



Why Experienced Teachers are Important - And What Can be Done to Develop Them

Helen F. Ladd, Duke University

Trying to keep educational costs in check, America's cash-strapped states, school districts, and charter schools are hiring less costly novice teachers – often energetic college graduates supplied for two-year stints by expanding programs like Teach for America. In the late 1980s, most of the nation's teachers had considerable experience – only 17 percent had taught for five or fewer years. But since then the national teacher workforce has expanded while the overall experience level has dropped sharply. By 2008, more than one in four of America's teachers, some 28 percent, had less than five years of experience. Especially in underprivileged areas, many individual schools have much higher proportions of novices in the classroom.

What difference does it make that the United States now has a large – and rising – number of inexperienced school teachers? Some observers approve the trend. They declare that experienced teachers are not needed and applaud the rapid “greening” of the teaching force. But this view is short-sighted. Although a constant flow of new recruits is healthy, research shows that teacher experience matters in many ways.

What Experienced Teachers Do

Educational researchers have been able to pin down how much teacher experience matters.

- **Experienced teachers are on average more effective in raising student achievement than their less experienced counterparts.** This happens not just because experienced teachers are more likely to work in schools and classrooms with more advantaged students. When researchers carefully adjust for this reality, they still find that more experienced teachers are, on average, more effective than teachers with fewer years of classroom experience. In the research I have done with colleagues on teacher performance in North Carolina, the greater effectiveness of experienced teachers in boosting student achievement is clear for elementary, middle, and high schools alike.
- **Teachers do better as they gain experience.** Researchers have long documented that teachers improve dramatically during their first few years on the job. Less clear has been what happens after those early years. In our new research on middle school teachers in North Carolina, we find that math teachers become increasingly effective at raising the test scores of their students through about 15 years. At that point, they are about twice as effective as novices with two years of experience. The productivity gains are less dramatic for middle school English teachers, but follow the same trajectory. On average, even teachers with two decades or more of experience are far more effective than those same teachers were earlier in their careers.

- **Experienced teachers also strengthen education in other ways** beyond improving test scores. Our research in progress suggests that, as North Carolina middle school teachers gain experience, they become increasingly adept at doing other important things – like reducing student absences and encouraging students to read for recreational purposes outside of the classroom. More experienced teachers often mentor young teachers and help to create and maintain a strong school community.

The High Cost of Rapid Teacher Turnover

Heavy reliance on inexperienced teachers is not only worrisome because novices are less effective than veterans; constant turnover in the teacher body is also disruptive for schools and harmful to students. All too often, inexperienced teachers are first assigned to disadvantaged schools, where the challenges of maintaining order and effectively instructing students are very high. Novices placed in such schools understandably try to leave as soon as they can. More generally, the U.S. teaching corps suffers from the fact that many newcomers exit from the profession altogether after just a few years.

Counterarguments come from the apparent success of many charter schools that employ novice teachers and from the effectiveness of many Teach for America recruits. Despite their lack of experience and limited pre-service training, Teach for America members are often no weaker than other teachers in the heavily disadvantaged schools into which they are placed – and they may do better at teaching math. But Teach for America instructors do not stay long, with more than half leaving after their basic two year commitment and more than 80 % moving on after three years. Even strong charter schools have similar difficulties with teacher retention.

High teacher turnover requires schools to spend costly time on recruiting, mentoring, socializing, and training newcomers – only to see the trained teachers move on. And research on New York Elementary schools provides clear evidence for what parents know: high teacher turnover undercuts student achievement, especially in schools with many disadvantaged students.

How to Develop and Retain Effective Teachers

The bottom line is that it is important to retain effective teachers, and a waste of resources not to do so. Not all newly minted teachers have the potential to be high quality, so the challenge is to attract those with clear potential, give them opportunities to develop, and retain the most successful. For that to happen, salaries and career conditions both matter.

- Salaries must be adequate – and teachers must have an expectation that as they gain experience their salaries will rise in line with what college graduates earn in comparable professions.
- Teachers are more likely to leave a school – or the profession – when they suffer poor working conditions. Highly effective school principals can improve conditions and retain good teachers.
- Politicians should stop designating teachers as scapegoats. Especially when they work with socially disadvantaged students, teachers must be provided with the institutional supports they need to be effective and steadily advance their skills.

Evidence from Teach for America and experimental charter schools highlights the serious challenge not just of attracting, but also of retaining good teachers, especially in schools serving disadvantaged students. Wonderful as it is for bright college graduates to bring new energy and skills, schools pay a high price for too much teacher turnover. Surely America can do better – for starters, by recognizing the value of teacher experience and learning to develop and reward it.