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What really influences teacher attrition, migration, and retention?

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Abstract

Past research on teacher shortages due to turnover has not adequately distinguished between teachers leaving the profession (attrition) and moving between schools (migration), hindering the identification of tailored retention strategies for schools and/or the profession. This study, part of a comprehensive project including a systematic review, meta-analysis, and empirical investigation, surveyed 930 current and former K-12 teachers in Victoria, Australia. It explored their reasons for quitting, migrating, or remaining in the profession. Thematic analysis revealed that career factors and school characteristics primarily drive migration, whereas personal life stages and role compatibility influence attrition. Factors supporting retention include personal choice, job compatibility, and positive relationships with students and colleagues. Migration often stems from a quest for professional advancement and dissatisfaction with school culture. Conversely, attrition is predominantly driven by job dissatisfaction and burnout. The findings suggest that while migration can yield positive outcomes for departing teachers, some teachers may feel compelled to stay due to factors like poor employability, fear of change, or personal obligations. Importantly, the study captured voluntary and involuntary career decisions, with the latter often overlooked previously. This research underscores the need for tailored strategies that acknowledge and address both voluntary and involuntary aspects of teacher turnover.

Keywords Teacher turnover · Teacher retention · Teacher attrition · Teacher migration · Turnover intention

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Teacher turnover: attrition, migration and retention

Employee turnover is an issue when an organisation depends on the uniqueness and specialisation of its employees' knowledge, skills, and performance. The loss of such employees can disrupt organisational effectiveness and efficiency by reducing the collective ability of those who remain (Allen, 2008; Allen & Griffeth, 1999; Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Menzies, 2023; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Recruitment and training of replacements of similar competency and experience typically require substantial additional resources (Allen et al., 2017; Barnes et al., 2007; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ford & Forsyth, 2021; Gibbons et al., 2018; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020; Watlington et al., 2010).

The field is clouded by definitional problems (Macdonald, 1999; Rinke, 2007; Weldon, 2018) as past research has not used consistent nomenclature for the variety of behaviours related to the change in the number of teachers from one year to the next in a school and/or the profession. Terms such as 'turnover', 'attrition', 'movement', 'churn', 'leaving', 'continuing', and 'wastage' are used inconsistently across the body of research (Atteberry et al., 2017; Brantlinger, 2021; Menzies, 2023; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Quartz et al., 2008; Rinke & Mawhinney, 2017; Sims, 2021; Worth & De Lazzari, 2017). We use 'turnover' to describe all teacher departures from a school (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020) and distinguish within the concept of 'turnover' that 'migration' is when teachers move schools but stay in teaching, and 'attrition' is when teachers leave the profession altogether (Ryan et al., 2017).

A school may treat migration and attrition as the same thing: the loss of a teacher who must be replaced (Ingersoll & Perda, 2010). However, a stronger appreciation of the motivation and reasons that accompany each career decision could help organisations better manage their employees and support more satisfying careers (Brantlinger, 2021; Quartz et al., 2008; Räsänen et al., 2020; Rinke & Mawhinney, 2017; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Thus, there is an opportunity to unpack the antecedents for two distinct turnover outcomes (i.e., attrition and migration), and two retention outcomes (i.e., in schools and the profession). This study seeks to identify what influences teachers' career decisions and whether the types of turnover and retention are associated with specific antecedents.

Turnover behaviours and their intentions

The link between intended attrition as a predictor of actual attrition has been well-established (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Griffeth et al., 2000; Johari et al., 2012; McInerney et al., 2018; Räsänen et al., 2020; Rhodes & Doering, 1993). However, its strength has been questioned recently (Grant & Brantlinger, 2023). Using turnover intentions as proxies for behaviour, as much of the teacher turnover literature has done, is problematic because teachers may intend to leave long before actually leaving (Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Quartz et al., 2008; Smethem, 2007), and not all who intend to leave can or will leave (Cooper & Davey, 2011; DeAngelis et al., 2013; Grant & Brantlinger, 2023; Hulin et al., 1985).

Voluntary turnover requires an intention to leave, often explained by job dissatisfaction (Arnup & Bowles, 2016; Conley & You, 2014; Guarino et al., 2005; Heikonen et al., 2016; Saeed et al., 2014; Stockard & Lehman, 2004). Griffeth and Hom's (2001) model proposed voluntary and involuntary forms of turnover and retention, recognising that an employee's departure may be instigated by the employee or the employer.

Involuntary reasons for teacher turnover, where an intention to stay exists, include redundancy, contract unavailability, and unsuitable part-time hours (Palma-Vasquez et al., 2022; Sawatzki & Richardson, 2012; Weldon, 2018). Involuntary retention of teachers who intend to leave (Griffeth & Hom, 2001), can occur due to various constraints such as lack of employment opportunities, financial commitments, or personal circumstances.

Recognising that employees may leave an organisation or profession for reasons beyond job satisfaction, and unrelated to working conditions, challenges the assumption that all turnover stems from employee dissatisfaction (Claflin et al., 2019; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Schaack et al., 2022). Non-work causes include a spouse's career priority, finance, and family factors (Claflin et al., 2019; Dizon-Ross et al., 2019; Schaack et al., 2022; Steers & Mowday, 1981).

Turnover is not always a negative outcome for teachers or schools

Turnover models have typically been developed from the employer/government perspective using organisational or labour market theory, framing teachers leaving as a phenomenon to reduce (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001b; Simon & Johnson, 2015). However, while excessive turnover is unfavourable, low turnover may stagnate professional learning and development, and some migration between sectors can benefit schools and the system (Gibbons et al., 2018; Macdonald, 1999).

Total retention is unrealistic and undesirable, as ineffective teachers can harm more than benefit (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Guarino et al., 2004, 2006; Hanushek et al., 2004; Hardin, 2019; James & Wyckoff, 2020; Johnson et al., 2005; Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2015). 'Functional' turnover (Dalton et al., 1981; Menzies, 2023) benefits organisations when ineffective employees depart (Adnot et al., 2017; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). Allowing ineffective or incompatible teachers to voluntarily leave their positions is functional for schools and the profession. Effective schools usually benefit from dismissing low-performers and replacements better fitting the culture and role (Adnot et al., 2017; Brown & Wynn, 2009; Ingersoll, 2001b), though at the system level this can result in further disadvantage for schools with high turnover (Allen et al., 2017; Lampert et al., 2021).

Antecedents of turnover and retention behaviours and intentions

The reasons teachers stay or leave include individual characteristics, organisational issues, working conditions, and professional characteristics of education (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001a, 2001b; McInerney

et al., 2018; Sims, 2021; Skilbeck & Connell, 2003). Building on (Gundlach et al., 2024)'s meta-analysis of over 60 antecedents' correlation with attrition, migration, and retention intentions/behaviours, this study seeks to understand how individuals make these career decisions and the connection between antecedents and more narrowly defined outcomes.

Not every antecedent is assumed to be independent and discrete or equally contributing to turnover decisions. In complex career decisions, interrelated antecedents may be inseparable (Billingsley, 1993; Schaack et al., 2022) but accurately identifying them is crucial for developing strategies and policies to promote teacher retention where undesirable turnover exists (Guarino et al., 2005; Sims, 2021).

Systematic reviews (Gooden et al., 2023; Guarino et al., 2005, 2006; Ingersoll, 2001b) and meta-analyses (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Li & Yao, 2022; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020) have identified antecedent categories and compared influences, but no common theoretical framework exists.

Teachers' perspectives on job aspects may carry equal or greater weight than objective conditions. Understanding their career decision perspectives can develop insights into powerful turnover and retention drivers (Brownell & Smith, 1992; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015; Longmuir et al., 2022; Rinke, 2007). This study identifies which turnover (attrition, migration) or retention (school, profession) types most associate with specific antecedents. Additionally, it seeks to understand teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding these antecedents and how they directly relate to their career decisions, whether to leave the profession, change schools, or stay in their current role.

Method

This study uses an exploratory design via an anonymous online survey that invited current and former teachers to provide their reasons for career decisions to move between schools, leave the profession, or remain in their roles. Participants who had moved, left, stayed, or returned to teaching provided responses which were coded to themes from an existing framework (Gundlach, 2022; Gundlach et al., 2024).

Participants

The study participants consisted of a sample of 930 Australian teachers in Victoria, encompassing various career stages, including early-, mid-, late-career, former, and returned teachers, as well as diverse subject areas and year levels taught (Table 1). The study was approved by The University of Melbourne [Research ID 1954350.1] ethics committee and the study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

Since recruitment through official government and Catholic school systems was not permitted due to pandemic policies, participants were recruited using a 'snowball' convenience sampling method and advertising through online professional teaching communities. This may have potential bias for participants who

Table 1 Select participant demographics

Demographic	% (n = 930)	Demographic	% (n = 930)
Gender – Female	80%	Decade of teacher education—2010 – 2019	45%
Gender – Male	20%	Decade of teacher education—2000 – 2009	30%
Age—20 – 29	14%	0 – 5 years' experience	24%
Age—30 – 39	39%	6 – 10 years' experience	28%
Age—40 – 49	25%	11 – 20 years' experience	29%
Age—50 – 59	15%	21 + years' experience	19%
Age 60 + years	8%	Subject taught (Secondary school only)	
Ethnicity – Caucasian	93%	– *English*	39%
Status – Current teacher	84%	– *History*	32%
Level taught – High school	77%	– *Humanities*	22%
Level taught – Primary	22%	– *Science*	20%
Hold a Bachelor's degree	67%	– *Commerce*	15%
Qualified to teach High school	82%	– *Mathematics*	14%
Qualified to teach Primary	26%	– *Language other than English*	11%

Totals may add to > 100% where items are non-exclusionary

are more engaged in online professional communities. No efforts were made to ensure the sample accurately reflected Victoria's current teacher gender or school-level distributions. However, compared to available data (ACARA, 2022), the sample had a higher proportion of females (80% vs. 72%) and secondary teachers (77% vs. 48%). Further diversity in the sample could be achieved by targeting diverse cultural backgrounds and regional and remote schools, especially hard-to-staff schools. Inferences from the sample therefore refer only to the defined population from which it is taken (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010).

Almost 85% of the participants were current teachers, and approximately 65% had left a school at some point in their career, either for another school or industry. Of those not currently teaching, approximately 40% were working in another education-related role. The average age of participants was 41.12 years ($SD = 11.26$), with teaching experience ranging from one to 48 years (mean = 13.41 years, $SD = 13.33$).

Survey

A 43-question survey, informed by a systematic review of over 150 turnover measures and questionnaires (Gundlach, 2022; Gundlach et al., 2024), gathered rich detail on participants' career decisions. The survey included open-ended and multiple-choice questions covering demographics, attraction to teaching, withdrawal behaviours, turnover intentions and behaviours (moving schools, leaving the profession, retention), wellbeing, and other topics. The full survey is available on request (Gundlach, 2022).

Analytic strategy

The survey construction utilised themes from a systematic review (Gundlach, 2022; Gundlach et al., 2024). Multiple-choice questions were easily coded to respective themes, allowing for frequency and percentage reporting of responses. Open-ended responses underwent open coding, followed by axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to the systematic review themes (Gundlach, 2022; Gundlach et al., 2024), where possible.

Results

The results are presented in Tables 2 through 5, showing the percentage of participant responses in each category, along with illustrative participant quotations, complete with the participant's age and years of teaching experience (age, yrs.' exp.).

Attrition

Table 2 presents reasons for leaving the teaching profession provided by participants who had left, or current teachers indicating potential reasons for leaving. Nearly all reasons given for attrition had a negative tone related to stressors and job dissatisfaction. The most common reason (30%) was a loss of passion for teaching or their subject. Feelings of stress, burnout, and exhaustion (27%) were the second most cited, followed by feelings of unhappiness or dissatisfaction (24%). The desire for a new challenge and personal growth in a new career (10%) was the only positive reason mentioned for leaving the profession.

Migration

For migration (Table 3), the results differ from attrition. While attrition reasons had negative connotations, half of the top reasons for migration had positive intrinsic or altruistic motivations (Richardson et al., 2014), such as moving for a promotion or new role (32%), a new experience or context (e.g., school type or location) (28%), or professional challenge and growth (23%). One participant (38, 15 yrs.' exp.) noted variety in schools helps teachers 'gain perspective and experience, [assisting] in learning and improving practice.' Another (53, 13 yrs.' exp.) discussed feeling supported in career aspirations by leadership at the current school, but an eventual departure was planned 'when the time is right, beyond this school.'

The most common reason was the end of a contract (30%), classified as a 'demand effect' (Weldon, 2018). With 22% of Australian teachers on fixed-term contracts (AITSL, 2023), the process can be erratic and stressful. One participant (49, 5 yrs.' exp.) recalled, 'I left my last school because my contract ended, and they

Table 2 Participants' most nominated reasons for attrition

Attrition reason	% (n = 839)	Illustration
Loss of passion for teaching or subject	30%	'[Y]ou [can] fall out of love with your job, even though you love teaching.' (40, 18 yrs.' exp.)
Stress, burnout, exhaustion	27%	'I was exhausted dealing with the job… I changed careers to have a better life balance.' (42, 15 yrs.' exp.)
Unhappy or dissatisfied	24%	'I didn't have poor relationships with students, I just found it… draining to teach them.' (34, 4 yrs.' exp.)
Lack of connection with students	22%	'I left the profession because I started to hate the kids… the conflict just wore me down.' (30, 7 yrs.' exp.)
Lack of interest	12%	'Once [you stop] learning – seeking to improve and better [yourself] as a teacher and person – [you] should walk out the classroom door.' (43, 19 yrs.' exp.)
Incompetent or illegal practice	11%	(Incompetent) 'I found being forced to teach a year level I was not yet confident teaching was really the downfall for me. I told them I felt under experienced. (40, 6 yrs.' exp.) (Illegal practice) 'I was accused of [offence withheld by author]. I was investigated by my workplace [who] found that there was no evidence. After the situation… I was unable to connect with the children, families, and my colleagues. I could not confidently undertake my role.' (40, 4 yrs.' exp.)
Desire for new challenge or career	10%	'I value opportunities and recognition. When you hear about friends who work for exciting firms that offer opportunities, perks and flexibility, the school environment can begin to feel rigid.' (27, 4 yrs.' exp.)
Workload	9%	'The workload is too much. Every year more accountability and …more duties are piled onto teachers, but nothing is ever taken away. This results in very stressed and overworked teachers.' (38, 8 yrs.' exp.)
To improve physical health from situation of ill health	9%	'[I left due to] physical violence from students.' (33, 8 yrs.' exp.)
To improve mental health from situation of ill health	9%	'Many teachers leave due to bullying from students affecting their mental health'. (30, 5 yrs.' exp.)

Totals add to > 100% as participants could provide more than one reason

Table 3 Participants' most nominated reasons for migration

Migration reason	% (n = 833)	Illustration
Promotion or new role in another school	32%	'Moving schools was the best thing I did […for] my development as a teacher.' (33, 9 yrs.' exp.)
End of a contract	30%	'Contract work has forced me to move schools a number of times.' (37, 14 yrs.' exp.)
New experience or context	28%	'Staying in the one place is not necessarily a good thing as it can be limiting.' (65, 33 yrs.' exp.)
Poor culture	26%	'[I] left several schools because of negative colleagues or cultures.' (36, 13 yrs.' exp.)
Desire for new challenge or growth	23%	'I did not want to be one of those negative staff members who stay too long in a job. I have moved into another equivalent role and have not regretted my decision to move on. I have a refreshed outlook and am back in a positive mindset.' (48, 26 yrs.' exp.)
More convenient location	17%	'[M]y son goes to school with me but once he finishes, I may consider moving.' (40, 18 yrs.' exp.)
Conflict with leadership	13%	'I left two schools because the principals acted in a way which showed they would not protect my well-being or support me professionally.' (42, 20 yrs.' exp.)
To renew passion for teaching; Unhappy or unsatisfied in present school	11%	'Moving schools… helped reignite my fortitude and passion to teach.' (38, 10 yrs.' exp.) 'I am very unhappy at my school.' (29, 3 yrs.' exp.)
Lack of promotion or growth in current school	9%	'When you don't feel new opportunities for career progression can be provided, those are the times to think about moving on.' (38, 15 yrs.' exp.)
Better working conditions and/or workload	9%	'I think more and more teachers are beginning to feel trapped in a broken system… so, they 'shop around' looking for a school that treats their teachers well, or in a country or environment that they can more happily live in.' (41, 20 yrs.' exp.)

Totals add to > 100% as participants could provide more than one reason

had nothing for me. Later they did have something, but I had already accepted a job elsewhere. Contract work can be like that.'

The next most common negative reason for moving schools was the department or school's poor culture (26%). This has implications for how schools view high migration, as it may indicate a positive environment—one where teachers are growing professionally and are recruited to promotions in other schools—or a negative environment where teachers are moving schools to escape poor conditions.

Retention in the profession

Teacher migration between schools and retention within the profession are intrinsically linked phenomena, yet previous research has often treated these outcomes as distinct entities. Traditionally, studies have viewed migration as an active decision to leave one school, while retention in the profession has been framed as an active choice to remain in teaching. However, this dichotomous approach overlooks the fact that retention in the profession can be a consequence of school-level attrition, and involuntary migration. Such compartmentalised thinking likely originates from the foci of organisational and labour theory studies, which tend to prioritise teacher retention within specific schools or maintaining overall workforce supply respectively. This narrow focus, however, fails to capture the more nuanced and interconnected nature of teacher career trajectories.

This section denotes active reasons for staying when considering leaving the profession, not reasons for becoming a teacher or enjoying teaching. Table 4 reports the frequency of reasons for retention in the profession only, not individual schools. The most common reasons were connection with students (25%), financial commitments (17%), and positive collegiate relationships (13%).

Some participants who were parents expressed reluctance to leave due to potential disruptions to their own children's schooling: '[W]hen you have family and financial burdens…it is not simple to change careers' (58, 38 yrs.' exp.). Another participant explained: 'I have a mortgage and I'm a single parent. I'm fortunate enough to have a time fraction that suits my life and an ongoing position. These are my only reasons for staying' (29, 3 yrs.' exp).

Family reasons accounted for 12% of reasons despite intentions to leave. Convenient work hours for childcare and holidays were strong retaining factors: 'A key reason I've stayed…is the [time] I can have…with my kids' (43, 21 yrs.' exp.).

Echoing loss of passion as a top reason for attrition (30%, Table 2), passion for teaching/subject was a common reason to stay in the profession (12%, Table 4). A long-serving participant (61, 40 yrs.' exp.) suggested 'a variety of roles…and leadership opportunities all made staying worthwhile.' Another (63, 35 yrs.' exp.) recalled considering retirement but staying for 'interesting roles.'

Retention in a school

Table 5 reports the frequency of reasons for retention in a specific school (and therefore the profession). Similar to reasons for staying in the profession, the top active

Table 4 Participants' most nominated reasons for retention (Profession)

Retention reason	% (n = 96)	Illustration
Connection with students	25%	'[T]he thing that has kept me in teaching overall over the last 18 years is the students I teach, the relationships I have with them, and the sense that I am contributing to making their lives better in some way.' (53, 18 yrs.' exp.)
Financial commitments	17%	'It would take a while in another field to get back to my current pay rate.' (37, 14 yrs.' exp.) 'If it wasn't for a mortgage, I would not stay in this profession.' (45, 9 yrs.' exp.)
Collegiate relationships	13%	'[B]eing part of a team that has a collaborative culture is really important and has helped my wellbeing. That is important to help maintain the energy needed to survive.' (37, 10 yrs.' exp.)
Family reasons (partner/children)	12%	'I remain in the profession for the benefit it provides for my family and time with my children. There is no chance I would continue in teaching when my children finish school.' (49, 6 yrs.' exp.)
Passion for teaching/subject	12%	'I have stayed in the profession for the same reason I started: it is worthwhile… to work with young people and support their education. (50, 21 yrs.' exp.)
Sense of duty to colleagues and/or students	9%	'I do worry that if I were to leave, my school may have difficulty finding a replacement and may choose to drop the subject that I teach as a result.' (53, 14 yrs.' exp.)
No opportunities in other professions	9%	'[I] have been looking for something that pays similarly in a different field for several years but [there are] very few options' (43, 19 yrs.' exp.)
No other training	9%	'[O]ther professions required not only further extensive study but a striking drop in pay' (58, 18 yrs.' exp.)
To keep or use accrued leave	8%	'I will stay until I reach the Long Service Leave milestone and then I will actively look elsewhere.' (38, 17 yrs.' exp.)
Job security	5%	'I was prepared to trade pay, job satisfaction, [and] stress for [job] security.' (53, 18 yrs.' exp.) 'Secure employment [is a] very large factor to stay after many short contracts.' (38, 12 yrs.' exp.)

Totals add to > 100% as participants could provide more than one reason. Retention reasons denote reasons to stay when actively considering leaving

Table 5 Participants' most nominated reasons for retention (School)

Retention reason	% (n = 380)	Illustration
Connection with students	21%	'Despite an increased workload [and] responsibilities with co-curricular programs at my current school, I stay because the kids are …well-behaved [and] want to learn.' (44, 17 yrs.' exp.)
No opportunities in other schools	16%	'It is harder to move schools as you get older. Fewer opportunities to move have led me to stay longer than I wanted.' (53, 25 yrs.' exp.)
Collegiate relationships	16%	'I have considered many times leaving my current school, but … the friendships built with my colleagues draws me to stay.' (42, 16 yrs.' exp.)
Financial commitments	15%	'I would leave in a heartbeat if I could find similar pay.' (37, 15 yrs.' exp.)
Job security	9%	'Once you are in an ongoing position it is hard to leave a position you might not get again … due to so many jobs being contracts.' (30, 7 yrs.' exp.)
Fear of the unknown	9%	'I have only taught at the one school and think I should challenge myself but [I] worry that the grass may not be greener if I change schools. I am also concerned that I may not really be 'good enough' so [I] am scared to discover this at a new school.' (31, 7 yrs.' exp.)
Sense of duty to colleagues and/or students	7%	'Good teachers always build good relationships with their students, and once they have done that, it is very difficult to 'abandon' them.' (38, 6 yrs.' exp.)
To keep or use accrued leave	6%	'I had been finding [a] school difficult: I did stay … longer because I was close to being eligible for long service leave.' (53, 18 yrs.' exp.)
Leadership support	5%	'The biggest factor to keep me in schools in and teaching was having support from …the school management team.' (33, 4 yrs.' exp.)
Family reasons (partner, children)	4%	'Maternity leave arrangements and flexible timetabling when I returned were both significant contributing factors in me remaining in the same school.' (37, 15 yrs.' exp.)

Totals add to > 100% as participants could provide more than one reason. Retention reasons denote reasons to stay when actively considering leaving

reasons to remain despite intending to move included connection with students (21%), collegiate relationships (16%), and financial commitments (15%).

Notably, a lack of opportunities in other schools (16%) also featured prominently. One participant (33, 9 yrs.' exp.) reflected, 'My personal growth has stalled but if I move schools, I gamble being in a worse position because the problems are industry-wide'. Conversely, opportunities at the current school retained others, like a promotion to Faculty Head keeping one participant for 'another three and a half years' (31, 9 yrs.' exp.). Opportunities meant developing skills and experience, not necessarily a formal position or title, with one participant (37, 15 yrs.' exp.) recalling informal opportunities and encouragement from leadership prompting her retention after expressing her feeling of being undervalued.

Job security through an ongoing contract was a top reason to stay despite wanting to leave, with fears of losing it elsewhere: 'I am afraid if I move schools, I won't have an ongoing contract anymore' (38, 6 yrs.' exp.). Fear of the unknown (9%) and beliefs that other schools may not be better also prompted staying despite intentions to move.

Discussion

This exploratory descriptive study utilised a survey with multiple-choice questions themed to existing frameworks and carefully worded open-ended questions. It elicited data from a sample of current and former teachers across various year levels, subjects, and demographics, about their careers. The results scrutinised turnover reasons into more discrete categories involving attrition and migration, recognising that teacher retention in a school and the profession can be distinct outcomes with differing reasons.

This section outlines the study's contributions beyond current literature and implications for practice and policy. As an exploratory descriptive study using novel measures, methodological limitations are also addressed. While much literature on teacher turnover inadequately defines or distinguishes between attrition and migration, this study indicates that drilling down into the reasons for both can provide a more nuanced understanding. Teachers' career decisions will continue to be complex interplays of personal, professional and systemic influences, but narrowing the focus to attrition, migration, retention in the profession and retention in schools should aid identification of the most salient influences on each.

Attrition vs. migration: contrasting motivations

The results suggest a contrast between the reasons for attrition and migration. While attrition was predominantly associated with negative factors such as loss of passion, stress, and job dissatisfaction, the prevalence of positive motivations for migration, including career advancement and professional growth, suggests that not all teacher movement should be viewed negatively. Indeed, some migration may be beneficial

for both individual teachers and the education system as a whole, facilitating the spread of expertise and fresh perspectives across schools.

Missing out on internal leadership positions or opportunities can prompt teachers' thoughts of moving schools, suggesting migration effectively serves to increase opportunities unavailable internally, providing career growth and variety. Increasing internal career opportunities and advancement structures may therefore increase school retention and reduce the appeal of moving.

The role of contractual arrangements

The high proportion of teacher migration attributed to contract endings underscores the significant impact of employment structures on teacher turnover. This finding aligns with Weldon's (2018) concept of 'demand effects' and highlights the precarious nature of fixed-term contracts in the teaching profession. In the Australian context, it has been estimated to account for 18–27% of exits among early-career teachers (Weldon, 2018); this study found 30% of reported migration amongst teacher participants of all experience levels was due to contracts ending. The stress and uncertainty associated with contract work therefore emerge as critical factors in teacher career decisions, warranting further attention from policymakers and school administrators.

Contract-related migration warrants further investigation due to its significant implications for the accuracy of attrition statistics. What is often measured as turnover and potentially linked to unfavourable working conditions or employee dissatisfaction may, in fact, be initiated by schools as a form of functional turnover (Dalton et al., 1981). This strategy, aimed at reducing salary expenses, represents involuntary turnover from the employees' perspective (Abelson, 1987; Griffeth & Hom, 2001). Furthermore, a lack of job security in potential teaching jobs elsewhere can lead to 'reluctant staying' due to family responsibilities and financial commitments (Hom et al., 2012). This study reveals a need to explore the role of contract availability in involuntary teacher attrition and migration, involuntary retention, and perceived workforce mobility.

School culture and working conditions

The prominence of poor school culture as a reason for migration emphasises the importance of workplace environment in teacher retention. The predominance of emotional and psychological factors, such as loss of passion, stress and burnout, and unhappiness or job dissatisfaction suggests that the emotional toll of teaching is a significant driver of attrition. This aligns with the common acceptance that teaching has significant emotional labour (Kariou et al., 2021). Notably, the lack of connection with students as a reason for leaving contradicts the often-cited intrinsic rewards of teaching, indicating a potential disconnect between teachers' expectations and experiences. Meanwhile, conflict with leadership features more prominently as a reason for migration. The presence of health-related reasons (both physical and mental health improvement) further underscores the demanding nature of the

profession. These findings emphasise the need for targeted interventions to address teacher wellbeing, job satisfaction, and professional fulfilment to mitigate attrition and migration rates.

Reasons to stay: relational factors and financial stability

For retention in the profession and in schools, connection with students emerges as the primary motivator, and collegiate relationships also feature prominently in the top reasons, highlighting the importance of relationships in teacher job satisfaction and retention. Financial commitments are also influential reasons to stay. A lack of opportunities in other professions or in other schools; and job security concerns suggest teachers may prioritise stability when considering career changes.

The major contributions of this study are demonstrating that turnover is not homogenous, not always dysfunctional for schools, not always caused by job dissatisfaction, not always avoidable by a school, and not always voluntary on the employee's part. Instead, our findings reveal a complex dynamic where teachers may remain in positions despite dissatisfaction due to financial commitments, lack of perceived alternatives, or fear of losing job security. This phenomenon presents a challenge for the education system, potentially leading to reduced teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction. By tracking turnover as attrition or migration and examining reasons for leaving and staying, studies like this can help schools and systems manipulate the right variables for retention efforts on voluntary, avoidable, dysfunctional turnover (Abelson, 1987; Dalton et al., 1981; Griffeth & Hom, 2001).

Implications

There are several implications for research, practice, and policy stemming from this study. Future research should aim to define and classify types of turnover and retention into more nuanced operational frameworks involving discrete categories of staying or leaving. The most useful categories may include Attrition or Migration; Voluntary or Involuntary on the part of the employee; Avoidable or Unavoidable on the part of the school or profession; and Functional or Dysfunctional for the school or profession (Griffeth & Hom, 2001). Such classifications will provide clarity when associating antecedents like job satisfaction or salary levels with turnover figures that may comprise involuntary turnover (e.g., end of contract), unavoidable turnover (e.g., departures for study, travel or parenting), or functional turnover (e.g., departure of negligent or incompetent employees).

Additionally, schools and school administrators should consider identifying and tracking the destinations of departing teachers, not only classifying migration or attrition, but conducting exit interviews to match potential reasons for leaving with the turnover outcome. This will allow more targeted interventions to be made to training and support, working conditions, and other elements of avoidable turnover.

If teacher turnover research studies use intentions as a proxy for actual turnover, they should explicitly acknowledge the existence of involuntary turnover and retention (Griffeth & Hom, 2001). Only then will specific turnover classifications be

effectively associated with the many antecedents of turnover intentions. This study has served as a reminder that turnover is not universally negative, nor should 100% retention be an organisational goal for schools.

While attrition often stems from negative factors (e.g., loss of passion, burnout, dissatisfaction), the goal should be to create working environments that support teacher well-being, professional growth, and job satisfaction, rather than retaining all teachers regardless of their circumstances. Retaining severely incompetent, underperforming, or unethical staff after exhausting improvement efforts is dysfunctional. Similarly, retaining unenthused, exhausted, disconnected, or unhealthy employees who wish to leave to improve their health and wellbeing, or teachers who wish to retire, pursue other career interests or life events, is also an unfavourable outcome. Hard-to-staff schools and disadvantaged communities often experience disproportionately high teacher turnover, and encouraging retention of burnt-out teachers risks perpetuating this cycle of 'churn' and exacerbating existing inequities (Lampert et al., 2021). The present study reminds us that in some cases, turnover can benefit both individuals and organisations.

Based on participant comments, moving schools can actually help extend teaching careers by allowing migrating teachers to revitalise their passion for the job. Indeed, some participants with decades of experience had changed roles, duties, and schools multiple times, with positive effects. As moving schools was a response to improving physical and mental health or reviving career passion, future research may find value in comparing migration and attrition more explicitly. Teachers of all career stages expressed interest in professional growth. For those commenting on opportunities outside classroom teaching, there was a desire to stay in education but move into policy positions. Some indicated leaving the profession stemmed from a desire for new challenges or growth overall, distinct from dissatisfaction with a position or title. The 'stagnation' of learning was a common theme prompting thoughts of moving schools or professions. A potentially helpful step is for teachers to communicate career aspirations or grievances to leadership, as formal career discussions were rare according to participants.

A lack of opportunities in other professions was a top reason for staying in teaching. There was evident frustration about the lack of clear alternative career pathways with an education background. The idea of temporary breaks from teaching to gain new experiences and 'recharge' may warrant further research interest, through secondments, exchanges to other schools or institutions, and returns to teaching—potential avenues that could extend a teacher's working career in the profession while allowing temporary migration or absence.

Limitations

In terms of the research design and methodology, some limitations exist. While the sample size of 930 was relatively large for a qualitative study, a larger, representative sample would be advantageous. Having more former teachers and stronger representation of various teacher types (year level taught, etc.) could better support identification of trends associated with these demographics. Tracking the system

(e.g. government, independent) and geographical attributes (e.g. urban, suburban, remote) of the schools participants had left or stayed in, would be advantageous for a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing teacher turnover.

The 'snowball' and convenience sampling methods risked potential bias towards teachers engaged in professional associations and willing to complete surveys but were the best options available when in-school research was halted due to the pandemic. As a result, the findings may have limited generalisability and comparability to other populations.

The exploratory and descriptive nature of the survey precluded the use of psychometrically validated scales. However, while a limitation, this approach aligned with the descriptive scope of the present study, as such scales are typically used in more inferential research. Future research could consider using actual turnover measures, potentially in a longitudinal study, to examine alignment with the exploratory survey items used here, over time. Incorporating additional data sources, such as administrative records, could enhance the validity of the results.

The findings provide rich insights into the reasons behind teachers' career decisions, but the cross-sectional design limits causal inferences. Longitudinal studies following teachers over time as they experience migration or attrition would enhance understanding of how the identified factors influence these processes.

Conclusion

This study extends our understanding of the reasons behind teacher migration, attrition, and retention by distinguishing between the factors that influence teachers' decisions to stay in a school versus the profession. By surveying a large sample of current and former teachers about their career choices, data was generated on the antecedents of migration, attrition, and retention intentions and behaviours.

Thematic analysis revealed that major reasons for migrating between schools are career-oriented and based on school characteristics, while reasons for attrition tend to stem from personal life stages and feelings of role compatibility. Personal choice and compatibility emerged as key reasons for staying in a school or the teaching profession. Importantly, participant responses reflected both voluntary and involuntary career decisions, with involuntary factors largely overlooked in past literature.

A key finding is that migration can be a positive outcome for teachers, allowing for professional growth and revitalisation. Additionally, teacher retention may include those who desire to leave but cannot due to limited employability elsewhere, willingness to explore new opportunities, or commitments such as family or finances. These insights have important implications for how the field studies teacher retention and turnover moving forward. These findings challenge the traditional view of teacher migration as inherently negative, especially in the context of current teacher shortages.

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Declarations

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