



Giving up the lottery ticket: Finnish beginning teacher turnover as a question of discursive boundaries



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Some beginning teachers can't position as authors of educational discourses.
- First explanations for leaving teachers are the “accessible justifications” for attrition.
- Professional silences, cultural-historical norms must be negotiated by new teachers.
- Beginning teachers need tools and spaces to read the surrounding discourses.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers leaving the profession is an increasing trend also in Finland, which is interesting because many of the explanations found in other international contexts do not apply. The Finnish context, in which teachers are not controlled officially in any way, offers a unique context for investigating implicit control mechanisms and their relationship to teacher turnover. The research shows how intersecting discourses work in ways that may lead to self-exclusion of beginning teachers who cannot find a subject position within school. This happens unofficially and implicitly in a context that explicitly emphasizes teacher freedom, autonomy and societal appreciation. Teacher turnover provides tool for making visible the discursive boundaries that might otherwise stay hidden.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, teachers leaving the profession poses a significant challenge. In European countries, approximately 30–40% of new teachers select a field other than teaching (Wang, Hall, & Rahimi, 2015, p. 121), and 30–50% of new teachers change their profession during the first five years because of work-related exhaustion (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Rots, Kelchtermans, & Aelterman, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014; Thomson, Turner, & Nietfiel, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Existing research indicates that teachers leave the profession because of external factors such as heavy workloads, low salaries, challenging students, and the low social status of the profession (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Webb et al., 2004), and because of the increasing

pressures created by accountability measures (e.g., Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009).

In order to make more sense of teacher turnover, Clandinin (2000) has suggested that we should pay attention to new teachers' experiences of professional practice. As documented in multiple studies, the transition from “student of teaching” to “teacher of students” (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, p. 683) is a challenging one. For example, Moir (1999) described how teachers in their first year go through a series of phases, from eager anticipation to shock at the reality of their situation to a survival period that ends in disillusionment, self-doubt, and reflection. Harfitt (2015), in turn, concluded that contextual factors, especially support mechanisms, are key to understanding why beginning teachers leave the profession. Schaefer (2013, p. 269), on the other hand, discussed beginning teacher attrition as a challenge of identity making and identity shifting. According to Schaefer, beginning teachers enter teaching with preconceived ideas of who they might be as a

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teacher. These preconceptions include how they expect to live out staff relationships, relationships with students, relationships with subject matter, and relationships with parents, all of which are challenged as they enter the profession (Schaefer, 2013, p. 269). Similarly, Rots et al. (2012, pp. 4–5, 8) found that the emotional labor required to deal with the normative, emotional, and social aspects of teaching proved far more intrusive and pervasive for student teachers than the technical aspects of the job. Pillen, Beijaard, and den Brok (2013) looked at these issues in terms of professional ‘identity tensions’ under three themes: 1) the change in role from student to teacher; 2) conflicts between desired and actual support given to students; and 3) conflicting conceptions of learning to teach. They note that professional identity tensions are not necessarily a negative factor in professional development but also appear to be a positive “tool” for teacher learning (Pillen et al., 2013, p. 674). Finally, Clandinin et al. (2009) suggested that the changing landscape—for instance, the emergence of standardized achievement testing and accountability—contributes to teachers leaving the profession. They argued that the increasing international focus on the use of test scores as a means of measuring achievement engenders a central tension between what each teacher has come to know about the student and how the institutional machinery knows the student. They argue that this tension may be unbearable for teachers whose original motivation to enter the profession comes to be challenged by the institution’s perspective of children.

Teacher attrition in the Finnish context brings an interesting twist to this discussion. In Finland, exact figures do not exist, but an estimated 10–20% of graduating teachers choose professional fields other than teaching (see e.g. Malinen, Väisänen, & Savolainen, 2012; Nissinen & Välijärvi, 2011; Webb et al., 2004). Although this is a reasonably small number, the experiences of these 10–20% may tell us something about teaching in Finland. Leaving teaching is an increasing trend in Finland (Ostinelli, 2009), which is interesting because many of the explanations found in other international contexts do not apply. Although Finnish teachers’ salaries are not high compared with many other professions nationally, the social status of teachers is unusually high, both domestically and internationally (Malinen et al., 2012; Nissinen & Välijärvi, 2011; OECD, 2014; Simola, 2007). Domestically, skilled Finnish teachers are valued as a factor in Finland’s success after the Second World War and have earned international praise since the publication of the first OECD PISA results at the beginning of the millennium. Moreover, Finnish teachers have not been subjected to the increasingly popular high-stakes testing or accountability measures used in many other countries. In fact, there are no official control mechanisms for Finnish teachers: no school inspectorate, no standardized testing, no detailed national curriculum, and no officially required teaching materials. The education system has been decentralized since the 1970s, and teachers are expected to make most of the decisions as experts in their local context.

To become a qualified class teacher, the prerequisite is a university-based master’s degree (usually in education). Finnish student teachers are, in general, highly motivated to become teachers. The demanding selection process tests this motivation, as fewer than 10% of applicants are accepted into teacher training. For example, in 2014 at the University of Oulu, where the present research was conducted, there were 1866 applicants for the teacher education programs, of whom only 80 were accepted (fixed yearly intake). The application procedure includes two stages: a multiple-choice exam, followed by an interview and demonstration of a skill. Some applicants have worked for years to gain the necessary experience to convince the board of their suitability; many have spent a year completing university-level studies in education to gain a head start in the exam while others have worked as teachers’

assistants to gain practical experience and to convince the board of their motivation.

On being accepted into the program, it takes five years to qualify. Upon entering the program, students commonly describe the feeling as the equivalent of having the winning lottery ticket. That being so, it is surprising and interesting that between 10 and 20% abandon their career choice and leave the profession following graduation. What happens in that transition from studying to working? Why do they give up the lottery ticket just as they are about to cash it in? Answering these questions will provide more insights into the challenges and choices made by leaving teachers everywhere, and into the reasons behind those choices.

This study mainly follows the lead of both Clandinin et al. (2009) and Schaefer (2013) in looking at beginning teacher attrition as a question of identity making in the changing landscape of teaching. However, I have applied a different set of concepts; drawing on the work of feminist poststructuralists I speak of subjectification rather than identity making and shifting. This paper thus locates within the so-called “discursive turn”, exploring those processes of constitution by which phenomena come to be what they are taken to be. The purpose of the study is to shed light on the discourses within which individual beginning class teachers choose to leave, and the methodology draws on poststructuralist thinking. Teacher turnover is used as tool for making visible the discursive boundaries that might otherwise stay hidden.

2. A poststructuralist take on the beginning teacher’s self

In poststructuralism, *self* is seen as a dynamic, never-ending process: always a practice of “becoming,” always taking place *in relation* to something (see also Holquist, 1990). Self, then, is both a verb and a relation, the subject of a continuous process of being constituted, reconstituted, and reconstituting (see Taguchi, 2005). The poststructural perspective of self as a verb and a relation differs from humanist discourses, within which self or existence is located “inside” the individual. According to Youdell (2006), in humanist discourses, people are who they are because they choose to be so, or because of their inheritance (or some combination of both). From the poststructural perspective, however, self is not pre-existing, self-knowing, and continuous; rather, an individual becomes a subject through their ongoing constitution in and by *discourse* (Youdell, 2006, p. 35). As Taguchi (2005) explains,

The stories we tell can be understood as the result of what kind of meaning making is available to the subject; that is, what the discursive conditions are in terms of available discourses (meanings), and how the context is discursively constituted. This happens not only in relation to other subjects, but also in relation to situated discursive meanings in terms of geography, the institution, time, architecture, items, and aesthetics. (Taguchi, 2005, p. 250).

This means that “student teacher” or “teacher” is not something that some individuals simply *are* (or are not) but something that they *do*. However, they are not free to do it as they wish but must do it within discursive boundaries that work to define multiple categories, such as women, men, disabled, ethnic, European, adult, gifted, and special student. In other words, although each beginning teacher constructs their own idea of “teacher,” this is not an empty category for student teachers to fill as they wish while learning about their future work. The idea of “teacher” is already loaded with multiple contexts, people, and competing forms of knowledge, desires, and fears. The discourses therefore prescribe not only what is desirable but also what is *recognizable* as an acceptable form of subjectivity (Davies et al., 2001, p. 172). This

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