

Teachers' career decisions: Perspectives on choosing teaching careers, and on staying or leaving

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For early-career teachers in particular, teacher attrition and retention has been the focus of international research. We aimed to provide a more holistic view of teacher attrition and retention in an Australian educational context by including the perspectives of a cross-section of current and former teachers with various lengths of teaching service. We explored the similarities and differences in considerations about past career decision points reported by the teachers in different groups. Australian teachers (N = 133) who were staying in teaching (n = 59), or undecided about staying (n = 34), and former teachers who had changed careers (n = 40) completed free-response questionnaires about their decisions to choose and to stay in (or to leave) teaching careers. Thematic analysis suggested that three overarching themes were salient across all three groups of teachers at different decision points in the career. These overarching themes were personal fulfilment, practical considerations, and lack of alternatives or barriers to change. Strategies to retain teachers should aim to foster collegial relationships, address workload, respond to needs for job security or flexibility, and provide new opportunities within teaching.

Introduction

Teacher attrition has long been acknowledged as an international issue (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005) and has been the focus of a body of research in Australia, New Zealand, the USA, and the UK (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Brill & McCartney, 2008; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Employee attrition or the loss of experienced employees from a profession (Ingersoll, 2003), may be voluntary (due to early retirement or resignation) or involuntary (resulting from age retirement, retrenchment, or death). Problems associated with teacher attrition include the costs of recruiting, training, and employing new teachers; the difficulties faced by school communities in long-term planning; and the loss of classroom expertise (Brill & McCartney, 2008). As a result, some schools, particularly those in rural or disadvantaged areas, may be staffed by large proportions of inexperienced teachers (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). This has implications both for continuity for students (Smethem, 2007) and for support for new teachers. For early career teachers, informal support from experienced colleagues is crucial for high quality induction into the profession (Ewing & Manuel, 2005).

Late-career and early-career attrition have been of particular concern (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Brill & McCartney, 2008). Late-career attrition is noteworthy because teachers in Australia, as internationally, are part of an ageing population, with many teachers of the baby-boom generation due to retire by 2016 (Audit Office of New South Wales [NSW], 2008). Furthermore, early retirement has been encouraged by widespread membership in superannuation benefits schemes that reward early retirement (Audit Office of NSW,

2008). The projected retirement of teachers of the baby-boom generation has caused concern about future teacher shortages (Richardson & Watt, 2006) and has led to new teacher recruitment campaigns, attracting both school-leavers and career-changers into the profession (Manuel & Hughes, 2006). Indeed, the 2013 *Staff in Australia's Schools* survey found that over 35% of early-career teachers in Australia were over 30 years of age (McKenzie, Weldon, Rowley, Murphy, & McMillan, 2014). Whilst attraction of teachers has been successful, the retention of early-career teachers in Australia and internationally has been less so. US figures suggest that an estimated 33% of teachers leave the profession in the first three years, and 46% leave after the first five years (Brill & McCartney, 2008). Although the relative quality of teachers who stay and leave has been debated (e.g., Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011), it is clear that early career teachers with strong skills and high motivation consider leaving teaching as do their less skilled and less motivated counterparts (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012).

In previous studies, researchers have taken a number of different approaches to understanding teacher attrition and retention. These approaches included exploring the characteristics, motivations and aspirations of pre-service teachers (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Raggl & Troman, 2008; Richardson & Watt, 2006; Watt & Richardson, 2008; Williams & Forgasz, 2009), and early-career teachers (Bizet et al., 2010; Brill & McCartney, 2008; Buchanan, Prescott, Schuck, Aubusson, & Burke, 2013; Lam & Yan, 2011; Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Smethem, 2007; Rinke, 2009); asking current teachers why they stay (Cooper & Davey, 2011); and reviewing the reasons why former teachers left the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Brill & McCartney, 2008; Buchanan, 2009). Overall, recent research has focused attention on early-career teacher attrition, leaving a relative dearth of research about what motivates teachers to stay, and why some teachers do leave in mid- or late-career.

The current study

In contrast to past studies, we aimed to present an inclusive snapshot of the career decision-making considerations of an intergenerational cross-section of Australian teachers. We aimed to address this imbalance to obtain an overall, more holistic view. Thus, we incorporated not only the perspectives of current but also former teachers, and not only early career but also mid- and later-career teachers. We analysed reported influences on teachers' decisions to choose teaching careers and to stay in or to leave these chosen careers. We aimed to locate similarities and differences in the relative importance of themes for teachers who were either staying in teaching or were undecided about staying, and former teachers who had left the profession, to enhance understanding of attrition and retention, and to guide recommendations aimed at increased teacher retention.

Method

Participants

Participants were 133 current and former teachers who had completed a longer survey along with current and former police officers (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014a). This manuscript reports findings from previously unpublished open-ended responses by the current and former teachers, 93 of whom were currently employed in Australian schools and 40 of whom were former teachers who had changed careers. Of the total sample, 68.4% were female and 31.6% were male teachers, reflecting closely the gender proportions of teachers in Australia (69% female, 31% male; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). The majority were secondary- (66.9%) or primary-trained (24.1%) teachers, with a minority (9.0%) who had trained to teach in middle school, early childhood, or both primary and secondary schools. A number of teachers had taught in more than one school system: government (85.0%), Catholic (32.3%), and Independent (27.8%). Participants ranged in age from 23 to 70 years ($M = 44.47$ years, $SD = 10.40$) and had taught in Australian primary or high schools for between 1 and 40 years ($M = 16.25$ years, $SD = 10.72$), closely reflecting the age and experience of participants in the large scale *Staff in Australia's Schools* survey (McKenzie et al., 2014).

Materials

Participants completed an online survey containing multiple choice and free response questions about their careers. Multiple choice questions asked participants whether they were primary or secondary trained, whether or not they had considered a career change (and if so whether they had rejected the idea of career change; were still considering it; were currently in the process of changing, but were still teaching; were currently in the process of changing, but had left teaching; or had left teaching and had changed careers). These response categories were collapsed to form three groups of teachers: staying, undecided, and former (see Table 1 for teacher groups).

The free response questions asked of participants varied according to whether they were staying, undecided, or former teachers. In response to open-ended questions, participants were encouraged to provide 1-3 reasons. We asked the following questions (of teacher groups indicated in parentheses):

1. Why did you choose your career? (All groups)
2. What are the main things that contribute to your decision to stay in your career? (All current teachers: staying and undecided)
3. a) What things prompted your thinking about career change? (Undecided teachers – considering subgroup)
b) What were your main reasons for leaving teaching? (Former teachers)
4. a) Could your employer do anything to encourage you to stay longer in your career? (Undecided teachers – working towards subgroup)
b) Could your employer have done anything to make you want to stay for longer? (Former teachers)

5. What have been the positive and negative aspects of leaving your teaching career?
(Former teachers)

Table 1: Reported thoughts about career change by teacher group (percent)

Teacher group: consideration of career change*	Participants** % by group (n)	Total
Current staying teachers		
Never considered a career change	32 (19)	
Considered career change and decided against	68 (40)	44 (59)
Current undecided teachers		
Considering a career change but undecided	59 (20)	
Currently working towards career change	41 (14)	26 (34)
All current teachers		70 (93)
Former teachers		
Currently working towards career change	15 (6)	
Made a career change	85 (34)	30 (40)
Total		100 (133)

* Both undecided and former teacher groups included people working towards career change. Participants in the undecided group were still employed as teachers; those in the former group had left teaching.

** Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Procedure

Ethical approval for minimal risk research was obtained from the institutional ethics committee. Participants received the invitation to participate in the study via bulletins and magazines of Education Unions and Associations, articles in local newspapers, and snowball sampling, as participants were invited to forward the web-link to other current or former teachers who they thought may be interested in participating. Due to the method of obtaining participants, it was not possible to determine how many potential participants were aware of the study and elected not to respond. Information provided to participants prior to commencement of the online survey informed them that completion of it implied consent.

Method of analysis

Free responses to each question were analysed using the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to conduct a data-driven (inductive) thematic analysis according to teacher group. Free responses were first printed, read, and coded at the level of idea, whether a phrase or sentence. Respondents provided three reasons per item. We did not ask teachers to prioritise their responses and therefore all responses were given equal weight. Tentative themes, based on frequently observed codes, were noted. We tabulated coded responses; similar codes were grouped together to form sub-themes, these were then cross-checked with original coded responses. Approximately one-third of the data were re-coded at a later date and compared with the original coded data to check accuracy and agreement.

Minor changes resulted from the check. Finally, similar sub-themes were grouped under main themes.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics for the three teacher groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean demographic characteristics by teacher group

	Current teachers		Former teachers*
	Staying (n = 59)	Undecided (n = 34)	(n = 40)
Years of age (current) (when left)	46.75 (9.55)	41.24 (8.29)	43.85 (12.46) 37.45 (11.46)
Years in teaching	19.58 (11.21)	14.71 (8.58)	12.65 (10.38)
Years of tertiary education	6.56 (1.95)	7.12 (1.68)	7.13 (2.00)

Note. Means are reported (standard deviations in parentheses).

* 40% of the former teachers in this sample left teaching aged 30 years or younger; 40% left teaching aged 40 years or more (of these only 5% were aged 55 years or more).

Before presenting results of the analysis of free response data, it is worthwhile noting that, as can be seen from Table 1, of all current teachers (staying and undecided), four-fifths (80%) had considered or were considering a career change, whereas one-fifth (20%) had never considered a career change. Of staying teachers, however, approximately two-thirds (68%) had considered and rejected a career change. Thus, two-thirds of current staying teachers had chosen teaching at least twice: at the outset of their careers, and again early-, mid-, or late-career, after having considered alternatives. This suggests that the membership in these groups is not fixed, but fluid. This finding supports research suggesting that many teachers who consider leaving the profession do not ultimately leave (Cooper & Davey, 2011). Given the fluidity of these groups over the course of a career, these results present a snapshot of participants' perspectives about their teaching careers at a particular point in time in those careers.

Reasons for choosing a teaching career

Responses about choosing a career in teaching were classified into five themes: personal fulfilment; practical considerations; desire to contribute; lack of alternatives; and influence from others.

As Table 3 shows, the top three themes for joining the profession overall were personal fulfilment (48%), practical considerations (21%), and desire to contribute (13%). Personal fulfilment included expectations of enjoyment to be derived from a passion for learning, a

specific subject area, and a love of children or the anticipated enjoyment of working with young people: “I had a passion for my subject area and after my first Prac I discovered that I truly enjoyed working with young people”. Personal fulfilment incorporated a feeling of personal suitability for a teaching role which was often related to enjoyment of their own past school experiences. For a number of participants, the idea of teaching had been a childhood dream. This theme reflected reasons reported by early-career teachers (McKenzie et al., 2014).

Table 3: Reflections on reasons for teaching by teacher group and theme

Reason/theme* % responses	Teacher group			Total (n = 133)
	Staying teachers (n = 59)	Undecided teachers (n = 34)	Former teachers (n = 40)	
Personal fulfilment	48 (67)	39 (28)	55 (55)	48 (150)
Practical considerations	21 (30)	21 (15)	22 (22)	21 (67)
Desire to contribute	16 (22)	18 (13)	7 (7)	13 (42)
Lack of alternatives	9 (12)	15 (11)	12 (12)	11 (35)
Influence from others	7 (10)	6 (4)	4 (4)	6 (18)
Total**	100 (141)	100 (71)	100 (100)	100 (312)

* Teachers provided up to 3 reasons each.

** Total percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Practical considerations applied both to the time of studying teaching and to future employment prospects in teaching. A number of teachers had received scholarships to support them through their degrees: “I was offered a teacher’s scholarship to go to university”. Future job security and prospects, stable and reasonable income were frequently mentioned by participants: “it seemed like the best option at the time for secure and ongoing employment”. Opportunities afforded by the job, such as the ability to work in different geographic locations, were important to a number of participants (e.g., “I liked the idea of teaching in remote locations”). Reflecting past research, school holidays and face-to-face hours were a drawcard for many people when deciding between teaching and another option (Williams & Forgasz, 2009), particularly for teachers who had school-aged children or intended to have children (e.g., “I thought that I could combine career and family”).

The more altruistic motivation for becoming a teacher, the *desire to contribute*, included the idea of contributing to society as a whole through helping to shape the next generation, working in a worthwhile occupation, or making a difference in the lives of individual children and young people. For example, participants commented: “I wanted to help others and contribute to the community”; “to be a positive influence on young people”. Overall, these three themes relating to participants’ choice of a teaching career were consistent with the past research findings (Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Williams & Forgasz, 2009).

Two additional factors were important considerations for pre-service teachers. Lack of alternatives (11%) and influence from others (6%) were smaller but nevertheless salient themes. Both themes were applicable to members of all three groups of teachers. Respondents attributed the *lack of alternatives* to teaching to factors such as living in rural locations; lack of knowledge about other options; the limits of their existing qualifications (e.g., undergraduate degrees) or not having attained the marks to pursue other attractive options (e.g., “actually it was my second choice, I didn’t get the marks for my first choice”) and limited career options for women at the time they had chosen their career. Teaching was seen as a viable opportunity to have a career under one or more of these conditions. For example, “[I saw it as] a way of staying in rural areas with a decent job”. Similarly, a proportion of respondents were influenced in their decision by others, reflecting past findings (Richardson & Watt, 2006). Many had been inspired by a teacher from their own schooling (“because I wanted to be just like a teacher I had met during school and encourage young children to do their best – she was a great role model”), or had family members or friends in teaching (e.g., “I have a family culture of teaching”; “most of my friends were enrolling in teaching courses”).

As can be seen in Table 3, all five themes were evidenced by responses from teachers in each group. The themes relating to choosing a teaching career were ranked in the same order for staying and undecided teachers. However, for former teachers, perceived *lack of alternatives* outranked the *desire to contribute*. It is not clear why the reported desire to contribute was relatively less important to the former teacher group than to the staying and undecided current teacher groups.

Reasons for staying in a teaching career

All current teacher participants (both staying and undecided) responded to the question about reasons why they stay in their teaching careers. Their responses were classified into three themes: personal fulfilment; practical considerations; and barriers to change.

Table 4: Decisions to stay in teaching by teacher group and theme

Reason/theme* % responses	Teacher group		
	Staying teachers (n = 59)	Undecided teachers (n = 34)	Total (n = 93)
Personal fulfilment	62 (83)	43 (36)	55 (119)
Practical considerations	31 (42)	39 (33)	34 (75)
Barriers to change	7 (9)	18 (15)	11 (24)
Total**	100 (134)	100 (84)	100 (218)

* Teachers provided up to 3 reasons each.

** Total percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

As Table 4 shows, *personal fulfilment* was the most frequent theme overall (55%) for staying in a teaching career. Many participants stated that they loved teaching, found the work stimulating, and felt that they were personally suited to the role: “it’s something I believe I am good at and want to continue”; “I enjoy it!” In addition, teachers reported fulfilment

due to new opportunities which had arisen in teaching either through retraining, or through flexibility of role (“I enjoy the ongoing challenges and training”; “there is flexibility in my role and I have the ability to work part time”). Many teachers expressed a sense of meaning found in the work of teaching (e.g., “I feel that I’m making a significant difference in young people’s lives”).

Practical considerations (34%) made a significant contribution to teachers’ decisions to stay in teaching. Practical considerations while staying in teaching careers included current financial needs and future financial needs, accompanied by comments about superannuation benefits schemes (e.g., “I’m building up my superannuation”). Job security was important, with job permanency and the associated dependable income valued highly (e.g., “I have permanent employment and a steady income”). The perceived compatibility of both the face-to-face hours of teaching and the school holidays with family life were important considerations for many participants (e.g., “school holidays where I can look after my own children”).

The third theme in decisions to stay in teaching for teachers overall was barriers to change (11%). Barriers to change included a dearth of perceived alternatives and the path of least resistance. Many teachers acknowledged that they were comfortable, it was convenient to stay, and alluded to the ease of the familiar in contrast with the fear of the unknown (“it’s better the devil you know”; “I know the job expectations”; “I would say a lack of other qualifications and fear”). The perceived lack of available opportunities as a barrier to change both within and outside teaching reflected previous findings (Cooper & Davey, 2011). This contrasted with some staying teachers’ experience of the availability of opportunities, reported under *personal fulfilment*, as a reason for actively choosing to stay in teaching careers.

Some important differences in the relative importance of the themes for staying and undecided teachers emerged. The theme of *practical considerations* was far less relatively important to staying teachers (31%) than was *personal fulfilment* (62%). However, for undecided teachers, practical considerations (39%) were of similar in relative importance to *personal fulfilment* (43%). In addition, barriers to change were less applicable to staying (7%) than to undecided teachers (18%).

Reasons for considering and making a career change from teaching

The subgroup of undecided teachers considering career change was asked what prompted them to think about career change, while former teachers were asked why they left. The two groups of responses were analysed alongside one another to facilitate comparison. Three themes emerged: issues with teaching; need for change; and practical considerations.

Table 5 shows that the main theme reported by teachers as prompting them to consider career change and make a career change was issues with teaching (63%), including day-to-day issues such as loss or lack of enjoyment, negative interactions with staff, poor

Table 5: Reasons prompting teachers to consider or make career changes

Reason/Theme* % responses	Teacher Group		
	Undecided teachers: undecided subgroup*** (<i>n</i> = 20)	Former teachers (<i>n</i> = 40)	All (<i>n</i> = 60)
Issues with teaching	63 (62)	63 (48)	63 (110)
Need for change	23 (23)	14 (11)	19 (34)
Practical considerations	14 (14)	22 (17)	18 (31)
Total**	100 (99)	100 (76)	100 (175)

* Teachers provided up to 3 reasons each.

** Total percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

*** Of the total undecided teacher group, only the undecided sub-group (*n* = 20) was asked this question. The sub-group of undecided teachers who were working towards career change (*n* = 14) was asked what the career transition process involved for them.

workplace conditions, poor student behaviour, workload, and stress: "I'm tired of the demands of teaching, tired of dealing with students, tired with the increasing demands of the job"; "poorly behaved students lead me to question whether the stress is worth it". *Issues with teaching* also included poor leadership and dissatisfaction with administration in the form of a perceived lack of support (e.g., "there is a lack of support from management"; "school culture depends so much on the competency of the senior executive"; "expectations of teachers have reached absurdity"). This finding is largely consistent with past research which reported key issues in teaching as a lack of support, excessive workloads, and disruptive student behaviour (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Brill & McCartney, 2008; Buchanan, 2009).

High workload and a perceived lack of support from principals and others in leadership roles, were the issues with teaching most frequently mentioned by both former teachers and the considering subgroup of undecided teachers (e.g., "Paperwork can only be done in my own time and I'm just trying to keep up with workload"). In addition, issues in teaching included conflict in values of participants with current developments in education (e.g., "I feel that public money is wasted on schemes of dubious educational merit").

For undecided teachers who were considering leaving teaching, *issues with teaching* was followed by a need for change (23%). The need for change included the need for a new challenge and actively seeking a different role: "I want to combine my passion and skills for development in my career"; "the year advisor's role got me interested in counselling". Some participants reported interest in a new field or an offer from outside teaching: "I developed an interest in a new area – industrial relations". A number of participants also noted the lack of opportunities within teaching careers both to diversify and obtain promotions: "there is a lack of professional development opportunities"; "I have had repeated unsuccessful applications for promotion".

Practical considerations included the perception of inadequate pay, a lack of job security, and difficulty of achieving work-life balance: “I want more time for myself and my family”; “the difficulty of not finding a permanent position – I only ever had casual work as a teacher”. Of note is that the relative importance of *need for change* and *practical considerations* were of inverse significance to undecided (considering subgroup) and former teacher groups. The theme of practical considerations as a significant issue for the former teacher group was consistent with past research indicating that teachers were frustrated by a lack of job permanency (Anthony & Ord, 2008) and incompatibility of the demands of teaching and family life (Smethem, 2007). It is possible that a greater proportion of members of the undecided group held permanent teaching positions than did members of the former teacher group. It may also be that some differences in the relative importance of themes can be attributed to the timing. Undecided teachers reflected on their current career in the midst of frustrations with it, while former teachers reflected in hindsight.

Employer encouragement to stay in the teaching career

The subgroup of undecided teachers ($n = 14$) who indicated that they were working towards a career change was asked whether the employer could do anything, and former teachers ($n = 40$) were asked whether the employer could have done anything, to encourage them to stay. Although this question was optional, twelve undecided teachers (working towards subgroup) and 25 former teachers responded. Of undecided teachers, six said the employer could encourage them to stay, and six said the employer could not. Of former teachers, 16 said they could have been encouraged to stay, while nine said they could not.

Current (undecided) teachers' suggestions to the employer on ways to encourage staying largely corroborated past findings and included the provision of permanent jobs, opportunities to teach in their area of expertise rather than in other subjects (Ingersoll, 2003), and opportunities for diversification (Mayer, 2006; Rinke, 2009). Former teachers' suggestions were similar, and in addition, included more support to help with workload (e.g., reduced face-to-face teaching time, not giving new teachers a load of all difficult classes). This view is consistent with research suggesting that induction into the profession is important (Brill & McCartney, 2008). Reasons why they would not be persuaded to stay, reported by current teachers, were the desire for a new direction, a loss of faith in the system, and being worn down by workplace bullying. These reflected the thoughts of former teachers with the additional mention of poor health. One participant's comment sums up sentiment: “My employers could have treated me as a dedicated professional, rather than a number not to be trusted or respected”.

Positive and negative aspects of leaving teaching

Former teachers ($n = 40$) were provided the option to comment on positive and negative aspects of leaving teaching. Responses were classified into two shared and two unique themes, as shown in Table 6. Shared themes were: practical considerations; and aspects of teaching. The unique theme on positive aspects of teaching was new opportunities. The unique theme on negative aspects of leaving teaching was none.

Table 6: Positive and negative aspects of leaving teaching per former teachers

Reason/Theme* % responses	Aspects of leaving teaching	
	Positive (<i>n</i> = 38) ^{***}	Negative (<i>n</i> = 38)
New opportunities	48 (36)	-
Practical considerations	39 (29)	27 (15)
Aspects of teaching	13 (10)	56 (31)
None	-	16 (9)
Total**	100 (75)	100 (55)

No overall total provided because responses are from the same group. Teachers provided up to 3 reasons each.

** Total may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

***Two participants did not answer.

Participants reported more positive than negative aspects of leaving teaching. The most positive aspect of leaving teaching reported by former teachers was the new opportunities (48%) that had become available. These included new careers, further study, and travel. In new careers, respondents reported feeling appreciated, using their skills, and doing rewarding work: "I have travelled the world and achieved new goals"; "I found that my skills are transferable to my new role and valued in it".

Practical considerations (39%), such as higher pay and more suitable work conditions were another positive aspect of leaving. The meaning of more suitable work conditions depended upon the preferences of individual participants and approximately equally meant greater flexibility in work hours, or greater job security ("I no longer have to take work home – I have weekends off!"; "finally I have full-time work"). This suggests that there may be a mismatch for a number of teachers in the employment available to them in schools. While some participants wanted and needed the stability and security of a permanent job, they were only offered casual teaching or temporary contracts. Others were burdened by the constraints of a full-time role but apparently lacked the opportunity to convert their role to a part-time one or to obtain a more flexible role in teaching. This finding supports Mayer's (2006) suggestion of the need for greater flexibility in staffing practices. *Practical considerations* also took into account a greater sense of life balance, which enabled people to spend more time with family or to undertake further study: "I am spending more time with family"; "I have time to do the things that interest me".

The third theme, aspects of teaching (13%) reflected that former teachers were pleased not to have to deal with day-to-day issues in teaching: They were less burdened by work. At the same time, participants appreciated both the skills and the friendships that they had developed in their time in the profession: "less stress from the bitchy staffroom"; "the friends I've made and still have".

The most frequently reported negative aspect of leaving teaching was missing the aspects of teaching (56%) that the former teachers had previously enjoyed. Participants missed working with children or teenagers, and the sense of professional identity and meaning

they had had as teachers: “I miss the relationships and the fun of being around children”; “I miss being able to make a difference in young people’s lives”. Some participants experienced a loss of worth and felt that their now unused knowledge and skills were wasted: “teaching is what I was meant to do with my life”; “it impacted on my sense of identity – I really saw myself as a teacher”.

In terms of practical considerations (27%), some participants missed school holidays and experienced a loss of income (e.g., “I have less holidays now”). However, a number of participants stated that there were no negatives associated with leaving teaching (16%): “you know, I can’t think of any!”. These findings largely reflected those of Buchanan (2009) who found overall from interviews with former teachers that few regretted their decision to leave teaching, or considered themselves to be in a worse position, even if financial loss had resulted from the career change.

General discussion

The foregoing results illuminated themes important in decisions to start, continue, or leave teaching careers. Depending upon whether teachers were either staying, undecided about staying, or had left teaching, the same themes generally applied, but differed in relative importance. Three overarching themes were salient across all three groups of teachers at different decision points in the career; namely, personal fulfilment, practical considerations, and lack of alternatives or barriers to change. Implications that flow from these themes to enhance teacher retention are discussed below.

Personal fulfilment

When deciding to become a teacher, and deciding to stay in teaching, *personal fulfilment*, both in terms meaning and enjoyment, was a particularly important consideration. Both current and former teachers placed high value on positive relationships with students and colleagues, and these interpersonal relationships were especially enjoyable aspects of teaching careers (as found by McKenzie et al., 2014), cited both as reasons for staying and as aspects missed by former teachers. The importance of strong interpersonal relationships in retaining teachers reflected Ng and Feldman’s (2007) contention that time spent in an occupation is associated with developing connections with others, and therefore contributes to occupational embeddedness, the forces that bind people to their occupations. Conversely, an issue which diminished personal fulfilment in teaching was negative interactions, whether with principals and others in leadership roles, other staff, or students (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000). This finding reinforced the need for those in leadership roles to facilitate the development of school cultures that foster good relationships and mutual respect among members of the school community through their own enactment of communication practices and through the implementation of policies such as mentoring of early-career teachers. Indeed a number of researchers have emphasised the importance of collegial, supportive schools that can be viewed as communities of professional learning (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Ward, 2011). The opportunities available for teachers to undertake casual

work as relief teachers may provide valuable experience of different school cultures and increase teacher awareness of schools that represent a good fit.

Although teachers found fulfilment in many aspects of their work, workload was a key issue. Critically, workload was not only problematic for early-career teachers (Buchanan et al., 2013) but also for experienced teachers, reflecting the findings of McKenzie et al. (2014). The pressure of a high workload was not seen as sustainable by many teachers. Many former teachers, despite some regrets about leaving, experienced greater focus on family or enjoyable pursuits without the weight of that work overload. We observed a widespread perception among teachers of a lack of support from principals; the heavy workload was largely unacknowledged and was not financially compensated. Although a number of teachers suggested extra pay for overtime and extra work, more suggested increased support in the form of a reduction in face-to-face teaching hours, particularly when beginning a teaching career, or when under extra pressure. Based on teachers' stated needs from employers, the most appropriate response is more supportive leadership practices. Past research has shown that teachers perceived support in the form of decreased teaching load and acknowledgment from principals and others in administrative positions to mean that their contribution to the school was valued (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2014b). This further emphasises the importance of both support and high-quality mentoring highlighted in past research (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Lovett & Davey, 2009; Margolis, 2008) for both beginning teachers and their more experienced counterparts (Ward, 2011).

Practical considerations

Although practical considerations (such as income, job security, and work-life balance) were important and necessary, they were generally lower in teachers' priority order than was personal fulfilment in teaching. Nevertheless, practical considerations featured consistently in decisions to join the career, stay, or leave. The ability to earn a stable and satisfactory income was an important consideration in decisions both to leave and to continue teaching. For some, this was epitomised by the need for a stable job (Bizet et al., 2010).

For teachers with family and other personal commitments, face-to-face hours and school holidays were perceived as compatible with family and personal life, but the workload out-of-hours was not. Thus, considerations in both staying and leaving took family and personal needs into account, reflecting past research on the relational nature of career decisions (Motulsky, 2010).

Schools which are able to offer some flexibility in staffing practices, allowing teachers to negotiate increases and decreases in their face-to-face hours from year to year in response to their needs and preferences may be better placed to retain teachers. This need for greater staffing flexibility is consistent with previous research findings (Margolis, 2008; Mayer, 2006). However, increased flexibility would be unlikely to be welcomed if it were synonymous with decreased job security, as stability was valued highly by participants.

Lack of alternatives and need for change

The theme of *lack of alternatives* featured in teachers' choice of career and decisions to stay and to leave. Lack of alternatives was mentioned by members of all groups as a reason for joining the profession. The perceived lack of alternatives to teaching careers indicates a role for careers advice and education both prior to selecting a career, and while following a career pathway, to ensure that teachers who enter and stay in teaching careers select teaching as a preferred option rather than a forced choice. A lack of alternatives in choosing teaching was intertwined with the theme of barriers to change in staying in teaching, and need for change reported both by participants who were thinking about leaving and who had actually left teaching. Many teachers who were thinking of leaving or had left teaching expressed the need for change, whether within or outside teaching, consistent with past research (Rinke, 2009). Whilst it was clear that the presence of new opportunities within teaching contributed to personal fulfilment and was a reason for staying in teaching for some teachers, for many others, the need for change was coupled with a lack of opportunity to find that change within teaching. This finding corroborated past results indicating that a significant proportion of teachers who stayed in classroom teaching would have preferred roles with reduced teaching time but had been unsuccessful in an application for such a position (Cooper & Davey, 2011). Interviews with a subsample of former teachers indicated a preference to stay in teaching (Author/s, 2014). However, the lack of new opportunity for change within teaching, in conjunction with a perceived lack of opportunities outside teaching, for some teachers, resulted in a feeling of being trapped (Draper, Fraser & Taylor, 1998).

Clearly the themes of lack of alternatives or barriers to change as reasons to enter or stay in teaching careers are potentially problematic when it comes to retaining an engaged and dynamic teacher workforce. From time to time in the past, to reduce stagnation, Australian governments have offered teachers the opportunity to access a lump sum to leave teaching and establish new careers (Craig, 2009). However, as indicated by many staying teachers in our sample, and as suggested by Margolis (2008), increased opportunities within teaching to diversify and undertake professional development in areas of interest are desirable and may assist in retaining teachers by meeting their need for change and enhancing personal fulfilment. That is, many teachers want to stay in teaching, and are able to do so when new opportunities are available within their teaching careers. Teachers' desire to contribute to school communities in new and meaningful ways can be seen as an important resource. Some such opportunities for change through job diversity and professional development for individual teachers could be identified at the system level and in collaboration with teaching staff at the school level, in response to areas of need in the school.

Limitations and future research

In contrast to past research that has predominantly explored the aspirations and motivations of pre-service and early-career teachers, the present study focused on current and former Australian teachers' perceptions of their decisions about their careers. All questions were asked retrospectively and, as such, participants' comments reflected their current perceptions of past career decisions. However, these considerations are inherent limitations in cross-sectional research and do not pose problems for research in which participants' perceptions are specifically sought (Zittoun, 2009).

Our former teacher group consisted of people who had left teaching at early- (approximately one-third) and mid-career (almost half), rather than the oft-cited early- and late-career combination. (Those who left in later career accounted for just over one-fifth of the sample of former teachers.) Our snapshot of an intergenerational workforce enabled us to capture and include the experiences of mid-career teachers. Teachers in mid-career have the potential to contribute many more years of service, enhancing the stability of schools both in terms of continuity for students and mentoring for early-career teachers.

Conclusion

This cross-sectional study provided some glimpses into the perceptions of current and former Australian teachers about considerations influencing their career decisions. In our sample, teachers who had never thought about career change (one-fifth) were in the minority. To prevent attrition from teaching by increasing the numbers of teachers who actively decide to stay in their chosen profession as opposed to staying due to a perceived lack of alternatives, three overarching themes were important: personal fulfilment, practical considerations, and need for change.

Within these three overarching themes, insights provided by teachers indicated four key areas to address to help retain teachers: (1) to foster positive and supportive relationships within school communities; (2) to provide support for teachers to alleviate high workload; (3) to provide greater job security or flexibility in response to teachers' needs and preferences; and (4) to offer new and interesting opportunities to diversify within teaching. Many continuing teachers expressed positive feelings about their work environments and opportunities in teaching. Educational policies, school cultures and school leadership strategies that are able to address these needs for a broader range of teachers may ultimately retain more teachers within the teaching profession and contribute to dynamic and vibrant educational communities.

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Please cite as: Howes, L. M. & Goodman-Delahunty, J. (2015). Teachers' career decisions: Perspectives on choosing teaching careers, and on staying or leaving. *Issues in Educational Research*, 25(1), 18-35. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier25/howes.html>