

The Qualitative Factors That Affect Teacher Distribution

by Basha Krasnoff

Preliminary efforts to reform the teachers' workplace typically focus on factors that can be readily manipulated, such as pay, class size, or job security ... yet it is the social context of schooling that has been shown to significantly impact efforts to improve schools and student outcomes (Bryk et al., 2010).

Recent research offers convincing evidence that the teacher is the most important school-level factor in a student's achievement. What's more, the contribution of teachers has been shown to be especially important when it comes to the achievement of low-income students, who tend to have fewer learning supports outside of school. Researchers have found, however, that teachers' effectiveness in improving the academic achievement of these students varies widely, even within the same school (McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, & Hamilton, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004).

Because of teachers' importance in the academic success of students, researchers have explored the challenges schools face in hiring

and retaining high-quality teachers. Recently, research has focused on such questions as:

- Are low-performing schools that serve high-poverty, high-minority communities able to hire their fair share of highly qualified teachers?
- Why do high-quality teachers leave schools in high-minority, high-poverty communities at disproportionate rates, as compared to teachers who leave schools in less diverse, higher income communities?
- Do the teachers who remain in low-performing schools have sufficient knowledge, experience, and skill to improve the academic outcomes of their students?

State and district officials seek to build instructional capacity and eliminate disparities in teacher effectiveness in schools serving high-need students by trying to recruit the most promising teachers and to retain only the most effective ones. Unfortunately, district and school administrators have quickly discovered that hiring promising teachers and retaining them are two very different challenges. They find that early-career teachers, as if moving through a revolving door, steadily leave schools in high-minority, high-poverty communities to work in schools in less diverse, higher income communities, or to take jobs outside of education (Ingersoll, 2001). This pattern of teachers' exodus from low-income to high-income schools is documented in both large quantitative and small qualitative studies (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2007; Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; Johnson et al., 2004; Leu-kens, Lyter, & Fox, 2004). It seems that the very schools that need effective teachers the most have the greatest difficulty retaining them.

The High Price of Turnover

Persistent turnover:

- **Disrupts efforts to build a strong organizational culture**
- **Makes it difficult to develop and sustain coordinated instructional programs**
- **Makes it impossible to ensure that students in all classrooms have effective teachers**

Schools and students pay a high price when early-career teachers leave high-need schools after two or three years, just when they have acquired valuable teaching experience (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Neild, Useem, Travers, & Lesnick, 2003). Educators agree that first-year teachers are, on average, less effective than their more experienced colleagues (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006; Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004). When experienced teachers leave a school, particularly one serving low-income, high-minority students, they are most likely replaced by a first-year teacher who is substantially less effective. Thus, it becomes impossible for schools with continuous turnover to build instructional capacity and to ensure that

students in all classrooms have effective teachers. In addition, persistent turnover in a school's teaching staff disrupts efforts to build a strong organizational culture and makes it difficult to develop and sustain coordinated instructional programs throughout the school.

Explanations differ about what causes a high number of teacher transfers and exits, which create hard-to-staff schools. Looking at large data sets, some researchers interpret these turnover patterns as evidence of teachers' discontent with their low-income or minority students (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Hanushek et al. (2004) showed that student demographics are more important to teachers' transfer decisions than salary differences across districts; they interpreted this to mean that teachers choose to leave their students rather than their schools.

However, an alternative explanation is that teachers who leave high-poverty, high-minority schools are rejecting the dysfunctional contexts in which they work, rather than the students they teach (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Boyd et al., 2011; Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2004; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). There have been recent case studies and media reports about high-poverty, high-minority schools that are not hard to staff, but that actually attract and retain good teachers. These findings suggest that those schools provide the conditions and supports that teachers need to succeed with their students—whomever those students may be (Chenoweth, 2007, 2009; Dillon, 2010; Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2010; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Recent large-scale quantitative studies have provided further evidence that teachers choose to leave schools with poor work environments and that these conditions are most common in schools typically attended by minority and low-income students (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Ladd, 2009, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Thus, there is mounting evidence to suggest that the seeming relationship between student demographics and teacher turnover is driven not by teachers' responses to their students, but by the conditions in which they must teach and their students are obliged to learn.

Why Teachers Stay

- **Teachers stay longer in schools that have a positive work context, independent of the schools' student demographic characteristics**
- **Teachers remain in a school because of the school's culture, the principal's leadership, and the relationships among colleagues**

In a study of Massachusetts schools, Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2012) used data on teachers' job satisfaction, career intentions, and the conditions of their work to confirm that the school environment dismisses or minimizes much of the apparent relationship between teacher satisfaction and student demographic characteristics. They concluded that the school environment is a critical factor in teacher satisfaction, regardless of student demographics. The conditions in which teachers work matter a great deal to them and, ultimately, to their students. These researchers found that teachers are more satisfied and plan to stay longer in schools that have a positive work context, independent of the school's student demographic characteristics. Furthermore, although a wide range of working conditions matter to teachers, the specific elements of the work environment that matter the most to teachers are not narrowly conceived "working conditions," such as clean and well-maintained facilities or access to modern instructional technology.

Teachers choose to remain in a school, regardless of student demographics, because of social factors: the school's culture, the principal's leadership, and relationships among colleagues. These social factors predominate in predicting teachers' job satisfaction and career plans. Bryk and his colleagues have documented that improving these social conditions involves building relational trust between teachers and school leaders and engaging teachers in coconstructing the social context of their work (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010).

More important, research suggests that providing teachers with a supportive context contributes to improved student achievement. Ladd (2009) and Johnson et al. (2012) found that favorable conditions for teachers' work predict students' academic growth, even when comparing schools that serve demographically dissimilar groups of students.

Thus, policymakers who want to retain effective teachers and improve student performance, particularly in schools that are traditionally hard to staff, should pay close attention to the social and cultural context as teachers experience it.

The Teacher's Workplace

- **Different elements of the workplace affect teachers' ability to teach well, sense of self-efficacy, satisfaction with their role and assignment, and willingness to stay in their school and in the profession**
- **The quality of the social and cultural context of the school can have a powerful impact on a school's capacity to improve**

Despite growing recognition of the importance of work conditions, researchers have only begun to understand how different elements of the workplace affect teachers' ability to teach well, along with their sense of self-efficacy, satisfaction with their role and assignment, and willingness to stay in their school and in the profession (Johnson et al., 2012). Johnson (1990) proposed a comprehensive framework for analyzing the teacher's workplace. Its components ranged from the physical teaching environment (e.g., safety and comfort), to economic factors (e.g., pay and job security), to assignment structures (e.g., workload and supervision), to cultural and social elements (e.g., strength of the organizational culture and characteristics of colleagues and students). Through teacher interviews, Johnson discovered how interdependent these many factors are in determining an individual teacher's success and job satisfaction.

Preliminary efforts to reform the teachers' workplace typically focus on factors that can be readily manipulated, such as pay, class size, or job security. However, many workplace features, such as the social context of schooling, remain beyond the reach of collective bargaining, legislation, and administrative rule making. Yet, it is the social context of schooling that has been shown to significantly impact efforts to improve schools and student outcomes (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010). Conducting research in the Chicago Public Schools, Bryk and colleagues examined various role relationships within the

school—including teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents, and teachers with their school principal. They concluded that the degree of “relational trust” in these day-to-day relationships is crucial, and they documented the powerful impact that the quality of social exchanges can have on a school’s capacity to improve.

Clearly, any meaningful analysis of teachers’ work conditions must recognize the full range and interdependence of the factors that define the workplace, from the concrete and transactional (e.g., pay, workload, contractual responsibilities) to the social and transformative (e.g., interactions with colleagues and administrators, organizational culture). There is convincing evidence not only that the teachers’ ability to deliver effective instruction is deeply affected by the context in which they work, but also that this context may vary greatly from school to school and district to district (Johnson et al., 2012).

Work Conditions and Teacher Turnover

- **Principals are central to school improvement and to teacher satisfaction**
- **Strong principal leadership, collegial relationships, and positive school culture are key factors in greater teacher satisfaction with their position and greater student academic growth**

Recent findings about work conditions in schools have begun to reshape our understanding of the causes of teacher turnover. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Borman and Dowling (2008) found that teacher demographic characteristics, teacher qualifications, school organizational characteristics, school resources, and school student-body characteristics are all related to teacher attrition. They argued that the “characteristics of teachers’ work conditions are more salient for predicting attrition than previously noted in the literature”; however, the researchers concede that disentangling the relative contributions of student and school characteristics is challenging.

Horng (2009) explicitly attempted to distinguish among these possible determinants of turnover

through a survey that asked teachers their preferences for different types of hypothetical schools with different sets of demographic characteristics, work conditions, and salaries. The researcher found that work conditions—particularly administrative support, school facilities, and class size—are more important to teachers than salary and much more important than student demographics. In this study, the researcher examined the trade-offs that teachers reported among these different factors but not the work conditions that they actually experienced or the decisions they eventually made about leaving.

Boyd (2011) and Ladd (2011) combined information from surveys about teachers’ work conditions with data about career plans. The researchers found that, in addition to salaries and benefits, work conditions substantially influence teachers’ career plans. According to Boyd, work conditions were important predictors of New York City teachers’ decisions to change schools or leave the profession, even after accounting for differences in student demographic characteristics across schools. In particular, the researchers suggested that school administration is the most important factor in teachers’ career decisions. Similarly, based on statewide data from North Carolina, Ladd found strong evidence that work conditions, particularly the quality of a school’s leadership, are related to teachers’ stated career intentions.

Researchers repeatedly find that principals are central to school improvement and to teacher satisfaction. But, they have not been able to adequately explain the role an effective principal plays, including how effective principals conceive of and do their work. What is known is that strong principal leadership, collegial relationships, and positive school culture contribute to teacher satisfaction and help students experience greater academic growth. While these elements of the work context are distinct, they are also related: Schools with high scores on one element often have high scores on the others. There is a great deal to learn about principal leadership and how the principal exerts the informal and formal authority of the position to promote teachers’ collaborative work and a productive school culture.

While this growing body of literature suggests that work context matters to teachers, there has

been only one study that explored how teacher work conditions in U.S. public schools are related to the academic performance of their students. In 2009, Ladd examined the relationship between work conditions and student achievement in elementary schools, as evidenced by school-level, value-added scores. The researcher found that work conditions predict school-level, value-added scores in mathematics and, to a lesser degree in reading, above and beyond the variation explained by school-level student and teacher demographic characteristics. Of the five work conditions that Ladd examined, school leadership again emerged as the most important predictor of achievement in mathematics, whereas teachers' ratings of school facilities had the strongest relationship with reading achievement. Considering that legislators are placing increasing emphasis on evidence of student achievement when evaluating education policy, an understanding of the relationship between work conditions and student achievement is extremely important.

Conclusions

Although evidence continues to mount that work conditions play an important role in both teachers' career choices and their students' learning, there is still much to learn about the work conditions that matter most to teachers and how they influence school organization and instructional practice. To date, studies about this issue have relied primarily on large data sets that allow researchers to track teachers' career paths and student achievement over time, or they have analyzed survey data that report on teachers' views. Additional measures of the social conditions of work and a closer analysis of school-level practices would greatly enhance understanding. More research is required to understand why some work conditions are especially important, how they interact day-to-day, and what can be done to ensure that all schools serving low-income, high-minority students become places where teachers do their best work.

States and districts continue to gather and maintain rich longitudinal data about many factors that are relevant to this issue—student enrollment and achievement, teacher transfer patterns, principal hiring and assignment, teacher evaluation, school

climate, and parental satisfaction. By considering these data, individually and in combination, researchers can examine increasingly complex interactions among principals, teachers, students, and the school context. Examining these data at the state level will guide education leaders to identify the individual schools serving low-income, high-minority populations that warrant closer examination, either because of their success or their failure. Through such work, state education leaders can guide policymakers, school leaders, and teachers more fully and practically to improving schooling for all students. The more policymakers and school officials are able to choose appropriate levers to create a meaningful social and cultural context in which teachers and students will thrive, the greater teachers' commitment will be to the school and the higher students' academic achievement will be.

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To learn more



Basha Krasnoff
Basha.Krasnoff@educationnorthwest.org
Research and Development Advisor
503.275.9624



Melinda Leong
Melinda.Leong@educationnorthwest.org
NWCC Washington State Coordinator
503.275.9172



Mike Siebersma
Mike.Siebersma@educationnorthwest.org
NWCC Director
503.275.9642

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