



Teachers as leaders: Pre-service teachers' aspirations and motivations



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Examined pre-service teacher aspirations for early-/mid-career leadership roles.
- Investigated relationships between teaching motivations and leadership aspirations.
- Even at pre-service stage, many teachers expected to take on leadership roles.
- Especially common career aspirations included “hybrid” teacher-leader roles.
- Implications for practice to address teacher attrition and satisfaction discussed.

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ABSTRACT

Teacher attrition is among the most salient problems facing education systems worldwide. Recent research has attempted to understand this phenomenon in light of teacher generational characteristics, finding that today's teachers often view teaching as a short-term endeavor, and desire influence beyond the classroom. This exploratory study attends to this issue in relation to US pre-service teachers. Findings indicate that, even before officially entering the classroom, many teachers expect to take on leadership roles—especially “hybrid” roles that keep them partly in the classroom. Based on findings presented here, we consider implications for teacher preparation and teacher career paths.

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1. Introduction

In the current era of public school reform, classroom teacher retention remains one of the most elusive problems in education systems across the globe, garnering the attention of policymakers, scholars, and practitioners alike (Hochbein & Carpenter, 2012; McKenzie, Santiago, Sliwka, & Hiroyuki, 2005; Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001). Teacher attrition hinders the development of human capital, a key resource for school improvement (Curtis & Wurtzel, 2010; Odden, 2011). Teacher turnover creates a constant need to recruit, hire, and train new teachers to fill vacated positions. Arguably attrition also undermines the functioning, effectiveness, and efficiency of educational institutions (e.g., Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen,

2009; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2007; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). The exit of more experienced teachers from the classroom is particularly troubling given that teacher effectiveness typically grows over time (e.g., Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Murnane & Phillips, 1981; Rockoff, 2003).¹ Given organizational capacity issues associated with teacher turnover, as well as resultant teacher shortages in some locales, efforts to improve teacher retention remain a critical area of focus for education research and policy (e.g., Borman & Dowling, 2008; National Commission on Teaching for America's Future, 2003).

This paper contributes to a growing body of work that has begun to explore teacher retention issues in light of the generational

¹ While earlier evidence suggested that teacher experience effects are limited to the first five or so years of teaching, more recent work suggests teachers do continue to grow (e.g., Kraft & Papay, 2014); thus, teachers exiting the classroom throughout their careers may be problematic from a teacher quality perspective, assuming such teachers are replaced by those with less experience.

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characteristics of teachers. Teachers entering the workforce today differ in many ways from their predecessors. For example, today's newly minted teachers are more likely to have had a prior career or other career options (McKenzie et al., 2005; Peske et al., 2001). In addition, today's new teachers more often view teaching as a short-term career and are more likely to leave the education profession altogether (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Marvel et al., 2007; Rinke, 2011). Some research also suggests that teachers increasingly desire leadership roles, advancement, and influence beyond the classroom (Donaldson et al., 2008; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005).

At present, there is a need for further research on how pre-service teachers, the future of the teaching force, view both their careers prospectively and opportunities for role differentiation within the field of education (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In particular, little is known about how long pre-service teachers expect to remain in the classroom, and to what extent pre-service teachers enter the field with an eye toward leadership roles (e.g., instructional coach, administrator). We contribute to this area of research through an exploratory study of pre-service teachers' aspirations to hold leadership roles (including "hybrid" leadership roles which keep teachers in the classroom). The present study also probed pre-service teachers' leadership aspirations in light of their motivations for entering teaching in the first place, since initial teaching motivations have been linked previously to teacher career paths (Olsen, 2008). Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are pre-service teachers' aspirations for leadership roles 5 and 10 years into their careers?
2. To what extent are pre-service teachers' aspirations for leadership roles related to their motivations for entering the teaching profession?

Our study seeks to address the question of whether, for current generations of teachers, a perceived lack of vertical mobility in the profession might partly explain its attrition problems; and correspondingly whether pre-service teacher education is a potential mechanism by which to mitigate such perceptions. If pre-service teachers aspire to lead in education, for example, offering training opportunities to support their leadership development prior to career entry might support retention in the field. Understanding how pre-service teachers' initial motivations are related to their career aspirations might also explain *why* pre-service teachers aspire to lead. Knowledge of such relationships might be particularly useful in work with early-stage pre-service teachers who may be able to articulate their reasons for entering teaching, but lack an awareness of what leadership opportunities will later be available to them; in turn, teacher educators might be able to identify potential leadership roles that would be appropriate for particularly motivated students and alert them to those roles. We posit that these may be fruitful areas to focus pre-service efforts to address issues of teacher attrition.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

A robust literature on teacher career paths has identified various categories of teachers, for example "stayers," "movers," "changers," and "leavers" (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Hart & Murphy, 1990; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). These categories reflect various vertical (role) and horizontal (place of employment) career transitions, as well as decisions to leave the profession altogether. Career path scholarship posits that teachers' career decisions, including decisions to leave the field, are dynamic and should be understood as a complex interaction of many factors, including the labor market,

career structure, and individual-level variables. While our study examines individual-level factors (i.e., aspirations and motivations for field entry), it is important to note that a sizable body of literature has also shown that educators' career decisions depend on organizational (school and school district) characteristics (e.g., Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Donaldson et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2005; McKenzie et al., 2005; Peske et al., 2001; Quartz, Anderson, Masyn, Lyons, & Olsen, 2008; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001).

2.1. From teacher to leader

A vertical career decision made by some teachers ("changers") is to take on leadership roles within education (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). A prominent and especially relevant theoretical framework for understanding teacher leadership is distributed leadership (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004). Distributed leadership theory emphasizes leadership as a series of complex interactions among multiple leaders, followers, and practices (Spillane et al., 2004). This perspective on leadership is particularly useful for understanding school leadership because it accommodates multiple players (notably including teachers) working collaboratively across a system rather than positioning leadership as a central, administrative responsibility (Harris, 2003).

For the most part, research discussing the school leadership pipeline has focused on moving from traditional teaching to administrative roles, such as the principalship (Lortie, 2009; Papa, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2002). However, the proliferation of alternative leadership roles has led to a range of teacher leadership opportunities in education, both within and outside of the formal school context. While teacher leadership has received considerable attention in the U.S., recent work has come from European and Oceanian countries as well (Hulpia & Devos, 2010; Muijs & Harris, 2006; Snoek & Volman, 2014; Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011).

2.1.1. Defining teacher leadership

Given the evolution of teacher leadership over the past few decades, the construct has been conceptualized in various ways (Harris, 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Teacher leadership emerged with the development of roles such as department head, head/master teacher, and union representative, which entailed *administrative* (organizational and managerial) responsibilities. Over time the construct has expanded to include *instructional* leadership, with teachers participating more in staff and curriculum development and decision-making, and collaborating informally around practice (Smylie, Conley, & Marks, 2002; Smylie & Denny, 1990). Historically under the purview of the principal but increasingly including teachers, instructional leadership expressly targets curricular and instructional quality (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Murphy, 1988). For instance, teachers might engage in instructional leadership through instructional coaching (Harrison & Killion; Margolis; Smylie & Denny), leading professional learning communities, developing curricula and instruction (Smylie & Denny), or providing professional development (Harrison & Killion, 2007; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Teacher leadership can also support organizational processes (Smylie & Denny, 1990). For example, teachers can assist with district-level organizational decision making (e.g., curriculum planning, policy development) and work to develop partnerships with external stakeholders such as higher education institutions, industry, and community members (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; Smylie & Denny; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). At the school level, teachers can lead through nurturing relationships, collegiality, and trust among colleagues (Silva et al., 2000; Smylie & Denny, 1990).

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