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 School Principals:

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 school principals.

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). Part of 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.
School Principals

School principals are in a position to have a significant impact on school effectiveness. According to a review by Hallinger and Heck (1998), school leadership accounted for about 25 percent of the total school effect on student learning, as measured by changes in student reading scores. School principals were found to have an indirect (e.g. via setting school goals, hiring practices, supporting staff, gaining parental involvement) but substantive impact on student outcomes. This effect places school principals only behind classroom teachers in terms of their impact on student learning (Leathwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Despite the importance of school principals, research regarding their background characteristics and career paths (e.g., rates of retention, attrition, mobility and the variables related to such outcomes) is scant compared to the amount of research devoted to the career paths of teachers (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Horng, 2010). For example, while the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has administered a teacher attrition and mobility survey for almost a quarter century, similar principal surveys have only recently been administered in 2008-2009 (Battle, 2010). In the limited number of studies that have examined the career paths of principals, conceptual and methodological differences have made a synthesis of results across studies difficult (Farley-Ripple, Solano, & McDuffie, 2012). More studies are needed to gain a fuller understanding of the career paths of school principals.

Although the research on school principals is still emerging, there exist a number of findings from descriptive studies concerning their background characteristics, as well as rates of retention, mobility, and attrition within the field.
Background Characteristics

The majority of school principals begin their careers as classroom teachers. Using a sizable data set that included the information of every teacher and administrator employed in a New York State public school from 1970-2000, Papa, Lankford, and Wyckoff (2002) found that over 85 percent of school principals had held a former teaching position. Furthermore, in a study of school administrators in Texas, Fuller, Young, and Orr (2007) younger teachers were more likely to obtain the necessary certification to become principals. More specifically, the authors stated that most teachers decide to become principals within the first 5-7 years of their careers (Fuller et al., 2007).

Data on the gender breakdown of school principals has been collected as well. In a study by Rand (2004), researchers looked at data from Illinois and North Carolina from 1988-2001 and found that a disproportionate number of men were principals. In 2001, although over 70 percent of teachers were female, only about 50 percent of principals were female. This gap was greatest in elementary schools, where the proportion of female teachers was at its highest. Although the gender gap was described as “alive and well,” the proportion of women administrators has grown from 1988-2001 (Rand, 2004; p. 2). The researchers were unable to conclude whether this gap was due to differences in hiring practices, rates of women pursuing administrative positions, or both (Rand, 2004).

Who Stays, Moves, or Leaves

Much of the research on the career paths of school principals has investigated turnover rates and variables that account for principals staying or leaving. Those factors include salary, student characteristics (e.g., level of achievement), and characteristics of the school or district (e.g., percentage of students in poverty, school size). According to Beteille, Kalogrides, and
Loeb (2012), the annual turnover rate of school principals in various districts across the United States ranges from 15 percent to 30 percent (p. 905). Papa et al. (2002) noted that principals tended to be quite mobile and found that after six years, only about one-third of principals remained in the school where they began their career. Fuller et al. (2007) found that the retention rate over a three-year period was only about 50 percent, meaning that only about half of the principals stayed at the same school for three years. Some researchers have found that turnover rates are higher in schools serving more poor, minority, and low-achieving students (Fuller et al., 2007; Baker, Punswick, & Belt, 2010; Beteille, 2012). For example, Fuller et al. (2007) found that in Texas, principals working in schools with 50 percent or more economically disadvantaged students were 16 percent less likely to stay at their job compared to principals at other schools (Cohort Analyses: 3-Year Retention Rate section, Table 45). Furthermore, they found that principals in high-performing schools were 20 percent more likely to stay than principals serving lower-performing schools (Fuller et al., 2007).

Beteille et al. (2012) found that in Miami-Dade County Florida, schools with the greatest proportion of students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch (*i.e.*, schools with high rates of poverty) the annual principal turnover rate was 26 percent. The turnover rate was 17 percent at schools in the bottom quartile (*i.e.*, schools with low rates of poverty) (p.910). The annual turnover rate for principals serving in low-achieving schools was 30 percent compared to 15 percent in high-achieving schools (Beteille et al., 2012, p. 910).

Another generally consistent finding is that elementary schools have higher rates of retention for principals compared to middle and high schools (Battle, 2010; Fuller et al., 2007; Papa et al., 2002; Rand, 2004). Additionally, female principals are more likely to stay in their schools than male principals (Baker et al., 2010; Fuller et al., 2007). For example, over a three-
year period, Fuller and colleagues (2007) found that female principals were about 20 percent more likely to stay at the same school than male principals.

Given that this research data is correlational, the findings are not without caveats. While Beteille et al. (2012) found that annual turnover was higher in schools with more low-achieving students, they also concluded that a year of poor performance was not predictive of principal turnover. More studies would be needed to clarify this finding.

Another finding that warrants further investigation concerns gender. As mentioned, female principals have a higher retention rate than males, but the picture is not always straightforward. In the study by Fuller et al. (2007), researchers found that female principals were 20 percent more likely than male principals to stay at the same school over a three-year period. However, as compared to males, females were less likely to still be principals after five years but more likely to be principals after 10 years. The same researchers attributed these findings to higher rates of middle and high school principals (more often male) moving to superintendent positions. Another finding is that female principals were more likely than males to no longer be employed in Texas public schools after five and ten years (Fuller, et al., 2007).

**Accounting for the Data**

Beyond descriptive studies, researchers have employed numerous statistical models to account for the data on school principals. Studies have yielded varied findings, although some trends do appear to exist in the current literature. Researchers Baker et al. (2010) found that salary exerted the most consistent effect on principal retention. More specifically, the principal’s salary relative to salaries of other principals in the area appeared to account for whether a principal stayed or moved to another school. The authors stated that in some studies, researchers used salary alone, which they deemed inadequate to account for job change. When principals are
evaluating career options, they are more likely to compare their salary to the salary of other similarly qualified school principals in the area, as opposed to their own level of salary as an absolute. The authors noted that since the data does not allow causality to be claimed, the finding that relative salary had the most consistent effect on retention could be interpreted as principals that remain at a single school could simply earn more over time. They concluded, however, that this is probably not the case as principals that are making less than the average principal in the area are more likely to move and that such a change allows them to earn about 5 percent more on average (Baker et al., 2010). More studies are needed to see if this finding holds.

Beteille et al. (2012) question whether increases in salary incentivize principal movement between schools given the “rigidities of the salary schedule for teachers and administrators in most districts” (p. 916). Instead, the authors posit that other factors, including how easy it is to staff the school and the number of low-achieving, low-SES students, play a more prominent role (Beteille et al. 2012). This line of thought is perhaps consistent with common sense -- which many principals would prefer to work in a school with fewer challenges if the opportunity arises.

The assertion of Beteille et al. (2012) dovetails with other findings regarding the background and experience of principals hired at these more challenging schools. For example, Mitgang (2003) found that schools serving more low-achieving, low-SES students had a more difficult time recruiting experienced principals. Papa et al. (2002) also found that the worst-performing urban schools are more likely to have inexperienced principals with degrees from less selective colleges as compared to suburban and rural schools. Additionally, principals in these schools are also more likely to come from a non-teaching background (Papa et al., 2002).

The preferences of school principals and their movement from school to school were well described by Loeb et al. (2010). The researchers reported that most school principals move
voluntarily from position to position and are thus able to choose based on the availability of school openings, personal preference, and personal qualifications. However, they noted that schools with high numbers of low-SES, minority, and low-achieving student populations are more likely to be appointed a first-time principal by the district. These schools are also more likely to be appointed a principal on an interim basis by the district, possibly due to a principal leaving in the middle of the year. Although this initial placement may not be preferable, it may be perceived as a way to move into a leadership position for these first-time principals or those with little experience (Loeb et al., 2010).

With high turnover rates within more challenging schools, it is possible that these first-time principals gain the needed experience to transfer to a more advantaged school when one is available, thus “perpetuating the cycle of principal vacancies being more prevalent in these less desirable schools” (Loeb et al., 2010, p. 216). Although losing a principal is not always detrimental to a school’s performance, it is more likely to be detrimental in these challenging schools, where consistently high levels of principal and staff turnover may undermine reform efforts and make it more difficult to attract experienced staff (Beteille et al., 2012). As Loeb et al. (2010) asserted: “If consistent and experienced school leadership matters to student achievement…low-income students, students of color, and low-performing students are at a distinct disadvantage” (p. 224).

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

While we know the demographics characteristics, further research is essential to better understand the career paths of school principals. In addition, given the nascency and complexity of the research, future studies will need to address certain shortcomings in the literature if it is to
provide findings that help districts recruit and retain effective school principals. Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) identify three key shortcomings to current research and propose ways to overcome these limitations. The first is that the bulk of current research uses terms such as retention, attrition, and mobility in different ways and fails to take into account the complexity of such terms. The researchers explain that conceptually, different career behaviors occur across two dimensions: place and role (p. 221). Place refers to, “the location where an individual works in the educational system” (p. 221). This place can be broken down into different categories depending on the district but would often be divided into places such as school, district, or exit from system. The second dimension of career behaviors involving role, or the “position an individual assumes in a given system” (p. 222). This dimension can be broken down into categories such as teacher, assistant principal, principal, or superintendent.

Failing to take into account these two dimensions leads to different uses of terms and can make it difficult to compare the findings of different studies (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). Farley-Ripple and colleagues (2012) show that studies often use words such as mobility and turnover in different ways, in some instances, to measure role changes, at other times, place changes, and in others, both. These studies also report these place and/or role changes differently, either at different place-levels (e.g., retention rate by school, district, or state level) or by different time frames (e.g., annual, 3-year, 5-year retention rate). All these differences can act as a hindrance to a more cumulative knowledge base (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). Consistent definitions and distinguishing specifically between place and role changes is one way to address some of these issues.

A second shortcoming is that studies often do not take into account constraints such as opportunity and choice into statistical models of school principals’ career behaviors (Farley-
Ripple et al., 2012). As a principal can only take a new job if one is available, rates of retention, mobility, and attrition are going to depend on how many opportunities are available. Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) assert that more studies need to take into account variables such as the age of current administrators (as older administrators are more likely to retire), the number of schools in a district, and the number of school openings or closings in that district (p. 225). Likewise, studies need to take into account choice, or whether the career behavior is voluntary or not. Ways of considering choice include determining whether a principal was assigned a position, whether it was applied for, or whether the principal’s previous contract was not extended (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012).

Lastly, Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) contend that much of the current research does not consider two perspectives that can be taken -- the short-term or static view, and the long-term or dynamic view -- and the types of data that these perspectives generate. In studies that can be described as taking the static view, the career behaviors of all principals at some place-level (e.g. school, district, state) are given for some period of time (e.g. What percentage of school principals stayed at the same school in a particular district in 2008?). In studies that take a more dynamic view, cohorts of principals are examined differentially over a given period. For example, in a set containing principal data over a 10-year span, a researcher may examine the retention rate of a cohort of first-time principals, compared to a cohort of principals with more experience. The different perspectives each have their own strengths, depending on the purpose of the research. Farley-Ripple et al. (2012) state that static approach can help districts or states plan for the future, possibly by estimating how many principals are likely to leave the district after a given period of time. Dynamic data, on the other hand, could help stakeholders determine the variables important for retaining specific cohorts of principals (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012).
Research on the career paths of school principals is clearly underdeveloped as compared to similar research on teachers. However, although indirect, principals, as a major leader within schools, have the potential to shape the culture and practices of a school in meaningful ways and improve the lives of children. Some consistent findings have been found regarding descriptive information school principals, for example, their background before becoming principal, and rates of retention for different groups of principals. Data on the factors that determine whether a principal stays, moves, or exits the field is more varied. Further research that improves upon previous studies, for example, by taking into consideration some of the suggestions outlined by Farley-Ripple et al. (2012), will be needed. In doing this, the hope is that such research would better elucidate the factors that account for the retention, mobility, and attrition of school principals. Then, schools may be able to better attract and retain effective principals in the future.
References


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