Freedom and Confidence in the Classroom: The Impact of School Policy on Teacher Job Satisfaction

Lebanon High School

Armando Salinas, Agatha La Voie, Anna Glasgow, Judy Guo, Christine Wu

SOCY 11: Research Methods

Dartmouth College

Literature Review

Teachers arguably have one of the toughest and most important jobs out there. With long hours and low wages compounded by an overwhelming number of non-pandemic and pandemic factors, understanding what impacts teacher retention is an especially challenging problem. Understanding retention is even more difficult given its very nature—once teachers are gone, they are gone; therefore, we look to current teacher satisfaction to understand teacher retention. While there has been little research on teacher job satisfaction specifically, we can extrapolate from other studies of essential workers that observe how certain factors influence job satisfaction and retention. One quantitative study from 2015 found that improving staff break areas for nurses alleviated stress—improving their job satisfaction—and thereby improved staff retention (Nejati, Rodiek, & Shepley, 2016). Furthermore, a six-year longitudinal study published in 2020 on working mothers proved that we can make robust causal inferences about the effects of working mothers' work life balance satisfaction on their actual job retention (Fan and Potočnik, 2021).

Other existing literature shows that teacher satisfaction is heavily influenced by a school's microenvironment—in other words, its classrooms—as defined by individual teacher, student, and school characteristics, and its macroenvironment, its relationships amongst and between faculty and administration. Teachers that are younger, female, and have higher ACT scores are more likely to leave after five years, and especially if they are employed at "hard-to-staff" urban schools or schools that are poorer and more diverse (Achinstein et al., 2010; Parrot, 2010). While Lebanon High School is not urban, it nonetheless has racial diversity and a wide range of socioeconomic classes that ultimately have impacts on teacher retention. Demands and uncertainty plague teachers constantly especially with COVID-19 pandemic and its associated transition period; Lebanon High School is not unique in struggling with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout as has occurred with the shifting teaching environments (Pressley, 2021). Researchers have studied many dimensions of relationships within schools, namely the relations between administration and teachers and the general feelings of

amicability and efficacy within such interactions. Of these factors, they found the importance of intrinsic factors such as student attachment, fostering teacher autonomy, having a shared teacher identity, and creating a positive teacher perception of school administration in having the greatest impact on teacher retention and mitigating stress, as well as the importance of extrinsic motivating factors like material incentives (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Boyd et al. 2011).

While schools cannot control for their teacher or students' demographics nor their teachers' student attachment (Nelson, 2017) and also may not be able to feasibly manipulate finances, they should instead focus on maximizing the teacher experience in order to most positively affect teacher satisfaction and have the best overall outcomes not only for teachers and administrators but also for students.

There is less literature on longitudinal studies of teacher experience optimization and how schools can best assess and develop policies that capitalize on the relationship between teacher experience and retention. We aim to examine how the mechanism of teacher autonomy and self-efficacy could influence teachers' satisfaction and subsequent job retention as we infer that these are intrinsic factors that motivate teachers in their profession. Drawing on these conceptual ideas and past research, we hope to show that schools that focus on such strategies have a higher likelihood of retention, especially as our specific mechanism has the potential to very accurately break down what Lebanon High School can do better to support and improve how teachers feel in their jobs. Our study therefore is applicable regardless of the pandemic and is significant given the feedback loop that we are constructing that will impact teachers, students, and our collective future.

Research Question

The result of teacher retention is becoming a bigger issue to many schools around the country every day, our proposed study seeks to understand the following questions: 1) What school policy actions would increase teacher satisfaction and subsequent retention? 2) How does teacher autonomy explain the relationship between policy and satisfaction? These

questions revolve around Lebanon High School's goal of seeking an increase in teacher retention. Teacher retention has many different factors impacting them. Whether it is salary, mental health, etc. that is impacting the actions of teachers, our focus is on three main ideas: autonomy, self-efficacy and satisfaction. Autonomy is the act of having freedom to conduct oneself or control their own affairs while self-efficacy is the belief a person has in their ability to attain results to meet the challenges ahead of them. Lastly, satisfaction focuses on what the school can do to improve and affect teacher satisfaction- this is an implication for teacher retention. When conducting research it was seen that these variables had a significant impact on the teacher's behavior. The ultimate goal of the research is to assess how school policy impacts teachers satisfaction; thus, having the independent variable is the structure for school policy while the dependent variable is teacher satisfaction.

Methods

We have developed a survey in order to answer our research question about the relationship between the independent variable of teacher experience, the intermediary variable of teacher autonomy and self-efficacy, and the dependent variable of job retention. All three variables are operationalized so that they can be measured in the study.

Teacher satisfaction will be ascertained through a straightforward question. We then break this down with our intermediary variable, teacher experience, specifically on autonomy and self-efficacy. Teacher autonomy looks at the freedom and control a faculty would have over their curriculum, classroom etc. Self-efficacy focuses on the individual, in this case the teacher's, ability to teach in a classroom with whatever obstacles that are thrown at them. These two variables connect to the teacher's general feelings of their current position whether that is control for their teaching/professional environment, preferred teaching conditions, how much control they have creating these decisions and more. The focus with this section is to create a positive dynamic and relationship between teachers, admin and policies. Our dependent variable, job retention, is also measured, and serves to establish the proxy of job

satisfaction and retention because we are surveying teachers who are currently employed at Lebanon High and who have retained their jobs. After a comprehensive literature review, we believe that we understand the general relationship (as seen in the Conceptual Model-Appendix A), and so have designed this study using a deductive, top-down approach. We hypothesize that participants who rank higher levels of autonomy and self-efficacy will also report higher levels of job satisfaction and will be less likely to have considered leaving their job at Lebanon High in the past five years. This study will be able to prove correlation between the variables, but not causality. In the end, the findings from this study will encourage both administrators and teachers to have a positive relationship and find areas of improvement in order to reach the ultimate goal of satiating both teachers and administrators.

Research Instruments

To complete this project, the research team will administer a cross-sectional, web-based survey to the faculty at Lebanon High during the Spring Term of 2022. The survey will be sent to the entire teaching staff at Lebanon High, which is the target population the research project aims to study. With a non-probability sampling design, we recommend sending the survey to the entire teaching staff at Lebanon High School. While the optional nature of this sampling design does potentially appeal more to people with strong convictions (positive or negative), opening participation to the entire faculty will hopefully draw maximum numbers. Using this temporally and physically accessible survey method, we aim to gather data not on teachers who hold perspectives that lie on polar ends of the spectrum. Due to the small size of the teacher population at Lebanon High School, sending the survey out to every teacher is feasible, and will allow our study to gain maximum insight on teacher opinions. The web-based survey will be administered through Google forms for the technology is not only easily accessible for all teachers but will be easy for the administration to communicate the survey and send it out. This survey is estimated to take less than five minutes to complete for there are only ten questions to fill out that are multiple choice. We intentionally made this survey to be

short but effective for the purpose of increasing the likelihood of teachers taking the survey. At the same time, each teacher will be limited to filling out the survey only once. By limiting the teacher's participation to one survey each, we can prevent the skewing of data towards any specific teacher opinion in the case they attempt to fill it out multiple times. This technology is very convenient to participants because it is widely used and will likely be familiar to them and easy to navigate. On the research team side, Google Forms is optimal because it is not resource intensive, and also ensures the participants' data privacy and confidentiality. This study is cross-sectional and our survey will be administered once to the faculty; we plan to send it out sometime during the spring term.

This study should have strong reliability because the survey asks about each variable in two different ways. Teacher experience is measured as both autonomy and self-efficacy, while job retention is measured as job satisfaction and whether or not the participant has considered quitting. The reliability will be supported if both answers are consistent for each variable. The research team also believes that participants' responses would be consistent if the survey was re-administered under the same conditions. While the general principles and the relationships between the variables can be applied to other schools, the exact results of this study will not be generalizable beyond Lebanon High School because the teacher experience varies greatly school-by-school due to different administrations. The survey design method cannot prove causality, only correlation, and so internal validity does not apply to this project.

Analyzing and Interpreting Results

The purpose of the survey is to ascertain data to study the correlation between teacher experience and job satisfaction at Lebanon High to gain insight about job retention. The survey asks participants about teacher experience through two factors: autonomy and self-efficacy. One example of the teacher experience is setting curriculum for class, which is asked about like this:

How much control do you feel you have over setting your class curriculum?

I am confident in my ability to create a strong class curriculum.

The entire survey is quantitative, and questions like these are to be answered with ordinal responses: no control, some control, much control, or complete control. The survey judges job satisfaction by asking teachers to rate their satisfaction level, and by asking if the participant has considered leaving their job in the past five years. We hypothesize that participants who rank higher levels of autonomy and self-efficacy will also report higher levels of satisfaction and are less likely to have considered leaving their job at Lebanon High in the past five years. The degree of correlation will be able to be measured when comparing respondent's quantitative responses. However, since we have chosen non-probability sampling, only theoretical, not statistical, inferences cannot be made about the population. In order to interpret the results, the team will look at each respondent individually and average their autonomy and self-efficacy rankings to create one value for their "teacher experience." The ordinal responses to the questions about teacher experience will be converted into numbers: no control being a 1, and complete control being a 5. This can be compared to the participant's self-reported job satisfaction; "very dissatisfied" will be coded as a 1 and "very satisfied" will be a 5. The graph below illustrates the linear, positive correlation trend we expect to see between those variables.
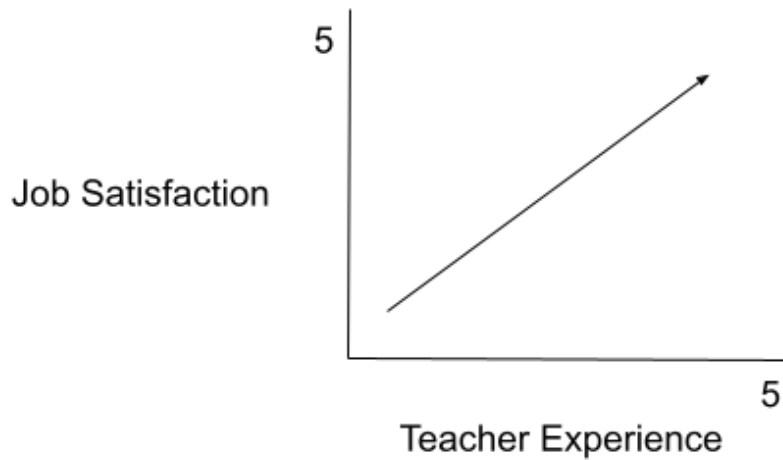
Design Strengths and Weaknesses

   An online survey is the most advantageous method for this study, but it does have some drawbacks to consider. First, there may be an impact due to social desirability bias, which is when participants show a tendency to respond in a way that they think will be interpreted positively by others. Since the teachers know that the school administration is viewing their answers (though anonymous), they may respond in a way that they think their bosses will approve of. Social desirability bias can be mitigated in other methods, like a field study where people's natural behavior is studied without them knowing. However, we did not opt for this method because it can be resource intensive, and there are questions about the ethicality of using people as participants without their consent.

   Another weakness of the online survey method is the fact that the research team cannot control the environment in which participants take the survey. For example, a teacher could take the survey in a loud, distracting location, like a restaurant, which could impact the attention they pay to their responses. This could be prevented in other methods, like an in-person study, where the environment where teachers take the survey could be controlled. In this design, the research team would set aside a quiet room for participants to take the study in at a designated time at the school. However, such scheduling may deter teachers from filling it

out; since the web-based survey participation is optional, the online convenience should lead to higher volunteer rates. Overall, an online survey is most appropriate for its practicality, low resource cost, and straightforward data interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Our study has been designed in accordance with the values and expectations established by the Belmont Report, and can be discerned into three specific points: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Respect for Persons: Our survey is preceded by a consent form which outlines, in detail, the intent, process, and time expectations to participate in the study. The form ensures the participant of the confidential nature of the study. The format of the consent form is legible, well-spaced, and concise. A copy of our survey's consent form is included in the appendix. Once the participant reads the consent form, they can either agree and proceed with the study, or exit the form. The survey, distributed through Google Forms, is confidential, ensuring the privacy of the participants and their opinions from peers, school administration, the public, and the surveyors. Established in the beginning and end, the survey includes contact information and the encouragement for participants to reach out if they have any questions about their data's usage in the survey as well as concerns about their privacy in the study. There will be no indication in our findings about who did or did not participate in the study. We have an optional question, but include a warning against providing any identifying information.

Beneficence: Our study contains minimal to no potential harm to participants (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1979). By distributing the survey through electronic means, we are able to ensure the confidentiality of the participants as well as providing teachers with privacy to carry out the survey. We will not link their data from the survey to their identities. Concerning COVID-19, our survey, being online, allows us to ensure the physical safety of the participants, as well as the surveyors. While minimizing the mental

and physical harm that could be caused by the study, the intention of the survey and research is to benefit the administration and faculty of schools by maximizing teacher satisfaction.

Justice: To ensure the accuracy and representation of participants in the study, the survey will be distributed to every teacher at Lebanon High School (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1979. They only have access to participate in the survey one time per person. In order to reduce potential biases, each participant will have access to the same survey, and can generate the same or different results.

Significance and Feasibility

The community partner, Lebanon High School, has around 600 students and 51 full-time teachers. Our research team reached out to a faculty member at Lebanon High School to get an insight of her teaching experience at the high school. From the meeting, we were able to understand that from her experience Lebanon High School's main problem was faculty turnover to teach in other districts. The goal for Lebanon High School is to provide the principal and administrators with information that can minimize the frequency of teacher turn-over. With this goal in mind, the proposed design is not only practical, but maximizes efficiency. They will be able to collect data surrounding the information about teacher autonomy, self-efficacy, and satisfaction via the Google forms survey. Google forms survey is fit best for this study because of its user-friendly interface. It can be easily distributed and is accessible to anyone due to its lack of cost and sign-up; we decided to steer away from any financial challenges because it would make it less feasible for Lebanon High School to implement. While being cost-effective and familiar, Google forms will maintain anonymity for the study's participants.

The quality of education has recently significantly declined due to the COVID pandemic and the decrease in teachers across the country. Schools taking actions against the acceleration of teachers leaving the field will fight against the turnover and instability's negative impact on students' education. Research has shown that when teachers have autonomy

over their classroom not only is there a positive effect for the teachers, but for the students as well. Understanding the relationship of autonomy and satisfaction will reflect positively on teacher retention. Our proposed research questions for Lebanon High School revolves around the efforts to increase teacher retention especially because the acceleration of teachers leaving has increased tremendously. In some cases, schools have had to shut down because they don't have enough personnel to keep the school running. The research question seeks to recognize the correlation between school policy and teacher autonomy- for our independent variable will be school policy and dependent variable will be teacher satisfaction. The ultimate goal of the research is to give Lebanon High School the opportunity to determine if their faculties are fulfilled with the program and curriculum; from there the principal and administration work to make changes, if any, to create an environment that please both sides.

The expected results should be interpreted into two categories: job satisfaction and autonomy plus self efficacy. For job satisfaction, it should be expected to have a wide spectrum amongst teachers due to differing work, age, and general experiences. On the other hand for autonomy and self efficacy, it is expected for the principal and administrators to see improving inter-relationships and teachers' experiences with school policy once change is implemented based on the research.

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Appendix

A. Conceptual Map
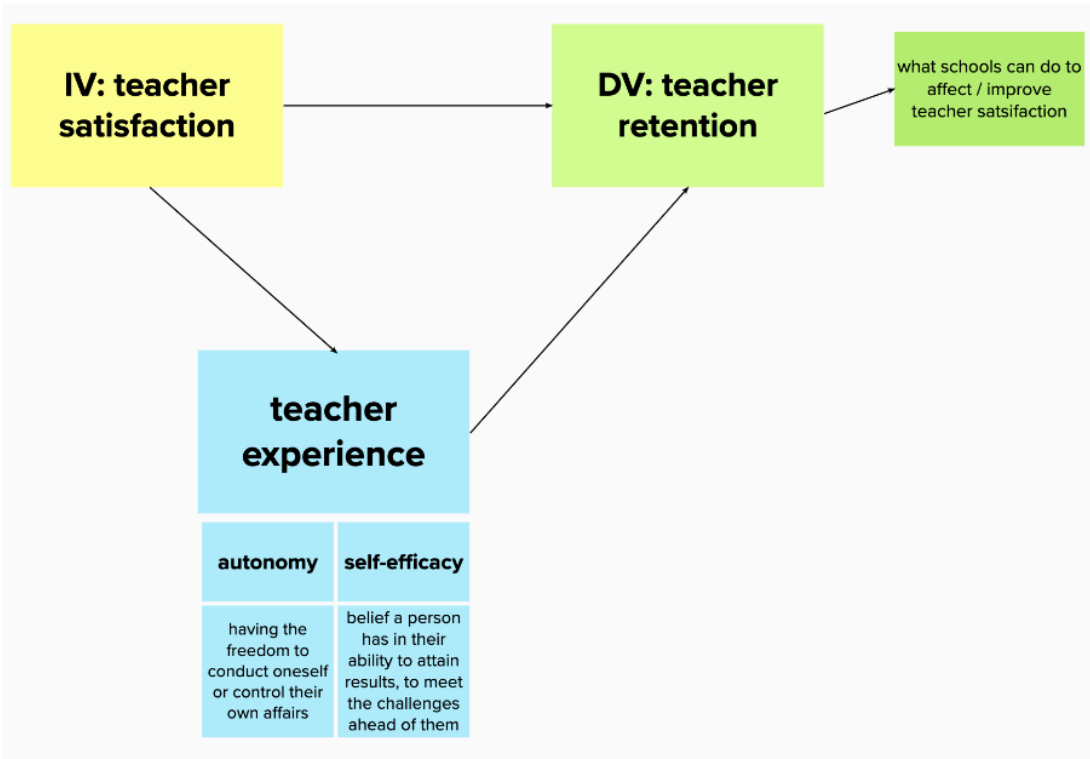
B. Survey Questions

- How much control do you feel you have over setting grading scales?

    - No control

    - Some control

    - Much control

    - Complete control

- How much control do you feel you have over setting your class curriculum?

    - No control

    - Some control

- Much control

- Complete control

- How much control do you feel you have over disciplining students in your class?

    - No control

    - Some control

    - Much control

    - Complete control

- I am confident in my ability to fairly grade assignments.

    - Strongly agree

    - Somewhat agree

    - Somewhat disagree

    - Strongly disagree

- I am confident in my ability to create a strong class curriculum.

    - Strongly agree

    - Somewhat agree

    - Somewhat disagree

    - Strongly disagree

- I am confident in my ability to fairly discipline my students.

    - Strongly agree

    - Somewhat agree

    - Somewhat disagree

    - Strongly disagree

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your job?

    - Very dissatisfied

    - Dissatisfied

    - Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

- Satisfied

- Very satisfied

- In the past year, have you seriously considered leaving your job?

    - Yes

    - No