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Former teachers' perceptions of post-teaching career job satisfaction: lessons for the profession

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ABSTRACT

Teachers worldwide are rethinking their commitment to the profession and their traditional roles in schools and classroom teaching, evidenced by significant global rates of teacher attrition and subsequent teacher shortages. Research aimed at deepening our understanding of teachers' decisions to leave the profession has primarily reported on teachers' intentions to leave the profession, with limited insights from former teachers. In this paper, we report on the second phase of a national study in Australia that focused on understanding teacher attrition from the perspectives of former teachers and their post-teaching work experiences. Framed by the concept of work satisfaction, we draw on in-depth interviews with 25 former teachers from across the country to understand the motivating factors shaping their post-teaching work experiences. Using thematic analysis, the findings revealed the power of professional autonomy, trust, and care as enablers of work satisfaction. These findings have the potential to identify the necessary changes at the individual, school, and systemic levels that would encourage a return to teaching in schools and strategies aimed at enhancing retention.

Introduction

Teacher shortages remain a critical issue for education worldwide. The UNESCO Global Report on Teachers (2023) projected a worldwide shortfall of 44 million primary and secondary teachers by 2030, showing countries including the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), and Australia will be critically impacted. To illustrate, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) Teacher Labour Market in England Annual Report described the teacher workforce supply in England to be in a "critical state" (McLean et al., 2024, p. 3), with the UK Government School Workforce in England Report (UK Government, 2024) identifying an increase of 20% in teacher vacancies between 2022–2023, representing a twofold increase from 2020. In the US, Garcia, Han, and Weiss (2022) projected a shortfall of 200,000 new teachers nationwide by 2024, while the recent Australia Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) Report (AITSL, 2023) noted

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that the 0.2% growth in registered teachers between 2019–2020 fell short of the required 2.4%, nationally.

While teacher recruitment has received significant policy attention to bolster work-force numbers (Garcia, Han, & Weiss, 2022; McLean et al., 2024), researchers have argued that the attrition of teachers must also be given concerted attention (Hulme, 2022). UNESCO (2023) argues that at least half of the global shortfall is due to teachers leaving the profession. In England, for example, 44% more teachers in 2022/23 indicated they intended to leave the profession than during the previous year (McLean et al., 2024) and in Australia, 35% of teachers indicated they were likely to leave the profession before retirement, with most likely to do so in the short-term (AITSL, 2023).

Given the purported negative impact of teacher attrition on, for example, student learning (Perryman & Calvert, 2019), the social cohesion and morale of schools (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022), and school and system financial resources (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Perryman & Calvert, 2019), numerous studies have been undertaken to understand teachers' intentions to leave the profession in Australia (Heffernan et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2019) and internationally (Räsänen et al., 2020; Vergara-Morales & Del Valle, 2023). While useful in understanding reasons that may lead to leaving teaching, these studies do not leverage the important insights of former teachers. A much smaller set of studies has addressed this perspective in international contexts (see, for example, Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Devers et al., 2024; Elsayed & Roch, 2023) with even fewer studies from Australia (Brandenburg et al., 2024; Buchanan, 2010). Also referred to in the literature as leavers (Brummet et al., 2024; Hancock, 2016) or ex-teachers (Agezo, 2010; Buchanan, 2010), there is a further absence of research that has considered what can be learned by investigating former teachers' post-teaching work experiences.

In this paper, we argue that such an investigation yields important insights into what factors former teachers, having also experienced teaching, may particularly value in the way they experience their work after leaving their school-connected teaching careers. In doing so, we aim to contribute a nuanced perspective on teacher attrition and reten-tion. Framed by the construct of job satisfaction (Judge et al., 2020; Ortan et al., 2021), we sought to understand the factors that were foregrounded by former teachers as providing them with gratifying post-teaching work experiences. To this end, this paper reports on Phase Two of a larger national study on teacher attrition in Australia (Brandenburg et al., 2024) as an under-researched yet rich investigative context.

Building on this project's Phase One exploratory survey of 256 former teachers, this Phase 2 paper reports on the findings of 25 in-depth interviews undertaken with former teachers across Australia. We address the following research question:

> How do former teachers perceive their job satisfaction is supported in their post-teaching working lives?

In the sections that follow, we first review current international and Australian studies about teacher attrition to map current understandings from the field. Next, we explain the conceptual framework for this study, before detailing the methods for this study. Find-ings are then presented and discussed. We conclude this paper by discussing the impli-cations of the study for policy, practice, and future research.

Leaving the teaching profession

The persistent challenge of teacher workforce shortages has prompted an increasing number of studies about teacher attrition and retention from across the world including Australia (Brandenburg et al., 2024; Heffernan et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2019), the UK (Arthur & Bradley, 2023; Perryman & Calvert, 2019), and the US (Garcia et al., 2022; Lochmiller et al., 2024). Most commonly these studies have focused on teachers' intentions to leave, taking a pre-emptive approach by drawing on the perceptions of serving teachers to understand if, when, and why they might choose to exit the profession (Heffernan et al., 2022; Longmuir et al., 2023; Sims & Allen, 2018). Such studies have reported a range of motivating factors, including salary (Liu, 2021), working conditions (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018; Stacey et al., 2022), intensified workload and the rise of administrative requirements (Creagh et al., 2023; Longmuir et al., 2023), and an escalating culture of professional accountability (Rodriguez et al., 2020; Stacey et al., 2022) resulting in teacher burnout, stress, and a loss of teachers from the workforce (Taylor, 2023).

Less prevalent in the research are studies investigating the leaving decisions of former teachers; that is, those who have left their teaching careers to take up alternative careers (though not necessarily completely disconnected from education) or in some instances, retire. Among these, Amitai and Van Houtte (2022) and others (Glazer, 2018; Trent, 2016) have reported how former teachers left due to "demoralisation" (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022, p. 8) and "disenchantment" (LaTronica-Herb & Karalis Noel, 2023, p. 5). In this instance, they believed that education was failing to meet students' needs or address social justice. Similarly, Trent (2016) reported how former teachers had struggled to work within the confines of "socially and historically specific conceptions of how to be, how to act and how to understand their work as teachers" (p. 88). Their stories, and those of former teachers in Glazer's (2018) study, were framed by frustration at what they perceived as expectations of conformity that constrained their ability to practice effective teaching. Underpinned by their beliefs and experience as "good teachers", they left as conscientious objectors (O'Brien et al., 2008).

Other factors contributing to former teachers' decisions to leave the profession have been highlighted. Experienced former teachers in a US study by Devers et al. (2024) explained how feeling undervalued and underappreciated by parents, colleagues, and school administration undermined their ability to remain as teachers, along with financial stress; limited support from leaders; and constraints to professional autonomy that led to teacher burnout. Amitai and Van Houtte's (2022) study adds a "flat career structure" (p. 8) to this list of issues. Former teachers mentioned to a much lesser extent administrative burden and curriculum changes.

With a limited number of studies drawing on former teachers to understand reasons for leaving, even fewer have explored their post-teaching career experiences. For example, a 2024 study by Australian researchers Brandenburg et al. argued that reasons for leaving the profession were complex and cumulative, but only briefly discussed the diversity of newly acquired education- and non-education-connected careers. Howes and Goodman-Delahunty (2014) surveyed Australian former teachers, reporting on the perceived negatives and positives of assuming new careers after teaching; however, their findings were aggregated with data from teachers only intending to leave and change careers. Similarly, an early case study by Agezo (2010) of former

teachers in Ghana offered a limited understanding of former teachers' subsequent work experiences beyond their satisfaction with their salaries.

A later qualitative study by Mawhinney and Rinke (2018) of US teachers underscored how former teachers may see working on the "outside" of teaching as enabling them to have a greater impact on education. Similarly, Hernández-Johnson et al. (2021) provided some description of the career moves of Teachers of Colour in the US, following teaching careers in which they felt "ignored, marginalised, unacknowledged, unrecognised, and underrepresented in school spaces" (p. 1936), and felt they could make a difference through community and Higher Education employment.

Australian researcher Buchanan (2010) went further in elucidating the post-teaching career experiences of former teachers who had moved entirely outside the field, where they experienced greater support, flexibility, prestige, work-life balance, and collegiality. While workload was not always deemed lesser than during their teaching, it was described as less intense. Interestingly, both Buchanan (2010) and Brummet et al. (2024) found most former teachers did not experience higher salaries in their post-teaching careers, suggesting that salary was not a strong "pull" factor in teacher attrition.

Consequently, studies foregrounding the voices of former teachers are still emerging. Among these, most remain focused on former teachers' reasons for leaving and to a lesser extent, on what can be learned from their subsequent career experiences. In this study, we address this limitation by capturing the rich insights of former teachers regarding their post-teaching job satisfaction, thus offering a unique perspective in this space.

Conceptual framework

In this study, we draw on the concept of job satisfaction to frame our thinking about the factors that support a positive appraisal (Locke, 1969) of one's work experiences. Locke suggests (1969), "job satisfaction is the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one's job values" (p. 316). Locke (1969) goes on to say, "job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are a function of the perceived relationship between what one wants from one's job and what one perceives it as offering or entailing" (p. 316). In other words, job satisfaction arises when one's work is perceived to fulfil those aspects of work that are valued and desired. Job dissatisfaction has been reported to positively correlate with work attrition among professionals, including teachers (Beymer et al., 2022; Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Several studies have sought to understand the factors that influence teachers' levels of job satisfaction. While personal characteristics, such as age and gender, have been inconsistently linked to varying extents to job satisfaction (see, for example, Liu & Ramsey, 2008), a clearer connection has been made to context. For example, Longmuir et al. (2023) found a decrease in teachers' reported job satisfaction from 65.9% in 2019 to 45.8%. They cited workload as the primary factor negatively impacting their job satisfaction, with relationships and making a difference as key contributors to job satisfaction. Other studies have made the connection between teachers' job satisfaction and school culture (Banerjee et al., 2017), school climate (Otrębski, 2022), decision-making opportunities (Brezicha et al., 2020), teacher collaboration (Toropova et al., 2021), and student-teacher relationships (Harrison et al., 2023).

Innovatively, this study uses job satisfaction to frame its investigation of post-teaching work experiences, which may add to our understanding of what job-related factors are highly valued by teachers to the extent that they are highlighted within their post-teaching careers. In essence, former teachers' subsequent career decisions and what they come to appreciate and not appreciate about their post-teaching work experiences serve to foreground what factors related to their job satisfaction are gained, and potentially lost, as a consequence of their career shift. In doing so, factors perceived as valuable to job satisfaction that could be leveraged in the teaching profession, and those that potentially need to be cultivated as priorities, can be illuminated.

Methods

Participants for this study were former teachers in Australia who had left teaching between 2016 and 2024. Following ethics approval from the relevant universities' Human Research Ethics Committees (ETH2024-0303, 2022-171; H24052), potential participants were opportunistically recruited across a two-month period via a social media post on Facebook and LinkedIn platforms. Participants completed a short online survey of primarily multi-choice questions to collect initial demographic information, followed by participation in one-to-one, online, semi-structured interviews (Appendix A).

Study participants

Online survey data were analysed using simple descriptive statistics (Madrigal, 2012) to generate an individual and aggregated profile of participants. A total of 25 participants were recruited for the study (Appendix B), and at the time of leaving the profession, they represented six of Australia's eight states and territories: Queensland, ($n = 7$, 28%), New South Wales, ($n = 3$, 20%), Victoria, ($n = 3$, 12%), Northern Territory, ($n = 8$, 32%) Western Australia, ($n = 1$, 4%), and South Australia, ($n = 1$, 4%). However, one of these former teachers had also spent most of their career in the Australian Capital Territory. They represented a broad range of ages, and most had left teaching in 2022 or 2023 (56%). The remainder had left teaching between 2016 and 2021. Participants included those who had left teaching pre-, during, and after the COVID-19 emergency period.

A range of geographic contexts were represented, with a balance of participants having taught in regional (52%) and metropolitan (48%) contexts during their careers and one located in a remote context at the time of leaving the profession. 76% were in a full-time role at the time of exiting teaching, with the remainder in contract (8%), part-time (12%), and casual relief teaching (4%) positions. Former teachers working largely in the primary or elementary years made up 48% of the participant group, with the remainder working mostly in the secondary or high school years. Most participants were classroom teachers (40%) and 44% were in curriculum and department leader roles.

Key reasons for leaving the profession (Figure 1) were obtained via a ranking question in the online survey and used, in part, to inform the development of the interview schedule and to deepen our background understanding of participants before interviewing. While school leadership (28%) and workload (20%) were most significantly ranked first, a range of other key reasons were reported, representing a diversity of responses.
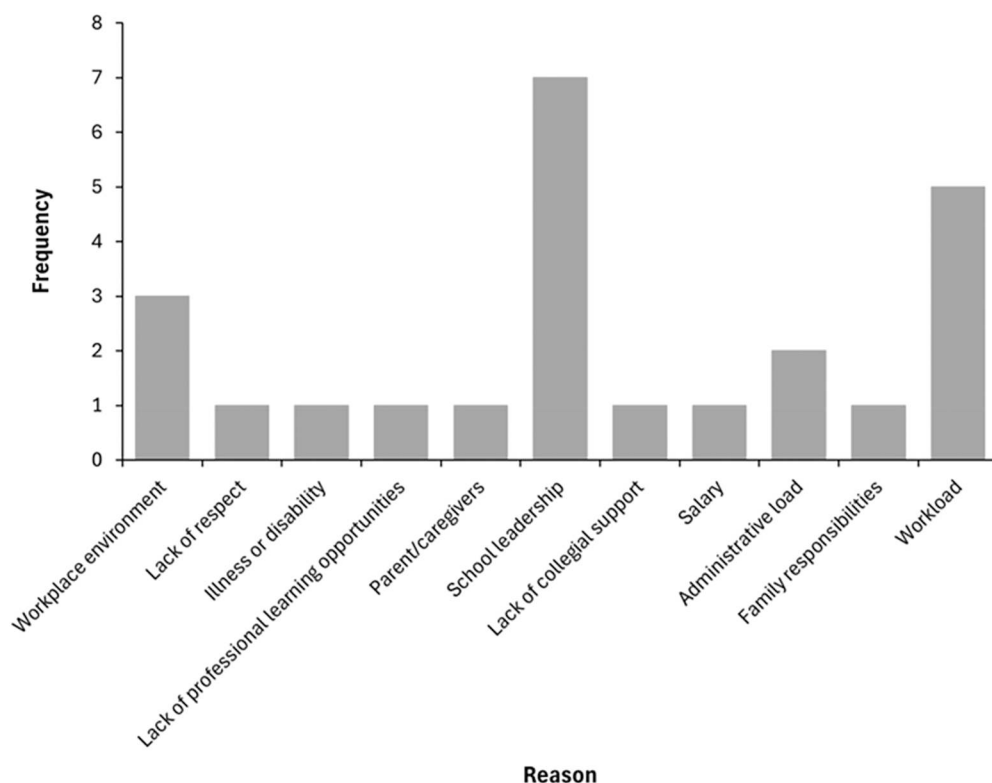
Figure 1. Reasons for leaving as ranked first by participants.

After leaving the classroom, the former teachers sought employment in a range of career pathways, with the majority ($n = 20$) pursuing employment in roles that related to education. Of these, many participants ($n = 12$) pursued career opportunities in Higher Education, taking on roles as teacher educators. Other education-connected roles included curriculum and resource designers ($n = 2$), career advisors ($n = 1$), education consulting businesses ($n = 3$), vocational studies teachers ($n = 1$), and sports training and development ($n = 1$). A minority of the former teachers ($n = 3$) pursued career opportunities outside of education, including the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and Government public service positions ($n = 2$). Each participant was allocated a code to protect their anonymity, with individual participants' "state" locations not included in this table to remove the risk of identification.

Interviews

Online, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with 25 former Australian teachers were conducted by the researchers using Microsoft Teams from March to May 2024. These interviews gathered insights into how former teachers experienced teaching; the factors related to their decisions to leave the profession; how they were experiencing their post-teaching work/careers; and the reasons for these perceptions. The conceptual framework of the study, underpinned by job satisfaction, guided, in large part, the

development of the semi-structured interview questions. Each interview took between 30 and 40 min. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by Teams, and all transcripts were subsequently checked for accuracy against the recordings and de-identified. Participants were invited to check the transcripts for accuracy.

Interview data underwent an inductive-deductive process of thematic analysis, drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2022). First, all members of the team read and familiarised themselves with the transcripts. The team then met to discuss their emerging sense of these data, before collaboratively coding two randomly selected transcripts to develop an emergent coding manual. Each team member then individually coded three more transcripts, adding further codes and noting where initial codes required refinement. The team then met to negotiate additional codes or those flagged for reconsideration. A coding manual was subsequently developed and applied, through refinement, to all transcripts. The research team then collaboratively grouped the codes into themes specific to the focus of this paper (focused primarily on interview questions bolded in Appendix A): how the former teachers in this study experience their post-teaching work/careers, and the reasons they perceived for how they do so. These themes were subsequently considered through the lens of job satisfaction as the conceptual framing for this study. To that end, codes were categorised and compared with factors identified in prior literature, as outlined in the conceptual framework section, with further sub-themes added that were significant to this study (Figure 2).

Findings and discussion

In the following section, we discuss the findings across three themes that encapsulate the key factors linked to the former teachers' perceptions of job satisfaction in their post-teaching careers: (1.) work conditions, (2.) work culture, and (3.) meaningful work. While we present these themes separately, we are not suggesting these exist in isolation of one another, but rather as an interactive and overlapping suite of factors that are part of a larger tapestry.

Work conditions

Drawing on the work of Hasan et al. (2021, p. 5), we use the term "work conditions" to refer to "the characteristics of the job and workplace structural factors". In this theme, we have identified accountabilities, workload, flexibility, and salary.

Accountabilities

Six participants shared how their current roles offered them greater freedom from bureaucracy, giving them a sense of space to be creative and make autonomous decisions. As Elliot, who worked as a career advisor explained, this constituted "100% professional freedom", while for Chris and others (Finley, Dillon), the autonomy made them feel "trusted". Jory, now working in Higher Education, concurred, also stating that "they trust that I am going to go in and do what I'm gonna' do". Dillon put this down to "professional courtesy and respect".

Several participants explained how they relished the absence of multiple layers of approvals and permissions to make changes, initiate new ideas, and respond in ways
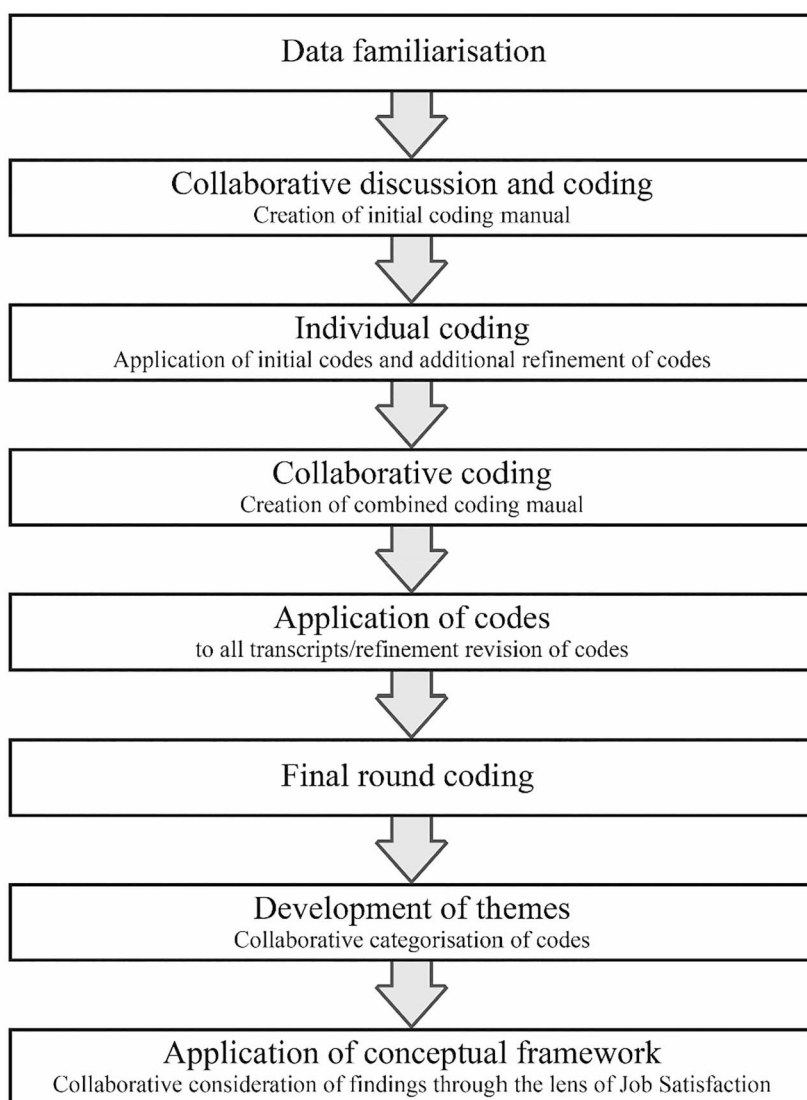
Figure 2. Process of analysis.

they felt were essential to do their jobs well. To illustrate, Cameron, moving into her own business after being a curriculum leader in a secondary school, stated that not having to constantly "ask for permission" gave her a chance to feel that her work had purpose. Others, like Elliot and Chris, noted that while they still had "guidelines and principles" (Chris) that framed their work, accountability processes were less restrictive on their time and autonomy. Elliot described decision making no longer needed to "go to a committee … write up a case". For others, accountabilities and bureaucracy remained a part of their post-teaching work, with Emerson describing that their current job "comes with its own misery and bureaucratic things … Because I'm running a business and there's still compliance". Exiting teaching, therefore, does not always mean a reprieve from the

stress and limitations of accountabilities. However, for some, bureaucracy and account-abilities were perceived as less of a barrier to "good work" (Chris).

Previous studies identified that teachers have found escalating accountabilities in the workplace to compromise their sense of professionalism. Constantly required to evidence their capacity to meet professional requirements and expectations (Rodriguez et al., 2020; Stacey et al., 2022), it is understandable that our participants foregrounded the importance placed on feeling trusted in the workplace. Devers et al. (2024) and others (Glazer, 2018; Trent, 2016) have also found a lack of autonomy to prompt teachers to leave their school careers, and while teachers' job satisfaction has been shown to positively correlate with decision-making opportunities (Brezicha et al., 2020), this study underscores the autonomy and trust as significantly valued work conditions. As the outcome of what are perceived to be more reasonable accountabilities, our study may highlight the extent to which these valued needs (Locke, 1969) are not being met in teachers' work conditions.

Workload

Of the 25 participants, 12 mentioned that they found the manageability of the workload in their current roles improved their work-life balance when compared with their teaching career. Elliot put this down to, in part, the fact that while they had new ideas for how things could be done emerging in their work, this did not mean "discarding everything … [but] building upon what is established and what works, which is good" (Clarke).

Of significance was their ability, at the end of the working day, to "disconnect from work and prioritise family" (Dillon). As Jordan, a 24-year teaching veteran, described, "I get to go home at the end of the day and leave my day at work". The participants spoke about the more manageable workload they encountered post-teaching and the opportunities this opened to invest in their own education (Eden) and enjoy other life activities. Kelly, now working in Higher Education, reflected:

> Because I can get my work done in the time available and then it means that I can go and learn Spanish on a Monday night and go and learn lead lining on a Wednesday night and volunteer on a Friday night … All the sorts of things that enrich your life, you know, and I've got the time and the energy for that.

Consequently, they felt that their career shift had improved their overall well-being, with Kelly explaining that she was " … so much more relaxed. I just can't get over that. I can get everything done in the time that I need to do it".

However, for some participants, the shift away from teaching did not result in a notable improvement in workload. Emerson, for example, shared how establishing their own business was a significant and unrelenting time investment. While others such as Clancy found their workload in Higher Education to improve their work experience, Campbell found that they had gone from the "frying pan to fire". While they had thought "it might be better than a school, it wasn't". Workloads that enable a sense of well-being and an opportunity to have an outside-of-work life were highly valued, even where post-teaching careers did not necessarily afford a decrease in workload responsibilities.

Workload has been well-reported as a key driver for leaving the profession among studies of teachers' intentions to leave (Heffernan et al., 2022; Longmuir et al., 2023;

Sims & Allen, 2018) and former teachers (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Brandenburg et al., 2024), most often linked to teacher burnout (Taylor, 2023). Moreover, studies similarly noted that former teachers have reported more manageable workloads in their post-teaching work (Buchanan, 2010; Hancock, 2016). Specific to this study, former teachers foregrounded a manageable workload as a significantly valued aspect of their post-teaching work conditions that enabled them to achieve both personal and professional goals, and in doing so, highlighted the significance of what teachers may want and need from their work, and are currently not experiencing in their school-based employment. Furthermore, this study points to the ready availability of alternative work for teachers that can satisfy these "job values" (Locke, 1969, p. 316).

Flexibility

Alongside reduced workloads, the trust afforded the participants in their current work led many to experience a level of work flexibility that enabled them to create a work-life balance. Nearly half of the participants in this study ($n = 11$) referred to work flexibility as being a positive outcome of their exit from the teaching profession, explaining the value of such arrangements for managing family responsibilities. As a former Department Leader in a Secondary School, Reese, now working in Higher Education, explained:

> I do get to set my own hours. … I don't have to leave the house at 7:30 am. And when my kids are sick. You know, like I can take a day off without having to rewrite a lesson plan and send it in before 8:15 am.

These former teachers relished the chance to "do their work and their life well" (Jordan).

Alongside providing the opportunity to meet work and family responsibilities, work arrangements supported their personal well-being. For Jory in Higher Education, the ability to plan out their day flexibly gave them time to "tune out" and recoup their energy. Chris saw this flexibility as an aspect of his work as a Training Developer that his employers specifically arranged. He explained that:

> I've gotta travel a little bit. If I have four days of constant work and different hours of work, then the expectation of me is the next day I need to take some hours for myself. I need to make sure I take a break and I'm told that don't keep doing it because they don't want me to burn out as well. They don't want their employees to burn out.

Similarly to Hancock's (2016) and Buchanan's (2010) studies of former teachers who identified flexibility arrangements in their new career contexts as a positive for achieving a more beneficial work-life balance, participants in this study underscored the importance of job flexibility to their perceptions of job satisfaction. Interestingly, this study went beyond previous studies to show how the availability of flexible arrangements as part of their post-teaching working conditions was conceived of as evidence of being cared for in their new workplaces. In doing so, this study has made clear the interrelationship between flexible work conditions (Hasan et al., 2021) and achieving a positive work culture (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020) whereby former teachers felt cared for and valued; thus identifying a potential approach to addressing teachers' reported concerns about the lack of care and respect afforded teachers in the workplace (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Brandenburg et al., 2024).

Salary

Interestingly only four participants discussed salaries, and among these, each offered a different perspective. For example, when Jordan had an opportunity to return to teaching, salary was a key factor in deciding to remain in their post-teaching career as a public servant. She stated, "I get paid really well … so it was a money thing for me". In contrast, another lamented the limits placed on them due to the loss of stable employment since leaving their teaching career. Working in Higher Education meant that casual short-term contracts impacted their life financially, such as when applying for a loan (Reese). A former teacher who now works in the Australian Defence Force, who had been a primary classroom teacher for 10 years, weighed up salary versus enjoyability and stated, "I am not paid as much as what I would be earning as a teacher, however, it's more enjoyable" (Quinn).

Overall, it is again interesting that such a small group mentioned salary when discussing their new careers, and among these, only one spoke about salary as a negative in comparison to their teaching careers. In contrast to the work of Liu (2021) and others (see, for example, Agezo, 2010), this study did not find that salary was a consistent factor raised by former teachers as contributing to their post-teaching job satisfaction. Like Buchanan (2010) and later, Brummet et al. (2024), we posit that salary is not a defining factor in determining the extent to which former teachers feel satisfied in their new careers and therefore, for this population, may be unlikely to serve as a singularly influential condition that would retain teachers in schools.

Work culture

We define work culture as the character and tone of the workplace, and the extent to which a feeling of belonging, connectedness, and being valued and respected is fostered. According to Erichsen and Reynolds (2020), such a work culture is strongly influenced by relationships with colleagues and leaders. We speak to each of these sub-themes.

Leaders and leadership

Within their current workplaces, leaders (or employers) were important to participants' feelings of value and worth. Six participants all commented on the value of "good leadership" (Clancy), the impact of which is described by Sam:

> I think having really good support around me has been like a really positive aspect. Having a direct line manager who understands; who mentors and coaches; and actively listens really helps. I don't feel intimidated to go and speak with the managers. And it's like an open-door policy.

The most notable characteristic of the leaders and managers to whom they referred was the trust they placed in their expertise, making them feel "valued, drawn upon, appreciated, respected" (Riley). Remy similarly experienced a newfound sense of recognition by leadership. She stated:

> She has complete faith in my knowledge and skills, and when I go to her and say, "Do you think I could do this?", she goes, "I trust you. Just go and do it" … the idea that someone goes you're the professional. I trust your judgment. That, to me, is just gold.

The affective impact of leadership in the post-teaching roles of the participants made a significant contribution to the way they were now experiencing their careers. Leadership and an associated lack of support have been identified as a key factor in teachers' intentions and decisions to leave the profession (Creagh et al., 2023; Devers, 2024; Longmuir et al., 2023). Leaders have been perceived as exacerbating workload and administrative expectations (Creagh et al., 2023; Longmuir et al., 2023) and lacking the essential relationality required to foster the kind of work culture that is essential to job satisfaction (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020). This study underscores the significant value that former teachers place in feeling cared for, trusted, and respected by leaders in the school setting and how this can be achieved, as evidenced in their post-work, by making space for open communication channels and trust-based responsibility.

Collegial collaboration and connection

Importantly, of the ten references to collegial collaboration and connection discussed by participants, there was an overwhelming representation of a loss of connection and collaboration with colleagues upon leaving their teaching careers. Key words and phrases participants used to describe this loss included "isolating" (Cameron), "depressing" (Finley) and Clarke stated, "I miss the kids. I miss the collegiality". One participant who had worked in independent schools for 12 years as a curriculum leader and who now works in Higher Education stated that, "I struggle in this new job. I spend a lot of time alone. And that's hard for me" (Indra). Remy also felt a similar sense of isolation after more than 20 years in a government primary school, and now moving into an education consultancy role where working closely with colleagues "is probably what I miss the most".

In contrast, some participants ($n = 3$) were relishing their new career and the collegiality and opportunities for connections. In all instances, these participants had moved into education-connected roles in technical and further education (TAFE) and Higher Education. Notably, for some who had exited the teaching profession, there was a perceived or experienced exclusion from the previous school teaching community. Described as a "closed circle" (Clarke), she explained how:

> As soon as you leave the classroom, you are not part of the fraternity. You're seen as like you sold out or you don't understand what it's like … you just don't have the credibility that you had.

Thus, leaving the profession can be an isolating experience.

The absence of a strong connection with students was also mentioned by the majority of participants ($n = 18$), with Drew sharing the following sentiments: "I get to work on professional learning. I get to work with teachers. I get to promote the status of teaching, and it's all lovely. But geez, I miss kids and I miss teaching".

Other participants, in stark contrast, find that now having a role with some connection to education is more than enough. For example, Sam stated, "I am still associated with schools and I'm still going into classrooms". While Longmuir et al. (2023) and others (Harrison et al., 2023; Toropova et al., 2021) have previously argued that relationships strongly contribute to teachers' job satisfaction, this study, while not discounting the value of this relationality to teachers' job satisfaction, does place in doubt the extent to which collegial

and student relationships have sufficient tractive force to keep teachers or return them to the profession. Despite these former teachers' less conspicuous access to relationships and connections in their post-teaching contexts, and their lament at the loss of these relationships as also identified in previous studies (see, for example, Brandenburg et al., 2024), it appears the impact of these reduced connections on their job satisfaction is mediated by the availability of other factors such as trust, autonomy, respect, and meaningful work.

Meaningful work

According to Weston et al. (2021), meaningful work is defined as work perceived to have purpose and worth. In this study, sub-themes of education by another name, and meaningful expertise were identified.

Education by another name

Some participants highlighted their contributions to education as a key factor in the positive way they were experiencing their post-teaching careers. Four participants specifically mentioned that they still feel that they are making contributions to education, and in some cases, schools and teachers, which remains an important professional goal for them. For example, Taylor, now a curriculum designer, found that her work still offered the opportunity to support teachers in schools. She explained, "I think I have a lot greater influence on supporting kids with their learning by supporting the teachers in front of them".

Those in university roles also reported that they felt a greater positive impact in the teaching profession because, as Perry stated, "I just teach teachers so that they can help kids, and I think that's an enormous privilege because I get to help more kids than the 48 in front of me". Others explained that they still "wanted to help schools … [rather than] just being a classroom teacher all the time" (Emerson). For example, Remy worked directly with schools and Higher Education institutions to provide professional learning for preservice teachers, teachers, and teacher educators, which she ultimately felt could "make a real difference for kids". Kelly concurred, explaining that, "in some ways [my new job] gives me the opportunity to still have that connection with the craft of teaching and to be able to still experience those things which I do still believe in and love". That said, Eden and Charlie both enjoyed working with in-service and preservice teachers as it came, from their perspectives, without the same pressure of accountability for student learning outcomes they had felt in the classroom.

In some instances, former teachers still had the opportunity to work directly with students. Drew felt this was important as she could do more than "just creating resources" and instead connect with students in schools in a broader capacity across more than one school or sector. Similarly, Cameron, through developing her own business based on student health and wellbeing, felt she was making a difference in a way that she had felt unable to, due to constraints of time and expectations, as a teacher. While not specific to schools or students, Chris considered his role in sports training and development to enable him to make a significant contribution to their clientele, thus bringing him a similar sense of purpose that inspired him to become a teacher.

The former teachers in this study had a solid foundation for success in their chosen professional contexts and could focus on elements of the teaching profession that they enjoyed the most. Through the lens of job satisfaction, this study emphasises the role of education in former teachers' attainment of "job-related needs" (Evans, 1997, p. 328) even after leaving school-based teaching. In other words, remaining "education-connected" (Brandenburg et al., 2024, p. 14), but outside of the perceived challenges inherent to the school context and system, contributes to former teachers' perceptions that they are still working in a way that makes a difference, and is a key factor in teachers' job satisfaction (Longmuir et al., 2023).

It would therefore seem that a lost passion for education does not drive former teachers' decisions to leave, or their choice to stay away, but rather their perception that factors experienced in the school context undermine the job satisfaction derived from making a difference to such an extent that it is no longer tenable. Furthermore, many former teachers have found alternative contexts that still fulfil their need to be involved in meaningful education-connected work.

Meaningful expertise

These former teachers were able to bring a versatile skill set to their new roles, demonstrating the adaptability of teaching skills outside of classroom teaching. To illustrate, Finley, still in an education-connected role as an online resource developer for teachers, makes use of her intimate knowledge of the curriculum to identify resource "gaps", while Kingsley feels she is "applying the same skills I was using as a teacher" for curriculum design in the Higher Education context. One former teacher spoke about how they were able to transfer their teaching expertise to support the differentiation of adult learners, an area in Higher Education that they felt was usually "completely disregarded" (Dillon).

Beyond education-connected roles, Campbell stated they "draw on a lot of the skills that I developed as a teacher. Communication skills, working with different audiences" as a public servant. Similarly, teaching experience provides Quinn with strong people management and leadership skills put to effective use as a Defence Officer. Interestingly, Sam, a former primary teacher of eight years now working in Higher Education stated, "I don't think the skills and the leadership qualities that I've obtained from doing my job would be utilised" should they return to the classroom, suggesting that skills brought to teaching may not always be able to be leveraged in quite the same way.

In Chris' opinion, "It is amazing that we don't lose a hell of a lot more teachers. They stay because it can be scary to leave. But if they knew how transferrable their skills were, and how employable they were, even more would be leaving". According to these former teachers, there is a wealth of work opportunities beyond teaching in a school, and they have found a way to leverage the knowledge and skills they developed during their time in the classroom to secure satisfying alternative careers. Given previous research has noted that teachers feel "demoralisation" (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022, p. 8) and "disenchantment" (LaTronica-Herb & Karalis Noel, 2023, p. 5), and frustration (Glazer, 2018) at their inability to put their skills and expertise into practice in the school setting, it is alarming that upon leaving teaching, opportunities to do so seem more accessible.

Limitations

Findings withstanding, the authors recognise the study's limitations and suggest that any reading of the findings be done so with these in mind. First, the study is small-scale and as such, the representativeness of the participant sample to the larger former teacher population across states/territories or specific post-teaching careers cannot be claimed. For example, the high representation of former school-based teachers working in higher education contexts may be specific to recruitment methods for this study, and therefore while interesting in this study, may not be representative of the post-teaching career choices of the broader former teacher population in Australia or elsewhere. Second, the Australia-centric focus of the study may not render generalisability of findings to other international contexts, and therefore, the authors encourage the uptake of comparative research work. Finally, we acknowledge that alternative methodologies may offer different perspectives and insights. For example, while we have drawn on job satisfaction using a qualitative approach to gather rich experiential insights, a quantitative approach using scaled data instruments may add value to our findings.

Conclusion and possibilities

In a research field dominated by studies focused on intentions to leave (Heffernan et al., 2022; Longmuir et al., 2023; Sims & Allen, 2018), and to a much lesser extent, former teachers' reasons for leaving (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Brandenburg et al., 2024; Devers, 2024), this study offers a different perspective to the issues of teacher retention and attrition by investigating how former teacher participants experienced their post-teaching careers. In doing so, the findings revealed the kinds of work conditions, work culture, and meaningful work that these former teachers valued and experienced. These findings may thus serve as useful lessons for the profession, informing recommendations for policy and practice that leverage our understanding of what former teachers perceive as those aspects of work that are valued and desired (Locke, 1969).

Teachers are highly employable, and they are finding alternative work that can, from their perspective, provide job satisfaction. The teaching profession, and the school-based teaching profession to be more specific, must compete with these alternative work contexts if it is to retain teachers for longer. This challenge will require incorporating ways of working to ensure that teachers can feel a sense of autonomy, trust, respect, and care through a re-imagining of work conditions, culture, and opportunities for meaningful work. To this end, we offer the following broad recommendations, not as a panacea for teacher shortages and attrition, but rather as a provocation for discussion at the school and system levels where such ideas would require contextualisation.

First, from the perspective of work conditions, we recommend revisiting system and school accountabilities and requirements to weigh the potential for productive impact against impost on teachers. Reimagining possibilities for flexibility through role sharing, and flexible and hybrid roles within and beyond the school setting may provide teachers with opportunities to do work and life well. Second, under the theme of work culture, we suggest that opportunities are sought for authentic collegial connection, in conjunction with enabling student relationships to be foregrounded in teachers' work. Furthermore, we propose providing teachers with a clear understanding of the rationale for non-

negotiable accountabilities, and to that end, involving them in developing processes to manage their implementation. Third, we argue that meaningful work will require the enhancement of opportunities for teachers to leverage their expertise and experience, at whatever career stage they may be, in places and spaces where they can serve as the drivers of their teaching work. The complexity and inherent challenges of addressing these recommendations are undisputed, yet addressing teacher workforce issues will depend on efforts to do so.

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Disclosure statement

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Appendix

Appendix A interview questions

(1) Can you explain the main reason for your decision to leave teaching? Was there a critical incident or event that was the defining moment – if so, can you please tell me more about this?
(2) What other things made staying in teaching so difficult or not viable for you?
(3) Why did you stay for as long as you did?
(4) What parts of being a teacher were positive for you?
(5) What do you miss the most?
(6) What would have kept you in teaching?
(7) What do you believe needs to change?
(8) How do you think teaching as a career has changed since you began teaching? Why do you think this is the case?
(9) **What are you doing now that you have left teaching?**
(10) **How does your current work compare with your teaching experiences?**
(11) Do you see that there is the potential for you to return to teaching? Why/Why not?
(12) What top three pieces of advice would you give to a new teacher?
(13) What do you think employers of teachers need to know?
(14) If there was an ideal system, what would that look like?
(15) Do you have any further comments you would like to make?