Possible Selves Theory and Why New Teachers Leave

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- Researchers of teacher attrition focus on contextual variable to explain teachers’ decisions to leave turnover-prone schools. This essay applies possible selves theory to conceptualizations of attrition in order to rectify this human resource problem.

New Teacher Turnover
An estimated one-third of teachers leave within three years of beginning teaching, and almost one-half leave during their first 5 years of teaching (NCTAF, 2003). In 1987-88 teachers entering the field of teaching exceeded those who left the profession by 3%, whereas in 1999-2000 those leaving the profession outnumbered those entering teaching by over 20%. These statistics are clearly alarming and have been linked to poor school and district functioning, including a lack of administrative leadership and declining student achievement (Guin, 2004). These concerns are also, in part, fueling current legislative initiatives aimed at securing highly qualified teachers for all the nation’s classrooms (Ingersoll & Rossi, 1995; NCTAF 2003).

The working conditions of new teachers have repeatedly surfaced as an important contextual factor contributing to the attrition rates among new teachers (e.g., Blair, 2003; Ingersoll, 2003). Contexts that are associated with higher turnover rates include low-income urban schools, situations in which teachers receive lower pay, a lack of professional support, unresponsive school leadership, high incidents of student behavior problems, teaching students from ethnic and racial backgrounds different from the teacher’s, and lack of parents’ ability to support the academic activities of students. These conditions seem to foster turnover-prone contexts.

One limitation of current analyses of teacher attrition is that explanations are frequently limited solely to contextual descriptions. Although useful, such explanations fail to uncover causal factors that may be associated with teachers’ decisions to leave. In fact, a closer examination of attrition statistics – though alarming – reveal that a sizable percentage of teachers remain in the very schools exhibiting characteristics that are described as driving teachers away. Possible selves theory may provide a perspective that is able to differentiate between teachers who leave challenging school settings from those who chose to remain.

Theories that consider teachers’ attitudes, dispositions and beliefs are rarely included in discussions about teacher attrition. Possible selves theory, however, has been used effectively to examine individuals’ choices during transitional periods, such as career choices of adolescents (Packard and Nguyen, 2003), older adults’ adjustment to retirement (Waid & Frazier, 2003), and to describe influences that assist or inhibit future-oriented thinking and behavior (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). We feel that utilizing possible selves theory to examine the issue of teacher attrition is particularly appropriate given the themes of transition and career choice inherent in teachers’ decisions to stay or leave the teaching profession.

Possible Selves Theory
Possible selves are dynamic, future-oriented, representations of the self. These self-representations are concerned with both what one hopes to become (i.e., hoped-for possible selves) as well as what one might fear becoming in the future (i.e., feared possible selves). Markus and Nurius (1986) described possible selves as self-knowledge pertaining to “how individuals think about their potential and about their future” (p. 954). Possible selves result from individual actions and beliefs, the social environment, and the interaction between individual and the social environment (Markus & Wurf, 1989).

Formation and effect of possible selves. Just as knowledge in an information-processing model is stored in long-term memory and may remain inactive until accessed, so too are self-representations, including possible selves stored, but inactive in long-term memory. When stimuli or cues from environmental or interpersonal contexts are perceived, specific self-representations become active.
in the working self. As such, possible selves, then, are dynamic in that they are being formed in response to the contingencies of intrapersonal goals and interpersonal influences. They are also “working self-conceptions” that are formed from self-representations related to goals, efficacy and other self-beliefs made salient under specific circumstances and settings.

Once possible selves are activated, they influence the regulation of individual’s behavior by providing an incentive for present behavior. Possible selves provide incentives by encouraging an individual to engage in behavior in the present in order to achieve what one hopes to become, or to avoid what one fears becoming. Possible selves also provide a standard for evaluating present behavior. Present behavior can be compared with the standard for what one hopes to become or what one fears becoming, and then evaluated based upon the degree to which the present behavior will enable the achievement of the hoped for possible self, or the degree to which the present behavior helps one avoid the feared possible self.

Possible selves may change as a result of one’s involvement with behavioral regulation. Achievements and other behavioral outcomes associated with possible selves may become the potential self-representation stored in long-term memory ready to be activated at another time and in another setting. Markus and Nurius (1986) suggest that all self-conceptions may be changed as a result of experience, but that possible selves, such as what one hopes to become or fears becoming in the future, may be particularly susceptible to environmental influences due to a lack of social experience that can directly confirm one’s future self-representation (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For new teachers and student teachers, this suggests that early school experiences offer a relatively powerful influence on teachers’ views of themselves in the future.

**Motivation from hope and fear.** Oyserman and Markus (1990) contend that the degree to which possible selves are balanced may also provide a motivational influence on present behavior that magnifies incentive and evaluation. Balanced possible selves refer to the presence of parallel self-concepts of what one hopes to become and what one fears not becoming. The presence of a parallel hoped for and feared possible selves may have an enhanced motivational impact due to the presence of two self-representations that are concurrently active in the working self. Balanced selves may also increase the interpretive potential of self-schema that are used to organize and guide self-related information. For example, the behaviors of a new teacher may be even more motivated when he is aware of his hopes of becoming a successful classroom manager, and his fears of failing as a classroom manager. Lacking the balance of hoped-for and feared possible selves, on the other hand, may diminish the motivational impact of possible selves.

**New Teachers’ Possible Selves**

Possible selves are likely to be a salient feature of the thinking of a new teacher. New teachers may imagine themselves becoming successful in their new teaching assignments. This vision of teaching success is likely to include a variety of self-representations, including providing effective instruction, and interacting with pupils and colleagues. New teachers are also very likely to consider their likelihood of being successful classroom managers. The specific conception of what is possible for an individual to achieve provides “direction and impetus for action, change, and development … by giving specific cognitive form to end states, and to the associated plans or pathways for achieving them” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, pp. 960-961). Given the contexts found within schools with higher rates of teacher turnover, new teachers in this setting may also have to consider their chances of successfully working with children who live in poverty, working with children who are of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, or working in a building that might have little staff collegiality, or limited principal support.

Each of these areas of consideration may be described in terms of possible selves. For example, new teachers may have a hoped-for teacher self that involves providing effective instruction, or a hoped-for teacher self that is associated with classroom management. New teachers working in turnover-prone contexts may also have hoped-for possible selves related to teaching students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, or working with students who live in poverty. The extent to which teachers selves are made salient by the context, and are actually hoped for, is the extent to which such self-representations will guide current behaviors.

In addition, new teachers are also likely to have feared-teacher selves, or self-representations of themselves that they would want to avoid becoming. These negative or feared self-representations can also influence current behavior if they are activated. For example, a new teacher is likely to fear becoming burned-out, uncaring or apathetic. The extent to which these teacher selves are truly feared, and are made salient by the environment is the extent to which these self-representations will guide behavior away from this end. If new teachers fear not
becoming what they hope for (e.g., providing effective instruction, or working with children from diverse racial backgrounds), then they would be characterized as having balanced teacher possible selves. The possible selves of the teacher, both hoped-for and feared, provide incentive to act as well as provide a standard against current actions may be evaluated.

**Context and Self-Representation in Teacher Attrition**

The link between a new teacher’s work setting and the design of the preparation program is not always easy to establish (Hollins & Torres-Guzman, 2005). At a minimum, however, programs that prepare new teachers should have a solid working relationship with the administrators and teachers in the districts most often served by the university’s graduates. Districts and schools who serve students from lower SES backgrounds, and that are historically underperforming, have a variety of demands placed upon them by federal, state and local education agencies. The circumstances creating this demand may, in part, be attributed to higher rates of teacher turnover (Guin, 2004). Consideration of the possible selves theory points to reasons why collaboration should be a top priority.

Those working to improve the achievement of students in turnover-prone schools should likewise consider that teachers’ possible selves may impact teachers’ decisions to remain or leave the particular school setting. For example, possible selves theory indicates that hoped-for-selves are especially vulnerable to negative experiences early on in their development. This would be true for new teachers because they do not yet have sufficient experiences to solidify this self-view, and to confirm the degree to which one’s views are realistic. School contexts that are demanding, lacking in collaboration, and are generally non-supportive may undermine new teachers’ self-views for working successfully in high-poverty schools.

To counteract the negative effects of initial trials and difficulties, district and school-level administrators should set up structures and allocate resources in a manner that support new teachers. Administrative actions undertaken to curb teacher attrition should be effective in reducing the number of new teachers who leave their positions and the teaching profession.

**References**


