Research Proposal Sample: Master's, Qualitative

About this document

A complete research proposal, written by Grad Coach to show what a well-aligned proposal looks like, section by section. The shaded "Coach's note" boxes explain why each part is written the way it is; they are not part of the proposal. This is an illustrative sample, not a real student's submission, and the study it describes has not been carried out. Its references are real and were checked at source.

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SAMPLE PROPOSAL

Staying or Leaving: How Early-Career Secondary Teachers Experience Workload in Their First Three Years

Degree: Master of Education (MEd)

Proposed method: Qualitative, semi-structured interviews

Word count (excluding references): approx. 1,900

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE TITLE**
>
> A good title tells the reader the topic, the population and the angle in one line. This one names who (early-career secondary teachers), what (workload) and when (first three years). The main title is plain enough that a reader knows the subject before reaching the colon.

1. Introduction and Background

Schools in the United States have struggled for over a decade to keep the teachers they hire. Shortages are uneven: they are sharpest in mathematics, science and special education, and in high-poverty schools (Sutcher et al., 2016). Much of the shortage is driven less by too few people entering the profession than by too many leaving it early, a pattern Ingersoll (2001) described as a "revolving door".

Teacher turnover is costly. Each departure brings recruitment and hiring costs for the district, and high turnover harms student achievement (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Attrition is also much higher among beginning teachers than among their experienced colleagues (Sutcher et al., 2016).

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When researchers ask why teachers leave, working conditions come up again and again: school leadership, relationships with colleagues, time pressure and job-related stress (Johnson et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Workload runs through several of these. Yet it is usually measured as a number on a survey scale. We know much less about what heavy workload actually feels like to a new teacher, which parts of it weigh most, and how it feeds into the decision to stay or go.

This study sets out to fill part of that gap. It will listen to early-career secondary teachers describe their workload in their own words, to understand how it shapes their thinking about whether to stay in the profession.

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE INTRODUCTION**
>
> Notice the funnel. It starts with a broad problem anyone can see (teachers leaving), narrows to who is most affected (new teachers), then to one cause (workload), and ends on what we don't know yet. By the last paragraph, the reader should be able to guess the research aim before reading it.

2. Problem Statement

Survey research consistently links teachers' working conditions, including time pressure and job-related stress, to their plans to leave the profession (Johnson et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Steiner & Woo, 2021). However, these surveys measure how much pressure teachers report, not how they experience it. As a result, school leaders know that workload matters but have little evidence about which parts of it new teachers find hardest to sustain, or why. Without that understanding, retention efforts risk targeting the wrong things, such as cutting hours in one area while the task teachers find most draining stays untouched.

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE TWO-PART PROBLEM STATEMENT**
>
> A strong problem statement has two halves. The first says what is already known ("surveys show workload matters"). The second says what is missing and why that matters ("we don't know how it's experienced, so interventions may miss"). If you can't write the second half, you don't yet have a research problem, only a topic.

3. Research Aim, Objectives and Questions

Aim: To explore how early-career secondary teachers experience workload during their first three years, and how that experience shapes their intentions to stay in or leave the profession.

Objectives:

1. To identify which aspects of workload early-career secondary teachers find most demanding.
2. To understand the resources (support, autonomy, collegial relationships) teachers draw on to manage those demands.
3. To explore how teachers connect their experience of workload to their intentions to stay or leave.

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Research questions:

1. How do early-career secondary teachers describe the demands of their workload?
2. What resources do they draw on to manage those demands, and how adequate do they find them?
3. How do they connect their experience of workload to their thinking about staying in or leaving teaching?

> **COACH'S NOTE · THE GOLDEN THREAD**
> Read the title, aim, objectives and questions side by side. Each objective maps to exactly one research question, and all three sit inside the aim. Later, the interview guide (section 6.4) will map back to these questions too. Examiners look for this alignment before almost anything else. When a proposal is rejected, a broken thread is one of the most common reasons.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Why early-career teachers leave

Research on teacher attrition has moved from asking *who* leaves to asking *why*. Ingersoll's (2001) organizational analysis was influential in shifting attention from individual characteristics toward school conditions. He argued that turnover reflects how schools are run, not just who they hire. Later work supports this. In a statewide survey in Massachusetts, Johnson et al. (2012) found that working conditions explained much of the apparent link between teacher satisfaction and student demographics, and that social conditions (the principal's leadership, school culture and relationships among colleagues) mattered most in predicting teachers' job satisfaction and career plans.

Workload features in most of this work but is rarely the main focus. It tends to appear as one item among many working conditions, measured on a scale and entered into a model alongside others.

4.2 Workload, stress and burnout

A separate body of research links workload to stress and emotional exhaustion. In a study of 2,569 Norwegian teachers, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) found that time pressure was one of six school context factors related to teachers' motivation to leave the profession, and that these relationships ran mainly through emotional exhaustion and feelings of belonging. In the US, a national survey during the COVID-19 pandemic found that nearly one in four teachers were likely to leave their jobs, and that teachers who planned to leave more often reported working conditions linked to stress and burnout (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

These studies establish that workload, stress and leaving are connected. What they cannot show, because of their design, is how teachers themselves understand that connection.

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4.3 Support for new teachers

Induction and mentoring programs are the most common response to early-career attrition. Reviewing 15 empirical studies, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) found that most reported positive effects of induction on teacher commitment and retention, with one notable exception: a large randomized trial in urban, low-income schools found no effect on retention. This suggests that support can buffer early-career demands, but it says less about which kinds of support teachers find useful when workload peaks.

4.4 The gap this study addresses

Taken together, the literature shows that workload matters to early-career retention, and that support can help. The gap is in how: how new teachers experience the demands of their job day to day, which demands weigh most, and what makes the difference between a heavy year and a decision to leave. A qualitative study is suited to this kind of question because it lets participants define what "workload" means to them, rather than responding to a researcher's categories.

COACH'S NOTE · THE LITERATURE REVIEW

This is organized by theme, not by author. Each subsection ends by saying what the research *can't* tell us, and section 4.4 pulls those gaps together into one. That's what makes the review an argument for your study rather than a summary of everyone else's. In a full dissertation this section would be several times longer; in a proposal, show you know the main conversations and where the gap is.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The model holds that every job has demands, the aspects that require sustained effort, and resources, the aspects that help people meet those demands or reduce their cost. When demands are high and resources are low, the model predicts strain and, over time, burnout. When resources are adequate, they can buffer the effect of high demands.

The JD-R model suits this study for two reasons. First, it separates demands from resources, which maps directly onto the first two research questions. Second, it is flexible about what counts as a demand or a resource in a particular job, so it leaves room for teachers to name them in their own terms.

The framework will be used as a lens, not a test. It will inform the interview guide and the early stages of analysis, but themes that fall outside it will be kept and reported.

COACH'S NOTE · THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Say why this framework fits *your* questions, not just what it is. Here the link is explicit: demands → RQ1, resources → RQ2. The last paragraph matters too. In qualitative research, saying the framework is a lens rather than a hypothesis to test shows the examiner you understand the difference.

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6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research design and philosophy

This study takes an interpretivist position: it assumes that teachers' experience of workload is shaped by how they understand it, and that this understanding is best reached through their own accounts. A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews is therefore appropriate. Interviews allow participants to describe their experiences in depth while ensuring each conversation covers the three research questions.

6.2 Participants and sampling

Participants will be teachers who:

- teach in a public secondary school (grades 6-12) in the United States;
- are in their first, second or third year of full-time teaching; and
- are currently employed as a teacher, or left teaching within the last 12 months.

Including recent leavers lets the study hear from teachers who acted on an intention to leave, not only those considering it.

Purposive sampling will be used to recruit 12 to 15 participants, aiming for variety in subject taught, school type and years of experience. Participants will be recruited through professional teacher networks and social media groups for new teachers, with snowball sampling if needed.

The sample size follows Guest et al. (2006), who found that saturation occurred within the first 12 of 60 interviews in their study. Following Malterud et al. (2016), the final number will be judged by information power: recruitment will stop once the interviews are giving rich, relevant data on all three questions.

> **COACH'S NOTE · SAMPLING**
>
> Every sampling decision here has a reason attached: why these criteria, why include leavers, why 12 to 15. "I will interview 12 people" with no justification is one of the most common weaknesses examiners flag. Cite a source for your sample size, and say what would make you stop.

6.3 Data collection

Each participant will take part in one semi-structured interview of 45 to 60 minutes, held by video call at a time that suits them. Interviews will be audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

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6.4 Interview guide

The interview guide is organized around the three research questions:

Research question	Example interview questions
RQ1: Demands	Walk me through a typical week. Which parts of your workload take the most out of you?
RQ2: Resources	When things get heavy, who or what helps? Is there support you wish you had?
RQ3: Stay or leave	Have you thought about leaving teaching? What brought that on? What keeps you here?

The guide will be piloted with one early-career teacher who will not be included in the final sample, and adjusted afterward.

6.5 Data analysis

Transcripts will be analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), following its six phases: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. Coding will be partly deductive, guided by the demands and resources of the JD-R model, and partly inductive, so that themes outside the framework are not lost. Qualitative analysis software (NVivo) will be used to organize the codes.

6.6 Trustworthiness

The study will address trustworthiness using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

- **Credibility:** participants will be invited to review a summary of their interview's main points.
- **Transferability:** the report will describe participants' contexts in enough detail for readers to judge how far the findings apply to their own setting.
- **Dependability:** an audit trail of coding decisions will be kept throughout analysis.
- **Confirmability:** a reflexive journal will record the researcher's assumptions, particularly as a former teacher.

> **COACH'S NOTE · METHODOLOGY**
> The methodology answers three questions for every choice: what will you do, why is it right for your questions, and how will you know it's sound. Notice that the analysis method (thematic analysis) and the framework (JD-R) are connected in 6.5. A methodology that names a framework in section 5 and never uses it again is a broken thread.

7. Ethical Considerations

The study will seek approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before recruitment begins. Participants will receive an information sheet and give written informed consent. They may withdraw at any time before analysis begins without giving a reason.

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Because participants may criticize their schools or leaders, confidentiality is the main ethical risk. Participants will be given pseudonyms, and school names, districts and other identifying details will be removed from transcripts. Recordings will be stored on encrypted university storage and deleted once transcription is verified.

Talking about workload and the decision to leave may be stressful for some participants. The interviewer will remind participants they can pause or skip a question, and a list of teacher support resources will be shared at the end of every interview.

> **COACH'S NOTE · ETHICS**
> Name the specific risk for *your* study, not a generic list. Here the real risks are being identified by an employer and emotional discomfort, and each has a concrete response.

8. Limitations and Delimitations

Delimitations. The study is limited to public secondary school teachers in the US in their first three years. Primary teachers, private school teachers and experienced teachers are excluded, because their workload and career decisions are likely to differ.

Limitations. As a qualitative study with a small purposive sample, the findings will not be statistically generalizable; they aim for depth, not breadth. Recruiting through online networks may over-represent teachers who are more engaged or more frustrated than average. Recent leavers may also recall their experience differently once they are out of the classroom.

> **COACH'S NOTE · LIMITATIONS VS DELIMITATIONS**
> Delimitations are boundaries you chose. Limitations are weaknesses you can't fully control. Stating both shows the examiner you have thought about what your study can and can't claim, before they have to point it out.

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9. Timeline

Month	Activity
1	Finalize proposal; submit IRB application
2	IRB approval; pilot interview; revise interview guide
3-4	Recruitment and interviews
4-5	Transcription and familiarization
5-6	Coding and theme development
7	Write findings and discussion chapters
8	Full draft to supervisor; revisions; submission

COACH'S NOTE · THE TIMELINE

Leave room for the IRB. Ethics approval often takes longer than students expect, and nothing can start until it's granted.

10. Expected Contribution

The study aims to add a qualitative, teacher-centered account to a literature dominated by survey data. Practically, its findings could help school leaders and induction program designers target the specific workload demands new teachers find hardest, and the forms of support that make them sustainable.

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