SPOTLIGHT ON EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS IN THE SCHOOLS –
YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW (SEPPS):
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE TIED TO DEMOGRAPHICS, STAYERS, MOVERS, AND LEAVERS

Demographics Characteristics and Career Paths for Elementary Teachers:
A Review of Literature

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Introduction

There is optimism about the future. Scholars from a variety of disciplines are conducting more research than ever on teacher education... We must continue to openly discuss and debate the role of teacher education in a democratic society such as the United States (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005, pp. 756-757).

This manuscript examines the scholarly literature to shed insight into the demographics characteristics and career paths taken by elementary teachers.

In 2005, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner edited the seminal book, Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education, which examined characteristics of our nation’s teachers, where they teach, and the influence of demographic variables. Gaining an understanding of how these and other factors relate to the progression of teachers’ career paths is critical, as Cochran-Smith and Zeichner report an average teacher turnover rate of 30 percent, with 6 percent never returning to the profession.

With the dean and associate dean professing interest in determining the influence of school of education alumni in the schools and on student learning, the Neag School of Education (herein, Neag School) at the University of Connecticut introduced an initiative -- A Spotlight on Education Professionals in the Public Schools - Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow (SEPPS). This initiative includes a review of literature (including information from professional organizations, NCES, AACTE, state departments, journals, etc.) of the demographic characteristics and career paths that are representative of educators from each field. This review would provide information such as background characteristics (including gender, race/ethnicity, age, type of employment), factors prevalent among stayers, movers, and leavers, and projections of future trends in the
field. While Cochran-Smith and Zeichner’s (2005) piece is now considered seminal, in many ways the information in this manuscript and accompanying documents updates the information from that 2005 book, and further elucidates field-specific teacher data (e.g., elementary, bilingual, world language, and music education). It also includes information about educators who are not teachers – including school counselors, school psychologists, and principals. Also, throughout this manuscript, we borrow from the writing of Billingsley (1993) in the area of special education to apply to the terms used across educators in all fields. As recommended by Billingsley (1993) and now illustrated in figure 1, “stayers” (retainees) is the label given to those who remain in the same position in the same school between school years; “movers” (transfers) refers to those teachers who stayed in a position but transferred to another school (in the same or a different school district), or who transferred to another type of teaching position; and “leavers” includes those who left the profession, for reasons such as retirement, finding another job in a different field, returning to school, or taking a job other than teaching at the school (e.g., school administration).

![Educators’ Career Path Diagram]

**Figure 1:** Educators’ career path as stayers, movers, and leavers.
Elementary Teachers

In the United States there are traditionally two levels of education – elementary and secondary. Elementary education usually encompasses grades kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade. Secondary grades generally includes sixth through twelfth grade. While secondary education classes are divided into subject areas (such as geometry, earth science, and Spanish) taught by separate teachers, elementary education teachers are required to teach most of these subjects within the walls of their classroom. In the state of Connecticut, an average of 47 percent of elementary school class time is spent on teaching English language arts, 19.8 percent on mathematics, 8.5 percent on science, 8.2 percent on social students, 6.3 percent on the arts, and 10.3 percent on other subjects such as foreign language or physical education (CSDE, 2012).

The U.S. Department of Labor (2013) further explains the role of elementary school teachers is to “... act as facilitators or coaches to help students learn and apply important concepts. Many teachers use a hands-on approach...to help students understand abstract concepts, solve problems, and develop critical thinking skills.” Elementary teachers also work with students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs) and elementary students are required to take state and nationally-mandated standardized tests every few years. The results are then made public, and decisions with high stakes for students as well as teachers can be made based on the results of these tests (United States Department of Labor [DOL], “Work Environment”).
The Demographics

As of 2012, the United States teachers are comprised of 3.4 million public school teachers and 0.4 million private school teachers (Goldring, R., Gray, L., & Bitterman, A., 2013). Of these teachers, 76 percent of public school teachers were female and the average age was 43. However, among elementary teachers, there is a significantly higher percentage of female teachers – 91 percent versus 9 percent male (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). Among the public school teachers, 82 percent were White, 7 percent Black, 8 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent Asian. The elementary pupil/teacher ratio has steadily declined from the 1970s – as of 2009, the public school pupil/teacher ratio was 15.4 (compared to 22.3 in 1970 and 17.9 in 1985). This ratio decline most likely resulted by the fact that the number of public school teachers have increased by a larger percentage over time than the number of students in recent years (NCES, 2011). Regarding salary, the average for full-time public school teachers was $53,100. 48 percent of teachers at the end of the 2012 school year had a master’s degree or higher.

The national demographics slightly differ from the state of Connecticut teacher demographics. As of the 2006-2007 school year, 92.2 percent of teachers in Connecticut were white, 3.7 percent were black, 3.3 percent were Hispanic, and 0.7 percent were Asian. However, the gender spread was almost the same – 74.4 percent female and 25.6 percent male (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDE], 2007,). A significantly higher percentage of Connecticut teachers (78.9 percent) have a master’s degree or higher compared to the national percentage (48 percent). The pupil/teacher ratio is slightly higher than the national average; there is an average of 19.6 elementary students per full-time teacher. Finally, the average salary for Connecticut teachers is much higher than the national average at $65,599.
Dispositions

It is often believed that in order to be an elementary school teacher, one must love children (Brown, Morehead & Smith, 2008). However, this trait alone is not enough to be an effective teacher. When investigating the perspectives of pre-service elementary teachers prior to beginning education coursework (Brown et al., 2008), six themes emerged on what makes a good elementary teacher. Nearly all of the students cited personal attributes (i.e., caring, compassionate) as the most important quality of a good teacher. Following those, being student centered, knowledgeable, and professional, and demonstrating good classroom management skills, and good teaching skills were also viewed as key characteristics (Brown et al., 2008). However, after their education coursework, student perspectives slightly changed, with the knowledge category increasing around threefold. This increase in the belief that knowledge is a key component to being an effective teacher may have stemmed from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which stated that each teacher must be highly qualified (Brown et al., 2008). On the other hand, personal attributes were still overwhelmingly chosen as the most important characteristics (about 46 percent versus 18 percent for knowledge), suggesting that teacher candidates are still focusing on personality traits more than mastering knowledge of the subject material (Brown et al., 2008).

Trends in Attrition

Teaching tends to have a higher turnover rate (17 percent) when compared to other occupations such as lawyers, architects, engineers, and nurses (Dagli, 2012; Ingersoll, 2012). In general, many teachers choose to leave the profession early on in their careers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hong, 2012; Ingersoll, 2012; Kersaint et al., 2005; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Morrison, 2012) which is of concern since in 2008, 25 percent of all teachers in the United States
had five or less years of experience (Ingersoll, 2012). In fact, only 61 percent of teachers remain in the field after 5 years (Kersaint et al., 2005). This number seems to be growing – in the United States, the overall attrition rate has grown by 50 percent in the past 15 years (Dagli, 2012).

Teachers may leave the teaching profession for reasons including retirement, stressful environments, poor working conditions, involuntary leave due to poor performance, loss of temporary certification, lay-offs, and many others (Kersaint et al., 2005; Liu & Ramsey, 2006). Teachers who left for family reasons in 2005 had an average of 9 years of teaching when they left, and ninety-nine percent were female (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005).

In Connecticut, elementary education teachers are rarely named as one of the shortage areas (CSDE, 2012). While more specific types of teachers within the K-6 system may be needed (bilingual, special educators, remedial reading, speech pathologists, etc.), the general education elementary teachers seem to be in surplus (Department of Labor, 2012). In fact, of the 649 vacancies within the 2011-2012 school year in Connecticut, only 7 (1.1%) positions were left unfilled due to lack of qualified applicants.

**Stress as an Influence of Leaving**

Overall, however, a large percentage of elementary teachers do choose to leave the profession. In one research study completed in a Florida community, 45.1 percent of elementary teachers chose to leave over two school years (Kersaint et al., 2005). This percentage was almost double that of middle (23.33%) and secondary (24.89%) teachers. On a more national level, 7 percent of teachers left the teaching profession between the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 school years. A common reason for leaving the profession is stress (Christopher, 2004; Fisher, 2011). Many new elementary teachers find the classroom management, excessive paperwork, and contact with parents to be very stressful. Some studies find that elementary teachers tend to be
more stressed than secondary teachers (e.g., Fisher, 2011) due to the nature of student ages – the younger students may still be developing social and behavioral skills (Fisher, 2011). Other studies found that elementary school teachers were negatively impacted by the lack of recognition from school faculty and, perhaps more importantly, parents (e.g., Adrianzen, 2012; Cockburn, 2000; Perrachione, Rosser & Petersen, 2008). For such a high-stress occupation, it may be frustrating to put so much effort and time into a job that often reaps little extrinsic reward.

Possible solutions have been suggested to help reduce this stress. Many teacher preparation programs across the country include mentorships which enable teacher candidates to ask questions and gain experience in a non-threatening way (Christopher, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Ingersoll, 2012; Morrison, 2012). Christopher (2004) found that the recommendation of a formal mentoring program between veteran and new teachers was prevalent in many interviews with new teachers. Mentorships are intended to provide more support for new teachers and help them better manage and cope with the stress. About the mentoring program, one interviewee stated that it was “nice having that one person you know you can go to and they can offer advice” (p. 74). However, throughout a mentorship it is critical that the mentor encourage the teacher candidate to reflect and grow and not instill his or her own views upon the candidate too much (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). It is also suggested that mentors participate in adequate training in order to be effective leaders and teachers for the candidates (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

**Lack of Administrational Support**

Many teachers across grade levels also cite the need for stronger support from administration as an essential aspect of improving job satisfaction (Christopher, 2004; Cochran-
Smith et al., 2012; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2005; Luekens et al., 2004). In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that of 347,000 leavers at the end of the 2008-2009 school year, 12.3 percent left partly due to feeling “dissatisfied with the lack of support…received from the administration” (NCES, 2009). Administrators and other school leaders can improve their relationships with new and veteran teachers by visiting classrooms more frequently and providing meaningful advice, reducing isolation within the school, making themselves more available to staff, and promoting and maintaining a positive school climate (Morrison, 2012).

To reiterate the importance of a strong administrator presence, some states have recently implemented new administrator evaluation guidelines. For example, Connecticut administrators will be evaluated based on the following four categories: leadership practice (40%), stakeholder feedback (10%), student learning (45%), and teacher effectiveness (5%) (CSDE, 2013). The four levels of performance that each administrator can reach range from below standard to exemplary. Evaluation systems like this provide administrators with requirements for providing support to teachers and staff and hold them accountable for student and teacher progress in the classroom. This is essential as one study found that “for every standard deviation increase in perceived support from the school’s administrative staff,” the chance of a teacher leaving from that school was reduced by 16.9 percent (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009, p. 448).

**Low Salary as Reason for Leaving**

Finally, many teachers leave the profession because of the low compensation (Allen, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Cockburn, 2000; Kersaint et al., 2005; Liu & Ramsey, 2006; Perrachione et al., 2008), though most teachers acknowledge that they did not choose the profession in order to make a lot of money, as illustrated by these comments: “If you’re in it for
the money you’re in the wrong job” and “If it was a second income it would be wonderful” (Cockburn, 2000, p. 228). Of the 40 percent of elementary teachers who stated that they certainly or probably would leave the teaching profession (Perrachione et al., 2008), the number one reason was “low salary”, indicating that salary does indeed play a major role in teacher attrition.

Although teachers may not be in it for the money (Cockburn, 2000), it should be noted that teacher salaries tend to be 20 percent lower than other jobs that require the same amount of education and training (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Teacher salaries are lower than the average compensation for nurses, accountants, dental hygienists, and computer programs (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Research supports that increased compensation would increase teacher retention; on the other hand, there is little evidence that shows that offering a higher salary would recruit more teachers (Allen, 2005).

The Lack of Self-Efficacy in Leavers

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance” (as cited by Hong, 2012, p. 420). Hong (2012) found a connection between self-efficacy in secondary teacher leavers – the seven leavers he interviewed indicated a lack of self-efficacy in controlling difficult classrooms, understanding and teaching the content, and other challenging situations, as highlighted by the following: “I wasn’t confident at the discipline area. How do you handle the students? There was no textbook written on how to handle a particular student” (p. 427). Self-efficacy, or lack thereof, affects almost all aspects of classroom teaching, such as preparing lesson plans, presenting the lessons, dealing with students and parents, and more. Even though Hong’s study interviewed secondary teachers, many of the same obstacles may arise in the elementary classroom. Low self-efficacy can lead to a focus on personal flaws, avoidance of
challenge, and less commitment to tasks and goals (Bandura, 1986). As Hong (2012) explains, “Teachers who put less effort into their work do not seek to improve their knowledge and expertise, and those who cannot persevere in the face of obstacles may not remain in the profession” (p. 428). Professional development workshops and a more collaborative and supportive school environment were suggested as ways to improve low self-efficacy among teachers.

**Movers**

NCES categorizes movers as those teachers who “were still teaching in the current school year but had moved to a different school after the base year” (NCES, 2009). In general, there are more movers than leavers (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). NCES found that 7.6 percent of public school teachers were classified as movers. This percentage is higher than that of private school teachers in the same year (4.9%). Also, movers tend to be younger and less experienced than continuing teachers; in general, movers tend to have an average of 10 years of teaching experience when they move versus 16 years of experience for teachers continuing at the same school (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005). The high percentage of young movers is of concern because it costs more money to professionally develop and prepare less-experienced teachers each time they move from one school to another (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2011; Allen, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Kersaint et al., 2005; Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005).

Of the nearly 280,000 public and private school teacher movers after the 2008-2009 school year, 32.7 percent listed reasons related to the convenience of the school’s location, such as moving due to “a change in residence” or “wanting to work in a school more convenient to my home.” The second most common response was “Because I was dissatisfied with the lack of support I received from the administration at last year’s school” (17.4%). As previously
discussed, the role of the administrator can prove vital to the retention of new and veteran teachers. However, other factors such as teacher salaries have also played a part in why teachers move from one school to another (NCES, 2009).

Allen (2005) explains that research points largely at differing teacher compensations as a reason why teachers may transfer between school districts, but that other factors such as gender and job satisfaction may also contribute to the decision to move. Teacher compensation is a continually controversial topic in the United States (Allen, 2005). Many schools may attempt to recruit teachers through added benefits such as loan-forgiveness, housing allowances, tuition for further education, and others (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2011; Allen, 2005). Some schools are even going as far as financially rewarding teachers who “demonstrate success in the classroom” (Allen, p. 90, 2005). Regardless of the type of compensation or benefits, it is clear that teacher salary may influence why some teachers choose to move to a different school (Allen, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Less than desirable work conditions may also contribute to why teachers move between schools (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Liu & Ramsey, 2006). Darling-Hammond (2003) found that poor working conditions, usually in urban settings, promoted transferring between schools. One Californian teacher stated, “The 1st grade classroom in which I found myself…had some two dozen ancient and tattered books, an incomplete curriculum, and a collection of outdated content standards” (p. 7). In addition to under-resourced working environments, many teachers in urban settings encounter large class sizes and experience less of a voice in school decisions. These conditions may improve for teachers who move to work in a wealthier community (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2003).
Stayers

It is important that elementary teachers stay in the profession as research shows that teachers significantly improve and are more effective after the first few years of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Kersaint et al., 2005; Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011). Fortunately there are many reasons why elementary teachers choose to stay in the profession. Teachers who work in wealthier districts tend to stay longer in their current school than teachers in poorer areas (Adrianzen, 2012). When stating reasons for high levels of satisfaction in these high-income districts, elementary teachers listed better interpersonal relationships (with colleagues, parents, students) and better physical working conditions (Adrianzen, 2012). Similarly, another study (Perrachione et al., 2008) found that the top three reasons for elementary teacher job satisfaction were 1) good students, 2) positive school environment, and 3) small class size.

At the same time, an elementary school stayer might enjoy working with children (e.g., Allen, 2005; Cockburn, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Perrachione et al., 2008). An investigation of a small group of elementary teachers (Cockburn, 2000) found that many responses based on the question “Why do you enjoy your job?” resulted in answers regarding the children. One interview stated, “What I really enjoy is the relationship with the children…they never cease to amaze me” (p. 227). The elementary teachers especially enjoyed watching the student progress throughout the school year(s), not only in an academic sense but also in social and behavioral domains (Cockburn, 2000). Echoing Adrianzen (2012), this group of teachers also mentioned that they enjoyed working with colleagues. Amicable relationships between colleagues (Argyle, 1987) seems to be an important theme in teacher job satisfaction: “Social support, from co-workers and supervisors, is a major source of both job satisfaction and positive
mental health...People in stressful jobs are in particular need of support from cohesive working groups or socially skilled supervisors” (as cited by Cockburn, 2000, p. 233).

In concert with this notion, one third of pre-service teachers who were interviewed regarding feelings of extreme stress during their field experiences stated that talking with others served as their main tension reliever (Rieg, Paquette & Chen, 2007). Four out of five new teachers interviewed in this study stated that communicating feelings with colleagues or administrators was very effective in reducing stress. Cochran-Smith et al. (2012) suggested that schools provide new teachers with more time to collaborate with colleagues. They also found that teachers who flourish during their first year and who take on leadership responsibilities within the school tend to stay within that school (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012).

The Role of Self-Efficacy in Stayers

High self-efficacy tends to play a strong role for the teachers who stay in their current jobs (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Hong, 2012; Rieg et al., 2007). Hong (2012) notes that new teachers often face the same types of struggles, so it comes down to how they deal with the stressors of the new teaching job. He found that the teachers who successfully overcome the many obstacles and challenges tended to have more confidence in their abilities to maintain cohesive classroom and behavior management. In a sense, these teachers demonstrated greater resiliency on the job (Hong, 2012). Brouwers and Tomic (2000) agree that low self-efficacy can create a low level of resiliency and may influence a teacher’s decision to leave: “When teachers have little confidence in their ability to maintain classroom order, they will likely give up easily in the face of continuous disruptive student behavior” (p. 249).

However, there are ways to increase self-efficacy of new teachers. Rieg et al. (2007) suggests that strong mentorship and support from the administration could help to strengthen
self-efficacy within the first few years of teaching. Achieving higher self-efficacy is essential for developing *stayers* because it may buffer them against stress as well as encourage them to become more motivated and feel more satisfied in the job (Betoret, 2006, as cited by Fisher, 2011, p. 10). In fact, high self-efficacy in beginning teachers is so influential to remaining in the field that Tishchannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) suggest that schools redesign first-year experiences for new teachers in attempt to establish better supports.

**Summary of Yesterday and Today Elementary Teacher Characteristics and Tomorrow’s Potential Issues to Address**

Research indicates that elementary teachers who stay in the field derive much enjoyment from having a significant role in the lives of children and helping them to grow. Furthermore, the teachers who are most satisfied with their jobs have strong, positive social support networks in their schools. However, there is rapid turnover of elementary school teachers due to factors of the job such as high levels of stress, lack of administrator support, low compensation, or lack of self-efficacy in the classroom (Allen, 2005; Christopher, 2004; Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Fisher, 2011; Kersaint et al., 2005; Luekens et al., 2004). Unfortunately, trends show that those who do leave the profession do so within the first few years of their teaching experiences, before they even become seasoned, truly effective teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Hong, 2012).

Despite these obstacles, research shows that new teachers can develop higher self-efficacy and as a result, desire to remain in the classroom longer. Having good practices in place, such as personal mentorship between new teachers and veteran teachers, more practical experiences within the student teaching training, and strong support from administration are all valuable means of developing both the skills and resiliency of novice teachers (Brouwers &
Tomic, 2000; Christopher, 2004; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Hong, 2012; Ingersoll, 2012; Morrison, 2012; Rieg et al., 2007). After all, it does take a few years to develop into a truly effective, high-quality teacher, so schools should note that establishing some of these practices is of benefit to both the faculty and students (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Kersaint et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2011).
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