



Quantitative and qualitative teacher shortage and the turnover phenomenon



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ABSTRACT

The study measures the quantitative and qualitative teacher shortage in Israel by examining the size of the turnover phenomena, and by investigating the actions taken by school principals when coping with teacher shortage. The study is based on a national survey involving the school principals of all elementary and secondary schools in Israel. Participation rates were 80% of the total number of school principals (N = 2224). Results show a large turnover, mostly of teachers moving between schools, an insufficient supply of certified teachers of core subjects and a widespread practice of out-of-field teaching. The findings redirect the problem of quantitative teacher shortage toward the problem of a hidden shortage that bears directly on the quality of the teaching force.

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1. Introduction

Teacher shortage is a concern that is shared by many countries and has been documented in a number of international reports (EURYDICE, 2002; Ingersoll, 2003a; Santiago, 2002; Schleicher, 2012). Teacher shortage in the labor market occurs when demand exceeds supply and is a result of an increase in demand, a decrease in supply, or both occurring simultaneously (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006). However, the operational definition of teacher shortage is not consistent. Some researchers define it according to an observable quantitative measure, that is, the number of unfilled teaching positions. Yet, since it is problematic to rely on this measure as most positions are filled at the beginning of the school year and no class is left without a teacher, others define it as the number of unqualified teachers hired to fill the vacant positions—a qualitative measure that highlights a ‘hidden shortage’ (Santiago, 2002: 22).

Another reason why it is difficult to determine a state of teacher shortage stems from teachers’ movements between or out of schools. In the literature, this phenomenon is referred to as ‘turnover’ (Ingersoll, 2003b). A high turnover of teachers moving from one school to another or leaving the occupation altogether conjures up an image of a ‘revolving door’ whereby a large number of teachers are in a state of job transition into, between, or out of schools (Ingersoll, 2003b; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010; Perda, 2013). In the literature, these two processes are also referred to as ‘migration’ and ‘attrition’. This large turnover often leads to quantitative staffing problems and might, under certain circumstances, also cause a qualitative shortage that jeopardizes the quality of the teaching.

Since evidence regarding the shortage of teachers in Israel is not conclusive and there is a lack of data on the turnover phenomenon – specifically on teachers moving from one school to another within the system – the current research focuses on these topics. The study aims to obtain measures of (a) the quantitative teacher shortage in Israel by taking into

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consideration the size of the turnover phenomena, and (b) the qualitative aspects of teacher shortage by exploring the actions taken by school principals in order to cope with the shortage, as well as the qualifications of teachers who are employed to fill the vacant positions in the schools.

1.1. Teacher shortage and turnover

Teacher shortage is expressed on two levels: (a) the national level, namely, the macro level (state, province, region, or district), and (b) the school level, namely, the micro level. The picture of teacher shortage that emerges at these two levels might not always coincide due to the different factors operating at each level.

Examples of factors leading to shortage at the national level include growth in student population, increased immigration, changes in national educational policy and labor agreements, the greying of the workforce, and the low prestige of the profession. Examples of factors leading to shortage at the school level include local school-related factors such as acute discipline problems, lack of support on the part of the principals, lack of teacher autonomy, absence of professional development activities, and a dearth of benefits offered in a particular school (Cannata, 2010; King Rice, Roelke, Sparks, & Kolbe, 2009). Although factors operating at the school level do not necessarily affect the overall national balance between supply and demand, they are responsible for the imbalance at the school level (Ingersoll & May, 2012).

While official national predictions tend to rely on macro factors, some researchers consider micro factors to be the most significant ones. They claim that teacher shortage comes into play mostly at the school level rather than at the national level, where the ratio of supply to demand remains stable over the years (Ingersoll, 2003a, 2003b; Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). For this reason, “school staffing problem cannot be fully understood without ‘putting the organization back’ into the analysis” (Ingersoll, 1999a: 6).

One of the factors underlying teacher shortage that works both on the macro as well as on the micro level is the turnover phenomenon. Turnover is defined either as teachers moving from one school to another, that is, movers, or teachers leaving the profession altogether prior to retirement age, that is, leavers. While a certain amount of turnover is normal, inevitable, and even beneficial to the health of an organization owing to the fact that new employees may bring new ideas and stimulate innovations, high levels of turnover decrease organizational productivity and incur increased costs. This is more acute in the education system than in other organizations since the former relies heavily on commitment and cohesion (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & May, 2012). Extensive turnover results not only in staffing problems but also threatens the quality of teachers’ and pupils’ performances (Ingersoll & May, 2012; Levy, Joy, Ellis, Jablonski, & Karelitz, 2012).

While the positive and negative aspects of turnover have been researched extensively in the industrial and corporate sectors (e.g., Meier & Hicklin, 2007; Mueller & Price, 1990; Price, 1977), data on teacher turnover are relatively scarce and focus primarily on data taken from the U.S. (e.g., Milanowski & Odden, 2007; Levy et al., 2012). Moreover, research on teacher supply and demand tends to place greater emphasis on the attrition phenomenon and less on teachers who migrate from one school to another. It is assumed that teacher migration has a smaller effect on teacher shortage because it does not alter the overall number of teachers in the way attrition does. Although this assumption is true on the national level, from the schools’ viewpoint, the effect of teacher migration and attrition is the same. In both cases, the result is a decrease in the number of staff members and the consequent need to replace them. Thus, from the school perspective, teacher migration also exacerbates the problem of keeping schools staffed with qualified personnel (Ingersoll & May, 2012).

Data on the size of teacher turnover in the USA demonstrate an annual turnover rate of 15.6% that is evenly split between migration and attrition (Kaiser, 2011; Keigher, 2010). Recent findings from the USA report on even higher rates of turnover—20% and more (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). However, turnover is not evenly distributed in schools since the turnover rates in schools in disadvantaged high-minority and high-poverty regions were found to be higher (Quartz et al., 2008).

Coping with teacher shortage at the national level leads to systemic actions that seek to increase the supply of teachers. Such actions include national policies aimed at attracting talented candidates into the profession, offering alternative routes for certification, recruiting overseas teachers, offering financial incentives, ameliorating working conditions, and improving the image and status of the teaching profession.

Coping with teacher shortage at the school level is usually in the hands of the school principals, who utilize various strategies in order to ensure that all teaching positions in their schools are filled. These are usually ad hoc solutions to school needs (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010) and include using substitute teachers, increasing the teaching loads of existing teachers, hiring teachers who lack the requisite qualifications and certification, employing teachers in part-time positions, increasing the number of students per class, and cancelling school subjects (Ingersoll, 1999b). While these strategies help principals solve the immediate quantitative shortage of teachers, they concurrently create a hidden shortage that affects the quality of the teaching workforce (Liu, Rosenstein, Swann, & Khalil, 2008).

Teacher shortage can be inferred not only by the number of teachers who were recruited to the school (the quantitative aspect) and by their qualifications (the qualitative aspect), but also by the extent to which the teaching loads of existing teachers were increased—a sign of the difficulty involved in recruiting a new teacher to this post.

2. The research context

Only a few studies have targeted the issue of teacher shortage in Israel; most of them focus solely on teacher attrition rather than on teachers’ transition between schools, and investigate only the quantitative aspect of teacher shortage rather

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