Teacher Attrition: The Former Teachers' Perspectives in the Bhutanese Context

Chencho Wangchuk[1*] and Jigme Dorji[2]

[1]Gedu College of Business Studies, Royal University of Bhutan, Bhutan.
[2]College of Language and Cultural Studies, Royal University of Bhutan, Bhutan.

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration with author JD. Author CW designed the study, managed the literature searches, performed the analyses, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author JD managed the analyses of the study. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Aims: To examine why professional teachers leave teaching and what measures the stakeholders could adopt to retain them.
Study Design: A qualitative research design.
Place and Duration of Study: It was conducted in Bhutan, and it took one year.
Methodology: Data were collected from 15 former teachers through semi-structured interviews and written responses to open-ended questionnaires. Qualitative data were analyzed using directed content analysis technique.
Findings: Analyses of the data revealed four findings. They are human, social, structural, and psychological capitals. However, as structural and psychological capitals were either the cause or the result of human and social capitals, the findings were subsumed into human and social capitals.
Conclusions: This study examined reasons for teacher attrition from the perspective of former teachers. Based on the analyses of the data, two measures are suggested for teacher retention. These measures are renovating or building new physical structures and revamping leadership selection procedures.

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Corresponding author: Email: chenchow15@gmail.com;

1. INTRODUCTION

Effective teachers and quality teaching play vital roles in improving schools and learning among children [1,2,3]. However, many educational institutions currently face teacher attrition problems. It is a pressing issue. Thus, it is widely discussed in numerous contexts such as Australia [e.g., 4,5], Canada [e.g., 6], and the USA [e.g., 7,8,9], for example.

Teacher attrition is not new to Bhutan either. In fact, retaining trained, experienced teachers has been a major challenge for the Ministry of Education (MoE) since 2008. According to the *Annual Education Statistics report 2019*, an average of about 3.89% teachers leaves teaching every year for various reasons including voluntary resignation [10]. Although this rate may be considered normal across the civil service, losing good teachers have huge financial, educational, and expertise-related implications. It disrupts instructional cohesion and disfavors students [11,12]. It is also costly for the schools [13,5,14,15,16] as higher attrition would mean recruiting, training and staffing schools with less qualified teachers [17,18,19]. Moreover, as knowledge, skills and experience also depart with those leaving [20,19], the replacement teachers recruited under contractual schemes [See 21] may fail to raise students' academic achievements as compared to those experienced ones [13,6]. In addition, as attrition is largely seen among teachers with higher academic backgrounds than those with weaker academic qualifications [7,22,19,23,24], teacher shortages in schools threaten ". . . possible compromisation of student learning" [25, p.33]. The school may also fail to ensure access to education, provide quality education, and achieve school improvement efforts [See 26].

A total of 1021 regular teachers have left teaching profession between 2008 and 2017 [27]. Similarly, [28] reports a teacher attrition rate at 4.02% in 2018 against 3.0% in 2009, an increase by 1.02% within the last decade. That means, a total of 263 experienced teachers left teaching profession voluntarily in 2018 alone against 125 in 2009 [p. 37]. Also, from a total of 480 teachers who left teaching as of May 2019, 277 of them left it voluntarily [10] indicating attrition rate at 5.44%, an increase by 1.42% from 2018 report. This trend is worrisome for Bhutan as recruiting and training involves time and resources such as infrastructure, human, and finance.

According to available literatures, several factors have contributed to teacher attrition in numerous contexts. Two dominating factors were low salary [4,5,14,19,29,30] and heavy workload [4,5,6,31,19,29]. Following these were poor working conditions [4,14,19,29] and lack of professional support [4,31,19,29]. Difficulties associated with classroom management [4,5,6] and poor relationship with colleagues and parents [6,31] were other reasons. Emotional state [5,31] has also affected teacher attrition rate. Though these results are varied, yet, they fit each of [16]'s four themes. These themes are human, social, structural, and positive psychological capitals.

There is little evidence of teacher attrition being studied in the Bhutanese context. Neither is there an evidence of it being studied from the perspective of former teachers. Therefore, this study explored why young professional Bhutanese teachers leave teaching in droves and suggest teacher retention measures through former teachers. Findings from this study would inform the government and the Ministry of Education to find measures that may encourage professional, experienced teachers to stay in and make teaching attractive among the prospective teachers. Moreover, it would also have implications for conducting induction and mentoring programs for the new entrants.

1.1 Research Questions

1. Why do professional teachers leave teaching within the first few years of their appointment?
2. What measures should the stakeholders adopt to retain professional teachers?

2. METHODS

As advised by [McGaw, 2002, as cited in 32], this study adopted a qualitative research design that aimed to explore and understand a phenomenon [33], that is, teacher attrition in the Bhutanese context. Reason for adopting this design was because it ". . . can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more convenient conventional research methods" [34,

p. 11]. In other words, it offered opportunities to look at a phenomenon holistically [35,36] which, otherwise, were not present anywhere [37] through the "use of naturally occurring data" [37, p. 44]. Because of these strengths, this design obtained in-depth details and reasons from the participants regarding their decisions for leaving teaching profession by ". . . immersing oneself in a scene and trying to make sense of it" [38, p. 3].

2.1 Participants

The participants for this study were 15 former professional teachers (nine males and six females) who had voluntarily resigned from the job within the first five years of their deployment. One reason for choosing school teachers, as participants for this study, was because tertiary education system in Bhutan experiences the ripple-effects of the type of school education. The other reason was based on studies that asserted higher attrition among young school teachers [17,6,24] whose experience between 1-5 years was found to have better effect on students' academic performance than others [39].

This study intended to ". . . develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon . . ." [40, p. 206], therefore, the participants for it were recruited through snowball sampling [41], asking for referrals from those who were still in the service at the time, to explore former teachers' perspectives on leaving the profession. Moreover, as they were a better "source of information" [42, p. 25] due to their experience of having worked in schools, their perspectives would provide a clearer picture of why many a teacher leaves teaching voluntarily annually. Through them, it was also possible to learn what measures could possibly assist teacher retention. Therefore, to gather different perspectives, the researchers recruited teachers who had worked in different schools - primary, secondary, and high schools – across the country.

2.2 Data Collection Tools

The tools employed for data collection were (a) semi-structured interview and (b) open-ended questionnaire. The former was chosen to understand participants' perspectives [35]. Through probing questions, it was also possible to elicit detailed information about teacher attrition from the participants. Also, there were higher chances of obtaining real experiences [37] through non-verbal communication signals

that could have led to quitting teaching altogether.

The latter tool was administered to obtain additional insights from those who wished to share their views, thoughts, and feelings through writing. By this, every interested participant was given equal opportunity to add to the richness of the data. These tools offered scopes for gathering missing data in either of them.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

A list of prospective participants' names was collected from the former school teachers known to the researchers. Initially, the researchers collected 30 names and their contact addresses (mobile phone numbers and email addresses). Then, the researchers contacted each of them and requested their participation in this study.

From the total prospective participants, only 15 of them expressed their participation interests. Nine of them participated in semi-structured interviews while other six responded to open-ended questionnaires. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom and Messenger, whichever was convenient to the participants, while responses to open-ended questions were received through mail.

2.4 Trustworthiness

As analysis, interpretation and reporting of the qualitative findings are subjective [36,43], there were potential threats that could have possibly undermined its credibility and trustworthiness. In order to overcome these biases, the researchers initiated several measures to at least minimize researcher, participant, and data analysis biases [44,45].

To minimize or eliminate researcher and participant biases, the researchers recruited two experienced researchers, who were familiar with interviewing techniques and participants, to independently conduct semi-structured interviews. Similarly, to minimize or eliminate analysis bias, the researchers and the interviewers exchanged copies of interview transcriptions and open-ended-questionnaire responses for independent analyses. Then, the team gathered for a debriefing to strengthen credibility of the findings [See 32]. Discrepancies arising from thematic coding were resolved through rigorous discussions [See 43] so that the themes fit [16]'s theoretical framework.

2.5 Data Analysis

Semi-structured interview transcriptions and open-ended questionnaires were analyzed using content analysis techniques. It is a technique that analyzes all written communications [36,46]. Written communications, in this case, included interview transcriptions and written responses to open-ended questionnaires. From the three distinct approaches that [46] discuss, the qualitative data in this study were analyzed using directed content analysis or deductive approach [47,46] guided by [16]'s theoretical framework. Data were analyzed at two stages. First, following [36]'s guidelines, the researchers, with assistance from the interviewers, independently read through, analyzed, and converted descriptive information into subcategories. Then, they gathered to identify the recurring themes, both latent and manifest contents, and put them under each of the four themes developed by [16]. Any thematic mismatches arising from the independent analyses were all resolved through discussions and member-checking with the participants.

3. FINDINGS

This section reports the analyses of the interview transcriptions and open-ended questionnaire responses. There are two sections.

3.1 Reasons for Leaving Teaching Profession

This section answers: Why do professional teachers leave teaching within the first few years of their appointment?

3.1.1 Human capital

Human capital among the participants comprised their skills, knowledge and abilities that were relevant to them as professionals. In this regard, all the participants not only acknowledged the positive impacts of timely short-term professional development programs on their personal and professional growths, but also expressed the need of them. For example, I2 acclaimed,

. . . workshops would equip us with better skills and knowledge that are relevant in teaching, and managing self, classroom, and students' behaviors. (6 November, 2019).

Some of them also called for regular in-school professional development programs that would upskill teachers with contextualized "pedagogic knowledge", "subject-related content", and other skills such as counseling and mental health, life skills and emotional intelligence, for instance.

The school management should encourage the competent ones to facilitate in-school workshops even if there were no such training available . . .. (R6, 16 October, 2019).

None of their expectations have materialized during their tenure as teachers. This, they said, was because of the existence of unfairness while "nominating teachers" for workshops. For example, at least five participants accused school authorities of nominating those "principals' favorites" often bypassing certain criteria despite calls for "nomination of relevant candidates". This favoritism had left them disgruntled and even enraged, consequently, resulting in "quit teaching altogether" as they found no reason to "adapt and continue". Also, they found it simply ". . . more frustrating . . . resulting in complacency and inactivity . . ." (R3, 23 December, 2019) endangering both personal and professional lives.

No new learning opportunities [workshops and short-term training] outside the school campus ill-equipped, ill-prepared me. . . . then, after the fifth year, I decided to quit it altogether as I found no reason to adapt and continue in that school. (I4, 10 November, 2019).

Workload was another factor that simply obligated them to do more but achieve less. It appeared that the schools looked directionless with teachers involved in many a non-academic activity. One participant wrote.

Besides the teaching workload, I was also required to coordinate cultural and literary activities. Like me, others also had to do a lot. We worked like robots ... (R6, 16 October, 2019).

I was trained to teach. But, on reaching school, I had to coach sporting activities, attend all forms of competitions. (I7, 13 November, 2019).

Besides lack of in-school learning opportunities and heaviness of workload, the decisions of the school authorities have affected these participants. Failure of school authorities "to build and strengthen" human capital seemed to have negatively impacted staff development, school culture and students' learning.

3.1.2 Social capital

All participants appeared extremely happy and delighted when describing their strong personal bonds with students and colleagues. Due to strong social connectivity, the participants always "enjoyed being in" their schools. Considering their social relationships and deep sense of belongingness to one another, all the participants "wished to be in school[s] throughout" their lives. I9, for instance, remarked,

I loved my students and colleagues. I wanted to continue working in the school as it was in it where I was able to derive maximum satisfaction. Besides continual learning, I used to derive maximum gratification (12 November, 2019).

Despite such socially fulfilling experiences, all of them had finally quit it for reasons other than the social capital. Poor working conditions, lack of access to good internet, health, and transport facilities, and poor or autocratic school leadership were some recurring reasons. That is why they admitted that leaving teaching was "the toughest decision" of their lives at that energetic, dynamic, and youthful age.

3.1.3 Structural capital

Poor infrastructural facilities have significantly influenced participants to leave teaching. This capital, according to the participants, included physical structures such as school buildings, play fields, staff quarters, and library rooms. Because most of the participants were former teachers of primary and secondary schools, their schools were the ones which were severely short of good infrastructural facilities.

It was too difficult for me to teach my pupils in those poor classrooms. There were leakages from the roofs. Floor was uneven . . . the windows did not have glasses . . .. (R3, 23 December, 2019).

I was posted in a remote school. I had to reach it on foot. . . . because it was a village, it was difficult to rent a livable rental house then. Though it [the school] had only 45 students, it was deprived of good classrooms and teaching materials. (I6, 3 December, 2019).

In addition, a former middle school teacher added,

I needed proper playing fields for my health and fitness. That school did not have any such fields. Lack of them forced me to I apply for transfer two

times in five years only to see my applications rejected. Then, I decided to resign . . . at the end of my fifth year in service. (I3, 7 December, 2019).

Primarily, lack of proper housing, poor classrooms and no or lack of sporting facilities were the reasons which led to their resignations because of continual ". . . physical discomforts and emotional setbacks . . ." (I3, 7 December, 2019) in those settings.

3.1.4 Positive psychological capital

This capital encapsulated participants' state of mind and its wellbeing. Majority of the participants commended the relationship they had with their colleagues. Because of the highest level of collegiality in the previous workplaces, these participants have had positive state of mind and so its wellbeing. Their yearnings were evident in both verbal and non-verbal signals.

I had extremely good relationships [with] all colleagues. We were a strong community of colleagues bonded by love, compassion, and kindness. (R1, 3 October, 2019).

I miss that social environment. Everyone was helpful, genuine, and synergistic. My mental wellbeing was strong because of our unconditional association. (R5, 1 October, 2019).

As in any workplace, these former teachers' emotional and psychological wellbeing also depended on the kind of social environment they had in their respective schools. For example, in the schools that had visionary, compassionate and adjustable leaderships, the participants' psychological and emotional wellbeing was found more positive. This was because these authorities were "democratic", "humane", "considerate", "industrious", and "farsighted" despite their strictness when it came to fulfilling professional obligations.

On the contrary, those participants who served under "autocratic", "dictatorial", and "self-centered" leaders have experienced both emotional and psychological disturbances.

I always disliked going to office as the principal did not like me. He was always unappreciative and biased . . .. (I1, 7 December, 2019).

My principal always praised himself . . . he was self-centered and autocratic . . . he never

listened to our suggestions or opinions . . .. (I7, 13 November, 2019).

Therefore, despite good collegiality among the subordinates, the kind of leaders and their leadership styles seemed to have caused frustration, extreme disappointment, and unhappiness leaving them with no other options, except leaving teaching for other jobs.

3.2 Teacher Retention Measures

This section answers: What measures should the stakeholders adopt to retain professional teachers?

The participants, as former teachers, recommended two specific measures that may possibly facilitate retention of, what they called, "good", "experienced", and "competent" teachers.

3.2.1 Build physical structures

A poor physical infrastructure was one of the reasons that forced them out of the schools. Lack of or no proper rental houses, classrooms, and playfields were the contributing factors to their physical discomforts and emotional setbacks, which, then, have contributed to their emotional and psychological discomforts. Two respondents wrote,

. . . have welcoming physical structures such as classrooms, staff quarters and playfields. Lack of them would not help retention of competent teachers. (R2, 20 October, 2019).

. . . renovate the old ones and build new structures. Such physical structures may cater to the physical wellbeing of the teachers and so will they lengthen their service . . .. (R4, 2 October, 2019).

In order to accomplish these requirements, they suggested the government to ". . . discontinue with unnecessary excessive funding for those recently established central schools" (R6) so that those "unnecessary excessive funding" for the purpose of ". . . supplying all necessary items free of cost" (I7) could be diverted to the construction of new classrooms, hostels, play fields, and staff quarters. Availability of these physical structures would not only make teachers feel privileged, but also promote their emotional, psychological and physical wellbeing. Otherwise, they predicted that the schools would continue losing good, experienced teachers.

3.2.2 Revamp leadership selection procedures

Leaders have the potential to stagnate, corrupt, or transform the spirit of professionalism among its staff. In this case, most participants were severely affected by their leaders and, therefore, they have all resigned from teaching within the first five years.

In most cases, those who have either friends or relatives or acquaintances at the headquarters are selected irrespective of their performances in the selection interviews. The expected ones . . . do not get those leadership positions. To rope in competent, visionary individuals, there must be fairer selection procedures. (I5, 7 November, 2019).

Another participant exclaimed,

Unless we fairly select committed, competent applicants, we will not be able to bring changes in the school system. Honestly, if I were to go back to school, I would wish to have a leader who leads, not one who commands and controls. The former will bring motivation, energy, synergy and proactivity in a community of teachers while the latter will simply destroy and ultimately kill the working spirit of those good ones. (I8, 20 November, 2019).

Therefore, the participants, who were adversely affected by leadership styles during their tenure in the schools, strongly suggested a radical change in leadership selection procedures. Indeed, they recommended choosing motivating, visionary, industrious individuals as principals or vice principals if the ministry wishes retention of teachers.

4. DISCUSSION

The objectives of the study were to investigate why former professional teachers left teaching early and what measures the stakeholders could adopt to retain them in teaching. The categories and subcategories obtained from the data sources fit the capitals developed by [16]. However, as these capitals are inextricably linked, they are subsumed into two main findings because the structural and psychological capitals were either the cause or the result of human and social capitals.

To build and strengthen human capital, timely workshops and short-term training for teachers are indispensable after graduating from teacher training colleges. Workshops on life skills,

counseling and mental health, and teaching pedagogy, for instance, would transform and discipline teachers, their thoughts, and their actions [48]. Such professionalization opportunities increase teachers' personal and professional efficacies and encourage them to remain in their job longer [7]. However, as in [19, 4,5,29], these participants were deprived of such learning opportunities due to unfairness in school politics. Many candidates were disfavored due to favoritism, probably, a result of, what [49] calls, balkanization, a culture that does not favour conditions for learning and growth. Besides heavy workload, unfair means have severely affected preparation and mentoring [14] leading to frustration, complacency, and inactivity. Professionally, such disturbances may have impacted student learning by the schools failure "to create conditions in schools in which students will flourish and give their best" [50, p. 41]. Particularly, to reduce teacher workload, the ministry may develop a policy that delegates non-academic work to non-teaching staff so that teachers could focus only on teaching. Also, analyzing the situational needs of the schools, the schools could conduct in-school training by inviting experts from outside so as to make opportunities to learn and grow available to everyone.

Socially, all participants had symmetrical relationships particularly among colleagues and with students. Owing to this sense of community, the participants' positive psychological and emotional wellbeing was positive resulting in a deep sense of connectedness and belongingness. It may be due to this high social connectivity, salary never ensued as a reason for their resignations unlike in the previous studies [See 14,4,5,6,31]. This means the former teachers treasured good relationships and harmonious working environments. Despite strong mutualism and collegiality, they have all quit teaching. Poor working conditions as in [14] and [4], no access to internet and health facilities due to remoteness of their workplaces, and school leadership were their main reasons. To retain teachers, the government may divert central school funds for the construction of physical structures such as classrooms, offices, laboratories, and staff quarters besides providing good internet, road, and health facilities. With reference to leadership, the participants strongly suggested revamping leadership selection procedures. Indeed, schools require good leaders who are not, according to [51], "time telling", but "clock building" [p. 23]. Schools and

their teachers merit leaders who promote and nurture "collaborative culture" [49, p. 192] characterized by dynamism, shared vision, synergy, reciprocal learning, and collegiality [52]. Otherwise, the ministry and the schools would continue to lose good, experienced teachers resulting in huge financial, educational, and expertise-related implications and student learning.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDA-TIONS

This study examined the reasons for teacher attrition and the measures for teacher retention based on the analyses of the data collected from two sources. The findings are presented based on the capitals of [16]. Subsuming the reasons for attrition into two, human and social capitals, the findings suggest two recommendations for teacher retention.

First, as most teachers do not seem to get equal opportunities for workshops and short-term training, the school authorities may explore areas through which they could build and expand their human resources. Understanding the situational needs, the schools may invite facilitators and coordinate in-school professional development programs so that everyone can participate in them. Selecting competent individuals in leadership positions is the other recommendation. This is because good leaders not only influence the dynamics of the school functions, but also inspire and motivate teachers through their leadership. Ultimately, reduction in teacher turnover would bring tremendous reduction in financial, educational, and expertise-related implications.

CONSENT

Informed consent forms defining the objectives and purposes of the study were emailed to them. Through it, they were informed that their involvement in this study was purely voluntary.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

As noted in Fraenkel et al. [36], Silverman [37], and Spradley [42], the researchers considered three ethical issues concerning participants' safety and security besides communicating the purposes of the study both verbally and electronically through informed consent forms. First, to maintain confidentiality of whatever information they shared during the data collection time and to protect their real identities,

pseudonyms (e.g., I1, I2, . . . and I9, and R1, R2, . . ., and R6) are used throughout the reporting of the findings. I1 to I9 represent those participants who participated in the semi-structured interviews while R1 to R6 embody those participants who wrote written responses to the open-ended questionnaires. Second, the researchers also strictly considered what [43] call "soft relativism" [p. 16] especially during the interviews. Therefore, to seek their cooperation, the researchers and interviewers treated them with respect by seeking permissions before tape-recording their conversations during the interviews, for instance. Finally, as [42] suggests, the researchers would make the reports available to the participants.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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