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Should I Stay or Should I Go? Physical Education Teachers’ Career Intentions

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigated Finnish physical education (PE) teachers’ intentions to leave the profession and the reasons behind them.

Method: A large sample (N=808) of PE teachers who graduated between 1980 and 2008 (women 432, men 376) answered a modified job satisfaction and teacher follow-up questionnaire that elicited career perceptions, intentions and current work duties.

Results: In this sample, 26% of the respondents were contemplating leaving their jobs as PE teachers and an additional 13% were actually in the process of transferring from PE teaching, but planned to remain in school teaching. To determine the reasons for considering leaving the PE teaching profession, principal axis factoring (PAF) with direct oblimin rotation was performed on the 35 items of the questionnaire. These factors were labeled as status of the PE teaching profession, pupils, working conditions, colleagues, expertise, workload, administration, and stress. The most influential factors were poor facilities, equipment, and isolation from the peers. Additional factors included working conditions, low status of the PE teachers, and workload. For women, workload and stress were more significant reasons for leaving the profession than for men (p=.010–.040, d=0.34-0.43). PE teachers in the age group of 40–44 years old constituted the largest group who were considering leaving the profession.

Conclusion: Thirty-nine percent of the PE teachers considered leaving the profession. Even though PE teachers face a variety of challenges in their work, the majority intend to remain in the teaching profession. Improved resourcing and collegial support could potentially reduce PE teachers’ intention to leave.

Keywords: Career intention, physical education teacher, turnover, attrition, area transfer
Recent studies have reported how teachers’ working environment have intensified. Teachers face a school world that is more challenging than any previous generation. For example, classes are more heterogeneous, including pupils with identified learning difficulties, varied cultural backgrounds, and different languages (Billingsley, 2004; Webb et al., 2004). High expectations and goals, a wide range of students’ needs and bureaucratic requirements are driving some teachers to high levels of stress and burn-out. As a result of these pressures, some teachers are leaving the profession, a phenomenon commonly known as turnover (Billingsley, 2004). In Finland, a relatively small proportion (7.2%) of teachers are reported to leave the profession (Itkonen & Jahnukainen, 2007) annually, while in the USA the numbers are much higher and teacher careers are shorter (Billingsley, 2004).

**Teacher career cycle**

The intentions of teachers to stay in or leave the profession can be viewed through the lens of the teacher career cycle model (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). A teacher’s career cycle may be a linear progression, but this is not necessarily an accurate picture of how all teachers experience the cycle. Instead, environmental influences from both the personal and organizational dimensions serve to influence teachers’ careers with the teachers moving in and out of the stages (Fessler, 1992). According to the model, the pre-service stage is comprised of professional preparation at the college or university and can also include retraining for a new role. The induction stage usually encompasses the first years of employment as a teacher during which time the individual adjusts to school life, seeking acceptance from students, colleagues, parents and others (Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Lawson 1989). However, if teachers do not gain acceptance or they perceive that a certain level of competence is expected of them, they might move straight to the end of the cycle and the career exit stage. In the competence building stage teachers continue to develop their
teaching skills and abilities through courses, workshops and collaboration with experienced staff. Those who are successful in building their competence are likely to move to the next stage, but those who are unable to build their competence are likely to exit the profession or move to the frustration or stability stages (Burke & McDonnell, 1992). At the enthusiasm and growth stage, teachers possess a high level of competence, but they are still developing their knowledge (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). At this point, PE teachers have been described as achieving veteran teacher status and their skills, knowledge, values and sensitivity are said to be valued by school administrators and other teachers (Lawson, 1989). After the growth stage, Fessler and Christensen (1992) identify a career frustration stage. During this stage PE teachers commonly feel job dissatisfaction and face limited resources, large classes, isolation, marginalization and low salary in the PE teaching profession (Lynn, 2002; Lynn & Woods, 2010). For some PE teachers these dissatisfying factors along with the repetitiveness of teaching PE, leads their job satisfaction to wane and eventually results in a decision to leave the profession (Lynn & Woods, 2010). The nature of support from administration and peers may play a crucial role in determining whether teachers stagnate at the frustration stage, remain at the stability stage, enter the future stages, or exit (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). In the career stability stage, teachers are still committed to the profession or they might still be teaching, but have lost their enthusiasm. Teachers are doing what is expected, but nothing more. In the career wind-down stage teachers prepare for retirement or change their profession. They reflect on their careers and they feel positive emotions, being excited but also relieved that it is time to move on (Lynn, 2002). This is followed by the career exit stage (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). But as previously mentioned, the teacher career cycle is not linear. The career exit may occur, for example, after the induction stage.
Teacher turnover

Teacher turnover has become a major concern in recent decades (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008). Teachers might consider changing schools (migration), or teaching in a different subject area (area transfer) or moving into school administration. Teachers who attempt these changes are commonly called movers. Unlike movers, those who leave to work outside of the teaching profession (attrition) are classified as leavers (Boe et al., 2008). The problem of turnover has also been identified in PE. Evans and Williams (1989) reported that nearly 80% of men and 40% of women considered leaving the profession, and 85% of PE teachers could name at least one colleague who had already left the profession. Nevertheless, according to LeCompte’s longitudinal study in the USA (1991), only 29% of the teachers who had considered leaving the teaching profession actually left.

Considerable literature has been published on teacher attrition and intention to leave the profession (Boe et al., 2008). Billingsley (2004) identified reasons for teachers wanting to leave or stay, proposing four domains: teacher characteristics, work environment, affective responses to work, and teacher qualifications.

Teacher characteristics

Teaching experience is commonly linked to the intention to leave the profession. According to Mäkelä, Hirvensalo, Whipp and Laakso (2013), those who choose to leave the PE teaching profession (leavers), do so earlier than those who choose to move (movers). PE teachers with less teaching experience are more likely to leave the profession and more experienced teachers tend to stay (Mäkelä et al., 2013).

Along with teaching experience, gender is one of the most studied variables of teachers’ careers. Previous research suggests that male and female teachers perceive their work differently. Female employees tend to choose the teaching profession because the working conditions are perceived to suit the traditional female roles, whereas males tend to
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view teaching as a means of social mobility. Therefore, it is hypothesized that females tend to stay in teaching whereas males tend to leave the profession (Cushman, 2005). On the other hand, in a recent study of Finnish PE teachers by Mäkelä et al. (2013), no differences related to gender among those leaving the profession.

**Working environments**

Data from several sources have identified the working environment as a reason to leave the PE teaching profession (Mäkelä et al., 2013; Woods & Lynn, 2001). PE teachers’ intentions to leave have been reported to be exacerbated by inadequate support from school administration or colleagues, professional and personal surveillance, workload, insufficient teaching facilities and equipment, and student misbehavior (Macdonald & Kirk, 1996).

Potentially, the most common reason for leaving the PE teaching profession is inadequate support from administration (Whipp, Tan, & Yeo, 2007). One outcome from the inadequate support of administration may be isolation, especially for early career PE teachers. Lack of collegiality is also reported as a reason for PE teachers leaving the profession (Macdonald, Hutchins, & Madden, 1994; Woods & Lynn 2001). According to Macdonald and Kirk (1996), lack of support may also manifest itself in controlling PE teachers through rules and regulations, thus reducing their perceived level of autonomy. The visibility of PE teachers’ work makes the profession a particularly easy target for criticism and control (Macdonald & Kirk, 1996).

The workload of contemporary PE teachers has been reported to be demanding. PE teachers often coach school sports teams or organize extracurricular activities after school (Armour & Yelling, 2004; Richards & Templin, 2012; Templin, 1989). Some PE teachers have described the workload as unbearable, and the demands on their time and energy have driven them away from the profession (Whipp et al., 2007). Early career teachers identify different workload-related concerns during the first years. In particular, they experience
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pressure, exhaustion, a lack of tools and time and inability to escape these demands (Shoval, Erlich, & Fejgin, 2010).

PE also features certain unique working conditions. For example, insufficient facilities and equipment can lead to frustration, because teachers struggle to generate learning outcomes and to meet curriculum expectations with minimal resources (Kougiousztis, Patriksson, & Stråhlman, 2011). This in turn has been identified as a reason to leave the profession (Bain, 1990).

Even though working with young people has been identified as a major source of professional satisfaction (Moreira, 1995), a connection has been reported between student discipline problems and PE teachers’ intention to leave the profession (Macdonald et al., 1994). Teaching and controlling students’ demands considerable energy and time, and these requirements leave teachers frustrated and desperate (Shoval et al., 2010). The challenges of student discipline are reported by some as the major reason for leaving the profession (Sparkes, 1991; Templin, 1989). Koustelios and Tsigilis (2005) found that PE teachers’ job satisfaction is connected to the job itself rather than the salary. In contrast, some former PE teachers have identified low salary as a significant reason to leave the profession (Mäkelä, et al., 2013).

PE teachers face marginalization and perceived lack of power in their profession. PE is seen as a marginal subject that tends not to be central to the function of schools (Sparkes, Schempp, & Templin, 1993) and PE teachers report feeling disrespected (Macdonald, 1999). In addition, a lack of teaching efficacy or ability to positively influence student learning (e.g., Henninger, 2007) and an inability to participate in decision making or a lack of opportunities for professional advancement are common for PE teachers (Whipp et al., 2007). The lack of power is closely associated with status that can be divided into formal and semantic dimensions. Legislation and curriculum are connected to the formal status, whereas semantic
status is associated with authentic school settings (Hardman, 2008). According to some PE teachers, peers and community members rate PE, like music and art, as a subject that lacks academic status. However, some PE teachers have recently suggested that associating PE with health promotion has increased respect for the subject (Kougioumtzis et al., 2011).

Affective responses to work

According to Rusbult (1983), the job motivation elements of commitment are clustered around three key themes: job satisfaction, personal investment and career alternatives. When considering changing their profession, PE teachers tend to evaluate their current job and other jobs within a benefit/cost framework (Sparkes, 1991). Commitment to school-based physical activity and to students are seen as key motivational factors to continue teaching despite the routinization and pervasiveness of PE teachers’ work (Macdonald, 1999). Many factors that influence PE teachers’ intentions to leave also affect teachers’ professional burnout. Other factors reported to contribute to burnout include behavior problems, unsuitable sporting facilities, insufficient professional support, time allocation, and problems in class organization (Fejgin, Talmor, & Erlich, 2005).

Teacher qualifications

In the PE teaching profession, opportunities to advance within the schools are generally limited to positions with greater administrational duties (Moreira, 1995). Moreover, PE teachers have commonly reported a lack of potential career mobility (Whipp et al., 2007). With career advancement and experience, some PE teachers seek more intellectual challenges or new lines of work in which they can utilize their skills (Macdonald et al., 1994; Whipp et al., 2007). PE teachers also report a need for professional development and new challenges to advance their PE teaching capabilities. Professional development can come via in-service experiences, but previous studies have reported a lack of in-service training or its ineffectiveness (Armour & Yelling, 2004; Bain, 1990). If the possibilities for professional
development via in-service training are lacking, teachers may be motivated to seek other
professions in which they can develop and use their capabilities better (Mäkelä et al., 2013).

A number of studies have suggested that early career teachers face a reality shock
during their first years of teaching. This term refers to the conflict that emerges when a
teacher moves from their initial teacher education into authentic school settings where
combined with the marginal status of PE, there is a lack of instructional time, large class
sizes, inadequate facilities and equipment, and public ignorance of PE (Armour & Yelling,

**Purpose**

In this study we examined the level of Finnish PE teachers’ intention to leave the
profession and the factors influencing this intention. Most research on PE teachers’ careers
has been carried out with qualitative methods and therefore this study aimed to fill the gap in
quantitative research literature. First, our hypothesis for this study was that the reasons
Finnish PE teachers wanted to leave the profession varied for those with differing experience
and gender. Second, we hypothesized that PE teachers in Finland face some of the same
problems as elsewhere, such as working conditions and workload. However, it may be that
there are some cultural differences in the reasons for leaving the profession. It can also be
assumed that PE teachers are considering moving inside the teaching field and hypothesized
the proportion of teachers who are considering leaving PE will be smaller than in other
countries.

**Method**

**Participants**

This research is part of the Education and Job Satisfaction Research project at a major
university in Finland. The ethical committee of the university approved this research. A total
sample of 1,408 PE graduates received an invitation by mail to participate in this study. The
recipients were PE teachers who had graduated from the University in Finland in 1980–2008. Having read the information document that accompanied the questionnaire, the teachers’ confirmed their informed consent to participate in this research by completing and returning the questionnaire. The last known address could be found for 1,394 graduates from the Population Register Centre of Finland and 24 letters were returned as undeliverable. The letter was resent to non-responders three times. In total, 1,084 respondents (response rate 78%) completed the questionnaire. The distribution of respondents across the career patterns was as follows: working as a PE teacher = 808; retired = 20; left PE teaching = 256. Among the 808 PE teacher respondents, 39 were on maternity leave or nursing leave at the time of answering the questionnaire, 5 were on leave of absence and 4 declared they were not teaching for other reasons. The sample of participants for this study (N=808) provided a representative sample for the study of Finnish PE teachers’ intention to leave the profession. The total of 808 respondents included 78 respondents who only answered a shortened version of the questionnaire. This version was sent to those who had not answered the questionnaire after two reminder letters and it included questions about their present job, job satisfaction and the intention to leave PE teaching. The shorter version of the questionnaire also included questions about background information, intention to leave and general job satisfaction. The request for reasons for intention to leave and the rating of job satisfaction factors were omitted from the shortened version to encourage participation.

**Questionnaire**

The questionnaire used in this study included a modified version of the survey on the job satisfaction of PE teachers by Nupponen et al. (2000; 2004) (Mäkelä, Hirvensalo, Palomäki, Herva, & Laakso, 2012) in combination with a modified version of the Teacher Follow-up Survey (Keigher, 2010) first implemented for US teachers. The final version was modified after consultation with a reference group of experienced Finnish Physical Education
Teacher Education (PETE) academic staff. The modifications included the addition of questions relating to the following: equipment and facilities provision, workload, working ability, status of PE teachers, schedules, and perceived levels of isolation. The final version of the questionnaire included the following variables.

Intention to leave. Respondents confirmed that they had an intention or willingness to change their career in the past year when answering the first question: “I have not considered changing my career / I have considered changing my career but remain in teaching”.

Respondents who had considered changing their profession were asked to clarify their intention from the following alternatives to PE teaching: principal / class teacher / study advisor / other subject teacher / special education teacher / other. The respondents who identified a willingness to move within the teaching profession were classified as a movers. A respondent who had not considered changing careers inside the teaching profession was asked a second question measuring the respondent’s intention to leave the teaching profession: “Have you considered changing your profession to move outside of teaching?” The response options ranged from (1) often, (2) now and again, (3) seldom, to (4) not at all. Responses 1–2 were categorized as leavers and responses 3–4 as stayers. At times, for purposes of analysis, the movers and leavers were merged and classified as changers and they were compared with the stayers. However, comparisons were consistently made between leavers, movers, and stayers.

Questions relating to reasons for leaving the profession required the respondents to indicate if specified aspects were affecting their intention to leave the profession. These included questions relating to administration, pupils, colleagues, respect, status, workload, stress factors and working conditions. The 5-point scale ranged from (1) not affected at all, to (5) affected very markedly.
Job satisfaction questions asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with their work. The 5-point scale ranged from (1) very dissatisfied to (5) very satisfied (Appendix 1).

Commitment was evaluated with the following question: “If you could go back to your college days and start over again, would you become a PE teacher or not?” The teachers who responded “unsure” were omitted from the analysis.

Background information included gender, school level, place of residence, years of teaching PE, teaching hours and overall working hours.

Data analysis

Principal axis factoring (PAF) was performed on the 35 items of the questionnaire to determine the reasons for considering leaving the profession. Correlations between variables were moderate to strong requiring direct oblimin rotation in the analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell 2013). Item loading .30 or higher were retained on each factor. An eigenvalue greater than 1.00 was used as a criterion for the initial number of factors and eight factors were initially extracted accounting for 62.0% of the total variance. Factors were labeled as follows: status of the PE teacher (item loadings .314–.737), pupils (item loadings .335–.866), working conditions (item loadings .509–.852), colleagues (item loadings .500–.842), expertise (item loadings .678–.722), workload (item loadings .388–.675), administration (item loadings .762–.925), and stress (item loadings .374–.669). Test-retest for the reliability of the reasons for leaving the teaching profession was assessed among 30 persons in duplicate questionnaires carried out two weeks apart. The 35 items yielded a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.93, and a mean interclass correlation of .95 (F=5.41, p<.001), which confirmed reliability.

The data analysis began with descriptive statistics, representing the means and standard deviations for leavers and movers and background variables. The differences in intention to leave and job satisfaction between background variables were analyzed with
independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests. The reasons for leaving the profession were first compared between potential *changers* and *stayers* with Mann-Whitney U-test (due to deviations from normal distribution) and secondly, between *leavers*, *movers* and *stayers* with ANOVA. Cohen’s *d* statistic was used to report the effect size of differences. It was considered large when .80 or higher, moderate at about .50 and small when it was .20 or less. ANOVA was also used to determine differences between the factor scores that were generated in PAF.

**Results**

Of the 808 PE teachers who graduated between 1980 and 2008, a total of 307 (39%) teachers expressed their intention to leave the profession frequently or occasionally. The majority of these (67%) considered moving outside of teaching (*leavers*), whereas 33% considered moving but remain inside the teaching profession (*movers*). Of the *movers*, the majority considered a career move to teaching another subject (34%) or to the role of principal (31%). A quarter of those wishing to leave the profession intended to become a study advisor (a person who helps students choose courses, future studies, etc.). Some of the *movers* considered becoming a class teacher (8%) or special education teacher (2%). Men mainly considered moving to the role of principal (51% of men) whereas women favored moving to another school subject area (38%), study advisor (31%), principal (16%) or class teacher (12%).

**Teacher characteristics**

PE teachers who had been working for 16 to 20 years in PE contained the largest group who considered leaving the teaching profession (46% of the group). There was no difference between men and women reporting an intention to leave the profession (*p*=.237, *d*=0.13). However, workload and stress factors impacted more women than men in their intention to leave the profession (*p*= .010–.040, *d*=0.34-0.43). *Stayers* and *leavers* had more
teaching experience than *movers* \((p = .004-0.08, d=0.30-0.33)\). *Movers* had less teaching

hours per week (23.9 hours) than *stayers* (25.3 hours) \((p=.035, d=0.28)\), but more time

allocated to other work (11.2 hours) than *stayers* (8.7 hours) \((p = .042, d=0.28)\) (Table 1).

*Leavers, movers* and *stayers* did not differ from each other concerning the level of school

\((\chi^2(6)=7.298, p=.294, d=0.21)\) or size of the town \((\chi^2(10)=9,467, p=.488, d=0.06)\) in which

they taught.

Table 1.

**Working environment**

Factor analysis identified five categories within the working environment: working

conditions, colleagues, administration, pupils and workload. For working conditions there

was a significant statistical difference \((p=.010, d=0.45)\) between *changers* and *stayers* (Table

2). The impact of workload also differed significantly between *changers* and *stayers* \((p=.033, d=0.36)\). Moreover, half of the respondents reported that diminished work ability had added
to their consideration to leave the profession. Further comparison of the factors that

potentially influence *leavers, movers* and *stayers* did not produce significant findings (Table

2).

Table 2.

Factor analysis identified two categories that were related to rewards. The first was

the status of the PE teaching profession with a significant difference noted between *changers*

and *stayers* \((p=.025, d=.035)\); that is, changers reported higher intention to leave because of

perceptions of low status. Lack of respect \((p=.011, d=0.25)\) and lack of recognition \((p=.002, d=0.31)\) differed significantly between those intending to change and those staying. Again,

for changers these reasons increased intention to leave the profession more so than for

stayers. Further investigation did not reveal any other differences between the PE teachers

intending to leave or move. The expertise of the PE teacher was the second construct related
to rewards and consisted of perceptions of teachers’ own capability and lack of opportunities for advancement. These were both significantly different for those intending to change or stay \((p<.001-.009, \text{ }d=0.25-0.35)\). Changers identified these reasons influencing more to their intentions to leave the profession (Table 2). When comparing leavers and movers there was no difference in the participants’ responses to these statements.

**Affective responses to work**

*Stayers* were more committed to their work than changers \((p<.001, d=0.69)\). *Movers* were more committed to the PE teaching profession than leavers \((p=.025, d=0.44)\). There was a significant difference between *stayers* and *changers* in job satisfaction \((p<.001, d=0.97)\).

Further examination between leavers and movers revealed that movers were more satisfied with their job than leavers \((p=.002, d=1.02)\). Factor analysis identified three items related to teacher stress. Changers reported that stress and busy schedules had significantly impacted their intention to leave when compared to stayers \((p = .007-.022, d=0.28-0.22)\). In contrast, there was no difference between changers and stayers for the statement “testing of pupils is causing stress” \((p = .595, d=0.05)\) (Table 2).

**Discussion**

This study examined teachers’ intention to leave the PE teaching profession. We found that 39% of Finnish PE teachers were considering or had considered leaving the profession. The majority had considered leaving to work outside of teaching (26%), whereas fewer had considered moving within teaching (13%). These data are substantially lower than those reported for British PE teachers, where 80% of men and 40% of women identified their intention to leave the profession (Evans & Williams, 1989). One possible reason for lower levels of intention to leave the profession in Finland is the definitive focus of the work. In comparison to North American teachers, Finnish PE teachers do not have dual roles (e.g., as PE teacher and head coaches), that has been reported to cause role conflict and enormous
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workloads (Richards & Templin, 2012). The relatively good status of teachers in Finland and high-quality pre-service training (Heikinaro-Johansson & Telama, 2005) may also explain the lower levels of intention to leave.

Teaching career cycle

A teacher’s career begins in the pre-service stage and continues with the induction stage. During this period, the teacher is socialized into the system and strives for acceptance from administration, students and peers (Fessler & Christensen, 1992). Previously, early career teachers have been reported to be the most likely to leave the profession because of difficulties encountered in the early phase of their teaching careers (Billingsley, 2004). These problems include role uncertainty, role conflict, harassment from colleagues, isolation, poor resources and difficult first assignments (Macdonald et al., 1994). If these problems are too difficult for beginning teachers, their competence building may be insufficient and they may become motivated to exit the profession (Fessler & Christensen, 1992).

Early career teachers, unlike mature age teachers, may have fewer financial obligations or they may not have settled into some specific occupation or location and are therefore potentially more comfortable than older PE teachers when considering a change of job. On the other hand, these younger teachers may already have left the PE teaching profession, and those who remain may have already established themselves in the teaching profession or some specific location. Further support for this consideration is found in a recent study on Finnish PE teachers’ attrition rates (Mäkelä et al., 2013) where 38% of the Finnish PE teachers who had left the profession, had done so within their first five years of teaching. Nevertheless, in the current study early career teachers (i.e., those with teaching experience of 1 to 5 years) were not over-represented among those who were intending to leave. This might be explained with the quality of PETE program, which produce well prepared and competent PE teachers (Heikinaro-Johansson & Telama, 2005). Competent and
well-prepared teacher training may facilitate the progress of PE teachers from the induction
stage and to the competence-building stage.

During the competence-building stage teachers strive to improve their teaching. It is
also important during this stage to have support from administration (Fessler & Christensen,
1992). In the present study we found that administration was a significant factor affecting PE
teachers’ consideration to stay in the profession or leave it. If teachers feel valued, supported
and respected, they may continue to remain in PE teaching. In the enthusiastic and growing
stage, teachers reach a high level of competence. In addition, at this stage administration
support is important for allowing teachers to have in-service possibilities and sufficient
autonomy to carry out their job. If administration fails to support teachers’ during their
enthusiastic and growing stage, teachers may enter the frustration stage (Fessler &
Christensen, 1992).

We observed clear signs of career frustration among those teachers who had been
teaching for 16 to 20 years. At this stage it is most likely that PE teachers have gained their
professional competence. Some of these PE teachers are still excited and committed to their
job. However, nearly half of the teachers in this group were looking for other career options.
At this stage it is not uncommon for teachers to feel trapped in an unfulfilling job (Fessler &
Christensen, 1992). According to Henninger (2007), some teachers at this stage of their
careers can be referred to as “lifers”. They are committed to and express sustained
enthusiasm for what they are doing and they believe they are making a difference. On the
other hand some teachers are “troopers”, these being teachers who have lost their
commitment and enthusiasm for teaching and are looking for challenges outside of the
profession. In response to entering the frustration stage, some of the teachers may exit the
profession; others may change their subject focus and go back to the induction stage. Those
who still remain in the profession may move to the career stability stage. Having entered the
career stability stage, PE teachers choose to stay in the profession, some because they just love to teach PE, and some because there are no possibilities for promotion (Lynn, 2002). However, if the possibilities appear, teachers in this stage may choose to leave the profession. These differing paths were also seen in this study; some teachers were clearly looking for new challenges, but others were committed to teach until retirement. After the career stability stage, a wind-down stage occurred, where the intention to leave the profession decreased among those aged 50 years and older. It might be that some of the teachers still have intention to leave, but along with retirement nearing, opportunities to leave the profession are decreasing. It has been found that the percentage of PE teachers who leave the profession after age of 50 is relatively low (Mäkelä et al., 2013).

Teacher characteristics

The results of this study did not reveal gender-related differences in teachers’ intention to leave the profession. However, women reported that workload and stress were significantly more influential in their intention to leave the profession than men. This could be explained by the differences in the PE offered for boys and that offered for girls. In Finland, there is a wide range of games for boys, but girls’ options are centered on dance, aerobics (rhythmic aerobic exercise), and gymnastics. Instructing dance or aerobics is potentially more physically demanding than refereeing games. This may explain why female teachers feel they are more impacted by their workload. Female teachers are also reported to seek more of a balance between work, family, and home life than male teachers (Smethem, 2007), and this may lead to feelings of being overworked or experiencing burnout.

Working environment

Perceptions of the working environment were strongly associated with the intention to leave, with working conditions identified as the most important factor. Consistent with previous studies (Kougioumtzis et al., 2011; Mäkelä et al., 2013; Shoval et al., 2010),
respondents highlighted concerns related to poor resources and lack of facilities or  
equipment.

As previously reported (Macdonald et al., 1994), the respondents identified isolation  
as a common problem for PE teachers. When compared to those intending to stay, those  
considering a change in profession more consistently identified that they felt isolated from  
the others. This isolation may present itself as a lack of collegiality, which has been  
previously reported as a reason for leaving the teaching profession (Macdonald, 1999).

The third working environment factor was pupils. In this study, those intending to  
change professions identified the students’ lack of respect for PE and the students’ lack of  
basic skills more often than stayers. The perception that students lack basic skills may be a  
consequence of the polarization of students’ fitness levels (Huotari, Nupponen, Laakso, &  
Kujala, 2010). Contrary to expectations, this study did not find significant differences  
between leavers and movers for the pupils factor.

There was no statistically significant difference in the perceptions of administration  
between those intending to change professions and stayers. However, it could be argued that  
administration had an indirect influence on teachers’ intention to leave the profession. Busy  
schedules, minimal resources and lack of recognition are all potentially related to school  
administrators. In recent times (Mäkelä et al., 2013), it has been found that administrational  
factors strongly affect the decision to leave the teaching profession in Finland. It is also  
notable that the general status of PE may be influenced by school administrators. For  
example, if public support for PE is low, a school administration may be inclined to have  
relatively high staff–student ratios in PE classes (Bain, 1990; Woods & Lynn, 2001).

Workload markedly impacted teacher’s intention to leave the profession. These  
perceptions are interesting given the fact that unlike other countries (Templin, 1989) there are  
no coaching duties for PE teachers in Finland. Perceptions of an excessive workload are
consistent with previous studies (Shoval et al., 2010; Whipp et al., 2007) and are seen to be affecting teachers’ work and quality of life. It is worth noting that half of the respondents reported that diminished capacity for work (e.g., injuries or diseases that weaken work ability) had contributed to their intention to leave the profession. Of these potential leavers, more than one-in-ten reported that diminished working ability had influenced their considerations markedly or really markedly.

Working environment includes variables that could be influenced by school policy makers and administrators. In this study working conditions and poor scheduling were related to the intention to leave. By concentrating on these variables and improving them in the working environment, schools could potentially maintain their quality teachers, an essential part of providing a high-quality PE experience for all pupils (Whipp et al., 2007).

PE teachers said that they perceived PE teaching to have a relatively low status, a perception that contributed to their intention to leave. The relatively low status of PE teaching and concerns associated with it when compared to other teachers has also been reported in Britain and Australia (Moreira, 1995; Whipp et al., 2007). Recent work (Mäkelä et al., 2013) has concluded that low status is a significant reason for the early exit of PE teachers in Finland, a problem that should receive further attention. The attitudes of non-PE teachers, administration, parents and students influence the status of PE. Some experienced PE teachers, however, have gained respect and status during their career (MacDonald, 1999). Further understanding of all stakeholders’ perceptions related to PE and PE teachers’ status and strategies to enhance these perceptions are needed if a positive attitudinal change towards PE is to be realized along with improved PE teacher retention.

**Affective responses to work**

Traditionally, the major source of teacher satisfaction has been working with young people in a context that is mutually enjoyable (Hargreaves, 1998; Palomäki & Heikinaro-
The results of this study confirm that PE teachers in Finland are relatively committed to their profession. However, despite the positive responses to their work, there are concerns. Teaching PE is a demanding job, with the respondents identifying the physical load of the job to be taxing. When compared to other occupations the physical load can be considerable, because it includes activities such as warm-up exercises, instructing aerobics and walking or running (Sandmark, Wiktorin, Hogstedt, Klenell-Hatschek, & Vingård, 1999). The emotional load can also be considerable because of misbehavior, lack of motivation among students and other conflict at work. Teachers have identified conflict to be the strongest source of negative emotions (Hargreaves, 2001). In Finland, the number of pupils who are reported to be antagonistic toward PE is about 7% (Palomäki & Heikinaro-Johansson, 2011). Similarly, in Australia less than 10% of Year 6/7 and Year 8/9/10 male and female students have declared a dislike for PE (Whipp & Taggart, 2003).

For PE teachers time allocation is problematic (Armour & Jones, 2004). PE teachers often have to move from one teaching place to another during the breaks. Consistent with these findings, busy schedules affected the decision to leave the profession. Moreover, work stress was found to be a common and a significant influence on PE teachers’ intention to leave, especially for women. Without adequate time, teachers cannot establish emotional bonds and achieve understanding with their students, and if they are not so committed to their students (Hargreaves, 1998), the learning outcomes may potentially be diminished.

**Teacher qualifications**

The decision to leave is linked to the perceived opportunities available. According to Rusbult (1983), available job alternatives increase over time for some workers, and for others, alternatives increase in response to the development of skills and reputation. In contrast, for some workers these opportunities decrease over time. Likewise in Australia (Macdonald et al., 1994), the role of the “head of department” is an attractive option for many
Physical education teachers’ career intentions

PE teachers. In some countries, the fitness industry has also been an attractive alternative for PE teachers (Macdonald et al., 1994); however, only a small proportion (<1%) of PE teachers in this study had considered a move to the fitness industry. Nevertheless, it could be assumed that the proportion of PE teachers moving to the fitness industry will increase if, in the future, the industry expands.

In this study, the majority of PE teachers who intended to leave the profession, had considered professions outside of the school world. It is noteworthy that the number of PE teachers who considered a move was lower than the number of PE teachers who had actually left the profession (23%; Mäkelä et al., 2013). According to LeCompte (1991), the actual turnover of teachers who had considered leaving the profession was only 29%. Because there are relatively limited alternative career possibilities, it could be speculated that the actual turnover of PE teachers in Finland will be lower than 39%.

Implications of this study

Further research to investigate the actual attrition and area transfer of the PE teachers and to clarify the working ability of PE teachers may help develop strategies to enhance quality of work life and teacher retention. One solution to minimize the early exit of teachers could be mentoring programs. In Finland, there is no systematic mentoring or in-service training for teachers. With a mentoring program and a formalized opportunity to facilitate lifelong learning, PE teachers could access reinforcement of their occupational identity, receive encouragement from fellow PE teachers and have the possibility to share common concerns (Whipp, Pengelley, Gordon, & Debowski, 2010). During such programs, PE teachers could explore innovative ideas and thereby minimize routinization and the repetitive nature of their work. More attention could also be focused on recruiting students to enroll in PETE programs. It is important to determine the annual attrition rate of PE teachers. This information could aid government when establishing the number of students who can enroll
in PETE programs. At this point in time, the number of graduating PETE students seems to be insufficient to fill all available PE teaching positions in Finland.

Limitations

This study included PE teachers who had graduated from a major university in Finland. There are also PE teachers who are unqualified (lacking a teaching degree) or who have qualified as class teachers. These PE teachers are not included in this study. The possibility of the potential influence of critical or political circumstances at the time of collecting the data should also be kept in mind. This may have caused potential variation in teachers’ professional intentions during the time the data was collected. The sample of this study is specific to Finland and may not be comparable to other contexts or countries.

Final thoughts

This research provides new information about PE teachers’ career intentions and the reasons behind their intentions to leave. Even though research of teachers’ attrition, area transfer and migration is widespread, this study utilizes an extensive sample of Finnish PE teachers (N= 808) to provide a clear picture of PE teachers’ career intentions in Finland. The present study also identified PE teachers’ preferred career plans (principal, study advisor, other subject teacher, class teacher). The findings provide important information about the factors that cause dissatisfaction among teachers and the key reasons that drive them away from PE. We found that better resources and more support from peers and administration could significantly influence the quality of PE teachers’ working lives.
References


Physical education teachers’ career intentions


APPENDIX 1

1. **In the past year have you considered a change from your current PE teacher job:**
   ( ) Not at all – please go to Question X
   ( ) Seldom – please answer Questions X-X
   ( ) Now and again – please answer Questions X-X
   ( ) Often – please answer Questions X-X

2. **If you have considered a change from your current job, your intention is to**
   ( ) Remain in school and change focus to
   □ Administration (principal)
   □ Class teacher
   □ Another subject teacher
   □ Study advisor
   □ Special education teacher
   □ Other, please specify_____________________

   ( ) Move outside schools to another profession, please specify one profession that you have considered

3. **If you have considered changing your focus or a change in profession, how have the following aspects influenced your consideration to change? (Please use the scale provided and circle one response only)**

   **Scale:** 1= not at all, 2= incidentally, 3= to some extent, 4= markedly, 5= very markedly

   - Administration does not respect PE: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Students do not respect PE as a school subject: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Society does not respect PE teachers: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Low status of PE teachers: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Students do not respect PE teachers: 1 2 3 4 5
   - A desire to better use my own expertise: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Repetitive nature of the work: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Poor working conditions: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Insufficient equipment: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Insufficient facilities: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Unpleasant working environment: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Too many disturbing factors in the working environment: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Isolation from the colleagues: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Poor opportunities for promotion: 1 2 3 4 5
   - Lack of feedback on my performance as a PE teacher: 1 2 3 4 5
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Physical education teachers’ career intentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Diminished work capacity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Lack of support from colleagues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>Jealousy of colleagues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Colleagues do not respect PE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>Poor relationship with colleagues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>Salary is too low</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>Workload is too high</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><strong>Work stress is too high</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><strong>Lack of time allocated to complete work/too tight schedules</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><strong>Disobedient pupils</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><strong>Testing of students causes stress</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><strong>Lack of parent co-operation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><strong>Lack of co-operation from colleagues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><strong>Administration do not support teachers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><strong>Inflexibility of administration</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><strong>Incapability of administration</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><strong>Limited trust in administration</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td><strong>Poor student learning outcomes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td><strong>Pupils lack the basic skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><strong>Poor student material</strong></td>
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</table>

**NOTE.** *Factors: status of the PE teacher =1, pupils=2, working conditions=3, colleagues=4, expertise=5, workload = 6, administration=7, and stress=8.*
Table 1. Age, years of teaching experience and teaching and other than teaching hours of changers and stayers and significance (t-test).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Intention to change</th>
<th></th>
<th>Intention to stay</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>Cohen's d</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>43.5 (6.5)</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>44.7 (7.8)</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>344 42.8 (6.22)</td>
<td>.134</td>
<td>44.8 (7.72)</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>380 44.0 (6.60)</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>44.5 (7.88)</td>
<td>.461</td>
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<td>Teach. Experience</td>
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<td>13.7 (7.0)</td>
<td>.208</td>
<td>14.4 (8.6)</td>
<td>.009</td>
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<td>Men</td>
<td>347 12.8 (6.5)</td>
<td>.050</td>
<td>14.4 (8.1)</td>
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<td>Women</td>
<td>417 14.4 (9.0)</td>
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<td>Teaching hours</td>
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<td>Women</td>
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<td>24.6 (5.11)</td>
<td>.975</td>
<td>0.003</td>
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<td>Other working hours</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>10.3 (8.4)</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>8.7 (8.5)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>295 10.3 (8.7)</td>
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<td>8.3 (9.0)</td>
<td>.076</td>
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<td>337 10.1 (8.2)</td>
<td>.336</td>
<td>9.2 (8.0)</td>
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Table 2. Comparison of the influences on teachers intending to change or move in relation to the working environment (Mann-Whitney U-test).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Changers M (SD)</th>
<th>Stayers M (SD)</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
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<td>Working conditions</td>
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<td>Pupils</td>
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<td>.007 (0.91)</td>
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<td>Workload</td>
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<td>-.154 (0.77)</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>0.36</td>
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<td>Status</td>
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<td>-.156 (0.85)</td>
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<td>Expertise</td>
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<td>0.27</td>
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