

Understanding the Psychology of Teacher Retention in the African Context

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Abstract

The study explores the meta-theoretical context of teacher retention, focusing on psychological factors like organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and human resource retention practices. It highlights the evolution of retention strategies and emphasises their importance in the educational sector, particularly in Africa, where high teacher turnover affects the quality of education. The study discusses two retention models: Döckel's model, which identifies six key retention factors such as compensation, job characteristics, training and development opportunities, supervisor support, career advancement, and work-life balance; and Zin et al.'s model based on Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory. The Conservation of Resource (COR) theory acts as an overarching theoretical lens, positing that psychological resources such as work engagement, psychological capital, and occupational passion are crucial for retention. The study concludes by suggesting a psychosocial approach to teacher retention that can mitigate high turnover rates and improve educational quality, particularly in an African context.

Keywords: Teachers, Organisational commitment, Job satisfaction, Human resource Retention practices, Psychological resources

Introduction

This study's meta-theoretical framework seeks to establish the parameters and conceptual framework required to understand the aspects that affect retention in the educational setting. This study conceptualises the psychology of retention and the role of psychological factors such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and human resource retention practices satisfaction. This is critical for tackling school retention challenges, particularly in the African context, where teacher turnover is substantial and has serious consequences for educational quality and sustainability. Retention, as a concept, has evolved significantly over the decades. Initially recognised in the 1930s due to the need to retain older employees, it has since expanded to include a variety of practices aimed at keeping valuable employees within organisations (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). In the educational sector, retention is particularly critical as teachers play a fundamental role in shaping future generations.

Globally, retaining teachers is a growing challenge, affecting both developed and developing countries. This is due to high turnover rates and teacher shortages that disrupt education systems, impacting student achievement and increasing financial strain on schools. According to research, factors such as school leadership, collegial relationships, and school culture are crucial for retaining teachers (Boyd et al., 2011; Cells et al., 2023; See et al., 2020; Teacher Tapp, 2023). With effective leadership, teachers feel valued and motivated to stay. Effective school leaders are therefore able to create a supportive environment that fosters collegial relationships and a positive school culture. Additionally, job demands, and professional duties significantly affect retention, particularly for high school teachers who often experience burnout due to the emotionally taxing nature of their work. Therefore, designing jobs that fulfil teachers' needs for belonging, well-being, and professional growth can enhance retention (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Teaching Playbook, 2019).

In Africa, the situation is even more intense. Unfavourable working conditions, low salaries, school politics, and lack of support contribute to high teacher turnover and shortages. These challenges not only make recruitment difficult but also worsen the shortage of qualified teachers (Alonge et al., 2020; Global report on teachers, 2023). Addressing these issues requires systemic changes. Teachers need competitive salaries that meet both basic and professional aspirations. To keep them engaged in their careers, they deserve healthy environments, manageable workloads, adequate resources for teaching, and opportunities for growth (Cells et al., 2023; Skaalvik & Skaalvik,

2017). Therefore, by investing in teachers' well-being and professional satisfaction, schools can build stronger educational systems worldwide.

The study employs the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory to explore teacher retention, emphasising that individuals seek to acquire and safeguard valuable resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). It identifies work engagement, psychological capital, and occupational passion as psychological resources that can enhance motivation and well-being, leading to higher organisational commitment and job satisfaction. Two retention models are examined: Döckel's (2003) model, which highlights compensation and support factors, and Zin et al.'s (2012) model, which integrates motivation-hygiene factors. Focusing on these psychological factors is essential for effective retention strategies and improving educational quality, especially in Africa.

Conceptualisation of retention

Retention has emerged as a critical concept in organisational management, particularly in educational institutions facing challenges in retaining qualified teachers. Retention as a strategic goal began to take shape in the 1930s when companies realised that they needed to hold onto their more seasoned, senior staff members (Mahoney, 1953). Since then, retention has developed into a multifaceted approach encompassing various practices and policies aimed at attracting and retaining valuable employees. In the context of education, retention goes beyond simply keeping teachers employed; it involves creating an environment that fosters job satisfaction, positive student relationships, and a long-term commitment to the teaching profession. This holistic approach recognises that effective retention strategies must address multiple aspects of a teacher's professional and personal life.

Research identifies several key elements crucial for teacher retention, including compensation, job characteristics, training and development, supervisor support, career opportunities, and work-life balance. Competitive salaries and benefits are strong motivators (Biasi, 2021), but these alone are not enough for long-term retention. On the other hand, job characteristics such as autonomy and meaningful work seem to significantly contribute to teacher satisfaction and commitment (Han et al., 2020; Teaching Playbook, 2019). Similarly, professional development opportunities enhance skills and foster loyalty by demonstrating organisational investment in teachers' growth (Sancar et al., 2021). Supervisor support is also vital. Meaning that effective leadership that offers guidance and emotional support can greatly influence a teacher's decision to stay (Demirtas & Uslukaya, 2023). Additionally, career advancement pathways motivate teachers to view their roles as long-term commitments (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). Also, work-life policies promoting balance can reduce burnout and enhance job satisfaction (Latiep, 2023; NCBI, 2020). However, the implementation of these strategies varies by context, and is mostly influenced by factors such as school culture, demographics and community support (Mullen et al., 2021; Seelig & McCabe, 2021; Scallan et al., 2023). Furthermore, teachers' needs also differ based on their career stage and personal circumstances. Therefore, retention strategies should be part of a comprehensive approach that fosters a positive school culture and encourages teacher leadership and collaboration.

While retention remains a complex challenge for educational institutions, a multifaceted approach addressing compensation, job characteristics, professional development, support, career opportunities, and work-life balance offers the most promising path forward. Therefore, by recognising the diverse needs of teachers and creating environments that nurture their professional growth and personal well-being, schools can build a stable, committed, and effective teaching workforce (Teaching Playbook, 2019).

Global and local trends in retention

Worldwide, retaining highly skilled and knowledgeable employees is a significant challenge for organisations striving to remain competitive. In the education sector, the prevalent issue of teacher shortages and the challenges associated with keeping teachers in both developed and developing nations highlight the urgent need for attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners (Global report on teachers, 2023; Teacher Tapp, 2023).

Teacher Retention: A Global Concern

The retention of teachers is a pressing issue worldwide, as teachers are fundamental to the educational system and the broader societal framework. Teachers are not merely conveyors of knowledge but are mentors, role models, and agents of change who significantly influence the development of young minds. The departure of skilled teachers from the profession can have far-reaching consequences, including diminished educational quality, increased workloads for remaining staff, and disruptions in student learning (Cells et al., 2023; Lochmiller et al., 2024; Viac & Fraser, 2020).

In both developed and developing countries world-wide, teacher shortages and retention challenges are common. In developed countries it is issues such as burnout, lack of professional development opportunities, and

inadequate compensation that are often cited as reasons for high turnover rates. In developing countries however, the challenges are compounded by factors such as poor working conditions, low salaries, and limited resources. These issues therefore necessitate a multifaceted approach that addresses both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors, influencing teachers' decisions to stay in the profession (Global report on teachers, 2023; Teacher Tapp, 2023).

Effective school leadership also seem crucial in retaining teachers. For instance, when leaders genuinely support their staff, create a positive atmosphere, and encourage growth, people feel happier in their jobs and more committed to their work. Similarly, leaders who are easy to talk to, give helpful feedback, and recognise everyone's hard work help teachers feel truly valued and appreciated. In contrast, poor leadership can lead to dissatisfaction and higher turnover rates (Lochmiller et al., 2024; See et al., 2020). Collegial relationships also play a vital role in retention. This is because a collaborative work environment allows teachers to share ideas and resources, fostering a sense of belonging and professional fulfilment, and reducing feelings of isolation (Cells et al., 2023; See et al., 2020; Teacher Tapp, 2023). Furthermore, a positive school culture that aligns with teachers' values is as essential for retention. This can be seen in schools that prioritise student learning and teacher well-being, creating motivating environments as opposed to toxic cultures which contribute to higher turnover rates (See et al., 2020; Global report on teachers, 2023; Teacher Tapp, 2023). Additionally, job characteristics, including workload and administrative support, significantly impact retention. For instance, high demands can lead to burnout, particularly among high school teachers (Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021). Therefore, addressing burnout through work-life balance and professional development is critical for retention (Fabelico & Afalla, 2020; Jomuad et al., 2021). Research also shows that continuous learning opportunities enhance job satisfaction and commitment, making professional development essential for retaining motivated teachers (Sancar et al., 2021). By addressing these factors, schools can create supportive environments that encourage teacher retention.

Retention in the African School Context

In African schools, unfavourable working conditions, low salaries, school politics, and lack of support contribute significantly to high teacher turnover and shortages. These challenging not only hinder recruitment and retention efforts but also exacerbate the shortage of quality teachers across the continent (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013; Alonge et al., 2020). For instance, in many African schools, poor working conditions create a difficult environment for teachers to thrive professionally. It is overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and dilapidated infrastructure that make it even more challenging for them to deliver quality teaching (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013). Hence creating good work environments through improved facilities, adequate teaching materials, and supportive school cultures is crucial for teacher satisfaction and effectiveness.

Additionally, adequate compensation is crucial for teachers, as it addresses both their basic financial needs and professional status. A fair salary can enhance a teacher's sense of value, while a low salary can lead to financial strain, prompting many to seek better paying opportunities (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013; Alonge et al., 2020). In addition to their salaries, competitive benefits such as health insurance and retirement plans tend to provide security and stability, fostering commitment to their roles (Alonge et al., 2020). Teachers may also face interference from administrators or local officials that undermine their autonomy and professional judgment, leading to burnout and attrition (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013). In such cases, supportive school leadership becomes essential, as it may offer instructional guidance and emotional support, creating a positive school climate that empowers teachers (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013). African studies have further highlighted the importance of training and development opportunities for teacher retention. When teachers are well-trained, they are more likely to commit to their schools. This is because continuous learning enhances their skills and job satisfaction, while on the other hand positively affecting the performance of their students (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013; Alonge et al., 2020).

In summary, governments and educational institutions must therefore prioritise improving working conditions in schools, including reducing class sizes and upgrading facilities (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013). Salary structures should also be revised to offer competitive compensation that reflects the importance of the teaching profession (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013; Alonge et al., 2020). Implementing comprehensive training and development programs can equip teachers with the skills they need to succeed and grow professionally (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013). Furthermore, fostering supportive leadership, where principals and administrators are trained in effective management practices that prioritise teacher well-being and professional growth, is essential (Alonge et al., 2020). What can also boost teachers' morale and retention rates is a collaborative school culture, where teachers feel valued and have a voice in decision-making processes (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013). By addressing these interconnected factors (working conditions, compensation, professional development, and supportive leadership), African schools can create environments that not only attract quality teachers but those that also retain them for longer (Adebayo & Gombokomba, 2013; Alonge et al., 2020). This holistic approach,

therefore, is essential for building a stable, motivated, and effective teaching workforce, capable of providing quality education to Africa's young minds and further driving the future development of the continent.

Theoretical frameworks of retention practices

Employee retention remains a critical challenge for organisations aiming to maintain a competitive edge and ensure continuity in their operations. Two prominent models in the literature that address this issue are Döckel's (2003) model and Zin et al.'s (2012) model. Both models offer comprehensive frameworks for understanding the factors that influence employee retention, albeit from different theoretical perspectives.

Döckel's Model of Retention Factors

Döckel's model presents a comprehensive framework for addressing employee turnover, highlighting six crucial factors (compensation, job characteristics, training and development opportunities, supervisor support, career advancement, and work-life balance) that organisations should consider retaining their workforce. While the model offers valuable insights, it is essential to critically examine its components and their implications.

Compensation remains a fundamental aspect of employee satisfaction, although its effectiveness varies based on individual priorities and market conditions (PeopleScout, 2023; Zin et al., 2012). While it attracts talent, an overemphasis on monetary rewards can create a transactional work culture. Job characteristics also significantly influence retention, but the model's focus on skill-job alignment may overlook the value of challenging roles that promote growth (Coetzee & Stoltz, 2023). Training and development opportunities are also crucial for employee retention, yet the model does not address the challenges of implementing effective programs or the risk of investing in employees who may leave for better opportunities (PeopleScout, 2023). Supervisor support is rightfully emphasised but may oversimplify leadership dynamics, which require a balance of guidance and autonomy (Bichsel et al., 2023; PeopleScout, 2023). With regards to career advancement, although this component is vital, the model may not consider limitations in smaller organisations or conflicts between individual aspirations and organisational needs (Bichsel et al., 2023; Coetzee & Stoltz, 2023). Finally, work-life balance initiatives are important but the model lacks exploration of implementation challenges across diverse demographics (PeopleScout, 2023; Bichsel et al., 2023). Döckel's model does provide a solid foundation for understanding employee retention, but incorporating additional factors could enhance its effectiveness.

Zin et al.'s Model of Retention

Zin et al.'s model, grounded in Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, provides a detailed framework for understanding employee retention by categorising factors into motivation and hygiene elements. Herzberg's theory asserts that intrinsic motivation factors such as responsibilities, challenging work, recognition, personal achievement, and advancement opportunities enhance employee motivation and satisfaction (Coetzee & Stoltz, 2023). These factors foster a sense of purpose and engagement. When employees face meaningful challenges, they are more likely to remain committed, driven by personal growth (PeopleScout, 2023).

Conversely, hygiene factors like salary, benefits, company policy, working conditions, supervision, and interpersonal relations do not inherently motivate but are essential for preventing dissatisfaction (Coetzee & Stoltz, 2023). Inadequate attention to these factors can lead to discontent and turnover. For instance, competitive salaries and favourable working conditions may prevent dissatisfaction but do not inherently inspire commitment (Bichsel et al., 2023). Thus, fair compensation and a positive work environment are vital for maintaining employee satisfaction (PeopleScout, 2023). Zin et al.'s model also highlights the importance of aligning organisational goals with employee expectations for retention. Implying that organisations that align their objectives with employees' career aspirations create a motivated workforce. Furthermore, a positive organisational culture that promotes collaboration, recognition, and respect enhances commitment (PeopleScout, 2023). Additionally, comprehensive benefits such as wellness programs and professional development opportunities address broader employee needs, contributing to long-term commitment and job satisfaction (Coetzee & Stoltz, 2023; PeopleScout, 2023).

Döckel's and Zin et al.'s models offer valuable insights into employee retention from different angles. Döckel's model focuses on specific practices like compensation, career opportunities, training and development, supervisor support, and work-life balance, providing a concrete framework for retention. In contrast, Zin et al. incorporates Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, emphasising both intrinsic motivators and extrinsic hygiene factors. While Döckel highlights practical aspects, Zin et al. emphasises psychological factors influencing satisfaction. Both models, however, stress aligning organisational practices with employee needs. Therefore, by integrating these approaches, organisations can develop effective retention strategies that foster job satisfaction and long-term commitment.

Psychosocial perspective for teacher retention

The psychosocial perspective for teacher retention presents a theoretical framework for understanding the complex interplay of factors that influence teacher retention in educational settings. This perspective integrates several key psychological constructs and organisational factors to explain how teachers' experiences and perceptions in their work environment contribute to their decision to remain in the profession. At the core of this approach is the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory, which provides a foundational understanding of human behaviour in the workplace. The COR theory posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, maintain, and protect resources they deem valuable (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In the context of this study, these resources include work engagement, psychological capital, and occupational passion. The emphasis on resource preservation aligns with the observed tendency of teachers to become defensive or aggressive when faced with potential resource loss (Mvana, 2024; Collie et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018).

The psychosocial approach to teacher retention identifies work engagement as a key resource in the retention process. This is a resource that serves as the initial spark that ignites a positive cycle of resource gain and retention (Collie et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018). It relates to a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). The psychological capital resource, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in translating work engagement into positive outcomes. Psychological capital encompasses the four key components (self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience) that enable teachers to navigate challenges, maintain a positive outlook, and persist in the face of adversity (Collie et al., 2017). When enhanced, psychological capital can explain positive relationships between work engagement and retention outcomes such as organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and satisfaction with human resource retention practices (Collie et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2018). The inclusion of occupational passion resource adds another layer of complexity to the psychosocial approach to teacher retention. Amplifying the effects of work engagement and psychological capital on retention. Emphasising that teachers with a strong passion for teaching become more resilient to stressors and more committed to overcoming obstacles within their work environment (Chen et al., 2018; Chaaban & Du, 2017).

By considering multiple psychological and organisational factors, this approach provides a better understanding of the retention process than those focusing solely on external factors like salary or working conditions. The psychosocial perspective acknowledges the importance of internal psychological states and personal resources in shaping teachers' career decisions. While it offers a holistic view of retention by considering psychological factors, it raises questions about the complexity of relationships between these factors and may therefore underemphasise systemic and structural issues affecting retention. Nonetheless, it suggests that improving teacher retention requires enhancing psychological capital and fostering passion through mentoring programs, opportunities for professional growth, and positive school culture that values and recognises teachers' contributions (Chen et al., 2018; Chaaban & Du, 2017). Thus, aligning with the conservation of resources (COR) theory that emphasises resource preservation to prevent burnout and disengagement (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The psychosocial approach to teacher retention therefore offers valuable in-sights for understanding the complex dynamics of teacher retention. Its integration of psychological constructs with organisational factors provides a comprehensive view of the retention process. While the approach has limitations and raises questions for further research, it offers important insights for educational leaders and policymakers seeking to improve teacher retention rates. By addressing both the psychological and organisational aspects of teaching, this perspective paves the way for more effective and holistic approaches to supporting and retaining talented teachers in the profession.

Conclusions

The literature on teacher retention highlights the critical importance of effective human resource strategies in maintaining a high-quality, committed workforce in educational institutions. These strategies encompass a range of practices that address both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators for teachers, which also recognise that retention is a multifaceted issue requiring a comprehensive approach (Cells et al., 2023; EEF, 2023; Mvana, 2023). Such an approach is essential for addressing retention challenges in both developed and developing countries. In developed nations, for instance, this approach could tackle challenges related to burnout and lack of professional development, which contribute significantly to high turnover rates. While in developing countries, challenges related to poor working conditions and low salaries which exacerbate retention, could be eliminated. Therefore, a psychosocial perspective for teacher retention, grounded in the conservation of resource (COR) theory, offers a comprehensive framework that integrates both psychological constructs and organisational factors. This is a perspective that acknowledges the importance of internal psychological states and personal resources in shaping teachers' career decisions. Suggesting that improving teacher retention requires enhancing psychological capital

and fostering passion through mentoring programs, opportunities for professional growth, and positive school culture that values and recognises teachers' contributions. Two retention models are also examined in this study to provide further insights: Döckel's model, which focuses on practical factors such as compensation and support, and Zin et al.'s model, which incorporates Herzberg's two-factor theory, emphasising intrinsic motivators and hygiene factors. The two models highlight the importance of aligning organisational practices with employee needs. Therefore, integration of these approaches is essential in creating effective retention strategies that can promote satisfaction and encourage long-term commitment among teachers in African schools.

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