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Teacher Migration From High-Performing Middle Schools: A Case Study

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I recently conducted fieldwork to explore the dynamics of teacher migration and understand how it relates to teachers' perceptions and attitudes. The research was conducted through the eyes of a sixth grade language arts/social studies' teacher working in a middle school I will refer to as PLC (Professional Learning Community) Middle School. By spending extensive time and conducting multiple interviews with the teacher and other staff members, I was able to explore some of the reasons and conditions why teachers leave schools, particularly high-performing schools to teach in other high-performing schools. Attending weekly meetings at all levels and content areas with migrating teachers, combined with interviews and document collection, allowed me to further understand the gap that exists between what a high-performing school professes to be and how it actually is perceived by its own teachers. This gap is what proves to be disconcerting and frustrating for teachers who are satisfied with teaching but consider relocation to meet further personal and professional challenges.

The research took a look at a high-performing middle school from the inside out. High-performing teachers were leaving or transferring to high-performing schools in the Wake County Public School System, Raleigh, North Carolina, the 23rd largest in the country (National School Boards Association, 2006). The departure of a teacher from a lower performing school seems logical where federal and state demands increase every year and resources are limited. However, the slow exodus of quality teachers from higher performing schools puzzled me as a researcher. The area was scarcely studied in depth as is teacher migration since teachers leaving schools to work in other schools are merely replaced, not causing a vacancy in the system. In order to further understand the migration issue from high-performing schools I needed to work from inside a high-performing school and spend time with and talk to migrating teachers.

My primary focus of interest was what is called *organizational or collective* efficacy (Bandura, 1977), the collective level of high performance by organizations. The issue of teacher migration was the symptom of a greater concern, that of the internal structure and performance of the school organization. However the greater problem lay beyond, with the school teachers as an aggregate, that is, the organization. What were contributing factors to the teacher exodus? My obvious focus was on the inner dynamics of the organization since as a "school" the outer surface revealed high-performing status yet internally things were not right since people, many high qualified, experienced teachers were leaving.

Most urban secondary public schools house more than one hundred employees, three quarters of them teachers. A typical middle school in my former district employed some 75 teachers with varying styles and backgrounds. Yet in five years almost 50% of those teachers were gone, many to other schools even though the schools they left were deemed "high-performing" by the school district. By "high-performing" I refer to the North Carolina state standard of end-of-year exams where a school reaches 90% or more of their student population (tested) at grade level or above (Department of Public Instruction, 2005).

Utilizing the social cognitive theory of Albert Bandura (1977) which examines how social factors influence how we create or construct our experiences, I researched the school world of a middle school

teacher, observing how he and other individual teachers worked together as a group. Social cognitive theory examines the self and organizational efficacy of teachers and schools as transformative agents. Teachers with high abilities do not necessarily perform well collectively or as an organization if specific cognitive, behavioral, and environmental conditions are not in place to support their collaborative work efforts. The study of these three conditions within the school organization provided me with an in depth look at how teachers feel or believe themselves to be validated.

This study can help guide future research efforts towards examining the criteria that enables a school organization to understand the designation high-performing according to authentic and local site-based school needs, not only state performance standards. The study may contribute to our greater understanding of why teachers opt to migrate from successful schools.

Introduction to study

About half of the total teacher turnover is cross-school migration. Unlike attrition from the occupation, teacher migration is a form of turnover that does not decrease the overall supply of teachers because departures are simultaneously new hires. As a result, it would seem reasonable to conclude that teacher migration does not contribute to the problem of staffing schools. From a systemic level of analysis, this is probably correct. However, from an organizational perspective at the school site level, the data suggest teacher migration does contribute to the problem of staffing schools (Ingersoll, 2001a, p.4). A central factor that convinced me to conduct research within one school was the understanding that teachers work in social settings, in organizations and not in total isolation. Conducting interviews and surveys with migrating teachers throughout the district, in isolated manner, would not have allowed me to observe the organization in movement, the day to day operations of a large, high-performing group, with one mission and the same organizational goals. Getting inside a school building of a high-performing organization allowed me to understand the interplay of school climate with all its variables and how teachers interact within them. This interplay sets the stage for teachers' cognitive experiences as they form perceptions and opinions of their sense of belonging in the organization. These issues are crucial to teacher migration, whether teachers want to seek better learning environments more consistent with their values and beliefs, or remain where they are. Teachers operate collectively within an interactive social system rather than as isolates. Therefore, educational development through efficacy enhancement must address the social and organizational structure of educational systems (Bandura, 1997, p. 243)

The Problem: Teacher Turnover

Approximately 30% of new teachers depart teaching within three years and 40 to 50% depart within five years (Ingersoll, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The highest turnover is in the fields of special education, mathematics, and science (Ingersoll, 2001). Of those beginning teachers, those who are dissatisfied with student discipline and the school environment are more likely to migrate or leave the profession (Boser, 2000). Richard Ingersoll (2003) of the University of Pennsylvania concluded in a report for the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy that teacher recruitment programs will not be effective in stemming the tide of teacher turnover unless greater scrutiny of the organizational issues are defined and examined. The traditional approach to teacher turnover has been to enhance and strengthen recruitment programs and hire more teachers. However, the real problem is the "revolving door" of teaching at the public school level. What is often overlooked is teacher migration (teachers

transferring to other schools or districts) as opposed to teachers leaving the profession. Regardless of what the reason is for the teacher departures, they must be replaced, and that void requires interviewing, hiring, becoming acculturated to a new school, fitting in with the existing staff, and familiarity with parents. It is estimated that almost a third of the country's teachers leave the profession sometime during their first three years of teaching. The cost for teacher turnover is expensive.

Replacing almost 16 percent of the country's teachers every year seriously undermines the fiscal allocation to fund other more essential areas of need. A recent study in Texas revealed the state's annual turnover rate of 15.5 percent of all teachers, which includes a 40 percent rate for teachers in their first three years, costs a "conservative" $329 million a year. When organizational costs for termination, substitutes, learning curve loss, and new training are included, the cost may more than double the $329 million (Texas State Board for Educator Certification, 2000). While the greatest challenge posed by this exodus is replacing valuable resources, not all teachers leave schools to exit the teaching profession. In fact, Ingersoll (2001) discovered that the movement from one school to another and one district to another (migration), accounts for 50% of the turnover that schools and districts experience (Ingersoll, 2001). The loss of a good teacher, whether to another profession or to another school, means losing a very integral resource. That teacher has become familiar with school practices; understands the school's curricular practices and instructional focus; has built a rapport with students, parents, and colleagues, and the search for an adequate replacement taxes the administrative team in time, labor, and resources (Johnson & Birkland, 2003).

Ingersoll (2003), using the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its supplement, the Teacher Follow up Survey (TFS), conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, discovered that the two primary reasons beginning teachers left the profession were pursuit of another job (39%) and dissatisfaction (29%). SASS/TFS represents the largest comprehensive data source available on teachers, staffing, occupational, and organizational aspects of school (Ingersoll, 2003). An interesting finding in the Ingersoll study is that the dissatisfaction expressed by the teachers did not result from student demographics or other external factors but rather from organizational factors, such as questions of leadership and teacher decision-making. With even relatively successful schools showing a steady turnover rate, the problem points to the school organization itself and a lack of congruence between teachers' perceptions and administrative perceptions (Ingersoll, 2003).

The high turnover rate affects beginning teachers more than others. Traditionally, the teaching profession has lost many teachers early in their careers, well before retirement (Johnson & Birkeland, in press; Lortie, 1975; Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991). A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (2004-2005) revealed that 29 percent of the teacher attrition rate was due to job dissatisfaction as a major reason for leaving. More than three-fourths of the respondents cited the following reasons for their departure: school working conditions; student discipline problems; lack of support from the administration; poor student motivation; and lack of teacher influence over school wide and classroom decision making (Ingersoll, 2003). Thus, simply hiring new teachers as replacements is a reaction to the problem not a prescription for further improvement.

The Challenges: From preservice to in- service teaching

Beginning teachers may be receiving all the requisites of organizational mentoring, peer support, and adequate resources but their sustained professional growth begins to lessen after the first few years.

For instance, the district requires each school to assign a mentor to each initially licensed teacher yet that teacher teaches the same workload and same amount of students as a veteran teacher. New teachers are "thrown into" their experiences and provided support while they are undergoing the stress and anxiety of learning how to stand in front of one hundred or more young students every day to deliver a quality presentation. Sharon Feiman-Nemser (2003, p. 25) reinforces the notion that beginning teachers need constant support; "Keeping new teachers in teaching is not the same as helping them become good teachers." Moreover, most beginning teachers need three or more years to achieve competence and several more to reach proficiency (Feiman-Nemser, 2003 p.27). If middle school administrators do not see beyond the pretense of a fleeting social recognition for teachers, they run the risk of losing potentially excellent teachers to other professions or other schools.

The idea of representation as participation (Cotton et al., 1988) in no way reveals the level of participation of beginning teachers and their validation by more experienced teachers. Simply being on a committee does not mean that one is being "heard." In fact, Glew et al. (1995) cite a higher and lower level of participation. The higher level implies "role-expanding opportunities" (p. 402) while the lower level simply allows the participant to "have a greater voice" (p. 402). Beginning teachers, in an effort to develop greater selfefficacy, need to know their voices truly make a difference. Organizations may have more influence on participation than individual teacher differences (Steers, 1977).

The overly bureaucratic organization, replete with rules and regulations, limits beginning teachers' autonomy and ability to be a successful practitioner (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Neumann (1989) cited three categories why people are reluctant to participate in decision-making: (1) structural (the real decisions are made outside the participatory setting), (2) relational (precedence of hierarchical rank and status on the committee), (3) societal (employee socialization, ideology, or school history between teachers and administrators). Beginning teachers exhibit a professional vulnerability in the initial stages of teacher entry as their sense of self-efficacy is in question, their belief in their ability to perform the task of teaching. While self-efficacy increases during the preservice years, it declines during the student teaching phase (Hoy & Woolfok, 1990; Spector, 1990). Therefore, beginning teachers may be susceptible to the level of support provided by other teachers or administrators in the initial stages of teaching. Self-efficacy displays a resistance to change once it has become established (Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). Thus early experiences set the tone for teachers' beliefs in their personal capabilities as effective teachers.

The stronger the belief in the group's efficacy to mobilize more participation needed to succeed in proposed changes, along with the greater the expected share benefits, the higher the participation rate (Kerr, 1996). One of the keys to organizational success is linking diverse self-interests to a common goal which serves as a key motivational device (Alinsky, 1971). This can be a formidable challenge to site-based administrators. What is a powerful 'common goal' that is not too general, vague and still compelling? When teacher challenges and dilemmas become overwhelming, the diminished belief in making a difference ensues, and a lower self-efficacy is a result.

The Needs: Keys to Success for Teachers

Open communication between teachers and administration

One salient example of an external constraint for beginning teachers is the lack of relevant information provided by management, or in the case of the school, the administration. Major decisions are made

regarding curriculum, instruction, facilities, management, and operations, yet if the organizational climate does not support leadership dissemination, many of those decisions are simply "passed on" to the rest of the staff from the principal via memos or e-mails. At times, beginning teachers are not sure that a particular task is done thoroughly because from their perception, adequate information is not provided by administration. Maintaining a "full, open, and decentralized communication system" (Pacanowsky 1988, p.374) is essential for organizational efficacy. The larger the school, the more insignificant the individual effort of the teacher may appear (Kerr, 1996). Beginning teachers need to be heard and acknowledged for the rich experiences that they already bring to the organization, not for the existing paradigm that they must "pay their dues" and only with experience will they be able to contribute worthily to the ongoing educational narrative.

Beginning teachers may have a strong sense of self-efficacy in the area of competence but not in the area of authority. This is because the teacher already is aware of the level of competence and simply needs more time and experience to support that belief. On the contrary, authority is "granted" by the higher powers within the organizational structure and therefore is somewhat out of the direct control of the beginning teacher. The limited power entrusted in beginning teachers recognizes that they are lower in the teaching hierarchy. Recognition of teachers needs to come from fellow teachers and administrators in a way that will support constant growth.

Social recognition of teachers

Social recognition for the beginning teacher serves as a reinforcer in the organization but is not well understood. Social recognition in this context has been largely overlooked and not researched extensively (Bandura, 1986; Luthans & Stajkovic, 2000). Miller (1978) noted that social recognition is "one of the most neglected, taken for granted and poorly performed management functions" (p.115). The effectiveness of social recognition for beginning teachers lies in its motivation potential, its sense of predictive value (Bandura, 1986; Luthans & Stajkovic, 2000). Predictive value lends more importance to desired behaviors and validation of beginning teachers as active agents in the organization. Teachers need social recognition but not in an arbitrary, isolated manner which proves ineffective, an empty reward that does not sustain motivation. Beginning teachers need genuine appreciation with specific tangible benefits. For example, providing praise for a beginning teacher after an excellent class (on the part of an administrator or other formal evaluator) is appropriate and appreciated but not sufficient enough to sustain motivation over a longer period of time. Presently, many administrators "drop in" on a class to complete formal observations and then move on to the next teacher. Over the years my discussions as an administrator with teachers have revealed that these brief and infrequent observations are sometimes more intimidating than supportive of the teacher's growth. With increased familiarity and attention , the administrator and teacher may develop a sound working rapport if the administrator is supportive. Engaged, empowered beginning teachers are more motivated and more motivated employees lead to greater work performance. The supervisor plays an important role here because of their effect on the morale and collective efficacy of the organization. However, school administrators are often selected and function because of their "technical competencies and job-related knowledge" (Bandura, 2000 p.9).

Beginning teachers need the essential interpersonal support of administrative guidance, enablement, and motivation. In a day filled with responses to discipline problems, classroom observations, and supervisory duties (i.e. cafeteria, hallway, bus, etc.), the administrator is challenged to adequately

foster this systematic support so badly needed by beginning teachers. The absence of this crucial component systematically in a school climate may have an adverse effect on beginning teachers' attitudes. As individual teachers confront organizational challenges and obstacles, a healthy school climate also encounters obstacles in a collective setting. The following cites the major challenges in a school climate, the area referred to in this research as organizational efficacy, or collective efficacy.

Increased autonomy of the school

Increased school-site accountability

The power to establish local policy

Areas of decision-making

Distribution of authority

Organizational efficacy: Are the voices of beginning teachers heard?

Organizational or collective efficacy represents the beliefs of group members concerning "the performance capability of a social system as a whole" (Bandura, 1997, p. 469). Among teachers, organizational efficacy refers to a consensus in the school that the faculty can organize and carry out effective action required to have a positive effect on students (Goodard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004). In the past twenty years research has found an association between three kinds of efficacy beliefs and student achievement: the self-efficacy judgments of students (Pajares, 1994, 1997), teachers' beliefs in their own instructional efficacy (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk, Joy, & Hoy, 1998), and teachers' beliefs about the collective or organizational efficacy of their school (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). Of the three efficacy beliefs, organizational efficacy is the most recently studied and the least studied by educational researchers. The growing interest in organizational efficacy stems from strong research links between perceived collective efficacy and differences in student achievement among schools (Bandura, 1993; Goddard, 2001; Goddard et al., 2000). Bandura demonstrated that the effect of perceived collective efficacy on student achievement was stronger than the direct link between SES (socioeconomic status) and student achievement. Goddard also showed that, even after controlling for students' prior achievement, race/ethnicity, SES, and gender, collective efficacy beliefs have stronger effects on student achievement than student race or SES. The range of a school's beliefs about the collective capability is wide yet is strongly linked to student achievement.

Pressures on organizations remain constant in an effort to maintain productivity without increasing costs. This is no less in the field of public school education. As more students move into an area, logistical demands become conspicuous and challenging to the local district and site-based school. Standardized testing accountability and No Child Left Behind parameters exert more pressure on today's public school teachers. Teachers are asked to be more creative, innovative, and proactive with not much more time and with finite resources. Organizational efficacy looks at the aggregate of teachers within the school organization. Both perceptions and self-efficacy help us expand our knowledge of organizational behavior (Stadjkovic & Luthans, 1998).

With state and district requirements for the initially licensed teachers, school constraints only exacerbate the equanimity of beginning teachers. In a study done by Chiles & Zorn in 1995 regarding

empowerment in organizations, research found that the more employees felt hindered by the organizational culture, the less likely they were to feel empowered. The two dimensions of empowerment researched, competence and authority, both related to negative perceptions of what the researchers designated macro-level culture or organizational culture. Stated differently, employees were more likely to feel competent, or capable of performing the job, when they did not perceive negative influences from the organization, particularly from management. This supports the statement that self-efficacy may be hampered by external constraints in the organizational support.

Challenges to the effectiveness of organizational efficacy

Social processes and problems are fluid in this social world, not static or fixed. Most preservice programs do not adequately address the "peer socialization processes in schools" (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). If a school endeavors to foster a truly collaborative organization, it becomes a community and thus should invite preservice teachers into that community (Rosenholtz, 1989). Teachers taught to teach in professional "isolation" find collaborative practices challenging and often difficult. Two kinds of cultures have been traditionally awaiting teachers' entry into the school building: cultures of individualization, with relative teaching isolation and occasional sharing with peers (Little, 1990) and balkanized cultures, where teachers work in self-contained groups, often according to content areas (Hargreaves, 1994). Competition generally takes place between the varied groups for resources. The very nature of the two aforementioned cultures serves as an organizational barrier to professional relationships among teachers. Preservice teachers trained for "professional isolation" (Avila de Lima, 2003, p.216), devoid of socialization and collaborative skills, are teachers destined for frustration and teacher migration and possible exodus from the profession itself. Hargreaves (1997) cites the uncertainty whether teachers will truly be able to work collaboratively in the "post-modern age" or become "deprofessionalized" due to the excessive demands nonexistent twenty years earlier (p.86). The very nature of learning for both students and teachers is changing dramatically so it is not simply a question of more demands but rather more demands and adaptation to new manners of learning (American National Commission on Teaching, 1996). This is in the midst of a high-stakes testing environment.

From Self-Efficacy to Organizational Efficacy: The necessary bridge

Sociocognitive theory, whether operating with self or organizational efficacy, centers around enablement (Bandura, 1997). Teachers must be empowered to make key decisions regarding their daily operations whether it involves curriculum, instruction, scheduling, or classroom management. Organizational efficacy is not merely the sum of all teachers' efficacy levels since interactive dynamics remain fluid not static. Some factors involved are how the group is structured, types of activities, how the activities are led, how teachers interact with each other, etc. (Bandura, 1997).

An effective means of enhancing organizational efficacy is by borrowing from other school organizations which is a key form of organizational learning. This sense of reaching out to other schools and other educators is almost as effective as firsthand learning (Dutton & Freedman, 1985). The research on organizational learning is not as advanced as that of self-efficacy and more research is recommended. The promising news, though, is that strong links have been established between the effect of organizational efficacy and student achievement, stronger than the link between socioeconomic status and student achievement (Bandura, 1993; Goddard, 2001; Goddard at al., 2000).

More research is required towards understanding organizational climates, particularly schooling. How teachers fit into existing organizations successfully or poorly will rely more on a greater understanding of how sound their relationship-building and socialization skills allow them to create professional learning communities. The new leaders of schools must stay current with the research and understand the dynamics of organizational efficacy. It is not enough to have many good teachers on a campus. Bridges must be formed to connect all these teachers to reach high organizational goals and keep teachers in schools. Teachers who love to teach will most likely not leave the profession but they will leave schools to share their skills in other schools if educational leaders become complacent. Educational leaders can never become complacent if any serious change is to take place within the system. We must reach out to others and sometimes reach within ourselves to understand change, not merely embrace it.

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