

## THE SILENT CRISIS: TEACHERS' DROPOUT OF SCHOOLS

Hussam Samara WATTAD

*Moldova State University*

The high rate of teachers' drop out of profession are evident in many countries including developed countries. This phenomenon has major economic and educational consequences on state, schools and pupils. Individual differences, motivational variables, environmental settings and economic consideration have an effect on teachers' decision to drop out of teaching. Dropping out is not necessarily final, and in many cases, teachers who left teaching, find their way back to this profession.

**Keywords:** *teacher, drop out, attrition, silent crisis.*

### CRIZA SILENT: RENUNȚAREA PROFESORILOR ȘCOLARI LA ACTIVITATEA DIDACTICĂ

Rata ridicată de plecare a cadrelor didactice din profesie este evidentă în mai multe țări, inclusiv în țările dezvoltate. Acest fenomen are consecințe economice și educaționale majore asupra statului, școlii și elevilor. Diferențele individuale, variabilele motivaționale, setările de mediu și economice au un efect imens asupra deciziei cadrelor didactice de a renunța la activitatea didactică. Însă, abandonul nu este neapărat definitiv; în multe cazuri, cadrele didactice care au renunțat la predare revin la această profesie.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *profesor, abandon, criza tacită.*

International statistics indicate discouraging teacher attrition rates in many developed countries [20]. In several European countries, approximately 30–40% of student teachers who graduate do not become teachers [24], with an estimated 40% of graduates who do enter the teaching profession leaving within five years (e.g., U.K.; [19]). In Australia, about 45% of early career teachers regularly consider quitting the profession within 10 years [3] with about 30% actually doing so within the first five years of instruction [33]. Statistics for North American teachers are equally disconcerting, showing U.S. teacher attrition rates of 30–50% over the past 40 years [10] with approximately one third of new teachers quitting within three years, about half leaving within five years, and 10% quitting every year [5; 14]. Given research showing most teachers to quit for reasons other than retirement (e.g., U.K.: 66%; Australia: 75% [21]; see also [13]), studies have explored both structural and personal factors underlying adjustment and attrition in the teaching profession. Among Canadian teachers, recent statistics show up to 30% turnover within the first five years of instruction [17], with over half reporting a willingness to leave the profession [23] and 40% quitting within the first five years [6]. Additionally, research with Canadian teachers has examined important non-psychological predictors of attrition and adjustment (e.g., lack of resources, health problems [7]) as well as psychological predictors of how Canadian teachers are coping with occupational stress (e.g., [23]). Some recent Canadian studies explore individual differences in motivational variables as predictors of burnout and attrition in teachers (e.g., self-efficacy [18]; causal attributions [28]).

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) [14]. Statistics from Sweden shows that the annual attrition rates are about the same for teachers and nurses [12].

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 [30]. Financial costs also accompany teacher attrition. In an American study Borman and Dowling [4] 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 de-

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 [13]. Extensive quantitative studies from USA estimate that only 40 to 50% of the graduated teachers are still working as teachers five years after graduation [14]. The situation seems to be similar in Great Britain [9]. The first five years seem to be a particularly critical period in teachers' decision to stay in or leave the profession [11]. 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 [6] point out that prior research seems to focus on providing correct answers, quick fixes and decontextualized 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 [8]. "We need", Borman and Dowling [4, p.399] assert, "truly longitudinal data with more than two time points to capture more nuanced pictures of teachers' career trajectories".

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. Luekens et al. [22] 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.

In international research on who leaves, why they leave and what kind of schools they leave behind some broad trends can be discerned. Results from an American perspective [4] suggest that teachers 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 [25]-countries.

There is some evidence that pay matters in teachers' decisions to stay or leave [15], but it does not make the entire difference. Organizational factors within schools, such as lack of support from administrators, student discipline issues and lack of input and decision-making power seem to be playing a larger role [4]. Johnson et al. [16] report that high ranked reasons for leaving schools are, for example, inappropriate or unmanageable assignments, accountability pressures and paperwork.

In a Swedish survey of teachers working conditions [32] the respondents ranked opportunities to find other work, no prolongation of present work, poor psycho social working environment and low pay as the most common reasons for leaving. However, all the results above have been generated out of databases or large surveys, at a one-shot basis and/or drawn from retrospective data. Information about teacher attrition as a process over time can only be found in the few longitudinal studies that have been conducted during the last decade.

Wilhelm, Dewhurst- Savellis, and Parker [34] have, by self-report measures in five year intervals, followed 156 teachers for 15 years. The results show the same attrition patterns as earlier statistical studies, but they also found that the "leavers" often had a more negative image of the profession prior to entry than those who stayed. The authors suggest - in relation to the findings - that factors related to working conditions may be of less importance than individuals' perceptions of the profession.

In a US project "The Next Generation of Teachers", based on longitudinal data from 50 novice teachers during their first three years in the profession [15, 16] the researchers tried to explore the possibility that a new generation of teachers might bring with them new conceptions of career. The findings suggest that new teachers approach teaching more tentatively or conditionally than older generations.

Rinke [29] describes a current notion of teaching as an "exploratory" career in which the teachers view teaching as one of many careers they might have. In spite of this seemingly relaxed attitude to teachers' work many of the leavers and movers expressed the same commitment and dedication as those who envision teaching as a lifelong career. This is also noted by Peske et al [26] who point at the potential value for this group of

“leavers” and “movers” to contribute to public education. Anderson and Olsen [1, 2] have, from results of a one-year longitudinal study, also highlighted the potential of the leavers. The “leavers” in their study were leaving classroom teaching but were not in fact leaving the field of education, and were still strongly committed to urban education. The authors suggest that we should term these teachers “shiffters” rather than “leavers” and that we need more inclusive and multiple frames for teacher careers that acknowledge them as shiffters.

Quartz et al. [27] reveal that shifting accounts for a significant proportion of teacher attrition and therefore should be added to the landscape of teacher retention research. Also, the fact that younger teachers were much more likely to shift than to leave education entirely points, according to the authors, to teaching careers as a generational matter. In line with Johnson et al [16] they discuss whether today’s teachers may be entering the profession with career goals that differ from those of previous generations.

### Conclusions and Reflections:

Much of research regarding this phenomenon is required in order to understand it better and to reduce it. 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.

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