



Teachers' exit decisions: An investigation into the reasons why newly qualified teachers fail to enter the teaching profession or why those who do enter do not continue teaching



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Attrition differs according to gender, teaching degree and teachers' experience.
- Lack of future prospects is the main reason for leaving the profession early.
- Teachers' experience explains variances for all but one motive: job satisfaction.
- Reasons for attrition weighed less heavily on teachers without teaching experience.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the motives for teacher attrition of newly qualified teachers who never started a teaching career and those dropping out after a short period. A survey was conducted among teachers with ($N = 154$) and without ($N = 81$) teaching experience. Five reasons for attrition were discerned: job satisfaction, school policies, workload, future prospects and relations with parents. The results demonstrated that a lack of future prospects was the predominant reason for attrition. The effect of teaching experience was significant for most motives, in addition to the impact of gender or teaching qualification. Teachers with experience do not take exit decisions lightly.

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High rates of attrition during the first year (s) of teaching has caused problems in maintaining the supply of qualified teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2004), with significant teacher shortages as a consequence in several countries. Depending on the source, percentages of attrition vary between 30 per cent and 50 per cent (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Johnson & Birkeland, 2004; Smethem, 2007), with many qualified teachers never entering a classroom or leaving the job after a short period of teaching experience.

Attrition is regarded by many as an important determinant in the ineffectiveness, low performance (Ingersoll, 2001) or lack of

quality in contemporary education (Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008). As a consequence, teacher retention should be of continuous importance for every educational system. Understanding who typically leaves the profession and why they chose to do so can help policy makers invest in initiatives that target the teachers most at risk for quitting and ameliorate the conditions that appear most salient in teachers' decisions to leave (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006).

A stable finding among studies on teacher recruitment and retention is that attrition is high for young and newly qualified teachers and lower for older and more experienced teacher until they reach ages at which retirement is feasible (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). However, previous research has not always acknowledged that the group of teachers leaving the profession within five years encompasses two distinct categories of dropouts. On the one hand, it contains a group of teachers who, although graduated from a teacher-training program, never started

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a teaching job (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010; Thomson, Turner, & Niefeld, 2012). On the other hand, it includes teachers who started a career as a teacher but turned to other jobs shortly after (Dolton & Von der Klaauw, 1995; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). However, whether or not teachers actually had teaching experience with teaching practice may play an important role in their motives for not abiding a career in teaching. Explicitly targeting this distinction may help in advancing our understanding of the exit problem. The current study therefore explores teachers' motives for leaving the teacher profession and investigates whether or not the nature and prevalence of these motives differentiates between teachers with and graduates without actual teaching experience. As previous research has shown significant differences in attrition according to gender and level of teaching, these variables were taken into account as control variables (e.g. Borman & Dowling, 2008; Kelly, 2004).

1. Attrition

1.1. Outlining the concept

Commonly, a distinction is made between teachers leaving the teaching profession as a 'personal choice' and teachers exiting due to 'natural causes', such as retirement, maternal leave, resignation, temporary leave or career interruption. The latter kind of drop-out is usually indicated by the term wastage, while the first is labelled as turnover (Macdonald, 1999; Williams, 1979). Turnover, in turn, encompasses two types of attrition: transfer attrition and exit attrition (Billingsley, 1993). Transfer attrition, otherwise known as migration (Hahs-Vaughn & Scherff, 2008), refers to teachers who leave their current position for a teaching career elsewhere, within or outside their current school district. Exit attrition, in contrast, refers to teachers who leave the teaching profession and change careers (Ingersoll, 2001). *The present study is solely concerned with exit attrition.*

Previous research has convincingly shown that, with regard to exit attrition, the early years of teaching are crucial (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino et al., 2006). Although the number of exits vary considerably between countries and periods in time (Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Tartwijk, 2003), there seems to be a degree of consensus that after a period of five years, a turning point is reached. In countries such as Australia, Norway, the UK, and Spain, exit numbers in the first five years of teaching are usually between 30 and 40 per cent; while they are about 50 per cent in Germany, Italy and the Netherlands (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Purcell, Wilton, Davies, & Elias, 2005; Smithers & Robinson, 2003; Stokking et al., 2003). In Flanders the attrition rate according to official sources is significantly lower and varies around sixteen per cent (Department of Education, 2013). Afterwards, attrition numbers decrease steadily (Kirby & Grissmer, 1993) and teachers tend to remain in the teaching profession on a more permanent basis (Stinebrickner, 1998). Consequently, we opted to aim our research at *exit attrition up until five years after graduation.*

The concept of early exit attrition appears to obscure a further distinction, as some certified teachers quit their teaching profession within the first five years, while others decide not to pursue a teaching career at all. Although both groups have received some attention separately (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010; Thomson et al., 2012), few to no studies have compared the two groups. Therefore the current study explores *early exit attrition distinguishing between teachers who did not start a teaching career and those who left the profession early.* In the remainder of the paper we will relate to this distinction by referring to 'having actual teaching experience or not'.

Finally, although it can be informative to investigate attrition rates as such, if we want to understand 'why' these teachers chose not to become or to remain a teacher a warmer, more qualitative approach seems in order. In line with several other studies (e.g. Watt & Richardson, 2007), we believe that exploring teachers' motives to leave to profession may provide additional insights. Our study is therefore concerned with *motives for early exit attrition according to having actual experience or not.*

1.2. Motives for attrition

Teachers may have personal reasons or job-related motives for exiting the teaching profession. Often these are based on individual experiences of the job and/or influenced by factors in the school context (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

1.2.1. Personal expectations

The match between what one expects, and what one experiences on the job, informs career choices (Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000). For instance, although an altruistic desire to serve society and to 'make a difference' is one of the primary motivations for pursuing teaching and staying in the teaching profession (Guarino et al., 2006; Smethem, 2007), the social respect and acknowledgement of the profession is often perceived as being low (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005). In their study, Kyriacou and Kunc (2007) found four key dimensions that teachers incorporate to assess this (mis)match between expectations and experiences: (1) supportive school management, (2) adequate time, (3) attentive, cooperative students and (4) a happy personal life. Their findings demonstrate that the more these factors match teachers' expectations, the more enthusiastic teachers are about teaching and their career choice. On the other hand, if teachers experience disappointment with regard to these dimensions, they express more negative thoughts about teaching and are less convinced about having chosen the right career path (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007).

Based on the expectancy-value model in motivation, the 'Factors Influencing Teaching-Choice'-project (FITChoice-project) explored motivational factors in student teachers that were influential in their decision to become a teacher (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Results demonstrated that (1) intrinsic value (2) being able to work with children and adolescents, (3) perceived teaching ability, (4) the possibility of making a social contribution and (5) to shape the future of children or adolescents were the primary motives for choosing teaching as a career and were also moderately to strongly related to satisfaction with this choice (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Differences in these motives and perspectives were also found to be related to whether or not student teachers were planning on persisting in their career or foresaw switching or quitting in the near future after their graduation (Watt & Richardson, 2008). Recent research demonstrated that motives for choosing a career as a teacher are more similar than different across samples in different countries (Australia, United States, Germany and Norway) (Watt et al., 2012).

1.2.2. Factors in the school context

Although the choice to switch profession or end a career is made by the individual, often factors in the school context are identified as causes of stress, dissatisfaction or frustration, which in turn may lead to motivation to leave (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Sources of discontent range from simple facilities and conditions, such as air quality in classrooms, heat, lighting, school size (Buckley et al., 2005), to relations with students and/or parents (Macdonald, 1999; Tye & O'Brien, 2002) and support by colleagues and management (Billingsley, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2003).

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