, loss of expertise or knowledge, management time for turnover and temporary replacement costs. A relief teacher is an expensive commodity that few schools can afford, threatening to leave learners without a teacher in a classroom for a prolonged period of time should a teacher wish to leave mid-term or even simply because the teacher teaches a particular subject where a replacement teacher is hard to find.

Shaw *et al.* (2005:594) point out that the loss of key organisational staff can severely damage an organisation's social fabric which, in turn, could lead to important decreases of a work group's performance outputs. Losing talented educators results in potential performance losses such as an impact on a school's results, a key indicator used by parents when selecting a school. It can also have a long term negative impact on a school if the departing educator leaves gaps in a school's execution capability and human resource functioning. This not only includes lost productivity, but also possibly loss of work team cohesion and social good will.

Excessive labour turnover can therefore not be accepted blithely as it results in both financial costs and pressures to the organisational development and maturity by increasing organisational vulnerability to threats. The degree to which a school, its staff members, property, resources and social activity are susceptible to harm, degradation or destruction largely influences the desirability to teach at a specific school. Educator turnover increases especially if school managers expose the school to potential risks to their core competence and to the loss of learners. The omnipresent teacher-learner ratio is a very real measure of the sustainability of the teacher workforce in a school. When learners leave, the job security of educators is at risk.

2.2. Drivers of educator turnover

Rewards: Existing literature highlights reasons like recruitment methods, managerial acumen, an unwelcoming work environment, the absence of recognition programmes and a poor remuneration structure for a high employee turnover in organisations (Abassi & Hollman, 2000:303; Sherman *et al.*, 2006:8). When educators experience a lack of recognition, they will seek to find it

elsewhere. This concurs with the findings by Johnson (2000:140) which shows that two-thirds of respondents in the research admitted that lack of appreciation was the major factor in driving them to leave their organisations.

Career progress: Inadequate opportunities to be sent on courses, seminars or workshops to enhance skills development and pedagogical knowledge are also contributing factors to a high staff turnover as no investment in upskilling them is perceived (Cappelli, 2000). This leads to the belief that staff members are undervalued and not worthy of investment. These are both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational drivers that may assist educational managers to increase employee retention in their schools.

On-boarding practices: Educators often express concerns about the academic progress of learners when they are faced with new or new-to-school teachers. Even when teachers continue in the same school, they can shift roles by moving to another grade and/or even other subjects (Chingos & West, 2011:30).

Job-person mismatch: New educators and school managers are habitually in “survival mode” during their first year (Green, Adendorff, & Mathebula, 2014). Impelling a cohort of new educator graduates into the system will not in itself serve to improve the average level of qualifications of employed educators. Substantial financial costs are associated with educator turnover. Add to this dilemma that many educators are not teaching the subjects they are qualified for or specialised in, or are teaching in a phase in which they were not trained or in which they did their teaching practice.

Evaluating the degree to which this is occurring should provide a more accurate assessment of the match between educator supply and demand, particularly in those subject areas and phases where the need is most prominent.

Private ‘corporate’ culture: To retain a good, talented workforce, the organisation has to create a positive environment conducive to the output required (Munish & Agarwal, 2017:145). The authors further postulate that successful organisations tend to respect their employees and adapt their policies to be more flexible for the benefit of employees so that a greater level of employee engagement can be achieved. They conclude that retention is the process in which an employer takes steps to prevent job switching of their key employees. School leaders are inter alia required to improve the running and functioning of their schools. The school may need to employ a stand-in educator for a term to allow the new permanent educator to fulfil contractual agreements first.

Work-life balance: In a sector where the ideals of family values and a caring environment are often marketed as selling points by a school, the unique needs of the talented woman-employee have to be catered for. Maternity leave benefits or opportunities for caring for elders are examples of what should be given special consideration by the school management. Many high-potential and talented educators leave their school careers when they find that they cannot do justice to their maternal and other family responsibilities if they continue in their jobs (Srinivasan, 2011).

Performance management: The retention policy in schools should incorporate some facets of business organisations where talent retention forms part of the business strategy in order to improve productivity and, subsequently, profit. When staff members are promoted only because they have seniority due to the number of years that they have been at a school, younger, innovative and hardworking educators are demotivated and this may push them to seek greener pastures in the private business sector or even seek better opportunities abroad.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Research approach

A qualitative research approach was followed, using grounded theory within an interpretative paradigm. In broad terms, qualitative research is an approach that allows one to examine people's experiences in detail (Hennink *et al.*, 2011:111). Qualitative methods generally aim to understand the experiences and attitudes of interviewees. These methods aim to answer questions about the 'what', 'how' or 'why' of a phenomenon rather than 'how many' or 'how much', which are answered by quantitative methods. As educators will be interviewed about 'why' they would leave or 'how' they can be retained, a qualitative method will be employed. A case study strategy was selected to conduct the research. The case study strategy was considered most appropriate, as the researcher wanted to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in the real-life context (Creswell, 2012:19).

3.2. Sampling

The sample for this study was teachers (N=22) from five selected private schools in Johannesburg. Most of the participants were female (N=19) with a combined average of more than 15 years of educational experience (N=12). Most participants were in possession of an Honours Degree as their highest level of

education (N=12) and were appointed in school management positions (N=12). Access was negotiated and/or obtained to enter the research setting by contacting the principals of the different institutions and seeking permission in writing from the educational corporations that own the particular private schools in which the intended research was to be conducted. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to conducting the research.

3.3. Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data from the participants. According to Babbie (2010:32) semi-structured interviews allow the free flow of ideas. Explorative and descriptive questions were used to collect data during semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions (Mouton, 2001:56). A recording device was used to ensure the accurate transcription of all data collected during the interviews and focus groups (Stuckey, 2014:6).

3.4. Data analysis

Theme (content) analysis was done to analyse the data. Content analysis has the capacity to demonstrate how data can be analysed in a systematic and methodical way, in order to guarantee rigour. The data was coded to identify patterns that could assist in understanding the large volume of information obtained during the interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted across all the data to identify the common issues that recur, and identify the main themes that summarise all the views collected (De Vos, 2017:5). The quality and rigour of the study was ensured by confirming the accuracy of transcribed notes with participants as well as through peer debriefing (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007:49; Robert *et al.*, 2006:43). Prior permission for the use of the recordings was obtained from the respondents (Brikci, 2009).

4. FINDINGS

The researcher identified seven themes from the combined responses of the participants. Table 1 presents the themes that emerged most often from the interviews. They are ordered from the most to least frequent themes.

Table 1: Themes from the interviews

	Themes
1	Rewards
2	Career progression
3	On-boarding practices
4	Job person mismatch
5	Private “corporate” culture
6	Work life balance
7	Performance Management

4.1. Theme 1: Rewards

Educators at private schools, especially those with esteem and self-actualisation drive, like any other employees in the private business sector, want to be appreciated and rewarded. It need not necessarily be with money, but by openly acknowledging their achievements and contribution to the attainment of organisational goals and objectives. Participants stated the following:

1. “I think it would be nice if you got a little bit extra for going the extra mile. So, if you put yourself out there for extra hours in like sport hours, whatever, I think there must be a little bit of something nice. I think that could be nice”. Head of Department, Social Sciences, 39, Female, 16 years’ experience.
2. “I feel like there is no appreciation for what we are doing in the class. There is not enough recognition being given to the teacher”. Educator, 26, Female, 3 years’ experience.
3. “I feel that the salary for new teachers isn’t in line with what other schools are prepared to pay and I feel that it is almost like a negative for my current school”. Head of Department, 41, Female, 18 years’ experience.

4.2. Theme 2: Career progress

In order to ensure that the most ambitious and effective educators stay for ten years and beyond, school systems should create career progression opportunities that allow educators to gradually earn leadership positions that meet their aspirations, provide them the time to serve, and compensate them appropriately.

There are many specialised paths that school systems can create for educators' various interests and strengths. Participants stated the following:

1. "Being given a bit more responsibility as well as having a bit more opportunities for growth will contribute to me staying. The responsibilities and assisting a grade head. That is playing a big role in keeping me here now". Educator, 32, Female, 8 years' experience.
2. "I was pushed out of my comfort zone a lot. It was amazing. I think it developed me as a person and developed me as a teacher. Even the bad things. I feel it taught me a lot about how to handle situations. I learned from even the things that weren't so good". Educator, 28, 5 years' experience.
3. "Development is a very important thing for me because I don't want to be stuck in the same position for ten years. If I feel like growing and development is becoming a challenge for me then by all means I would have to move on". Educator, 26, Female, 3 years' experience.

4.3. Theme 3: On-boarding practices

When educators move from one school to another where educators are expected to coach sport, it is often found that, though sought after in the classroom, they are lacking in offering sport, culture or other activities that take place outside the classroom. These extra-mural needs may also be specific to a particular school and the educator may not have been exposed to gaining the necessary experience in such activities at a previous school. Participants stated the following:

1. "In terms of the tools I felt there could have been a mentor. There could have been somebody to help and assist me. It was no – you are in the deep end – sink or swim and carry on. I also feel now with the new staff coming in there should be some sort of buddy system or someone to check up on them". Subject Head, 42, Female, 14 years' experience.
2. "I don't think anyone knows what they are doing when they start a job. I was given all the tools that I needed but it was me not really using them correctly and those first few months. That was the problem." Educator, 46, Female, 21 years' experience.
3. "Only after term one I started to settle in. The buddy system was in place but not effective. It was probably because the personalities of us both were introverted, and we just never got together". Educator, 33, Female, 10 years' experience.

4.4. Theme 4: Job-person mismatch

The mismatch of educators forced to teach a subject for which they have no passion leads to unhappiness that will soon grow into a desire to leave the school. Even when a subject that is a passion is taught, the curriculum is often so restrictive that an educator may feel that it is better to pursue the passion for that subject outside the classroom environment and leave the educational sector. Participants stated the following:

1. “I was told never to be a teacher. Rather be a doctor or a lawyer. And yet I became a teacher so I think my advice to them would be to if that is truly what they want to make sure they understand what they are doing because a lot of us think teaching is just standing in front giving information”. Head of Department, 53, Female, 29 years’ experience.
2. “I kind of just ended up in teaching because I still did not know what I wanted to do, and it was something that my dad wanted me to do. He kept pushing and said just try it. When I went to my first teaching practical, I actually loved it”. Educator, 27, Female, 4 years’ experience.
3. “I have always wanted to be a teacher, but I did not pick it at first. Loved it but realised I could never because I have an aggressive personality and in my final year decided “oops I should have stuck with my gut” and I went into teaching 4 or 5 years into varsity. It is not one reason. Loved the subject, loved working with people but seeing the change”. Educator, 28, Female, 2 years’ experience.

4.5. Theme 5: Private ‘corporate’ culture

Schools within a more corporate environment often do not allow principals to have hiring autonomy due to the red tape involved in hiring a new educator. The process of appointment permission is often long and tedious. In delaying the appointment of a candidate that was successfully interviewed, the desired candidate may already have been snatched up by another school. Participants stated the following:

1. “I think especially in a corporate school where we are doing it with a corporation not just with education and a school we have conflicting and competing missions in a sense and I think that things need to happen and when they happen it needs to happen on time and properly and I think that is what

management can definitely do better”. Head of IT/CAT, 56, Male, PhD in Physics, 31 years’ experience.

2. “I think currently my frustration that is just going to tip me over the edge is that I feel I’m being micro-managed by the head office and the pressure of getting results or getting that average. I feel that pressure is getting more every year and there is more expected of the teacher rather than of the learner. It is like what are you doing to get the learner through; there is no accountability on the learner’s part”. Head of Department, 41, Female, 18 years’ experience.

4.6. Theme 6: Work-life balance

During exit interviews, ladies often state that their salaries can easily be made up by the husband working an extra hour or two or that the cost of a nanny and transport, together with the advantage gained by spending time with their own children, outweigh the benefit of a second salary for the family. Participants stated the following:

1. “Realistically it sounds like a fabulous job because you get the holidays off and people think we work a half-day job but, it is not. You are taking marking home. It is hours and hours of extra lessons and it is not only that it is almost the emotional investment of yourself as well”. Head of Department, 41, Female, 18 years’ experience.
2. “Obviously when hockey is very busy during that second term it is a lot more difficult to keep a work-life balance with gym and family etc., but I have learned to allow more off that this year. Most of the time yes, when it is busy at work no but most of the time, I get it done”. Educator, 26, Female, 1 years’ experience.

4.7. Theme 7: Performance management

The introduction of an open, fair and transparent performance appraisal system that leads to the promotion of staff members on merit and not merely on seniority should form part of the school’s retention strategy. Participants stated the following:

3. “I feel I am not being recognised for what I am doing. I am talking about my own circumstances because every year I’ve had to take over from someone in my department or the person we’ve hired wasn’t fulfilling their duties and I had to keep stepping in”. Head of Department, 41, Female, 18 years’ experience.

1. “I certainly feel acknowledged from my direct head, even if it was in an email. Small things were definitely there. There was a relationship and there was certainly a support from our operational head in terms of the staff”. Educator, 30, Male, 4 years’ experience.

5. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research was to explore the factors relating to the retention of quality teachers in selected private schools. Remuneration remains an important element in turnover. Salary disparity was also identified as one of the factors causing academics to leave their profession. The results further showed that the participants’ level of satisfaction with their pay and the nature of the work were significant in terms of predicting or explaining their overall commitment to the organisation. Critical to the understanding of targeted incentives, particularly increased salary, is that while research has consistently shown that salary increases prolong teachers’ tenure in the field, an adequate salary is necessary but not sufficient for teacher retention. Pay and nature of work are associated with the behaviour that governs an individual’s career motivation and decisions to stay with a company (Abassi & Hollman, 2000:303; Sherman *et al.*, 2006:8).

The study revealed that job satisfaction, salary, recognition and promotion are important among the educators who took part in this study. Job satisfaction is consistently negatively associated with employee turnover. Job satisfaction was identified as the most important aspect, as this was linked to interaction with learners. Educators who were interviewed reported overall good job satisfaction, believing that their own work is valuable, or that something worthwhile is accomplished in the job (Cappelli, 2000; Chingos & West, 2011:30; Munish & Agarwal, 2017:145).

This study had some limitations. A qualitative research approach was used only focusing on teachers in a specific regional area. As such the results cannot be generalised to other schools and regions as well. The sample was limited to private school teachers and management. For future studies it is recommended that a comparative study is done to identify key retention factors for both public and private schools.

This research makes important practical contributions. The findings show that a strategic management plan is vital amidst the volatility in the external environment and increased expectation of parents and learners for value education in an environment where personal care and attention is the norm. Private school

managers need to become more in tune with the staff in their care. The research provided some insight into the desire of educators regarding their professional development and developing strong collegial relationships. Lastly, it may establish significant trends in leadership support from management and result in the consideration of alternative remuneration practices.

6. CONCLUSION

Teaching is often described as a calling, rather than a career. This is often done to placate educators when comparing remuneration of educators with other professions. Though teaching can definitely be perceived as a calling, it is certainly a career that holds the same promises, opportunities, pitfalls and challenges as a multitude of other professions. The establishment of methods to create a more empowered work environment with greater autonomy for educators is essential. A combination of teacher retention and new teacher training is vital to ensure that the demand for quality educators is met. After all, most educators are passionate about education and thrive on the idea that they are shaping the future through their daily interactions with learners. They adore teaching and working with children and endeavour to increase their impact at their respective schools, clusters, districts, provinces and on a national level. Holding on to these quality educators necessitates school management teams to implement specific strategies aimed at retention.

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