



## Decisions to enter and continue in the teaching profession: Evidence from a sample of U.S. secondary STEM teacher candidates<sup>☆</sup>

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We used survey data from 311 math or science final year pre-service teachers.
- The first survey asked about their identity as a teacher and intent to teach.
- A follow up survey 1–3 years later determined their actual behavior.
- Student teaching satisfaction and identity predicted intended and actual behavior.
- Identity mediated the student teaching satisfaction–outcome relationship.

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### ABSTRACT

Given its prevalence and cost it is imperative to identify predictors of early career teacher turnover intentions and behavior. During their final year as education majors, 311 US, STEM Secondary Education students rated their student teaching experience, the strength of their teacher identity, and their intent to enter the teaching profession. Within 1–3 years after graduating 191 of them reported whether they remained in the teaching profession. One's identity as a teacher, as well as the perceived quality of student teaching experiences, predicted both intent and actual entry into the teaching profession. Furthermore, teacher identity mediated the relationship between student teaching satisfaction and outcomes.

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By the time teachers enter the classroom, a nontrivial cost has accrued to students, educators, and school systems. Individuals who choose to become teachers expend substantial funds and frequently take on debt, teacher educators invest significant time and resources into their training, and school systems expend considerable resources to recruit, hire, and train new teachers. Although there are substantial benefits of having a highly-trained teacher workforce, the effectiveness of the process is diminished

if individuals who are trained as teachers do not enter or quickly leave the profession. It is therefore important to understand what drives individuals to remain in the profession as a first step toward finding ways to increase teaching engagement.

In our study, we propose that two factors relate to teaching intent and engagement. First, drawing on the psychological literature on identity, we believe that those who think of themselves most strongly as teachers should be more likely to intend to enter, and to actually enter, the teaching profession. This approach examines identity from a social psychology perspective, which differs somewhat from the majority of the teacher education literature (see for example [Hong, 2010](#)). Second, we investigate one perennial aspect of teacher education – the student teaching experience – relating it to both identity and teaching engagement.

We begin our investigation of this topic using rudimentary measures in an archival data set collected from a sample of U.S.

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secondary science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) teacher candidates.

### 1. Intent to enter and to remain in teaching

Above, we discussed two types of research evidence closely related to the vocational choices of preservice teachers. First, some individuals may complete their training as educators but do not enter the teaching profession, as observed in a major OECD Study (OECD, 2005) conducted from 2002–04 that included 25 countries, and a smaller Belgian study (Rots, Aelterman, & Devos, 2013) examining career choices of 217 student teachers who subsequently graduated. Second, while there is a lack of reliable data on teacher attrition at the national, state, or local level, a few studies indicate the turnover rate for beginning teachers may in fact be quite high. Many enter the teaching profession with the idea that it will be a short-term endeavor (Smethem, 2007). Some graduates enter the teaching profession but quickly leave the field as noted in a study of five school districts spread over urban, suburban, and rural areas in the Midwestern United States (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007). A study of new teachers in Milwaukee (Imazeki, 2005) found that only 30% of the 1992–93 cohort remained after six years. In general, schools with higher fractions of low-income students and minorities experience greater turnover rates than their counterparts (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Scafidi, Sjoquist, & Stinebrickner, 2007). Thus, programs aimed at understanding and reducing teacher turnover may help to reduce economic disparities accentuated by high levels of teacher turnover.

Of these two types of evidence, scant research has investigated the former issue (Rots et al., 2013); the majority of existing data focuses on early career turnover. Given that preservice teachers needed to have decided years before graduation to pursue a degree in education, at which time they likely intended to enter the teaching profession, we consider decisions not to take teaching positions after graduation as an early form of turnover. Therefore, below, we review the literature on teacher turnover (both within as well as out of the profession).

The cost of teacher turnover is high. As with turnover in other industries, teacher turnover generates direct costs to school districts related to recruiting, selection, and training (Barnes et al., 2007; Milanowski & Odden, 2007). A similar case could be made for students who decide not to enter the teaching profession, as the funds and effort devoted to their education could have been spent on other students. Furthermore, large-scale studies showed that teacher productivity increases substantially after the first few years of tenure, levelling off after three years (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). Students taught by first year teachers perform, on average, 0.06 to 0.08 standard deviations lower (as measured by math and verbal test scores) than students taught by teachers with three or more years of experience (Staiger & Rockoff, 2010). It is thus imperative that we understand the factors that predict teacher turnover, particularly among early teachers.

To investigate turnover, we turned to the field of Industrial-Organizational (I-O) Psychology, which has investigated turnover for decades, developing many generalizable models of the phenomenon. Although the literature differentiates among many different types of turnover (see Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffith, 2012), in our research we focus on deliberate choices to exit the profession early – turnover that is both voluntary (i.e., it was the teacher's decision to leave) and avoidable (e.g., not based on factors such as family relocation, health concerns, or having reached retirement age).

Theories of turnover (e.g., Hom et al., 2012; Lee & Mitchell,

1994; March & Simon, 1958; Mobley, 1977) propose many constructs related to the phenomenon. Some models investigate turnover in response to 'shocks' to the system such as an abrupt change to the work environment (e.g., a new boss or organizational policy) or life circumstances (e.g., marriage). Other turnover models examine turnover intentions as emerging more gradually as a result of evaluations of one's situation or the employment landscape.

Predictors of teacher turnover have been studied in many ways (see Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Heinz, 2015 for recent reviews). For instance, teacher turnover relates negatively to job satisfaction (e.g., Ingersoll, 2003), professional and organizational commitment (e.g., McInerney, Ganotice, King, Marsh, & Morin, 2015), salary (e.g., Ingersoll & May, 2012; Strunk & Robinson, 2006), social support (Pomaki, DeLongis, Frey, Short, & Woehrle, 2010), and administrative support (e.g., Ingersoll, 2001; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Tickle, Chang, & Kim, 2011), and is positively associated with time pressure or workload (Doering & Rhodes, 1989). Furthermore, studies of individual differences have shown that individuals more likely to leave their jobs or the teaching profession are more likely to be older (e.g., Ingersoll, 2003), have lower self-efficacy and greater upward striving tendencies and short-term orientation (Chapman & Hutcheson, 1982; Houkes, Janssen, de Jonge, & Bakker, 2003; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Pomaki et al., 2010), and are less likely to have certification, membership in professional organizations, or union membership (e.g., Kelly, 2004; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Strunk & Robinson, 2006). Gender and the subject taught may be related to turnover, but research differs regarding the direction of these effects (Ingersoll & May, 2012; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014; Kelly, 2004; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Strunk & Robinson, 2006). Similarly, race appears to relate to turnover, but relationships may be complex and may depend on environmental factors such as the racial composition of the school (Ingersoll, 2001; Kelly, 2004; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Conflicting results have also been found for rural versus urban schools (e.g. Ingersoll & May, 2012; Kelly, 2004; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Clandinin et al. (2015) interviewed early career teachers about their intentions to remain in teaching, and found that contextual and individual themes characterized the responses. Among the themes found were support for new teachers, identity and belonging, contract tensions, and work-life balance. However, more research needs to be done to gain a more complete understanding of the factors that influence decisions to enter into and remain in the teaching profession. Below, we discuss two additional considerations: Identity and field experiences.

### 2. Identity

In the psychological literature there is a variety of theories and definitions of identity or self-concept (Oyserman, 2001). Some facets of identity are idiosyncratic (i.e., characteristics uniquely related to oneself such as personal appearance), but others are related to membership in particular social groups based on demographic characteristics or roles such as "teacher" (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1999). Individuals act in ways consistent with their identities, and they will shape their environments to make them congruent with their identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1999; Oyserman, 2001; Stryker & Burke, 2000).

In terms of social group membership within organizations, identity has been studied at several levels of abstraction. For instance, Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley (2008) articulated multiple layers of identity, ranging from narrow/central definitions to broader conceptualizations. At a relatively broad level ("Content of Identity"), identification can include the characteristics associated

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