Too tired to teach?
Key determinants of mental health and early retirement among senior teachers: a comparative and teacher-specific perspective.

Short summary

“The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”

Currently policy makers in Belgium are focused on making teachers and other employees work longer. Policy makers are worried that the financial crisis, increasing life expectancy, expected teacher shortages, and the retirement of the baby boom generation, will put pressure on the social security system and in the end would make the social security system unsustainable. For this reason several pension reforms were implemented such as restricting early retirement possibilities or increasing the statutory retirement age. Although these were already profound reforms, more reforms are planned. At the moment a crucial debate concerns the topic of arduous or hazardous work. The core idea of arduous work revolves around the question if certain occupations or some type of work is mentally or physically too difficult or too tough to continue working until normal retirement.

It is clear that objectifying arduous work to some extent will be a crucial factor in the decision making process. Such an objectification is necessary to prevent the sustainment of myths about the toughness of certain professions based on historical perceptions. In this regard the teaching profession serves as an interesting case. It is widely accepted in the media, political, and academic debate that teaching is a tough and demanding profession. Teachers are often portrayed to experience more stress and mental health problems than other occupations. In addition, since the 80’s Flemish teachers have the possibility to retire earlier than other occupations. Although it was originally implemented as a temporary strategy to make room for a surplus of young teachers and had little to do with mental health, early retirement is now often presented as an indispensable measure to make the profession bearable for senior teachers. Indeed, research and statistics on long term absenteeism of the Flemish department of education and training indicate that senior teachers suffer from high amounts of mental health problems which pushes them prematurely out of the profession.

Thus policy makers are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, there is strong pressure to motivate everybody to work longer. In difficult economic times, a special justification is
needed why an occupational group should be able to exit the workforce earlier than others. On the other hand, the important societal position of teachers is recognized and nobody wants exhausted teachers teaching our children. For this, the education of children is too important for our society. If teachers do report a high amount of (mental) health problems and teaching can be considered a tough profession in comparison to other occupations than leaving the workforce earlier than other professions is a reasonable demand. If not, than there is no reason to give teachers special treatment with regard to their retirement age. Against the background of these ongoing debates on tough professions and the already implemented and upcoming pension reforms, it is highly relevant for society to do an in-depth investigation of 1) the reasons why senior teachers leave the profession early and 2) the mental health of senior teachers. To investigate these topics we follow a dual approach. On the one hand, we focus on teacher-only samples to investigate the specific working conditions and dynamics within the teaching profession. For example, it is crucial to investigate whether often cited problems such as burnout are mainly due to how work is organized or if this is inherent to the intrinsic nature of the profession. On the other hand, we compare senior teachers with senior employees from other occupations. The latter is a distinguishing characteristic of this dissertation because although there exists a lot of high quality research on teachers in Flanders and in the world, with a few exceptions this research is focused on teacher-only samples. To be able to correctly identify the position of teachers relative to other professions a comparative approach is indispensable.

The core of this dissertation is based on one peer reviewed book chapter and four peer reviewed articles of which one is still under review. These publications are:


Van Droogenbroeck, F., & Spruyt, B. I ain’t gonna make it. Comparing job demands-resources and attrition intention between senior teachers and senior employees of six other occupational categories in Flanders. (Under Review)