



Teacher attrition the first five years – A multifaceted image



Per Lindqvist^{*,1}, Ulla Karin Nordäng¹, Rickard Carlsson

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

HIGHLIGHTS

- Combining qualitative data with statistics in a longitudinal study on teachers' career show that:
- Teacher attrition is a more complex and non-linear phenomenon than what is often proposed.
- Teacher drop-outs are in many cases temporary.
- Teachers out-of-school experiences can in many cases be understood as enhancing teaching ability.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 4 July 2013

Received in revised form

10 February 2014

Accepted 19 February 2014

Keywords:

Teacher

Attrition

Career

Longitudinal study

ABSTRACT

Based on a longitudinal study on Swedish teachers' ($N = 87$) career trajectories this article presents a comparison between quantitative and qualitative data within the cohort and puts this in relation to general statistics on teacher attrition. The analysis indicates that caution is advised in interpreting and making use of general statistics. Teacher attrition is a more non-linear and complex phenomenon than what is typically proposed. In many cases drop-outs are temporary. Individuals not only leave, but also return to the profession over time and their out-of-school experiences can in many cases be understood as individual initiatives to enhance teaching ability in the long run.

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

1. Introduction

Teachers are the most important professionals in a country that wants to invest in the future (Svenska Dagbladet, 2010).

This statement from the Swedish education minister exemplifies an international trend in policy that emphasizes the relationship between the competitiveness of a state and the quality of its educational system. Trained and skilled teachers are a fundamental requirement in such reasoning and increasing efforts to provide students with teachers have become a challenging worldwide quest. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2009) claims that 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. Countries not only in Sub-Saharan Africa have by far the greatest need for additional teachers, but also Western countries such as Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the USA are pointed out as facing

teaching gaps, although these can be considered as moderate in comparison (ibid.). In the case of Sweden, prognoses indicate that the number of certified teachers in the compulsory school will be too low to cover the demand during the next 20 years. In 2020, the Swedish educational system will, according to national statistics, lack roughly 22,000 teachers, approximately 20% of the teaching workforce (Statistics Sweden, 2012; Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2012).

The most common measure to overcome such a shortage of teachers is to try to increase recruitment into the profession. Hence, a number of campaigns to attract young people to teaching has been launched during recent years. In several countries recruiting strategies that involve incentives such as loan subsidy programs, signing bonuses or higher salaries has been the policy responses to the problem (OECD, 2005). In addition, alternative routes into the profession have been put on the agenda by governments around the world. Teach for America and Teach First in England represent only two of the numerous efforts to expand the supply pool of potential teachers globally.

However, statistical findings also indicate that the major problem for schools is not a shortage of teachers coming into the system. The real problem is that, even in countries where sufficient

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +46 (0) 480446757.

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

¹ Lindqvist and Nordäng are the main authors to the article and have contributed equally.

numbers of teachers are trained, it appears as if many of the newly graduated choose not to go in to teaching at all (Luekens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004) or to leave after just a few years (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006). This observation has been developed in the scholarly literature, notably in the works of Ingersoll (2003, 2007) and hints at a different kind of measure to remedy the shortage of teachers. The alternative it suggests is that it may be a more efficient strategy to put in an effort to retain and support active teachers, or to attract teachers who quit or never started teaching to return to the profession. Putting it metaphorically, it is better to patch the holes in the bucket before trying to fill it up.

The image that comes to mind is of a bucket rapidly losing water because of holes in the bottom. Pouring more water into the bucket will not be the answer if the holes are not first patched. (Ingersoll, 2007, p. 6)

In the case of the Swedish teaching “bucket” there were 235,878 teachers (including pre-school teachers) working in Sweden 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 degree, fill up the future shortage of teachers, especially in certain categories.

The ambition in this article is to take a closer look at the holes in the bucket by presenting data from a longitudinal study of Swedish teachers.

In comparison with the rates of turnover from other occupations teaching has higher rates than higher-status occupations (professors), about the same as comparable semi-professions (nurses) and lower than some lower-status occupations (federal clerical workers) (Ingersoll, 2003). Statistics from Sweden shows that the annual attrition rates are about the same for teachers and nurses (Hasselhorn, Muller, & Tackenberg, 2005). Although the level of turnover could be comparable with rates in other professions the importance of teacher attrition lies in its costs for schools and effects on large number of pupils. A less stable teaching force will result in educational and organizational disturbances. Research indicates that teacher turnover has a harmful effect on student achievement, especially in poorly performing schools, and that turnover also negatively affects the students of those teachers who remain in the same school from one year to the next. Thus, even teachers outside of the redistribution – the stayers – are somehow harmed by it (Ronfelt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Financial costs also accompany teacher attrition. In an American study Borman and Dowling (2008) claim that the total cost of replacing public school teachers who dropped out of the profession was nearly \$2.2 billion in 2001. Developing knowledge about teacher attrition is thus an important issue for both policy and research. Such knowledge could, for example, help policy makers invest in initiatives to identify the teachers most at risk of quitting or most likely to return to teaching and to change the conditions that appear most crucial for the decisions to stay, leave or return.

In relation to the importance of teacher attrition for central educational concerns, comparably little research has been carried out in this area, and the findings are often presented as progress reports or prognoses. Nevertheless such studies provide indications of what to focus on and how to demarcate further research.

The proportion of graduated teachers who drop-out often seems to correlate with the number of years in the profession. Statistical data gives an image of a U-shaped distribution of exits, in which younger and older teachers (retirement excluded) are more likely to leave (Ingersoll, 2001). Extensive quantitative studies from USA estimate that only 40–50% of the graduated teachers are still

working as teachers five years after graduation (Ingersoll, 2003). The situation seems to be similar in Great Britain (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006). Consequently, in this article we will focus on the first five years, which seems to be a particularly critical period in teachers’ decision to stay in or leave the profession (see also Hammerness, 2008).

Results from research on teacher attrition are generally on a one-shot basis, drawn from a wide target population of teachers, producing general overviews of a population from a long distance at a particular point of time. In a review of teacher attrition Schaefer, Long, and Clandinin (2012) point out that prior research seems to focus on providing correct answers, quick fixes and de-contextualized data. More rarely attrition is considered as a process over time where cohorts of teachers are followed in longitudinal studies, through extensive parts of their careers, in order to identify typical patterns of development and examine individual variations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). “We need”, Borman and Dowling (2008, p. 399) assert, “truly longitudinal data with more than two time points to capture more nuanced pictures of teachers’ career trajectories”.

Through a unique material consisting of correspondence between 87 teachers and their former teacher trainer, from their graduation continuing up to the present, we are facing the opportunity to follow a cohort of Swedish teachers during their first 19 years after graduation. The informants have, regardless of whether they have been sick, been on parental leave or just have quit working as teachers, continued to participate. The number of teachers in this longitudinal study is small relative to the sample sizes available in teacher-specific databases on which results – as the ones mentioned above – are based. However, our material allows analyses and comparisons that have not previously been possible. In the article we will first present “the overall picture”, that is statistics of attrition within the cohort, and compare it with findings from studies on larger databases. Then we will zoom in on qualitative data to capture “close-up pictures” of the individual trajectories during the first five years. The ambition is to show the dynamics in teachers’ career trajectories and to put this picture in relation to internationally widespread general statistical overviews.

2. The overview – statistics and previous findings on teacher attrition

There is a small, but growing, body of research on teacher turnover, an umbrella term including teachers who move within (migration) and/or leave from (attrition) teaching. In this article we will concentrate on presenting results concerning teacher attrition in the cohort, the “leavers”. We are here primarily interested in teachers’ choices to exit from or re-entry into the profession. That is not to say that the great number of teachers staying in the profession but moving to another school is a non-essential question. Luekens et al. (2004) have shown that “the movers” are about as many as those who leave school. For a school with high teacher turnover it makes no difference whether the leaving teachers change to another school or to another profession. The school is, in both cases, negatively affected and must deal with the loss of the teachers.

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

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6851149>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6851149>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)