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Understanding the Role of Teacher Decision-Making in Voluntary Teacher Turnover: A Review

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Abstract

Education leaders and researchers have long called attention to high rates of teacher turnover in U.S. public schools. Teacher voice in school-level decisions is one factor widely linked to improved teacher retention. This paper integrates research on the causes and consequences of teacher turnover, the role of school working conditions in teacher career decisions, and teacher decision-making control to understand the relationships between these constructs and to frame future research on teacher turnover and related human resource challenges.

Keywords: teacher turnover, teacher voice, teacher leadership

Education policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in the United States have struggled for decades to improve the attractiveness and sustainability of the teaching profession. Despite countless efforts to influence the flow of teachers into (and sometimes out of) schools, teaching remains a profession plagued by shortages and “maldistributions” (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Two major human resource problems have persisted: (1) the low interest, particularly among high-achieving college graduates and people of color, in pursuing careers in public school teaching, and (2) the high rates of voluntary teacher turnover due to job dissatisfaction. While the particular focus of this paper is on teacher turnover, both problems are indicative of a more general trend: for too many, the downsides of teaching outweigh the rewards.

Approximately 14 percent of teachers leave their positions each year, compared to only 11 percent of all employees nationwide (Ingersoll, 2001). Scholars examining the composition of the teacher workforce have noted particularly high rates of turnover among novice teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001), with an estimated 40 to 50 percent of teachers leaving the profession altogether within their first five years in the classroom (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The rate of teacher turnover is higher in schools in low-income, urban communities than it is in higher-resourced communities, in part due to the prevalence of novice teachers in low-income schools compared with those in more affluent communities (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 1999). As a result, turnover disproportionately affects students growing up in poverty, who are more likely to be children of color and/or English language learners.

Following Ingersoll (2001), I consider teacher turnover to be the combined effect of teacher *migration* (moving from one school to another) and teacher *attrition* (leaving the teaching profession altogether). Teacher turnover may be *voluntary* (i.e., a teacher chooses to resign) or *involuntary* (i.e., a teacher retires, is terminated, or is laid off). A further distinction can be made between “healthy” turnover and “unhealthy” turnover (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Some employee turnover may positively impact organizational functioning; the introduction of

“new blood” or the dismissal of ineffective staff members may be beneficial to an organization’s overall performance. When the negative effects of turnover outweigh the positive effects, however, turnover results in unhealthy organizational instability. Given that many schools invest heavily in the hiring, training, and socialization of new teachers, and given that turnover in teaching exceeds the “normal” rate of turnover in other occupations, I assume for the purposes of this paper that voluntary turnover is harmful to the overall health of the school organization.

In fact, researchers have identified numerous negative consequences of teacher turnover. Turnover results in job vacancies and shortages that are costly to fill (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Carroll (2007) estimates that the annual cost of replacing teachers lost to turnover in the U.S. is over seven billion dollars. Shortages and vacancies not only stress school leaders and hiring managers who may be compelled to accept under-qualified teachers in order to meet their schools’ staffing needs, but they also stress faculty members who must “pick up the slack” to ensure the school continues to run smoothly. In addition to being costly and stress-inducing, persistent turnover has been shown to significantly reduce staff morale and deteriorate positive school climate in affected schools (Guin, 2004). Seeing peers leave their positions not only suggests to staff members that more satisfactory work can be found elsewhere, but it also endangers the development of collegial trust and professional community as teachers begin to perceive their colleagues as uncommitted and itinerant (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Louis & Kruse, 1995). Perhaps the most compelling reason to be concerned about teacher turnover is that it negatively impacts student learning (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). Importantly, not only do students in classrooms directly affected by turnover suffer academically, but their grade level peers—whose teachers may be the ones picking up the proverbial slack—have been shown to suffer indirectly (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

One factor widely considered to influence teachers’ workplace satisfaction and career decisions is the extent to which teachers have a meaningful voice in classroom and school-level decisions that impact their work with students (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & May, 2016; Johnson, 1990; Johnson 2004; Shen, 1997; Weiss, 1999). Well-established and popular theories of worker motivation and commitment, as well as empirical studies of workplace motivation outside the field of education, highlight the importance of having control over one’s work to worker effort and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2011; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Kanter, 1979; Pink, 2011; Spector, 1986). Scholars of organizations have distinguished between two key forms of control: *worker autonomy*, essentially the characteristic of being “left alone” to carry out one’s work free of managerial interference, and *worker participation* in organizational decision-making. The latter emphasizes the productivity and motivational benefits of “having a say” in organization-level structures and policies that influence one’s work (Ashforth, 1989; Spector, 1986). In theory, then, by increasing teachers’ voice in school decision-making, teachers should become increasingly committed to their schools and to their work, with the ultimate beneficiaries being the students who have more motivated and committed teachers.

Numerous scholars have studied efforts to empower teachers to take on leadership work. Much of this scholarship views teacher leadership primarily as informal “influence” over instructional matters, emphasizing its role in improving teaching and learning (York-Barr & Duke, 2003). Fewer studies have sought to understand how enhancing teachers’ involvement in school-level decision-making influences teachers’ career decisions. The purpose of this paper is to review what is known about teacher leadership and decision-making in relation to teacher turnover and to identify key gaps in the research literature that future research may address. I

begin by providing a broad overview of the known causes of teacher turnover, then focus more acutely on negative teacher working conditions as a key contributor to teacher turnover. Next, I consider how existing research on teacher leadership and decision-making informs ongoing efforts to reduce negative working conditions and the turnover it causes. I conclude with a conceptual framework to guide future research along with several suggestions for further study, including a promising opportunity to investigate how teachers' formal school-level decision-making authority—as opposed to mere “influence”—may shape their satisfaction and career intentions.

The financial, educational, organizational, and individual costs of turnover are enormous. Furthermore, turnover disproportionately impacts schools in high poverty communities with high populations of non-White students, making this issue a serious equity concern. Better understanding how school organization, and specifically teacher leadership, are related to this concerning human resource challenge will ultimately help to illuminate promising solutions for researchers and practitioners alike.

Causes of Voluntary Teacher Turnover

There is no shortage of research on teacher turnover in U.S. schools. As such, I draw heavily on existing reviews of research on teacher turnover in framing its key causes, supplementing these reviews with empirical, peer-reviewed studies of the topic that rely primarily on statistical analysis of large datasets. Examining the role of working conditions in turnover decisions require a more interpretivist lens. As such, I sought the perspectives of sociologists of education looking to characterize schools as workplaces and understand the myriad school-level factors that shape teachers' motivation and persistence in their jobs.

What causes unhealthy, voluntary turnover? Deciding to leave a job is complicated; it is the product of individual circumstance, emotion, and perception of organizational “fit” as much as it is a rational cost-benefit calculation. Therefore, any theory of turnover should avoid characterizing its causes in too deterministic of terms. Nevertheless, findings from countless studies and reviews of the literature on turnover and attrition generally fall into several overarching causes. These include turnover resulting from (1) individual attributes, (2) insufficient compensation, (3) insufficient or ineffective early support, and (4) negative working conditions.

Individual Attributes

Scholars examining teacher turnover as a function of individual teacher characteristics have sought to understand the types of teachers that are likely to leave their teaching roles and the types that are likely to stay. Researchers in this group have generally concluded that teacher turnover is highest among young and novice teachers, teachers with a history of high academic achievement, science and math teachers, alternatively-licensed and non-licensed teachers, and teachers reporting dissatisfaction with their preparation (Borman & Dowling, 2008; DeAngelis, Wall, & Che, 2013; Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). With regard to young and novice teachers, as well as alternatively-licensed, non-licensed, and otherwise under-prepared teachers, these findings seem to suggest that both pre-service and in-service teacher education matters to teachers' ability and willingness to take on the many challenges of teaching. High turnover

among high-achievers and science and math teachers is presumed to result from these individuals having more lucrative career opportunities outside of education.

Insufficient Compensation

Efforts to retain high-achieving teachers and teachers with strong science and math backgrounds have, not surprisingly, emphasized various forms of monetary inducement. While teachers' low pay relative to members of other professions is often cited as a reason for teacher attrition, evidence concerning the influence of compensation on teacher turnover is mixed. While some studies have found a correlation between increased salary and greater teacher retention, differentiated pay appears to be an insufficient incentive in convincing high quality teachers to stay in schools serving disadvantaged students (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2011; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Economist Richard Murnane and colleagues have argued that districts must "get the incentives right" to attract and retain qualified teachers (Murnane, Singer, Willett, Kemple, & Olsen, 1991, p. 130). While pay is perhaps the most obvious type of incentive, there are certainly other forms of compensation that may factor into teachers' career decisions. Murnane et al. (1991) recognize that—in addition to appropriate pay—school working conditions, support for new teachers, and opportunities for teacher learning and experimentation are necessary components of any plan to address widespread teacher retention problems.

Insufficient or Ineffective Early Support

The especially high rates of turnover among novice teachers have prompted some researchers to study the early experiences of these teachers in an effort to identify key gaps in their professional development and socialization. Numerous studies have suggested that the availability of new teacher induction and mentoring programs significantly decreases new teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Kelley, 2004; Odell & Ferraro, 1992). One major study, however, found no effect of induction on retention in schools serving low-income student populations (Glazerman et al., 2010). Together, these findings suggest that induction and mentoring may certainly mitigate the challenges of being a first-year teacher in a well-resourced, high-functioning school but may not be enough to sustain teachers in more under-resourced settings.

While induction and mentoring may significantly help new teachers get over the hump of the first two years, are they enough to sustain teachers long term? Do novice teachers see examples of respected veteran teachers with jobs they aspire to have? Or do they see disgruntled, overworked, and undervalued teachers propelled more by inertia than by intrinsic motivation? Researchers examining the influence of school working conditions on teacher turnover argue that the organizational characteristics of schools—from the way success is defined and measured, to the role of teacher voice in school governance, to the freedom of teachers to exercise professional judgment, to the quality of working relationships—have profound implications for teacher retention and satisfaction.

Teacher Working Conditions and Turnover

One factor consistently linked to teacher dissatisfaction and turnover in schools is negative teacher working conditions (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll, 2001; Simon & Johnson, 2015). In an important study on the organizational characteristics of schools related to turnover, Richard Ingersoll (2001) demonstrated the salience of working conditions impacting teachers' turnover decisions, calling into question prevailing explanations of turnover which tended to emphasize individual teacher characteristics or market forces. Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics' Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS), Ingersoll found that teacher dissatisfaction and pursuit of other work accounted for more turnover than did retirement, layoffs, or terminations. Among the top reasons for teacher dissatisfaction were such organizational working conditions as insufficient administrative support, student discipline challenges, and lack of teacher influence over school-level decisions.

What role do school working conditions play in a teacher's decision to stay or leave? Scholarship on teacher working conditions reveals several inherent challenges of teaching, the importance of teacher voice and autonomy in career satisfaction, and the value of collegial relationships in fostering teacher loyalty and commitment.

The nature of teachers' work. The teaching of young people is, by its very nature, difficult work. Numerous scholars have long written about the challenges and ambiguities of teaching, and "what teaching does to teachers" (Waller, 1932, p. 375). Dan Lortie's (1975) *Schoolteacher* examines some of the profession's inherent challenges, highlighting several peculiarities of teachers' work that distinguish it from that of other professions. For example, unlike other professional relationships, the relationship between teacher and student is involuntary; teachers do not choose their students, nor do students typically choose their teachers (or choose to attend school to begin with). Motivating students who might be unwilling and immature constitutes a significant and difficult component of teachers' work. A further challenge confronting teachers is the ambiguity of professional success. Lortie (1975) describes the chasm between institutional metrics of teacher performance (e.g., standardized test scores) and teachers' own conceptions of impact, which are often difficult to measure (e.g., citizenship, critical thinking) or temporally distant (e.g., gainful employment, college graduation). Given that job feedback—or information about the effectiveness of one's efforts toward a goal—has been shown to be a critical component of workplace motivation (Bandura, 1977; Hackman & Oldham, 1976), the difficulty teachers have experiencing success may already predispose them to decreased work commitment.

Social conditions of work. Differences in teacher satisfaction and retention between schools reflect corresponding differences in their respective working conditions. Unlike the working conditions described in the previous section, these workplace characteristics are, fortunately, more amenable to change. One aspect of teachers' work-life that researchers have consistently found to influence satisfaction and commitment is the quality of teachers' social relations (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015). For example, in their work to understand the pattern of voluntary movement of teachers from Massachusetts schools in predominantly high poverty, non-White areas to those in predominantly middle-class, White areas, Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2012) found that differences in social working conditions accounted for this pattern of movement—not student demographic characteristics, as previous researchers had asserted (see Hanushek, Kain, &

Rivkin, 1999; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004). Johnson et al. (2012) conclude that the context of adult work life—and particularly the “social conditions” of teachers’ work with colleagues and administrators—appear to trump student demographic characteristics or compensation in determining teachers’ career intentions.

Of these “social conditions,” the relationships teachers have with their school administrators appear to influence their degree of workplace satisfaction most profoundly. Ingersoll (2001) reports that teachers from a nationally-representative sample list inadequate administrative support as the top reason for dissatisfaction with their jobs. Multiple recent studies have also underscored the importance of administrator support in teachers’ career decisions (Boyd et al., 2011; Ladd, 2011; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Results of Boyd et al.’s (2011) survey of current and former New York City teachers are particularly noteworthy; well over 40 percent of movers and leavers in their study cited dissatisfaction with support from administrators as the single most important aspect influencing teachers’ decisions to leave their jobs. The second most prevalent determinant was student behavior, with just under 20 percent of teachers reporting this factor as most important.

Large statistical analyses of actual turnover decisions consistently point to dissatisfaction with administration and student behavioral challenges as top reasons for teacher departures. Others have emphasized the crucial roles that collegial relationships, collaboration among teachers, and relational trust play in fostering long-term teacher commitment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Johnson, 2004; Lortie, 1975; Nieto, 2003; Rosenholtz, 1989; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Furthermore, beginning teachers’ expectations around social aspects of school work life may be changing. For example, Susan Moore Johnson and the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (Johnson, 2004) note that unlike their predecessors—who had become accustomed to isolationist school cultures—many of the new teachers in their study “do not expect or want to work alone” (p. 252). Instead, new generations of teachers prefer organizational contexts in which they experience frequent interaction and collaboration with colleagues.

Distribution of control in schools. Another theme among recent entrants into teaching in Johnson’s (2004) study was that new teachers looked forward to opportunities for greater participation in their schools, whether in the form of hybrid teaching-administrative roles or involvement in school governance. Relatedly, a clear pattern in the teacher retention research is that schools with the most satisfied and committed teachers are those which grant teachers a voice in school-level decision-making (Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003; Ingersoll & May, 2016; Johnson, 1990; Johnson 2004; Shen, 1997; Weiss, 1999). Leveraging both qualitative interview data and statistical analysis of SASS data, Ingersoll (2003) found that schools with greater teacher control over various facets of their work had less intra-organizational conflict and greater staff retention than schools with less teacher control. Furthermore, the effect of control on conflict and retention was especially pronounced in the “social” domain of decision-making, which included decisions about student discipline policy and other working conditions. More recently, Ingersoll and May (2016) reported that classroom autonomy and having input into school-level decisions were among the most important factors in the career decisions of teachers of color, an important finding given increasing calls to recruit and retain more teachers of color in U.S. schools. These findings highlight how teacher voice in non-instructional matters—those matters traditionally within administrators’ scope of control—may help to reduce teacher dissatisfaction, negative collegial relations, and early departure from the profession.

Findings suggesting that decision-making control is related to teacher motivation are unsurprising in light of existing research in social psychology and organizational leadership

about workplace motivation, particularly in professions involving complex and ambiguous work (Davenport, 2013; Deci & Ryan, 2011). Researchers in these fields have identified numerous positive organizational outcomes of enhanced employee control, including increased motivation, job satisfaction, job performance, work-life satisfaction, creativity, commitment, and openness to organizational change (Hornung & Rousseau, 2007; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Spector, 1986; Thompson & Prottas, 2006).

If enhanced teacher control over decisions impacting their work has the potential to improve their satisfaction and likelihood of staying in their jobs, a logical conclusion is that school leaders experiencing poor teacher retention should create more opportunities for their teachers to participate in school-level decision-making. Such initiatives have been established in a growing number of schools and districts across the U.S. in recent years. The next section describes what is and is not known about teacher leadership initiatives in relation to teachers' career decisions.

Teacher Leadership: A Pathway to Teacher Retention?

For the purpose of this review, I examined a significant body of quantitative and qualitative research on a range of related constructs involving enhanced teacher leadership and decision-making as they pertain to teacher work life and career decisions. Groups concerned with the low status of the teaching profession have long called for an increase in teacher participation in school decision-making and, to a lesser extent, teacher autonomy (Holmes Group, 1986; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 2003; The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching, 1986). While theoretical arguments for teacher empowerment prevailed for years before practical implementation took off in schools, efforts aimed at expanding teachers' roles in school leadership activities have blossomed in recent years (Wenner & Campbell, 2016). This affords an opportunity to examine how such efforts influence teachers' career decisions.

Given the conceptual "muddiness" attributed to the various terms used to describe teacher leadership and related constructs (Wenner & Campbell, 2016), some clarity on the topic is warranted. Scholars in this category refer to such concepts as *distributed leadership* (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2004; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001), *teacher leadership* (Muijs & Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2016), *teacher empowerment* (Bogler & Somech, 2004; Marks & Louis, 1997), *collaborative leadership* (Hallinger & Heck, 2010), and *participative decision making* (PDM) (Smylie, Lazarus, & Brownlee-Conyers, 1996; Somech, 2010) or *participatory reform* (Anderson, 1998). For the sake of simplicity and inclusivity, I have chosen to refer to these ideas collectively as "teacher leadership" initiatives in order to emphasize *teachers* as key actors.

In their seminal review of scholarship on teacher leadership, York-Barr and Duke (2004) define the construct as "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (p. 287-8). In general, contemporary scholars have conceptualized teacher leadership as: 1) a distributed property of organizations, "spread" over individuals and domains (Gronn, 2000; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Ogawa & Bossert, 1995) and 2) a means to professional learning about effective teaching practice through collaboration, inquiry, and reflection with colleagues (Fullan, 1994; Harris, 2003; Muijs & Harris, 2003). Researchers in this area have largely rejected the "charismatic head" theory of leadership (Muijs & Harris, 2003) and are therefore

more inclined to perceive leadership as a practice of influence (Spillane, 2006) as opposed to the possession of formal authority by virtue of a person's position.

Many studies have explored the influence of teacher leadership opportunities on teacher leaders and their colleagues, finding both positive and negative effects. In their recent review, Wenner and Campbell (2016) described four themes of teacher leader effects: "the stresses/difficulties, changing relationships with peers and administration, increased positive feelings and professional growth, and increased leadership capacity" (p. 29). On the negative end, increased teacher responsibilities without structural accommodations (e.g., time set aside for leadership duties) led to stress and burnout (Ovando, 1996; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). For example, some teachers in Baecher's (2012) study of novice teacher leaders in New York City reported feeling overwhelmed by the additional responsibilities that leadership roles entailed. Additionally, several researchers have documented how teacher leadership initiatives conflict with prevailing norms of egalitarianism and autonomy in schools, resulting in teacher leaders experiencing relational conflict with colleagues as these norms are challenged (Duke, 1994; Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 2000; Wenner & Campbell, 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Such conflict is exacerbated when teacher leader roles are not clearly defined, as the "hybrid teacher leaders" in Margolis and Huggins' (2012) study experienced. Teacher leaders with under-defined roles inevitably took on various *de facto* roles that often conflicted, resulting in decreased leadership capacity and relational strain.

On the positive end, some studies have documented improved morale and commitment (Duke, 1994; Smylie, 1994; Wenner & Campbell, 2016), as well as self-efficacy in leadership abilities as teachers gain experience exercising influence (Barth, 2001; Harris, 2004). Marks and Louis (1997) found that empowered teachers were more likely to experience a sense of professional community and were more likely to accept responsibility for student learning. Taken together, the benefits and drawbacks of teacher leadership for teachers do not provide conclusive evidence that teacher leadership alleviates the negative working conditions linked to turnover that were identified in the previous section.

Barriers to teacher leadership. In light of the negative individual and organizational effects of teacher leadership, and only marginal benefits, it is noteworthy that the vast majority of scholars writing on the topic continue to maintain faith in its potential. These scholars maintain that successful implementation of teacher leadership initiatives has been thwarted by largely surmountable, if substantial, barriers (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Duke, 1994; Harris, 2003, 2004; Lieberman, Saxl, Miles, 2000; Marks & Louis, 1997; Muijs & Harris, 2003; Ovando, 1996; Wenner & Campbell, 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Relative consensus has emerged surrounding the barriers to implementation of teacher leadership efforts provided in Table 1, below.

In light of these substantial barriers, along with the well-established difficulty of cultural and structural changes in complex, institutionalized organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) it is no wonder that the promise of teacher leadership has not come to fruition at scale.

Table 1

Common Barriers to Effective Teacher Leadership Implementation

Barriers to Implementation of Teacher Leadership Efforts
1. Lack of principal support for teacher leadership
2. Lack of role clarity for teacher leaders
3. Insufficient time to conduct additional leadership responsibilities
4. Insufficient training for teacher leaders
5. Culture of egalitarianism in which teacher leadership is distrusted
6. Culture of individualism and isolation in which collaboration is avoided
7. External accountability pressures leading to increased administrative control
8. Inauthentic opportunities to participate leading to teacher disillusionment

It is important to note that, in practice, teacher leadership is not conceived first and foremost as a strategy for improving teacher satisfaction and retention. Instead, teacher leadership is most commonly referenced as a strategy for improving *teaching and learning*. The definition of teacher leadership given above by York-Barr and Duke (2004), for example, labels the practice as a means to “improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement” (p. 288). This emphasis is logical; having first-hand knowledge of and experience working with their students, teachers are well-positioned to make decisions about what and how to teach. If teacher leadership efforts are frequently thwarted by the many organizational barriers highlighted above, however, their influence will certainly be limited. Perhaps, then, if teachers are empowered to collectively shape the social and environmental context in which they conduct their work, the obstacles facing teacher leaders will be diminished. Interestingly, there is a small but growing group of schools in the U.S. in which teachers have secured such collective autonomy. The following section will introduce what is known about working conditions and teacher turnover in these “Teacher-Powered” schools.

Teacher-Led Schools

The Teacher-Powered Schools (TPS) initiative, a joint project of two non-profit organizations, Education|Evolving and the Center for Teaching Quality, maintains a database of 108 schools nationwide that are intentionally designed to give teachers a voice in school-level decision-making. The explicit purpose of TPS is to “empower teacher teams to secure collective autonomy to design and run schools” (TPS, 2015). To be included in the TPS network, teachers at a given school must have “final authority” in at least one of fifteen decision-making domains (TPS, 2015). These domains, which TPS leaders deem “collective autonomies,” include, for example, budgetary discretion, choice of curricular materials, school staffing decisions, and school discipline policy (for a full list of the fifteen autonomies, see Appendix A). While the TPS initiative launched in 2014, many of the schools in the network were established decades ago (TPS, 2015). For the sake of clarity, I will henceforth refer to the initiative itself as TPS, but will describe the schools within the network as “teacher-led schools.”

No two schools in the TPS portfolio are entirely alike. To some extent, this is to be expected; when decision-making authority is granted to the teachers at any given school site, that school is likely to evolve out of local need and in response to the unique blend of teachers, students, and families that make up the school community. Many teacher-led schools have principals, some do not. Some have unionized teachers, others do not. Some teacher-led schools serve predominantly students of color from low-income neighborhoods, others serve mostly White students from more affluent or middle-class backgrounds. Of the 108 schools in the TPS network, 66 are within traditional school districts and 42 are charter schools.

Perhaps the most comprehensive portrayal of teacher-led schools is provided in the book, *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots* (Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012), co-authored by Education|Evolving Senior Fellow Kim Farris-Berg and Edward Dirkswager. *Trusting Teachers* is the only publication, to my knowledge, that seeks to describe and analyze the effectiveness of U.S. teacher-led schools as a group. Farris-Berg and Dirkswager’s key finding was that the eleven teacher-led schools they studied (which they deemed schools with collective “teacher autonomy”) share the nine characteristics of high-performing organizations that the authors synthesized from the organizational leadership literature (see Table 2). None of these characteristics relate specifically to staff retention, but several reflect the kinds of teacher working conditions suggested in the previous section to deter voluntary teacher turnover, including having a shared purpose, measurable goals, and a collaborative work environment among staff.

Table 2

Nine Cultural Characteristics Shared by High-Performing Organizations and Schools with Teacher Collective Autonomy (Farris-Berg & Dirkswager, 2012, p. 31-32)

High-performing organizations have managers and workers who:

1. Accept ownership: Welcome authority and responsibility for making decisions and be accountable for the outcomes.
 2. Innovate: Take risks to try creative new things, challenge old processes, and continuously adapt.
 3. Share purpose: Seek clarity and buy in to the mission, values, goals, and standards of practice.
 4. Collaborate: Establish a culture of interdependence characterized by an open flow of ideas, listening to and understanding others, and valuing differences.
 5. Lead effectively: Expect leadership from all and perceive leadership as in service to all.
 6. Function as learners: Establish a culture characterized by a sense of common challenge and discovery, rather than a culture where experts impart information.
 7. Avoid insularity: Learn from and be sensitive to the external environment.
 8. Motivate: Be engaged, motivated, and motivating.
 9. Assess performance: Set and measure progress toward goals and act upon results to improve performance.
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Farris-Berg and Dirkswager (2012) argue that the schools’ similarities to high-performing organizations serve as a “reasonable proxy” for success (p. 162). Given the peculiarities of teaching as a profession and of schools as workplaces (Johnson, 2004; Lortie, 1975), and given

the particular outcomes sought by education policymakers and the public at large, significantly more information is needed to justify this claim. Rigorous, independent research on outcomes of teacher-led schools that are more specific and relevant to contemporary challenges in U.S. K-12 education—such negative teacher working conditions and teacher turnover—would help to determine whether teacher-led schools are meaningfully different places to work or are producing meaningfully different results. Are teacher-led schools motivating and sustainable workplaces for teachers? Do teachers in teacher-led schools voluntarily leave their positions any less often than their peers in more traditionally managed schools? Such questions merit further investigation given the positive correlation between teacher participation in school-level decision-making and teacher retention highlighted previously (Ingersoll, 2003).

Synthesis

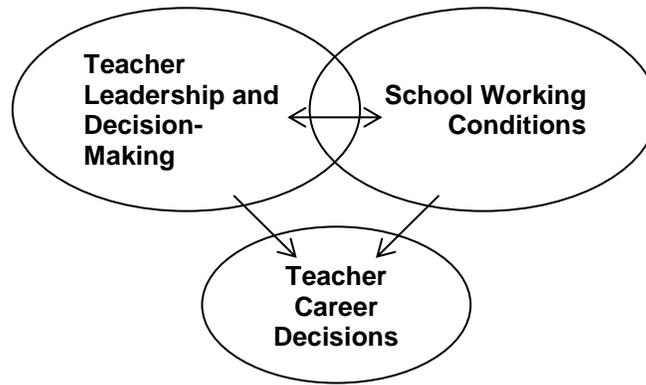
This paper sought to characterize the problem of teacher turnover and its causes, explore the relationship between teachers' voice in school-level decision-making and their career decisions, and understand how efforts to promote teacher leadership in schools have influenced teachers' experiences at work. Teacher turnover is a serious problem that is not only costly to schools and school districts, but also detrimental to teachers' morale and students' learning environments. Negative working conditions, particularly teachers' lack of administrative support and lack of control over decisions that impact their work, have been found to be major contributors to turnover. Recent efforts to empower teachers through various teacher leadership initiatives have sought to reduce teachers' feelings of powerlessness, but the effects of such efforts on teachers' work lives have been mixed at best, primarily due to the added stress of taking on leadership work.

In the existing teacher turnover literature, teachers having a voice in school-level policymaking is considered one of several working conditions linked to turnover, but such a voice is not usually viewed as a *mechanism* for improving other negative working conditions that might detract from teachers' experiences on the job (see Figure 1). If teachers are able to collectively shape their working conditions directly, new possibilities for ameliorating teacher turnover and dissatisfaction may emerge. For example, enhanced teacher leadership may lessen the salience of principal support in turnover decisions as teachers become less dependent on principals to enact change at the school or classroom level; it may minimize the distance between decision-makers and the classroom, encouraging working conditions that align better with teachers' instructional needs; and it may motivate teachers by fulfilling a psychological need for control over their work (Deci & Ryan, 2011).

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between teacher leadership and decision-making, school working conditions, and teacher career decisions as reviewed and conceptualized in this paper. In the model, teacher leadership and decision-making may simultaneously constitute a set of working conditions (hence the overlapping ovals), while also contributing to other working conditions through the decision-making process. For example, a school may be characterized by high levels of teacher involvement in decision-making (what might be considered a working condition in itself), and that involvement may shape other school working conditions (e.g., working hours, curricular autonomy, and trust between colleagues). Oppositely, school working conditions may influence how teacher leadership and decision-making is practiced. For example, a school characterized by an isolationist culture in which teachers largely work behind closed doors may not see teacher

leadership and decision-making exercised the same way as a school with a more collaborative, open-door culture. All of these relationships are likely to shape how teachers perceive their jobs and make career decisions (e.g., whether to persist in a job or resign).

Figure 1. Understanding teacher career decisions as a product of teacher leadership and decision-making, school working conditions, and their interactions.



Importantly, much of the existing research on teacher leadership has characterized it as influence over instructional matters, and for good reason. By virtue of their training and professional socialization, teachers are understandably better prepared to address issues of teaching and learning than issues related to the operational side of running a school. However, granting teachers influence over instructional matters without engaging them in non-instructional decisions—such as scheduling, establishing discipline policies, or hiring staff, for example—may limit the extent to which teachers feel their voices are being heard. The fact that insufficient time, training, and administrative support for teacher leadership presented significant barriers to implementation among the studies reviewed suggests that organizational resources may have been more effectively distributed to support teacher leaders.

Would teachers with greater control over their collective working conditions choose to allocate resources differently? The research presented in this paper is insufficient to make any definitive claims on the matter, but the “Teacher-Powered” schools introduced toward the end of the review represent potentially fruitful sites for investigating this question. These schools are intentionally designed to support teacher decision-making in areas including but not limited to instruction. There are a number of teacher-led schools that appear to be high-functioning, but research on how they operate and whether their working conditions are meaningfully different is lacking.

Opportunities for Future Research

A considerable gap in the research on teacher turnover identified in this paper is the absence of studies investigating how teachers who are engaged in school-level decision-making choose to shape their working conditions, and how those working conditions, in turn, influence teachers’ decisions to stay or quit. Questions to guide future research may include:

1. What are the work experiences of teachers in teacher-led schools? Does teacher retention at these schools differ significantly from retention at more traditionally-led schools?
2. How is leadership distributed in teacher-led schools, and what is the effect of such distribution on teachers’ working conditions?
3. What kinds of teachers most thrive in schools with enhanced teacher leadership?

4. What kinds of school-level decisions do teachers identify as most salient to their job satisfaction and career intentions?
5. How can principals work with teachers to improve their working conditions and promote teacher retention?

Pursuing these questions may help researchers to move beyond identifying obstacles to enacting teacher leadership and toward investigating its potential in shaping teacher professional work life.

Concluding Thoughts

In considering the wealth of existing research on teacher leadership, working conditions, and turnover, it is striking how frequently school administrators emerged as critical determinants of teachers' career decisions and attitudes. Unsupportive administration was not only the most common reason for teacher dissatisfaction and turnover among the teachers in both Ingersoll's (2001) and Boyd et al.'s (2011) analyses, but it was also one of the most frequently-cited barriers to enacting teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). While some may suggest that inadequate principal training is to blame for unsupportive administrative practices, it seems misguided to place so much control over the destiny of teachers' work lives into the hands of a single person or small administrative team. If lack of principal support became less of an obstacle for teachers by shifting decision-making authority into their hands, some of the human resource challenges facing schools may be alleviated.

At baseline, teaching is complex work. Desired learning outcomes are ambiguous and difficult to operationalize, students are ever-changing and often uncooperative, and success is hard to come by. To address their students' diverse and dynamic, teachers need to be able to respond in real time to situations they confront. Often teachers have the autonomy they need to respond at the classroom level, but sometimes more complicated problems require the coordinated response of multiple staff members or the entire school community. Giving teachers the formal authority to bring issues to a vote or to add items to the decision-making agenda honors teachers' professional expertise while fostering a shared sense of responsibility for school success. The teacher-led schools in the TPS network represent a tiny fraction of the schools in the U.S. and may be atypical, but they are worth studying because they leverage well-established theories of workplace control and motivation to truly "do school differently," despite numerous institutional and societal pressures to conform to a traditional paradigm of schooling. They are breaking down barriers to teacher leadership by trusting teachers to shape their schools in ways that may lead to more engaging and fulfilling work.

The problem that this paper has sought to address is high teacher turnover in U.S. schools, but an equally disturbing problem is the decline in interest in pursuing teaching as a career among college graduates (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). If teachers were treated more like professionals, with greater autonomy over their classrooms and greater participation in organizational decisions impacting their work, would young people be more likely to aspire to teach? As Johnson (2004) described, the workforce is changing, and young people have different expectations of what their careers will be like now than they did 30 years ago. This next generation expects their future workplaces to be collaborative environments where employees are entrusted to use their knowledge and skills to solve challenging problems in innovative ways. Perhaps expanding the formal decision-making capacity of teachers would

afford them the flexibility and opportunity to shape schools into the kinds of workplaces that aspiring teachers seek.

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Appendix A

List of Teacher-Powered Schools “Autonomies”

To be included in the Teacher-Powered Schools (TPS) network, schools must demonstrate that their teacher teams have “final authority” in one or more of the following decision-making areas, known as “autonomies” (Teacher-Powered Schools, 2015; see teacherpowered.org).

1. Selecting colleagues
2. Transferring and/or terminating colleagues
3. Evaluating colleagues
4. Setting staff pattern (including size of staff; allocation of personnel among teaching and other positions)
5. Selecting leaders
6. Determining budget
7. Determining compensation, including leaders
8. Determining learning program and learning materials (including teaching methods, curriculum, and levels of technology)
9. Setting the schedule (of classes; of school hours; length of school year)
10. Setting school-level policies (including disciplinary protocol, homework, etc.)
11. Determining tenure policy (if any)
12. Determining professional development
13. Determining whether to take, when to take, and how much to count district/EMO/authorizer assessments
14. Assessing school performance according to multiple measures (not only a mean proficiency score)
15. Determining work hours