

I'm not a psychologist, I'm not a school nurse,
I am a teacher

A qualitative study about how former teachers view their reasons
for leaving the occupation

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how former teachers view their reasons for leaving the teaching occupation in the context of the Swedish compulsory school. The study took a qualitative form where nine semi-structured interviews were conducted. The participants were all former teachers, including a number of first teachers. The theory of the psychological contract and the job embeddedness model were used as tools for explaining the teachers' decisions and the process that led them to leave the occupation. The findings indicate that there are several on- and off-the-job factors contributing to teachers' quitting decisions, and that embedding factors can have a buffering effect on shocks stemming from contract breaches. The study provides insights about voluntary turnover within the Swedish school sector. Further, it has important implications for policymakers as it highlights how various on- and off-the-job factors can impact on the decision to leave the teaching occupation. It also provides a simplified model explaining the roles of both expectations and embedding factors in the decision – and how these intersect.

Keywords: Teacher, voluntary turnover, turnover intention, public sector, educational staff

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Definitions

Lgr 11	Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre 2011 (Skolverket, 2011).
Lpo 94	Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre 1994 (Skolverkets författningssamling [SKOLFS], 1994).
Lgr 80	Curriculum for compulsory school 1980 (Skolöverstyrelsen, 1980).
Voluntary employee turnover theory	Theory explaining why an individual decides to leave an organization (Lee et al., 2017).
Turnover intention theory	Theory explaining the probability that an employee will quit a job in the near future (Ngo-Henha, 2018).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Qualified teachers constitute one of the pillars of a well-functioning society. They inspire learning, contribute to the spread of democratic values and help children to build the solid foundation from which to grow. Teachers are fundamental building blocks of the Swedish school. Unfortunately, they are also a scarce resource.

In 2018, 15% of the qualified teachers in Sweden had left teaching for other careers – a stable percentage since the last 20 years, but a high one compared to other professions (Adermon, A. Laun, L., 2018). Adding to this, a survey study among union members (Lärarnas Riksförbund, 2018) showed that as much as every second teacher has considered leaving the occupation, with the working conditions being the main cause. The shortfall in teachers has been evident for both teachers and parents (Statistiska Centralbyrån [SCB], 2017) and finding qualified teachers continues to be a challenge for Swedish schools (Skolverket, 2019a). The future does not look much brighter: it is expected that Sweden will be lacking around 45 000 teachers in less than 15 years (Skolverket, 2019a).

It has long been known that teachers voluntarily leave for other jobs. Attempts have been made to increase the attractiveness of the teaching occupation: increased wages, opportunities for further education and the introduction of a new career position are only a few examples (Björklund et al, 2017). Despite these efforts, the number of teachers having other jobs evidently remains high. This suggests that issues regarding the teaching occupation remain. Why do teachers choose to leave the occupation? Have these efforts not been effective? To know where to put resources, it is necessary to know where the flaws lie. Our contribution to this field will therefore be a qualitative study of why teachers, in the context of the Swedish school, choose to leave the teaching occupation.

1.2 Empirical context

The Swedish school has a decentralized structure, with municipalities being responsible for the education. In addition, there are numerous private schools (Skolverket, 2019b).

In 2011, a new curriculum – Lgr 11 – was introduced to the Swedish school (Skolverket, 2011). This contains guidelines concerning grading scales and general requirements, replacing the previous curriculum Lpo 94 (see [definitions](#)). Lgr 11 consists of several parts, including the school's mission and values, goals and directions for the education, and syllabuses (Skolverket, 2011). According to Wahlström and Sundberg (2015), the new curriculum affects how teachers' perceive their mission and how content is produced.

In 2013, a new reform for career services for teachers was launched (Sveriges Riksdag, 2013). This introduced the new role of “förstelärare” (“first teacher”), thus creating development opportunities within the occupation. Increasing the salaries for those who are qualified as especially skilled teachers, and giving them more responsibilities, are ways to encourage them and make better use of their competences. It is up to each school to decide on how to implement the reform, and the position could either be permanent or limited in time (Skolverket, 2015).

1.3 Literature review and research gap

While turnover intention is not the same as voluntary turnover (see [definitions](#)), we argue that studies within both areas, that are connected to the subject of teacher turnover, are relevant to include for a research review. This is because we are interested in the subject of turnover, and insights can be gathered from both adjacent areas.

There have been a number of studies on turnover intention among teachers, although primarily performed with quantitative methods and on-the-job factors in focus. For instance, Frijters et al. show that the main reasons for quitting decisions among teachers in the UK concern other aspects than pay (Frijters et al., 2004). However, another study focusing on the US found the opposite (Johnson, Berg & Donaldson, 2005). Focusing on Swedish conditions however, Karbownik (2014) concludes – again through quantitative methods – that wages do correlate negatively with mobility. Deciding factors thus seemingly vary among countries.

Several studies have found that factors within the school, such as lack of collegial support and difficulties with unruly students, have a large influence on the quitting decision (Borman & Downling, 2008; Kyriacou et al., 2003). Connected to this, Hobson et al. (2009) showed that teacher turnover could partly be explained by whether their pre-job expectations were met or not, which affects the teacher’s job satisfaction.

In 2017, the Swedish governmental statistics agency (Statistiska Centralbyrån) made a report about the reasons for voluntary turnover among Swedish teachers. The results showed that factors such as stress and workload had a significant effect on teachers’ turnover decisions. About half of the respondents found working conditions, including salary, to be important determinants of the quitting decisions.

As for qualitative studies with a Swedish focus, Lindqvist & Nordängers longitudinal, research shows the importance of teacher identity in the decision to stay or leave. They describe the choice of career in relation to identity-making and expectations. Leaving teaching could in this aspect be the result of a conflict between demands of the profession and the professional identity of the individual. In other words, leavers which are not attuned with a teacher professional

identity are more likely to leave the profession (Lindqvist, Nordäng, 2016). Lastly, Corda & Murtokangas (2016) identified a number of elements that contribute to Swedish teachers' wishes to quit, such as motivation to teach and workload. However, their qualitative data is constrained to teachers still in the occupation of teaching. This is a limitation: the study admittedly highlights factors that affect turnover intentions, but evidently the respondents have not yet chosen to quit teaching – thus, a complete picture of their decision process is not provided.

As shown, there are several studies focusing on teachers still in the occupation of teaching. However, we argue that *former* teachers' views are equally important to explore: they can reason about their experiences in a way that is disconnected from the immediate school context. The ex post perspective on Swedish former teachers based on qualitative data is evidently under-represented in research as of date, with a prominent exception of Lindqvist & Nordäng. Their research provides valuable insights in focusing on identity, but this focus also comes with constraints. The study mainly focuses on frames of references and their relationship to the professional identity, meaning that other potentially relevant factors are excluded.

Further, even though research has highlighted the importance of certain factors – such as expectations – in the quitting decision, the connection between various factors is not as well understood. What is the importance of expectations in relation to job-related factors and community-related, contextual elements? Despite a number of interesting studies in this field, there is a lack of research explaining the interconnectedness of these different factors. On top of that, we believe that the conditions in the Swedish school have changed and thus provide a new context in which these aspects can be viewed.

1.4 Purpose and research question

By interviewing former compulsory school teachers, this study aims to explore how various internal and external factors – including expectations as well as on- and off-the-job aspects – can lead to voluntary teacher turnover. Adding the newly introduced first teacher as well as recent curriculum changes to the discussion will ensure a contemporary relevance. Performing this through an in-depth qualitative study, where former teachers' own experiences and descriptions are in focus, will provide a more complete picture of the factors that together lead a teacher to leave the occupation. Given the limitations of the studies described above, this study provides interesting additions to the knowledge about teacher turnover. The research question is:

What leads Stockholm county compulsory school teachers to leave the teaching occupation?

1.5 Delimitations

The study is delimited to covering compulsory school teachers who have left teaching during the period of 2013-2020. This takes into account the effects of the 2011 curriculum change as well

as the 2013 reform for career services. We believe that these changes have contributed to a new working environment and including them is a way to ensure the study's relevance. Furthermore, the study is concentrated on a few municipalities in the county of Stockholm. Since different aspects could become important depending on location, we chose to limit our study to one specific county. The choice of Stockholm county was mainly due to convenience.

The former teachers chosen for the study have all been certified by the Swedish National Agency for Education. Our definition of former teachers thus excludes non-licensed substitute teachers. The study focuses on *former* teachers, who have left the job in favour of another occupation or education. In this definition, we also include teachers on leave for education for another occupation with a proclaimed intention of working within the new occupation after the leave. The definition excludes retirements, burnouts and teachers on sick leave. If the definition would have included the latter, other aspects such as lifestyle and health conditions might have removed the focus from the occupation as such. Moreover, the teachers have *voluntarily* left teaching, which is why teachers who have been dismissed are not part of the study. Dismissals is an entirely different topic and could be caused by several other factors than the occupation as such. Lastly, the former teachers chosen for the study have been employed in either public or private schools.

Henceforward we will use the word "teachers" also when referring to the former teachers.

2. Theory

2.1 Use of theory

In order to understand why teachers quit, two frameworks are used. The theory of *psychological contracts* (PC) offers explanations about the relationships between teachers and their employers. This theory stipulates that a broken psychological contract leads to disappointment which potentially triggers thoughts of quitting. The *job embeddedness* (JE) model offers further explanatory value as it explains why people stay at their workplace, focusing on contextual factors.

2.2 Expectations and outcome: The psychological contract

Rousseau (1995) describes the purpose of a contract as to bind two or more parties into a viable and productive exchange. However, contracts cannot cover all possible situations and moreover, they are subject to interpretation by human beings. A contract is thus inherently ambiguous despite its apparent transactional purpose and clarity: “Contracts are beliefs in mutuality rather than the actual fact of mutuality”. This is what the concept of the *psychological contract* revolves around: the individual’s subjective view of the contract (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 6).

2.2.1 Contract making

Rousseau describes that the psychological contract can be seen as a mental model, involving subjective encoding and decoding of information and framing perceived promises. Promises are not objective constructs: everyone processes information differently and creates their own interpretation of what has been communicated. The psychological contract – or the mental model – usually lasts until there is a signal of interruption (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 2).

The psychological contract has two parts: a *transactional* one which is objective and detailed (such as monetary compensations), and a *relational* which most often is implicit and unspecified (such as expected behaviour). Examples of transactional contract terms are limited personal/emotional involvement in the job and commitments according to carefully designed specifications. Typical relational terms include high emotional involvement, personal development, both written and unwritten terms, and conditions affecting personal life. The balance between the two components differs between occupations (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 4).

The main concern with psychological contracts revolves around the principal-agent mutuality, which is described as being driven by *predictability*, *enablement* (whether the two parties help each other achieve their goals) and *clarity of the effort* (whether the relationship eases fulfilment of the respective roles). To establish a psychological contract, both parties have to be aligned in

their intention of outcomes. Rousseau states two principal risks related to this mutuality: potential discrepancies of communicated promises and expected commitments, and the subjective interpretation of a contract (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 3).

2.2.2 Violation of psychological contracts

A psychological contract is considered broken once the perceived promises are unfulfilled by one party, either deliberately or not. The breakage can stem from perceived *opportunism*, *negligence* or *failure to cooperate*, and sources of contract violations can be either contract makers or systems as a whole. One example of system-based contract violation brought up by Rousseau concerns training: when learned skills are not tied to the job. Another is when stated procedures differ from practice. A violation emanating from a contract maker could be when employers are perceived as having misrepresented the nature of the job (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 5).

The perceived size of loss is one of the factors influencing whether a discrepancy is perceived as a breach or not – a violation takes place when the failure of commitment leads to the victim being injured in some way. Another factor is the relationship strength – if there is a history of conflict or repeated discrepancies, or if the events are interpreted as intentional, there is a higher risk of a perceived breach. A third factor is *monitoring*: bad relationships make the parties sensitive to even small discrepancies, while good ones have the opposite effect. Discrepancies are less likely to be interpreted as violations if the relationship is strong, with recurrent interactions and evidence of good faith (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 5).

If a discrepancy has been interpreted as a breach, the victim feels deceived which undermines trust and mutuality. This might lead to various reactions: some suffer silently or try to renegotiate the contract, while others *exit* the relationship voluntarily. Exit is the most likely reaction to a violation when the contract is transactional and commitment is easily measured, many other potential jobs are available, the relationship is brief, other colleagues are also quitting, and attempts of restoring a violated contract have turned out unsuccessful (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 5).

2.2.3 Changing the contract

Rousseau highlights that the very reason for contracts is to stipulate future behaviour based on an initial agreement, but that these contracts inevitably will change over time. The question is whether this unavoidable change maintains, enhances, or breaks the contract in use, and this depends on the mutual behaviour of the two parties.

In total, there are three kinds of contract change: one internal and two external. *Contract drift* is an internal change that develops within the contract holders themselves without any formal

effort, and alters their understanding of the contract. Examples of situations where contract drift can happen are when one party perceives itself as more contract-fulfilling than others, when it adjusts its interpretation to suit a changed personal need, or when performance requirements rise gradually over an extended period of time without employees protesting. Personal development, maturation, aging, and the contract's duration can also lead to contract drift – it is the contract parties that change, not necessarily the external factors. *Drift* thus occurs when the terms of the contract are understood differently by the parties due to internal change (Rousseau 1995, chapter 6).

External change is about factors outside the contracting parties, and there are two variants. The evolutionary *accommodation* means adjusting the existing contract slightly with maintained consistency. Examples could be single changes in performance goals, compensations, or work hours. *Transformation*, on the other hand, involves building entirely new frameworks, re-defining and disrupting (or even terminating) the existing contract to construct a new one. Since psychological contracts are beliefs of mutuality rather than fact of mutuality, what is perceived as accommodation or transformation varies individually (Rousseau, 1995, chapter 6).

2.3 Turnover intention: The job embeddedness model

The *job embeddedness model*, introduced in 2001, attempts to explain and predict why employees stay in organizations. The explaining, contextual factors are *fit, links and sacrifice*, and it has been concluded that high job embeddedness both decreases employee turnover and increases job performance (Lee et al., 2017). Further, job embeddedness can be separated into two dimensions; organization and community. Organizational embeddedness concerns on-the-job factors, focusing on the organizational environment such as pension and salaries, whereas community embeddedness deals with off-the-job, communal aspects such as family and leisure time (Lee et al., 2014). The more embedded an individual is in the organization and the surrounding community respectively, the less likely it is that he or she will resign. However, in some exceptional cases a high embeddedness could actually facilitate leaving.

2.3.1 Fit

Fit can be described as the comfort level or compatibility experienced by an employee vis-à-vis the organization and the environment. On an organizational level, important factors could be personal values and career goals, whereas examples of community factors can range from weather to available entertainment activities (Reitz & Anderson, 2011).

2.3.2 Links

Links are connections between the individual and other people and activities within the organization and the community, being both formal and informal. Embeddedness increases as the amount of links increases. Organizational factors can be pressure from colleagues and the

physical environment at work, and community factors could be pressure from family or friends (Reitz & Anderson, 2011). A high job embeddedness generally makes leaving a job harder. However, having many links, especially off-the-job ones, could lead to spontaneous job offers or knowledge about available positions. In such cases, a high embeddedness paradoxically could lead to turnover. Also, a high organizational embeddedness could lead to conflicts at home, pressuring the individual to leave (Mitchell & Lee, 2001).

2.3.3 Sacrifice

The sacrifice dimension concerns the perceived loss of leaving the organization and thus breaking the links – both the links in the organization and the community. This includes loss of material and psychological benefits, financial costs and other switching costs such as loss of career advancement. The sensed ease of moving between jobs, and the costs associated with links breakage, affects the choice of staying or leaving (Reitz & Anderson, 2011)

2.3.4 Shocks

With the JE model, Mitchell and Lee (2001) also theorized that job embeddedness might work as a buffer against *shocks* – jarring events that trigger thoughts of quitting, such as not being promoted, having a family problem or receiving an unexpected job offer (Crossley et al., 2007). Holtom and Inderrieden (2006) showed this to be true: the level of embeddedness does decide how dissatisfaction or shocks are handled, and the likeliness of a shock resulting in resignation is higher when embeddedness is low.

2.4 Discussion

2.4.1 Combining the theories

Using the psychological contract theory for explaining why teachers quit offers a deep understanding of the psychological triggers behind the decision – especially in the cases where there is indeed a perceived broken contract. However, the theory does have limits. For example, we discovered during interviews that even in the cases of a broken contract, it takes more to actually engage the resigning process. The breakage of the contract may spur a strong desire to quit, but the realisation depends on several more, contextual factors.

Traditional employee turnover research concentrated on job dissatisfaction and available job alternatives as main causes of voluntary turnover. Classical works by authors such as Mobley (1977 via Crossley et al., 2007) paved much of the way for this organizational focus. Notwithstanding the contributions of these traditional theories, this devotion to on-the-job factors and organizational commitment, omits the world outside the workplace. This is where the JE model stands out: it is one of few employee turnover theories that complements on-the-job

factors with off-the-job ones (Crossley et al., 2007), thus offering a more holistic view of possible reasons for quitting a job.

The theories of psychological contracts and job embeddedness offer distinct explanatory value on their own, and together they offer new insights into why the nine teachers chose to quit. Based on the aforementioned definition of a shock, we believe that a psychological contract breach can constitute one, and combining the two models helps us understand the entire chain of events leading to the act of resignation. As mentioned, a broken psychological contract does not necessarily lead to an immediate resignation. Instead, we suspect that psychological contract breaches may negatively influence the job embeddedness of the teachers, which in turn mediates the effect of this breach.

The picture below shows the factors that will be brought to the analysis.

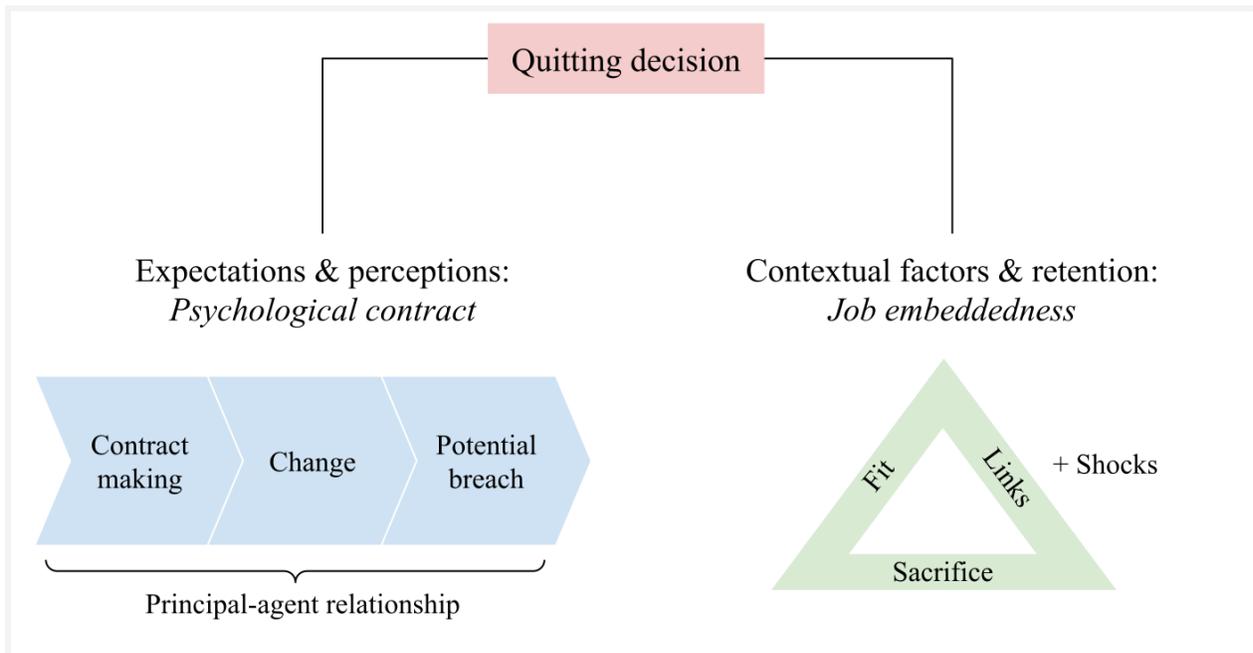


Illustration 1: Selection of theories

2.4.2 Theory discussion

It should be noted that in turnover research, the JE model is predominantly used for *predicting* which employees are likely to resign, as the model focuses on retention rather than the turnover process itself. This is why Reitz and Anderson caution against using it as an explanatory tool (Reitz & Anderson, 2011). Nonetheless, we argue that the JE model does offer explanatory value also when describing *why* employees did leave their job, as it complements the PC theory with contextual factors. It is important to stress that this study does not aim to prove or disprove said models – the intent is to use them as tools for a fuller understanding and richer description of the respondents' individual situations and choices.

Also, the main focus of this study is to explore why teachers choose to *leave the teaching occupation*, and not simply a workplace. Admittedly, some of the factors mentioned are workplace- and not occupation-specific. Nevertheless, we argue that the theories can be used also for explaining the decision to leave the occupation: aspects of expectations in the PC theory, as well as aspects of the JE model, should be applicable on occupation-related issues. However, some workplace-specific conditions do matter even in the decision to change occupation entirely, which is why both these levels will be taken into consideration.

The goal with using these two theories is to capture the breadth and nuance in the teachers' process of quitting. However, no theory is complete, and other theories would have resulted in different themes. In that regard, this study does not offer a complete picture of the respondents' reasons for leaving the teaching occupation, and even less a general picture of the profession as a whole.

3. Method and study design

3.1 Choice of method

For this study, nine semi-structured interviews were made. The aim was to let the respondents reason about their decisions and actions freely, and yet remain within the scope of the study, as per the recommendations by Bryman & Bell (2011, page 467). With the goal of exploring the individual teachers' views on the given subject, questions were broad and possible to modify as the conversations went on.

With the intention of capturing and making sense of the individual teachers' subjective views, the method fits within the interpretive paradigm (Bryman & Bell, 2011, page 16). Building on the assumption that the world is socially constructed, and thus not possible to objectively describe, the study focuses on understanding how people make sense of situations and construct their own realities. Given the study's goal to find out how former teachers view their reasons for leaving the teaching occupation, the interpretive approach was found to be most appropriate. Such an approach allows for a more in-depth understanding of the situational and emotional aspects contributing to certain outfalls, in this case voluntary turnover.

The study took an abductive approach, meaning that the process of gathering data and finding theories with explanatory value was iterative (Bryman & Bell, 2011, page 13). Throughout the process, we constantly moved back and forth between data and theory. As shown in the following sections, we sometimes adjusted the process of data gathering according to the preliminary theories.

3.1.1 Interview guide and structure

For the interviews, we constructed an interview guide containing questions that covered three specific areas; pre-teaching, being a teacher and post-teaching (see [appendix 1](#)). This chronological, tripartite structure was formed in order to make full use of the psychological contract theory, in which expectancy-reality experiences play an important part.

The first category of questions aimed at capturing the teachers' expectations before entering the profession, including educational aspects. The second category covered how the teachers experienced the occupation, including positive and negative aspects, and whether their expectations formed in the pre-stage were met. The last category allowed the teachers to contemplate their reasons for leaving the occupation. It also included the respondents' new roles and how their present occupation can be contrasted with the teaching profession. Having these questions late allowed the respondents to reason more freely, without an initial negative framing.

If however the respondents chose to talk about their reasons for quitting at the beginning of the interview, they were free to do so.

At the beginning of the interviews – before going into the more specific questions – the respondents got to talk briefly about themselves and their teaching roles. They were also asked to explain how a normal working day could look like – warming up the discussion – and to recall the wide variety of work aspects, and not simply the negative parts.

Having semi-structured interviews was appropriate as it eased comparisons between interviews, and ensured that certain aspects had been covered. Furthermore, this approach was preferable over an unstructured one since we conducted a few of the interviews separately. On those occasions, we wanted to make sure that the interviews were structured in a similar way.

3.1.2 Interview process

Before conducting the interviews, a pilot interview was made. After the pilot interview, the interview guide was adjusted in order to become more easily understandable, and the amount of questions was reduced to fit the time limit. A few minor adjustments were also made after the first couple of interviews. For example, we added questions about how family members and colleagues reacted when the teachers decided to quit, which we – through our abductive approach – realized could be important aspects when using the JE model. Apart from that, the interview guide remained intact throughout the process of data gathering.

After a number of interviews, we started to experience a saturation in the answers. For example, aspects of workload and the feeling of inadequacy seemed to be recurring. As new interviews only added to the previous found results, we chose not to ask for more respondents. Instead, we started to analyse the answers to see if any additional interviews were needed, and we concluded that the performed interviews had given us sufficient material for the analysis.

We did six out of nine interviews together, and three out of nine separately. When both were present, one of us took the role as main speaker, and the other one took notes. However, we decided to vary the roles so that both were comfortable with the interview structure – this also made us confident in performing interviews separately.

3.2 Choice of respondents

The choice of respondents was mainly due to proximity and ease of access. Upon contacting schools and unions, we learned that they are not allowed to spread registers of former employees due to regulations. Instead, we started to contact interviewees whose names we got through our own personal networks. From there on, we made announcements on Facebook in the group “Lärarupproret” (Eng. “The teachers’ uproar”), and also contacted individuals fitting our

definition on LinkedIn. Five of the respondents came from personal networks, three from Facebook announcements (whereof two from Lärarupproret) and one from LinkedIn.

Out of the people chosen and accepting for interviews, all were women. The distribution in terms of gender is thus skewed. However, according to SCB (2018) around 74% of all compulsory school teachers are women. This makes us consider the uneven distribution as less of a problem.

In [appendix 2a](#) we provide an overview of the teachers participating in the study, as well as their subjects and tasks. Schools are not included, partly for ethical reasons, and partly because several of the respondents have switched schools rather frequently. Furthermore, we argue that school specific circumstances do not add as much explanatory value to why teachers voluntarily *leave the occupation*. Such circumstances would rather explain why they leave a certain school for another, which is not the purpose of this study.

Of the nine teachers, five had primarily worked in the municipality of Norrtälje, one in Sigtuna, one in Sundbyberg, one in Täby and one in Stockholm. In this study, they are anonymized and will be referred to as Anna, Britta, Cajsa, Diana, Ella, Felicia, Greta, Hedvig and Inga.

3.3 Method of analysis

As we conducted the interviews, we continuously transcribed them in order to ease the analysis at a later stage. When analysing the empirical material, we started off by summarizing the relevant answers for each respondent separately. In this first step we stayed very close to the data.

The next step was to conduct a more detailed coding, where the statements from the respondents were labelled depending on category. For example, numerous statements were connected to high work demands of various kinds, others concerned the teaching profession as such. These general labels were used to code each respondent's answers, and eleven overarching categories emerged. These were subsequently grouped together, forming five main themes (see table 2). These first and second order themes were first and foremost selected based on frequency of occurrence – the qualitative data was thus “quantified”. In table 1, we show how we organized the themes and sub-themes. See [appendix 3](#) for a more detailed description of the coding process.

Main theme	Expectations and preparations	High job demands	Governing	Bonds at the workplace	The new job
Sub-themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expected professional tasks - Education: communicated commitments and provided tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The simultaneous roles of the teacher - Exhaustion and sense of inadequacy - External demands - Effects on private life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Irresolute governing - The role of the first teacher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feelings of responsibility towards the pupils - Support and pressure from colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The new job

Table 1: Emerged themes after data collection and processing

When presenting the empirical material, the findings are structured as in table 1. Some of the quotes in the empirical section are slightly edited to become more readable, however, content-wise they are unchanged. Recognizing the fact that translation of data is an act of interpretation and sense-making process that can deprive the quotes from their intended meanings (Bryman & Bell, 2011, page 488), we have chosen to include the original Swedish quotes in [appendix 4](#).

3.4 Ethical considerations

The respondents were all informed that they will remain anonymous and that participation is voluntary. They were also informed about the purpose of the study before accepting the request. Two of the respondents asked for – and received – the interview guide beforehand. During the interview session, they were allowed to skip questions. All interviews were recorded, but the recordings were only used for the purpose of analysing the material and to give a fair representation of the respondents’ answers. We asked for permission to record, which all accepted. The respondents have received code names, and their schools are as promised not mentioned in the thesis.

3.5 Method discussion

3.5.1 Methodological issues

All studies have limitations, and ours is no exception. This section will include a discussion of the issues that arose during the process of data gathering, and how they were handled.

First, accessing respondents came with some difficulties, which is why it was necessary to use personal contacts and social networks to reach out. When using personal networks, there is always a risk of biases. In this case, it appeared that a few of the respondents were familiar to each other. Having respondents belonging to the same network – or the same municipality – could be problematic: they might then have influenced each other’s opinions or been affected by the same contextual factors. Although, even when comparing the answers between teachers from completely different municipalities and schools, they were surprisingly similar.

Second, using “Läraryppret” might have contributed to a skewness in the choice of respondents: the members openly express concerns about lacking resources for schools and teachers, and problematise the present school politics. They might therefore be more negatively biased towards today’s school policies. For instance, one of the purposes of the group is to “stop the cuts and savings on the school system” (Läraryppret, 2018). We handled this by reaching out through other channels as well.

Third, limiting the study to the county of Stockholm has probably affected the result: the teachers’ possibilities, such as alternative career opportunities and salaries, are potentially dependent on location-specific circumstances. However, isolating the study to one specific county makes the teachers’ situations more comparable, which in this case was an advantage.

Lastly, having only female representation might have contributed to a bias in the answers, but to what extent is beyond the scope of this study.

For all these cases, it is important to point out that our intention was not to have a population-representative sample, but rather to explore the subjective views of a few individuals. Nevertheless, we found it important to have some variation on the dimensions that we suspected had an impact on the results, for example location and common networks. We therefore handled the mentioned issues by reaching out through several different networks and by critically analysing to what degree the results might have been affected by the mentioned circumstances. Having more respondents from various municipalities and schools, would perhaps have contributed to a richer material. However, due to the experienced saturation in the answers, a larger material might only have made a marginal difference. Further, our goal was as mentioned not to generalize, but to explore the subjective experiences of a few former teachers.

3.5.2 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative studies can according to Bryman and Bell (2011, page 43) be evaluated using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Acknowledging the importance of high trustworthiness, we have carefully considered these aspects throughout the process.

By performing research in accordance with canons of good practice (Bryman & Bell, 2011, page 396), *credibility* has been ensured. In addition, the thesis has been sent to the respondents participating in the study.

Whether this study is *transferable* or not is an empirical question. The study focuses on depth rather than breadth, since the aim is to place the decision to quit teaching in relation to the individual respondent's personal situation, both work-related and private.

Concerning *confirmability*, it is possible that our own views and expectations have shaped our interpretations. However, we have done our best to remain open to different viewpoints. We have also performed coding separately and compared our answers to become more confident in the data analysis. Doing this, we have minimized the impact of our personal values on the research process.

The study's *dependability* is considered to be high as records of the study process have been kept, making it possible to follow each step, as per Bryman & Bell's instructions (2011, page 398). By describing the steps in the process of gathering and interpreting the material, we have sought to be transparent with our research process. Furthermore, having continuous discussions with our supervisor and supervision group was another way to ensure that the right procedures were followed.

4. Empirical material

This section focuses on the teachers' experiences and descriptions of the quitting process. The structure is based on the themes that emerged through the coding process (see [section 3.3](#)). By using extensive citations, we want the data to speak for itself.

For most of the cases, no single factor contributed to the decision to leave the occupation: rather, the process consisted of many interrelated factors that together led the teacher to quit. In individual cases, certain happenings triggered the decision. However, mostly it was the result of a complicated process containing both driving and restraining forces where a final trigger, being either positive or negative, determined the outcome. Thus, this section will not include the decision point in isolation, but instead identify the common contextual factors that together led the teachers to leave the occupation.

4.1 Expectations and preparations

4.1.1 Expected professional tasks

As shown by theory, expectations are important in determining whether a job is considered satisfying or not. The respondents in this study had different starting points and expected different things from their employers. Overall, the expectations were high and positively nuanced, with only a few exceptions. When describing their pre-teaching expectations, the respondents' views varied depending on previous experiences: some referred to the time when they themselves were pupils, others had previous experiences of working in a school context.

Moreover, what motivated the respondents to become teachers differed. For some, the teaching profession was attractive since it offered a stable income and thus provided security. For others, the main reason for becoming a teacher was to help children shape a promising future. Several of the respondents also mentioned that they liked the idea of *freedom* in forming their lessons, and the pedagogical challenge that this incurred. What most respondents agreed on, however, was that the teaching role was supposed to comprise one main task: educating pupils.

“I have always liked to learn new things: learning for the sake of learning, so I guess that’s why I took a liking to it [the teaching profession]. I was also involved in association activities and found it really fun to teach and take care of those parts.” – Ella

Felicia described how her expectations on the profession differed from the actual experience of being a teacher.

“It [the picture of the teaching profession] was probably more glamorous; that one would have time for each pupil. And if a pupil would not reach the goals – that you would be able to help them so much more.” – Felicia

Many of the respondents thus looked forward to the teaching role as being filled with numerous opportunities for knowledge sharing. Moving on from the expectations, we now turn to the education that aimed at providing the teachers with the necessary tools for the profession.

4.1.2 Education: communicated commitments and provided tools

In general, with only a single exception, the respondents found the teacher education insufficient for the job. While the education provided some necessary skills within specific areas, such as maths and language skills, other dimensions of what would become the job were absent. For example, the education seemed to be lacking parts concerning conflict management. What the majority valued most in terms of pedagogical insights were the periods of internships.

“It [the education] lacked leadership training and conflict management, as well as subject knowledge. So no, I guess I wasn't prepared for the task after the education. Rather, it's like being an apprentice: you have to learn the hard way” – Cajsa

“I found the education truly meaningless. For real, it was really not good at all. I got to learn different knowledge philosophies – which might be good – but what I really want to know is how to help pupils who aren't reaching the goals. You know, hands-on tips based on experience. The educators should know.” – Felicia

With this backpack of expectations and preparations, the teachers now entered the teaching profession.

4.2 High job demands

4.2.1 The simultaneous roles of the teacher

Entering the teaching profession meant entering a new role. A majority of the respondents described this new role as more extensive than expected: being a teacher meant much more than merely being a person who teaches. In the overwhelming majority of cases, conflict management, documentation and conferences consumed a lot of time. In addition, adjusting the education to pupils with special needs, and making sure that the education was individualized, was generally experienced as stressful, as in Britta's case.

“[What requires most time] is this documentation; contacting parents, pupils with special needs that you constantly have to arrange meetings about how they should reach their goals and how to help them in the best way possible.” – Britta

Diana described a gradual change that took place during her years as a teacher. From having a lot of assistants in the classroom, fewer teachers became responsible for more pupils. Furthermore, she described the difficulties that follow when a few teachers have to consider a lot of pupils’ different needs.

“Adjustments are needed, and we personally have to do all the adjustments. I’m not a special-education teacher. Had I wanted to become one, I would have studied for that. I am a teacher.” – Diana

Greta and Ella also described the teaching role as fragmented, consisting several other parts than the educational.

“I’m not a school counsellor, I’m not a special-education teacher, I’m not a psychologist, I’m not a school nurse – and yet I have to manage all these things, which I can’t, at least not within the limits of my profession. [...] More time for teaching – that’s what I think many want and need.”

– Ella

“There are numerous things ... everything from fixing tables to changing light bulbs, being recess monitor, making sure that the kids behave when waiting for the bus to arrive – these are things that might not... they are important for seeing the pupil and what’s going on, but perhaps it shouldn’t be the responsibility of the teacher.” – Greta

The introduction of Lgr 11 also contributed to new requirements, affecting the teaching role. To interpret the content and follow the guidelines was described as time-consuming and in many cases difficult.

“And then, with Lgr 11, came the knowledge requirements. There are many advantages, but – in my opinion – the school has become overly theoretical and boring.” – Anna

“With the new curriculum came higher demands on really evaluating the pupils, and that concerned both third and sixth grade. But also continuous documentation when moving forward.” – Britta

The quotes indicate that the curriculum added new demands to the list, and thus the teaching role became more extensive. Among the respondents, almost everyone experienced frustration due to the diverse roles that they had to occupy simultaneously. This was one aspect of the high job demands, contributing to a growing dissatisfaction. Another aspect, which in big part was a result of this, was the experienced stress and exhaustion.

4.2.2 Exhaustion and sense of inadequacy

Being responsible for many people could be a source of energy and learning. Numerous respondents expressed the pleasure in seeing pupils succeed. The teaching profession was also described as dynamic: filled with moments of joy and characterized by a constant process of personal development. A number of respondents explained how they valued the freedom to design lessons, and to interact with pupils. Hedvig described the job as having many ups and downs, where the ups provide the necessary energy to continue. However, sometimes these energy provisions are simply not sufficient to cover up for the more demanding parts of the occupation. This became evident for the majority of the respondents. The lack of recovery, coming from an overload of tasks, affected them negatively. Never being allowed to finish successively became a frustration.

“You’re like a mini-boss that has to manage 80 persons a day, with all their individual needs, and all requirements embedded in the leadership of the school. The society’s expectations of the school; that you have to meet each individual’s personal needs, means that you’re never finished, you’ve never done enough.” – Cajsa

“It felt like I never had time to do a really good job, because there was simply not enough time.”
– Hedvig

“If you want to be a good educator and do a good job, you’ll either have to work yourself to death and end up having a breakdown, because that’s what it takes. Or you’ll have to choose to bring down your level of ambition, which creates frustration and a sense of inadequacy.” – Inga

As evident from the quotes, there was simply not enough time to do a good job. However, not only internal demands created the dynamic context surrounding and affecting the teachers; outside parties also played a part in defining and restraining their roles.

4.2.3 External demands

Being a teacher means having responsibilities. Teachers are supposed to handle several different relations, including relations with children, parents and other teachers. Further, they need to adapt the education to live up to the expectations imposed by higher instances. Somewhere in this net of relations and expectations, the former teachers expressed a sense of being mistrusted.

This mistrust was perceived as being the reason for the extensive documentation requirements. By making the teachers report every aspect of work, the schools would be protected from any potential blame from parents or higher instances. This created a situation where the teachers experienced that they had to prove themselves worthy.

“You’d never question a doctor or a dentist about their profession, but everyone has been to school and has an opinion about it.” – Britta

“Today, it’s completely twisted; the school is the sole part having responsibilities, while pupils and caregivers only have rights [...] This feeling surrounding the whole teaching profession, that I have to prove everything – it’s not good. It’s shifted from a confidence in the teacher a long time ago – that you trust the abilities of the teachers, and believe in their capabilities – to teachers constantly having to show what they do.” – Inga

“Whenever a small fight took place, you had to write a report about it, and it’s all about school protecting itself from... well, if there is some incident that would lead to something bigger, you have to be able to show that: ‘We have reported this, and done that.’” – Greta

There were of course exceptions: teachers explaining that parents could differ in terms of their behaviours and a few that never encountered any such pressure. Nevertheless, experiencing this mistrust led to frustrations that in many cases added to the factors that led to the decision to quit. Adding to this, the manifested stress not only affected their professional life.

4.2.4 Effects on private life

The teaching occupation clearly consists of numerous, work-intensive tasks. Swedish teachers are expected to work 45 hours a week, which according to the respondents is supposed to be compensated through periodic breaks. Nonetheless, the teachers often experienced difficulties in disconnecting work from private life.

“You were never able to do either what you needed or wanted to do. And also, you were completely exhausted when you came home – so I guess you could say that the family had to suffer.” – Greta

“I guess I had difficulties letting go. I tend to bring things home too easily, you know, in my mind. I don’t think that’s particularly good, and then, in the evenings, you could find yourself pondering over things.” – Hedvig

“You have to prioritize; should I go under... or rather, should I manage work and then, when I get home, crash in front of my soon to be four children that we’re supposed to take care of, or should I have a good time at work and have energy left when I get home?” – Diana

Consequently, it was difficult for many of the teachers to let go of work and keep their energy levels high.

So far, we have focused on more general demands affecting the teachers in the occupation. In many cases the governance had an equally important role in the process towards quitting.

4.3 Governing

4.3.1 Irresolute governing

When it comes to governance, differences can be seen between the individual cases. A number of respondents admitted that the quality of governance depended on the individual headmasters, and thus it was shifting. Some respondents also experienced a rather frequent replacement of headmasters. It is important to point out that a number of the respondents were satisfied with the governance, even though everyone acknowledged a lack of resources. However, in a few cases the governance became an important factor triggering the decision to leave. As those cases were individual and rather specific, we will not show any extensive quotes in this section for ethical reasons. We can say however, that one case concerned a misunderstanding that worsened the teacher’s working conditions, and another was about a work related conflict that made the teacher feel less valued. For Ella, it was clear that the conflict became the triggering factor.

“This [the misconducted governing] also kind of made me decide that, ‘no, now is the time to get out’.” – Ella

In addition to this, and within the subject of governance, the role of the first teacher also added to the factors affecting some of the teachers.

4.3.2 The role of the first teacher

What it means to become a first teacher varies depending on school. For some, the process towards this advancement is extensive. For others, the role is project based, rotating among all the teachers and does not require as much.

For a few of the respondents, becoming a first teacher brought new confidence due to a confirmed superiority.

“But it [the process towards becoming a first teacher] was really useful and informative and I learnt a lot about myself too, so – sure – it was difficult at times, but it was also great fun. And then it was nice when I got the: you passed, you’re on top.” – Britta

“[When becoming a first teacher] I got a completely different pride and confidence in myself, and I was able to say: ‘I know what I’m doing, I know I’m good and I do this because this and that’. I have to say that the process was super useful.” – Inga

Becoming a first teacher could even play a part in the resignation decision, which Britta admitted. She came across the new job partly through her new role.

Thus, the introduction of the first teacher role could have different implications. However, the story is not yet completed. We have another component in the dynamic school environment. A component that, in contrast to the previously mentioned issues, induced energy in the teachers and acted in the opposite direction of the factors mentioned in the earlier sections: bonds at the workplace.

4.4 Bonds at the workplace

4.4.1 Feelings of responsibility towards the pupils

Out of the respondents, almost all mentioned the pupils as driving forces to remain within the occupation. The feelings of responsibility towards the pupils made it hard to leave the school environment. The pupils could of course also have problematic attitudes that complicated the work, but in general they were described in a positive light, providing energy and meaning.

“Being a teacher, I felt a different kind of responsibility for these little lives’ future; partly concerning upbringing. You have this caretaking responsibility.” – Ella

“Children are amazing, truly wonderful. [...] To leave a class in the middle of a semester, to leave the pupils who have special needs, that’s a damn betrayal, it feels really really bad.” – Felicia

“Had I not left [the name of the school], I’m not sure I would have chosen to quit at that point. I guess it’s because... you’ve known the students for such a long time. Some of them, those being older... you’ve been their teacher since fourth grade – at least in the crafts. The same thing with the colleagues; since you had such a good time, you get such a connection with them.” – Hedvig

Here, Hedvig also brought up another important factor that together with the responsibility for the pupils increased the teachers’ commitment to work: namely the colleagues.

4.4.2 Support and pressure from colleagues

Almost all respondents admitted that they had great colleagues that provided support and helped them through difficulties.

“The reason why I stayed there for such a long time was because of the work team; they were the ones that made it work during hard times. You always knew that they were there for you, and that they could tell you that ‘stop – you need to step down now’.” – Inga

However, the good relations and the sense of team effort could also act as a force pressuring the teachers to work, as in Ella’s case.

“At some point we didn’t get to bring in substitute teachers; instead, we had to cover up for each other in the work team. [...] It varied, but that doesn’t really raise your morale. You solve it, you help each other, but I didn’t consider them to be the best solutions. And that naturally made it difficult to be away or to call in sick, because it meant so much more work.” – Ella

With these last words about the driving and restraining forces at the workplace, we now turn to the last part of the collected data: the new job.

4.5 The new job

As we have seen, the teachers worked in a complex environment consisting of various demands and a multitude of tasks. However, the respondents seemed to agree on the importance of having somewhere else to go before leaving. In Britta’s case, a job offer became the factor triggering her to leave the occupation. Before leaving, she had developed a good relationship with another employer, which resulted in a new job opportunity.

“I thought: should I give it a try? I still have like 20 years left. Should I sit here in a classroom, and keep on working? I thought: Okay, the teaching occupation remains. I have an education and sure, it might look differently in the future, but perhaps it’s worth trying. So I eventually decided to throw myself out and give it a try.” – Britta

Similar to Britta, Inga had established contact with her new employer before leaving, and decided to apply when a job became available.

“When this job came out, I felt like: NOW I have the opportunity and the possibility to choose: should I do it, or should I not? [...] That was actually during a period when things [in teaching] went quite well. But still, it was too tempting and so I couldn’t resist.” – Inga

No teacher chose to resign without having an alternative occupation or education in mind. In their current profession, they generally value the freedom, flexibility and a manageable workload, something that they found absent in the teaching occupation. However, the teacher identity stays with several of them.

“[Advantages of the new job] *The freedom. I thought I had some amount of freedom as a teacher too, but I wasn't able to do things at my own pace. I couldn't choose how to organize my time, I was bound up by other people's schedules; pupils', colleagues' as well as conference hours. Now, I get to make appointments myself. [...] I'm still a teacher, I always say that when I present myself.*” – Anna

“[Advantages of the new job] *I'm in charge of my own time. I'm not pondering over things when I get home, we have no performance reviews, none of that. When I work, I work, and when I get home, I'm free to do whatever I want.*” – Hedvig

Out of the respondents, no one emphasized the salary as an important factor in the decision to leave the occupation. It was rather the working conditions, mainly the high job demands, that made them lose energy and as a result started to search for alternatives.

4.6 Concluding words

We have now described how the teachers viewed the process from expectation to exit. Clearly, the decision to quit is not an easy one and several aspects seem to matter: high job demands, governance issues and the attraction from a new job can trigger the desire to quit, while bonds at the workplace might have the opposite effect.

5. Analysis

5.1 Psychological contract

The theory of psychological contracts explains the relationship between the former teachers and their employers, and helps to understand why many of them felt surprised, overwhelmed and eventually disappointed once they entered and experienced the profession.

5.1.1 Established psychological contract

Considering the nature of the relationship to the employer, it should be noted that many of the teachers acknowledged a frequent replacement of headmasters. They also expressed a lack of commitment to the organization as such: they generally emphasized the importance of pupils and colleagues rather than the employing organization. Moreover, they seemed to identify themselves with the profession rather than any particular workplace, which for example Anna admitted. This leads to the conclusion that the employer-employee relationship in general can be described as rather weak.

For many of the former teachers, the impressions of the school as an employer were shaped already when they themselves were pupils – their memories were primarily that of a place of teaching and learning. Others built their expectations on a limited set of professional experiences within the educational system or similar environments. Common for all these expectations of the occupation is a focus on teaching, work peace, development and helping children to grow and fulfil themselves. The stated expectancies consist of both transactional components – such as a safe job opportunity with decent salary – but primarily of these implicit, relational ones. This was what being a teacher meant for the nine interviewees. These expectations were hardly challenged but rather reinforced during their years of training and created a psychological contract – the individuals' subjective views and expectations of being a teacher.

5.1.2 Psychological contract breaches

To keep a psychological contract intact, the principal-agent mutuality is key. In the case of eight of the nine former teachers, there was a discrepancy between what was communicated about the profession and what they ultimately met at the workplace. The perceived communicated promises of teaching and learning were unfulfilled, and this violated the psychological contract. Conflict management, mistrust and extreme workload was not part of a common understanding. Many of the teachers were prepared for these tasks to some measure, but they did not expect them to make up the majority of the work hours. This led to fatigue and stress, and eventually an idea of moving towards another occupation where the psychological contract could be upheld.

5.1.3 Changing the contract

Going from ordinary teacher to first teacher means new assignments and a higher salary. The extent to which the role as first teacher affects the work varies, but becoming a first teacher does evidently contribute to a shift in self-perception. For example, Britta described how the new role confirmed her as being on top. Similarly, Inga expressed that the role as first teacher gave her new confidence. Consequently, becoming a first teacher includes a formal component – higher salary and new assignments – and an informal component – a shift in self-perception. Together, they contribute to a change in the contract. The formal component could be described as an *evolutionary accommodation* as the contract is partly changed but not in its entirety. This changes how the teacher is viewed by the employer: the pressure to deliver good results has increased. From the perspective of the first teacher, this also seems to cause a *contract drift*: the first teacher's requirements are higher due to the newly gained confidence, causing the teacher to view the employer differently. The expectations set by the first teachers could then be considered better fulfilled elsewhere, leading to a contract breach due to unfulfilled requirements.

Moreover, contract drifts result from other personal changes as well. As several of the respondents experienced that the job did not rhyme with matters such as family life and personal issues – aspects that evidently have changed over time and consequently were not present during the initial contract formation – another contract drift occurred. For instance, Diana mentioned awaiting her fourth child. This also alters the contract and makes the teachers look for jobs better adapted to their family lives.

5.1.4 PC meets JE

From the psychological contract, it has been concluded that contracts have been changed, and breaches of the contracts are clearly discerned. However, we are still puzzled by the fact that many have chosen to stay even though the contract often is broken early on. Despite having a weak connection to the employer – which would suggest a higher sensitivity – the individual teacher was initially unwilling to leave the occupation. Consequently, there must have been other factors of importance: relationships beyond the psychological contract that mediated the effect of the broken contracts. To explain this, we will turn to the factors embedding the teachers in the job.

5.2 Job embeddedness

5.2.1 Fit

A majority of the teachers admitted that the educational elements in the teaching profession were appreciated; as a matter of fact, they constituted one of the main motivations to enter the teaching occupation. The freedom to design lessons and help pupils was considered compatible

with the teachers' goals and aspirations, contributing to an increased job fit. However, as the teaching role did not comprise the expected tasks, a broken psychological contract was – in accordance with our previous analysis – experienced. The broken contract reduced fit to the extent that the teachers were no longer comfortable with the various tasks that they had to perform, nor were they given sufficient time for recovery. When alternative jobs were presumed to offer a higher degree of freedom, fit became relatively lower in comparison. For instance, Hedvig found another job with a higher level of freedom, and – as the teaching role was not satisfying enough – the current degree of job fit was not sufficient to make her stay.

5.2.2 Links

Strong links at the workplace can increase embeddedness and decrease the willingness to leave. In the case of our respondents, pupils and colleagues were evidently strong forces that increased the pressure to stay. These strong connections compensated for seemingly weak relationships with the employers. The bonds at the workplace explain why the teachers, despite being dissatisfied with the working conditions, still chose to stay: they felt a responsibility for the pupils and acknowledged that the remaining teachers would suffer if they left. As Hedvig admitted, having invested both time and effort in relations with children and colleagues complicates the decision to leave.

However, community-wise the negative effects on the teachers' private life, such as the experienced exhaustion, had the opposite effect. The community links consequently counteracted the job related links. As a matter of fact, the strong links at the workplace might actually have *caused* the family related issues leading to the quitting decision: as the teachers' exhaustion – stemming from responsibility towards the children and an inability to let go – became more apparent, their family life suffered increasingly.

In Britta's case, we can also see the importance of off-the-job links in the decision to leave the occupation. As Britta developed a working relationship with another company, while still maintaining her role as teacher, the community links were strengthened to the extent that a job offer appeared. Similarly, Inga had been in touch with her new employer before leaving, once again showing the importance of off-the-job links.

5.2.3 Sacrifice

As several of the respondents admitted, they needed to find a reasonable alternative before leaving the teaching occupation. Despite the experienced difficulties at work, the sacrifice of leaving was initially too big. Having invested several years in the occupation, the teachers needed to have somewhere else to go in order to reduce the switching cost. However, starting over is a complicated and time-consuming process, which increases the sacrifice of leaving. Although, for the respondents that were offered jobs, the sacrifice dimension was evidently

reduced as they were guaranteed security elsewhere. Also, as Britta admitted: “the teaching occupation remains”, meaning that the possibility to go back legitimized the decision to leave. The strengthened off-the-job links experienced by for example Inga might also have served to decrease the sacrifice of leaving. She got familiar with a new employer before leaving, thus the cost of leaving the occupation decreased as the off-the-job-links acted as pulling forces.

Moreover, the broken psychological contracts, resulting from the experienced stress and inadequacy, played a part in reducing the sacrifice dimension: the teachers clearly found that the teaching occupation did not offer them enough benefits in comparison with other occupations. In fact, the negative impact on their health and private life successively reduced the level of job embeddedness, making the sacrifice dimension relatively less important.

5.2.4 The effects of shocks

Clearly, there were several factors apart from the relationship to the employer that mattered to the teachers. Further, the level of embeddedness had a buffering effect on the contractual changes. The contract breaches mentioned in the PC section could in fact be explained as shocks; they reduce and are simultaneously mediated by the level of embeddedness. This complicates the situation. For instance, the effect of a contract that was broken early on might have been reduced due to high embeddedness, stemming from the strong links at the workplace and decreasing the impact of the shock. Several dimensions thus play a part in the dynamic school environment: as the broken contract led to a shock decreasing fit, the level of links at the workplace mediated the immediate effect of this shock. However, as the shock decreased the general level of embeddedness, the effect of another shock could not be covered for as easily. For example, Britta experienced a reduced fit as the working conditions changed, and when a job offer induced a second shock, the links at the workplace were no longer sufficient to hinder her from leaving the occupation. Thus, the effect of a second shock became the final trigger for the quitting decision. The total teacher job embeddedness had become low enough.

5.3 Visualizing the complete journey

With this said, we can now summarize our findings in a simplified model representing the process leading to a quitting decision.

Expectations constitute the initial frame, through which the contract with the employer is viewed. When the teachers entered the occupation, the heavy workload combined with the various tasks connected to the teaching role led to exhaustion – and in many cases a contract breach. However, the effects of the working conditions were mediated by the factors embedding the teachers in the occupation, such as the strong connections to pupils and colleagues and the high switching costs. These strong connections had a buffering effect on shocks: they reduced the immediate impact of the contract breaches. When the factors embedding the teachers in the

job were no longer sufficient to make them stay – or, when a second shock made the job embeddedness shrink to a certain level where the pulling forces from alternative occupations started to dominate – they chose to move on. It is important to point out that this is a simplification. In fact, the various dimensions are interconnected and affect each other to a high extent, and we have only touched upon a few of these connections.

The model below provides a simplified explanation of the teachers’ journeys. The model is by no means generalizable; rather, it visualizes the study’s findings and summarizes the process from expectation to exit.

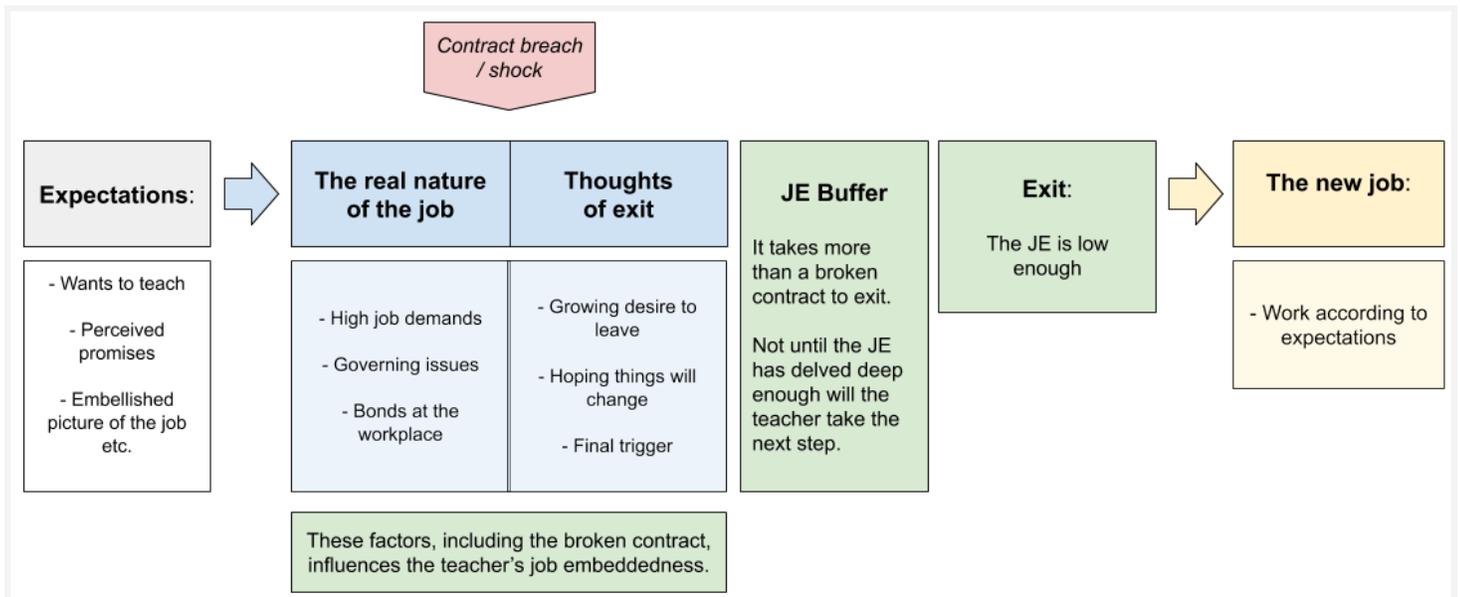


Illustration 2: Overview of the teacher turnover process

6. Discussion and conclusion

6.1 Answer to the research question

By interviewing former teachers about the process that eventually led them to leave the teaching occupation, we have now gained insights about several types of factors contributing to a quitting decision: on-the-job, off-the-job, psychological and contextual factors. We also have a better understanding of how these factors are connected. Considering this, we are now able to provide an answer to the research question:

What leads Stockholm county compulsory school teachers to leave the teaching occupation?

To explain the findings, we have constructed a model visualizing the journey from expectation to exit. The journey is complex as it consists of several factors working in various directions. The first step consists of expectations. We saw that expectations in general were high and that the teaching role was primarily expected to entail opportunities for knowledge sharing. As these expectations were not entirely met, psychological contract breaches were identified. However, the broken contracts were not sufficient to make the teachers leave the occupation, which is due to job embeddedness mediating the effects of the breaches. Via the JE model, we thus added the contextual concepts of fit, links and sacrifice into the discussion. Links are especially important embedding factors for teachers, including the pupils towards whom they feel a responsibility, and colleagues with which they form special bonds. It was not until the total job embeddedness had decreased to a certain level, making the switching cost lower, that the teachers chose to move on.

6.2 Discussion

6.2.1 Practical implications

If we do not know what makes teachers leave, we cannot optimize the utility of our resources. Despite the efforts made to increase the attractiveness of the teaching occupation, the former teachers participating in this study did not find the benefits sufficient to outweigh the costs. We have now gained a better understanding of the various factors that impacted on the teachers' decisions to quit teaching, and how these factors were connected. The study provides interesting insights for policymakers as it highlights how several on- and off-the-job factors simultaneously shape an environment that either succeeds or fails in retaining teachers.

Some of these factors have been highlighted in previous research and reports. For instance, both Hobson et al. (2009) and Lindqvist & Nordänger (2016) acknowledge the importance of job expectations, and that a clash with job demands can contribute to leaving. In accordance with

other studies, we also found that pay was not an important factor (Frijters et al., 2004), but that stress and high workload were (Corda & Murtokangas, 2016). Similar to findings by Borman & Dowling (2008) and Kyriacou et al. (2003) showing that lack of collegial support may lead to quitting, we found that collegial support contributes to retention. However, we also found that this strong collegial unity sometimes leads to a stress of letting colleagues down. Moreover, we found children to be a significant source for retention. Despite several discrepancies between expectations and job demands, where employees in other occupations might have left, these teachers stayed.

6.2.2 Further research

The aforementioned limitations of this study make room for further research within the subject of teacher turnover. This study was limited to cover the county of Stockholm, and another geographical scope might have contributed with different insights. Our suggestion to further research is thus to include more teachers, from various locations for a higher variation. Comparing teacher turnover in big city areas with smaller towns and the countryside would also be enlightening. As would an application of the PC-JE combined perspective to another occupation with similar issues.

This study was made a few years after the introduction of Lgr 11. It also included a few first teachers. However, another role has quite recently been introduced to the Swedish school: namely that of the teaching assistant (Skolverket, 2020). It would be interesting to investigate how the role of the teaching assistant affects the teachers' working conditions, and analyse this from the perspective of those who choose to leave *despite* having teaching assistants present. Will the high job demands that were highlighted in this study as well as previous research still play an important part in the decision to quit teaching? There are evidently numerous interesting subjects to explore.

6.2.3 Limitations

Despite offering interesting and important insights, this study has limitations. First, it is built on the subjective experiences of a number of former teachers. We can only trust the words of the respondents, which is not enough to provide a complete picture of the problem. It is possible that the teachers remember certain aspects, perhaps the most significant parts of the teaching occupation, and focus less on others. They might also have presented themselves in a way that contradicted their real actions. Furthermore, their stories about the teaching profession might have sounded more negative than was evident. This could be explained as a form of rationalisation, where a new occupation is seen in a more favourable light, contrasting the old workplace. People who have left the occupation could also be more negatively biased towards it, as they clearly did not find the benefits significant enough to stay. However, we argue that the similarities in the stories, mainly referring to the high emphasis on heavy work demands,

compensate for these risks. We might also have interpreted the respondents' answers incorrectly, or misunderstood the weight they put on specific factors. By recording the interviews, we tried to overcome this to the fullest extent.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview guide

Introduction

1. Berätta lite om dig själv och hur din tid som lärare har sett ut
2. Beskriv lite kortfattat en typisk arbetsdag.

Expectations

3. Varför ville du bli lärare? Vad var ditt mål med att bli lärare?
4. Vad hade du för bild av läraryrket?
5. Hur var lärarutbildningen? Förberedde den dig för jobbet som lärare?

The profession

6. Hur var det att jobba som lärare?
 - Positiva och negativa delar?
 - Fick du göra det du ville göra? Det du hade tänkt dig när du utbildade dig?
7. Fanns det några sätt att avancera inom yrket (och var det något du var intresserad av)?
8. Hur upplevde du styrningen? Kände du att arbetsgivaren tog vara på din kompetens?
9. Upplevde du att synen på dig som lärare förändrades under din tid i yrket? Individuellt (personligen) och generellt (lärare som profession).
10. Upplevde du att arbetsbelastning och arbetsuppgifter ändrades under tiden som du arbetade?
11. Kunde du påverka din arbetssituation? T.ex. om du hade önskemål om arbetssätt, fortbildning etc.
12. Hur upplevde du stämningen på kontoret och bland kollegor?
13. Hur var stämningen i klasserna?
14. Upplevde du att arbetet förändrades i samband med den nya läroplanen 2011?
15. Upplevde du att något förändrades i samband med införandet av förstelärare?

The decision to quit

16. Varför slutade du?
 - Huvudsakliga anledningar?
 - När började du tänka på att sluta? Varför? Någon specifik händelse?
17. Hur kändes det att sluta?
18. Vilka alternativa karriärvägar upplevde du att det fanns och vad lockade med dessa?
19. Vad hade fått dig att stanna kvar?
20. Kan du tänka dig att återvända? Vad skulle kunna få dig att återvända?
21. Såg du det främst som att du sökte dig *bort* från läraryrket eller *till* något annat?

The new employment

22. Hur är ditt nya jobb jämfört med läraryrket? Vad är bättre/sämre? Största skillnaden?

Ending

23. Finns det någon mer fråga som du tycker att vi borde ha ställt?

Appendix 2a: Interviewees who participated in the study

Codename	Gender	Subjects and tasks
Anna	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First teacher/special-ed. teacher - Compulsory school teacher at first, later special-ed. teacher - Physical education and health - Music - Art
Britta	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First teacher - Mathematics - Science studies
Cajsa	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First teacher - Swedish - English
Diana	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Swedish - Physical education and health - Mathematics - English
Ella	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Swedish - English - Mathematics - Social study subjects
Felicia	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preschool class teacher - Swedish - Social study subjects
Greta	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Swedish - Mathematics - English - Social study subjects - Science studies
Hedvig	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Crafts - Mathematics
Inga	Woman	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Music

Appendix 2b: Account of conducted interviews

Codename	Duration	Date	Form
Anna	50 min	18 February 2020	Physical meeting
Britta	44 min	21 February 2020	Physical meeting
Cajsa	47 min	25 February 2020	Physical meeting
Diana	55 min	28 February 2020	Physical meeting
Ella	58 min	2 March 2020	Physical meeting
Felicia	40 min	2 March 2020	Physical meeting
Greta	54 min	3 March 2020	Physical meeting
Hedvig	65 min	3 March 2020	Physical meeting
Inga	49 min	4 March 2020	Physical meeting

Appendix 3: Examples – from transcript to theme

Quote	→ Sub-theme 1	→ Sub-theme 2	→ Main theme
<i>“I have always liked to learn new things: learning for the sake of learning, so I guess that’s why I took a liking to it [the teaching profession]. I was also involved in association activities and found it really fun to teach and take care of those parts.” (Ella)</i>	Wanted to teach	Expected professional tasks	Expectations and preparations
<i>“It [the education] lacked leadership training and conflict management, as well as subject knowledge.” (Cajsa)</i>	The education was not good: internship valuable, not subjects	Education: communicated commitments and provided tools	
<i>“Adjustments are needed, and we personally have to do all the adjustments. I’m not a special-education teacher.” (Diana)</i>	Dissatisfaction: the teaching role is far too extensive	The simultaneous roles of the teacher	High job demands
<i>“It felt like I never had time to do a really good job, because there was simply not enough time.” (Hedvig)</i>	Never time to do a good job	Exhaustion and sense of inadequacy	
<i>“You’d never question a doctor or a dentist about their profession, but everyone has been to school and has an opinion about it.” (Britta)</i>	Being questioned	External demands	
<i>“You were never able to do either what you needed or wanted to do. And also, you were completely exhausted when you came home – so I guess you could say that the family had to suffer.” (Greta)</i>	Negative impact on private life	Effects on private life	
<i>“This [the misconducted governing] also kind of made me decide that,</i>	Governing became trigger	Irresolute governing	

<p><i>'no, now is the time to get out''</i> (Ella)</p>			
<p><i>"... but it [the process towards becoming a first teacher] was really useful and informative and I learnt a lot about myself too," (Britta)</i></p>	<p>First teacher process informative</p>	<p>The role of the first teacher</p>	
<p><i>"Children are amazing, truly wonderful. [...] To leave a class in the middle of a semester, to leave the pupils who have special needs, that's a damn betrayal, it feels really really bad." (Felicia)</i></p>	<p>It felt wrong to leave the children</p>	<p>Feelings of responsibility towards the pupils</p>	<p>Bonds at the workplace</p>
<p><i>"... the reason why I stayed there for such a long time was because of the work team; they were the ones that made it work during hard times." (Inga)</i></p>	<p>Support from colleagues was valuable</p>	<p>Support and pressure from colleagues</p>	
<p><i>"[Advantages of the new job] The freedom. I thought I had some amount of freedom as a teacher too, but I wasn't able to do things at my own pace." (Anna)</i></p>	<p>Valued freedom in the new job, contrasting teaching</p>	<p>The new job</p>	<p>The new job</p>

Appendix 4: Quotes in Swedish

1. *"Jag har alltid själv gillat att lära mig saker. Lärandet i sig, så det var väl lite det som gjorde att jag fastnade för det [läraryrket]. Sen höll jag på en del med föreningsverksamhet och tyckte det var jättekul att lära ut och ha hand om det."* - Ella
2. *"Det [bilden av läraryrket] var nog mer glamouröst tror jag, att man hade tid för varje elev. Egen tid med elever. Och är det någon elev som inte skulle klara sig enligt målen, att man skulle kunna hjälpa dem mycket mycket mer."* - Felicia
3. *"Den saknade ledarskapsträning och konflikthantering, och även ämneskunskaper. Så där tyckte jag nog att nej, man var inte rustat för uppdraget efter utbildningen. Utan det är lite lärlingsjobb nästan, man får lära sig den hårda vägen."* - Cajsa
4. *"Jag tycker Lärarhögskolan var meningslös. På riktigt alltså. Den var verkligen inte bra. Jag fick lära mig olika kunskapsfilosofier och det kanske är jättebra, men jag vill ju veta vad gör jag med elever som faktiskt inte klarar målen. Alltså, handfasta tips och erfarenhetsmässigt. De som är på lärarhögskolan ska ju veta."* - Felicia
5. *"Det är det här med dokumentation, kontakt med föräldrar, elever som har speciella behov som man har möten kring jämnt tyckte jag. Hur de ska nå sina mål och hur man ska jobba på bästa sätt för att nå dem."* - Britta
6. *"Det ska anpassas, vi personligen ska göra alla anpassningar. Jag är inte speciallärare. Hade jag velat bli det hade jag pluggat till det. Jag är lärare. - Diana*
7. *"Jag är ju varken kurator, jag är inte speciallärare, jag är inte psykolog, jag är liksom inte skolsköterska. Och ändå ska man klara av att sköta allt det, och det gör man ju inte, framförallt inte inom ramen för sitt läraruppdrag. [...] Mer tid till undervisning - det är det jag tror många vill ha och behöver."* - Ella
8. *"Det är ju massor av grejer egentligen ... men det var alltifrån skruva bord till att byta glödlampor och kanske vara ute på rastvakt, hinna att gå till bussen och stå där och se till att ungarna sköter sig. Såna där saker, som kanske inte... Som var viktiga i och för sig i synen av eleven och allt vad som händer, men som kanske inte ska ligga på läraren"* - Greta
9. *"Och sen med Lgr 11 så kom kunskapskraven. Det finns många fördelar men jag tycker skolan har blivit väldigt teoretisk och tråkig."* - Anna
10. *"Det blev högre krav med den nya läroplanen att du verkligen ska bedöma eleverna, årskurs 3 och 6 och så. Men också under tiden, vägen fram då sen."* - Britta
11. *"Man är en slags minichef för 80 personer varje dag, med alla olika individuella behov, alla krav som är inbäddat i skolans ledarskap. Samhällets förväntningar på skolan, att tillgodose varje individs behov gör att man aldrig blir färdig, aldrig har gjort tillräckligt."* - Cajsa
12. *"Det kändes som att jag aldrig riktigt hann göra ett riktigt bra jobb, för jag hann liksom inte riktigt."* - Hedvig

13. *“Vill man vara duktig pedagog och göra ett bra jobb, så kommer du antingen att jobba ihjäl dig och gå in i väggen för att det krävs för mycket för att du ska klara det. Eller så måste du välja att lägga ner din egen ambitionsnivå vilket skapar frustration och otillräcklighet.” - Inga*
14. *“Man skulle aldrig ifrågasätta en läkare eller en tandläkare om deras profession, medan skolan har alla gått i och har någonting att tycka och tänka om.” - Britta*
15. *“Idag har det ju vridits något otroligt till att det bara är skolan som har skyldigheter och elever och vårdnadshavare som har rättigheter. [...] Och den känslan i hela läraryrket, att jag måste bevisa saker, är inte bra. Det har vänts från förtroende ganska långt till tillbaka, att man litar på att lärarna gör det de ska och de gör det bra, till att de måste bevisa vad de gör i allt hela tiden.” - Inga*
16. *“Så fort det var något litet bråk, så det var någonting, då skulle man skriva en händelserapport på det. Och det handlar bara om att skolan ska ha ryggen fri för att... ja, om det är någon incident som skulle leda till något större så skulle skolan kunna ta fram: “Det här har vi rapporterat och det här har vi gjort” - Greta*
17. *“Jamen det var att man inte hann med att göra allt som man skulle. Man hann aldrig göra allting som man ville. Och sen också att man var helt slut när man kom hem. Så familjen hemma fick ta stryk, kan man säga.” - Greta*
18. *“Jag hade nog lite för svårt för att släppa. Jag har lite för lätt att ta med mig det hem, alltså i huvudet. Och det tror jag inte heller är något vidare bra. Då kunde man ligga och fundera över saker på kvällarna.” - Hedvig*
19. *“Man måste ju prioritera: ska jag gå under... eller ska jag klara jobbet och komma hem och krascha för mina – ja, snart fyra barn, som vi ska ta hand om – eller ska jag ha roligt på jobbet och ha energi när jag kommer hem.” - Diana*
20. *“Det [bristen i styrningen] blev väl också lite det att jag bestämde mig att nej men nu ska jag härifrån.” - Ella*
21. *“[Om försteläraryrket] Men väldigt nyttigt och lärorikt om sig själv också. Så visst var det jobbigt, men jättekul. Så då var det också skönt när man fick tillbaka det. Du är godkänd, du är på topp.” - Britta*
22. *“Jag hade en helt annan stolthet [som förstelärare] och förtroende i mig själv och kunde säga “jag vet vad jag gör, jag vet att jag är bra och jag gör det för att det här”. Den processen var jättenyttig måste jag säga.” - Inga*
23. *“Som lärare kände jag ju ett ansvar för de här små livens framtid på ett annat sätt. Dels att man har det här uppfostransuppdraget, man har det här omhändertagandet.” - Ella*
24. *“Barn är ju helt fantastiska, helt underbara. [...] Att lämna en klass mitt i en termin, och lämna elever som har speciella behov. Det är ett jävla svek om jag ska uttrycka mig så, känns jättejätteilla.” - Felicia*
25. *“... hade jag aldrig bytt från [skolans namn] ... det är inte säkert att jag hade slutat där och då. Lite för att ... eleverna har man känt så länge. De som man har haft som är äldre, dem har man haft sen de gick i fyran, om man säger slöjden. Och även kollegorna, eftersom man trivdes så himla bra. Man får en himla anknytning till dem.” - Hedvig*

26. *“... anledningen till att jag stannade där så pass länge, för det var arbetslaget som gjorde att man i de tuffa perioderna pallade. För man visste att de fanns där och kunde liksom säga åt dig att ‘nu ska du inte ha mer, nu backar du.’” - Inga*
27. *“Ett tag hade vi att man inte fick ta in vikarier utan vi skulle liksom täcka upp för varandra i arbetslaget. [...] Det var lite olika under tiden men sånt höjer ju inte direkt arbetsmoralen heller. Man löser det, man hjälper varandra men jag tycker inte att det var de bästa lösningarna. Och det gjorde ju såklart att man inte ville vara borta eller vara sjuk för det innebar så mycket merjobb.” - Ella*
28. *“Jag tänkte: men ska jag prova? Jag har ju ändå 20 år kvar? Ska jag sitta här i ett klassrum och jobba? Men så tänkte jag att: Okej, lärarjobbet finns kvar, jag har en utbildning och visst det kanske inte ser likadant ut i framtiden som det gör idag, men det kanske ändå är värt att prova. Så då kastade jag mig ut och testade.” - Britta*
29. *“Men när den här tjänsten kom, då blev det “NU har jag möjligheten och valet – ska jag hoppa på eller ska jag inte?” [...] “Nej, då var det faktiskt en bra period där jag kände att det rullade på. Men det lockade för mycket, för att inte hoppa på.” - Inga*
30. *“[Fördelar med det nya yrket] Friheten. Jag tyckte jag hade frihet som lärare också, men jag kunde inte ta det i mitt eget tempo. Jag kunde inte styra min egen tid. Jag var bunden till andras tider, elevernas tider, kollegornas tider, mötestider. Nu bokar jag in själv. [...] Jag är fortfarande lärare, det säger jag alltid när jag ska presentera mig.” - Anna*
31. *“[Fördelar med det nya yrket] Man bestämmer mer över sin tid. Jag sitter inte och funderar någonting hemma när jag kommer hem. Vi har inga utvecklingssamtal, inga sådana. Jag jobbar när jag jobbar och när jag kommer hem så är jag ledig.” - Hedvig*