Chapter 27

Examining the Relationship Among Teachers’ Working Conditions, Stress, and Professional Trajectory

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ABSTRACT

Teacher attrition can have a disruptive effect within a school, negatively impacting student learning. Moreover, teachers’ reported working conditions are an important factor in determining whether they leave or stay within the field. The majority of research examining workplace climate in schools fails to consider the perceptual nature of these reports and how they might be related to teachers’ risk for stress and other occupational health measures. This chapter provides an overview of the research relating teacher working conditions to teacher mobility and other workplace dispositions. Then, the authors present the transactional stress model as an alternative to traditional approaches for examining teacher mobility. Policy implications for educational agencies, schools, and teacher education are then presented.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher turnover is a well-documented and substantially researched phenomenon. Yet, understanding how many teachers leave the profession and what factors contribute to teacher mobility remains highly debated. Earlier studies suggest that almost one-third of teachers leave the profession altogether within their first 3 years and almost half leave after five years (Ingersoll, 2001; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2009). Yet, in the post-recession labor market, research suggests that the five-year turnover levels have dropped to approximately 17% of the workforce (Gray & Taie, 2015). Moreover, while studies indicate salary is an important predictor in determining whether individuals choose teach-
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ing or remain in the field, working conditions matter as well, perhaps even more (Béteille & Loeb, 2009, Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001; Ladd, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Salary (dis)incentivizes educators as they weigh the opportunity costs of teaching (i.e. low pay, low status, and difficult professional climate) to the intrinsic professional rewards (i.e. giving back to society, working with young people, and engaging subject matter of interest) (Boardman, Darling-Hammond, & Mullin, 1982; Guarino et al., 2006; Johnson, 2004). However, Hanushek and Rivkin (2007) found little association between teacher salary and attrition in Texas. In their analysis, perceived occupational climate, particularly between urban and suburban schools, were noticeably variable and a more consistent predictor of teacher turnover. Additional studies have shown that teachers’ reported working conditions are significantly correlated with job satisfaction and retention (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson, 2006; Loeb et al., 2005; Petty, Fitchett, & O’Connor, 2012).

From a public policy perspective, fostering positive working conditions are not only a more consistent predictor of teacher retention, but they are also potentially a less expensive means of keeping teachers in schools. Findings indicate that teachers with positive perceptions of their schools are more likely to be satisfied with their work and remain in teaching, and less likely to succumb to burnout (Béteille & Loeb, 2009; Johnson et al., 2014; Ladd, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Furthermore, retaining teachers prevents staffing instability, which erodes sustained educator quality and harms student achievement (Guin, 2004; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). While informative, this line of research does not typically consider the perceptual nature of teacher responses and how they can be operationalized as risk for occupational stress. In this chapter, we present the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) transactional model of stress as a viable alternative to traditional production-function approaches toward examining teacher working conditions. The transactional model suggests that teachers’ stress can be understood as resulting from self-appraisal of their classroom demands vis-à-vis their classroom resources. When perceived imbalances in demands and resources exist, teachers are vulnerable to stress (Lambert, McCarthy, Fitchett, Lineback, & Reiser, 2015). Research has shown that identifying teachers with the greatest perceived imbalances in demands and resources is an important indicator of risk for stress, as well as an important predictor of various career trajectory outcomes such as job satisfaction, burnout, and intention to remain in the field (Lambert et al., 2015; McCarthy, Lambert, O’Donnell, & Melendres, 2009). This chapter lays out the extant literature on teacher working conditions, then offers policy and practical implications for the transactional model as a way for school leaders to address the risk for occupational stress and its potential outcomes. In the final section of our chapter, we detail further directions for research.

LITERATURE ON THE PROFESSIONAL PHASES, CAREER TRAJECTORY AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF TEACHERS

Teacher Professional Phases

Traditional research on teachers’ career trajectories generally describes the stages of teaching as if teachers stay in the profession for the longevity of their working lives (Burke, 1987; Fessler, 1992; Katz, 1972). Katz (1972) described four developmental phases of the pre-kindergarten teachers: survival, consolidation, renewal, and maturity. Katz’s theory helped schools and administrators understand the different resources and support that teachers might need at the various developmental stages. Burke (1987) and