

FACTORS AFFECTING YOUNG TEACHERS' DECISIONS TO LEAVE THE PROFESSION IN BULGARIA

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Abstract

The current article provides a review of research related to teacher turnover and the factors influencing teachers' decisions to leave their jobs at schools. The article presents the procedures for standardizing a modified version of a methodology used to measure the factors affecting teachers' decisions to quit their positions in schools. The results of a multifactorial analysis showed that workload is one of the most significant factors influencing teachers to make the decision to leave their jobs, considering both their years of experience at the school and the teaching stage. The correlation analysis revealed that colleague support plays a buffering role in factors such as workload and school atmosphere, but not in relation to new opportunities, which might be reasons for teachers to decide to leave their current positions.

Keywords: workload, school climate, new opportunities, teacher support, professional satisfaction

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher turnover poses a serious problem with significant consequences for the quality of education in Bulgaria. According to data from the "Education" Union, young teachers in Bulgaria account for only 15.26% of the workforce, and over 70% of them leave the educational system within the first year. As a result, the average age of Bulgarian educators is 54 years, and only 6.5% of teachers are under the age of 29 (Petrov, Y., 2023).

Research shows that teacher turnover negatively impacts student engagement and achievement, as well as school leadership (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Räsänen et al., 2020). This problem is not unique to Bulgaria; even countries like Finland, where the teaching profession has traditionally been highly valued and teachers have been dedicated to their careers, are experiencing increasing concern about teacher job satisfaction, the attractiveness of the teaching profession, and rising turnover rates (Räsänen et al., 2020).

For years, the teaching profession in Bulgaria has been unattractive, characterized by high stress, emotional strain, and inadequate working conditions, which result in low job satisfaction and feelings of underappreciation among young teachers (Mizova et al., 2016).

Efforts to attract the most capable and talented young individuals to the teaching profession are facing challenges in many educational systems worldwide. The reasons for this problem can be social, structural, and psychological factors (Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000). Below are the factors that can contribute to retaining teachers in the profession:

Support from school administration and organizational culture and climate: Support from school administration is a crucial component that contributes to teacher retention. Beginner teachers particularly need support as they are more vulnerable to leaving the school compared to experienced teachers. Young teachers feel more satisfied with teaching when they receive support from school leadership (Stockard & Lehman, 2004).

Higher satisfaction is linked to more active teacher engagement in their work and less experience of conflicts and distress. Principals and school administrators play a key role in building a cohesive organizational culture and a favorable climate in schools, which are prerequisites for retaining teachers in the profession (Staribratov & Babakova, 2017).

Programs for induction into the profession and mentoring are effective ways to retain teachers in the teaching profession. Similar programs exist in the USA and Europe, providing comprehensive,

sequential, and sustainable processes for professional development, designed to introduce, support, and retain novice teachers, while also promoting their ongoing growth (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). The goal of an induction program is to develop a more competent and confident educator.

Passing through such programs can mark the beginning of a successful career for teachers, reducing the number of early career departures, fostering collegial relationships, and enhancing professional development (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004).

Mentors play a crucial role in introducing novice teachers to the profession. Their primary function is to assist new teachers in building trusting relationships and supporting their actions. Numerous studies indicate that well-developed mentoring programs lead to improved relationships with colleagues and allow teachers to feel more effective in their instructional abilities (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Teachers' working conditions encompass various aspects in which they fulfill their mission and tasks. These conditions include not only material aspects like access to ICT equipment and classroom conditions but also psychological factors such as teacher workload, class size, student behavior and discipline, teacher autonomy, evaluation, certification, career advancement opportunities, and more.

According to research, the main reasons teachers leave the profession are heavy workload, numerous and varying government initiatives and reforms, stressful school climate (student behavior, school administration, etc.), and personal circumstances (Smithers & Robinson, 2003).

One of the most common problems teachers face is their workload. In one study, it was found that insufficient time for planning and preparation, along with teacher workload, reduces their job satisfaction in teaching (Liu & Ramsey, 2008).

In comparison to other professions, the low salary of teachers negatively impacts the prestige of the profession and the recruitment and retention of educators. For instance, a study conducted in 22 European countries revealed that higher salary was the primary factor that could improve the overall status of the teaching profession in 10 of those countries. Multiple studies show that the level of salary is one of the key factors influencing teacher turnover (Eurydice, 2012).

A decent salary and good working conditions can serve as primary incentives, providing high motivation for teachers and making their profession more attractive. In recent years, the range of skills required of teachers has significantly increased. Besides their traditional mission of teaching, they now have to perform various other tasks, such as utilizing information technologies, working collaboratively on projects, assisting in the integration of children with special educational needs into the learning process, participating in school management, and more. At the same time, the educational sector is increasingly competing with the business sector in attracting the most qualified young graduates. In such a scenario, salary and working conditions can be decisive factors in choosing a career. In this regard, the policy regarding teachers' salaries should not be overlooked (Eurydice, 2012).

Teachers should also have the opportunity to express their opinions on the modernization of curricula and educational reforms. The inability to voice their opinions and influence educational policies reflects on teachers' job satisfaction, leads to resistance to innovations, and contributes to attrition from the profession (Eurydice, 2012).

This problem requires a systemic solution and collaborative efforts from all educational institutions. Creating a stable and supportive environment for teachers is crucial to increasing their satisfaction, retaining them within the education system, and improving educational outcomes for students.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this study is to present the stages of validation of the scale for factors affecting young teachers' decisions to leave the teaching profession, and to present the results related to the factors of "gender," "years of experience," "professional orientation," and "teaching stage."

2.1 Participants

A total of 247 teachers from across the country with up to 5 years of work experience were surveyed. Among them, 35 were male, and 211 identified themselves as female. Regarding years of experience, 35 participants had up to 1 year of work experience in schools, 96 had 1 to 3 years of experience, 71 had 3 to 5 years of experience, and 27 had over 5 years of experience. Furthermore, 85 individuals chose the teaching profession after completing secondary education, 101 indicated that they pursued a teaching career after working in another field, and 22 stated that they decided on education during their university studies. In terms of teaching stage, 65 participants taught at the elementary level, 43 in the middle school level, 68 in the high school level, 15 taught at both high school and middle school levels, and 17 taught at both elementary and middle school levels.

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. The modified version of the scale "Factors Affecting Teachers' Decisions to Leave the Profession" (Smithers, A., & Robinson, P., 2003) was used. Teachers were asked to rate, on a 7-point Likert scale, the extent to which they were inclined to leave the profession based on factors such as excessive workload and stress, students' misbehavior, lack of free time, etc.

2.2.2. A demographic questionnaire was included, capturing data on gender, years of experience, teaching stage, and professional orientation. Additionally, teachers' satisfaction with their choice of the teaching profession was measured with the statement: "To what extent are you satisfied with your decision to become a teacher?" Satisfaction with the pedagogical education received at the university was assessed with the statement: "To what extent are you satisfied with the pedagogical education you received at the university?" The support from colleagues was measured with the statement: "To what extent did you receive support from your colleagues when entering the profession?" Lastly, teachers' engagement in organized training and events was measured with the statement: "To what extent do you actively participate in school-organized training and events?" Participants responded to all these statements using a 7-point Likert scale.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Factors Affecting Teachers' Decisions to Leave the Profession Scale (Smithers, A. & Robinson, P, 2003) is designed to identify factors that may influence teachers to leave school. It contains 16 items divided into 5 factors: Workload (too much work, stress, government initiatives); New challenge (new challenge, change, desire for another job); School (the way the school is run, underestimation); Salary (school salary too low, better prospects); Personal circumstances (personal circumstances, desired change). The degree of agreement with the statements is assessed on a seven-dimensional Likert-type scale.

One of the main conditions for the validation of the scale was checking its structure and reliability among young teachers in Bulgaria. We asked participants to rate the questionnaire to indicate their attitude towards each statement, i.e., the degree to which they agree with the corresponding statement. We also asked participants to provide data on their work experience, gender, satisfaction with their education, workplace, professional orientation. Most young educators completed the test in less than 5 minutes. In order to establish the internal validity of the scale for measuring the factors that cause young teachers to leave work, we used Cronbach's Alpha criterion. For the establishment of the factors of the methodology, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis, Component principal and basic criteria KaiserMeier-Ohlin and Bartlett's criterion. To determine the number of factors, we used the Varimax method to determine factor weights. In order to check the normality of the empirical distribution of the methodology for the factors influencing young people to leave work, we chose the Kolmogorov-

Smirnov criterion, which allows to estimate the probability of a normal distribution. In our case, $p = 0.59$ (degrees of freedom = 236), which confirms that the scale for measuring the factors that influence young people to leave school is normally distributed and allows to perform the next stages of validation. Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was 0.893. This reliability index is considered high enough to use the scale in the study of the factors influencing the decision of teachers to leave school.

In order to establish the structure of the scale "Factors influencing the decision of teachers to leave the profession" we made a factor analysis. We checked if the scale was suitable for factor analysis and to achieve this goal, we used the criterion (KMO = 0.870 and Bartlett's test ($X^2(105) = 1289.210$; $p = 0.000$)). To check the factor analysis of the scale for the factors influencing teachers' decision to leave the profession (15 items) we used the method of principal components, Varimax rotation. Exploratory factor analysis allowed 3 factors to be identified, with a total explanatory variance of 56.54%.

Below, on Table 1, you can see the matrix of the components in a factor analysis and reliability index for Bulgarian sample.

	Workload	School Climate	New opportunities
Excessive workload and stress	,681	-,425	-,049
Policies and high requirements of the Ministry of Education	,663	-,403	-,053
Feeling undervalued	,721	-,015	-,098
Desired new change and challenge	,317	,120	,587
Misbehavior of students	,614	-,501	-,054
Opportunity to practice another profession	,295	-,153	,598
Poor resources and school facilities	,335	,595	-,072
Problems and difficulties with parents	,651	-,174	-,305
Misunderstandings and difficulties with colleagues	,369	,558	-,402
The privilege of some colleagues at school	,334	,615	-,232
Administrative workload at school	,723	-,188	-,223
Family and personal circumstances	,314	,119	,507
Too low salary	,376	,249	,610
The organizational culture and management of the school	,421	,628	-,041
Lack of free time	,671	,000	-,021
Cronbach's alpha	$\alpha=0,854$	$\alpha=0,748$	$\alpha=0,709$

Table 1. Matrix of the components

High engagement with many students and classes: the teachers face the challenge of dealing with large numbers of students and classes, which often results in insufficient time for individual attention to each student. This can cause feelings of ineffectiveness and loss of motivation.

Extraordinary duties and responsibilities: In addition to classes, teachers are also charged with other extraordinary duties, such as preliminary preparation of materials, checking of tests and controls, conducting Olympiads, parent meetings, etc. These additional responsibilities can exhaust teachers and take time away from their personal lives.

Lack of support and training: If teachers do not receive the necessary support from school management or do not have access to appropriate training and development, they may feel left behind and undervalued in their professional skills and knowledge. Also, the lack of career development and opportunities for growth at school can create a feeling of being undervalued.

Management problems and bureaucracy: Excessive bureaucracy and management problems in schools can make the work of teachers difficult and deprive them of autonomy and freedom in the performance of their professional duties.

All these factors can create a sense of exhaustion and hopelessness among teachers, which can eventually lead them to leave the school in search of better conditions and opportunities for professional development. To reduce teacher turnover, it is essential to address these issues and take action to improve their working conditions and satisfaction.

The "School climate" scale contains statements such as "misunderstandings and difficulties with colleagues", "the privilege of some colleagues in the school", "the organizational culture and the way the school is managed".

School climate is one of the essential factors that can affect teachers' work motivation and satisfaction and ultimately lead them to consider leaving their jobs. Here are some of the reasons why school atmosphere can become a factor in teacher turnover:

Insufficient support from school management: When teachers do not receive the necessary support and encouragement from school management, it can demotivate them and lead to the feeling that their work is not sufficiently appreciated.

Insufficient support from colleagues: Interaction with colleagues is essential to the work atmosphere. When teachers do not feel supported or have trouble communicating with their colleagues, this can contribute to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction.

Unfavorable corporate culture: The corporate culture of the school plays an important role in teacher motivation. If the school promotes insufficient cooperation, lack of respect or negative attitudes, this can create tension and dissatisfaction among teachers.

All these factors can contribute to a bad working climate in a school and cause a feeling of dissatisfaction and hopelessness among teachers. To reduce the risk of teacher turnover, it is necessary to pay attention to improving the working climate and promoting positive interpersonal relations in the school community.

The New Opportunities scale contains 4 statements that are semantically related to other or new work alternatives and opportunities in front of teachers that they rate as better, e.g. "Desired new change and challenge", "Opportunity to practice another profession", "Family and personal circumstances", "Wage too low".

Some teachers may leave their school jobs in search of new opportunities that provide variety, challenge, and personal and professional development. Here are some of the reasons why teachers may choose to look for new opportunities:

Professional Development: Some teachers may feel that they have reached a plateau in their current job position and want to find a more senior or specialized position that will provide opportunities for more advanced professional growth and development.

Salary Increase: New job opportunities may offer better pay and benefits, which is attractive to teachers looking for economic stability and an improvement in their financial situation. This especially applies to mathematics and informatics teachers in Bulgaria.

Work time flexibility: Some teachers may be attracted to positions that offer more work time flexibility, allowing them to better balance their work and personal lives.

Better conditions for learning and education: If teachers have the opportunity to work in educational institutions or educational organizations that offer better resources and educational opportunities, this can be a motivating factor for them. There are not a few cases when a novice teacher leaves a school because he has the opportunity to develop at a university where there are good opportunities for development.

Avoiding stress: Some teachers may seek new opportunities to avoid the high levels of stress and burnout associated with their current school work. Many teachers during the study reported that their main stressors at school were related to school administration and working with their students' parents.

Manova showed that there were statistically significant differences on the Workload scale and the years of experience factor (Fig.1). Teachers who have less than one year of experience do not feel very stressed compared to teachers who have more years of experience ($F(1618,409)= 2.959$; $P=0.054$).



Fig. 1. Manova on the Workload scale and the years of experience

Teachers with several years of school experience a higher workload than those with less than one year of experience for several reasons:

Classroom leadership: Teachers with less experience may be less likely to become classroom leaders. In contrast, however, teachers with more years of experience are more likely to be class leaders, which is an additional responsibility requiring more effort and workload in class organizational matters.

Diversity of students: Longer tenured teachers often face a more diverse spectrum of students with different learning needs and interests. This requires adaptation of the learning activity for each student, which increases the workload.

Assessment and parent communication: Experienced teachers are often responsible for assessing a larger number of students and interacting with their parents. This process can take considerable time and effort.

Although teachers with longer tenure have more experience and knowledge to help them deal with complex situations, they may experience a greater workload due to the many duties and responsibilities they have compared to novice teachers. It is important that schools provide support and resources for all teachers, regardless of their seniority, to improve their working environment and ensure their effective functioning.

Statistically significant differences were also found on the "workload" and "teaching stage" scales (Fig.2). Teachers who teach students from more than one learning stage feel significantly more stressed than teachers who teach students from one learning stage ($F(1550,574)= 2.646$; $P=0.034$).

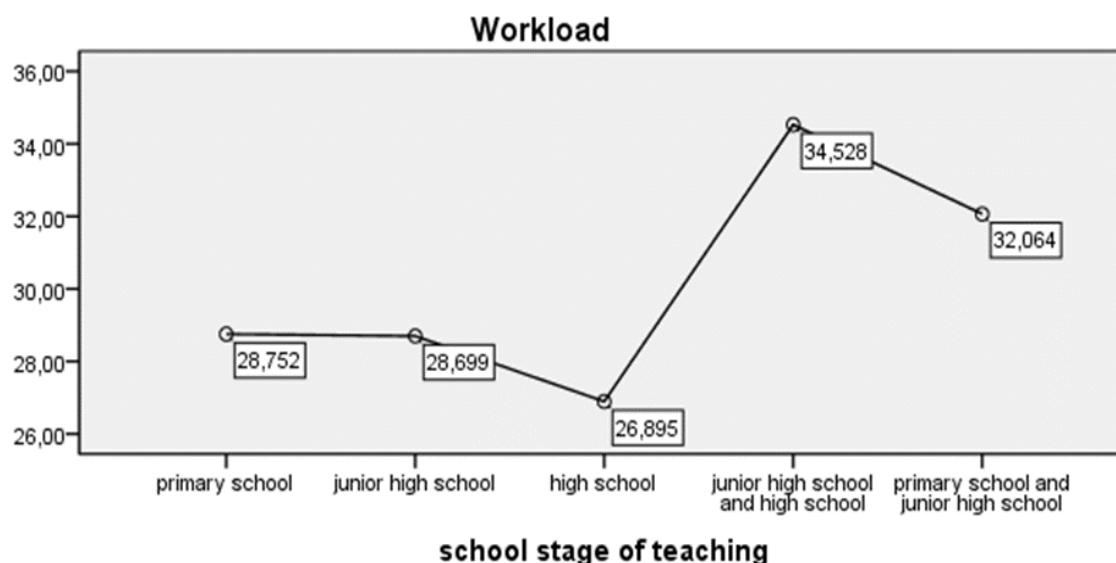


Fig. 2. Manova on the Workload scale and the school stage of teaching

Teachers who teach students in two learning stages experience a higher workload as they are involved with students with different learning needs and learning rates. Therefore, teachers must strive to meet the individual needs of each student, which can be stressful and require more resources and time. In addition, teachers who teach students in two learning stages should have a greater variety of teaching materials that are adapted to the different levels of students. This requires additional time and effort to prepare and plan lessons.

Generally, teachers who teach students in two learning stages have a larger number of students in their classes. This means they have to deal with more individual questions and needs, which can lead to a higher workload. In addition, teachers must be careful to ensure that the learning material is appropriate and understandable for all students, regardless of their learning level. This requires better organization and planning, which can increase the workload.

All these factors may contribute to the higher workload of teachers who teach students in two learning stages. However, these teachers play an extremely important role in the development of their students and their success in the educational process. It is therefore important to provide adequate resources and support to improve their work environment and facilitate workload management.

In order to establish the interrelationships between the individual scales, we performed a correlation analysis (Table 2).

	Work load	School climate	New opportunities	Satisfaction with the choice of the teaching profession	Satisfaction with education	Support from colleagues	Participation in trainings
Work load	1	0,575**	0,519**	-0,348**	-0,189**	-0,227**	0,020
School climate	0,575**	1	0,459**	-0,151*	-0,124	-0,214**	0,028
New opportunities	0,519**	0,459**	1	-0,226**	-0,022	-0,007	-0,020
Satisfaction with the choice of the teaching profession	-0,348**	-0,151*	-0,226**	1	0,348**	0,301**	0,226**

Satisfaction with education	-0,189**	-0,124	-0,022	0,348**	1	0,251**	0,121*
Support from colleagues	-0,227**	-0,214**	-0,007	0,301**	0,251**	1	0,189**
Participation in trainings	0,020	0,028	-0,020	0,226**	0,121*	0,189**	1

* - significance at the 0.05 level ** - significance at the 0.001 level

Table 2. Relationships between factors influencing teachers to leave school and satisfaction with career choice and university education, support from colleagues and participation in training

Table 2 above shows that the correlations between the three scales - workload, school climate and new opportunities are significant.

A negative moderate but statistically significant correlation was present between the scale "work load" and "satisfaction with the choice of the teaching profession". Teachers who feel overwhelmed at work regret choosing teaching as a career. Also negative, but weak and statistically significant correlation is seen between the scale "work load" and "satisfaction with university education" and also "colleague support". We can assume that teachers who feel burdened at school are not fully satisfied with their university education, i.e., education does not fully help when one has to cope with challenges at school. Teachers who have the support of their colleagues manage to cope with the workload. That is why it is important to build a climate of good relationships and cohesion between teachers in school. The support of colleagues at school is a buffer against the workload, as young teachers know that there is someone to rely on if they get into a difficult situation. The trend is similar for the "School climate" scale. Interestingly, on the scale "New opportunities" the factor "support from colleagues" has no significance. Support from school colleagues is an important factor in the satisfaction and professional development of young teachers, but it is not always sufficient to keep them in school. Young teachers often set personal career goals that may include diverse experiences in different educational settings or specializations. They may see the new opportunities as a chance for personal and professional development that cannot be provided by staying in one school alone. Additionally, new job opportunities often offer better pay and benefits, which can be attractive to young teachers, especially if they feel financially insecure in their current position. Although support from colleagues is an important factor, young teachers have different needs and goals in their professional careers. They should be encouraged to consider a variety of options and choose what best suits their personal and professional ambitions.

It is also interesting that the "participation in training" factor is not correlated with any of the scales on the reasons influencing young people to leave the field of education. That is, courses and training to improve qualifications are not particularly relevant to the factors that influence people to decide to leave school.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study has a number of limitations. The sample is not large and the results obtained do not give us grounds to draw any definite conclusions about the problem under consideration. Additional research is needed to support the obtained results even more convincingly. The correlations are low, but still significant, and this gives us reason to make assumptions. Heavy workload is one of the main factors that can make young teachers decide to leave the field of education. That is why it is important to take adequate measures to ease the teaching profession, and this, in turn, will be a prerequisite for young people to more confidently choose the teaching profession as a career. This is important for maintaining quality staff in the education system and for ensuring a stable education for future generations.

At the same time, it is important for educational institutions and school management to look after the working conditions of teachers and provide them with the necessary support and recognition to maintain their satisfaction with their career choice as teachers. The support from colleagues and the cohesion of

the teaching staff are a serious buffer for making a decision to give up the teaching profession as a career among young people.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is funded by project KP-06-M35/2 “(De)motivative factors and characteristics for the choice of the teaching profession as a career for students, students, students in pedagogical specialties and beginners as teachers”, Bulgarian Science Fund, Ministry of Education and Science.

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