

## **Where are they now? Ex-teachers tell their life-work stories**

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Considerable research has been conducted into teacher retention and attrition (Huberman, 1989; Dinham, 1995; Ewing & Smith, 2002). Little is known, though, of the circumstances of ex-teachers, in terms of factors such as salary, workload, working conditions and 'job prestige'. For this paper, telephone interviews were conducted with 22 ex-teachers, asking what led them into and out of teaching, and views on their current working conditions compared to those of teaching. The interview protocol for this project foreshadows a questionnaire that could be used more broadly, nationally and internationally. This paper reports on respondents' perceptions of their current circumstances compared with those of teaching. Few of these ex-teachers regret their decision to leave the profession, and few consider their current circumstances inferior, even those whose raw salary is lower. The findings have implications for teacher recruitment, education, the provision of working conditions in the teaching profession, and for the public perceptions and promotion of teaching.

### **Introduction**

Teacher attrition is a costly affair. This is the case not only in terms of the 'public purse', but also in regard to the costs for individuals undertaking teacher education. More importantly, for at least some ex-teachers, the road through and out of teaching is strewn with disillusionment and bitterness.

Teaching is an at times solitary business, particularly in contrast to the collaborative experiences of pre-service (Corrie, 2000). Moreover, the transition into the workforce from pre-service contexts is not an easy one. All teachers are being faced with increasing expectations in terms of accountability with regard to student outcomes, record keeping and pastoral care, among other responsibilities. For beginning teachers, these demands take on added difficulty in the context of relative inexperience and a new workplace. For some, the commencement of teaching may coincide with living away from the family home for the first time. For some of these teachers, it will be the first time living in, or out of, a large city.

At the same time, teacher education institutions are at times criticised for an apparent failure to prepare their students for the workplace. Russell (2005, p. 1) comments that, "pre-service teacher education is easily seen as attempting to do too much too soon", an observation that suggests that some of what pre-service education sets out to achieve might be more effectively left until teachers enter the service. Similarly, Aubusson and Schuck (2006) point out some of the incongruities between pre- and in-service contexts. These inconsistencies appear to be only part of the problem, however.

Forthcoming papers will look in detail at factors that drove these teachers from the profession, and at the teaching-borne skills they take into their current work. This paper sets out to identify the differences in key professional factors such as salary and workload between teaching and these respondents' subsequent or current occupations.

## **Review of the literature**

A number of studies (e.g. Dinham, 1995; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999; Ramsay, 2000; Dworkin, 2001; Schuck, Deer, Barnsley, Brady & Griffin, 2002; Ewing & Smith, 2002; Pillay, Goddard & Wilss, 2005; Buchanan, 2006) have reported on teachers' needs, including those of beginning teachers. These studies have investigated induction programs, school support, the special needs of casual teachers and requirements for initial teacher education programs, as well as reasons for teacher burnout and attrition. Their findings included the need for pre-service education to address: class management and discipline; dealing with ranges in ability; interacting with parents; and fulfilling administration duties. The findings also generated implications and recommendations for schools, including more, as well as more effective support structures and a reduced workload for beginning teachers. Some of these studies have also indicated a lack of practical application in pre-service courses (Schuck et al., 2002) and an overly-idealistic preservice environment (Ewing & Smith, 2002).

Other recommendations to support early career teachers include: a more seamless progression from pre- to in-service support for teachers, (Feiman-Nemser, 2001); mentors (McCulla, 2002); and school-university partnerships (Darling-Hammond & Aneess, 1994) or communities of discourse (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001). Zeichner (2005, p. 118) observes that teaching and teacher education have been oversimplified by the public and the profession alike, observing that "many universities today treat teacher education as a self-evident activity both for school- and university-based teacher educators."

Similarly, the question of teacher attrition has been under-problematised. Williams (2002, p. 2) points out that what is seen as a recruitment problem is actually an issue of retention, and cites Merrow: "The teaching pool keeps losing water because no one is paying attention to the leak." Likewise, Korthagen (2004, p. 91) observes the "prevalence of burnout among experienced teachers", and goes on to claim that, "research has shown that the loss of ideals, and what people experience as a lack of support when it comes to the realisation of those ideals, play an important part in cases of burnout and, in some cases, the decision to resign from their present position." Citing Edelwich and Brodsky (1980), Korthagen describes burnout as "progressive loss of idealism, energy, purpose, and concern as a result of conditions of work" (p. 92).

Calderhead (1996) criticised a behaviourist approach to education. Similarly, Goodlad (1984, p. 241) observed that,

the gap between the rhetoric of individual flexibility, originality, and creativity in our educational goals and the cultivation of these in our schools reveals a great hypocrisy.

From the beginning, students [and teachers] experienced school and classroom environments that condition them in precisely opposite behaviours – seeking ‘right’ answers, conforming, and producing the known.

Teachers have proceeded to positions as varied as President of the United States or Prime Minister of Australia, as well as internationally known entertainers and authors, among others. Little is known of the circumstances of ex-teachers, particularly those who are not famous, in terms of regretting or otherwise their decision to leave teaching, or their current circumstances with regard to matters such as salary and working conditions.

The project described here adds to the knowledge and understanding of the volatile nature of teacher morale. It also illustrates in passing some of the highly sought-after skills and attributes that teachers bring to other professions.

## **Methodology**

This study comprises a series of semi-structured interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) with 22 people (15 females, 7 males) who had left school-teaching mid-career to take up other positions (see Appendix 1). The extent of teaching experience ranged from less than a few months, to more than 20 years. One reason for the choice of such participants is that they are well placed to make comparisons between teaching and one or more other careers, in terms of factors such as salary and workload.

Snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) was used to recruit participants, with the author’s colleagues initially suggesting possible participants, who in turn suggested others. Excluded were people who still had formal teaching as a major part of their current work, such as university academics. Nevertheless, this is an imprecise criterion, and a number of the respondents provide instruction or education as part of their current work.

Views discussed included: How respondents ‘saw themselves’ as teachers; how and why they decided to leave or enter school teaching; whether their views have changed since making their decision to leave or enter teaching, if so, how and why (see Appendix 2). Prior to the interviews taking place, participants were presented with an interview protocol, to provide them with time to consider the questions therein.

The interviews were tape-recorded, then transcribed by a research assistant. Content was analysed for indicators of professional dis/satisfaction, their causes and ex-teachers’ responses. Interview transcripts were subjected to a coding process, outlining common as well as outlying causes, effects and circumstances surrounding the departure of teachers, as well as comparisons with their current circumstances. The findings were critically reviewed for what they revealed about teacher constructs of the profession and of teaching and learning. For the sake of clarity, the findings are reported under categories such as ‘salary’ and ‘prestige’, but these categories are by no means mutually exclusive.

## Limitations

The limits of snowball sampling are acknowledged here, in terms of risking an unrepresentative sample with regard to demographic factors. Also, many of the respondents recounted traumatic ‘escapes’ from teaching. It is possible that those with the most memorable and remarkable departures will be more likely to volunteer for a project such as this. Nevertheless, these recounts confirm what is known anecdotally about the demands of teaching.

## Findings and discussion

One thing I noticed quite early on was that there was very much the sense in medicine that it was ‘welcome to the brotherhood’. Doctors in comparison to teachers fall over themselves backwards in order to welcome you into the profession, to assist you, to spend time with you, to teach you, and that’s not something that I experienced as a teacher. I was quite startled by the contrast ... very much a welcoming into the fold.  
[Janelle]

Some of the recollections of these participants can be summarised as a lack of collegiality in the profession. Kathy observed that as a casual teacher, support was patchy; whereas some faculties would be highly obliging in outlining work that a class could do, in other cases, she recalled, “I couldn’t believe the people who delighted in watching you get eaten.” Another aspect of the isolation of teaching was observed by Christine, who recalled from her teaching days that her friends working in the City had much more adult interaction. Specific career aspects are discussed below.

### Salary

I’m probably paid more than I was as a teacher, and, you know, that’s quite scary. [Patrick]

In contrast to Patrick’s situation above, a number of the interviewed ex-teachers sustained a salary reduction upon leaving teaching. There are at least three possible explanations for this:

- It is altruistic motivation rather than money, which is the prime factor in attracting people to teaching; as Jacqui said, “Salary doesn’t mean anything. I’m happy doing what I’m doing and that’s the main thing.”
- Some people are desperate to get out of teaching, whatever the cost; Mark’s wife, as a teacher, earns \$20 000 per annum more than he does. Nevertheless, Mark spoke of “all those black thoughts” he recalled from his teaching days that keep him from returning to the profession now. David recalled the difficulty in leaving a secure, relatively well-paid job, referring to, “the stress levels involved in teaching; it just took too much toll on my health, and no financial reward was really worth that.”
- Current salaries in teaching are competitive or superior to careers requiring similar levels of ability.

It is interesting that none of these teachers, even those who had had very negative and unsupportive experiences in the profession and who were now earning considerably more, was disdainful about teacher salaries. Invariably, they expressed concern that relatively low salaries were a symptom of a low societal regard for education. While in some jurisdictions, it is asserted that beginning teacher salaries are comparable to those of other professions requiring a university degree, a number of these ex-teachers enjoyed considerable salary increases upon leaving teaching. Others took a salary cut as part of working part-time.

For Carol, salary was linked to promotion: "There was a structure in place that didn't allow me to earn more money unless I became a deputy or a principal." Her friends who have stayed in teaching, "see me in business earning more money, whereas I think what they're doing is a much more important job. The influence they have is much more far-reaching."

Some, such as Fiona and Geoff, went into full-time study, where, in Geoff's words, the student allowance "compared with teaching, was piddling." His first pastoral job was part-time, so "salary went out the window." Janelle will earn more money as a doctor, but the workload will still be high. Denise knew she would sustain a salary reduction, but was "prepared to do that to have less stress... I think there's a lot more important things than money." For some, salary was a critical factor, though. Paul's consultancy work is considerably more lucrative than was teaching, and economically he would find a return to teaching "almost impossible", the salary differential being "about 40 or 50 percent."

### **Workload and responsibility**

Time outside work is your own. [Angela]

A number of the respondents mentioned the burden of working outside of school hours. Jenny recalled, "you go home worrying about it and you never seem to cut off, whereas I had a career before where I could do the work well, forget about it and come back to carry on." Lauren went from teaching immediately into youth work, and found the conditions and salary inferior to teaching. The face-to-face hours were longer in youth work, but "when you went home, you went home and did not have to do anything." Mark says of his work in the legal profession, "while I'm there I'm on the run, but at the end of the day I can just knock off." By contrast, his wife, still a teacher "will come home and work some nights until 11 pm. And then she'll be working again on the weekends and she just sees that as the expectations for a teacher." For Angela, in her current work in nursing, "you work hard, but there's no pre- or post-work like marking and preparation or that sort of thing." Mark believes that the parameters of his previous work in the bank were much more defined than in teaching; "it was like feeding coal into a boiler and so long as the coal was supplied, I could feed it into the boiler and I could do it well and everything was fine." Jillian said that librarianship entailed less responsibility than teaching: "I could be a lousy librarian and nobody would notice." Patrick, an ex-maths teacher, commented, "there may be one or two things I'm working on. I'm not managing four or five classes at a time."

For some, it is the nature as well as the amount of work and responsibility that is significant. Carol indicated that, “in teaching you are much more responsible for people. In business ... the responsibility is more ... related to staying in budgets ... more of systems and processes rather than people.” “More relaxed” is how Jacqui referred to her current work burden compared to teaching. Mark spoke of the responsibility without authority that added to the complexity and stress of his teaching work.

Workload didn’t decrease for all the ex-teachers, however. For Carol, workload in business is similar to that in teaching, except that of her first year of teaching, which entailed, “every evening working and you’d work in the holidays.” After this, however, Carol found the teaching workload more manageable. Janelle described her workload in medical studies compared to teaching as “out of the frying pan and into the fire.” She was also daunted by what she has observed about the workload of doctors. Moreover, in medicine if you make an error, “you can’t get out the liquid paper and change it.” Angela made similar comments about her responsibilities in nursing.

As suggested by several of the comments above, it is the stress and intensity of teaching that compounds workload. Naomi finds her current workload greater than in teaching, but less stressful. Similarly, Patrick observed that he can leave his work at work now, and not worry about it until the next day. He partially blames his previous stress in teaching on “trying to be too perfect.” Colin noted the intensity of the work situation in teaching: In his subsequent museum work, “I wasn’t anywhere near as controlled by the bell in the same way.” He spoke of “days much longer ... but it was not as intense as a school day.”

Teaching appears to be subject to ‘workload creep’ wherein new responsibilities are periodically added to existing ones, but few responsibilities are removed from the profession. While teaching is certainly not alone in being prey to this phenomenon, these respondents are comparing the teaching of bygone days with their current situations. As Pamela pointed out, “teaching was a greater workload, but day care is increasing. Every year they find something else to add.” If ‘workload creep’ is more than just an imagined construct in teaching, it stands to reason that the teaching job that these people left, in some cases years ago, has increased in its demands since then.

A larger staff appears to mitigate workload. Denise recollected lunchtimes being eroded by playground duty, the burden of which is lighter if shared among more teachers. Jacqui mentioned that being one of three teachers on her grade alleviated her programming responsibilities. As Hayley observed,

When I went to work in an office, I was amazed that, golly, I’ve got time to myself, I can go to the bank, you know, you can go to the toilet when you want. It was really the little things ... I had a lot more freedom in an office than in teaching.

Hayley summed up the responsibilities as follows:

Teaching was a much harder job than the jobs that I was doing and getting paid a lot more for. Also less responsibility, you know, getting paid a lot better yet I could work 8:30 to 6 pm or 9 to 5 pm. I didn’t have the responsibility on my shoulders every night.

You know, that Robert wasn't reading and such and such wasn't getting their maths, those sorts of things.

### **Working conditions, including support**

It was still 40 degrees in the classroom and the kids – you could do very little ... there were mice and huge cockroach problems. [Angela]

Mark also referred to the lack of air conditioning in schools, making it difficult for children and teachers to concentrate. David recalled that while the job conditions and wages of teaching seemed acceptable, his work in private enterprise has thrown into sharp contrast some of the inadequacies of working conditions at school, such as occupational health and safety issues, and support from senior staff. It has confirmed his views that what he was asking for in terms of teaching support was reasonable. He does miss the job he entered, but not the one he left – conditions and demands changed dramatically during his time in teaching, and managed to spoil some of the enjoyment and spontaneity of teaching and learning. In comparison to her teaching days, Hayley compared her office work: “a beautiful office ... fantastic Christmas parties. We did courses, cake-making courses ... all these perks.” Naomi finds her current sales representative work highly demanding, “with no down-time like the school holidays.” But, a “company car, international travel, respect, entertainment [allowance]” compensate for this. Her university friends who are teachers see her job as being more prestigious than theirs. Jenny's support and training in a private college was far superior to that in schools. She described the support as “phenomenal ... they sent me to Japan on an educational trip”, while her research work offered “very, very good pay” and regular international travel.

Fiona explained that her current research work is more flexible in terms of allowing her to spend time with her children. Similarly, Hayley said, “teaching was all-consuming and something that I could do when I was young and didn't have children.” She added, “I think that people who teach and then come home to children of their own are absolute saints.” This is perhaps ironic in that teaching is sometimes viewed as a parent-friendly profession, and chosen for that reason. Workplace flexibility embodies other virtues. Patrick noticed that compared to teaching, “I have a lot more control about what I work on to a large extent. I can control the pace, control how I think about it.” Fiona found that her subsequent work in teacher research has confirmed that her negative experiences in teaching are widespread.

### **Prestige**

I'm in a position here where people look up to me. [Ron]

A number of the respondents reported a decline over time in the esteem accorded to teaching. Angela stated, “I don't think there is prestige in teaching any more. I think there is a huge lack of understanding and disrespect in society.” Paul commented that nursing and teaching “have lost out big time” in terms of prestige. Mark noted that the standing of a teacher is “fairly mediocre these days.” As a doctoral student, Fiona doesn't believe her prestige will outrank that of her teaching days “until I can put professor in front of my

name.” By contrast, Patrick observed that people are more likely to be impressed with his current position as a quantitative analyst than as a teacher.

One significant issue is the lack of respect that some children accord to their teachers. As Patrick observed, “the people I’m working with, in the main, they want to get on and do the job. I don’t have that sort of aggressive, ‘why should I do that? You can’t make me’, type of thing.” By contrast, Jillian felt that teachers probably command more respect than librarians, who are more harshly stereotyped by society. That said, she added that there exists a dismissive societal view of teachers of “a female looking after children.” Relative lack of autonomy in teaching arose as further evidence of a lack of professional esteem for some respondents. As Pamela pointed out, “I’m my own boss” nowadays.

### **Security, career path**

Limited prospects for promotion appear to be an inhibitor as far as teachers continuing in the profession are concerned. In her subsequent research work, Jenny “moved on very quickly to a better position ... I had complete autonomy ... I couldn’t see that you could move so quickly up the ranks in teaching as you could outside.” While nursing does not offer Angela significantly different remuneration prospects, she sees more opportunity for promotion in than in teaching.

Lauren noted one particular pressure in private enterprise she hadn’t encountered in teaching: “you might not have a job tomorrow if you did not perform.” Nevertheless, in teaching, she had “the ultimate responsibility of looking after someone else’s children.” Compared to teaching, Lauren’s private enterprise position

was an obvious career path and a nurturing feeling, like, every day I was learning and getting better and I got rewarded for that through position changes and they used to throw in incentives. I knew that if I did well I would be rewarded for that with money or recognition.

This stands in stark contrast to the feelings of isolation and lack of support reported in previous sections.

### **Conclusions, recommendations and future research**

It needs to be kept in mind that some of these informants are recounting experiences from many years ago, and that certain working conditions may have changed markedly since then. Similarly, some cultural aspects, such as negative attitudes to women in the workplace, have perhaps disappeared or at least been driven underground. In some cases, working conditions may have improved, but in other areas, such as workload, and respect from students, conditions may have declined. It is noted here that mentoring of new teachers is becoming more widespread. Formal mentoring and induction were not available to the vast majority of these ex-teachers. One question remains at school-, system- and beyond-system level: in whose interests do mentoring and induction primarily act, the employer’s or the new teacher’s? Unless it is for the latter, mentoring and induction may simply provide further hurdles for those new to the profession.



In the unlikely event that teaching salaries and conditions vastly exceeded those of comparable professions, it is possible that some people may pursue teaching for less than noble motives. Nevertheless, salaries and conditions are measures of esteem accorded to the profession. Beyond that, there remains the pragmatic issue of people who avoid or leave teaching because they see the salary prospects as unviable. One additional imperative for an improvement in the physical working conditions of schools is that not only do these improve teaching conditions; they also improve learning conditions, and have positive offshoots for learners and for the educational capacity and capital of young people.

A number of these teachers left the profession because of the delay in securing permanent employment. This presents a difficulty for employing bodies, if newcomers are resistant to being sent to rural and isolated areas, or to other difficult-to-staff schools. A further increase in incentives to teach in these locations might mitigate this problem.

The *in loco parentis* nature of teaching renders it less flexible than many other professions in terms of the intensity and ebb and flow of the work. Isolation is another aspect compounding the responsibilities for teachers, and setting the profession apart from many others. In some ways, teaching can be likened to single parenthood – of 25 or more children. Opportunities for team teaching might alleviate some of this isolation.

One significant aspect of teaching is the professional prestige accorded to it and to its members. Gone are the days when teachers commanded respect from students or parents simply by virtue of their position, and this scepticism is probably not unhealthy in itself. Ironically, it is perhaps a sign of an educated community, which in turn is a symptom of the profession's success. Nevertheless, some accounts of these respondents from their teaching days portray children who present a safety risk to their teachers, their peers and themselves, apart from their debilitating effect on their own and others' learning. It is unpalatable for teachers, employing bodies, schools or societies to admit difficulties with regard to discipline. The ex-teachers in this study were courageous to do so, and their calls need to be taken seriously. Similarly, some of these respondents referred to a lack of professionalism accorded to them by their employers, the system, with its crowded curriculum necessitating a surface approach to learning, and even from their peers. One manifestation of this is a lack of autonomy, while some of the respondents recalled an anti-intellectualism, a low-level disdain for learning and for excellence. Attention to and remediation of this potentially multi-fronted deprofessionalism of teaching is likely to raise morale significantly in the profession.

If we are to believe the mantra that workers in the Twenty-first Century will typically have several careers, then it is only natural that some people will leave teaching. Nevertheless, the profession is losing highly qualified, highly competent people, who are proceeding to become doctors and take on other positions of high responsibility and high regard in the community. This flight from teaching represents not only a loss to many of these individuals, but also to the profession. Acceptance of the multi-career mantra also assumes the responsibility of making the teaching profession a competitive one in terms of salary and other conditions.

One way of confirming or otherwise the findings of this study would be to distribute a quantitative survey instrument to a larger number of ex-teachers. Such a survey could seek quantitative responses to questions such as: If your teaching salary were '10', how would your salary compare now, in numeric terms? A response of '6' would indicate that the person was now only earning 60 percent of her/his teaching salary, a response of 12 signifying a 20 percent increase. Another perspective on these aspects of the profession could be gained by interviewing or surveying the non-teaching partners of teachers.

It seems reasonable to propose smaller class sizes and/or a reduced face-to-face teaching load for all teachers, but particularly for those in their early years, as one way of alleviating some of the morale-related problems confronting the profession. The current introduction of this in some sectors is to be applauded. Beginning teachers may find that the work continues to expand to fill the time available, but it is likely that the quality of these teachers' work will improve, as will their satisfaction levels and the quality of their students' learning. Devolution of some responsibilities such as playground duty would be another way of releasing teachers to do their core work more effectively.

A cynic might argue that it is less costly for the profession to hire a majority of relatively inexperienced, and therefore less 'expensive' teachers. It would be unfortunate indeed if the teaching profession were seen, rightly or wrongly, as a nursery or springboard for other, 'real' careers. It is reasonable to assert that beginning teachers will underperform their more experienced selves in five or so years' time. For this reason, it seems appropriate, if not imperative, to shift the balance in favour of new teachers by giving them fewer duties and responsibilities as they adjust to the demands of the profession, and grow into those professionals high in experience, confidence and expertise – and high in goodwill for the profession.

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## Appendix 1: Summary of participant details

	Subject/s	Approximate teaching experience	Subsequent occupation/s
Angela	Primary	16 years	Nursing
Carol	Science/computing	10 years	Bank teller
Christine	Primary	9 months	Communications officer
Colin	Science	9 months	Museum curator
David	Agriculture	15 years	Small business retail
Denise	Primary	12 years	Administration; child care
Fiona	Science	2 years	F/t student, P/T researcher
Geoff	Science	14 years	Chaplain
Hayley	Primary	3.5 years	Executive assistant to CEO
Jacqui	Primary	30 years	Entertainment venue manager
Janelle	Science	21 years	Medical student
Jenny	English/French, ESL	18 months	Student administration
Jillian	Primary	2 years	Librarian
Kathy	English	9 years	P/T data entry + parenting
Lauren	Home Economics	1 year	Youth work; management
Mark	Primary	6 years	Clerical/legal work
Melinda	Primary	2 years	Admin assistant
Naomi	English	2.5 years	Sales representative
Pamela	Primary	18 years	Day-care centre manager
Patrick	Maths	15 months	Financial market
Paul	English/History	4 years	Workplace staff development
Ron	Middle school	20 years	Chaplain

Notes: Amount of teaching experience is approximate only. Some respondents were imprecise in their responses, and/or included some part-time (P/T) work, including what is variously known as casual/supply/relief teaching.

## Appendix 2: Interview protocol for ex-teachers

How long were you in teaching?

What kept you in teaching for that long?

What eventually led you to leave?

What view of teaching did you have before you entered the profession (say, in your final year/s of preservice)?

To what extent did this coincide with the reality of teaching for you in the early years?

Had you thought much or at all about the length of time you would probably spend in teaching?

As you look back on that transition time – as you decided to leave, how do/did you feel?

What thoughts were going through your mind?

Is there anything that would/could have kept you in the teaching profession?

To what extent (if at all) do you use the skills and knowledge you gained in teaching in your current work?

To what extent, if at all, did your teaching skills shape your decision to move into your current career?

How would you compare your teaching work to your current work in the following areas?

- Salary:
- Workload:
- Responsibility:
- Working conditions:
- 'Prestige' of the job

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