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The Experiences of Southeastern Massachusetts K-12 Teachers and Factors that Influenced Retention During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Author Acknowledgement
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Over the past two decades, concerns about teacher shortages have been consistent. While some states seem to be more affected than others, even those with excellent teacher preparation programs, such as Massachusetts, have had between 5% to 15.4% attrition, which is considerably higher than countries like Finland, Singapore, and Canada (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023b; Sutcher et al., 2019). Some of the reasons cited for U.S. teacher shortages include low pay, standardized testing, lack of autonomy, poor leadership, student apathy, and fear of school violence (Ingersoll et. al., 2021; Sutcher et al., 2019). When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down U.S. schools in 2020, an entirely new set of challenges threatened teacher retention. Investigated through the lens of Herzberg’s two-factor theory on hygiene and motivation (Evans, 1970) teachers’ descriptions of their COVID-19 experiences reveal the aspects that most influenced their decisions to remain in the profession.

Issues Facing Education

Teachers perform a critical public service that is necessary for communities to thrive. At the beginning of the 2023 school year, with Covid-19 well behind us, the outlook for hiring and retaining teachers remained poor. In the Northeast alone, 48% of districts were understaffed (Drysdale, 2023). In Boston, alone, there were 219 teaching vacancies (Hager, 2022). The problem of attracting and retaining educators is not going to be alleviated anytime soon. It is critical that teachers’ working conditions improve now.

Comparing public service workers in terms of salary, educational requirements, recruitment, and retention identifies disparities and allows us to work toward equalizing and supporting these pillars of public service and livelihood of society.

On the surface, teachers’ salaries are modest when compared with other public service professions that require similar or less education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023c). In Massachusetts, the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics show that police officers, who are not required to have a degree at all, earned a mean salary of $73,290 in 2022 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023a). Teacher qualifications include a teaching license as well as a master’s degree in the educator’s teaching assignment (Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2023a). The mean salary for a licensed high school teacher in 2022
was $82,960. Teacher salaries in high-poverty districts are even lower (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Often, the effects of poor school leadership are more significant than any other factor in teacher attrition (Ladd, 2011). For example, laissez-faire leadership, described as passive, avoidant, and non-authoritative, has been correlated with increased anxiety and depression for teachers (Van der Vyer et al., 2020). When administrators fail to properly support educators, those teachers either move to other districts or leave the profession altogether.

Finally, student apathy and behavior, especially with the possibility of demonstrating violent behavior, can drive teachers away from the profession (Farmer, 2020; Peist et al., 2020).

**New Circumstances**

In 2020, an entirely new set of circumstances beset school districts, administrators, teachers, students, and their families; COVID-19. Teaching conditions before the pandemic were already grim with teaching shortages predicted to worsen with each passing year. No one could predict how the COVID-19 pandemic would impact the daily lives of teachers or how many would remain in the classroom. In October 2022, the Boston Globe reported 800 teaching and other support vacancies exclusive to the Boston Public School System, and a widespread increase in teacher turnover by 15% compared to data analyzed from 2019 (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2022). Teachers’ reflections on their experiences during the pandemic reveals much about teacher resilience and retention when faced with drastic changes to the delivery of instruction.

**Goal of Research**

The goal of this research was to understand southeastern Massachusetts K-12 teachers’ experiences and the factors that influenced retention both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers of this study all reside in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They all work in the education industry and all the researchers have either children or grandchildren enrolled in Massachusetts public schools at the time of this study. Therefore, the desire to understand the factors contributing to the barriers to teacher retention served as a motivator to conduct this study.

The research incorporated Frederic Herzberg’s two-factor theory on hygiene and motivation factors (Evans, 1970) as a lens to capture the lived experiences of these Massachusetts educators. Literature was integrated into the findings to substantiate the impact on teaching and instruction in a COVID-19 pandemic classroom setting as well as during the transition back into the classroom. The significance of this research will better inform both educators and administrators employed in the K-12 public school system of the needs of
educators and students with an emphasis on the importance of engagement in a
distance learning format. The next section will discuss the framework and
methodology that was used as a lens for this research.

Framework and Methodology

Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory
Since this research was designed to identify the barriers and challenges
that exist causing K-12 teacher turnover, Herzberg’s two-factor theory, also
known as motivation-hygiene theory, was used as a lens for this study. In
addition, this theory was also chosen because it deals directly with the situations
at a workplace that this study sought to unearth through the participants’ lived
experiences. Herzberg (1968) developed a theory that posited that human
satisfaction can be influenced by two factors: the motivator and hygiene.

Motivators involve the intrinsic context of the job such as engagement,
retention, recognition, achievement, promotion, salary, and personal growth,
whereas hygiene factors extrinsic such as workplace conditions, relationship
between coworkers, administration/leadership, and remuneration. Alternatively,
hygiene factors are vital to evade dissatisfaction.

Methodology
A qualitative, narrative inquiry was used for this study to gain and
understand the participant’s lived experiences. The study’s design included a
semi-structured interview protocol that included twenty questions that allowed the
researchers to engage in the participant’s storytelling beliefs, opinions as it relates
to our study’s research question: “How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the
Southeastern Massachusetts K-12 teacher experience related to retention?”

All 10 participants were recruited with a standard recruitment message
posted on the Massachusetts Educators United Facebook page and the
incorporation of snowballing through professional networks to facilitate
interviews with participants employed as educators in K-12 settings throughout
southeastern Massachusetts (see Appendix A).

Results

Teachers’ Experiences Shifting Learning Modalities
Embracing change can be extremely difficult, especially when an
individual is facing uncertainty. In this section, we analyze teachers’ experiences
while pivoting learning modalities from in-person learning to remote learning, to
hybrid learning, and back to in-person learning over a 2-year span.
Remote Instruction
In March 2020, most Massachusetts K-12 schools transitioned entirely remote in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to keep students, teachers, and staff safe. As a result of having limited knowledge of the virus, the reaction and transition of the educational system was very abrupt. As COVID-19 was unexpected and carried potentially life-threatening consequences, it was highly disruptive and left little time to transition the stakeholders involved. Educators were expected to transition to remote teaching quickly and effectively while acclimating to a new, frightening way of life.

Hybrid Instruction
Many educators had trouble with teaching split audiences at the same time; remote and in-person, even though stakeholders viewed hybrid classes as progress toward in-person instruction. “Even with the hybrid model, I'm still teaching a computer screen. Educators questioned the benefits to the students who were remote as they divided their attention between online and in-person students. The transition was difficult and presented many barriers for both parties. However, the transition back to the classroom was equally difficult as described by the participants in the next section.

In-Person Instruction
The participants concurred that transitioning back to teaching in-person full time provided a sense of normalcy, while presenting new challenges. Participant B asserted that the students “needed to come back. I needed to be back. Slowly, I've been trying to increase the rigor. Asking a little more of them. Have a little more responsibility” (Participant B, personal communication, March 4, 2022). While all the teachers agreed they wanted to be back in class, it was hard for them not to feel what had been lost and recognize the insurmountable change that had occurred. Conversely, student-teacher relationships improved in some cases.

Lack of Guidance
Participants shared that one of the most difficult aspects of the transition was the fact they struggled with little to no guidance from leaders and decision makers. Participant A claims they “had no guidance. We had nothing. I had my school-sponsored computer that I had already had for the last two years, with nothing else. Everything else we found on our own” (Participant A, personal communication, March 6, 2022).

Technology
Tome, Gromova, and Hatch (2021) acknowledged the difficulty of technology and the process of knowledge management in transitioning to an online environment and how COVID-19 impacted the ability of competent people to become incompetent based on the social and environmental factors attributed to
the ability to function under this crisis. The participants expressed how the lack of training and technical issues impacted their ability to balance instruction with their ability to instruct effectively.

**Lack of Student Engagement**

Among the most significant challenges were students’ lack of attentiveness and how to measure student engagement, particularly in Zoom meetings where webcam usage was not enforced. Additionally, masks obscured the expressions of in-person students, making it difficult for teachers to assess their comprehension through non-verbal cues. Some students did not attend school in person or online, which necessitated communication with parents - some of whom were not supportive.

It appeared educators did not know when or how hard to push or where to push to gain parental and student attention. For instance, “When we first shut down, students weren't showing up to any remote classes” (Participant F, personal communication, March 4, 2022). Even when educators got the attention of parents or students, they weren’t exactly sure what to do with it because they were building the plan as they went and were at the mercy of administrators who were doing the exact same thing.

Participant A expressed that other students needed more support and resources to engage, for example, “One of the kids [I was teaching] was severely autistic. He would just sit there and cry online because he couldn't understand what we were doing. It didn't matter what I was showing online or sharing on his screen or anything like that. He needed someone right there to touch the screen, for him to touch the paper” (Participant A, personal communication, March 6, 2022). This participant provides a vivid example of how educators faced challenges in assisting students with disabilities in an environment that presents more difficulty as it presents the same level of issues for traditional students who struggle to focus on an online format.

**Coping and Teacher Resilience**

Resilience is defined as “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands” (APA, 2023, para. 1). Teachers cited several factors that contributed to their resilience throughout the pandemic. Mindset, mindfulness, relationships with colleagues, and positive reinforcement affected teachers’ ability to cope with challenges.

**Support from Colleagues**

Relationships with colleagues were the factor mentioned most when teachers described their ability to adjust to pandemic teaching. Many of the participants reported that they shared their feelings and concerns with each other in the workplace more often. Checking in on colleagues became easier to do...
during the online teaching phase when students were not physically present. Participant A grew very close to one supportive colleague and commented, “So when she retires in a few years that’s when I’m going to go, ‘Oh, maybe I shouldn’t be here anymore” (Participant A, personal communication, March 6, 2022). These connections provided the essential support educators needed to handle stressors and fulfill their roles confidently.

One Year Later

One year after the initial participant interviews, the same teachers were asked to answer follow-up questions regarding whether their roles had changed and how they described their job satisfaction post-Covid. The questions were delivered via email in a Google form. Five of the ten participants responded.

Role Consistency

In response to the question, “In what ways, if any, has your role changed since before the pandemic?” three teachers explained that their roles had become more complicated by students’ behavioral and mental health issues. They reported a heightened awareness of students’ social-emotional needs and the demands this added to teaching, including an increased focus on classroom management with less time for instruction. Two of the same respondents noted a need for more mental health counselors but also said that the time students spent with counselors was disruptive to instruction.

Post-Covid Challenges

Current challenges include curbing students’ cellphone use, wandering the halls during classes, low learning motivation, safety, lack of support for rigor and discipline, and an increased need for special services such as learning accommodations and modifications.

Teachers were also asked whether they have enough support and resources to effectively manage their job challenges and responsibilities. Four of the five respondents said they did not have the administrative support they needed. The support teachers said they needed most was more mental health professionals in the school to deal with students’ social-emotional issues throughout each day.

Job Satisfaction

Overall job satisfaction was low. Two participants said they were satisfied with their current work circumstances. One respondent explained, “I am satisfied with my job and feel that the problems we face are not unique to our school. The challenges here are the same as at most other public schools.” Others reported feeling burnt out, frustrated by the inconsistent messaging and lack of disciplinary support from the administration, or that the school was not moving forward as it should be since the pandemic. One teacher divulged wanting to leave the profession entirely.
Teachers’ Well-Being and Administrative Initiatives

Teachers’ assessments of their own wellness ranged from 1-4 on a scale of 4. The median wellness score was 3 out of 4, with 4 being the highest sense of wellness. When teachers were asked to describe how they cope with job-related stress, planning, exercising, healthy eating, and maintaining positive relationships with family, friends, and colleagues were listed. One respondent also noted the importance of “freeing their mind” from work on the weekends and not bringing work home or volunteering to chaperone or advising student activities. Another admitted to feeling fatigued. Two participants interpreted the questionnaire item as a classroom management question, indicated by the responses, “I have them under control” and “I am falling behind and working late every day.”

Recommendations (to improve workplace hygiene)

Offer Professional Development

The practice of industry offering professional development has been the subject of a wide body of research for many years. This body of research has revealed professional development as one of the many but important factors associated with teacher attrition and retention that are important in shaping teachers’ decisions to stay in or leave the profession (Borman et al., 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Nguyen et al., 2020). To this end, Participant H noted the importance of professional development to what was described as feeling like “we matter” and that offering professional development was a good way for this participant and their fellow teachers to feel “engaged” (personal communication, March 18, 2022). Additionally, the practice of offering professional development provides teachers with opportunities to receive feedback, support and collaboration, and to build learning communities with fellow teachers, support staff, and administration (Avalos, 2011; Borko et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). When asked about the impact of professional development offered to them and their teaching staff, Participant D, a new administrator, said, “we did the same thing the teachers did, so it was basically so that we could understand what they were doing (personal communication, March 21, 2022). Moreover, “we were like building the ship as we were kind of flying it at the same time, and the priority was to make sure the teachers could give the students what they need” (Participant D, personal communication, March 21, 2022).

Effective Online Pedagogy and Technology Training

Teachers’ technological needs were greater than what their fellow teachers could support. Participants struggled with adjusting to online navigation and keeping up with engaging virtual instruction. As a result, some schools offered their teachers professional development, but many went without and had to do the best they could with the limited experience they had. Participant A confirmed that
initially, it was “tough because we had no training, but we did manage to get a person who helped with the technology” (Participant, A, personal communication, March 6, 2022). In reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on K-12 educators and in an ideal world, school districts would have added additional training and provided the needed educator support, specifically targeting methods to engage students in a virtual setting. Face-to-face learning pedagogy differs from online learning pedagogy; therefore, teachers would require professional development and training to equip them with the competencies necessary to be successful if both are necessary.

**Soft Skills Training**

In addition to online teaching pedagogy, soft skill development expanding teacher knowledge and experience in topics such as change management and crisis management to aid in adjusting to unexpected and rapidly changing situations would have been helpful. Leadership training for both teachers and administrators focused on communicating during times of uncertainty, or overcoming resistance to change, are other effective subject matters. Perhaps educational leaders could undergo formal training to learn how to properly coach teachers through unexpected changes, or teachers could be trained directly for districts with larger professional development budgets.

**Foster Collaboration, Community, and Connection**

With training, school districts could develop more professional opportunities to create committees that will focus on a new strategic plan designed to address crisis management and how to best use technology to facilitate positive interaction with the students.

A peer support or mentorship program designed for educators to share experiences and ideas about strengthening their relationships with students could enhance the classroom environment. Peer support can be instrumental in creating positive dialogue and a sense of hope for educators who struggle in classrooms, especially when students are virtually only present.

**Enhance Student Engagement**

As a result of COVID, the findings suggest that students developed a mindset that just being present, but not fully engaged, was an acceptable practice. The residual lack of accountability and hyper-flexibility during such a tumultuous time perpetuated unrealistically low expectations which impacted their ability to stay motivated and on track with their level of expected learning. Now that students are back in the classroom full time, school districts and educators must reacquaint students with realistic expectations that include classroom engagement and collaboration. As with any transition, the adjustment period will take time and patience. Equally, students and their families must understand the importance of their role in helping students adjust to more rigorous expectations and how academic standards contribute to academic success.
Motivation Level and Workplace Dynamics

The relationship between school workplace dynamics and its impact on teacher job satisfaction and safety was identified by Participant E. The participant reflected on their first arrival at the school and key areas of need for administration to focus on and the participant noted “We talked a lot about psychological safety.” Participant D’s reflection of their lived experience recognizes the need to effectively foster a school climate that allows for openness and transparency so that the teaching community can feel “psychologically safe” and “show up their best self every day and recognizing when you're not showing up for your best self and knowing that it's okay to tell [me], but I'm not going to judge you” (Participant D, personal communication, March 21, 2022). This reflection by the participants is what is identified as contributing to a positive impact and job satisfaction for their teachers.

Wellbeing/ Burnout Factor

While Herzberg’s two-factor theory states that compensation can add to the educator's value system, this study showed that recognition and support were more significant in motivating and retaining talented educators. Educators who felt supported - even when the support came primarily from colleagues - felt more optimistic about continuing their careers after the Covid-19 pandemic. For teachers, that optimism is critical to the future of public education because the demand is greater than the financial rewards. Further, the demand is greater than the supply in terms of the teacher shortage.

Conclusion

This research inquiry revealed the challenges faced by K-12 educators in southeastern Massachusetts during the COVID-19 pandemic, how they navigated instructional barriers, and the hygiene factors that influenced teacher retention. The online and hybrid instructional models used during COVID-19 were compared with in-person classrooms one year later to determine the remaining challenges and whether teachers’ motivation to remain in the profession was unchanged. The researchers applied Herzberg’s two-factor theory to understand COVID-19’s implications for workplace conditions, coworker relationships, and leadership, as they relate to teacher motivation and retention. Potential recommendations for helping educators thrive in uncertain workplace conditions are derived through the voices of the participants in the study.

The findings of this study contradict Herzberg’s 2-factor theory in several ways. First, this study found that, although the participants reported low job satisfaction, they exhibited high motivation despite grim working conditions. Workplace conditions are argued to influence worker motivation levels (Herzberg 1968). A positive correlation exists between the work environment at school and
the teachers' job satisfaction level (Arifin, 2015; Aris, et al., 2011; Shahram et al., 2013; Kumar & Kumar, 2014; Muhammad, 2015). The inconsistency of this finding may be explained in part by Lin and Liu’s (2012), proposition that a workplace fostering creativity will more likely motivate its workers to successfully complete their tasks and engage in their organization. Learning how to create and record video lessons that could be used asynchronously and inventing ways to engage and interest students stimulated demanded creativity. Although the urgency of these demands posed additional stressors for teachers, they were able to remain motivated, resilient, and productive.

Future recommendations for teacher retention include motivating teachers by providing relevant, forward-looking opportunities for learning and growth. While no one could have predicted the Covid-19 pandemic, progressive thinking, in some cases, may circumvent the need for emergency professional development, which adds stress to the work environment. While the participants in this study were not focused on earning high salaries, recognition of teachers’ effort, educational achievements, and increasing their earnings are strong motivators for retention (Mustapha & Shahwahid’s 2014). Hygiene factors for administrators to consider include improving workplace conditions and fostering positive relationships between colleagues and administrators.
About the Authors

Cheryl Hebert, Ed. D., (she/her/hers) is an independent scholar and public-school educator. Dr. Hebert earned a doctoral degree in education with a concentration in curriculum, teaching, leadership, and learning from Northeastern University in 2020. Her research interests include K-12 literacy, civic engagement, and teacher wellness.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Study’s Participant Profile

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<th>School Level</th>
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<td>High School</td>
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