

## **Voices of Inspiration: Hope for Graduate Teacher Retention in Basic Schools**

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### **Abstract**

The paper investigated the motivation of teachers to continue teaching at the basic school level. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, basic school teachers' motivation to continue teaching at that level after obtaining degree certificate, was analysed. The study found that contrary to the findings of previous studies that teaching in basic schools is not the preference of teachers with degree certificates, many graduate teachers intend to stay in basic school teaching. However, this intention is influenced, mainly, by altruistic and intrinsic motives rather than extrinsic considerations. The desire to contribute to the development of children and society; helping to lay a solid foundation for education in Ghana; and engaging in programmes pursued at university, were stated as strong motivating factors. Implications are drawn and recommendations for attracting and retaining graduate teachers at the basic school level are made.

In many countries, the public image of teaching is that it is a low status profession. Treiman conducted a comprehensive comparative study on 26 occupations in 53 developed and developing countries in terms of the prestige accorded those occupations by the public (Fwu & Wang, 2002). In that study, secondary and primary school teaching placed 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> respectively. In Taiwan where teachers enjoy a relatively higher occupational prestige than their international counterparts, studies conducted in various parts of the country over three decades consistently placed secondary and primary school teaching only six steps higher than their international ranking in comparison with other occupations (Fwu & Wang, 2002). Thus, teaching in general and primary school teaching in particular is not the occupational preference of high calibre candidates. Unsurprisingly, Lockheed and Verspoor (1991) argue that people often become teachers for reasons of personal advancement rather than a commitment to the public good, and that "teaching in primary schools neither attracts nor retains the best-qualified and most-motivated individuals" (p. 92).

This appears to be the case in Ghana in that most people use teaching as a stepping stone to other occupations, and graduate teachers in particular do not want to teach in basic schools (Akyeampong, 2001). Recent research findings indicate that a significant proportion of basic school teachers who obtained degree qualifications either moved up to secondary teaching or left teaching for other occupations in the public and private sectors (Akyeampong & Lewin, 2002; Hedges, 2002). For example, between 1997 and 2001, about 70% of teachers who went on study leave to upgrade their qualifications from certificate to degree level did not return to their posts after completing their programmes (Akyeampong, 2002). It is not only basic school teachers who obtain degree qualifications who leave that level; graduate entrants to teaching normally prefer to be in secondary schools, teacher training colleges or work in the district and regional education offices. This lack of enthusiasm for basic school teaching as a long term career has resulted in shortage of teachers at that level (Lewin, 2002; Quansah, 2003).

The shortage of teachers in basic schools has become acute at a critical time in the country's educational development. By a constitutional mandate, the Government of Ghana is required to provide free compulsory universal basic education for all school-age children (Government of Ghana, 1992). The pursuance of this national goal ties in with the objectives of Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals to which Ghana is committed. Unfortunately, the teachers who would serve as the catalysts of educational reform do not stay at the basic level for long. In the light of this attrition, educationists and the general public wonder if there is any hope for basic education in Ghana.

The purpose of the study was to find out the factors which cause the few teachers who continue to teach in basic schools even after acquiring higher qualification, to stay.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants were 145 non-graduate professional teachers who were pursuing various education programmes (e.g. psychology, social studies, arts and primary education) at University of Cape Coast (UCC) to upgrade their teaching qualifications to degree level. Collectively, they had taught in all the 10 regions of Ghana. Each had at least three years teaching experience.

### **Instruments**

Two instruments were used for the study. The first was a questionnaire which attempted to gauge participants' intentions to continue or leave basic school teaching after their studies, and the reasons thereof. The second was focus group interviews to explore in greater detail the reasons given by participants who indicated, in their questionnaire responses, intention to leave basic school teaching.

### **Procedure**

The questionnaire was distributed to 400 participants, and 365 completed and returned it. Out of this number, 145 (39.7%), comprising 69 males and 76 females, indicated intention to continue basic school teaching after completing their degree programmes; 56 intended to move to secondary teaching; and the remaining 164 planned to leave the teaching field.

Since the study focus was on respondents who intended to continue teaching in basic schools, 40 of the 145 who had indicated this intention (split equally between male and female) were invited to participate in focus group interviews. The respondents were invited to participate in the focus group interview because of the clarity of their responses to the questionnaire; they had also volunteered to participate. Care was taken to ensure that they fairly represented, in terms of their ages, gender, years of teaching experience, the programmes they were pursuing, regions in the country where they had taught, and their year of study (first-fourth year), the original 145 who indicated intention to continue basic school teaching. That was done through maximum variation purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). Five sessions of focus groups were held, each comprising four male and four female participants and lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview questions sought to gain more insights into the questionnaire responses, that is, the respondents' reasons for choosing to stay in basic school teaching after their degree programmes. For example, how did the nature of the programmes they were pursuing influence their decision to remain in basic schools? All the interviews were audio-taped, with participants' consent, and transcribed for analysis. Through a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a set of recurring themes representing the participants' reasons for continuing basic school teaching were identified.

The questionnaire and focus group interviews produced a substantial amount of data which provided rich understanding of the reasons for the teachers' decisions to continue teaching in basic school. These are presented in the section that follows.

### **Results**

The focus of the study was on teachers who intended to continue basic school teaching. They were between the ages of 21 and 55 with over 80% under 41 years. Their teaching experience ranged from one to thirty-five years; about 96% had taught for 1-20 years. With the exception of three, all the teachers were of the rank of Senior Superintendent or below. Some of the reasons given by the teachers pertained to staying in the teaching profession in general while others related to continuing basic school teaching in particular.

#### **Reasons for Staying in Teaching**

As a group, the teachers stated five categories of reasons for intending to remain in the teaching profession in general. The categories and illustrative statements from the questionnaire responses and focus groups are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Why Teachers Decided to Remain in Teaching**

<i>Influential Factor</i>	<i>Illustrative Statements</i>
Intrinsic interest in teaching as a profession	I have the love and desire for teaching. I love the [teaching] profession.
Contributing to educational advancement and national development	I want to be part of educational development in Ghana I want to help build the nation Ghana.
Stemming out graduate teacher attrition	To encourage other colleague teachers to remain in the profession. To serve as a role model for other teachers to emulate.
Utilising already-gained experience	After teaching for 8 years I have gained much experience in teaching and therefore would want to continue.

I have gained more experience [7 years] for the job.

Compatibility of professional and personal needs.

I will get time for my own family after closing.

The teacher has enough time for other activities.

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Respondents seemed resolute in their choice of teaching as a career. They saw this profession as a tool for social advancement, and as a place where one can easily make use of and build on prior expertise. For them, teaching also provides opportunities for contributing one's quota to the solution of educational problems such as the shortage of qualified teachers, without sacrificing time for attending to important personal needs. Thus, the social and the personal needs are held in a dynamic equilibrium.

For three of the respondents, fulfilling their contractual obligation under the study leave policy was an influential factor in their decision to stay in teaching. One questionnaire response indicating this reason was "I am on study leave with pay". However, further expatiation on these reasons during focus group showed that they did not see the requirements of the policy as forcing them into an occupation they did not like. Rather, they saw themselves already rendering a service to their people and their country; they also saw the sponsorship they had enjoyed as a sacrifice by other people. Consequently, for them, the very fact that they were pursuing education programmes, and the sponsorship offered by GES provided an opportunity to continue that service and reciprocate the investment made in their university education. "I am here to pursue a programme in Education and my people, that is, the GES, are sponsoring my university education. That gives me the chance to go back to do my service as I have been doing", one explained. "And also as a Ghanaian, the national cake is being used to cater for my education at the moment; so if I don't go back to serve the people, it would not be patriotic on my part just to leave the service", another echoed.

### **Reasons for Staying in Basic School**

Respondents were determined not just to continue their professional practice as teachers but more so at the basic school level. They stated different reasons for preferring basic school to secondary teaching. Table 2 presents the various themes in their explanations, the number of times these were mentioned in the questionnaire responses, and examples of the specific statements (more detailed explanations from the focus group interviews are presented in the text). Some factors were mentioned only a few times in the questionnaire responses. However, the warmth, enthusiasm and persuasiveness with which the teachers explained them during the focus group interviews, indicate how important a factor such as the teachers' obligation under the study leave contract, was in their decisions. Themes which were stated 40 or more times in the questionnaire (28% or more in Table 2) are elaborated below; themes least mentioned in the questionnaire yet discussed passionately in the focus group interviews are summarized.

#### **A Passion for Working with Children**

As Table 2 shows, a significant proportion of the reasons given for wanting to continue basic school teaching can be characterised as altruistic. The most prominent reason under this category is a passion for working with children and contributing to their advancement (37.2%). This desire appears to have developed from and/or been reinforced by the teachers' previous experience with children:

I have always been encouraged, and like to teach in a primary school or at the basic education level because I enjoy teaching the children....And from the experience that I had when I taught for three years in a primary school, I think if I am able to pursue a degree programme at university here and go back to them I will be able to impart some of the knowledge that I have acquired here to the children.

**Table 2: Why Teachers Decided to Continue Basic School Teaching (N=145)**

Reason	f	%
<i>A passion for working with children</i> Because I love children. I want to impart some knowledge to children at this level.	54	37.2
<i>Laying a strong foundation for education</i> I want to help build a solid foundation in terms of learning in Ghana. To lay a very strong foundation for learners upon which they can build at the senior secondary level.	53	36.6
<i>Engaging in programme pursued</i> My area of study is related to that level. Because the programme trains teachers purposely for the basic level.	41	28.3
<i>Easy to handle children</i> Children at the basic level are easy to teach. The basic school children can be corrected easily.	14	9.6
<i>Challenging negative perceptions</i> To set an example that graduates can teach at the basic school level. To correct the erroneous idea that teachers with no certificate, or less qualified teachers teach in basic schools.	8	5.5
<i>Utilising and building on existing experience</i> I have gained more experience in teaching in basic school. I have taught in the basic school for long.	6	4.1

<i>Desire to pursue further study/research in basic education</i>	5	3.4
To pursue my master's programme in Basic Education in Ghana.		
To research in basic school level teaching.		
<i>Solving problem of teacher shortage</i>	5	3.4
The basic school lacks more professionals to teach.		
Being in basic school will offer me the opportunity to help solve the problem of teacher shortage.		
<i>Less workload</i>	5	3.4
The workload is easier, especially with the writing of lesson notes.		
The workload is not so tedious and time-consuming.		
<i>Same salary and professional development opportunities</i>	4	2.8
Salaries are based on ranks and not level of teaching.		
Teachers can upgrade their qualifications when teaching at this level.		
<i>Fulfilling study leave obligations</i>	3	2.1
I am on study leave with pay.		
To justify the huge expenses made on me by Government in training.		
<i>More challenging work</i>	2	1.4
Teaching at the basic level brings the best in you as a teacher since you have to use many methods for deeper understanding.		
The basic schools make the teacher very experienced.		

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### **Laying a Strong Foundation for School Reform**

Reforming the school system by helping to build a strong foundation at the basic level also emerged as another altruistic theme. As many as 53 (36.6%) teachers stated this in their responses to the questionnaire. One respondent saw a firm basic education as the panacea to the problems at the subsequent levels: "I believe one thing, that if the foundation is good, when you build upon it, it is easier. So if we are able to get the graduate teachers [to lay] the solid foundation at the basic level, a lot of problems at the JSS and SSS will all be solved". This concern derived from respondents' reflection on their own experience in the primary school, either as students or teachers. Respondents thought as students they "suffered a lot" in the hands of non-professional teachers who only followed a transmission model of pedagogy, leading to students passively receiving knowledge with very little understanding. Recalling his own experience in primary school, one respondent argued that the presence of untrained teachers at the basic school level deprives children of quality teaching and learning, and the nation of the good foundation needed at that level:

I realised that from primary 1 to primary 4 none of the teachers who took us was a professional; so some of us suffered a lot. So, you see, the teaching skills were not there... They were teaching rote learning. They were not using materials because they even did not know how to use the materials... When you are building [a house] and the foundation is not strong, I think whatever you do at the top, the building is still weak and it will collapse one day... So I find it wise to go back and then help my people, especially in the villages.

In retrospect, respondents realised that their own teaching as non-graduate professional teachers at the basic level had some shortfalls, especially in the assessment of student learning. This realisation was obviously as a result of the new knowledge and skills they had acquired in the university. It engendered in them a resolve to go back and help build and reshape the system through their individual contributions as well as collaborative efforts.

### **Engaging in Programme Pursued**

All the respondents were pursuing Bachelor of Education programmes, two of which – B.Ed (Basic Education) and B.Ed (Primary Education) - were specifically targeted at basic school teaching. Respondents who were enrolled in these programmes stated the nature and focus of their

programmes of study as a reason for wanting to continue teaching at that level (28.3%). According to the respondents, each of the two programmes equips them with the knowledge, teaching skills, methods and techniques to enable them teach confidently at the basic school level, and they were eager to put their new expertise into practice. Typical responses include: "The programme provides the skills for teaching and the teacher can confidently teach"; "Having obtained the necessary techniques of teaching at the basic level, I would put them into practice".

### **A Role Model to Rural Children**

A related altruistic theme that came up in the interviews is the wish to be an exemplar to children in the rural communities, where there may be few educated persons. There was a sense that some respondents had assumed this role in the past, had found it helpful and therefore wanted to continue. The desire to be a guide to children in the rural communities was particularly strong in respondents who experienced rural life during their initial years of teaching and found it beneficial: "Moreso we've been posted to the village where some of us who had not experienced village life before were able to get a chance to experience a lot of things. So I find it is worth it to go back when I finish my degree programme".

### **Challenging Negative Perceptions**

Eight respondents (5.5%) decided to continue basic school teaching in order to challenge negative perceptions some graduates and the Ghanaian public have about a career in teaching, especially, at the basic school level. The perceptions could be summarised as: "Teaching is a financially unrewarding and socially inferior occupation. One cannot make it in life being a teacher. Basic school teaching is for unqualified or less qualified teachers". Some respondents viewed this as an objectionable notion which must be rectified. They also wanted to prove to graduate teachers who look for lucrative jobs elsewhere that "no matter where you are, if you put much effort into whatever you are doing, you can make it". Ultimately, the teachers hoped to set personal examples of graduate teachers teaching in basic schools for their colleagues to follow, reverse the trend of graduate teacher attrition at that level, and solve the problem of teacher shortage. Their resolve was strengthened by the fact teaching at the basic level would cause them nothing because they "will all be receiving the same salary, the same promotion, [and] start from the same rank".

## **Discussion**

The study demonstrates that all does not seem doom and gloom for basic school teaching in Ghana, for almost 40% (N=365) of respondents (a group identified as attrition-prone) planned to stay in basic schools. They were motivated, primarily, by reasons particular to teaching, namely, the education of young children, to improve their life chances; a sense of providing service to society; and application of their degree subject.

On the one hand, this is not surprising because working with children and nurturing their learning is what teachers are trained to do (Cockburn, 2000). Research on teacher motivation, commitment and job satisfaction in Sub-Saharan African and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries has consistently found that 'working with children' is a key source of teacher job satisfaction and retention (Bennel, 2004; General Teaching Council, 2003; OECD, 2005). It is the rewarding nature of the job rather than pecuniary gain that is the prime motivation for becoming and remaining a teacher. Some studies report that such intrinsic factors are dominant at the early stage of the teaching career, but become less important in the later years. Once on the job, personal circumstances such as compatibility with private life, flexible schedule, recognition, and career opportunities are found to be more important to teachers (OECD, 2005). In contrast, after several years of teaching, the teachers in the current study were still motivated by intrinsic factors.

On the other hand, the teachers' decision astonishes the Ghanaian educationist and researcher. The educational workforce in Ghana and in the world generally, is a hierarchical bureaucracy whose structure encourages and rewards role and occupational migration away from children and teaching. Besides, the general perceptions about teaching and basic school teachers promote migration from teaching to other jobs and from basic to secondary school teaching. For teachers who were on the threshold of getting a degree qualification, which facilitates this migration, to deny themselves of an opportunity desired by many remains inexplicable beyond the altruistic factors identified in this study.

The findings of the study confirm but, in some respects, also challenge the notion of graduate teachers' lack of enthusiasm for basic school teaching identified in previous research (e.g. Akyeampong & Lewin, 2002; Hedges, 2002). On the issue of 60% (N=365) of the total sample who completed the questionnaire intending to leave basic school teaching, the study confirmed previous findings. On the question of 40% of the teachers in this study being

enthusiastic to continue teaching at the basic school level, the findings seem to contest prior evidence. Of course, more qualitative data on the personal and professional identities of these teachers would have lent more leverage to this assertion. Nevertheless, the teachers' altruistic and intrinsic motivations for intending to continue basic school teaching, revealed in the focus groups, provide reasonably qualitative data that support the quantitative evidence of the teachers' enthusiasm.

The 'hopeful voice' of the teachers in this study who planned to stay in basic school teaching because of its intrinsic satisfiers is very strong. This should be a source of encouragement to policy makers, educationists and other stakeholders who might have felt despondent about the future of basic schools in Ghana. Taking the respondents at their word, it points to a bright future for basic school teaching and signals the advent of a light in the tunnel towards 'graduatisation' of the teaching force at that level. An all-graduate teaching staff in basic schools would eliminate the perceived acrimony between non-graduate and graduate teachers in schools, and raise the standard of teaching and learning.

### **Implications for Retention Policy and Research**

The study involved basic school teachers who were upgrading their teaching qualifications to degree level in one of Ghana's two teacher education universities. Their 'voices' may not, therefore, echo the motivations of all basic school teachers. Collectively, however, the teachers had taught in all the 10 regions of the country and had considerable experience in basic school teaching; their views may therefore provide useful pointers to teacher retention policy and research. A few suggestions are made below in this regard.

Firstly, teacher education policy would benefit, in terms of retaining teachers, from recruiting candidates who are motivated by altruistic factors into teacher training, and from integrating these factors into the training programmes. In particular, the desire to work with children and contribute to their advancement; to render service to people; and to share knowledge and ideas with people should be identified in prospective teachers through well-designed and conducted interviews, and avenues for their development provided in the pre-service training programmes offered in the teacher education institutions. Practising teachers who demonstrate continuous and effective engagement with their altruistic interests should be recognised and rewarded. For example, demonstrated teaching that caters for the

educational needs of socio-economically disadvantaged children; or proven interest in, and action to promote, issues of social justice and equity could be made essential criteria for selecting best teachers who are recognised during the annual Best Teachers Award ceremony.

Secondly, the decision by the Ghana Education Service (GES) to reduce the number of teachers who are awarded study leave with pay for further studies, and rather encourage them to upgrade their qualifications through distance education appears a cost-effective retention measure. However, to achieve the objective of gradually building up a body of graduate teachers at the basic school level, teachers who enrol in programmes with direct focus on basic education should be supported financially. Such teachers are more likely to want to teach at that level with their degree qualifications than those whose degree programmes are not similarly focused. The former group of teachers tend to see a direct relationship between the new knowledge and skills they acquire and their classroom practice. They are, therefore, more eager to put the new ideas to test.

Thirdly, the teachers' intention to continue basic school teaching prompts a review of aspects of current teacher deployment policy. According to GES conditions of service, graduate teachers start on the rank of Principal Superintendent and are, by virtue of their status and by policy, required to work in secondary schools, teacher training colleges and district offices in various teaching and administrative capacities (GES/GNAT, 2000; GES, 2003). This practice not only deprives basic schools of the knowledge, skills and experience of graduate teachers, but also implies that basic school teaching is for non-graduates, a perception held by a section of the Ghanaian public and some teachers (Cobbold, 2007). This policy needs to be revised. The review should first re-examine the duties of a Principal Superintendent as specified in the conditions of service to enable graduate teachers trained for basic school teaching to operate at that level. As a complementary measure, there should be intensive public education to change the Ghanaian society's perception of basic school teachers, and teaching at that level made more lucrative through provision of attractive incentives.

Finally, further research replicating this study could widen the sample to include teachers upgrading their teaching qualifications to degree level in University of Education, Winneba (UEW) as well as degree holders who are already teaching at the basic level.

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