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Exploring the Multiple Roles of Beginning Urban Educators

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Developing Teacher Leaders: Exploring the Multiple Roles of Beginning Urban Educators

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Abstract

Understanding how to prepare and support teachers as social justice educators committed to working in high-poverty, urban schools is a growing area of inquiry—one that is crucial if we are to stem the tide of high attrition from these hard-to-staff schools. Teacher educators struggle to create conditions within formal pre-service programs that will prepare educators for the many challenges unique to urban schools. This paper informs this struggle by looking at the early career trajectories of educators prepared specifically as social justice educators. Specifically, we are interested in capturing the multiple professional roles that urban educators assume in their quest to change the world and further social justice. Do these roles help keep educators engaged in their challenging work? We explore this question based on survey data from 417 urban educators in their second through sixth year of their careers and conclude by suggesting a new policy framework for thinking about urban teacher retention—a frame that extends beyond the classroom and into a variety of multiple professional roles.

Developing Teacher Leaders:

Exploring the Multiple Roles of Beginning Urban Educators

Understanding how to prepare and support teachers as social justice educators committed to working in high-poverty, urban schools is a growing area of inquiry—one that is crucial if we are to stem the tide of high attrition from these hard-to-staff schools. Teacher educators struggle to create conditions within formal pre-service programs that will prepare educators for the many challenges unique to urban schools: overcrowding, high faculty turnover rates, limited resources, and inadequate facilities. This paper informs this struggle by looking at the early career trajectories of educators prepared specifically as social justice educators. Specifically, we are interested in capturing the multiple professional roles that urban educators assume in their quest to change the world and further social justice. Do these roles help keep educators engaged in their challenging work? We explore this question based on survey data from 417 urban educators in their second through sixth year of their careers.

Rethinking Professional Roles of Urban Teachers

In the past decade, there has been a call for multicultural teacher education programs that "challenge the ideological underpinnings of traditional programs, place knowledge about culture and racism front and center in the teacher education curriculum, include teaching for social justice as a major outcome, and value the cultural knowledge of local communities" (Cochran-Smith, 2003). This type of "new multicultural education" grooms teachers to build on the assets of their students, rather than viewing students through a deficit lens. Participation in these new multicultural education programs prepares teachers to become social justice educators – aiming

to challenge and transform existing school structures in ways to better serve students and communities. However, the development of these social justice educators does not end when they finish their teacher preparation programs and begin their work as classroom teachers. According to Wilson, Floden and Ferrini-Mundy (2001), our lack of knowledge about how to best prepare teachers for urban schools remains a major gap in teacher preparation research. These authors emphasize the need for research linking teacher preparation and professional development to examine the ongoing role of teachers' learning experiences as they continue their careers in education. Increasingly, university preparation programs are examining the trajectory of ongoing teacher learning experiences for urban educators. Like teachers of traditional teacher education programs, these social justice educators take on multiple professional roles that further their quest for changing the world and help maintain their commitment to working in urban schools.

Much of the research examining the ways that teachers' professional roles influence their retention focuses on the impact of workplace conditions on teachers' commitment levels. In this sense, commitment is defined by "the degree of positive, affective bond between the teacher and the school" that was built on "the degree of internal motivation, enthusiasm, job satisfaction teachers derive from teaching and the degree of efficacy and effectiveness they achieve in their jobs" (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997, p. 2). Firestone (1994) has suggested that better working conditions and a better professional environment lead to increased teacher motivation. In fact, he recommends that schools be restructured in order to provide a differentiation of teacher roles in order to offer teachers multiple career path options, more decision-making power, better workplace conditions, and enhanced professional development opportunities. Rosenholtz (1989) notes the connection between workplace conditions, professional development, and teacher

motivation. In a study of over 1200 elementary schools, she examined the relationship between highly motivated teachers and commitment to their work and identified three key characteristics that accounted for 76% of teachers' commitment to their workplace: a high degree of teacher autonomy, psychic rewards that outweigh work frustrations, and ample opportunities for professional development.

The importance of professionalizing teachers has also been seen as a way of increasing teachers' commitment, and consequently retention, in schools. Upgrading the status of the teaching occupation has been seen by many as a key factor to reforming schools. A report prepared by the National Center for Education Statistics examined five characteristics to consider in the effort to professionalize teaching: teacher credentialing, formal and informal pre-service training, professional development opportunities, degree of teacher authority in the workplace, and teachers' financial compensation (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997). Their study found that teachers' commitment is in fact higher in schools that provide higher salaries, enable teachers to have influence over policy, and support new teachers in formal programs. Yet, not all professional activities were found to positively influence teacher commitment. More traditional forms of professional development, such as university courses or seminars sponsored by professional organizations, did not have a positive effect on teacher commitment. The report recommends that more than the mere existence of programs must be included in future research, as some programs have a larger effect on teachers' commitment than others.

Participation in professional networks is one role that provides ongoing professional development opportunities. Johnson and Boles (2001) note that numerous studies have revealed positive effects of teacher participation in professional networks. This form of professional development has been praised for the ways it "created collegial communities, enhanced their

subject matter knowledge in intellectually stimulating ways, expanded their repertoire of instructional strategies, facilitated access to new materials and resources, validated their philosophies and teaching practices, and developed their confidence and leadership skills" (Useem, Buchanan, Meyers, & Maule-Schmidt, 1995, p.12). Others have found that educators involved in these networks are provided a variety of opportunities for professional growth and colleagueship as well as an opportunity to develop leadership skills and opportunities (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992). Additionally, Quiocho and Rios (2000) point out that these networks are crucial for supporting the professional development of minority teachers. They note that such networks can help ensure that minority teachers do not become assimilated into a system that demands social and political obedience. Yet, researchers of teacher networks caution that involvement in such networks can run the risk of isolating teachers from their colleagues (Firestone, 1993).

Teachers also adopt the role of researcher as a form of ongoing teacher professional development. Existing literature examining teacher research presents a drastically different picture than that of teacher networks. While teacher networks often focus on issues of teaching and learning, the latest teacher research movement involves tying a research agenda to a larger political mission that aims at collective action (Huberman, 1996). These political missions have the potential to mirror the critical inquiry found in new multicultural teacher education programs. Yet, despite the empowering features of teacher research, obstacles to it are deeply embedded in the structure of schools (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). These obstacles include teacher isolation, occupational socialization, the knowledge base for teaching, and the reputation of educational research itself. Yet, there is hope that communities for teacher researchers can play an essential role in school reform, especially in urban schools where reform is the most needed.

The continuity and fluidity of ongoing and embedded professional development programs in schools provide opportunities for teachers to take on multiple roles outside the walls of their classrooms. These professional development schools allow teachers to "assume roles traditionally reserved for 'leaders.' Their fuller professional role enables them to learn and lead continuously as they inquire together into ever more responsive practice" (Darling-Hammond, Bullmaster, & Cobb, 1995, p. 88). By allowing teachers to share leadership roles, teachers are able to take on leadership roles and increased school-site decision making without formally moving into an administrative position. In this sense, highly effective educators do not need to leave the classroom in order to build leadership skills and take on more professional roles at their school site. Schools employing built-in professional development tend to elicit greater teacher commitment.

Though teachers' professional involvement has been tied to teacher commitment levels, it is crucial that the conditions of the teachers' workplace also be considered when discussing teacher retention. Studies have shown that teacher retention is positively correlated with a smaller student/teacher ratio and with strong administrative support (Shen, 1997), yet urban schools have the largest class sizes (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Higher rates of teacher retention are correlated with teachers' involvement in decision making at their workplace (Ingersoll & Alsalam, 1997; Shen, 1997). Yet, urban schools often are part of large, bureaucratic districts in which school officials have little flexibility in allowing certified teachers to make decisions or to leave the classroom to participate in leadership roles during the school day. There has been little attention paid to the types of embedded professional development opportunities that successfully operate within the context of large urban, bureaucratic school systems.

Teachers' professional involvement – in teacher networks, research studies, and other authentic professional development opportunities – help teachers sharpen their leadership skills and increase their commitment. Presumably, deeper involvement and higher commitment levels lead to higher rates of retention. It is unclear, however, how teachers' engagement in leadership roles and activist roles impact their decisions to stay in urban schools, where workplace conditions are often inferior to those in more affluent, suburban schools.

Due to the difficulty in tracking teachers, little research has been done on the personal, professional, and workplace characteristics that play a role in teachers' decisions to stay in urban schools. Although the Teacher Follow-up Survey to the national Schools and Staffing Survey does track specific teachers, they determine if the teachers have "left" the field based on one follow-up survey. This retention data is limited because it does not take into consideration teachers who have left the field and later returned (Adams & Dial, 1994). Data shows that up to 25% of teachers may fall into this category (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). It is therefore important to frame retention conceptually as a continuous process.

Sampling Social Justice Educators

To better understand the relationship between urban teachers' multiple roles and ongoing commitment to schools, we selected a sample of educators who received their training in what Cochran-Smith calls, a "new multicultural teacher education" program. It is helpful to sample teachers with similar teacher preparation backgrounds and initial commitment levels to urban schools. Surveying teachers with social justice teacher preparation backgrounds allows us to probe the ways that teachers' professional identities emerge as they engage in multiple professional roles. Since highly-qualified teachers are less likely to leave the field after the first

three years than less-qualified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000), it is also beneficial to examine the ways in which these teachers become professionally involved in their workplace or community. Also, sampling educators with different years of experience reveals trends in career trajectories.

Our sample consists of 417 educators six cohorts of teachers who have been teaching between one and six years. These teachers are all considered "highly-qualified" as they have a subject-based undergraduate degree, a Master's degree in Education, and special certification for teaching students from different cultural and racial backgrounds. Therefore, this sample allows us examine the relationship between professional roles and predicted retention without focusing on the varying experiences of teacher preparation and pre-service experiences. All of the educators surveyed are alumni of UCLA's two-year teacher education program. This program takes on a social justice agenda, promoting activism amongst new teachers. Since teachers hold full-time teaching jobs during their second year in the program, they become part of the alumni group as they begin their second year in the classroom. Four out of five educators in our sample are women, and as figure 1 indicates, these educators represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

In an effort to understand the relationship between key professional characteristics and retention, we are currently conducting a 5-year longitudinal study of highly qualified teachers who began their careers in urban schools. This paper serves as a "snapshot" within our larger retention study and examines the results of the most recent survey of an ongoing pool of educators. These alumni are tracked using a database that records personal demographic information, contact information, place of employment, and current job description. Using the contact information from the alumni database, graduates were contacted and asked to complete a survey either on-line or on paper. Thirty-two percent of alumni filled out the electronic survey,

and another 35% of graduates mailed in paper surveys. Follow-up phone calls were made in order to gather basic workplace information for an additional 22% of alumni. We were unable to gather data on 11% of the graduates, though preliminary analysis indicates that these subjects may be missing at random. In terms of individual characteristics, the distribution of the missing 11% of graduates is similar to the distribution of the non-missing group.

These highly qualified teachers stay in teaching at higher rates than national averages. Of the responding graduates, 88% remain working in K-12 schools. Yet, in an effort to examine the multiple roles that these educators have taken on, our sample includes educators who may not be in the classroom teaching but are still retained in the field of education. Overall, then, 95% of our sample is considered retained in the field of education. This paper reports the multiple roles these UCLA alumni take on as part of their professional careers. Specifically, we examine the teacher leadership roles, administrative roles, and activist roles that this group of retained educators has undertaken. These urban-educators' responses are juxtaposed with national responses in an effort to see why teachers leave urban schools at a quicker pace than other schools. By examining the characteristics of teachers taking on various roles, we hope to shed light on the ways these professional roles can impact retention of urban teachers and redefine the structure of retention.

Taking on Multiple Roles

With the bureaucratic demands placed on urban teachers, it was predicted that most of teachers' professional lives would focus around primary job responsibilities including lesson planning, grading assignments, aiding students outside of class time, and juggling other job-related responsibilities. However, our overall results indicate that these educators take on

multiple professional roles in addition to their primary job responsibility. More than half of our urban educators take university courses and participate in observational visits to other schools. Eighty percent of our sample is involved in regularly scheduled collaboration with other teacher on issues of instruction, and 95% of the educators attend workshops, conferences or trainings. Additionally, teachers also report involvement with individual or collaborative research, mentoring programs, activist organizations, and networks of teachers outside of their school sites. Figure 2 demonstrates the percentage of our respondents involved in each of these professional development activities.

In addition to these professional development roles, a smaller percentage of graduates also take on leadership roles. These include department/grade-level chair (8%), mentoring other teachers (11%), administrators (2%), staff developers (13%), coaches (7%), activists (7%), coordinators (13%) or some other leadership role (22%). Overall, graduates report an average of five professional development and leadership roles in addition to their primary job responsibilities. Our sample of educators also report that they stay in education primarily because they enjoy the subject matter, are attached to the kids, and want to change the world. The least reported reasons for staying in education were flexibility and the academic calendar. Looking to the short-term future, all of the retained educators report that they plan on working within the field of education in the next five years (Figure 3). While over 70% of educators anticipate teaching in five years, the remaining educators predict they will be working as a school administrator, working in K-12 schools in another role, working in education outside of K-12 schools, or leaving education temporarily. Over half of the classroom teachers report that their long-term career plans involves teaching as long as possible or until retirement – another 30% of current classroom teachers have not decided how long they will remain as a classroom

teacher. In order to analyze the impact of multiple roles on the teachers' projections about their professional future, this paper will examine the differing characteristics of educators engaged in multiple roles – as well as educators who fall into the categories of teacher leaders, administrators, and activists.

Do more professional roles lead to increased commitment?

Teachers who take on more roles are more likely to report they stay in education because they find teaching to be a fulfilling and challenging career and they have good relationships with colleagues. Not surprisingly, the more roles these teachers take on, the more hours they spend working each week.

At their school sites, teachers with more roles are more satisfied with opportunities for advancement, and less satisfied with class size. They also report a higher degree of perceived respect from society. Interestingly, despite this positive perception of their importance, it appears that teachers with multiple roles may actually be at the greatest risk of leaving the classroom, but not education. Teachers reporting that they are going to stay in teaching until retirement only have an average of only three roles, while teachers wanting to leave as soon as possible have an average of six roles. However, since none of these teachers indicate that they are planning on leaving the field of education in the next five years, it is conceivable that many of these teachers will leave the classroom to take on different roles within the educational field.

Since this analysis is based on educators up through their sixth year of teaching, it is still unclear how the number of multiple roles will change as teachers continue their career trajectories. Huberman (1993) notes that teachers in their fourth through sixth years of teaching enter a "stabilization phase" where they make the decision to commit to teaching. During this

period, teachers begin to feel a sense of independence while simultaneously building collaborative relationships with other educators. Thus, the next few years of data analysis will better reveal the relationship between years of experience in education, involvement in multiple professional roles, and retention.

Teachers Embracing Leadership Roles

We define "teacher leaders" as those educators who report being involved as a department or grade level chair, mentor, coach, staff developer, coordinator, or other stated teacher leadership role. A little less than half of our sample falls into this teacher leader category. Teacher leaders are less likely than other educators to report that they stay in education for the job security. These leaders' professional development activities vary compared to non-teacher leaders. Teacher leaders are more likely to engage in individual or collaborative research and present at workshops or conferences. However, they are less likely to be engaged in mentoring programs or participate in a network of teachers than non-teacher leaders.

Interestingly, these teacher leaders are significantly less likely to express interest in receiving National Board Certification. By engaging in these alternative leadership roles, perhaps these teachers are building leadership skills to work in education in a different capacity. If they are not planning on remaining in the classroom, they may see little reason to pursue the rigorous demands of achieving National Board Certification. Alternatively, they may sense that the time commitment of National Board Certification will interfere with their current leadership roles.

In addition to professional development activities, teacher leaders take on different leadership roles compared to non-teacher leaders. They are more likely to assume administrative

responsibilities at their workplace and participate as leaders in activist organizations. Overall, they take on an average of two more roles than non-teacher leaders and perceive a higher degree of respect from administrators than non-teacher leaders. However, despite their increased involvement in schools, teacher leaders do not report any differences in their anticipated future professional life compared to non-teacher leaders.

An Emerging Portrait of Administrators

We define administrative leader as those educators who reported administration as their primary job or reported taking on administrative responsibilities in addition to their classroom teaching position. Six administrators in our sample were identified, so while we have initial indications of administrator leader characteristics, we are only able to offer only an emerging portrait of these leaders.

In terms of personal characteristics, these administrators tend to be older and have children, yet they work an average of eight more hours than non-administrators. Professionally, they are more likely to attend university courses, perhaps within the framework of administrative credentialing programs. Compared to other teachers, administrators are less likely to stay in education because they enjoy the subject matter. These administrators are much more likely to take on roles as staff developers than non-administrators.

At their schools, administrators are less satisfied with collaborative opportunities, class size, and available resources than other educators. Yet, they are also less likely to report that routine paperwork interferes with their jobs, perhaps because such paperwork defines their jobs. Administrators' also report higher levels of respect from society than non-administrators.

The Dispositional Nature of Activists

We anticipated that many UCLA graduates would be engaged as educational activists given the social justice agenda of their teacher preparation program. Only 7% of the sample, however, reported taking on a leadership role as an activist. An additional 15% of surveyed educators report participating in an activist organization with a non-leadership role. This section will discuss the characteristics of both activist leaders and the larger group of all activists as they pertain to their professional experiences.

The emerging portrait of activists varies drastically from the rest of the educators in our sample. Ethnically, the Chicano/Mexican American and African American teachers are over-represented in the activist leadership group. Both Native American teachers also identify themselves as activist leaders. Activist leaders are more likely to stay in education because they are attached to the kids, and all activists are less likely to stay in education based on good relationships with colleagues.

Activists' professional development activities also diverge from the experiences of other educators. Activist leaders are more likely to observe at other schools, and all activists are more likely to present in workshops or conferences than their non-activist colleagues. Activists are also more likely to engage in individual or collaborative research, perhaps instantiating Huberman's description of research with a political agenda (Huberman, 1996). Activist leaders are also more likely to be teacher leaders, mentors, and staff developers than non-activists. Yet, activist leaders seem to take on different types of leadership roles than other teacher leaders. They are more likely to work with other teachers as mentors and staff developers. Activist leaders take on an average of three more roles than other educators, and report working an average of one and a half more hours each week than others.

Activist leaders also report less satisfaction with their work conditions compared to other educators. They are less likely to agree that colleagues share their beliefs, less satisfied with the policies and practices of assigning students to classes, and report fewer opportunities for collaboration and professional development. They are more likely to agree that their school facility is in need of repair. All activists report less satisfaction with available resources, less satisfaction with class size and report feeling less safe at their school site than non-activists (Figure 4). These results may reflect the isolation that many teachers feel when they attempt to reform schools within politically active yet marginalized groups. Thus, it appears that activist leaders do not only differ by the professional roles they take on, but also by a deeper dispositional stance. Activists who are not leaders are also generally less satisfied with their workplace conditions, and report less positive relationships with colleagues. Dissatisfaction with such conditions often leads to teacher attrition (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Unfortunately, all the activists in our sample are significantly more likely to indicate that they plan on curbing their teaching role as soon as possible. The challenge, then, is to determine how to support these educators in turning their frustration of school conditions into increased leadership involvement to aid their sense of advocacy in changing the structure of urban schools.

What does retention mean, anyway?

Though this "snapshot" is unable to predict urban teacher retention, it does allow us to probe the professional lives and emerging identities of retained urban educators. Our preliminary analysis suggests a new policy framework for thinking about urban teacher retention—a frame that extends beyond the classroom and into a variety of multiple professional roles.

This study included educators who are still involved in the field of education. Out of our sample, 86% of these educators are full-time classroom teachers, with another 3% working as part-time teachers or substitute teachers. Yet, 1% of our sample is school administrators, 5% of this sample includes educators working in K-12 schools in a different role, and another 5% of our sample indicated they worked outside K-12 schools in the field of education. In the larger sense, these educators are considered “retained” in the field of education, though not specifically as classroom teachers. Since these educators are considered highly-qualified and take on multiple roles, it is important to include these educators in our retention study to determine exactly what career paths look like for educators in urban schools.

In this sense, we propose thinking about retention not as a dichotomous indicator--“stayer” versus “leaver”—but as a complex array of professional roles that enable urban educators to stay committed to their work as social justice educators. In fact, data collected on incoming UCLA teacher candidates reveal that many future educators actually anticipate this complex array of roles. When asked "Do you envision your career as primarily rooted in the classroom or in multiple roles extending beyond the classroom?" most (68%) --chose "multiple roles." The students who view themselves in these multiple roles seem to adopt a social justice identity; attaching a higher importance to changing the world, furthering social justice, and working in low-income communities as reasons they strive to become teachers. These future educators are also more likely to envision teaching as a stepping stone to a leadership position in public service.

Conclusion

This discussion on the implications of teachers' professional lives on teacher retention highlights the importance of providing teachers with multiple roles, including leadership roles, as an embedded form of professional development. Though increased involvement in these roles offers an initial sense of optimism that correlates with remaining in the teaching field, participating in activist organizations seems to invoke increased frustration with workplace conditions and thus less hope for retention. While this analysis does not provide conclusive answers on the connections between these roles and retention rates, it does create a set of questions regarding the impact of taking on multiple roles, including leadership and activist roles, to frame longitudinal data analysis based on the same sample of teachers.

This study also allows us to re-envision a retention framework that is inclusive of multiple professional roles that educators assume in efforts to further social justice, change the world, and work in communities that are in the most desperate need for highly-qualified educators. Teacher education programs need to recognize the importance of these fluid professional roles and help prepare educators to take on leadership roles outside of the classroom. In order to serve students in high-priority schools, it is imperative that we prepare social justice educators to take on leadership roles and become involved at their school site in ways that transcend the classroom walls.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1: Ethnicities of sample.

Figure 2: Percent of sample taking on professional development roles.

Figure 3: Anticipated job in 5 years.

Figure 4: Activists and non-activists reporting satisfaction with workplace conditions.

Figure 1: Ethnicities of sample.

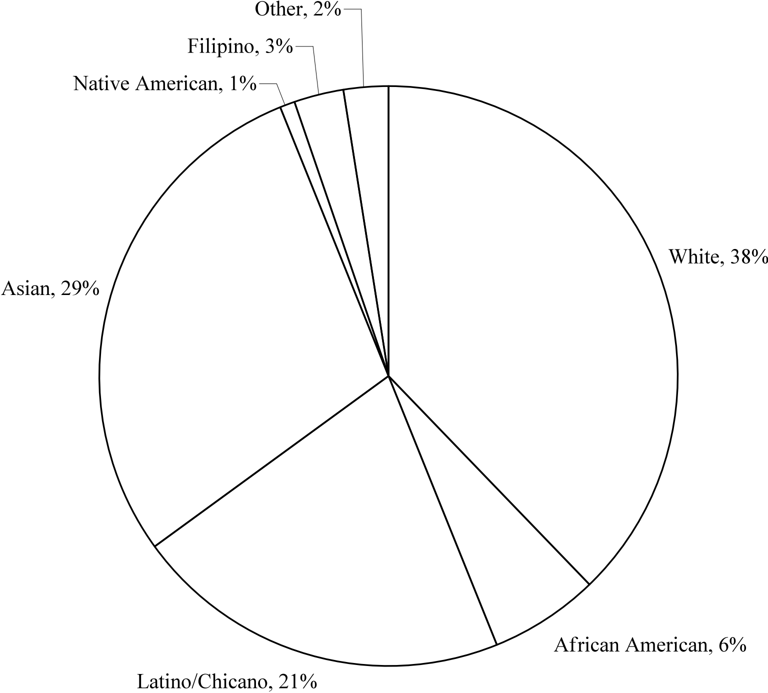

Figure 2: Percent of sample taking on professional development roles.

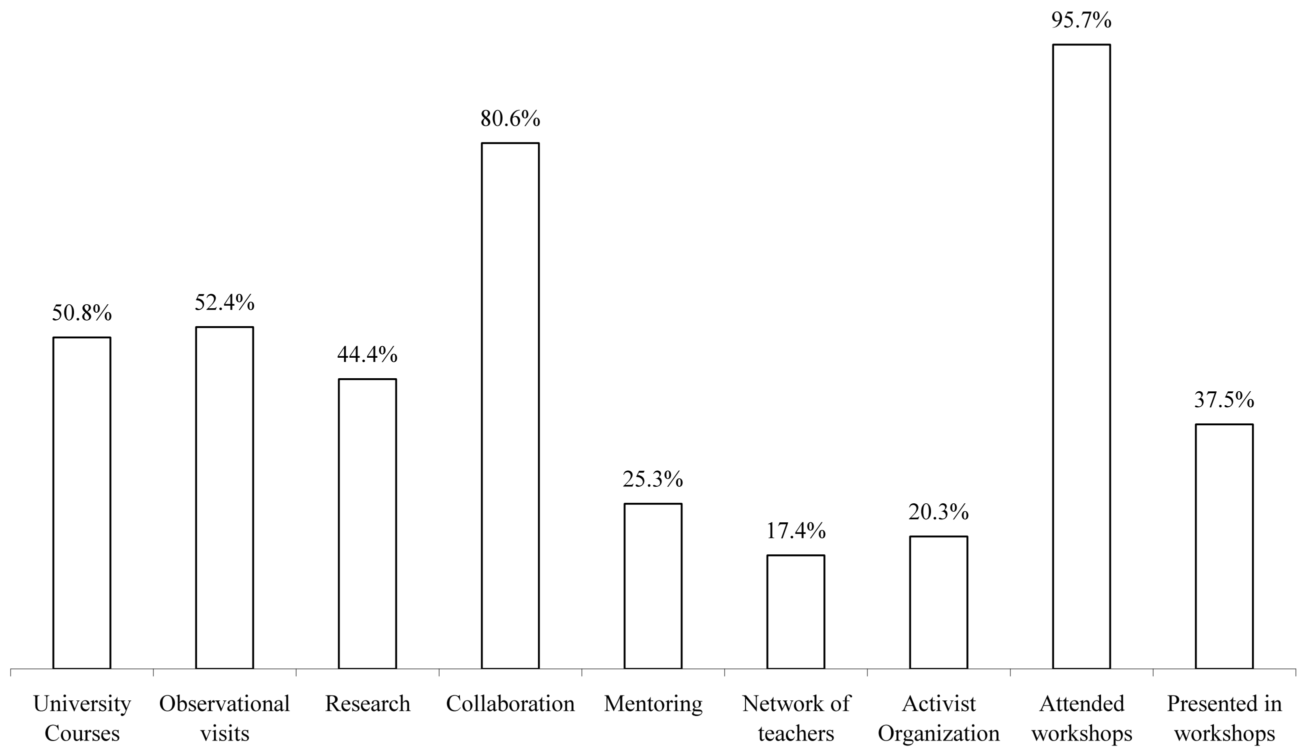

Figure 3: Anticipated job in 5 years.

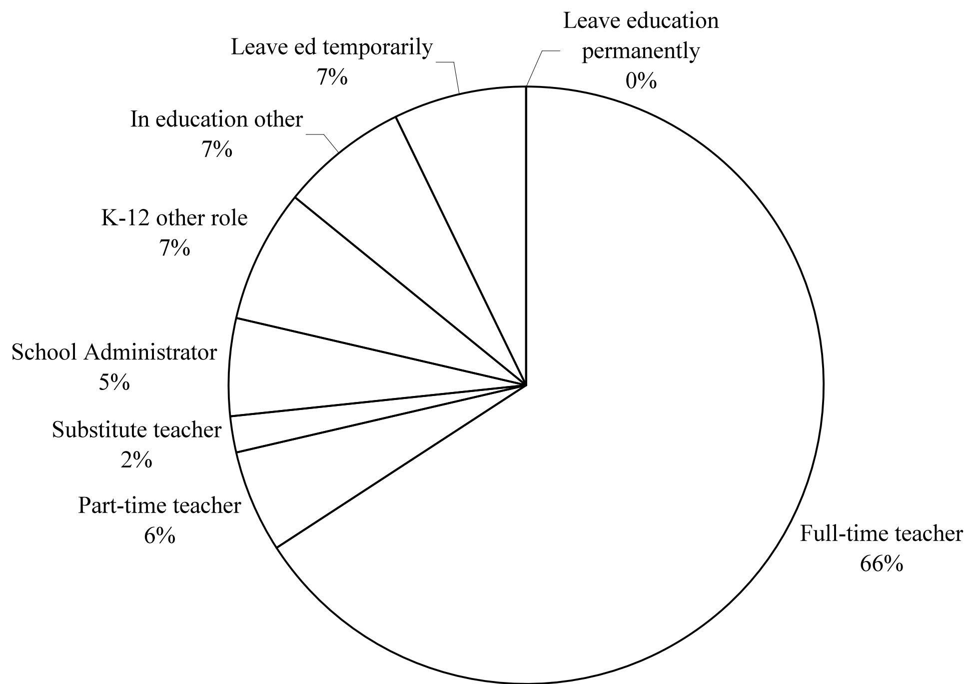

Figure 4: Activists and non-activists reporting satisfaction with workplace conditions.