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

English/Language Arts Teachers and Reading Consultants in Secondary Schools:

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 Secondary English/Language Arts Teachers and Reading Consultants.

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](image)

**Figure 1:** Educators’ career path as stayers, movers, and leavers.
**English/Language Arts Teachers and Reading Consultants**

English Language Arts curricula, as described in the Common Core State Standards, should utilize an integrated approach to instruction that combines the closely connected elements of reading, writing, listening, and speaking within a meaningful context. At the secondary level, the responsibility for teaching this body of knowledge rests primarily on English language arts teachers. However, a subgroup of teachers that are typically employed in secondary school settings, called reading consultants, have advanced degrees and a more specialized role in supporting students’ progress in reading. This review will provide an overview of the characteristics, roles, and career patterns of these individuals.

**Secondary English/Language Arts Education Curriculum**

An English/language arts (ELA) curriculum (which includes reading) has been incorporated into the nation’s schools since the 1800’s, and has evolved greatly throughout the years. The early days ELA curriculum in the public schools relied almost exclusively on reading from a primer. Since then, there have been shifts from whole language to phonics-based approaches, and more recently to James Britton’s concept of language across the curriculum, which would eventually become the precursor to the common core curriculum adopted throughout the country. The role of the teacher is one that adopts a spiral curriculum, ensuring that each new skill and concept builds on previous knowledge.

**Secondary Education English/Language Arts Culture**

Today, schools today are faced with high attrition and absenteeism among teachers (Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thoreson, 2001), along with high drop-out student rates. Sewell (2008) cautions against the danger of society falling further behind in literacy based skills:

> The consequences of a burgeoning illiterate society may be felt when over 3,000 students with limited literacy skills drop out of high school every day (NCTE 2006). Furthermore, while contemporary society demands a high degree of reading ability, only 13 percent of adults are
capable of ‘performing complex literacy tasks’, forcing American businesses to look overseas for qualified workers (NCTE 2006). In the classroom, teachers are forced to overcome the devastating outcomes of illiteracy: incompetence and antipathy. Students who lack a sense of competence disengage themselves from the learning process, afraid or unwilling to overcome their inadequacies. Students who cannot connect literature to their everyday experience become antagonistic towards reading and writing and also disengage themselves because they cannot see the value of their reading. (p. 87)

As students fall further behind academically and question their abilities, behavior concerns and classroom management difficulties multiply. This sometimes causes novice teachers to question their own competence, leading to lower self-efficacy and commitment. A cyclical pattern of poor classroom management can thus ensue, with detrimental effects on students that already at-risk for academic failure and negative life outcomes associated with limited literacy.

The authors of the Alliance for Excellent Education report that just 30 percent of high school students read proficiently, and more than a quarter read significantly below grade level. Further illustrating this problem, they state:

Nationally, more than six million middle and high school students are at significant risk of dropping out of school. The reality is that a third of entering ninth-grade students will drop out of high school before attaining a diploma, and another third will graduate unprepared for college or a good job. In our cities, the situation is worse: about half of the high schools in the nation’s thirty-five largest cities have severe dropout rates—often as high as 50 percent. Students in high-poverty or high-minority schools are in desperate need of expert, high-quality teachers if their achievement and attainment levels are to improve, yet they are almost twice as likely as other students to have novice teachers.” (p.2).

There is a need to acknowledge and fix the “cost” of teacher attrition on our urban students, not only financial, but also educational, emotional and social. Barnes, Crowe and Schaefer (2007) estimate the total cost associated with replacing leavers for schools and districts across the nation is well over seven billion dollars, not to mention the loss in teacher quality and student achievement that must be factored in to the total cost.
Teacher Characteristics and Attrition Rates

Johnson, Harrison-Berg and Donaldson (2005) report the results of the teacher follow-up study of 2000-2001 that indicated of the 304,700 English language arts teachers, 86.3 percent had stayed in the profession, 8.3 percent had moved to another district or school and 7.2 percent had left the profession. Although the rise in attrition rates of teachers has been studied for several years, relatively little has been studied about the factors that influence English language arts teachers to stay, leave, or move. Furthermore, determining the demographics of reading teachers, reading specialists/consultants in public schools, Meyer, Madden and McGrath (2004) reviewed data from the 1999-2000 School and Staffing Survey (SASS). Approximately one million general education teachers cited reading as their primary focus or specialty. Of these, 29,000 identified as reading specialists and 32,000 identified as “other” reading teachers. In this study, 74 percent of reading specialists reported to be employed full-time.

Scherff, Ollis and Rosencrans (2006) studied five teachers from this field who had left by the end of their second year, citing difficulties with colleagues, increasingly stringent demands for special education to be incorporated into their curriculum, and lack of support from administration as reasons for moving or leaving. They found that teachers are overwhelmed by the amount of high stakes testing and the implication that their jobs are affected if their students perform poorly. Burns (2007) states that “teachers, as individuals responsible for increasing student achievement, are directly implicated as a primary source of school failure. And as literacy achievement is a central target for testing in current accountability mandates, literacy teachers and English teachers are particular targets for scrutiny” (p. 123).

How the “professional culture” of a secondary school and how it can be affected by student tracking and performance on high stakes testing has been discussed by Gere and
Berebitsky (2009). They contend English/language arts teachers are under greater scrutiny with high-stakes testing as it is assumed that language arts form the basis for all other content areas. Similarly, Feng and Sass (2011) studied the attrition rates of reading in secondary schools. They found the quality of colleagues was determined to be a contributing factor in teachers’ decision to remain in a school. If a high quality teacher is not surrounded by similar peers, s/he will often relocate to another school that will support that requirement. They also determined that higher quality teachers tended to move to schools with higher achieving students and smaller sections of poor and minority students, which serves to preserve and widen the achievement gaps of ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Still, Bueker (2005) studied the effects on a whole school literacy reform on teacher attrition rates for reading and language arts teachers in New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and North Carolina. While many teachers cited the development of stronger and more supportive school communities as a positive effect of this program, most cited concerns with lack of administrative support and the lack of time for collaboration as a factor in their decision to remain in the schools. Many teachers claimed to feel a sense of disempowerment by being forced to teach a prescribed curriculum and not having the option to incorporate previously used and established curriculum into the new program.

In addition to these factors identified, research exists which support the view that self-efficacy in teachers is a significant factor in attrition rates for those who teach in secondary English/language arts classrooms. Tschannen-Moran and Johnson (2011) studied the relationship of self-efficacy in teachers to their behaviors in the classroom. They determined that a teacher with low self-efficacy is more likely to blame students for their lack of achievement, provide substandard instruction or give up entirely on the students, possibly leading to the decision to
leave the profession entirely. They state, “Effective action depends, in part, on one’s perceived
self-efficacy that the knowledge and skills needed to perform the task can be mobilized
successfully under varied and unpredictable circumstances.” (p 752). The Teacher Efficacy in
Literacy Instruction Scale (TSELI) was used measure the correlation between self-efficacy and
successful teaching skills and ability. They determined that both the demographic background
and the number of years teaching were weak predictors of high self-efficacy. Elementary
teachers ranked higher in self-efficacy than secondary teachers. Additionally, the level of
socioeconomic status of the student population was not a significant factor when determining
self-efficacy in teachers.

Teachers that are “Stayers” in the Profession

As demonstrated in the staggering statistic that nearly 30 percent of teachers leave
teaching within the first five years, it is crucial to understand what qualities the teachers possess
that allow them to obtain job satisfaction and remain in the field. Positive work experiences and
the ability to collaborate with colleagues and receive positive recognition from their
administrator resulted in higher levels of job satisfaction and a higher tendency to stay in their
current position. More specifically, Hargreaves (1994) found that positive work experience
coupled with the belief that one was “meant” to be a teacher influences the decision to remain in
the field.

McCann and Johannessen (2004) surveyed 11 novice English teachers over a two year
period to determine factors that could lead to a decision to leave the profession and what
supports, if any, were in place to influence a teacher to remain in the profession. Teachers that
decide to stay in their current school often cite strong collaboration with colleagues and
administrators as a factor in their continued job satisfaction. Schools that offer time and
opportunity for collaboration tend to promote higher levels of academic achievement both within the grade and continued through subsequent grades. Also, schools that demonstrate support for shared value of teachers and students tend to increase job satisfaction. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) studied sixteen schools in four year period to determine which departments were affected by teacher collaboration. They determined that the English Language Arts departments demonstrated a greater collaborative relationship and in turn possessed greater job satisfaction.

**Teachers that are “Leavers” from the Profession**

Teachers choose to leave the profession for a myriad of reasons, and quite often the decision results from multiple compounding factors (*e.g.* poor work environment or building conditions, low salary, poor classroom management, perceived lack of respect from colleagues or support from administration, or inadequate supplies or resources). It is only recently that the availability of prediction models has allowed researchers to predict factors that impact teachers’ decisions to leave. These factors include larger class sizes as a result of increased student enrollment without additional hiring, and an increase of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, suggesting the need for better preparation of teacher’s work in today’s classrooms. Hargreaves (1994) discusses how “role overload”, those tasks not directly related to teaching that consume a large part of the available time result in a decrease in personal satisfaction with the job and becomes a significant factor in attrition.

A common theme across all disciplines is that teachers predominantly leave within the first five years of teaching. McCann and Johnson (1994) suggest that a common problem for beginning teachers is the challenge of creating a “teaching persona”, which is largely determined by behaviors and decisions surrounding how they are supposed to “act” as a teacher, how strict their standards should be, and how to handle interactions with students, administration and
parents. Many teachers struggle with defining an identity as a teacher, getting lost in little conflicts and having few classroom management skills to deal with them.

The same authors discussed the need to reconcile a novice teacher’s expectation of teaching with the reality of the classroom. Teachers may have a quixotic view of actively engaging students in a literary discussion with rapt attention, but they quickly find that the “real” classroom is far different from the textbook portrayal. Several teachers reported difficulty dealing with student apathy, mainly because they expected the students to be as engaged with the literature as they were. All 11 teachers in the study reported that the workload was unreasonable and attributed it to teaching high school English; they believed that the workload would have been more manageable if they had chosen another subject. Two of the teachers left after the first few years. In addition to citing an unreasonable and unmanageable workload, they perceived that efforts to correct classroom behaviors were futile. Furthermore, they felt their decision to teach had been a compromise due to limited career choices.

**Teachers that are “Movers” in the Profession**

The researchers at the Alliance for Excellent Education (2005) estimate more than 232,000 teachers move yearly to other school district, but remain in education. Barnes, et al. (2007) estimates that each urban school spends more than $70,000 per year on costs associated with “movers”, regardless of whether the move is within district or outside of district. Compared with urban schools, suburban schools spend an average of only $33,000. Novice teachers that possess high academic qualifications are more likely to move to districts that offer a higher financial incentive or are considered more appealing due to their location or student body. The higher ranking of a teacher’s undergraduate institution has also been found to have a positive correlation with the likelihood of moving to another district. Teachers with higher academic
qualifications are more likely to leave a school whose students are not performing well academically.

Luekens, Lyter, Fox and Chandler (2004) reported that 7.7 percent of teachers moved in 2000-2001 to other districts, but remained in education. Of the 2,994,600 total teachers surveyed, 304,700 were English/language arts teachers and 7.4 percent of that total moved to another school or district. Additionally, of the 806,300 teachers who were in urban schools, 8.1 percent moved to other schools; of the 1,511,900 teachers in suburban schools, 7.8 percent moved; and of the 676,400 teachers in rural areas, 7.2 percent moved.

**Who are the English/Language Arts Teachers and Reading Consultants of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow?**

Teacher attrition is a burgeoning concern in today’s society. Secondary language arts instruction taught is being taught by individuals who are leaving the profession and citing an unmanageable workload, student behavior and apathy, inconsistent or lacking administrative support, and an unreasonable demand to meet ever-changing standards. We started as a society of teachers in this field who focused solely on learning through rote memory, to learning to read in Greek and Latin, to instruction in the classics. We saw the advent of the whole language and phonics approaches in reading, eventually restructuring to a spiral curriculum and then to the adoption of the Common Core, which seeks to incorporate this field into all content area instruction. We now incorporate digital and multimedia into direct instruction in classroom. The future teacher might be to develop the technological savvy to keep up with the next generation of learners, but perhaps the most vital aspect of teaching English/language arts in the future might be the ability to make the “old” literary works relevant for students and to instill a sense of passion for possible future generations of students that can serve as a next generation of teachers.
The future teacher might also be a consultant to all fields as the content is embraced by other fields such as social studies and science with the newest enacted standards.
References


