

The Movement of Teachers Within Ontario School Boards

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Abstract

This study examines teacher movement between secondary schools within the same school board using qualitative multiple case study. Interviews were conducted with each participant before moving, shortly after moving, and a period of time after moving schools. The coding of the interviews found evidence corroborating known themes of leadership, teacher match to the school environment, professional success, peers, working conditions, productivity, personal reasons, the school building, socio-economic situation of the community, financial considerations, and proximity to where teachers went to school, were born, and have relatives. However, two additional themes, stress and the role of policies, were identified before achieving theoretical saturation; these two additional themes are the focus of this article.

Keywords: *teacher movement; mobility; teacher transfer*

Introduction

In the last decade there has been considerable research to investigate the movement of teachers between schools. For the most part, teacher movement has been examined using large scale quantitative studies (Barbieri, Rossetti, & Sestito, 2011; Feng & Sass, 2011; Guarino, Brown, & Wyse, 2011; Jackson, 2013; Keigher, 2010; Thorton, Perreault, & Jennings, 2008) that have caused debate between different interpretations. To clarify the interpretation, a qualitative approach was used to better understand individual teacher experiences when moving between secondary schools within the same school board.

This study focuses on teachers who are moving, whether by choice or otherwise, between public secondary schools (grades 9 to 12) within their school board. The study was conducted in Ontario, Canada, where there are 31 public English school boards (Ontario, n.d.) covering approximately 500,000 km². Teachers in these large school boards are also brought together through a professional regulatory body. All interviewees were registered members of the Ontario College of Teachers.

The Ontario context is distinct from other jurisdictions because of the large geographical size of school boards but also a multiculturalism policy within Canada that is long standing. The large school boards mean that what constitutes a move between school boards in other countries, may qualify as movement within a school board in Canada. In addition, some considerations such as an inclusive approach to the cultural mosaic of school boards could be different than other jurisdictions. In view of the potential for observations that may reflect a different research context, the research question was: Has the research literature recognized all the themes necessary to reach theoretical saturation?

The importance of this study is its examination of the contextual circumstances of decisions regarding teacher movement. The analysis used open coding but followed this with axial coding

that was informed by findings from earlier studies. Themes were associated with previously identified findings with two exceptions, namely *stress* and the *role of policies*. The focus of this article are these two themes that could not be associated with earlier studies.

Literature Review

Teacher movement has been studied because it is costly and could potentially be reduced. Previous studies have examined teacher movement and the closely associated phenomena of teachers leaving the profession. The prior work has emphasized quantitative approaches and managed to identify many details, such as measuring the number of teachers who move, and concepts associated with the difference between the schools those teachers move from and the schools they move to.

The movement of public teachers in the United States, assessed in 2007/08 using a sample of 3.4 million teachers, occurs at a rate of 7.6% per year (Keigher, 2010). This rate is reasonably consistent with an earlier five-year, 1993 to 1998, rate for New York state (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). Keigher (2010) stated that 4.2% are moves within a district, while the rest leave the district or the teaching profession. For secondary teachers the rate of movement is 7.1% (Keigher, 2010), which allows an estimate of within district moves for secondary teachers of 3.9%. Three principal reasons have been emerging to explain the high rate of transfers: school and student factors, career satisfaction, and personal life factors. This evidence is indicative that approximately 4% of teachers move between schools within their school board each year.

School characteristics have been examined in terms of teacher movement. Barbieri et al. (2011) found middle school teachers the most likely to transfer. They also found that teachers working in large schools have lower transfer rates, which Kukla-Acevedo (2009) suggested was due to more varied opportunities without external transfers. These findings are consistent with the professional success issues identified by Thorton et al. (2008). Professional success refers to opportunities for professional growth leading to opportunities for promotion. Thorton et al. also identified building related issues that include both infrastructure and classroom equipment; the latter of which included access to technology. An alternative explanation of teacher movement is the quality of match between a teacher and the school environment (Jackson, 2013).

Transfers away from low socioeconomic schools are more common than other transfers (Barbieri et al., 2011; Guarino et al., 2011; Jackson, 2013; Lankford et al., 2002). There have been mixed results regarding cultural influence in these decisions. It has been suggested that teachers may transfer to improve their working conditions (Lankford et al., 2002), which could lead to spurious correlations. There is little change in the transfer rate when compared with years of teaching experience, however, the rate of transfer is higher, at every number of career years, for at-risk schools (Guarino et al., 2011).

Related to career effects are moves between schools aimed at improving the quality of peers a teacher has. Peer quality affects teacher performance, impacts students' standardized test scores (Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009) and contributes to job decisions (Feng & Sass, 2011). The peer quality concept has been generalized to *match quality* that compares a teacher to their teaching environment (Jackson, 2013). As a contrast, productive teachers do not tend to move, but the link between teacher movement and productivity is weak (Feng & Sass, 2011; Goldhaber, Gross, & Player, 2007). This point implies that teachers who move tend to be of low to moderate productivity and their productivity improves as a result of moving. Improved productivity is consistent with a finding of improved professional success (Thorton et al., 2008).

Personal life concepts, such as commuting (Hornig, 2009), account for 26% of teacher moves (Keigher, 2010). Reiningger (2012) found that teachers tend to teach close to where they went to school. Teacher movement has also been found to be toward each teacher's birth place (Barbieri et al., 2011). It has been suggested that teachers have social inclinations and are oriented toward

children and families (Denzler & Wolter, 2009), both of which may drive a desire to live closer to relatives. Financial gains, because of bonuses for teaching in particular schools, have a “small but significant” teacher movement effect (Guarino et al., 2011, p. 974). However, it is rare and most moves for monetary gain are between, rather than within, districts (Goldhaber et al., 2007; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivken, 2004; Lankford et al., 2002).

The literature has a bias toward quantitative methodologies but has identified many pertinent concepts that are summarized in Table 1. In view of some strong studies with very large sample sizes it would be remiss not to use the concepts that arise in the literature to inform this study. In this respect, this study looks for consistency between lived experiences and the considerations identified in Table 1. It further sought additional concepts in an effort to achieve theoretical saturation, which is the primary focus of this article.

Methodology

The overwhelming body of prior literature is primarily quantitative in nature, which does not provide details of multiple realities that may arise within the scope of each concept that has been recognized. The philosophical stance taken here is ontological (Creswell, 2007) in the sense that it questions whether the collection of concepts identified in prior literature (i.e., Table 1) has achieved theoretical saturation. A postpositivist paradigm (Creswell, 2007) is enacted through axial coding informed by earlier research as the basis for analyzing and explaining the findings (Fram, 2013; Pole, 2007). Within this paradigm the concepts from the prior literature were interpreted as naturalistic generalizations (Creswell, 2007; Fram 2013) as a means to determine if the collection of known concepts is saturated. Contextual understanding of teacher movement is addressed using an interpretive case study (Merriam, 1998). Each individual case is a teacher who was moving within their school board regardless of the reason.

Teacher movement from one school to another, within a school board, is a transition that takes time because it follows a contractually agreed upon process. Typically, it begins in May or June with an administrative process, a summer break then takes place through July and August before teaching at a new school begins in September. An alternative process can arise in schools that have a semester schedule where a transition can occur at the end of January. Other transitions are less common and were not observed in this study.

The participant selection criterion required that teachers knew that they were moving schools. The qualitative design considered the impact that the transition could have (Perren, Keller, Passardi, & Scholz, 2010) on responses from teacher participants. A particular concern was that subjective opinions could change during the transition regarding the school being moved-from (the *initial school*) and the school being moved-to (the *destination school*). Changes in subjectivity could occur before or after a move and might vary because some teachers choose to move while others are forced.

To respond to the methodological challenge, a triad of interviews was used. The first interview occurred while the teacher was at their initial school and collected information about the process leading up to the decision to move. The second interview took place three to four weeks after they had started teaching in the destination school. The final interview occurred after an adjustment period of seven months for summer moves and four months for January moves. The focus of the final interview was on an overview of the move with comparative questions about the initial and destination schools.

Table 1

Concepts identified from the research literature

Factor	Reference
A. Leadership issues	Thorton, Perreault, and Jennings (2008)
B. Quality of match between a teacher and the school environment	Jackson (2013)
C. Quality of match to peers	Feng and Sass (2011)
D. Transfers away from low socioeconomic and at-risk schools	Barbieri, Rossetti, and Sestito (2011); Guarino, Brown, and Wyse (2011); Jackson (2013); Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2002); Kukla-Acevedo (2009)
E. Improve their working conditions	Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2002)
F. Professional success (opportunities for professional growth leading to opportunities for promotion or simply improved productivity)	Thorton, Perreault, and Jennings (2008)
G. Having low to moderate productivity	Feng and Sass (2011); Goldhaber, Gross, and Player (2007)
H. Building issues (infrastructure and classroom equipment such as access to technology)	Thorton, Perreault, and Jennings (2008)
I. Financial gains	Guarino, Brown, and Wyse (2011)
J. Personal life factors, such as commuting	Hornig (2009); Keigher (2010)
K. Proximity to where they went to school	Reininger (2012)
L. Proximity to birth place	Barbieri, Rossetti, and Sestito (2011)
M. Proximity to relatives	Denzler and Wolter (2009)
N. Cultural factors (Including cultural elements of both student and teacher.)	Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2005); Hanushek, Kain, and Rivken (2004)

Interview guides were informed by prior research, but such that brevity in questions and conversation points provided opportunities for interviewees to express their own experience. The analysis of interview transcripts began with open coding using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). This was followed by axial coding where emergent themes were examined in terms of consistency with concepts previously identified in the literature (i.e., Table 1; Fram, 2013). Since the focus was on determining whether prior research had reached theoretical saturation, consistency was considered sufficient for coding associated with

previously identified concepts. Further examination looked for themes that were not consistent with findings of prior research and used selective coding to clarify those themes. The analysis served as a critical examination for omissions from the existing literature.

Participants

Seven Ontario teachers from five different Ontario school boards, all members of the Ontario College of Teachers, participated in this study. Two teachers identified themselves as being in rural settings and five in urban settings. Twenty-one interviews, three with each teacher, were conducted with interviews being in person (6), by Skype (3) and by telephone (12). Six of the participants allowed conversations to be recorded and one did not. In all cases, field notes were taken and these were used exclusively in the single case where the interview was not recorded. Member checks were received in 17 cases.

Two of the teachers engaged in this study were male and five female. They averaged 10.6 years experience ranging from 3.5 to 21 years and were teaching nine different subjects. All of the participants taught in secondary schools with students nominally aged 14 to 17. Six were permanent teachers; five full-time and one part-time. One teacher was seeking a permanent position.

Throughout the rest of this paper, teacher names are provided using pseudonyms that maintain gender and indicate whether the teacher chose to move or was obligated. The code names are: Albert, Boris, Cheryl, Diana, Rita, Sonia, and Tina. Names beginning with A, B, C, and D chose to move, while names beginning with R, S, and T were obliged to move schools.

Results

Evidence of each concept mentioned in the literature (see Table 1) was found in the interviews. Only concept D, “transfers away from low socioeconomic and at-risk schools”, was not found in any of the interviews of the participants who were obliged to move schools, however, it was found among the interviews of participants who chose to move schools. Two additional concepts, E, “improve their working conditions,” and M, “proximity to relatives,” were not found in any of Rita’s interviews. This may have reflected a methodological adaptation to her second interview because she had a major health event, which prevented her from teaching when she was scheduled to join the new school.

Theoretical saturation was not found, but substantial coding was identified as being closely associated with the thirteen concepts in Table 1 that were derived from previous research. The development of those codes as themes and theoretical implications will be described in a separate paper. The focus of this paper is two emergent themes, stress and role of policies that were not associated with concepts identified in the literature. The two additional themes, along with the collection of thirteen prior concepts did, collectively, achieve theoretical saturation of the interviews. Therefore, the following sections will discuss only these additional themes.

Stress

It is little surprise that there was evidence of stress during the process of teacher movement. The details from the interviews facilitate an understanding of the scope of this theme. In addition, the interviews showed that stress can manifest itself in different ways and the contextual details speak to an individualized experience of stress. Together, the scope and experiences, provide direction for future research.

Albert recounted stress that existed prior to the process of moving schools; “...there has been a lot of family stress over the last four or five years...” He also identified it having a role after the decision to move had been made: “I was really sad and I was stressed out and I was doubting my decision. I did feel guilt to.” Subsequent to moving to the destination school, Albert

became seriously ill. This occurred several months after the move and necessitated a leave of absence. The medical condition did not have a clear cause.

Boris described a slow increase in stress over the previous few years. After the move, he remarked about having some health concerns with respect to an existing condition that had flaired up. However, the causes of the stress and health concern were not clearly due to moving schools because he also taught at a local university and had increased his teaching load in that role as well as his brother in law having recently passed away after a couple of years of illness.

Cheryl remarked that the process of applying for positions and interviews "... was stressful, but a good stressful."

Diana reiterated the stress of wondering if she would be moving. In the third interview she described feeling highly stressed because she felt trapped in her initial school and unable to move. She also indicated that she had been through a series of stressful events. She identified her doctorate as the initial one: "Came off one super-stress to another super-stress."

Rita felt stress through the process. In the late summer a pre-existing health concern flaired up: "I was a write-off." She had taken time off the previous May and wondered if she was properly healed. She was definitive that the health concern was not caused by her having to move schools. However, she believed her illness was exacerbated by stress. She was very stressed about going to the destination school in September; she applied for a medical leave of absence and was stressed about a lack of clarity that resulted. She indicated seeing her position posted as a temporary vacancy and had "a huge sigh of relief." While this overlaps with the policy component, her monitoring of the temporary vacancies was her own way to address the stress of having not had a clear response regarding her seeking a medical leave.

Sonia was stressed about not knowing how stable her position was "... you are not too sure if it is going to be you or not." Sonia was off sick the day she was declared "excess" and the principal phoned her at home. She was concerned that she might be obliged to take a special education job because she was qualified, but noted it was not a job that she wanted. When Sonia spoke about the process of being offered roles, she indicated making some decisions in a manner that allowed principals to contact their second choices without it being revealed that the second candidate was not the first choice. It was evident that she felt this was important to reduce the stress of other teachers that is associated with knowing that they were not the first choice for a new school.

Tina was stressed because it was not her decision to move – she reflected that she cried a few tears. However, once she recovered from the decision, she was effectively resigned to it and only felt stress in relation to not knowing details. Tina said, in terms of her career, she rarely took a day off, but at the destination school "...I had a lot of headaches and muscle tension, things like that, because of the situation." She took two days off for a cold, which "...is an anomaly." She likened the moving process to grieving; it corresponded to the loss of a school, and, in her case, loss of the subject she had taught for many years.

In terms of the collection of teacher voices, two had pre-existing medical conditions flair up, two reported being ill after moving – one was minor, but an anomaly, while the other was major, four indicated pre-existing stress, and all of them acknowledged varying degrees of stress along the way. The details are sufficient to consider stress as a theme.

The theme of stress has received some discussion in the relevant literature. Kukla-Acevedo (2009) indicated a need for stress to be considered as a potential mediating factor in the workplace. It is an aspect of the teaching role that arises primarily from a teachers own actions (Kauts & Mittu, 2011). While stress is generally perceived negatively, this might be mitigated by a new school providing more collegial interaction in order to become more familiar with the new setting. This could reduce feelings, from the initial school, of isolation or disconnection (McGonigal, 2015) and reduce stress.

It is likely that stress fluctuates and is only mentioned when it exceeds a tolerable level, which is the diathesis-stress model (Dozois & Ouimet, 2010). Applying this model one would expect teachers to cope with stress (Kyriacou, 2001) as they normally do. However, if the process of moving increased their stress to an extent that they cannot cope then it manifests itself in other ways such as health effects. In this study, four teachers mentioned health impacts during the moving process. While none was directly connected to the move, the circumstantial coincidence and relatively high proportion suggest that this is a theme that warrants further attention.

Role of Policies

There were many mentions of policies at different stages during the teacher movement process. What is presented here is the evidence of the theme that emerged from the interviews; there has been no attempt to clarify the policies or to determine whether teachers should have been better informed. The section presents the perceptions that the teachers vocalized.

Albert indicated that he chose to move and felt it was necessary. He indicated nothing could have been done to address his needs without him moving. In effect, the only policy that could, in his opinion, help him was the policy that allowed him to make the choice to move between schools.

Boris expressed concern regarding a particular policy intended to facilitate teachers moving between schools. It is called a *reciprocal-transfer process* and entails two teachers arranging to swap positions provided administrative oversight allows it. Boris was clearly irritated because he thought he had an arrangement but it collapsed. His concern was with the extent the process can go while allowing either teacher to renege. Boris also said he received a “hot tip” from his principal about a new position that was going to become available. Contrary to his concern with the reciprocal-transfer not working in his favor, this example shows that details of other policies did work in his favor.

Cheryl was actively seeking a permanent full time position and, if she had had that, would be unlikely to consider moving as frequently as she was obliged to; “...I just take whatever job I can get.” In terms of the process, she noted that applications for teaching positions were handled by some principals using email and others by fax. She felt the latter was awkward and out of date. She also noted that policies regarding teachers in her position were changing and noted Ontario regulation 274/12 as having implications for occasional teachers. The regulation provides a process and some seniority protection for new teachers to progress to a permanent position (Ontario, 2012).

Diana had a position of responsibility that came up for renewal. However, this coincided with a policy change in her board that led to the “unprecedented” opening up of all positions of responsibility. Diana indicated that she “...would encourage a review of the system to allow for more lateral movements.” In this instance, the concern was with the way in which policies are changed and the alternative options that are available when changes are implemented.

Rita spoke about *surplus* and *redundent* teachers. Surplus teachers will not have a position in their school in the following year but will have a position somewhere in the school board (unless they refuse it). Redundent teachers will not have a position in the school board the following year. Rita described the declaration of surplus and redundant teachers as “...a cycle every year, if you don’t know you are oblivious.” In interview three, Rita indicated that this was the 18th year that her board had large numbers of teachers declared redundant. She said that large numbers of them were hired back every year and she theorized that this was being used as a mechanism to prevent stagnation of rural schools. She felt that through the process, teachers could be hired at different places, principals could acquire fresh teachers, and that this would create a degree of knowledge mobility within the school board. During her explanation, Rita mentioned that a school told her she would remain surplus (as opposed to being recalled) if she did not move

schools. Rita also questioned why there could not be multi-year staffing plans. The theory that Rita put forward calls into question whether the policies are being used for purposes that the policies were not designed for.

Rita, as a surplus teacher, was acknowledged in an assembly that included retiring teachers. This resulted in her experiencing issues with students who did not understand that she had not chosen to leave. Rita was also concerned about the way her medical leave was handled leading into the new school year. There was very limited communication in the weeks leading up to the school year and a proper appraisal of the required paperwork was completed after the school year had started. To exacerbate the situation, stress may have played a role in aggravating the illness. In this instance the concern is two-fold, that the leave may not be implemented in a timely manner to meet the needs of teachers who work within a scheduled year and second, that there may be interactions between policy components and stress.

Sonia felt that the policy implementation might not be done in a way that was in her best interests: "... I knew I better darn well get a job in the first round or I might get screwed." Later she expressed this as "...control your own destiny." She acknowledged elements of the policies were made to avoid pressure tactics being used. However, she was concerned that turning down a position would remain in the institutional memory and might have negative implications in the future. She remarked that her destination school was two years old and "... they hired a very specific profile of people..." This portrayal is indicative of the policies taking place within contexts and that contextual components can have an impact on individual teachers.

Tina felt "It is not clear how the process works." In particular, she was unsure how the surplus designation was determined in her particular situation. She was a parttime permanent teacher which disallowed her taking a position of responsibility (i.e., curriculum lead) and did not have seniority over other teachers who could take single classes. When the person hired to be the curriculum lead was subsequently seconded to another role, she was not allowed to fill the temporary position this created. She later described the emotional side of the situation:

...I think after 26 years of teaching I shouldn't have to do this. Like I feel very degraded and demoralized and disrespected, not that anybody is doing it because there is no face out there that is accountable for these changes, but that is how I feel in relation to my profession.

Many comments relating to policy arose in the coding process, which is not overly surprising given the need to regulate teacher movements within school boards. However, the array of concerns regarding policies and their implementation, point to the need for considering this as a theme. Several teachers indicated that policies are not functioning as expected. Specifically, there was evidence of information flowing in non-standard ways, for example, Boris spoke of receiving a "hot tip." There was also evidence of hiring practices for a new school influencing the movement of teachers with particular attributes and other teachers who relied on the formal dissemination of information who said the process lacked clarity. One teacher offered an explanation for what she felt were excessive designations of teachers as redundant. She suggested that it facilitated circulation of teachers within the school board to avoid staff stagnation in rural schools.

This study found evidence of mobility being desirable by individuals and school boards. Individuals expressed a feeling that moving as necessary for their wellbeing or career improvement. This idea may be consistent with Guarino et al. (2011) who suggested the use of incentives based on schools, rather than individuals, to promote collaboration within the school. The individuals who moved might have had a reduced inclination to move if there had been increased collaboration within their initial school. This would not have had any impact on the teachers who were obliged to move schools.

School boards may benefit from mobility through a mixing of teachers. In this study there

was a suggestion that policies were being used to cause the movement of teachers between rural schools. The implication was that teachers were being inappropriately declared redundant to cause the movement of teachers. If this is occurring it points to the need for a policy that directly addresses the need to have some teachers circulate to reduce the potential stagnation of teachers in rural schools. Such school board action is not dissimilar to the use of policy to move teachers between schools in Bermuda (Smith, 2012), however, the implied hidden agenda would make it more stressful.

These findings, regarding policies, are more nuanced than simply having monetary incentives to reduce teacher movement (Guarino et al., 2011). They do not support salary differentials based on matching the qualities of the teacher to the qualities of a school (Feng & Sass, 2011) because several teachers spoke of needing a change to address changes in their quality or the quality of their match to the school. Half of the teachers in this study chose to move and described having a better match to their new school. However, the teachers who were obliged to move schools did not describe having a better match. This suggests that the idea of matching (Jackson, 2013) may be unrealistic in school boards where demographic declines oblige some teachers to move schools.

The findings suggest that future policy discussions should not simply focus on reducing mobility of teachers and need to consider a wider array of potential policies. In particular, existing policies allow teachers to choose to move to vacated positions and subsequently, oblige movements to provide surplus teachers roles at a new schools. These strategies are dichotomous in the sense of benefiting the individual or the school board, but not both. Future policies should examine how the collective needs of teachers and the school board can lead to better solutions than those generated from dichotomous policies that are currently in use.

Limitations

This study was confined by the relatively small number of participants. This may constrain the transferability of the results to other contexts. In particular other jurisdictions, which have different features and policies, may not find the two themes applicable.

The teachers who participated in this research were all of European ancestry. This does not negate the findings, but implies that the scope is constrained and additional study of this kind is needed for situations that involve teachers of other ethnic ancestries.

Conclusions

Teachers in this study moved because they felt they needed to or because they were obliged to by their school board. The teachers who chose to move felt their decisions were good and that they benefited from moving. Teachers who were obliged to move were less impressed with the outcome and questioned the process that led to their moving.

This study found evidence of all the concepts that have been identified in previous studies. Specifically, themes of leadership, teacher match to the school environment, professional success, peers, working conditions, productivity, personal reasons, the school building, socio-economic situation of the community, financial considerations, and proximity to where teachers went to school, were born, and have relatives (as detailed in Table 1). This research also had two additional themes emerge: stress and the role of policies. Together the thirteen concepts from the literature and two new themes were sufficient for theoretical saturation in this study.

In view of the two new themes, future research should examine the occurrence of stress. If the diathesis stress model is applicable it may be able to guide the improvement of supports for teachers who are obliged to move schools. The role of policies, particularly emerging in conjunction with the theme of stress, suggests looking at the details of policies with a vision not of overhauling existing policies, but rather improving particular details of the policies that will

benefit all concerned. Specifically, it would be invaluable to measure stress through the process of teacher movements in order to identify the aspects of policies that give rise to the most stress. This could then guide alterations of policy details in order to constrain the stress level of both participants of the process and the administrators who enact the policies.

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