

The Effect of Recent Legislation on Teacher Attitudes

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents, who always encouraged me to follow my dreams and did their best to provide a way for me to reach my potential. This paper is also dedicated to my husband. Without his love and support, I would not have been able to finish this semester of student teaching and complete this project.

Acknowledgments (optional)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	v
Abstract.....	2
Literature Review.....	3-4
The Legislation Passed.....	4-5
Teacher Attitudes.....	5-6
The Research.....	6
The Survey Results.....	7-9
Conclusion.....	9-10
References.....	11
Appendix A.....	12-15

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1- GRAPH- AGE GROUPS

FIGURE 2- GRAPH- TEACHING EXPERIENCE

FIGURE 3- GRAPH- CHALLENGES FACING TEACHERS

FIGURE 4- GRAPH- HOW THE END OF TEACHER TENURE AFFECTS TEACHER
ATTITUDES

FIGURE 5- GRAPH- HOW THE END OF MASTER'S PAY AFFECTS TEACHER
ATTITUDES

FIGURE 6- GRAPH- LIKELINESS TO BE TEACHING IN NC IN ONE YEAR

FIGURE 7- GRAPH- LIKELINESS TO BE TEACHING IN NC IN FIVE YEARS

ABSTRACT

THE EFFECT OF RECENT LEGISLATION ON TEACHER ATTITUDES

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Over the past year, there has been a huge focus on legislation that was passed by the North Carolina General Assembly, particularly legislation that relates to education. Pay raises for teachers with Master's degrees was removed. Teachers who already had their master's still get their increased pay, but teachers in the future will not receive extra compensation for holding a master's degree. In the future, teachers will not be able to achieve tenure. Longevity pay was eliminated. Another issue facing teachers is the new salary schedule. Teachers within their first few years of teaching were given a seven percent raise. Teachers with more experience were given smaller raises. This has created an atmosphere of dissatisfaction for many teachers in North Carolina. According to a study by Richie Bernardo, North Carolina ranks 50 on a list of best and worst states for teachers.

In 2006 US Census data, North Carolina ranked 26th in teacher pay. Statistics in 2013 rank North Carolina 46th in teacher pay. So what brought about this change in rankings? This paper examines the legislation passed by the General Assembly that brought about these changes, as well as how these changes have affected teacher attitudes. Through a survey of practicing teachers at my internship site, I determined that the legislation passed has a negative effect on teacher attitudes and has contributed to teacher attrition in North Carolina.

Literature Review

Factors in Teacher Attrition

Teacher turnover rates have been increasing in the last few years as compared to years past. The national teacher turnover rate is 17 percent. It is estimated that one-third of teachers leave the profession within three years, while an estimated 46 percent don't make it more than five years (Kopowski, 2008). Numerous studies have been conducted to determine the major factors in teacher attrition and what can be done to keep teachers in the classroom.

One factor in teacher turnover is standardized testing. Teachers feel pressure from the law that holds them accountable for student test scores. Many teachers feel that it is unfair for their teaching ability to be judged based to their students' scores. In an article by the National Education Association, one teacher stated that "There will always be children who perform below others on standardized tests, but under the current accountability mandates, their teachers are looked at like we're not doing a good job, even if we've been doing good work with them". (Kopowski, 2008)

Another factor in teacher attrition, especially among beginning teachers, is a lack of support in the classroom. New teachers are given their own classroom and expected to perform at the level of more experienced teachers. In many schools, new teachers are thrown into a "sink or swim" experience (Ingersoll, 2012). While many schools now implement beginning teacher support programs, this experience is still common, and a factor in the 14 percent of teachers leaving the profession after one year.

A third factor in teacher turnover is salary. In 2011, United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that teacher salaries should start at \$60,000, with the opportunity to earn up to \$150,000. The average starting salary for teachers is \$35,139 (Smollin, 2011). On top of being underpaid, teachers also spend money out of their pockets to cover classroom expenses. Eight

percent of teachers spend \$1,000 out of pocket on classroom expenses, and the average teacher spends \$433 a year on their classrooms (Kopowski, 2008). Leaving the teaching profession for the prospect of making more money in another career is becoming more common.

The Legislation Passed

In the 2013 session of the General Assembly, bills that relate to master's pay and teacher tenure were passed. General statute 115C-302.1 states that "The State Board of Education shall maintain the same policies related to masters pay for teachers that were in effect for the 2008-2009 fiscal year" (General Assembly, 2013). From the 2007-2008 session of the General Assembly, Senate bill 1386 states that the State Board of Education will set the entry level salary of teachers and other personnel who have "A" certificates, "Masters" certificates, National Board Certified, or advanced degrees. The bill states that principals can choose to pay employees more if they think that the employee's qualifications make it appropriate to do so, or to recruit and retain teachers in certain areas like special education, math, and science (General Assembly, 2013) The 2013 budget passed by the legislature and signed by Governor McCrory eliminated the ten percent increase in teacher pay for holding a master's degree.

The 2013 session of the General Assembly also saw the repeal of a bill passed in 1981 that established procedures for teacher tenure. The 1981 bill, G.S. 115C-325, set the definition and requirements for teachers achieving career status as "when a teacher has been employed by a North Carolina public school system for four consecutive years, the board, near the end of the fourth year, shall vote upon whether to grant the teacher career status" (General Assembly, 2013) and goes on to state that a career employee is defined as an employee that has been given career status by the local board. General statute 115C-304 says that "Tenure of teachers shall be

determined in accordance with the provisions of G.S. 115C-325”(General Assembly, 2013). That bill was repealed, effective July 1, 2014, which eliminated teacher tenure.

The new salary schedule for teachers upset some teachers who have been in the profession more than a few years. Salary is one of the major factors in teacher attrition (Kopowski, 2008). Teachers within their first ten years of teaching received large raises, seven percent or sometimes more, according to NC DPI. Teachers with more years of experience received smaller raises. For example, in 2013, the base salary for a first year teacher was \$30,800. Beginning in 2014, the base salary for a first year teacher was \$33,000, a seven percent increase. Teachers with five to six years of experience received the largest raise. The salary for a teacher with this amount of experience in 2013 was \$31,220. In 2014, the salary of teachers with five to six years of experience was \$36,500, an 18.5% increase. On the other hand, teachers with 19 years of experience received raises of 3.3%, with their salary increasing from \$41,710 to \$43,500.

Teacher Attitudes

The legislation passed by the General Assembly in 2013 set off a firestorm of public opinion. There was a debate over whether or not teachers are paid enough. The removal of master’s pay and teacher tenure has affected the attitudes of teachers in the classroom and the attrition and mobility of teachers within the state, to other states, or out of the teaching profession altogether. According to an article by Julian Heilig, “Wake County Schools anticipated teacher attrition because of North Carolina Governor McCrory’s education reforms that included larger class sizes, heavier workloads, and other indirect financial burdens”(Heilig, 2014). Heilig references the Schools and Staffing survey, which states that “North Carolina ranks 4th lowest in beginning teacher pay—a ranking that does not correspond to its cost of living (NC ranks 27th most costly out of all 50 states)”(Heilig, 2014). After having their salaries frozen for the past few

years, experienced teachers received minimal pay raises. Many teachers already feel that the profession is not respected and that legislators do not care about them. One article by Katie Mgongolwa, a teacher in North Carolina, states that teachers are “forced to wonder if an administration plagued with controversy has purposefully attempted to devalue North Carolina public education in order to make the next generation passive and uneducated, if not outright ignorant.”(Mgongolwa, 2014)

The Research

Seeing the changes made to education in North Carolina, and looking at a future of teaching, I was interested in finding out how current teachers viewed the changes and how it affected their attitudes. I planned to research how the legislation passed by the general assembly affected teacher attitudes, and also how it affected the teacher’s plans for the future. To conduct my research, I developed a survey using Survey Monkey, and sent it to all the teachers and staff at the school where I completed my student teaching. The school where I did my student teaching is a small school, with about 300 students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. The school has a high Hispanic population. Sixty three percent of the students at the school are Hispanic. The school is also a high poverty school, with 94 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch. There are a total of 29 faculty and staff at the school. Survey participants were given a week to complete the survey, which was a total of 10 questions long. The questions first collected general information, such as age group, years of teaching experience, degrees held, and where participants completed their degrees. The questions became more specific, asking how the ending of teacher tenure and master’s pay affected teacher attitudes. The next questions asked how likely teachers were to still be teaching in North Carolina in one year, and in five years.

The Survey Results

For my research, I sent out a survey to the teachers and staff at the school where I completed my student teaching. In all, I received 11 responses out of 29 faculty members for the first survey, and 7 for the second survey. The survey questions aimed to find out general information, such as how long participants had been teaching, where they completed their degrees, and their age group. More specific questions aimed to find out what teachers viewed as the biggest challenge in the classroom today, how legislation has affected attitudes, and whether they plan on teaching in North Carolina in the future.

The first question in the survey asked participants their age group (refer to Figure 1). Of the answer choices, 45% responded in the 26 to 30 year old range, with 5 responses. With 2 responses, 18% of participants responded in the 46-50 year old range, and the age groups of 36-40, 51-55, 56-60, and 61-65 each received one response. The second question in the survey asked participants how long they had been teaching (refer to Figure 2). Of the answer choices, 1-5 years received two responses, 6-10 years received five responses, 11-15 and 16-20 years each received one response, and 21-25 years received two responses.

The third questions asked participants what degree(s) they hold. As expected, the majority of participants hold a bachelor's degree in elementary education, with seven participants responding that they hold that degree. Four of the participants also hold a master's degree, three of them in reading. One of the participants holds degrees in sociology and exceptional children. Another respondent holds degrees in history, museum studies/public history, and EC licensure. Another participant holds a degree in early childhood development. Another respondent holds a degree in English, and a teaching license through lateral entry.

The fourth question of the survey asked participants what their specialty or concentration area was. Four participants responded that their specialty area was K-6, one responded that their

concentration was art, one responded with ESL, and one responded with early childhood. Two of the participants responded that their concentration was in the area of exceptional children, which matches with the two EC teachers at the school. The fifth question of the survey asked participants where they completed their degrees. Ten out of the 11 participants completed their degrees in North Carolina. One respondent completed their degree in Tennessee.

The sixth question in the survey asked participants what they view as the biggest challenges faced by classroom teachers today (refer to Figure 3). Seven of the participants responded that standardized testing was the biggest challenge. Two of the participants answered that recent legislation was the biggest challenge. Curriculum and time management each received one response.

The seventh question in the survey asked participants how the ending of teacher tenure has affected teacher attitudes (refer to Figure 4). 18% of respondents were neutral, 45% of participants said that the ending of tenure negatively affected teacher attitudes, and 36% of respondents said that the ending of teacher tenure very negatively affected teacher attitudes. The next question in the survey asked participants how changes to the pay scale and the ending of master's pay affected teacher attitudes (refer to Figure 5). Nine percent of participants were neutral, 27% of participants said that the changes to the pay scale and the ending of masters pay negatively affected teacher attitudes, and 63% of respondents said that these changes very negatively affected teacher attitudes.

The ninth and tenth questions of the survey asked participants how likely they are to continue teaching in North Carolina. Fifty-four percent of participants said that they were very likely to be teaching in North Carolina in one year. 18 percent of participants said that they were likely to be teaching in the state in one year, while 18% of respondents were neutral and 9% of participants said it was very unlikely that they would be teaching in North Carolina in one year

(refer to Figure 6). Thirty-six percent of participants said that they were very likely to be teaching in the state in five years. 18 percent of respondents said that they were likely to be teaching in North Carolina in five years, while 18% of participants were neutral in this area. Nine percent of participants said that it was unlikely that they would be teaching in North Carolina in five years, while 18% of respondents said that it was very unlikely that they would be teaching in the state five years from now (refer to Figure 7).

Conclusion

Educators are members of a profession that directly impacts the future. Keeping highly qualified and passionate educators in North Carolina's classrooms is important to the success of North Carolina's students. With teacher attrition rates already on the rise, this is especially important in North Carolina. The actions of the North Carolina General Assembly have placed doubt into the minds of some teachers about whether legislators and those in power truly support the profession. While the results of the survey showed that practicing teachers at the school surveyed view standardized testing as the biggest challenge they face, the recent legislation received the second highest number of responses. When asked how the ending of teacher tenure affected teacher attitudes, 81% of survey respondents said that this action of the General Assembly negatively affected teacher attitudes. When asked the same question about the ending of master's pay, 90% of survey participants said that the actions of the General Assembly negatively affected teacher attitudes. The information collected in this survey leads to the questions "how do teachers across the state view these changes? How have they affected their attitudes?" The research could also be extended to find out what changes practicing teachers would want to make in order to make North Carolina a more "teacher friendly" state. To answer these questions, I would conduct another survey with a wider range of participants, perhaps a regional survey. Another way to answer these questions would be to observe and interview

teachers across the state to see how the changes have impacted them, and what changes they would make. Since teachers have such a direct impact on the future, efforts should be made to keep quality teachers in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Figure 1

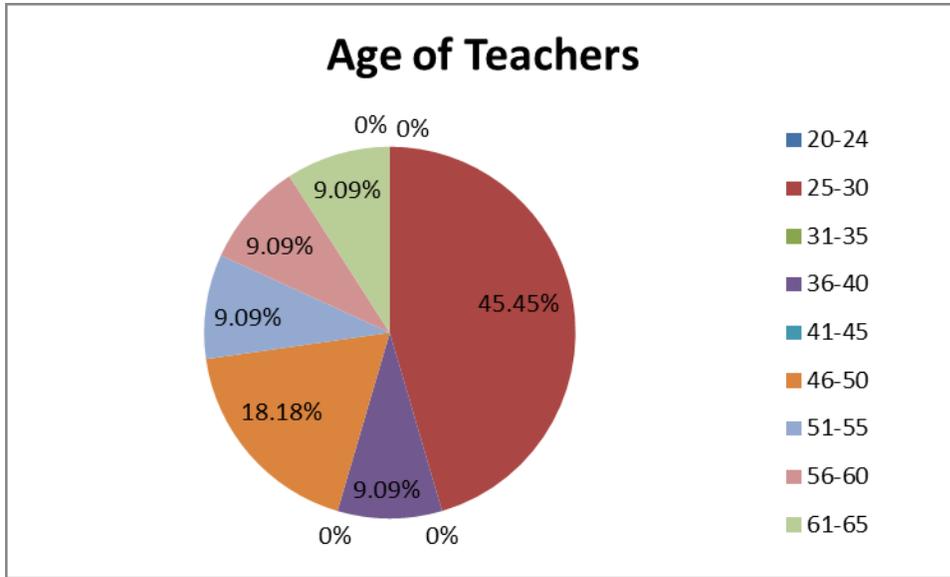


Figure 2

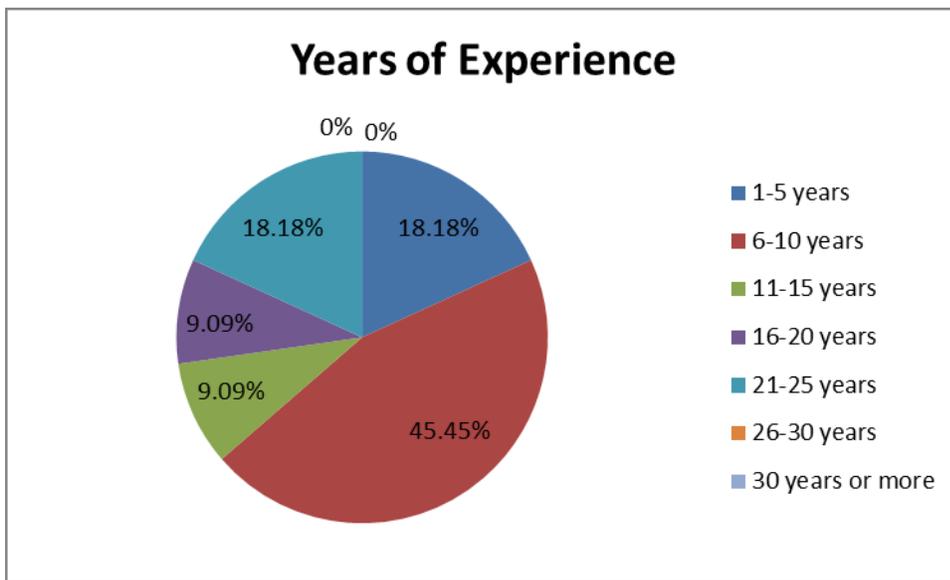


Figure 3

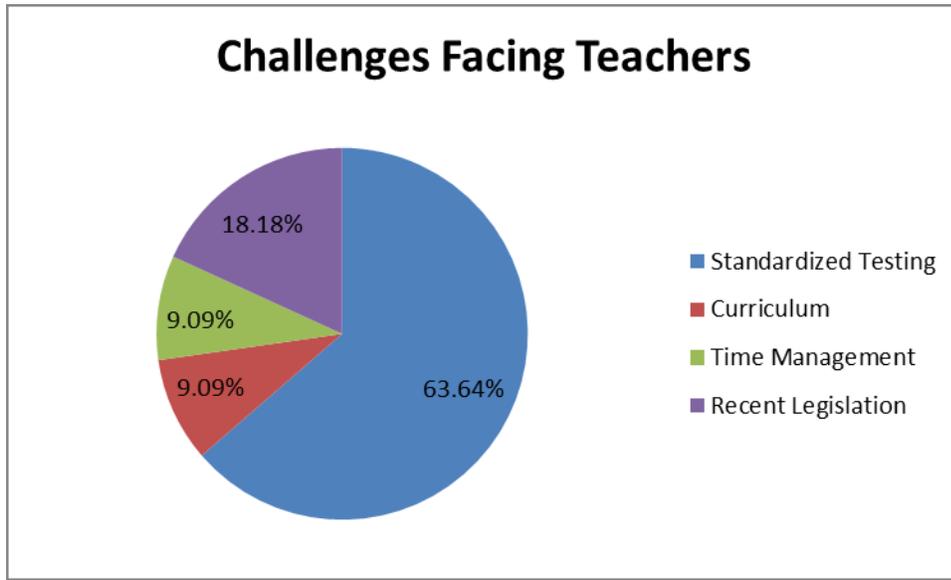


Figure 4

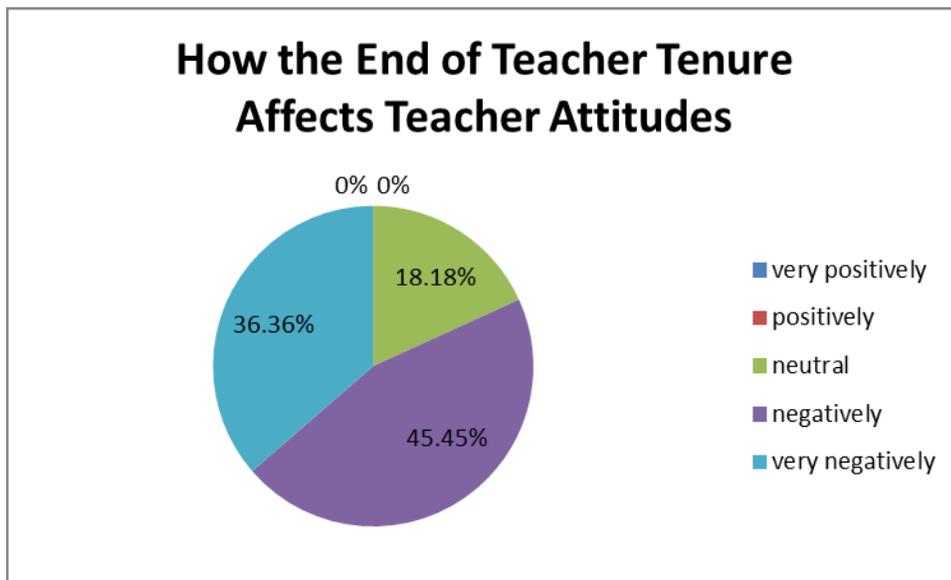


Figure 5

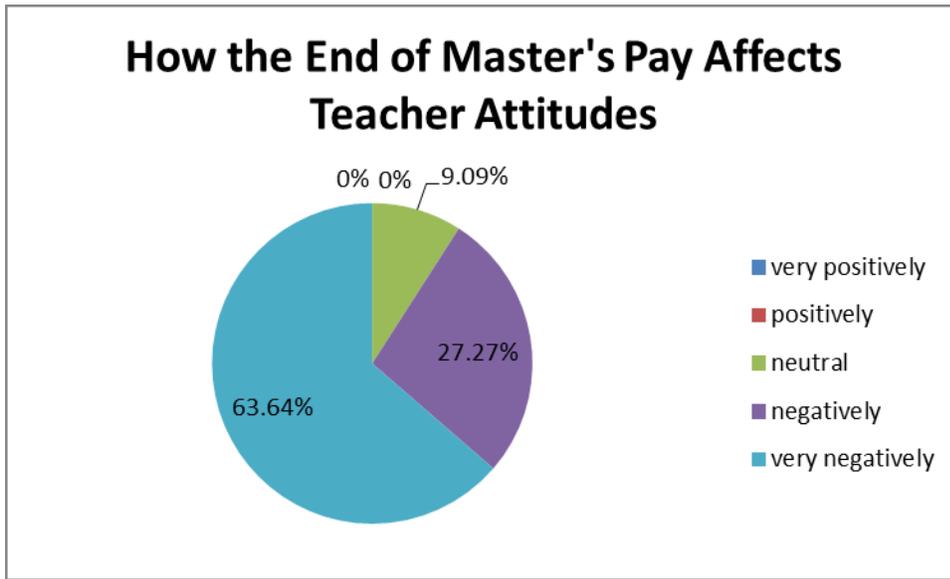


Figure 6

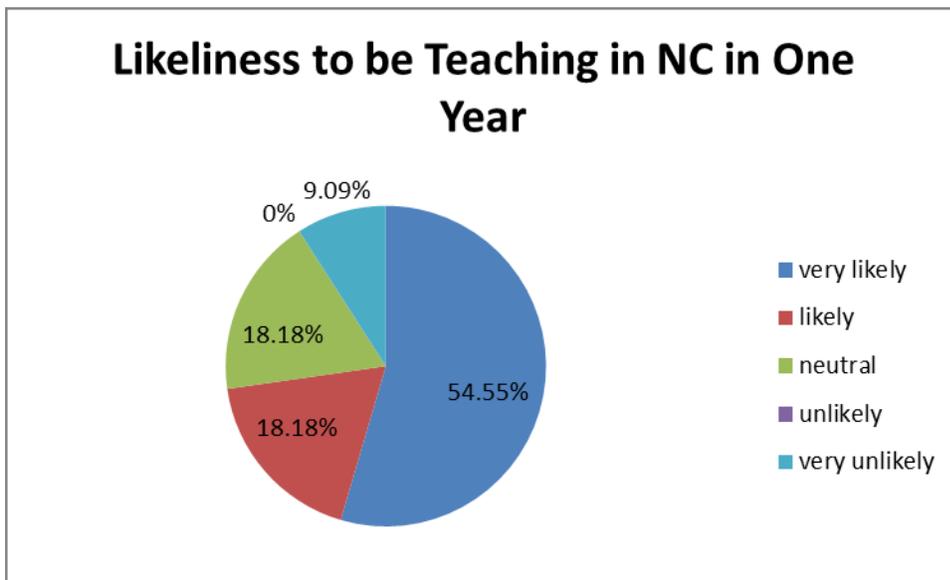


Figure 7

