

Employed or Not Employed? An Examination of Saskatchewan Beginning Teachers'  
Experiences of Seeking and Obtaining Employment

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**Abstract**

Based on a joint research study between the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation and the University of Saskatchewan, this paper examined the employment experiences of Saskatchewan beginning teachers. More specifically, this paper highlights findings from one year of cross-sectional survey data on Saskatchewan beginning teachers with respect to: (a) their employment seeking strategies; (b) their obtained employment (including contract type, position, and location); and (c) the fit between their preservice education and teaching assignment.

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## **Introduction**

As the Canadian teaching force retires and educational reforms reshape the context of schooling, research in the recruitment and retention of new teachers is on the increase (Canadian Teachers Federation, CTF, 2004; McDonald, 2001; Ontario College of Teachers, OCT, 2003; Tardif, 2005). Prior to entering their profession, studies indicate that preservice teachers are optimistic about finding employment (Snyder et al., 1995) and idealistic about their future careers (National Education Association, 2004). In contrast, survey results suggest that almost all new teachers in Ontario are dissatisfied with their teaching assignments and experiences (McIntyre, 2004). Although most provinces in Canada have initiatives in place addressing teacher recruitment and retention (CTF, 2004), teacher supply and demand is not homogenous across all regions of Canada (Gervais, Thony, & Maydan, 2001), and thus it is important to understand the work lives in which Saskatchewan education graduates find themselves. Furthermore, few studies provide an on-going description and analysis of the complex challenges that individuals face when they make the transition from pre-service programs to professional teaching or, as in some cases, decide to leave the profession (Martin, Chiodo, & Chang, 2001).

Teacher retention is an issue in education (Carroll & Fulton, 2004; Ferriter & Norton, 2004; Fuller, 2002), mainly because teaching has a turnover rate higher than that of most professions (Watts Hull, 2004). For example, nearly one third of American teachers are in “transition” (migration or attrition) every year (Ingersoll, 2001). Similarly, the OCT has reported massive turnovers in the Canadian teaching population (OCT, 2003) and more than 60% of Ontario school boards have reported problems with teacher retention (CTF, 2000). Retention of beginning teachers is also of grave concern

(Ingersoll, 2001; Watts Hull, 2004). It is estimated that 20-50% of new teachers resign during their first 3 to 5 years of teaching (Fleener, 2001; Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000; Suydam, 2002; Villani, 2002; Voke, 2002). This is problematic as teachers typically require 5 to 8 years of experience to master the profession (Scherer, 2001). Classrooms become recurrent training grounds as teachers leave before becoming experts only to be replaced by novices.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to highlight the findings from one year of cross-sectional survey data on Saskatchewan beginning teachers with respect to: (a) their employment seeking strategies; (b) their obtained employment (including contract type, position, and location); and (c) the fit between their preservice education and teaching assignment. Employment seeking strategies and tips obtained from interviews with twelve beginning teachers in Saskatchewan serve to provide a contextual basis for the survey results.

### **Methods**

The Becoming a Teacher project is a SSHRC funded longitudinal (3-year) study of the transition experiences of beginning teachers in Saskatchewan. A mixed-method design including surveys and in-depth interviews is used to explore the transition experience across personal, interpersonal, socio-cultural, and environmental domains. This particular focus of the study pertains to the experiences of Saskatchewan beginning teachers' in seeking and obtaining employment.

## **Survey**

*Survey participant recruitment.* All beginning teachers who graduated from the University of Saskatchewan during the Fall of 2005 or the Spring of 2006 with valid alumni addresses (N = 386) were surveyed. This study received appropriate institutional ethical approval and participation in the survey was voluntary. Surveys were mailed to graduates in the Winter of 2007.

### *Survey measures.*

Demographic information. Survey participants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire including gender, age, type of teacher education program, and major/minor in the teacher education program.

Teacher characteristics. Survey participants were also asked questions relevant to their first year teaching position including number and location of teaching positions applied for, number and location of positions offered, and type of teacher employment obtained by first year education graduates. The match between teaching assignment and undergraduate education training was also investigated.

*Analyses.* All data was scanned using the REMARK computer program, allowing for 100% verification. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all data.

## **Interviews**

*Interview participant recruitment.* An additional twelve diverse beginning teachers who became members of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation in early Fall 2006 were selected to provide insight into a range of experiences during their first year of teaching. As part of a larger one hour phone interview, these individuals responded to

questions involving their employment experiences as a beginning teacher in Saskatchewan.

*Interview analysis.* Participants responded to two interview questions. The first question asked the teachers to reflect on how they decided to become a teacher and who or what influenced their decision? The teachers were also asked what other career options, if any, they considered and participants were probed for reasons why the individual chose teaching rather than the other options. The second question focused on the teachers' current position including a description of their teaching position, assignment, and school. Participants were also asked when they started teaching at the particular school and how they came to teach at that school. Participants were then probed for details about the job search process. Responses to these questions were transcribed. Interviews were reviewed and particular responses to the employment questions were examined for common themes.

## **Results**

### **Survey Results**

*Demographics.* The response rate for the survey was 32.6% ( $n = 126$ ). Of the education graduates agreeing to participate, 73.8% ( $n_t = 93$ ) found employment as a first year teacher. The demographics of this subsample are presented in table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographics of graduates with first year teaching positions ( $n_t = 93$ ).

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	69.6
Male	30.4
<b>Age</b>	
22-24	42.4
25-34	43.5
35-44	9.8
45+	4.3
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	47.8
Married	33.7
Common Law	14.1
Separated	2.2
Divorced	2.2

The majority of the participants completed their education in 2006 (91.9%), followed by a small portion of respondents who finished their training in 2005 (8.1%). The majority of the participants specialized in elementary/middle years or secondary education (45.6% and 40.8%, respectively; see Table 2). The subject majors of the participants were well dispersed with English (12.7%) and Native Studies (11.9 %) being the most common. Participants' subject minors were also well dispersed with English (24.6%) and History (11.9%) being the most common.

Table 2: Participants' Education/Training

Education/Training	N	Percent
<b>University/College</b>		
University of Saskatchewan	122	98.4
Other	2	1.6
Total	124*	100
<b>Convocation Year</b>		
2005	114	91.9
2006	10	8.1
Total	124*	100
<b>Education Program **</b>		
Early Childhood	1	0.8
Elementary/Middle	57	45.6
Secondary	51	40.8
Aboriginal Teacher Education Program	18	14.4
Arts Education	5	4.0
Other	16	12.8

\*Note: Missing data for University/College and Convocation Year (N=1)

\*\*Education Program total percentages may not add up to 100 because respondents could select as many answers as applied.

*Employment sought by participants.* Following graduation, most participants applied for a teaching position (96%), followed by those who applied for non-teaching positions (12.8%) and/or teaching related positions (12%). Only a very small percentage of participants chose not to seek employment during this time (4.8%; see Table 3). Over half of the participants sampled applied for one to four different positions (56.1%). A considerable amount of the participants indicated that they had applied for five or more positions (41.3%; see Table 3). By far, the most common type of teaching position applied for by participants was with the provincial K-12 school system (90.1%). The majority of participants applied for positions located in urban Saskatchewan (75.8%) and/or rural Saskatchewan (60.5%). According to the survey data, far more participants chose to apply for out of province teaching positions than to apply for teaching positions

in northern Saskatchewan (32.8% and 13.7% respectively; see Table 3). Additionally, nearly every participant (99.2%) indicated that they currently hold a valid teaching certificate.

Table 3: Employment sought by participants

Employment Sought	N	Percent
<b>Type of position applied for *</b>		
Teaching Position	120	96.0
Teaching Related Position	15	12.0
Non-teaching Position	16	12.8
Decided not to seek employment	6	4.8
<b>Number of teaching positions applied for</b>		
None	3	2.4
1-4	69	56.1
5-9	29	21.1
10 or more	25	20.3
Total	123**	100
<b>Types of schools applied for</b>		
Provincial K-12 school system	91	30.1
Independent school	0	0
First Nations School	2	2.0
Other	4	4.0
N/A	4	4.0
Total	101***	100
<b>Location of schools applied for *</b>		
Urban Saskatchewan	94	75.8
Rural Saskatchewan	75	60.5
Northern Saskatchewan	17	13.7
Another Province	41	32.8
Another Country	10	8.1
N/A	3	2.4

\*Note: Total percentages may not add up to 100 because respondents could select as many answers as applied.

\*\*Note: missing data N=2

\*\*\*Note: missing data N=24

*Beginning teachers' current employment situation.* The majority of participants received one to four offers of a teaching position within one year after their graduation (75.8%). Considerably less of the participants received no teaching offers (23.4%; see Table 4).

Table 4: Number of teaching positions offered to participant

Number of Teaching Positions Offered	N	Percent
None	21	23.4
1-4	94	75.8
5 or more	1	0.8
Total	124*	100

\*Note: missing data N=1

The majority of the survey participants indicated that they were currently employed as a teacher (84.8%), followed by those who were employed in a non-teaching position (10.5%), not employed (3.8%), and those who were students (1%; see Table 5). At the time that surveys were administered, most beginning teachers were employed in a full-time position (71.6%), followed by those who were substitute teachers (26.5%) and part-time teachers (2%; see Table 5). Additionally, a greater percentage of males had full time jobs (66.7%) than females (55.7%).

Table 5: Participants' current employment situation

Employment Situation	N	Percent
Employed as a teacher	89	84.8
Employed in a non-teaching position	11	10.5
Student	1	1.0
Not Employed	4	3.8
Total	105*	100
Full-time	73	71.6
Part-time	2	2.0
Substitute	27	26.5
Total	102**	100

\*Note: missing data N=20

\*\*Note: missing data N=23

A large amount of first year full-time teachers received temporary contracts (41.1%), followed by those who received permanent contracts (38.4%) and replacement contracts (11%). Due to a large amount of missing data (N=113), it is difficult to say what types of contracts the majority of part-time teachers received (see Table 6). Also, more males reported having a permanent contract (33.3%) than females (18.2%) whereas more females have a temporary contract (28.4%) than males (13.9%).

Table 6: Participants' first year teaching contracts

Type of Contract	N	Percent
<b>Full-time</b>		
Permanent	28	38.4
Replacement	8	11.0
Temporary	30	41.1
Other	7	9.6
Total	73*	100
<b>Part-time</b>		
Permanent	4	33.3
Replacement	2	16.7
Temporary	6	50.0
Other	12**	100

\*Note: missing data N=52

\*\*Note: missing data N=113

*Match between the participants' education and teaching assignment.* With respect to the perceived match between the participants' education program and teaching assignment, more participants reported an "excellent match" than those who reported a "poor match" (24.5% and 18.1% respectively). Over half of the participants' responses (57.4%) fell in between these two extremes (see Table 7).

Table 7: Perceived match between teaching assignment and teacher education program

Perceived Match	Poor Match	2	3	Excellent Match	Total
N	17	18	36	23	94*
Percent	18.1	19.1	38.3	24.5	100

\*Note: missing data N=31

*Non-teachers' employment situation.* When asked for their reasons for not teaching, the majority of participants reported they were “not able to find a suitable teaching position” (57.1%) followed by participants who reported “other” reasons (33.3%), and those who were deferring their teaching to a later date (9.5%; see Table 8). Examples of “other” explanations specifically recorded by participants to explain their unemployment as teachers included starting a family, feeling unprepared to teach, the decision not to uproot their family, difficulty finding housing in place of employment, and retired teachers filling temporary contracts and substitute teaching positions.

When asked what they were doing instead of teaching the greater part of participants indicated that they were currently still looking for a teaching position (16%), followed by those who were employed in non-teaching occupations (8.8%; see Table 8). The majority of non-teachers indicated that they planned to return to the teaching profession in their future (69%), leaving a small portion who were unsure what they would do (20.7%), and those who were not planning on returning to teaching (10.7%; see Table 8).

Table 8: Non-teachers current employment situations

Employment Situation	N	Percent
<b>Reason for not teaching</b>		
Not able to find suitable teaching position	12	57.1
Have deferred teaching to a later date	2	9.5
Other	7	33.3
Total	21*	100
<b>What participant is doing instead of teaching **</b>		
Still looking for a position	20	16.0
Teaching related occupation	2	1.6
Non-teaching occupation	11	8.8
Further study	4	3.2
Family responsibilities	3	2.4
Travel	4	3.2
Other	5	4.0
<b>Planning to return to teaching in the future</b>		
Yes	20	69.0
No	3	10.7
Not sure	6	20.7
Total	29***	100

\*Note: missing data N=104

\*\* Note: Total percentages may not add up to 100 because respondents could select as many answers as applied

\*\*\*Note: missing data N=96

## Interview Results

Six themes relevant to the employment experiences of beginning teachers in Saskatchewan emerged: Getting the Job; The “Hiring” Experience; Type of Position; Unexpected Surprises; Attrition; and Advice for Education Graduates.

*Getting the job.* Participants spoke about the job search process and how “getting the job” looked for them. Many participants spoke of the application process. For example, one participant stated, “I applied for so many jobs last summer that it wasn’t even funny.” Although some participants received positions as unknown entities through the application process, “When the school had been at our career fair, they had mentioned that this position would be coming available, so I just kept my eyes posted and then I just

applied for it.”, other participants spoke about the importance of networking and specifically “having someone on the inside” to help initiate the contact with the people responsible for making the hiring decisions. For example when responding to an interviewer prompt, one participant noted that the principal, “...worked with my sister for eight years.” Similarly, in response to the interviewer comment, “And you got a full time job right away?”, one male participant reported, “I did, yes. I’m fairly unique in that”. He continued by describing his situation, “Well my wife actually is a teacher as well. So she kind of has a regular run, I mean she has probably more of a normal look from a student who just graduated – ended up teaching at \_\_\_\_\_ last year. So we moved here and yeah, kind of really liked the area and didn’t want to go anywhere, so I applied and I guess it kind of helps to have some kind of backdoor channels and people knew about me. I had also interned at the one school when I was out here so they knew me fairly well from one school.”

Several other participants spoke about the advantage already having experience at the school had in getting their position. For example, several students mentioned that they had interned at the school where they were hired. A couple of participants stated that they had volunteered at the school before they were hired.

One participant spoke in detail about the importance of planning your education experiences strategically to maximize your ability to find a position. “...in my internship I made sure I went to a rural town because I thought that was more realistic for me. ...I saw myself in a rural town K-12 school. ...I made sure that I taught out of my subject area so that I did have experience and I could put it on my resume and say that I know what it’s like to teach out of my subject area. I’m prepared for that; I could handle that.”

*The “Hiring” experience.* All of the participants interviewed experienced a different hiring process including differences in hiring time frames, start dates, amount of notice provided before start date (i.e., late hires), and different types of contracts. Participants spoke about the fact that despite having obtained a position the job search process was *not* yet over because they were in a contract position and they were now applying for new positions for the next year. The new application process was confounded by the fact that their current position was not yet completed and the lack of knowledge of where they might be next year. “It’s not user-friendly right now – it’s a mild way to put it, especially for a first year teacher. You don’t know whether you’re going to be having a job next year or you don’t know what’s going to be happening, so it’s fairly unsure.” Another participant stated, “...I feel like I’m a survivor of the first year and I know I will be attempting to teach after this. Like I will plan to teach for the fall but whether or not I get a position is another story.” Other participants spoke of the difficulty in requesting a transfer to a different school location when their current position was still ongoing. For example, one participant said, “I like teaching and I think that was the hardest thing was asking for the transfer and even what I told my principal was its’ not the school. I really love the kids and I thought if you could just take the school and move it closer to the city...”

*Type of position.* The major sub-themes emerging from type of position is diversity. Participants interviewed all held unique positions across the urban/rural/north continuum, the grade continuum (E.g., Elementary, Secondary, K-12, 5-8, K-5, 6-12, 7-12), the school of employment (some participants taught at 2 schools), the amount of work (full-time vs. part-time) and how part-time positions were “lived”. For example, “I

guess I'm in two different schools so that's maybe why it [workload] seems a little bit busier. I'm teaching three grades, so that would be why....Out of a six day cycle, I guess I work 5 days, so I'm 85%." In addition some participants taught within their subject areas entirely while others taught partially or outside their teaching areas. Some participants taught one grade level while others taught split grades, multiple grades, or worked as a relief teacher. For example, "So it's [teaching position] full-time. I teach grades 4 to 12. I teach religious studies and literature grades 4 and 5. Grades 6 and 7, well basically from grades 7 to 12 I teach English, from grades 8 to 12 I teach social studies. I teach art from 8 to 10 and I teach hygiene 6 to 7. ....when someone asks me, 'What level do you teach?' I'm like, "are you kidding me? From 4 to 12." The number of students and diversity of students taught also varied dramatically between participants. For example, "It [Teaching] was a huge shift for me from interning....to coming here and realizing I can't move as fast – spending a lot of time reviewing skills."

*Unexpected surprises.* Although appearing well prepared for the profession, participants expressed surprise at a number of employment related factors such as the late hiring process and assignment to location experienced by some, the isolation of teaching in a small community when you are new to that community and the amount of workload. For example, one participant returned a call from a Principal at 7:30AM Friday morning in September and, "...I asked her when she wanted me to start. She said 'how about today?' I said I have nothing planned. She said its September so for the first week or so just wing it – just get to know the kids." Another participant stated, "Well, what happened is that you send your CV to the school board, and do your whole interview thing. And after that they call you and tell you where they put you, where they transferred

your resume. So you're hired and then they put you to the school. So that's where I had a little bit of like uh-huh. Because I specifically told them I live in [a large city], but I'm from [a large city]. I don't want to be sent somewhere where there's going to be so much culture shock. I want to stay within the city and then they pitch me up north, and I thought, for crying out loud. But I thought, ok, I'll tough it out for a year and then you can ask for a transfer". Isolation was a common surprise even though participants knew that moving to a new community would be challenging. For example, "As much as you think you're doing, a lot of internship, when you get out there and you do your first year, it is extremely difficult. It's intimidating. It's extremely uncomfortable to being somewhere where you don't know anybody." Another participant remarked, "I'm the only girl in this entire village that's my age." A male participant reported, "It's been a little tough. I felt a little isolated, just being new and also, just having so much work to do I can't really get out and socialize much." Gender differences in the recognition of beginning teachers were recognized by two participants. One male participant had been "shoulder tapped" for administration within the first six months of his start date while a female participant stated, "I feel that men who are first year teachers get more notice than women. There aren't many men. ...the head of \_\_\_\_\_ is a male and he probably has four or five brand new teachers that are male and just the joking that goes on between them, you know, it's almost like camaraderie..."

*Attrition.* When asked if the beginning teachers thought they would still be in the profession 30 years from now, many agreed or partially agreed stating that teaching was a good fit and a good career. "I can't picture myself doing anything else." One participant stated that although there were challenges, there were "...more highs than lows". Other

participants believed they would be in the profession but would likely pursue some change in their employment relative to school, teaching position or assignment.

*Advice for Education graduates.* Many participants offered advice to Education graduates on all aspects of seeking and obtaining employment. Some suggestions included not limiting yourself to urban and suburban areas but to consider rural and Northern locations, preparing yourself for the job via awareness of the potential diversity of schools and classrooms, gaining experience teaching outside your area of expertise, learning how to read and use curriculum guides and developing year plans and good classroom assessments. Other recommendations included being aware of the heavy workload and other related challenges without getting discouraged. Participants living in new communities advised making it a priority to get involved in the community. Participants also recommended examining other venues for your Education degree outside of schools.

### **Discussion**

The majority of surveyed Education graduates from the University of Saskatchewan in the Fall of 2005 and Spring of 2006 were able to find some type of position as a teacher. However, one limitation of the study is the fact that the survey had a low response rate. It is possible that Education graduates who were unable to find a position as a teacher chose not to respond to the survey. Thus the results may only show one side of the coin. Another limitation is the fact that only the graduates from the University of Saskatchewan are represented by the survey results. In order to address these two limitations, this Spring Education graduates (Fall 2006 and Spring 2007) from

both the University of Saskatchewan *and* the University of Regina will be surveyed. A concerted effort will be made to ask *all* education graduates to complete the survey.

The interviews with beginning teachers was invaluable as it provided a context for the survey responses. Most beginning teachers were content with their experiences yet facing challenges surrounding workload and isolation. The major theme emerging from the data was the diversity of beginning teacher experiences with seeking and finding employment. One limitation of the nature of these interviews was that they were all held with Education graduates who had already found employment as a teacher. In order to rectify this limitation, a study is currently underway recruiting and interviewing education graduates who have yet to find a position as a teacher or who are under employed as teachers. By identifying the employment experiences of Saskatchewan beginning teachers, government, universities, and teacher organizations can work together to provide the kind of professional supports education graduates require.