



Already elsewhere – A study of (skilled) teachers' choice to leave teaching



Per Lindqvist*, Ulla Karin Nordäng

Department of Educational Science, Linnaeus University, 39182 Kalmar, Sweden

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher attrition is a process of identity-making which begins long before leaving.
- Choices to leave are made within personal frames of reference and the opportunity structures of the labor market.
- Leavers with images of themselves, not attuned to apprehended professional identity, are more likely to leave the profession.

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ABSTRACT

The article presents findings from a longitudinal study (1993–2014) examining how ex-teachers, who were perceived as “skilled” during teacher training, describe their paths out of the profession and discussing the possibility of retaining or re-recruiting teachers in - or back to - the occupation. The result emphasizes teacher attrition as a process related to identity-making within the interrelation between opportunity structures and individuals' frames of reference. Findings indicate that leavers with broader frames of references and images of themselves not attuned to apprehended professional identity are more likely to leave the profession.

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1. Introduction

Providing skilled teachers to all students has become a world-wide quest. According to [Unesco \(2009\)](#), half of the world's countries need to expand their teaching forces in order to be able to enroll all primary school-age children by 2015. The largest shortage of teachers can be found in developing countries, but there are also growing gaps in Western countries, such as the USA, Ireland, Spain and Sweden ([Unesco, 2009](#)). According to Swedish statistics, the educational system will lack roughly 22 000 teachers, approximately 20% of the teaching workforce, by 2020 ([Statistics Sweden, 2012](#); [Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2012](#)).

The most common measure to overcome the shortage of teachers is to increase efforts to recruit new teachers to the profession. However, results from studies on large quantitative data

sets indicate that the major problem is not a shortage of teachers coming *into* the system, the real problem seems to be that many of the newly graduated choose not to enter teaching at all ([Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004](#)), or leave after just a few years ([Cooper & Alvarado, 2006](#); [Ingersoll, 2003](#)). These results hint at a different kind of remedy. The alternative is a more efficient strategy in retaining and supporting active teachers, or in making qualified teachers, who quit or never started teaching, return to the profession. The potential of re-recruiting the “leavers” in order to fill the teaching gap is, at least on a statistical level, promising. In Sweden, there were 235 878 teachers (including pre-school teachers) working in schools in the year 2010 ([Swedish Government, 2010](#)). Compared to the number of graduated teachers at that time, one can logically conclude that 37 500 of the graduated (16%) were working outside the educational system. If these “missing teachers” were re-recruited to the teaching profession they would, to a large extent, fill the future shortage of teachers.

Results from research on teacher attrition are generally drawn from wide target populations, producing general descriptions on a

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: per.lindqvist@lnu.se (P. Lindqvist).

one-shot basis. More seldom, attrition is depicted over time, as a process (Hodkinson, 2008; Schaefer, Downey, & Clandinin, 2014). However, in the present article we will present findings from a unique longitudinal study, carried out over two decades, in which teacher attrition have been examined from the standpoint of teachers who have left the occupation and established themselves in new careers. The main intention is to inquire into how teachers construct meaning in the description of their paths out of the profession. How do they, in the actual moment and retrospectively, describe their decisions to leave and the circumstances that affected their decisions? With this in mind, we want to discuss the possibility of retaining or re-recruiting teachers in - or back to - the occupation. Could anything have made them stay? Would it be possible to make them return?

Teacher attrition is, needless to say, inevitable. And not all of it is necessarily harmful. Many new teachers leave the occupation because they simply do not master it (Fontaine, Kane, Duquette, & Savoie-Zajc, 2012). Consequently, research in teachers' retention and recruitment should also consider the question of teacher quality. Such studies are, for different reasons, scarce (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). In the present study, however, we have tried to spot the most skilled among the leavers allowing indicators on teacher quality during teacher preparation to guide us in the selection of informants. These indicators are of course only one of many, on how to pinpoint teacher quality. Nevertheless, it gives us an opportunity to study teacher attrition and re-recruiting in relation to notions of teacher quality and to discuss whether it is possible to "rekindle" these "faded stars"?

2. Literature review – framing the research problem

Attrition rates in developed countries vary. In Germany and France, less than 5% of teachers leave school within the first five years, while comparable rates from the USA and the UK are 30–50% (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006). The annual attrition of American teachers increased by 41% from 1987 to 2008 (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012). The same pattern can be found in Sweden, where an increased attrition rate can be discerned over the last 30 years. The average frequency of leavers among Swedish teachers was doubled during the 1980s and 1990s, and has continued to grow ever since.

In international research on who leaves, why they leave and what kind of schools they leave, some general trends can be discerned. Results from studies on US teacher attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001; Luekens et al., 2004) suggest that those who are more likely to be "leavers" are female, white, married, working within special education, math or science. The schools they are leaving are often urban or suburban with high enrollments of poor, minority and low-achieving students. This pattern is also indicated in studies on teacher attrition and turnover in OECD member countries (OECD, 2005). Studies have also shown that approximately 25% of leavers at some time return to the profession (Authors, 2014; Borman & Dowling, 2008; DeAngelis, 2013). These teachers often re-enter schools that are similar in terms of student and teacher characteristics, to those that they have left, primarily large schools in urban and suburban areas (DeAngelis, 2013). Beaudin (2008) claims that the returning teachers are less qualified and that they are characterized by having more limited employment prospects outside education than the ex-teachers who did not return.

There is some evidence that pay matters in teachers' decisions to stay or leave (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005; Kyriacou, Kunc, Stephens, & Hultgren, 2003) but contextual factors within schools, such as lack of support from administrators, student discipline issues and lack of input and decision-making power seem to play a larger role (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Kyriacou et al., 2003). High-

ranking contextual reasons for leaving schools are described as inappropriate or unmanageable assignments, accountability pressures and paperwork (Johnson et al., 2005). In a Swedish survey of teachers' working conditions (Statistics Sweden, 2005), the respondents retrospectively ranked opportunities to find other work, no prolongation of present work, poor psychosocial working environment and low pay as the most common reasons for leaving.

Some studies suggest that teacher attrition is related to expectancies and motivations for entering teaching (Hobson et al., 2009; Watt & Richardson, 2012; Watt et al., 2012). Findings indicate that positive prior teaching and learning motivation related significantly positively to planned persistence. Hence, individual expectancies that are not realized in a particular school context will have a negative impact on professional satisfaction. In a longitudinal study of 156 teachers, Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis and Parker (2000) found that those who leave the profession express a more negative image of it before entering, than those who stay. On the basis of this result, they discuss whether factors that can be connected to working conditions may matter less than previously thought in cases of teachers quitting.

Previous research has focused more on the factors that affect the decision to leave teaching rather than following the teachers' routes into new professional careers. However, we know that some of the leavers conceptualize teaching as an "exploratory career" (Rinke, 2013, s. 98). They try out teaching but ultimately leave the classroom for, what they perceive as, a more desirable career. Although this shift in career trajectory can involve high financial, professional and personal costs for the individual, we also know that teachers who leave are generally satisfied with their decision (a.a.). Few consider their new circumstances inferior, even those whose salary is lower than before they left teaching. They often demonstrate an on-going or newfound dedication or passion in their new profession (Buchanan, 2009), and also bring their teaching expertise for the benefit of others in other professional areas (Brownell, Smith, & McNellis, 1997; Rinke, 2013). "The skills and attributes of teaching are highly transferable and highly valued by employers in other professions" (Buchanan, 2009, p. 35).

3. Theoretical framework

Much of the research in the area appears to identify the issue of teacher attrition, and consequently the suggestions for solving the problem, as either connected to individual or contextual factors (Rinke, 2007; Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012). Some recent studies have, however, begun to conceptualize teacher attrition as part of an identity-making process in which individual and contextual factors are integrated and negotiated (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009; Craig, 2014; Flores & Day, 2006; Rinke, 2013). Flores and Day (2006) define identity as "an on-going and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences" (p. 220). Identity, they write, is something that teachers use to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to the context. Teachers' professional identity is thus a more or less conscious apprehension of 'me as practicing a profession'. It is about connecting the demands of the profession to your own self-understanding (Keltermans, 2009). Prospective teachers bring with them earlier experiences of, and ideas on, what teaching is and should be, when they enter the field. Becoming a teacher is about "combining parts of their past ... with pieces of their present" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1029). But it is also about preparing for the future. The making of career decisions involves what Merton (1957) originally named anticipatory socialization. The concept describes a process of identification, which includes preparing for a coming professional membership by adopting attitudes and values that are

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