



‘I left the teaching profession ... and this is what I am doing now’: a national study of teacher attrition

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Abstract

Current teacher attrition in Australia and globally has created an untenable situation for many schools, teachers and the profession. This paper reports on research that examined the critical issue of teacher attrition from the perspective of former classroom teachers and school leaders. Although there is extensive national and global research related to teacher shortages and intentions to leave the teaching profession, minimal research has sought insights from those who have left the profession in Australia, including ascertaining what they are doing now. Using an online survey, data were collected from 256 former teachers from all states and territories, sectors and career stages who had left the profession between 2016 and 2022. Using descriptive statistical and thematic analysis, this study highlights the potential loss to teaching and the education profession more broadly due to teacher attrition. For these participants, the reasons for leaving were often multifaceted and the process of leaving was often protracted. Many of these former teachers have maintained links to the education profession occupying various associated roles and positions. We call for a reconsideration of the ways that strategies to ameliorate teacher attrition are conceptualised and implemented.

Keywords Teacher attrition · Teacher shortages · Former teachers · Teaching retention

Introduction

The challenge of addressing teacher shortages is now reaching critical levels in Australia (Allen et al., 2019), the United States of America (Garcia et al., 2022; Ryan et al., 2017) and elsewhere (Sims & Allen, 2018). As predicted by Welton in his 2015 report ‘The Teacher Workforce in Australia: Supply, Demand and Data Issues’, a decline in attracting and retaining new teacher candidates, coupled with reported escalating rates of teacher attrition (Geiger & Pivivarova,

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2018; Sims, 2020), has combined to create the perfect storm (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2021). The current level of attrition has created an untenable situation for many schools, teachers and the profession (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Sims, 2020) with teachers who are ‘highly engaged’ with a ‘deep personal and moral commitment to education’ (Kelchtermans, 2017, p. 967) among those leaving. This national study presents a salient and timely contribution to the field by foregrounding the perspectives and insights of those *who have left* the profession: an often-overlooked group of stakeholders from whom we can learn.

Attrition is a natural occurrence within all professions (Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Weldon, 2018) and can be the result of retirement, family responsibilities, relocation, mobility and health (Kelchtermans, 2017). As Karsenti and Collin have suggested, ‘it is better for the teaching profession if teachers who become aware that they lack the skills or the desire to work with students veer towards other professions’ (2013, p. 142). Similarly, Kelchtermans (2017) and Weldon (2018) have suggested that not all teacher attrition is problematic, with Kelchtermans (2017) positing, ‘just think of teachers who find out themselves that they really don’t like the job or the ones who turn out to be very bad at it’ (p. 962). He also suggested that simply seeing teacher attrition as a ‘capacity problem’ (p. 963), or having enough teachers to fill workforce positions, is an oversimplification of the problem and solution to teacher shortages. However, he argued that there is ‘a need to prevent good teachers from leaving the job for the wrong reasons’ (p. 966).

Although extensive research on teacher shortages across Australia is available, including that focussed on the impact of attrition (Taylor et al., 2023) together with teachers’ intentions to leave the profession (Heffernan et al., 2022a; Kelly et al., 2019), there are minimal data on *former* teachers, including what they are doing now. Until very recently, Australia has not had a nationally consistent approach to collecting attrition data across states, territories and sectors and has therefore drawn heavily on international data to predict attrition levels (Weldon, 2015, 2018). Even now, according to the first ‘Australian Teacher Workforce Data: National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report’ (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2021), longitudinal workforce data will be required before leaving intentions can be statistically compared to the number of teachers properly exiting the profession.

This paper reports on research that explored the perceptions of former teachers in Australia to inform our understanding of the underlying causes behind the current exodus problem. We posit that former teachers are in a unique position to provide insight into what occurs before they decide to leave, and then, what comes next. Using an online survey, we collected quantitative and qualitative data from 256 former teachers from all states and territories across Australia who had left the profession between 2016 and 2022, to respond to the following research question

*Why do teachers decide to leave the profession? and
Where do teachers go after they leave the profession?*

In this paper, we provide the insights and perspectives of these former teachers.

First, we review pertinent literature about teacher attrition drawn from both Australian and international contexts. We then provide a detailed explanation of the methods used for the study. Finally, we present and discuss our findings and conclude with an elaboration of the implications of the study for the teaching profession.

Teacher attrition as a contemporary crisis

The high rates of teachers leaving the profession have economic, educational, professional and personal consequences that cannot be ignored. As Geiger and Pivivarova (2018) highlighted, attrition can 'wreak havoc on students, other teachers, school administrators and the surrounding community alike' (p. 605). Researchers also warn of loss of expertise, financial costs, negative impact on staff morale and implications for students' educational experiences (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2017; Santoro, 2018). From a learning perspective, Kelchtermans (2017) agreed that teacher attrition creates discontinuity in students' learning experiences, while Newberry and Allsop (2017) and Sims (2020) added that when teachers leave unexpectedly, there is a significant disruption to students' learning and the school context more broadly in terms of social cohesion (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022) and school values, norms and goals (Kelchtermans, 2017).

Schools are communities that thrive on having teachers from all career stages (Sukkyung & Conley, 2014). Whether teachers are in the first 5 years of their career (Kelly et al., 2019), in their mid-career or their later career, leaving in critical numbers as they now are is likely to have a far-reaching impact. When an early-career teacher leaves, the school loses that teacher's inclination for innovation, new perspectives and, in some instances, a future school leader (Kelchtermans, 2019). Geiger and Pivivarova (2018) and Weldon (2018) noted that it is important when considering teacher attrition, particularly that of early-career teachers, that newer generations of individuals are more likely to transition between careers and are less likely to follow a 'continuous and linear career trajectory' (p. 10) than their more-experienced colleagues. However, when more-experienced teachers leave, they take with them their experience, expertise and knowledge and, as a result, both students and early-career teachers are denied the opportunity to benefit from their accumulated experience (Sukkyung & Conley, 2014).

To date, however, most studies of attrition have focussed on teachers' intentions to leave; that is, teachers considering, expecting or planning to leave within varying time frames (Ryan et al., 2017) rather than those who have left their careers in schools. For example, in a study of 2,444 Australian teachers surveyed in 2022 by Longmuir et al. (2023), a majority (58%) indicated that they either planned or would like to leave teaching. Similarly, another Australian study (Kelly et al., 2019) investigated early-career teachers' intentions to leave and the influence of pre-service education and school support on these intentions. In 2016, Australian researchers Arnup and Bowles (2016) evaluated the link between resilience and intentions to leave among teachers; and more recently, Heffernan et al. (2022a) investigated the intentions of Australian teachers to leave

from the perspective of well-being and workload. The recent ‘Australian Teacher Workforce Data’ National Teacher Workforce Characteristics Report’ (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2021) similarly focussed on teachers’ intentions to leave and their reasons for considering their exit from the profession, in the absence of available data from former teachers. International studies in the United States of America (Ryan et al., 2017) and the United Kingdom (Sims & Allen, 2018) have also sought to understand teacher attrition through the lens of leaving intentions.

The changing nature of teachers’ work

Teachers are currently working in professional environments reflective of the broader global neoliberal appetite for high levels of accountability and performativity (Tett & Hamilton, 2019). As a case in point, in the last decade alone, Australia has undertaken multiple reviews into teacher education (see, e.g. The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group Report, 2014; Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (Australian Government, 2022; Teacher Education Expert Panel, 2023) and implemented external processes of professional oversight, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2016) in a bid to advance teacher quality. However, many studies have demonstrated the debilitating impact of this culture of culpability on teachers’ ability and motivation to remain in the profession. Stacey et al. (2022), for example, have argued that accountabilities such as national testing have changed the nature of teachers’ work, with ‘a rise of “risk” and “audit” practices’ (p. 775). Similarly, Gore and Rickards (2021) found that over the past decade, such ‘reform solutions’ (p. 336) have placed teachers under unprecedented stress, with Longmuir et al. (2022) and Sullivan et al. (2021) similarly arguing that this excessive surveillance has created a context that has left many teachers doubting their ability.

In addition to these environmental stresses (Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2015), numerous studies have reported that teachers feel their workloads are unmanageable (Heffernan et al., 2022a; Longmuir et al., 2022), explained by Creagh et al. (2023) as ‘time poverty’ (p. 3). Such an increase in expectations without support fails to recognise the inherent complexity of the learning, behaviour and social needs of the children and young people in contemporary classrooms (Longmuir et al., 2022). Teachers’ professional identities are negatively impacted as they face an ongoing impost ‘of unceasing change, new initiatives, new programmes, new data reporting’ (Stacey et al., 2022, p. 781). In addition to responding to the complex work of teaching (Mockler, 2018), educators are concurrently expected to complete administrative duties for which they simply do not have adequate time (Longmuir et al., 2022). Similarly, Lawrence et al.’s (2019) study of 215 Australian secondary teachers and former teachers found burnout is more often associated with non-teaching-related workload (such as paperwork and meetings) than teaching-related work (such as planning). In essence, teaching is perceived by teachers to be an ‘expanded and expanding’ role (Stacey et al., 2022, p. 773).

Concerning workplace conditions

Teacher workplace conditions have been identified as both overwhelming and discouraging for many teachers, explained to be the consequence of a 'symbiotic relationship between working conditions, and the outcomes and achievements of the work that can be undertaken' (Stacey et al., 2022, p. 772). According to Fitzgerald et al. (2019) and Ryan et al. (2017), working conditions for teachers, described as the material, cultural and organisational character of a school setting (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Geiger & Pivivarova, 2018), play a large part in the ways teachers experience their work in schools. Where teachers perceive their work conditions to be negative, the likelihood of teacher stress, burnout and attrition is exacerbated.

According to Geiger and Pivivarova (2018), teachers tend to describe problematic workplace conditions in terms of 'sub-par relationships with administrators or colleagues, feeling a lack of support by school leadership, and poor school culture and morale' (p. 617). Furthermore, workplace bullying by parents and students has also arisen as a significant concern (Burns et al., 2020; Fogelgarn et al., 2019; Longmuir et al., 2022). Although teachers may additionally report leaders as being significant to workplace pressures and morale (Geiger & Pivivarova, 2018), Heffernan et al. (2022b) have cautioned that school leaders are also suffering from their own exceptionally high stress levels both in Australia and internationally such as in the United Kingdom (Thomson et al., 2021) and the United States of America (Reid, 2022).

In summary, to date, very few Australian studies have drawn on data sets that have included former teachers (see, e.g. Perryman & Calvert, 2020; Ryan et al., 2017). Although studies about teachers' intentions to leave the profession have been identified as important to predicting future workforce needs and determining appropriate strategies for teacher retention (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2021), such studies do not identify 'actual behaviour in terms of leaving the profession' (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2021; Räsänen et al., 2020, p. 854). Ryan et al. further argued that as a consequence of this research emphasis on teacher intentions to leave, there has been 'limited research on those teachers who actually do leave the profession, and even more so, where they go after exiting the profession' (2017, p. 3). Our study sought to address this limitation.

Methods

In the following section, methods of data collection and analysis are outlined. In addition, the participant sample of former teachers is described drawing on the demographic data collected via the online survey.

Data collection

The survey data, including qualitative and quantitative responses, were collected online using Qualtrics software over a 4-month period (November 2022–February 2023) from 256 teachers who had exited the teaching profession between 2016 and 2022. Of the 23 questions, Part A comprised 16 questions, largely in Likert-scale and multiple-choice format, related to demographics including (a) length of time in the profession; (b) the state or territory (six states in Australia—Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia, New South Wales; South Australia—and two territories—the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, the national capital) where participants spent most of their career teaching; (c) the sector (state, Catholic or independent) and (d) their specific role within the school. Part B comprised seven (mostly qualitative) questions that elicited the participants' key reasons for leaving; their current work (if any); their longer-term intentions regarding employment and the opportunity to provide any further comments.

The survey participants were recruited through multiple social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and a combination of classroom teachers and school leaders responded to the survey. For the study, we defined a *former teacher* as someone who has left their work in school-based education (e.g. a classroom teacher, curriculum or department leader, or principal). We do not claim wider representativeness of the broader former teacher population (Cohen et al., 2011) from this opportunistic sample of former teachers. This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the relevant universities (2022-171).

Data analysis

The approach to data analysis from this survey was twofold. First, quantitative data, such as demographic data, were analysed using descriptive statistics. We report on these data using frequency counts and percentages. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was then used to code and categorise qualitative data from extended open-ended responses. Each extended open-response question was coded by a minimum of two team members and discussed, collaboratively, where necessary, to ensure consensus. This process highlighted, for instance, specific factors reported by participants as contributing to their decisions to leave teaching.

Subsequently, we supplemented our approach to analysis after ascertaining that our initial thematic analysis (as above) was oversimplifying the reported experiences shared by the participants. This approach to analysis suggested that these former teachers were identifying discreet and siloed factors as responsible for their decisions to leave. However, when extended responses were viewed holistically, it became clear that these factors were operating in conjunction with one another as multifaceted reasons for leaving. We therefore use extended

quotes from the open-ended questions in reporting findings and in our discussion to highlight the multifaceted nature of their decision making. All participant responses have been allocated a pseudonym and a survey response identifier (e.g. Laura, SP33).

Survey participants

The participants in this study consisted of 256 former teachers who left their position in an Australian school between 2016 and 2022. Although we cannot claim that our participant group is proportionately representative of all teachers leaving the profession from specific locations and sectors in the past 7 years, the responses were collected from former teachers across all Australian states and territories with the majority from Victoria (45%), followed by New South Wales (23%) and Queensland (20%). Participants included former teachers from all three Australian schooling sectors (government, independent and Catholic), with the majority (59%) exiting from a government school (see Fig. 1a). Most participants (60%) were working in metropolitan areas, and almost 40% in regional and rural contexts (32% & 7% respectively) at the time of leaving the profession (Fig. 1b). Of the 256 participants, 181 identified as female, 71 as male and 4 as 'other'.

Of the total participants, 71.6% were in full-time positions; 13.7% were in part-time positions; 10.5% were employed on a fixed contract; while the remaining 4.2% were employed as casual relief teachers when they decided to leave teaching. Participants included those who had been working at all career levels, with the greatest number (18.1%) teaching for 7–10 years. 7.9% of participants left after teaching for up to 3 years and 2.3% left in the first year of teaching. Some 10.2% of the participants left after working in schools for more than 30 years. Although most of the former teachers responding to this survey left in 2021 ($n=34$) and 2022 ($n=76$),

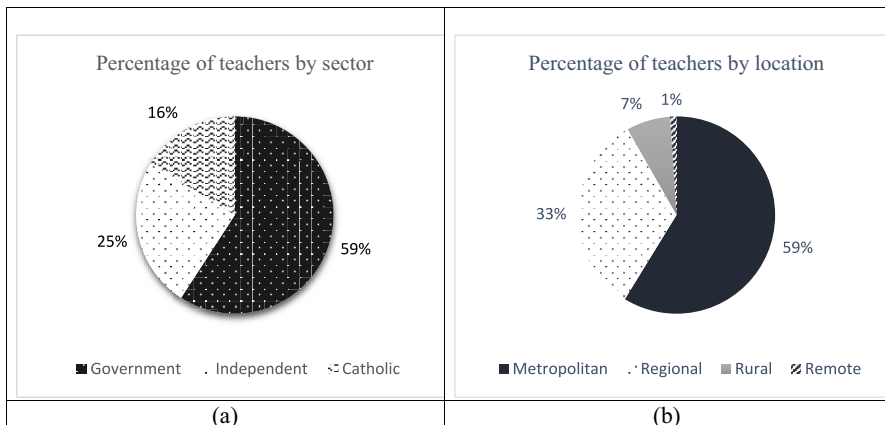


Fig. 1 School sector (a) and Geographic locations (b) where teachers were employed prior to leaving the profession

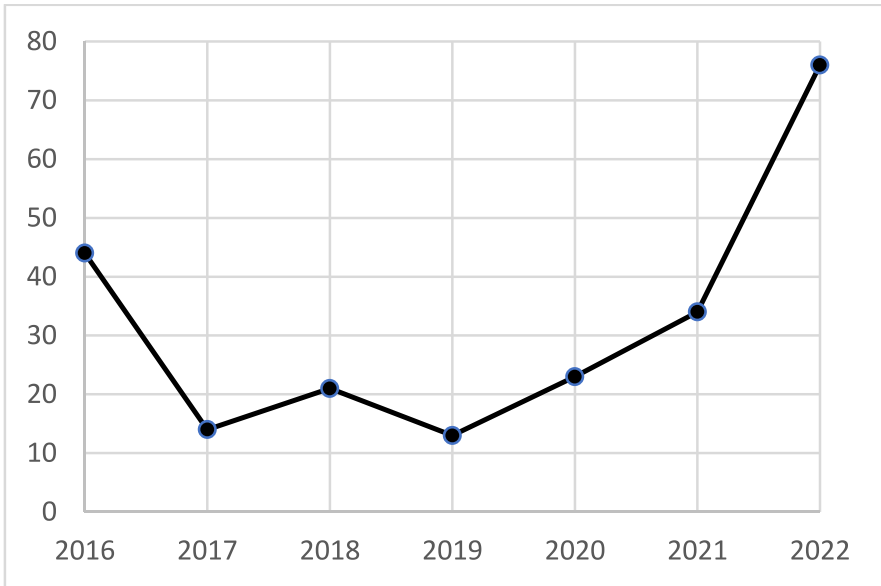


Fig. 2 Calendar year when participants left the profession

a large number also indicated they left the profession as long ago as 2016 ($n=44$) (Fig. 2).

More than 40% of those surveyed were in school leadership positions at the time of leaving (principal, 2.1%; deputy or assistant principal, 8.0%; department leader, 18.6%; curriculum leader, 12.8%), and 53.7% identified as classroom teachers and ‘other’ accounted for 4.8% of the responses.

Findings and discussion

We first consider key factors that led to these teachers’ decisions to leave teaching and in doing so, draw attention to the multifaceted nature of their decisions and of the impact of leaving. Next, we report on our findings regarding the career decisions of these teachers upon leaving the profession and discuss the ongoing connections of many to education beyond school settings.

Why did these former teachers leave?

Participants nominated their key reason for leaving the profession from a prescribed set of suggestions; Table 1 summarises the results. The main issue listed was school leadership (17.71%), followed by workload (16.57%), workplace environment (9.7%), student behaviour (7.43%) and lack of respect (6.86%). Some 5.14%

Table 1 Reasons for leaving the profession

Reason	Frequency (<i>N</i> = 175)	Percentage
School leadership	31	17.71
Workload	29	16.57
Workplace environment	17	9.71
Student behaviour	13	7.43
Lack of respect	12	6.86
Administrative load	9	5.14
Lack of personal satisfaction	10	5.71
Salary	7	4.03
Family responsibilities	5	2.86
Lack of collegial support	5	2.86
School structures	3	1.71
Lack of professional learning opportunities	3	1.71
Lack of recognition	2	1.14
Lack of professional recognition	2	1.14
Policy pressures	1	0.57
Low status of profession	1	0.57
Advanced age (retirement)	1	0.57
Other*	24	13.71

*The 'other' category was often elaborated in response to Question 23: Do you have any further comments you would like to make with regard to your decision to leave the teaching profession?

attributed their main reason to administrative overload. About 5.71% stated that a key factor was a lack of personal satisfaction.

Previous studies have similarly identified school leadership (Geiger and Pivivarova (2018), workload (Heffernan et al., 2022a; Longmuir et al., 2022) and work conditions (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Fitzgerald et al., 2019; Geiger & Pivivarova, 2018) as reasons for teachers' intentions to leave the profession. Our study extends these findings. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative responses enabled us to garner deep and revealing insights into the often-protracted decision made by former teachers to leave the profession. The open-ended responses revealed the multiple factors that accumulated over time that ultimately led to an exit. Our findings also highlighted that, for some, leaving was a positive experience and was the result of retirement, another opportunity, or the desire to move on and explore new working landscapes and careers.

Leaving as multifaceted

The following section highlights the participants' responses to the critical events or overarching rationale that led to the final decision to leave the profession (Survey Question 18). The responses reveal the combination of factors that contributed to the decision to leave. The extended quotes indicate the complexity of these decisions and the impact of these factors that accumulated over time. Paul, an experienced

full-time secondary teacher who had been teaching in a regional school for between 16 and 20 years, left the profession in 2018. He reported that

There were many [factors], including: expectations to teach to assessment tasks rather than teach for lifelong learning; constantly increasing administrative and yard duty requirements; leadership which demanded professional behaviour yet treated teachers like infants, i.e. greatly undervalued and patronised by members of the leadership team; significant daily tiredness due to constant demands on time; no sense of personal satisfaction from classroom teaching nor recognition from leadership for the amount of time and energy put into teaching. (SP72)

Although Paul stated that the key reason for leaving was a lack of personal satisfaction, he also explained that expectations to teach to the test, combined with the administrative load and lack of support from leadership, ultimately contributed to his departure. Dealing with administrative load and increased workload are generic provocations that point to the expanding nature of teachers' work (Creagh et al., 2023; Fitzgerald et al., 2019), but the perception of low professional autonomy and lack of recognition from leadership were issues that impacted this teacher on a personal level. Paul's response speaks to how standards and accountability have impacted how teachers can enact their professional judgement (Stacey et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021) in support of student learning needs and demonstrates how much positive acknowledgement from school leadership matters to teachers (Geiger & Pivivarova, 2018). Several teachers in this study reported similar experiences and, consequently, had not flourished and ultimately left the school. Gore and Rikards (2021) similarly noted the importance of professional trust and respect from colleagues.

The following quote again shows how a multiplicity of factors combined to influence a teacher's decision to leave the profession. Laura, a deputy principal who had been working full-time in a metropolitan independent secondary school for 4–6 years, reported that

Teaching is the best profession in the world - so rewarding to work with students. Media and society need to back off (a nurse or accountant wouldn't be blamed for the hospital ramping/tax rates the system creates and teachers are doing their best within the system). There needs to be an appreciation that it is an incredibly difficult job to do (far more than academic). It is poorly paid relative to the level of responsibility compared to business/industry and level of university study required. I am going to travel to countries that need my teaching skills and work with students who value education. (SP33)

Laura's motivation and desire to teach are unquestionable; however, as has been previously reported, teachers in Australia face a constant barrage of negative commentary from the press (Mockler, 2018) and from politicians (Asbury & Kim, 2020). From Laura's perspective, 'Media and society need to back off'. Laura also stated that teaching is 'an incredibly difficult job' that should be appreciated, and that remuneration must be comparable with business and commerce, following

the lengthy years of study required to become a teacher. Despite some variation among the findings of previous studies regarding links between salary and teacher retention (see, e.g. Pham et al., 2021), this issue was raised several times by the former teachers in this study.

Perceived issues of diminished respect for the profession were identified in several survey responses. For example, Jo (SP9) explained that 'Community respect for educators is at an all-time low', and Ada (SP13) lamented the way that 'being unappreciated by admin[istration], parents, and the media wears people down'. Similarly, Sam (SP142) explained there was:

too much political influence, both from outside and inside school communities, which often blocks teachers from teaching effectively - to equitably address the needs of all students, to provide the level of differentiation demanded (and needed), and to go beyond simply following the fads and restrictive bureaucratic demands.

Teachers have been shown in several studies to thrive when their professional expertise is recognised (Allen et al., 2019; Asbury & Kim, 2020), acknowledgment that SP142 did not feel is available to teachers now.

The following quote from Tara, a mid-career secondary teacher who left a rural school in 2022, demonstrates the emotional and stressful impact of teaching. Although she 'loved teaching', the combination of demands meant that for her 'the joy of teaching' had simply vanished:

I love teaching, the actual teaching part, anyway. It is the administrative work that makes my work stressful. In any given lesson I am expected to not only focus on the content I am teaching, and the welfare of my students, but to implement the instructional model, learning intentions and success criteria, process praise, golden statements, brain breaks, low-stakes writing tasks, etc. The list goes on. The joy of teaching is simply vanishing. (SP64)

The nature of teachers' work is changing—demands are increasing, workload is intensifying, and excessive administration are combining to extract the joy from teaching.

Geiger and Pivivarova (2018), along with identifying the economic loss to the education system when teachers leave, also highlighted the social and educational loss to schools and the emotional cost to the individual. For many, leaving teaching meant exiting a profession they loved, with many expressing deep sadness at leaving their students behind. As Kim (SP118) stated, 'The hardest thing was knowing I was walking away from making a difference in the lives of young people, each and every day'. In some instances, leaving took considerable deliberation, with 23% taking between 3 and 5 years to finally exit the profession, and 10% taking more than 5 years to do so (Fig. 3). Similarly, Sims (2020) found that former teachers in the United Kingdom also described leaving as painful, hesitating for some time before finally leaving.

The responses above are indicative of the 'microstress effect' (Cross & Dillon, 2023) experienced by many teachers, whereby the build-up of pressures

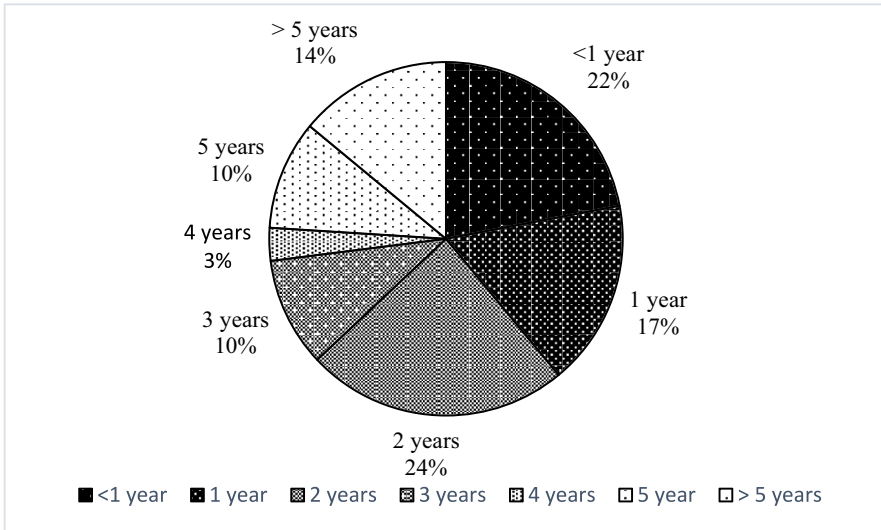


Fig. 3 Time taken by teachers to make the decision to leave

associated with various tasks and responsibilities at work can have a negative impact on their professional and private lives. Like Tara, many of the participants in this study felt that leaving was the result of not just one of the challenges in isolation, nor was it an impetuous reaction; but rather a combination of issues over a period of time made their jobs untenable. A dichotomy between ‘actual teaching’, which was often seen as pleasurable, and intolerable aspects of the job was highlighted by many of the teachers surveyed. These data capture some of the multifaceted and interrelated reasons why teachers left the profession. They also support research conducted by Karsenti and Collin (2013), who found that teachers leave the profession due to an ‘interdependence of attrition factors ... and [this] is more the result of a set of factors than a single factor, which only increases the likelihood that teachers will drop out’ (p. 142). Our study extends these findings by showing that such sets of factors are indeed involved in teachers’ decision to leave.

Leaving as positive

Although in the previous instances, the act of leaving the profession appeared fraught with negativity, for some participants, leaving the teaching profession was a positive experience, describing their decision as the next step in their career trajectories opening the door to new possibilities. Coined as the ‘career choice effect’ (Weldon, 2018, p. 71), for some, their skills enabled them to apply their ‘new skills in data analysis ... [and find] other opportunities to practice these skills’ (Toni, SP50). One teacher, for example, sought to apply for a short-term work opportunity away from the classroom but did not return as anticipated. This full-time primary teacher

stated, 'I originally intended for this to be temporary, but I have found enjoyable higher-paying work outside of teaching on a permanent basis' (Lucas, SP139).

Others spoke of 'opportunity' and invitations from external employers that lured them away from teaching. Thus, the decision to leave was the result of 'an attractive opportunity, rather than to escape a terrible job' (Liz, SP126). And, as Rena (SP24) stated, the 'opportunity arose for me to leave when I applied for a job in corporate [sic]—nothing dramatic happened beforehand [sic]'. This finding supports Buchanan's (2009) argument that 'the skills and attributes of teaching are highly transferrable and highly valued by employers in other professions' (p. 35). Other studies have also shown that teachers can feel 'pulled' away from teaching, rather than 'pushed', by offers of work that present with better salary and work conditions than contemporary teaching positions can provide (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Geiger & Pivivarova, 2018). For others, leaving reflected the choice to retire after a long and satisfying career: 'After more than 30 years in front of students, I felt it was time to "pass the baton" to the next generation for both me and the students' (Marie, SP40). Such former teachers form part of the natural and expected cycle of attrition (Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Weldon, 2018).

Where did these former teachers go?

Insight into where teachers may be re-establishing themselves professionally offers additional understanding about teacher attrition and, to some extent, its broader impact on the community as skills and expertise are employed in alternative work settings. In our study, an overwhelming majority (82%) of the teachers who had left after 4–15 years were still working. Of these, about 7% had returned to casual teaching in one way or another, and (4.4%) had sought further education through study. About 4.4% had fully retired.

A further 51.8% of all former teachers were involved in work that drew on knowledge and skills developed through teaching, such as in sports coaching, social work, counselling and the well-being industry. This 'professional redirection' (Karsenti & Collin, 2013, p. 142) highlights the skill and knowledge portability and regard that former teachers take with them into new professions and workplaces. Significantly, when asked, 'To what extent are your skills knowledge and dispositions used in your current workplace?', 62% stated 'a lot' and 26% 'somewhat'. In other words, generally speaking, teachers do not find it challenging to redeploy their skills away from the classroom (Weldon, 2018), which may, for some, reduce the fear of leaving teaching if conditions are perceived to be untenable.

Significantly, many of those who had left teaching (36%) were still working in education-related areas such as devising education resources, creating learning design, developing education policy, teaching in a non-school context, consulting and managing education programmes in institutions such as museums and art galleries. About 20% had transitioned into work in the higher education sector. These findings resonate with Lindqvist and Nordänger's (2016) work that found teacher identity held by teaching professionals remains deeply embedded even after they have left the school context. They found that despite a change in work context,

former teachers still see themselves to be educators who are ‘strongly committed to schools, children’s learning and education’ (p. 96). In many ways, these former teachers, like those in Lindqvist and Nordänger’s study, still ‘brought their professional expertise into society at large’ (Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2016, p. 96) and potentially aimed to continue to nurture their teacher identities through the education-connected pursuits.

While they felt unable to continue to engage in teaching within the school context, the teachers were less willing to completely remove themselves from education (in its many forms). Instead, they found ways to engage in education-connected work which was less school-connected. Thus, former teachers are taking their highly transferable skills built up through teacher education and classroom experience with them into new employment, suggesting their sustained commitment to teaching, but outside of the traditional school system. As Tao (SP43) explained, ‘I am still in education but not in schools’, while another stated, ‘I left the teaching profession in a school context. I remain in education and teaching in an ITE [initial teacher education] context where I can both contribute and be challenged/developed’ (Caleb, SP45). In short, this study has demonstrated that workplace conditions and their complex interplay of stressors (Geiger & Pivivarova, 2018) may push teachers away from schools but not from education more broadly.

This finding could potentially give rise to the possibility of re-inspiring former teachers to return to the classroom, an idea made slightly more conceivable given that 15.7% stated that they would probably return, 1.3% indicated they would definitely return to the profession, and almost half (48.4%) indicated that while they would probably not return, they had not ruled it out entirely. Lindqvist and Nordänger (2016) dismissed the likelihood of ‘rekindling’ (p. 96) the flame of former teachers in a bid to lure them back to the classroom as unlikely. In contrast, Weldon (2018) reported on a small number of teachers from the 2014 Staff in Australia’s Schools survey who had returned to teaching after resigning because they missed teaching. Some participants from our study also indicated that they had previously left and returned. Jan, (SP10) an early-career secondary classroom teacher who was working in the independent system, left for the first time in 2018, with her return planned for 2023. She reported:

I left twice. The first time was after 3 years. My mental health was broken due to poor student behaviour and disrespect/bullying ... This year I’m supplementing my writing with CRT [casual relief teaching] work because I can see how desperate the system is. I’m curious to see how it’s all changed since COVID but I’m anxious about it.

We would suggest, however, that despite our study revealing that 82% of former teachers from this study maintained their teacher registration after exiting the profession, significant changes would need to take place to ‘re-recruit teachers in-or back to-the occupation’ (Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2016, p. 89). Herein lies the importance of responding to the insights and perspectives shared by these former teachers regarding their reasons for departing the profession.

Limitations of the study

The findings from this study afford important insights into the perceptions and experiences of former teachers in Australia related to their decisions to leave the teaching profession, and their subsequent work choices. However, we acknowledge several methodological limitations to be considered in the reading of these findings.

First, participants were recruited via social media and therefore may not be representative of a broader population of former teachers who did not have access to the social media networks through which the survey was distributed. Second, and related to the previous, is that participants self-selected to respond to the survey, and therefore, data may be restricted to those former teachers who had particular experiences and reasons motivating their involvement. Acknowledging the response bias that can result from this recruitment method (Cohan et al., 2017), the study does not lay claim to being statistically representative of the current teaching population or that of former teachers in Australia, or elsewhere.

Third, it is understood that the survey used was not a validated instrument. Our objective was to explore and describe the perceptions of former teachers responding to the survey. However, future research using a validated survey tool with a probability-based population would be necessary to substantiate our findings. Furthermore, in-depth interviews may provide a means by which to theoretically explore the complexity of former teachers' decisions to leave the profession, thus extending insights emerging from our initial survey data.

Conclusion and implications

This study has adopted a unique perspective on the issue of teacher attrition through its focus on a hitherto less-researched teacher participant group—that of former teachers (Ryan et al., 2017). In this paper, we have described perceptions and experiences as reported by a group of former teachers from Australia about leaving the teaching profession. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data collected via an online survey, we examined the complex and cumulative nature of the factors that contributed to their exit. The data also provided important insights into the next career steps these former teachers took upon leaving their school positions, and the various impacts this had on their lives and well-being.

The findings from this study serve to highlight the complex issue of teacher attrition in several ways. First, teachers leaving the profession may do so from a range of settings, sectors and career stages, making the problem of attrition one that could have significant implications on the professional capital of schools from which they exit (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2019; Ryan et al., 2017; Santoro, 2018). Thus, strategies and policies intended to address the issue will also need to consider the needs and concerns of teachers more broadly if retention is to be improved.

Second, particular reasons have been identified as critical to exit decisions, such as school leadership, the work environment and workload. However, it may be that the potential combined and cumulative effect of these factors on teachers' satisfaction with their work, and their sense of professional value, is critical in developing a deeper understanding of effective strategies to stem attrition. Attempts to address the current momentum of teacher attrition must include a multifaceted approach and be, in and of itself, sufficiently complex to address the current attrition trend. Failure to take this approach to date may explain why, after it gained attention more than a decade ago, we are still discussing the problem of teacher attrition.

Third, this study also identified that the majority of teachers have maintained their teacher registration. Herein lies a key opportunity to attract former teachers back into schools. However, it is undeniable that significant changes would need to occur in the teaching context to achieve this. In making these changes, we may also be better positioned to retain 'highly engaged' teachers with a 'deep personal and moral commitment to education' (Kelchtermans, 2017, p. 967). When former teachers tell, we need to listen.

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Declarations

Competing interests There are no competing interests (financial or personal).

Ethical approval This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Federation University Australia (Approval Number - 2022-171) and registered with the ethics committees at the other participating universities.

Consent to participate Consent for participation in this survey and associated publication was obtained for this study.

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