

TEACHER ATTRITION IN THE BAHAMAS: SURVEY OF TEACHERS
LEAVING THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM (1979-1981)

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of any profession is based largely on the quality of the members that it is able to attract and retain. Indeed, Greer (1966) has suggested that occupational retention itself, is a mark of a profession and an indicator of professional status.. Within the teaching profession, forever self-conscious of its occupational standing, the loss of members -- variously termed "attrition" (Chapman and Hutchenson, 1982), "drop-out" (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1969), "turnover" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1971), and "wastage" -- has been a cause for considerable concern. This has, at times, been related to a system-wide inability to meet the demands for qualified teachers and on other occasions with the increased costs stemming from the training of teachers who then choose not to practise their profession or leave after only a few years.

In addition to such quantitative concerns centering on the numbers of teachers leaving the profession each year attention has also been given to the qualitative characteristics of these teachers -- their academic qualifications (Schlechty and Vance, 1981), experience (Mark and Anderson, 1978), gender and race (Schlechty and Vance, 1981; OECD, 1971) -- and to the reasons that lead to teacher attrition. As The Bahamas strives to Bahamianize its teaching force, such issues take on considerable importance and, in this article, the findings are outlined from a study that surveyed the characteristics of Bahamian teachers resigning from employment with the Ministry of Education between the years 1979 and 1981.¹

METHODOLOGY

The population of teachers selected for study was defined as all those Bahamian teachers in primary and secondary schools who resigned from employment with the Ministry of Education during the period January 1st, 1979 to December 31st, 1981. This definition excluded non-Bahamian teachers and all teachers working in the private school system (see Table 1.) It

did, however, include a number of teachers who left the public school system merely to transfer to the private school system.

Data for this study came from two main sources; Government records and a fourteen item questionnaire. The names of all the teachers resigning during this period were obtained from the Official Government Gazette along with the last school they taught in. This information provided the basis for an analysis of the annual attrition rates, the gender characteristics of the group, and the type of schools losing most teachers. In addition, with the assistance of members of their last school, and the Bahamas Union of Teachers, an extensive effort was made to locate the whereabouts of these teachers and to send them a questionnaire that elicit further information concerning their years of teaching experience, academic qualifications, and reasons for leaving teaching.² The total number of resignations recorded in the Official Gazette for the period was 206. Local addresses were obtained for 113 teachers, and as a result of an initial questionnaire mail-out in December, 1982, and a follow-up effort in January, 1983, 54 usable questionnaire were returned, representing a 48% response rate.³

In the following pages, findings from the survey are presented for the population as a whole with regard to annual attrition rates, gender, and type of schools losing teachers, and in addition, data is presented on the qualifications and experience of those teachers responding to the questionnaire, along with their reasons for leaving.

FINDINGS

The Numbers and Genders of Teachers Resigning

Data collected from the Official Gazette indicated a relatively stable pattern of resignations annually during the three years studied, with the average of 70 resignations a year giving an annual attrition rate of

Table 1. Bahamian Teachers in Ministry of Education Schools
by Type of School and Gender, (1980-1981)

TYPE OF SCHOOL			
	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TOTAL
Male	191	256	447
Female	1052	461	1513
TOTAL	1243	717	1960

3.5 per cent for the teaching force as a whole. When attention is given to the gender of teachers who resigned, little difference was revealed between the numbers of male and female teachers leaving the profession (see Table 2).

Resignations by Type of School and Gender

Since most male teachers teach in secondary rather than primary schools in The Bahamas, in Table 4 an attempt is made to separate the two effects by considering male and female attrition rates in both primary and secondary schools. By separating the two factors, it is possible to show that attrition rates are higher for males than females regardless of type of school, and that attrition rates are higher in secondary schools than in primary schools regardless of gender. Attrition rates (indicated in brackets in Table 4) range from a high of 8.0 per cent for male, secondary school teachers, to a low of 1.9 per cent for female, primary school teachers.

Table 2. Resignations by Gender
1979 - 1981

	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Number of Teachers	94 (46%)	112 (54%)	206 (100%)

However, since female teachers greatly outnumber male teachers in The Bahamas, these figures represent a considerable over-representation of male teachers. When attrition rates are calculated separately according to gender, male attrition rates reach 7.0 per cent a year, while the female rate is a low 2.5 per cent.

Resignations by Type of School

In order to examine which schools were experiencing the greatest loss of staff, data on the type of school these teachers last taught in was classified into primary and secondary levels, and the results tabulated in Table 3.⁴ While the figures in Table 3 indicate approximately similar numbers of teachers leaving both levels of school, this is, again, somewhat misleading given the considerably larger number of primary school teachers in the system. When attrition rates are compared for secondary and primary schools, the former exhibit a considerably higher figure of 5.1 per cent a year than the latter's 2.3 per cent.

Table 3. Resignations by School Type
1979 - 1981

	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TOTAL
Number of Teachers	88 (44%)	110 (56%)	198* (100%)

*Data of eight teachers' schools was not available . 28

Table 4. Resignations by School Type and Gender
1979 - 1981

GENDER	TYPE OF SCHOOL		
	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TOTAL
Male	32 (5.8)	60 (8.0)	92 (7.0)
Female	56 (1.9)	50 (3.8)	106 (2.5)
Total	88 (2.3)	110 (5.1)	198 (3.5)

Resignations by Academic Qualifications

Official statistics were not published on the academic qualifications of those teachers leaving the profession, although obviously such characteristics are likely to have serious implications for the profession. An examination of the academic qualifications of those teachers responding to the Teacher Attrition Questionnaire designed for this study revealed a large number of highly qualified teachers leaving the profession (see Table 5.) The data in Table 5 indicates that of the teachers responding to the questionnaire 28 per cent had less than a Bachelor's Degree as their highest academic qualification, 44 per cent had a Bachelor's Degree as their highest academic qualification, while a further 28 per cent held Master's Degrees. The loss of a number of highly qualified teachers from any educational system is clearly a serious matter.

attractive career opportunities exist outside of teaching, with the highest number of teachers stating that the existence of an attractive opportunity outside of teaching was a major factor in their decision to resign. In contrast to what may be regarded as the "pull" factors were indicated from within the profession, including poor working conditions (a lack of resources, large classes, a lack of administrative support, and poor student attitudes), a lack of opportunities for career advancement, and inadequate financial remuneration.

Reasons for Leaving Teaching

In seeking to establish the reasons that lead teachers to leave the Bahamian public school system, teachers were asked to respond to a list of twelve possible reasons for resigning, and to state whether in their case each reason constituted a major or minor contributory factor, or not. The responses to this question are tabulated in Table 6. Clearly apparent from the responses of the teachers was that

Table 5. Resigning Teachers by Academic Qualifications,
(Questionnaire Responses, 1979-1981)

	HIGHEST QUALIFICATION				
	BJCs	'O'Level	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree
Number of Teachers	2 (4%)	10 (18%)	3 (6%)	24 (44%)	15 (28%)

Table 6. Reasons for Resignations (Questionnaire Responses)
1979 - 1981

REASON	IMPORTANCE			WEIGHTED ⁵ IMPORTANCE INDEX	RANK
	MAJOR	MINOR	TOTAL		
1. Poor Salary	16	22	38	54	4
2. Location	4	9	13	17	8
3. Poor Career Opportunities	23	11	34	57	3
4. Working Conditions					
-class size	14	17	31	45	5
-resources	24	11	35	59	2
-attitudes	9	13	22	31	7
-administrative support	15	12	27	42	6
5. Retirement	0	0	0	0	12
6. Unsatisfactory posting	3	2	5	8	9
7. Spouse's Career plans	1	0	1	2	11
8. Child rearing	1	1	2	3	10
9. Better job Offer	29	6	35	64	1

DISCUSSION

In an expanding school system, such as in The Bahamas, which still recruits non-Bahamian teachers in order to fully staff its schools, any loss of qualified local teachers must be regarded seriously.

Although an annual attrition rate among Bahamian teachers of 3.5 per cent is not high by international standards (Stubbs, 1983), the much higher rates indicated for male teachers, and the loss of a significant number of highly qualified members of the profession, present a serious challenge to those committed to provision of excellence within the Bahamian school system.

With male teachers making up only 23 per cent of the teaching force, an annual attrition rate of 7.0 per cent is likely to lead to an increased under-representation of men in Bahamian schools. More positively, the study has indicated the stability that exists among female teachers, especially at the primary school level where attrition rates were a very low 1.9 per cent. This characteristic The Bahamas shares with many other countries (OECD., 1971, p.102), with the teaching profession appearing to offer the best working conditions (flexibility of service obligations) for women.

The study further reveals a higher rate of resignations from secondary schools than primary schools, and suggests that many of those teachers leaving the profession are

among the most highly qualified. Support for this is found, in part, in the explanations given by teachers for resigning, where a high priority was given to being offered a more rewarding job outside of the public school system combined with related concerns over the salaries paid to teachers. The study's results suggest that for the more qualified teachers there exists the opportunity for them to market their skills outside of teaching in a wide variety of other business and professional activities. These teachers, who, perhaps, have the greatest contribution to make to the nation's educational system are also the one's most sought after by other sectors of the economy

An examination of the reasons that teachers gave for leaving the system revealed a variety of concerns that included, poor working conditions, lack of career advancement opportunities, and salaries. Such issues are not unique to The Bahamas. Few countries offer teachers salaries that are comparable with those paid to similarly qualified personnel in other occupations, and the structure of educational systems tends to limit the range of promotional opportunities available for competition. Never-the-less, teachers occupy a key position in the intellectual, emotional and physical growth of individuals, and through them the development of the nation. Such a task should not be left to the under-qualified or the expatriate.

FOOTNOTES

1. The data used in this article was collected by Salomie Stubbs, as part of the course requirements for her University of the West Indies, Bachelor of Education Degree, and is reported more fully in Stubbs (1983).
2. Teachers who were located outside of The Bahamas were not included in the mail-out of questionnaires for reasons of speed.
3. The questionnaire administered to these teachers was first pre-tested on a group of teachers who resigned from teaching after 1981. This group of teachers was not included in the study because at the time of data collection only a partial list of resignations for 1982 was available.
4. For the purposes of this table, all-age schools are classified as primary schools.
5. A Weighted Importance Index was calculated to give greater weight to those reasons labelled as "major" compared to "minor" reasons. The Index was obtained by assigning a value of 2 to a "major" response and 1 to a "minor" response.

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