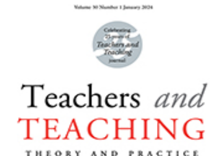

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Still standing: an ecological perspective on teachers remaining in hard-to-staff schools

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we investigate the working lives of three Australian teachers in the hardest-to-staff schools as they tell their stories of how teacher attrition has impacted them and others. Drawing on Zavelevsky & Shapira-Lishchinsky's ecological framework (2020) we analyse their work-stories to better understand issues impacting the teaching workforce in a time of extreme teaching shortages. Part of a larger study on teachers who remain in hard-to-staff schools, here we focus not only on the challenges facing the education workforce but also on the insights that may lead to better strategies to retain teachers in the schools that need them most.

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Teacher retention; teachers' narratives; ecological framework; teaching shortages; teaching workforce, hard-to-staff schools

Introduction

The ethnographic research project that informs this paper investigates the working lives of teachers who remain in the hardest-to-staff schools that have experienced very high teacher turnover. In these times of unprecedented teaching shortages in Australia and elsewhere, much of the recent focus of research, both in Australia and internationally, has been on the reasons for teacher attrition (Heffernan et al., 2022; Perryman & Calvert, 2020) and on issues of supply, such as identifying ways to attract new teachers into the profession (Ovenden Hope, 2022; See et al., 2020). However, and though teacher retention is a growing field of research (Arthur & Bradley, 2023), less attention has been paid to those who remain teaching in the school system. In our study, we examine the daily lived experiences of teachers who remain teaching in schools with more than 10% vacancies. Our project seeks to understand why teachers stay (for instance, whether voluntarily or because they have no other employment options), how they feel about their work, whether their work has changed and how they feel they have been personally and professionally impacted by teaching shortages in their specific contexts.

We have called the overall project 'Still Standing' . . . but this, we soon realised, needed a question mark. Are teachers still standing? How are they doing and what advice can

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they offer not just to halt attrition but to support those who remain in classrooms. In this paper, we review some of the literature on teaching shortages and report on the experiences of three teachers who offer their complex and nuanced insights into teachers' work in hard-to-staff schools.

Background

While extensive research has already been done on why teachers leave the profession (Caudal, 2022; Lampert et al., 2021; See et al., 2020), very little research has been conducted on the consequences or impact of teacher attrition on the school leaders and teachers who are left behind in hard-to-staff schools experiencing high teacher turnover or 'teacher churn'. These consequences relate to areas such as well-being and emotional labour (Day & Hong, 2016), workload issues including teaching 'out of field' (Du Plessis, 2019), teacher burn-out (Rajendran et al., 2020), teachers' job satisfaction and career aspirations. All of these areas are related to teacher retention and attrition, prompting us to examine more closely a topic of great urgency. Teaching shortages are one consequence of what Stacey et al. (2023) refer to as the future and changing nature of teachers' work.

The vast majority of research on teacher retention is focused on why teachers and school leaders leave, rather than what we can learn from those teachers who do, in fact, remain (Eacott, 2022; McKinnon, 2016; Weldon, 2016). Gaining deeper understandings of the day-to-day work of teachers in hard-to-staff schools allows policymakers, government and school leaders to gain crucial knowledge about how to address the challenges of retaining teachers in a climate whereby some accounts indicate as many as four in five teachers are considering leaving the profession (Carey, 2021). Some global reports are referring to this as 'the great resignation' which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Streeter, 2021). The teaching profession is portrayed in numerous policy documents and reports as currently facing multiple areas of serious concern, with the numbers of teachers entering the profession having plateaued, a significant percentage of the teacher workforce nearing retirement, teachers in a state of exhaustion due to the impact of COVID-19 combined with unsustainable workloads and the overall changing demands of the profession. The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (Craven et al., 2014, p.51) had already, many years earlier, expressed widespread concerns about teacher shortages, recommending 'support [of] the continued national initial teacher education and workforce data'. More recently, the Australian Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP) notes that recent conditions such as the pandemic have created a 'tipping point' bringing forward long-projected endemic teaching shortages (Teacher Education Expert Panel, 2023, p. 6). Our research on the impact of teacher attrition on those who remain in the classroom adds to and complements other largescale projects on teacher workforce supply and demand (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2021; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2023; Department of Education, 2023; Victorian Department of Education and Training, 2021) by grounding the impact of teacher shortages in local lived experience. In particular, it addresses the key priority area identified in the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (Department of Education, 2023) to keep the teachers we have.

Prior even to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were dire predictions about serious teacher shortages or 'teacher exodus' (Aspland, 2016), 'the revolving door' (Ingersoll, 2001) or 'teacher churn' (Sorensen & Ladd, 2018). Whether the focus is on hard-to-staff

metropolitan/urban schools (Day & Hong, 2016) or regional, rural, or remote schools (Halsey, 2018), most of the existing policy and research on teacher attrition makes it clear that the expectations of teachers, including their extensive workloads, their emotional labour and the sheer impossibility of working in an understaffed setting may make their work difficult beyond anything mere resilience can solve (Buchanan et al., 2013). School leaders are under pressure as well, often having to make hard practical and emotional decisions that impact both on themselves and their staff (Heffernan et al., 2022). Noting that teachers often talk about their workloads as 'unsustainable', 'untenable" or' 'unbearable' (Heffernan et al., 2022, p. 206), there is little doubt that these issues are going to get worse as schools struggle to put teachers in front of students.

Our overriding objective is to pursue how the work of teaching is being reshaped within specific hard-to-staff Australian schooling contexts while at the same time acknowledging the importance and impact of wider sets of social and political forces. The social, political, and economic conditions affecting teachers' work in these schools is far from simple; rather, it reflects a complex and fluid environment shaped by a range of current circumstances and dilemmas that impact on teachers' work. In short, this research aims to contribute ways to mitigate issues of teacher workforce based not on those who leave, but rather on understanding the experiences of those who stay.

To begin, we explore the term 'hard-to-staff schools', suggesting old definitions are outdated in a climate where nearly all schools in Australia are, in practice, hard to fully staff.

Fine-tuning a definition of hard-to-staff schools

Until recently, in Australia, hard-to-staff schools were reasonably easy to describe and define. Whether explicitly or simply taken-for-granted, it was known that the hardest-to-staff schools were remote or regional, located in diverse and economically disadvantaged urban settings or in certain subject areas, such as Maths, Science or IT. In addition, outer suburban schools have historically experienced teaching shortages as do special schools (Blackmore et al., 2023). However, an Australian Education Union survey in the State of Victoria, Australia, reported in 2022 that almost 90% of all public school principals predicted they would be unable to fully staff their schools in 2023, with 80% readvertising vacancies and 98% stating there were few applicants (Marchant, 2023). In New South Wales, teacher workforce shortages are reported across both metropolitan and rural geographical locations and currently sit at approximately 1,800 full-time vacant positions (Parliament of New South Wales, 2023). These teaching shortages, reported without nuanced jurisdictional analysis, presume that the definition of 'hard-to-staff' remains the same as prior to the pandemic.

Glazer (2021, 2022, p. 1) contrasts what he defines as 'easy-to-staff schools' as those whose teaching positions are coveted by teachers and which regularly have many more applicants than positions to fill. Such schools have a more stable population of teachers which Du Plessis (2020) finds, unsurprisingly, has a positive effect on everything from student wellbeing to their academic achievement. While not as acute, the president of the Victorian Principals Association said the workforce shortage now extended to public, Catholic and private schools (Precel, 2023). As a cover-all term, 'hard-to-staff' only tells a partial story. We would agree with Hobbs and Törner (2019, p. 313) that the use of the term obscures what is most important about the teaching shortages; that is, the unequal impact of teaching shortages on teachers and students in already historically

disadvantaged schools. Now that government schools in 'leafy green' urban settings (Burnett & Lampert, 2019), independent schools and traditionally 'easy-to-staff' schools are also experiencing teaching shortages, a nuanced definition of 'hard-to-staff' is necessary to refer not just to the staffing issues, but with an emphasis on the impact of this staffing on school leaders, teachers, other school staff (such as administrative staff and teaching assistants) and, of course, on students and their families, not to mention its broader relationship to long standing issues of educational equity.

A pre-pandemic American study (Opfer, 2011) assists us in fine-tuning the term 'hard-to-staff'. Opfer distinguishes between schools that have difficulty hiring and schools that have high attrition. Teachers leave the profession for a variety of reasons, including personal, professional and system-based. However, in more privileged schools with healthy resources, these staff can be more easily replaced. Now, however, even private and public urban schools are experiencing teaching shortages. In a press release, the Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch) raised concerns that private schools are increasingly 'poaching' staff from public schools because they too are short-staffed and experiencing teacher shortages. The Union, however, emphasise that while many schools may be experiencing teaching shortages, there are significant equity issues related to the impact of these staffing issues on students and their families, noting that it 'comes as no surprise that private schools are able to use their abundant resources to offer financial incentives and opportunities that public schools have no capacity to match' (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2023).

By 'hard-to-staff' we mean schools that have difficulty attracting teachers in the first place, or have trouble replacing those staff who leave. With teacher shortages identified as a timely and urgent issue, we subsequently focus on the impact and consequences for school leaders and teachers who remain in schools identified as having recently lost more than 10% of their workforce over a period of 12 months. We further fine-tune the definition of hard-to-staff schools as schools that have not just experienced teacher loss but have also had significant difficulty replacing those teachers who have left. The list of differences in the consequences of school staffing has impacted on what 'hard-to-staff' means over time as social, political, and economic factors influence teacher retention.

Historically, crisis-level teacher shortages appear mostly in schools in Australia with values of less than 1000 on the Index of Community Socio-Cultural Advantage, i.e. those already considered disadvantaged (Burnett & Lampert, 2019), with Australian schools that serve socio-economically marginalised communities being six times more likely to report teacher shortages (Organisation for Economic Development, 2018). There are a host of differences between the impact of teaching shortages on historically hard-to-staff remote, regional, rural and diverse high poverty urban schools and the schools that are experiencing staffing hardships for, in some cases, the first time. These include differences such as the lack of supply of relief teachers to take classes even in the short term in traditionally hard-to-staff small local communities where, apart from the teachers who have quit, there are no other qualified teachers to take their place (Bryner, 2021), an ever-worsening housing shortage unable to attract new teachers or their partners to the community (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Eacott, 2023), not to mention the stigma often already attached to some localities which makes it difficult to attract new teachers, or for teachers to want to transfer or migrate to the school (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023; Lampert et al., 2020). This list of differences in the consequences of school staffing is extensive.

Method

This research considers the urgent problem of teacher retention and increasing concerns related to teacher shortages and the seemingly declining commitment to the teaching profession (Wilson & Carabetta, 2022). Aiming to address the retention of teachers and school leaders in schools with high workforce shortages, this study differs from previous ones that have focused predominantly on why people leave the profession. Instead, our research design focuses on teacher retention in schools with workforce shortages, teacher turnover and the varying consequences in differing contexts. Following Hargreaves (1994), Kelchtermans (2017) notes that in order to understand teachers' work lives—including the decisions to change them or even to leave them behind—one needs to disentangle the interplay of the technical, moral, political and emotional dimensions connected to these teachers' lives. By researching those teachers who stay—in spite of the high rates of turnover—we aim to identify context-specific personal, organisational and external issues that need to be addressed if the teaching workforce is to be stabilised.

Participants

In this paper, we focus on the experiences of three teachers who are still working in the hardest-to-staff schools: two Secondary teachers who teach in regional schools and one in a very remote school in an Indigenous community.[1] These three teachers, all referred to us, were purposefully selected to represent teachers at different stages of their career and in different locations. They were invited to participate in a conversation where the focus was to tell us about their working lives, thus inviting them to take these conversations, which were conducted on zoom and lasted around 45 minutes each, in any direction they preferred.

It was remarkably easy to find teachers remaining in hard-to-staff schools who want to tell their stories. There are many reasons for this but teachers in general appear to be looking for ways to tell their stories in a turbulent time in which they feel especially misunderstood or unheard (Willis et al., 2021). The need by teachers to tell their story, whether they are planning to leave or not, is identified by Dunn (2018) as an act of teacher resistance and agency. The popularity of online, informal communities of practice, such as TeachMeets (Cotton, 2022) also attests to teachers' desire to find ways to tell their stories. The three teachers who told us the stories reported in this paper are at different stages of their careers: two are within the first three years of teaching and the third has been teaching for over fifteen years. To code what these teachers told us, and to identify their stages of teaching we de-identify the three according to their time in the profession. Teacher One is identified as 1 R as in their first year of teaching regionally. Teacher Two is identified as 3 R as in their third year of teaching regionally, and Teacher Three is identified as 15RE as in their 15th year + of teaching, and their first year teaching remotely. None of the teachers in this preliminary study were working in metropolitan settings and all were Secondary teachers. Some aspects of their experiences, such as the teachers' gender or ethnicity, almost certainly accounted for some differences in their experiences but can only be touched on lightly in this paper, yet the questions raised now inform the larger study.

Data collection

We invited these three teachers to tell us their work stories, engaging them in 'purposeful conversations' (Edwards, 1999) to explore their understandings of teaching shortages and its impact on their daily work. The interviews extend our understandings of the flow-on effect of teacher shortages on individual teachers, their classroom practice and on system functions, such as their abilities to teach effectively, sense of efficacy and satisfaction, curriculum, human resources, workforce planning, relationships, well-being, and accountability, and how and why, despite these conditions, they have stayed.By analysing these teachers' stories, we seek to respond to concerns such as: What is teaching like in schools with significant teacher shortages? What are the technical, moral, political and emotional dimensions on teachers who remain in schools when significant numbers of their colleagues have left? Are the reasons for staying along with the consequences of teacher attrition different in urban schools versus regional schools or within schools in remote, Indigenous communities? What are the potential positive and/or negative consequences for those teachers who remain (i.e. might teacher attrition sometimes lead to positive career opportunities for those who remain)?

Since stories about what is happening in schools spread quickly within their communities, we have further de-identified the data by leaving very identifiable stories out and by deciding not to declare which States the schools are located in. Some very specific stories are omitted if it would make the schools known to readers.

Data analysis

To analyse data we utilised a multi-factorial ecological model of retention (Zavelevsky & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2020) drawing on Bronfenbrenner (1979) to identify an array of dimensions from the personal to external contextual concerns. As Zavelevsky and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2020, p. 3) note, while existing research has examined factors related to retention, 'few have simultaneously assessed the complete array of relevant factors thought to be responsible for the retention of teachers'. The factors impacting teachers' decisions to both stay and leave the profession are related to such things as the school or school systems' organisational practices, peer communication, individual aspects, how they relate to their community, their working conditions and how they are impacted by larger conversations about things like teacher status. Zavelevsky and Shapira-Lishchinsky's (2020) ecological model of teachers' work provides a framework to analyse teachers narratives.

The ecological model (Figure 1) is a useful way of categorising teachers' statements and experiences. Using the framework provides insight into teachers' perspective on the factors that might impact teacher retention. For each of the three interviews we transcribed and mapped statements onto the framework. As in most models or frameworks, there was often overlap which sometimes made it difficult to decide whether, for instance, a comment had to do with *organisational practices* or *working conditions*. Some issues did not neatly appear to fit into any category, as with statements about the importance of teaching support staff or relief teachers. The framework cannot be seen as definitive; rather it provides a way for us to understand key areas of interest and concern.

While we encouraged the teachers' stories to unfold during the conversation, rather than asking them specific questions, many of these categories organically emerged. Drawing on this small amount of data from three preliminary interviews, we use this paper to fine-tune

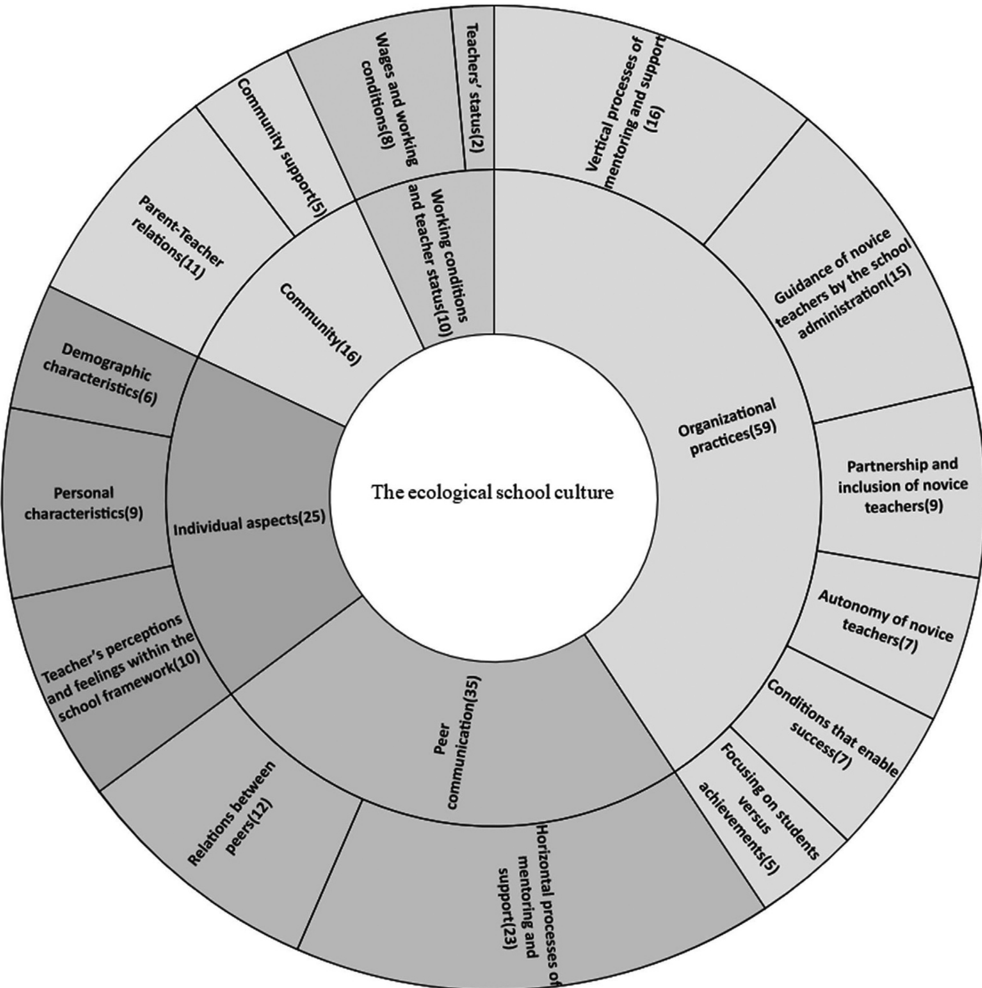

Figure 1. An emergent model of teacher retention from an ecological perspective (Zavelevsky & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2020, p. 5).

our understanding of how these complex dimensions, the personal and environmental effects work together to give us a picture of the complex and situated working lives of teachers who remain in these historically and increasingly hard-to-staff schools.

Discussion

While, as we state above, our conversations with the three teachers unfolded naturally, each discussion began by asking about the respondents work situation and moved to discussions about their daily work-lives, what they liked, found challenging and then, specifically about teaching shortages in their schools, how it impacted on them and why they stay. In each case, the teachers began by summarising what they saw as their story. 1 R (the teacher who had just been teaching one year in a regional context) explained they were from India, had moved to Australia to retrain as a teacher, and had moved their

family to the town seeing it as an opportunity. They had a PhD in another field and had always wanted to pass that knowledge along. 3 R (who had three years teaching experience and was in a different regional town) was also a career changer. They were from the district but had travelled extensively and were returning to this region, and had always wanted to work with young people. 15RE (teaching for 15 years) had worked their way up to a lead teacher role but had recently experienced life changes and wanted to teach remotely for a few years to 'get away' and also to challenge themselves by working on an Indigenous community, something they had always wanted and could now do now their children were grown.

To an extent, these teachers corroborated what other research has found; that is, that the most positive aspect of their job and the reason they stay is the commitment to the young people they teach (Harris et al., 2019). In the cases of 3 R and 15RE, they were emphatic in declaring their dedication to young people as their reason for staying. 3 R said, 'I love the students and I know I make a difference' and 15RE told us 'When you think about it, the children are really good, even though school and home are chaotic'. 1 R was a little less certain, saying a little more ambiguously, 'I know I have a lot of potential (but) I feel I'm wasting my time here'. Notwithstanding, the three agree that while they are there for the students, they are not always able to make the impact they dreamed of. This is a source of sadness for all three of the responding teachers. Teachers' remuneration was not addressed except for 3 R who talked about their desire to one day get back to the salary they had before they entered teaching, using wages as an example of how dedicated they were to being a teacher and how much they cared about the profession. 15RE believes that every teacher who remains in the school 'is there for the right reasons but it's the structural things that wear us down'.

Though each of them mentioned behaviour as stressful, they each explained 'poor behaviour' and disruption as related to systemic issues, many directly related to organisational practices (practical arrangements) resulting from teaching shortages. For instance, 1 R relayed that the previous year they had had phones in the classroom and could press a button if a student became dysregulated and someone would come and help, but 'now this has stopped because no-one is available'. They directly explained that

> It has indeed to do with the teaching shortage, because the leadership team are now taking classes themselves. They used to deal with behaviour but now they are also under stress. Last year we could give detentions to students but now they've stopped it. Nobody has time to sit in the detention room . . . after ten incidents the kid will be sent home for two days. That's it.

In their own research, Zavelevsky and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2020, p. 3) found that 'teachers described their teaching experience during the first year as a survival struggle followed by increased satisfaction as they accumulated more experience and succeeded in coping with various challenges'. As a novice teacher, 1 R's experiences confirm what other studies, such as Heffernan's et al. (2022) suggest: that easing into the profession is no longer the norm. Things are getting harder rather than easier, with multiple complex factors impacting teachers' experiences. This is significant, especially as we enter an era where new teachers will enter classrooms sooner (such as with Permission to Teach) and with much less theory or practice under their belts.

These teaching-crisis (Australian Education Union, 2022) produced organisational practices around classroom or behaviour management were reinforced by 3 R who similarly told us that in their school ‘when students escalate there’s often nobody around’. They added, ‘It’s a terrible feeling for instance when you watch kids trying to burn each other with Bunsen burners . . . and behaviour gets worse because of relief teachers, lack of consistency, lack of relationships. Oh, it’s bad. It’s not just a sinking ship. It’s on fire.’ Like 1 R, this teacher feels competent in managing a classroom if organisational practices related to discipline were still functioning. However, in the current climate in which there is no adequate support they sometimes feel ‘helpless and hopeless’. Explaining how understaffing affects classroom management takes the conversation out of the realm of individual aspects of teaching (such as adequate teacher preparation) and explains it as an issue related to working conditions. These result in changes to school organisational systems and ultimately school cultural practices and norms. In addition, the stressful area of student behaviour, which 1 R recognises as ‘trauma that bleeds over into teachers’ work’ is an organisational practice related to mentoring and support. 15RE also understood behavioural issues as connected to high teacher attrition but made certain to tell us this was not about the students themselves (who were ‘really good though their homelives can be chaotic’). 15RE gave the example that the school had had 4 Principals over the past two years. Moreover, as fly-in fly-out leadership, neither the current principal nor the deputy principal lived in the community so ‘if anything happened (like conflict in the classroom) there was often no school leadership present’. Overall, however, rather than the result of wilful or even poor leadership or institutional practices, all three teachers described their lack of preparation, mentoring or support as outside of anyone (including leadership’s) control. As 1 R explained, ‘leadership used to deal with student behaviour but now they are taking classes too’.

We begin with these examples to illustrate how logistics and coping measures dominate the working lives of these three teachers who remain in their schools. In fact, none of the three focused much on curriculum or pedagogy, except to say I no longer expect myself to do the full job because the full job is impossible to do . . . and differentiation really drops off. I just can’t do 50, or even 5 tasks for every lesson. It’s a tragedy but they’ll be worse off if I’m no longer teaching them at all (3 R), or ‘it doesn’t seem to matter what you’re qualified to teach—they just plonk you in’ (15RE). 15RE told a poignant out-of-field story about being allocated to teach a class on women’s business in their school, despite being non-Indigenous. These conditions whereby what you teach or how you teach it are less prioritised than simply ‘getting through the day’ (1RE) fall under the category of organisational practices related to survival but crucial to teacher retention. These are the issues that consume the daily lives of teachers who stay.

The organisational practices that impact the three teachers and which they associate with teaching shortages are sometimes extreme. In the case of the remote teacher 15RE, it included the story of the school’s temporary business manager who had not managed to pass the training course required to get a school corporate credit card. That meant the teacher had to go to the main town many hours away every Saturday to buy supplies necessary for their students to pass the required assessment. This was costly, time-consuming and expensive, and ultimately the straw the teacher felt might break their back as they too consider requesting a transfer. 15RE also told a story about an Indigenous colleague, an excellent Secondary teacher who inexplicably had been placed

by the Department in the Primary school despite how important they were to the community and despite her training in Secondary. To 15RE this seemed ludicrous and yet another random organisational practice. 3 R also related a story they perceived as unnecessary and irrational explaining that the Teachers Union states that teachers should be required to attend meetings at a maximum of two hours a week. In their school, that has been translated to mean 'we must stay for two hours a week. Where's the trust? It's so patronising, disrespectful and over prescriptive'. These seemingly unnecessary roles are mentioned by all three teachers. 15RE asks, 'can't something be let go? Can't we let go of the stupid parts of the job and focus more on kids?'. 3 R, who was a career changer coming from a job with significant responsibilities, extended the question. Comparing it to their previous career, they said 'the education sector seems bizarre to me. Unbelievably complex. What we are trying to achieve seems mental'.

3 R is the most articulate in explaining what they see as the eroding organisational practices of schools in a state of workforce crisis. They have tried to suggest operational changes but felt a bit gaslit. Am I crazy or is everybody else crazy? The leadership are overwhelmed and reactive – reactive rather than developing a strategic plan. I'm as engaged as I can be but I have no idea what the strategic plan is. There's no light at the end of the tunnel so you get learned helplessness. They add 'if you don't make a plan, or build the thing, then it's just magical thinking'. All three teachers alluded to the physical and psychological toll of teaching, with 1 R speaking about the impact of stress on their partner and toddler. 3 R explicitly noted that 'other professions are going to a four-day work or working from home. By not addressing flexibilities, full-time teachers are sometimes becoming petty—"why can they do this and I have to do that". I think there are ways around this'. While indirect, concerns about teaching as an un-family friendly professional arose.

15RE had not known their timetable for the first two weeks of teaching because there was nobody who knew how many teachers would even show up on the first day of classes. They ended up with six different classes to teach and added 'I had six different classes to prepare for and then I'd have extra classes if someone didn't show up. Teaching is patchy and chaotic. You'd turn up and have no idea—just cobble things together. None of the teachers said they wanted more subscribed lesson plans or scripted resources. In fact, they appeared to be saying the opposite; they wanted more time to be professionals. All three note their lack of autonomy, mostly related to the lack of time they have for planning, though 1 R despairs 'I would like to do things my way'. 1 R says their school looks perfect and the infrastructure is great despite being in a low socioeconomic area, but in second term they taught three more classes than in first term. Sometimes, 1 R says, they 'shiver at the thought of entering a class'. 3 R also had multiple roles including Head of Department (because just three years after graduation they were one of the most senior teachers in the school). On top of an 80% teaching load (non-negotiable because there is nobody else to do them) their role is also to make sure that the students, who often have a different teacher every day, are 'somehow still learning'. The sense of moral duty became so stressful to (3 R) that they have been on medication and (1 R) said 'I am struggling emotionally'. This affective, and often moral, dimension of teaching is a highly significant driver in why teachers stay.

All three teachers feel supported, or as much as they can be under difficult circumstances. They perceive the lack of guidance they receive and the processes of mentoring as being related to these 'chaotic' (3RE) times, and all acknowledged the stress leadership are under as well. 1 R said, 'well, the leadership are encouraging because they know we're

important. If I were to leave it would be their headache to recruit another teacher. She told me not to feel alone but it's just theory. I can tell you it's not happening. But it's words, no action'.

While none of the three teachers overtly explained these decisions (or lack of decisions) as politically or policy-informed, there was a general sense that how schools function (or don't function) is the consequence of decisions often made outside of the school itself. While these systemic and structural contexts were not explicitly identified, Stacey et al. (2023) have noted that teachers' engagement with policy and especially policy change are actually experienced as changed work demands and increases in workload in teaching at the organisational level of the school and how teachers perform 'their day-to-day work' (Stacey et al., 2023). 15RE did attest that the resources they received where often culturally inappropriate (e.g. being sent resources for refugee families to an Indigenous community, or being required to teach a module on Shakespeare): 'You have to rewrite everything. I rewrote the whole civics curriculum'. 15RE also lamented how much effort annually went into teacher recruitment and 'how little concentration there is on retention'.

We had hoped to learn about the positive reasons why teachers are staying in the profession. 3 R's dedication most certainly comes through, suggesting that if only teachers were allowed to focus more on their students the job would be satisfying. 1 R also know they would be happier, and could do better and still want to teach even though they aren't sure they can stay in their current school under the current circumstances. While 15RE is requesting a transfer, it is almost entirely because of the logistics of working conditions. 15RE does give an important clue, though, on the rewards of teaching and where they might come from. Partly because their school is remote, they live within the community (in teachers' accommodation in town). 15RE loved that 'you see people, they see you. It's a small enough place that people notice if you care. I got to know my housemates, I know the families. A good project came along where I could connect with the community, who have very busy lives. The positive impact of engaging with local communities is underrated, and likely a forgotten aspect of teacher retention in times of duress. While little was said by the others about community or parent-teacher relationships, it is worth observing whether this is one thing that drops off the map when sheer day-to-day logistics take over. Similarly, in that both domains are relational, the significance of community and of peer communication is seen as important to all three teachers. 3 R mentions the importance of their Facebook conversations with peers. Despite being mature aged while their housemates were young graduates just out of university, 15RE talks very fondly of them explaining how debriefing (and unwinding) was crucial to their survival. 1 R, raising a young family and new to the area, seems more isolated. Again, connectedness is significantly related to teacher retention. Time spent on building connections to peers and community (and even students) may seem dispensable, but may provide some clues on teacher satisfaction. Currently, the balance between organisational or technical demands and the emotional rewards of relationships is skewed towards the former. While previously we discussed the moral obligations teachers feel towards their students as a driver of teacher retention, this is not to say teachers who leave are somehow immoral. In fact, other research suggests it is also the reason some teachers leave, such as when they feel they are morally failing their students because they are unable to offer them the quality teaching they deserve (Santoro, 2018; Santoro & Morehouse, 2011).

Conclusion

This small slice of the much larger research project on the experiences of the teachers remaining in classrooms has been informative in highlighting teachers' complex working lives. We had hoped we would hear more good news stories, and still hope for that in the larger study. We wish we could say it were not the case, but while the three teachers we interviewed here all plan to stay in the teaching profession, none of them hope to remain in their current schools, all of which are identified as disadvantaged (on the somewhat inadequate Australian ICSEA Index of Community Socio-Community Advantage). Their day-to-day working lives are hard, stressful and sometimes overwhelming. Nevertheless, their stories and insights provide invaluable hints about the way forward, offering personal and professional advice on what teachers find supportive and helpful and what causes undue stress. Some conditions seem insurmountable, but in all cases the three teachers give clear indications of what aspects of work keep them there and which might see them leave. While the ecological framework is not perfect in explaining dimensions of teachers' work, it does enable a clear picture of the intersecting domains that define teachers' work. Zavelevsky and Shapira-Lishchinsky's (2020) seems to under-represent this dominance, which takes up much more than half of the narratives we discuss in this paper. The restoration of the balance of the ecological school culture, both with more productive organisational practices but also more attention on the other domains such as Kelchtermans's (2017) moral, technical and emotional dimensions may end up significant as we seek to make recommendations with regards to teacher retention. A deeper understanding of the work of teachers who remain teaching in the hardest-to-staff schools, for whatever reasons, has the capacity to inform policy and practice to respect, support and sustain the teaching workforce we currently have.

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