

Viewpoint: We won't solve the teacher shortage until we answer these four questions

May 5 2023, by Hugh Gundlach



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Schools and students around Australia continue to face [a teacher shortage](#).

This means some schools have gone back for term two unable to offer certain subjects. Some might have composite classes, [larger classes](#) or

[disrupted units of study](#).

This also means some students will not have the best possible chance at learning skills, developing a passion for a subject, or achieving their potential.

There are already several national and [state policy moves](#) to try to address the shortage and its potential causes. As part of these, teachers' [workloads](#), well-being, working conditions and pay have been raised as key factors.

Over the past five years, [I have studied](#) the career decisions of more than 1,000 Australian teachers across all [school years](#).

At the moment, we are trying to solve the [teacher](#) shortage without all the key information. Here are four questions we need to answer to really address this issue.

1. Who is leaving?

We know the teacher shortage is an issue around the country, at all year levels. But beyond this, it's hard to get specific details.

One point often lost in discussions about the teacher shortage is teachers are not a homogeneous group: they teach students from the first years of schooling to the last, and specialize in everything from languages to science to music.

This means [vacant roles](#) are also not homogeneous.

In the past ten years there has been concern about shortages of teachers in science, math and languages, as well as early career teachers, male primary teachers and teachers in remote, rural and disadvantaged

schools. Each of these groups will not necessarily be retained with the same strategy.

There is also a [potential mismatch](#) between the supply of teachers being trained in certain areas and the demand from schools.

So we need to know who is leaving and what is their expertise.

2. How do turnover numbers connect with reasons for leaving?

In the past, teacher turnover research has been dominated by [large-scale reports](#) with national data from the United States. These do not adequately connect teacher departures with the reasons for leaving, or necessarily reflect Australian trends.

Smaller studies are more [common in Australia](#), especially those looking at teachers' motivations and reasons for leaving. These often rely on hypothetical career intentions only, not real quitting behaviors.

This is not enough, as many teachers stay in schools and the profession despite an intention to leave. Decisions to leave are also not always planned.

Quitting can be based on time (such as the number of years' service or after earning long-service leave), life stage (such as starting a family), contingencies (such as a promotion or raise), and impulsivity (such as interpersonal conflict).

We need to connect how and why teachers leave with who they are.

3. Are teachers leaving or simply changing jobs?

In a [systematic review](#) of the past 40 years of teacher turnover research, I found the majority of past studies did not adequately distinguish between teachers who simply go to a different school, and those who leave the profession altogether.

We also need to know who is just moving schools and who is leaving the profession. Policy makers and schools can help develop understanding of shortages by tracking destinations of departing teachers and their reasons for leaving through data collection and exit interviews.

This helps work out whether there is a migration issue or an attrition issue.

The effect of a teacher's absence on students' learning and schools' operations may be the same. But the shortage solutions are likely to differ for migration and attrition.

4. Are we losing 'quality' teachers?

In my research, I also reviewed more than [200 quantitative studies](#) with data on teacher turnover and retention. Only one study had a measure of teacher quality.

We need to consider the quality of teachers who are leaving and staying. We should worry most about losing high-performing teachers, as opposed to those who were not a good fit for the profession or who left for personal reasons or reasons outside a [school's](#) control.

We should also be most concerned with teachers who are high-performing, who leave due to a difficult environment. After all, teachers' working environments are the students' learning environments.

Involuntary retention of employees—those who want to leave but cannot or do not—is not necessarily preferred to a teacher shortage.

We want children's teachers to be in the classroom because they are satisfied in their jobs and passionate about education and [young people](#), not because they are incentivized by another force such as extra pay or a lack of other employment opportunities.

What next?

A uniform approach to the teacher shortage will not work. Solving it requires matching up teacher types, quitting types and the reasons for leaving, with relevant initiatives for retention.

Collecting teacher turnover figures along with information such as year level taught, subject area, location, age, gender and years of experience will help.

Schools, [school systems](#) and governments should work together to create a fuller picture of who is leaving and why.

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