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Personal or School? Factors that Influence a Teacher’s Intentions of Remaining or Leaving the Profession

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Teacher turnover is costly in its financial implications and negative impact on student learning. Recent studies demonstrate that many teachers choose to transfer to a more preferable work setting or leave the field. By employing a nested design using Hierarchal Linear Modeling data from the most recent complete Schools and Staffing Survey 2007-2008 (SASS) by NCES, the researchers found indications that school-level contextual factors, such as teacher influence on school, teacher perception of control, and teacher perceived support play a significant role in teachers’ intentions to leave or remain in the field. An understanding of these factors allows policymakers and administrators to implement practices to improve work environments for teachers. Retaining good teachers is a key to improve teacher and school quality nationwide.

Keywords: Teacher turnover, contextual factors, teacher control, workplace conditions, policy implications

There is much discussion around student learning and student improvement, and while this is a crucial issue, the focus should also be on the environment that students must learn in and retaining those teachers who are effective. The increased focus on accountability may not yield a working environment conducive to retaining teachers and fostering commitment to teaching (Feng, 2009). The data from the most recent complete Schools and Staffing Survey 2007-2008 (SASS) by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) analyzed by using a nested design with Hierarchal Linear Modeling (HLM) indicate that contextual factors in the work environment of teachers play a significant role in teachers’ intentions to leave or remain in the field. These environmental factors are even stronger than personal factors (e.g. race, gender, education) when a teacher is deciding to remain or leave the profession. This becomes increasingly important when trying to find quality teachers for hard to staff schools and in turn impact student achievement. These schools are often times found in high poverty areas, and students are in the greatest need of consistency and quality teachers, rather than being exposed to a revolving door of teachers throughout their schooling experience.

Thus, despite the current interest in teacher quality and supply, there are some clear gaps in the published literature. Studies of teacher attrition seem to lack at least one of the following characteristics: use of a nationally representative sample or explicit linkages to a conceptual or theoretical framework within which to situate data analysis. Most often teacher individual characteristics are isolated and examined completely separately from the context of the organizations in which they work. Willett and Singer (1994) propose a plan for the National Center for Education Statistics that would allow a true longitudinal study to be conducted on teachers and the directions that their careers are going. However, until a dataset exists like that proposed by Singer and Willett, it is necessary to use the best and most comprehensive data about teachers available, the SASS dataset.
Building on previous research, this study examines the contextual factors in the work environment as well as teacher characteristics that influence teachers’ intentions to remain in or leave the profession. The intent was to determine which characteristics had a stronger influence on a teacher’s intention to remain in the profession, individual or contextual. Using the most recent complete data set from SASS by NCES regarding the teachers and their perceptions, the researchers found that contextual factors, such as teacher influence on school, teacher perception of control, and teacher’s perceived support, are factors in teachers’ intentions to leave or to remain in the field. These were stronger predictors than individual characteristics on teacher’s intentions.

Theoretical Framework/Conceptual Model

The conceptual model of teacher retention and attrition used in this research follows common characteristics that have been associated with teachers leaving the field at both the teacher and organizational level. This model is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) Ecological Theory, which suggests that individuals are affected by systems in their immediate surroundings and the contexts in which they work. Past research has generally focused only on the contribution of individual teacher characteristics and how they affect attrition. In turn, there is little information about how teachers and their workplaces interact and contribute to their decision to leave the classroom. The organizational factors or school characteristics encompass the school level at which the teacher works, including locale and poverty level, and these play a role in teachers’ control of the environment and the influence that teachers have within the school.

While all teachers might perform similar work, they do this work in different workplaces. These schools vary in both location and student demographics, but they also vary in what types of management or administration that are present. This model separates the teachers and their environments. This study is not only looking at the differences of teachers within a school, but also looking for differences between or across the schools as well and how these factors affect a teacher’s intention to remain in the profession.

Methods

In order to examine the factors in the work environment that influence teachers’ intentions to remain in or leave the profession, the most recent dataset from 2007-2008 SASS by the NCES were examined regarding the teachers and their perceptions. A hierarchical linear model was employed. The dependent variable is a continuous variable that focuses on a teachers’ intention to remain in the profession. School level factors were considered as well as teacher-level factors. The combination of these variables described the variation between teachers and their choices. The equations represent hypothesized relationships between the predictive variables, such as contextual work variables – influence, support, and control, on the outcome of a teacher’s intention to leave the profession.

Data Sources

The SASS is the largest, most extensive survey of K-12 school districts, schools, teachers, and administrators in the U.S. today. These data are nationally representative at the school level, based on a complex survey design. This survey is administered by the NCES to national probability samples. Schools are the primary sampling unit in SASS. There needed to be at least three teachers per school in order to protect the participants. During 2007-2008, close to 51,000 public school teachers completed the survey. These data contain a substantive subsection targeting those individuals who are involved with any school-level aspect of education, such as principals and teachers. The dataset includes training experience, mentoring programs, school structure, and subject taught for participants. The teaching-focused sections of the survey include questions about employment history, job changes, and school climate. For the purposes of this study, only those teachers who indicated they would either remain or leave the profession were kept in the sample. Those who were undecided or did not provide sufficient data were removed. In order to adhere to the SASS definition of a teacher, this sample includes any individual who was a full-time K-12 teacher. Part-time, long- and short-term substitutes, student teachers, teacher aids, and non-teaching employees were not included. Based on these criteria, a sample of 20,324 public school teachers were identified in this dataset and included in this analysis.
Results

While it is difficult to pinpoint one thing that influences a teacher's decision to remain in the profession, a few key variables present themselves as contributors to this decision, the bulk of these influences lie at the school level. It is worthwhile to recognize that some of the variables are either those that school administrators have no control over, such as whether the teacher is new to the teaching field, or the poverty level of the school, or they are factors that will take a significant amount of planning and time to initiate a change, such as salary. However, the variables that are of interest are those that the district and school administrators have both control over and can initiate change in a short amount of time, as that is what is desired in the current climate of education.

The factors that both school and district administrators have direct control over are those which exist in the context in which they work. When examining these contextual factors, as identified by the created variables that address a teacher's perception of support, influence, and control at the school and in their classroom, it was found that when teachers felt that they had a supportive environment to work in, they had greater intentions of remaining in the profession. Likewise, when teachers' perception of influence that they had within their schools was high, they were more likely to remain in the profession, and teachers who felt they had control in their schools had greater intentions of remaining in the profession. Lastly, when the teacher's perception of control within their classroom was high, they were more likely to remain in the profession. One finding that is inconsistent with the literature is that of poverty. Previous studies (e.g., Ingersoll, 2001) cite poverty level of the school as a contributing factor to teachers' choosing to leave the profession. In this study, the opposite effect was found - teachers in schools with a high level of poverty were more likely to stay. It is plausible that these teachers who work at these schools do not have the mobility that a teacher at a low poverty suburban school might have, or it could be that the amount of control they have is greater than those teachers who are located elsewhere. The relationships between the teachers' personal characteristics and the characteristics within the school context and how they interact seem to provide the most information regarding why a teacher intends to remain or leave the profession.

Scholarly Significance

These findings provide functional results when discussing potential reasons why teachers might choose to leave the profession. Not only do these results provide some basic information to policymakers, but this information is helpful to school administrators as well. Principals might look more specifically at both the work environment and how well their candidates will fit within this environment to avoid potential turnover; this is especially critical for those administrators who are working in high poverty areas and hard to staff schools. For example, principals in a high poverty school might want to hire new teachers and then give those teachers' support and influence within the school environment. While it might seem like a simple task, the notion of control and support can go a long way in providing a stable teaching force in the school environment (Huang & Waxman, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Sclan, 1993). In turn, it could have a positive impact on student experiences as well as student achievement.
References


