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I Quit! An exploratory study into language teacher attrition in Queensland schools

Abstract

Two decades of mandatory language education in Queensland has failed to produce increased student participation beyond the compulsory years (Liddicoat 2010). So, what have been the barriers to success in Queensland, and how can the Queensland experience inform other states? A major factor inhibiting the success of language education is a chronic shortage of language teachers. An exploration into the supply and demand chain has put forth a strong case that teacher attrition—teachers leaving to teach in other subject areas, other areas of education, or to other careers—is a major cause of this shortage.

This paper reports on the initial findings from a research study at Griffith University that is seeking to identify the reasons why language teachers leave their jobs. Data collected from 227 former and current language teachers in Queensland reveal that lack of preparedness, lack of support, and lack of respect for the subject area has a strong impact on language teacher attrition. More than half of the responding former teachers have remained attached to education, which suggests an inherent and deeper problem specific to language education, compared to teacher attrition in the broader educational context.

While the focus of this research is primary and secondary teachers, there are implications for the tertiary sector which link to the themes presented. Firstly, it discusses language education policy during the early years of learning and its shortcomings. Secondly, the shortage of quality language teachers and its impact on quality language education in earlier years is shown to be a probable obstacle to student pathways into university language studies.

1. Introduction

Two decades of mandatory language education in years 6 to 8 in the state of Queensland has failed to produce increased student participation beyond those compulsory years (Liddicoat 2010). In fact, Queensland has among the lowest uptake of senior high school language study at just 5% (Clyne, Pauwels and Sussex 2007), and in alignment with most states across Australia, languages are the least popular elective subject.

There is no single or simple explanation behind these figures, which are a result of a complex interplay of historical, social and political factors. However, numerous reports and studies over the past twenty years have identified a shortage of qualified and quality language teachers as one of the major contributing factors (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2011;
Australian Education Union [AEU] 2005, 2009; Australian Language and Literacy Council [ALLC] 1996; Australian Secondary Principals’ Association [ASPA] 2003, 2004, 2006; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD] 2010; Department of Education and Training [DET] 2012; Liddicoat et al. 2007; McKenzie, Kos, Walker and Hong 2008; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA] 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005; Nicholas, Moore, Clyne and Pauwels 1994; Slaughter 2007). In its 1996 report, the Australian Language and Literacy Council (ALLC) stated that “without a drastic change in policy and practice … Australia just does not have, nor is likely to have in the future … sufficient numbers of language teachers with appropriate language proficiency, as well as the other qualities necessary for the quality provision of language teaching” (ALLC 1996: 50). In the years since the ALLC report was released, during which time numerous programs have been implemented, this has changed little.

As warned in the Australian Economic Review (Webster, Wooden and Marks 2005: 92), “it is not correct to assume that since there is a teacher in front of every class that shortages do not exist”. Numerous ‘coping strategies’ are employed to deal with shortages, which can mask and often exacerbate the problem in that some of them are counterproductive to quality language programs. This includes employing teachers without adequate qualifications—in terms of language methodology training, or language proficiency, or both. Schools may change the language taught ad hoc, simply due to the availability of a teacher, while others rely on alternative modes of delivery such as distance education. Language teachers have been found to be responsible for teaching mixed-level classes, classes of combined year levels, and even classes composed of students studying different languages (Slaughter 2007). In 2010, languages led the list of subjects that schools in the state of Victoria could no longer provide due to the lack of suitably qualified teachers (DEECD 2010). Even in the compulsory years of study in Queensland, a 2011 report uncovered 76 schools that were not delivering mandatory language programs due to teacher shortages (Day 2011). The fact that this was rectified within a matter of weeks of publication leads one to believe that some of these stop-gap coping strategies were employed to overcome the shortages.

Despite the widespread acknowledgement of a shortage of language teachers, and the negative impacts this is having on the provision of language education to Queensland students, there have been few attempts to determine why this shortage exists. A review of the current literature on teacher supply and demand found that while an ageing teaching population and issues with recruitment do put pressure on teacher supply, a major contributing factor is attrition—teachers permanently leaving their jobs before the age of retirement (Ewing and Manuel 2005; Ewing and Smith 2003; Ingersoll and Smith 2003; McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon and Murphy 2011; MCEETYA 2003; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2002, 2005; Skilbeck and Connell 2003; Wilkerson 2000).

Teacher shortages in Australia are not equitably distributed. While there is a chronic undersupply of quality teachers of languages, there is an oversupply in other
areas (DET 2012; Hennessy 2011). For this reason, studies into teacher attrition “need to examine issues unique to each content area” (Wilkerson 2000: 1). However, very little Australian research distinguishes between different subject areas, and there have been no comprehensive studies relating specifically to the attrition or retention of language teachers. International studies on attrition often compare two dichotomous groups, sometimes labelled as ‘stayers’ and ‘leavers’ (Henry, Bastian and Fortner 2011; Liu and Ramsey 2008), while others also include ‘movers’, those who leave one school or area to teach in another (Ingersoll 2001; Kukla-Acevedo 2009). Where languages are concerned, the issue is even more complex. Anecdotal evidence sees uncounted numbers of teachers moving away from language education into other teaching areas (de Kretser and Spence-Brown 2010; Mason 2010). This group is not included in statistics on general teacher attrition, because they remain in the education system. In such cases, the reasons behind a teacher’s change in direction point not toward issues with the education system, or with the act of teaching, but to an inherent problem with the teaching of a language.

This contribution begins with an outline of the research study currently being undertaken through Griffith University, including a brief introduction to the conceptual framework adopted and a description of the participants. The limitations of the study are acknowledged before moving on to discuss selected findings from the initial stages of data analysis. The article concludes by urging progress in the research agenda on language teachers, as well as a strengthening of the ties between schools and universities to facilitate change.

### 3. The study

This study is an attempt to explore the many experiences and attributes of those at the chalk face of language education in Queensland primary and secondary schools. The significance of this study, along with its subject-specific focus, is that it includes responses from former teachers—those who are able to give us the deepest insights into attrition, but who are too often absent from attrition studies. The key to understanding attrition is to “recognise that a change has occurred that causes a reversal of the original decision” (Kirby and Grissmer 1993: 6), and this study aims to reveal the factors that contribute to that reversal, by asking the question: ‘What factors influence language teachers’ decisions to continue or leave the profession?’ A number of sub-questions were developed to help answer this overarching question. This contribution will look at responses to three of those questions, those which focus directly on the responses from former language teachers.

1. Where do Queensland language teachers go when they leave their jobs?
2. Why do Queensland language teachers leave their jobs?
3. What did former teachers need to ensure their continuation?

Quantitative data was first collected from language teachers through an online questionnaire from January to December 2012. The use of a standardised questionnaire ensures that each respondent is exposed to the same questions in
the same way, and can be interpreted as reflecting “differences among respondents, rather than differences in the processes that produced the answers” (Siniscalco and Auriat 2005). The online questionnaire enabled the elicitation of large amounts of data, with relative ease on the part of both researcher and participant, in terms of time and financial commitment.

As part of the larger study in which this research is situated, qualitative data was then collected through an iterative process whereby the data sought is determined by the quantitative findings (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib and Rupert 2007). The quantitative findings influence not only what information is sought from participants in the second phase of data collection, but which participants are best able to provide that information (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). Qualitative data are collected using case studies, with selected participants engaging in interviews with the researcher to gather more descriptive, and often more personal data (Kaplowitz 2000).

This mixed-method study thus adopts an explanatory sequential design which begins with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, a design which is among the most popular in mixed-method studies, (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann and Hanson 2003), used for gaining better understanding of research problems (Ivankova, Creswell and Stick 2006).

3.1 Conceptual Framework

The study is guided by a conceptual framework incorporating three interrelated economic principles. The framework was developed after a review of the literature uncovered a vast array of variables with a potential influence on teachers’ career choices. Human capital, “an individual’s cumulative abilities, knowledge, and skills” (Pil and Leana 2009: 1103), and social capital “the links, shared values and understandings” (Keeley 2007: 102), are both strong indicators not only of teacher competence and student outcomes, but also of employee retention. These theories argue that employees possess the skills, knowledge and positive relationships to cope with the demands of their positions (Leana 2010). However, they can also somewhat paradoxically, help to explain why some teachers may leave. In what Thomas (2007) has called an “unwelcome message”, teachers with very high levels of human capital were found to leave teaching for other careers comparatively more often than their colleagues, with their skills and knowledge highly valued in other fields. This double-edged sword also applies to social capital, where teachers “have the personal contacts, influence and access to information that makes opportunities for career advancement ... possible” (Thomas 2007: 21). While human and social capital are often considered ‘teacher factors’, there is increasing acknowledgement that the context in which teachers work plays a pivotal role in influencing their decisions. Organizational capital concerns the strength of procedures, processes, and infrastructure in supporting teachers in their jobs, and this dimension will help to understand how differences between schools may account for any differences in patterns of attrition.
The quantitative survey collected a range of data from both former and current teachers regarding their human, social, and organizational capital. All data were first analysed using Excel to calculate, where appropriate, totals, averages, frequencies and percentages for each item in the survey, to paint a picture of Queensland language educators. Data were then entered into a statistical software program (SPSS 20) and nonparametric tests were conducted to reveal statistically significant relationships between responses from former and current languages teachers.

3.2 Participants

Two hundred and twenty-seven teachers in total responded to the online questionnaire, 181 being current teachers, and 47 teachers who are no longer employed in Queensland schools as teachers of languages. Respondents were mainly female (86.4%), and mainly non-native speakers of the language they teach (73.25%). Teachers taught, in descending order, Japanese (44.14%), French (19.82%), German (17.57%), Italian (10.36%), Indonesian (6.67%), Chinese (4.05%), and Spanish (3.6%). Almost three-quarters of current teachers are in urban areas, with almost one quarter in rural areas, and less than 2% in remote areas. Most teachers (61.88%) are employed in state schools, with around 17% each employed in Catholic Education and Independent schools.

3.3 Limitations

Because data on language teachers are sparse, it is difficult to determine the representativeness of the whole population of language teachers in Queensland. The sample, however, does not deviate from what we do know about the breakdown of languages taught in Queensland, the feminisation of the teaching area, and the population breakdown of teachers in different geographic areas and educational jurisdictions. While the findings from this study still need to be applied with caution, there is no evidence to suggest that the sample is unrepresentative, and the findings will provide an important stepping stone to inform further studies.

The information gathered in this study would be strengthened if it could be complemented with data from other studies, for example, comparing language teachers with those of teachers in other subject areas, or language teachers in other states, particularly those who do not have the same policy of mandatory languages. At this stage, comparable studies are not available, and these are worthwhile areas of future research.

4. Findings

4.1 Where do Queensland language teachers go when they leave their jobs?

Forty-six former teachers responded to this question, and it was found that those who leave their jobs in language teaching in primary and secondary schools fall
into three categories (see Figure 1). The first category, representing one third (15/46) of respondents, are sideways movers (Figure 2) – those who have moved out of languages, but have remained teaching in primary or secondary schools in Queensland. Approximately one quarter (11/46) are upward movers (Figure 3) – those who have moved into promotional roles within schools, in education management, and into tertiary education. The last and largest group are outward movers, covering the 43% (20/46) of former teachers who have found jobs in other careers (Figure 4). One former teacher responded to the survey, but did not indicate their current field of employment. Interestingly, many of the outward movers have remained connected to education or to languages, with careers teaching overseas, in translation and interpreting, tourism, education-related small businesses, and the ESL industry.

**Figure 1: Movements of former languages teachers in Queensland (n=46)**

![Pie chart showing movements of former languages teachers in Queensland.](image1)

- **Outward movers** 43%
- **Sideways movers** 33%
- **Upward movers** 24%

**Figure 2: Destinations of ‘sideways movers’ (n=15)**

![Pie chart showing destinations of ‘sideways movers’](image2)

- **Primary, 6**
- **Secondary, 9**
Participants were asked to compare their level of job satisfaction in their current positions, to their job satisfaction when they worked as language teachers. Responses were received from all 47 participants, and showed that almost all former teachers (46/47) are more or equally satisfied in their new pursuits, with only one respondent being less satisfied since leaving language education in schools.

4.2 Why do Queensland language teachers leave their jobs?

A number of variables were found to have a statistically significant relationship with teacher attrition. This section will identify and expand on three of those variables, one from each of the categories of capital that guide the conceptual framework.

4.2.1 Human capital

In terms of human capital, many language teachers feel ill-prepared for the realities of their jobs, with only 27% (61/227) feeling their pre-service education prepared
them sufficiently. When May (2010) attempted to predict and facilitate outcomes in language education, he made an interesting discovery that could be applied further than the ESL focus of his study. To avoid career frustration, pre-service teachers needed to be made aware of the distractive forces they would encounter in the classrooms, as well as strategies for dealing with them. In fact, in order to be effective, some teachers had to “be subversive of the interests of various other involved parties” (May 2010: 17). Lee and Van Patten (2003) agree, warning that beginning language teachers need to be prepared for negative attitudes and indifference, to be aware that their students may not have the same passion for languages as they do.

The data collected for the current study revealed that only 14% (33/227) of all responding teachers had completed a degree specifically to train languages teachers. The majority of respondents to this study, as with teachers across Australia (Kleinhenz, Wilkinson, Gearon, Fernandez and Ingvarson 2007), completed a double or combined degree, most commonly an undergraduate qualification in language followed by a postgraduate education course (88/227). The types of degrees from which respondents graduated are illustrated in Figure 5.

![Figure 5: Pre-service education of Queensland languages teachers (n=181)](image)

Pre-service education courses for language teachers are generally delivered across two faculties where the content and style of language studied may not be appropriate to the teaching context, and the education component may be generic. While language-specific methodology training was rare, a comparable number of teachers (31/227) had no training in language teaching at all. Furthermore, many teachers had little experience in language classrooms before beginning their careers, and so the realities and politics of being a languages teacher were kept largely a mystery, until they stepped into the classroom. It is without surprise then that almost two thirds felt unprepared for the nuances and unique skills required to be a teacher of languages in the current educational and political climate (145/227).

4.2.2 Social capital
In terms of social capital, language teachers are more likely to leave if they feel isolated, and many language teachers feel isolated regardless of their geographic
location. About 30% (64/219) of teachers were itinerant, meaning they work at and travel between more than one school, often because there is not enough time dedicated to language education in primary schools to staff full-time positions. 10% of respondents (24/227) worked at four or more schools. Itinerant teachers may spend only brief periods of time at some of their workplaces, unable to develop support networks and positive relationships with other staff, and build a sense of belonging. Induction programs are becoming more commonplace and positive correlations have been found with retention when the program is aimed at specific subject areas (Wilkerson, 2000), but only 20% (42/208) of respondents to this study engaged in language-specific induction or mentor programs. On top of this, 44% (77/175) of current teachers surveyed were the only language teacher in their school. Heads of Department who are dedicated solely to languages in Queensland are rare. When asked who teachers turn to in their schools for help, many turned to teachers of other subject areas, and while this can build a teacher’s sense of belonging, it does little to help the teacher navigate the complexities of language teaching politics and pedagogy.

While effective induction processes are important, so too is the support of teachers throughout their careers, and while education authorities need to be accountable for providing such support, the majority of teachers responding to a study on professional learning in networks admitted that system-level support was often inappropriate or insufficient. Much more value has been derived from non-school-based, teacher-led support networks (Endicott 2011). It is for this reason that networks such as the Modern Language Teachers Association of Queensland (MLTAQ) provide an important support for teachers. The data from this study revealed that teachers who are actively involved in networks such as the MLTAQ are more likely to move into promotional positions.

4.2.2 Organisational capital

Of the teachers surveyed, 64% (143/221) believe that their language is not valued as a subject in their schools, and as a result the subject is not afforded the basic tools needed for successful implementation. These organisational capital factors have a strong relationship with attrition of teachers in the study. One of the most cited issues raised by primary school teachers was the fact that languages are aligned with classroom teachers’ Non-Contact Time (NCT). A somewhat dated but relevant study on Physical Education teacher attrition in Queensland (Macdonald 1993), a subject which is similarly timetabled against NCT, found that isolation, the low status of the subject, and teachers’ consequent low status as professionals were cited as causes for leaving. Another study on music teachers in the state of New South Wales raised similar issues, most notably clashes with other teachers who felt the subject area was a ‘frills subject’, something that had a place at the end of the year when the ‘real teaching’ was finished (de Vries 2004).

The covering of ‘real teachers’ NCT’ is seen as the priority, and several responding teachers revealed that they are officially employed as temporary ‘release teachers’,
despite delivering a full language program. Lessons may be scheduled once a week, and/or for very short periods of time. A single, 30 minute lesson once a week for students is not uncommon among the teaching schedules of the respondents, and teachers complained of languages being taken ‘offline’ for other ‘more important’ activities and events. One third (50/180) of respondents were not satisfied with their physical teaching conditions. A number of teachers left comments about the lack of a suitable teaching space, carrying resources from one room to the next, or being put into corners and withdrawal rooms. Significant numbers of teachers were also dissatisfied with their allocation of budget (31%, n=67), resources (19%, n=42), and access to technology (21%, n=48).

4.3 What did former teachers need to ensure their continuation?

An open-ended question asked of the 47 former teachers was ‘Is there anything that would have ensured your continuation?’ The responses are listed in Table 1 according to the number of times each item was mentioned. As revealed, support was by far the most mentioned response, with words like value, appreciation, opportunities, recognition also well represented.

Table 1: Responses from 47 former language teachers to the question, ‘Is there anything that would have ensured your continuation?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support – total</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support, from admin</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support, undefined</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support, departmental</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Support (from staff, school, as a new teacher)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value and recognition - total</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of subject from Principal</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of subject from staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of subject from community and parents</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value, undefined</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better employment opportunities - total</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent position</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in 1 school</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position with other subjects as well, or undefined</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved workplace conditions - total</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better resources</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less toxic school environment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive school environment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller class sizes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing would have changed my mind</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for professional development</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More confidence in ability</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased salary</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Removal of proficiency exam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (opportunities for promotion, better HR management, less isolation as an itinerant teacher, respect, appreciation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Conclusion

On the surface, Queensland appears supportive of language education, with the adoption and enforcement of compulsory language study in years 6, 7, and 8. However, the role of languages in Queensland schools is as tenuous as ever, and the policy does not extend to mandate the number of hours of instruction required, it only gives a recommendation. Even within this recommendation, there is no elicitation of how the subject should be timetabled for maximum outcomes, nor what kind of resourcing programs should be afforded. Ambitious targets set for student retention have been set, but when unmet, have been replaced by new, even more ambitious targets, instead of cooperative efforts to understand the causes of the failures.

Language education in Queensland is suffering from a chronic shortage of quality teachers, and this study is an attempt to understand one aspect of this shortage. This study reveals key issues that drive language teachers to ‘greener pastures’, either outside of education, or more commonly within the education system. Contributing to this movement away from languages is a lack of specific teacher training to prepare teachers for their jobs, a lack of support for language teachers, and a lack of value placed on the subject and its practitioners.

Issues surrounding language teachers need more research attention, in light of the falling status of language education, in Queensland, but also more widely across Australia and much of the English-speaking world. To have any success in improving student outcomes, student retention, and the position of languages as part of a varied and rigorous education for Queensland students, there needs to be more research attention on how to best support teachers in their roles, and the human, social and organizational capital can be enhanced so to ensure career satisfaction and longevity. This requires the cooperation of all levels of education, and the important link between schools and universities must be strengthened.

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