

**Teacher Attrition and Retention: Views of Australian  
Early Career Teachers**

by

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## **Abstract**

The topic of teacher attrition is a longstanding problem affecting the educational system of many countries. Even today, there is a growing concern about teachers leaving the profession. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought several changes to the Australian education landscape. Schools are not only losing quality teachers, but this also has implications for students, teacher educators, educational leaders and policy makers. Studies indicate that among those who leave, it was seen that attrition is more common among teachers who join the profession within the first five years. These teachers are referred to as early career teachers (ECTs). Some factors that push new teachers away from the profession are workload, a lack of confidence, inadequacy of teacher education programs, a lack of support from the management and classroom factors such as dealing with behavioural problems. In addition, literature show that these factors can lead to high stress levels, which may result in burnout among teachers. This study adopted a qualitative approach with the aim to explore the views of exit ECTs about the challenges they faced in schools, and how these factors might have influenced their decisions to leave the profession. The participants were recruited on social media using purposive sampling. A semi-structured interview schedule designed by the researcher was used as the data collection method. It is expected that the findings from the study will have significant implications including acting as a guide for school leaders in creating a supportive working environment for ECTs, who are still building their professional identity and finding their way into the workplace. The limitations and future recommendations are also outlined.

# Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university
2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: 

Date: 15/01/25

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*Thanks be to God, for I was able to do all this through him who gave me strength -*

*Philippians 4:13*

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## **Definition of terms:**

- Teacher attrition – teachers who have left the teaching profession
- Early career teachers (ECTs) – teachers who have been in the teaching profession for five years or less than five years.
- Exit early career teachers – teachers who have left the teaching profession in the first five years of their career.
- AITSL - Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership
- ATWD - Australian Teacher Workforce Data
- Burnout – a psychosocial syndrome which results from long-term exposure to stress and has been characterised by emotional exhaustion, feelings of depersonalisation, disconnection and reduced efficacy.
- Self-efficacy - someone’s judgement about his or her own capabilities in executing actions to achieve a desired outcome.



# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Introduction

It has been observed that teacher attrition, which refers to teachers leaving the profession, has become a general trend in many parts of the world (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). This longstanding problem has been affecting the educational systems of many countries for decades (Thomson & Hillman, 2020). Still today, the rate at which teachers are leaving the teaching profession is increasing at an alarming rate (Allen et al., 2019). Data from the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2021) suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic might have exacerbated the extent of teacher attrition. It is interesting to note that attrition is more common among those teachers who have joined the profession within the first five years (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). These teachers are referred to as early career teachers (ECTs). The issue of teacher attrition is concerning as schools are not only losing quality teachers but also losing the ability to plan with confidence for workforce needs, but it also has implications for teacher educators, policy makers and educational researchers (Kelly et al., 2019), which will be discussed further in the literature review. Therefore, this study will explore the experiences of exit ECTs to have a better understanding of the interplay of factors which might have influenced their decisions to leave the profession.

### 1.1 Aim of the study

According to Mawhinney and Rinke (2020), to have a better understanding of the factors which might contribute to teacher retention and attrition, researchers should look at the narratives of teachers. Therefore, this study aims to explore the experiences of early career teachers (ECTs) who have left the profession by looking at their narratives to better

understand the factors that influenced their decision to exit the profession. By adopting a qualitative approach, the research will examine the challenges these teachers faced in school environments and the interplay of factors contributing to their attrition. Specifically, the objective is to explore and identify the factors which might have contributed to the attrition of these ECTs. By gaining deeper insights into the interplay of factors contributing to teacher attrition, the current study aims to contribute to the understanding of the complexity of the situation and inform strategies to support and retain ECTs in the profession.

## **1.2 Theoretical framework**

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory will be used to guide the research process. This framework explains how workplace factors might influence employee well-being and productivity (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). The JD-R theory proposes that in every workplace there are job demands, which are aspects of the job that requires effort and energy, and job resources, which are aspects of the job that help employees cope with stress and achieve career goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). More specifically, job demands are factors in the workplace that lead to pressure and stress such as increased workload or challenging work conditions. Job resources are factors in the workplace that help to reduce demands and achieve goals such as organisational support, autonomy, and training opportunities. One key aspect of the theory is that when job demands exceed job resources, employees are more likely to experience high levels of stress which can lead to burnout. On the other hand, when adequate and sufficient job resources are available, it creates a culture of engagement which drives employees' productivity (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001).

The JD-R framework has been widely applied in educational research to examine different aspects of teacher well-being, motivation, and job satisfaction. For example, Collie

et al. (2012) used the JD-R theory to examine the relationships between school environment, social-emotional learning and teacher well-being in primary and secondary school settings. Their findings showed that challenging aspects of the school climate acted as job demands and contributed to increased teacher stress and burnout. On the other hand, a positive school climate and effective social-emotional training programs served as valuable job resources, enhancing teachers' job satisfaction and teaching efficacy. This study highlights the importance of nurturing a supportive school environment to promote teacher well-being and job satisfaction. Similarly, Granziera et al. (2021) applied the JD-R framework to explore job demands and well-being among ECTs. They found that when job demands outweigh available resources, ECTs tend to experience higher levels of stress which can lead to burnout and attrition. Conversely, adequate job resources help buffer the negative effects of excessive job demands and fostered greater job satisfaction among ECTs. The study highlights the importance of balancing job demands and resources to maintain early career teachers' well-being and increase their chances of staying in the profession on the long term.

In the context of my research, the JD-R framework offers a comprehensive lens to examine the interplay between job demands and resources and how this might influence teachers' career decisions to leave the teaching profession. For instance, the theory explains how teachers, especially ECTs, experience job demands such as heavy workloads, emotional stress and other challenges such as classroom and behaviour management. When these demands are not appropriately balanced by job resources, this can lead to burnout, a decrease in job satisfaction and in some cases to teacher attrition (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). In addition, the theory aligns with the objectives of this study, as it not only explains the factors influencing teachers' decisions to leave the profession, but it also highlights areas to focus on in order to improve teacher.

### **1.3 The background and problem underlying the study**

As mentioned in the introduction, the issue of teacher attrition is concerning. According to the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2021), more than 34% of ECTs reported being likely to leave the profession or were uncertain about whether they would stay until retirement age compared to their more experienced colleagues. The main reasons reported were the high workload, coping with the demands of the job and working more hours without adequate compensation (AITSL, 2021; Longmuir et al., 2022). In a study conducted in Australia, Wyatt and O'Neill (2021) found that one of the main consequences of teacher attrition is its negative impact on the proper functioning of schools. Since teachers are leaving, this shortage of staff would affect the delivery of the school curriculum. For instance, some classes might be merged or even cancelled (Thomson & Hillman, 2020). Consequently, teacher attrition can confuse students and compromise their learning, which in turn might impact on their academic performance (Thomson & Hillman, 2020). Another consequence of teacher attrition is that it places a financial burden on the economy to recruit and train new teachers (OECD, 2020, as cited in Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Due to the important implications on educational systems, there has been an increased focus on the factors influencing ECTs to leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). In America, it was found that one of the reasons for ECTs' attrition might be due to the transition from being a student to an employee (McLean et al., 2023). This transition brings significant changes such as adapting to a new environment, which can be too overwhelming for some people (McLean et al., 2023). Similarly, in an Australian study, Collie et al. (2018) highlighted the unique challenges faced by Australian teachers during this transition, emphasizing the importance of building rapport with students in shaping their professional identity and confidence in the teaching profession. Additionally, Buchanan et al. (2013) found

that Australian ECTs face challenges such as coping with the workload, managing behavioural issues in the classroom, adapting to new demands and dealing with the realities of teaching and burnout.

Amitai and Van Houtte (2022) argued that one issue with attrition studies is that attrition has been considered from either an individual or contextual perspective. Mawhinney and Rinke (2020) suggested that attrition is a process involving a complex interplay of different factors which might be internal and external. The main factors identified in the literature as contributing to teacher attrition are the quality of teaching education programs, workload, burnout, job satisfaction, and inadequate support systems (McLean et al., 2023; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). However, given that most large-scale studies have been conducted in America, these findings might not be generalisable to an Australian context as Australian teachers would have different career experiences compared to overseas teachers (Kelly et al., 2019).

While previous qualitative studies (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Mawhinney & Rinke, 2020) have attempted to find a more detailed explanation to teacher attrition by considering exit teachers' narratives, they did not focus on the experiences of ECTs, who have already left the profession. This highlights a gap in understanding how early career experiences shape attrition decisions, particularly in the Australian educational landscape. It is important to understand attrition from ECTs' point of view because their early experiences into the career are more likely to set the stage in determining their future career choices (Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). In line with this, Skilbeck and Connell (2003) found that the beginning years are the ideal time to focus on supporting and creating professional development opportunities for ECTs to improve their career experiences and outcomes (as cited in Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). Moreover, focusing on exit ECTs account for the complexity of the topic since these teachers have already left the profession (Amitai & Van Houtte,

2022). Therefore, by adopting a qualitative stance, my study seeks to explore the experiences of exit ECTs by providing a nuanced understanding of the factors shaping attrition decisions and informing strategies to improve retention during the critical early years of teaching.

#### **1.4 Research question**

In line with the research problem, the researcher designed one research question to guide the research process. The research question is “What factors shape ECTs’ experiences and career decisions, and how do these factors affect their job satisfaction and decisions to leave the teaching profession?” Specifically, the research question will identify the factors which influenced ECTs’ career decisions and explain how these factors have contributed to the teachers’ overall job satisfaction and decisions to leave the teaching profession.

#### **1.5 Significance of the study**

Firstly, this study will contribute to understanding the interplay of factors involved in teacher attrition from the lens of exit ECTs. Specifically, this study will inform about the challenges that ECTs are currently facing in school settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought several changes to the Australian education landscape. While the Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) noted an increase of 35% in intentions of teachers to leave from 2020 to 2022, recent data also showed an increase of 3% in the number of ECTs in 2022 (ATISL, 2023). These findings suggest that while there are more new teachers joining the profession, others are still planning to leave. Therefore, the findings from my study might shed light on how the pandemic has had an impact on teachers and on the standing of the teaching profession. In addition, the findings might in turn serve as a guide for school leaders, and even senior teachers to improve or provide more targeted support to ECTs specially in the early stages of their career, where they are still navigating their way into the workplace

(Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). Finally, this study might also act as an incentive for teacher educators in reinforcing and delivering quality programs to better equip students for their future careers.

## **1.6 Delimitations**

This study delimits its focus to ECTs who have left the teaching profession within the last five years in Australia. This timeframe was chosen to account for recency of experiences and to offer insights into recent trends in order to understand current issues surrounding attrition. The study also focuses on the Australian education system since the researcher is more acquainted with this context (given that she is studying and working in Australia) and is interested in learning about teacher attrition in Australia. A qualitative approach focusing on the narratives of exit ECTs is employed to examine the experiences of these teachers and understand the factors which shaped their decisions to leave the profession. By focusing on the narratives of these individuals, my study aims to uncover themes, challenges and solutions that may inform strategies to support teacher retention. The focus on qualitative narratives allows the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of exit ECTs, capturing the emotional and contextual nuances which might not have been possible with a quantitative stance. Moreover, while the researcher acknowledges that teacher attrition is a multifaceted issue, this study intentionally focuses on understanding the reasons why teachers are leaving the profession rather than exploring the reasons why some chose to stay in the teaching profession. The scope of this research was narrowed due to its smaller scale and time constraint. However, some information about motivational factors will be provided in the literature review to provide an overall picture of the attrition issue.

## **1.7 Summary**

In summary, this study aims to investigate the factors influencing teacher attrition, focusing specifically on ECTs who have left the profession in Australia within the last five years. By using the JD-R Theory as a guiding framework, the research aims to explore how workplace demands, such as heavy workloads and classroom challenges, together with insufficient resources like support and mentoring, may contribute to burnout and attrition. The qualitative approach seeks to capture the narratives of exit ECTs to gain deeper insights into their experiences and identify the interplay of factors driving their decisions to leave the profession. By shedding light on these challenges, the study aims to inform strategies for supporting ECTs in order to improve teacher retention.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review examines the key factors contributing to teacher attrition and retention, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by early career teachers (ECTs) during their first years in the profession. This chapter discusses factors such as workload, burnout, gender dynamics, self-efficacy, and the role of mentoring and induction programs, with an emphasis on how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced these factors.

It has been observed that teacher attrition has become a general trend in many parts of the world (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). According to Thomson and Hillman (2020), teacher attrition is a longstanding problem which has been affecting the educational system of many countries for decades. Still today, the rate at which teachers are leaving the teaching profession is increasing at an alarming rate (Allen et al., 2019). Interestingly, it was found that attrition was more common among ECTs who would leave within the first five years of teaching (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). The Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) surveys defined ECTs as teachers who have been in the teaching profession for five years or less than five years (Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). Findings suggested that nearly 50% of ECTs leave the teaching profession in the first five years (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Sims & Jerrim, 2020). However, in Australia, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the extent of attrition as each state gathers their own data, and in most cases, does not publish these figures (Buchanan et al., 2013). In a 2016 report, the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) suggested that teacher attrition lies between 8% and 50% but no further evidence was provided to support these estimations (AITSL, 2016, as cited in Gallant & Riley, 2017). While the teaching profession has long been recognised as a stressful profession, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation by introducing more pressures to the attrition issue (Balmer, 2024; Bastian & Fuller, 2023). Challenges such as unexpected teaching conditions,

remote learning, the use of new technologies to teach, students' achievement, mental health concerns and managing parent-teacher communications have greatly impacted teachers during this period (Lachlan et al., 2020; Zamarro et al., 2022). In addition, health concerns and the uncertainty about the spread and exposure to COVID-19 in schools contributed to the stress levels and burnout among teachers (Gillani et al., 2022). For instance, Diliberti et al., (2021), found that 4 in 10 American teachers who left the profession reported that changes to the teaching methods during the pandemic was the primary reason for leaving. The effects of the pandemic have been significant in the attrition issue, and it remains to be seen how long these effects will keep on impacting on the education system (Kotowski et al., 2022).

Kelly et al. (2019) raised concerns about teacher attrition in an Australian context because schools are not only losing quality teachers, but this issue also has implications for teacher educators, policy makers and educational researchers. While it was found that attrition rates do not differ from other professions such as nursing and policing (AITSL, 2023), it can be argued that the implications for the teaching profession are greater compared to other professions because it impacts on the learning of future generations (Buchanan et al., 2013; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011). According to Wyatt and O'Neill (2021), one of the main consequences of teacher attrition is its impact on the proper functioning of schools. Since there is a shortage of teachers, this would affect the implementation and delivery of the school curriculum. In turn, student learning would be compromised, and this will impact on performance and learning outcomes (Thomson & Hillman, 2020). Additionally, it places a financial burden on the economy to recruit and train new teachers (OECD, 2020, as cited in Madigan & Kim, 2021). In a study conducted in America by Nweke et al. (2006, as cited in Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021), it was estimated that the state of Georgia invested \$400 million to account for teachers who have left the profession. While the context is different, the above example highlights the financial cost of replacing teachers, which is a concern that resonates

globally, including in Australia. In response to these concerns, the Australian Government is making significant investments in public school funding to create a fairer education system by improving school resources and teacher working conditions (AITSL, 2018b; Clare, 2023; Kelly et al., 2019). For example, the Government is allocating \$785.4 million to public schools in Western Australia by 2026 and \$736.7 million to the Northern Territory by 2029 to enhance support systems. These investments aim to enhance school resources, improve working conditions of teachers, which may help reduce attrition and contribute to teacher retention (Clare, 2023).

Due to the important implications of teacher attrition on educational systems, there has been an increased focus on the factors influencing ECTs to leave the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021). According to McLean et al. (2023), the transition from university to the workplace constitutes a significant period of change for ECTs. For new teachers, this transition consists of many challenges such as applying new skills, building relationships with their students and colleagues, establishing themselves as professionals and finding their place in the field (Collie et al., 2018). Considering the overwhelming nature of this transition, McLean et al. (2023) found that new teachers feel more anxious, which might lead them to leave the profession within the first 5 years. However, these findings cannot be generalised to all new teachers. Ewing and Manuel (2005) emphasized that, despite facing challenges, many ECTs choose to remain in the profession. Supporting this, Kelly et al. (2019) found that some Australian beginning teachers reported positive experiences, highlighting resilience and job satisfaction even in the face of difficulties. Even though teaching might be seen as a challenging profession, teachers have different coping mechanisms which could explain why they might act differently to challenges (Van der Vyver et al., 2020). For instance, while some might feel demoralised, other might see challenges as opportunities for personal and professional development (Van der Vyver et al., 2020). In an Australian context, the diversity

in the educational system would lead ECTs to have different experiences of their professional journey, which might in turn influence their decision to either stay or leave the profession (Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021).

Research into attrition also raised questions about teacher retention (Allen et al., 2019). While it is important to understand the predictors of teacher attrition, it is also important to learn about the motivating factors which ensures the retention of beginning teachers (Wyatt & O'Neill, 2021). For instance, in a study looking at exit narratives of American teachers, Mawhinney and Rinke (2020), found that teachers reported a mix of push and pull factors when referring to their decisions to leave the teaching profession. According to Kelly et al. (2019), the goal of attrition research should aim at understanding the interplay of factors influencing ECTs and the changes that can be made to ensure quality retention. The focus should also be on improving teachers' working conditions in order to increase their motivation and job satisfaction (Doherty, 2020).

### **The Australian Context**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a great impact on the educational landscape and the job market in Australia. For instance, there was a decrease in the percentage of teachers intending to leave the profession before retirement age (from 26% in 2019 to 21% in 2020). This decrease might be attributed to the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. However, the Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) noted a sharp increase of 35% in intentions to leave from 2020 to 2022. The three main reasons for intentions to leave the profession were found to be workload and coping (89%), recognition and reward (71%), and classroom factors (60%) (AITSL, 2023).

The ATWD also noted that from 2019 to 2022, teachers, including ECTs, have seen an increase in their teacher duties which included non-teaching tasks such as marking, administration, curriculum planning and teamwork, communication with parents and extra-curricular activities. These duties, which consists of more than 10 hours per week of the teachers' schedule are reflected in their higher workload (AITSL, 2023). This increased workload suggests that there is the pressure to invest more time and effort into their work, which might have a negative impact on their well-being (Jomuad et al., 2021).

In the case of ECTs, a decline of 3% was noted from 2018 (14%) to 2020 (11%) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, in the recent ATWD report, there was an increase of 3% in the number of ECTs in 2022 (AITSL, 2023). Moreover, recent trends in data from the ATWD showed that the proportion of ECTs who have been employed on long-term contracts (more than 1 year), have increased from 61% in 2019 to 69% in 2022, suggesting a greater scope for ECTs in obtaining job security (AITSL, 2023). This increase may serve as an incentive for ECTs who had been considering leaving the profession due to the instability in the early years of their career.

The pandemic also led many individuals to reevaluate their career choices. For instance, it was noted that there was an increase in the number of mid-career changers. This decision might be seen as a positive change for education systems as these people are bringing new skills and experiences to diversify the education sector (AITSL, 2023). On the other hand, it was also noted that some teachers were planning to diversify their career by either switching to different roles in education or to different industries (AITSL, 2023). These changes suggest that a new lens needs to be adopted when considering workforce data. For instance, while age was a determining factor when considering years of experience, this is no longer the case as mid-career changers would be joining the profession with no teaching

experience (AITSL, 2023). However, individuals who join the profession at a later stage tend to face challenges such as higher stress levels from dealing with behaviour management in the classroom and frustration from a lack of acknowledgement from first-career colleagues (Wilkins & Comber, 2015). These individuals might also face financial concerns when joining teaching because teachers' salaries tend to be lower compared to other professions which require similar qualifications (Marchand & Weber, 2020). For the mid-career changers who expected more financial stability when joining teaching, these financial concerns might lead them to reconsider their decisions (Marchand & Weber, 2020). Therefore, these challenges in the profession might make them reevaluate their career goals (Wilkins & Comber, 2015).

### **Gender issues in teacher attrition**

Regarding gender, Australian data continues to reveal a disproportionate representation of males in leadership positions in education. From 2018 to 2020, there has been a decrease of 2% (from 71% to 69%) in the number of women holding senior leadership positions. This trend highlights ongoing gender imbalances in leadership appointments, despite women making up the majority of the teaching workforce (Napierala & Colvar, 2022). Despite women representing 76% of the teaching workforce in 2020, female teachers face unique challenges that drive higher attrition. Although teaching is often regarded as a female-dominated profession, it remains constrained by traditional societal expectations which can hinder the professional advancement of women (Napierala & Colvar, 2022). Koner et al. (2024) noted that female teachers were more likely to leave the profession than their male counterparts due to factors such as lower salaries, taking maternity leaves and the dual demands of work and caregiving responsibilities.

However, these pre-existing gendered pressures were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought the inequalities in the teaching profession into sharper focus (Miksza et al., 2022). For example, Bacher-Hicks et al. (2023) found that female teachers were more likely to leave the profession due to increased stress from balancing both professional responsibilities and domestic duties, which further deepened the gender disparities in teacher retention. Miksza et al. (2022) further noted that female teachers were more likely to take on increased caregiving responsibilities at home, such as homeschooling children, which significantly disrupted their work-life balance. This finding is supported by Parlark et al. (2021) who observed that female teachers who also had school-age children felt the impact of the pandemic on their work-life balance more acutely. These teachers not only had to adapt to new teaching methods, but also shouldered the additional responsibility of homeschooling, which placed a strain on their personal life and well-being. As a result, the increased pressures led to higher attrition rates among female teachers compared to their male counterparts, exacerbating existing gender inequalities in the profession (Koner et al., 2024; Lizana & Lera, 2022).

### **Expectations and realities of teaching**

As mentioned earlier, the transition from university to the workplace represents many challenges for beginning teachers (Collie et al., 2018). It was found that attrition rates are higher among less experienced teachers compared to their more experienced counterparts. While more experienced teachers have the skills to deal with high workload, ECTs have difficulty in carrying the same responsibilities as more experienced teachers (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). Therefore, because novice teachers have not yet built the resilience to deal with the pressures of the teaching profession, this might lead to their exit. In a study conducted by Amitai and Van Houtte (2022), it was found that beginning teachers in Flanders

(Belgium) felt that they have not been well prepared to face the reality of the workplace. Some teachers reported that they felt helpless in managing challenging behaviours in the classroom, especially when the students could sense a lack of authority and from the teachers (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). They also found it hard to cater for every individual student in the classroom and they blamed the teacher training programme, which did not provide them with adequate tools to support their students (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). Since not all new teachers could cope with this mismatch between their expectations and the realities of the profession, some took this as the last push to quit teaching (Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

In a study assessing the effectiveness of American teacher education programs, participants reported that one key component which was lacking in the program was how to work with learners from different socio-economic backgrounds (Billingsley et al., 2020). This idea relates back to teacher education program being deficient in providing adequate training to future student teachers, which might contribute to teacher attrition (McLean et al., 2023). In line with this, it was found that the internal characteristic of adaptability could either improve or reduce teachers' professional outcomes (Collie et al., 2018). Adaptability could be defined as the ability to adjust one's thoughts, emotions and behaviour in response to new changes and conditions (Collie et al., 2018). For instance, McLean et al. (2023) found that highly adaptable teachers in Southwestern America were able to control their thought patterns and maintain a sense of control when faced with challenging situations in the classroom. Teachers reported that they were able to build rapport with their students when they had to adjust their thinking to view challenging behaviour as an opportunity for communication rather than a student showing resistance (McLean et al., 2023).

Research indicates that adaptability can be developed in teacher education programs through targeted approaches. For example, Granziera et al. (2016) found that one effective



strategy is scenario-based learning, which allows teachers to practice decision-making and reflect on their actions in realistic teaching situations. In addition, competency-based education models focus on building specific skills such as adaptability, by focusing on mastery and ongoing development (Competency-Based Education Network, 2024). These methods emphasize the importance of preparing teachers, especially ECTs to navigate the complexities of their new profession.

## **Burnout**

Another factor which is suggested to be common among ECTs is burnout (Salmela-Aro et al., 2019). Burnout is a psychosocial syndrome which results from long-term exposure to stress and has been characterised by emotional exhaustion, feelings of depersonalisation, disconnection and reduced efficacy (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; as cited in Madigan & Kim, 2021). According to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007), all teachers would experience high levels of stress at least once in their career. Some stressors might include behavioural problems in the classroom, relationship with parents, or conflict at an organisational level. While most teachers might cope successfully with these stressors, others might not. Several quantitative studies (Jomuad et al., 2021; Mijakoski et al., 2022) into attrition have found a significant relationship between teacher workload and attrition and that this relationship might be mediated by burnout variables. However, to have a better understanding of the interplay of these variables, we need to look at narratives of teachers, thus suggesting the need for qualitative studies in that area (Buchanan et al., 2013).

In a study conducted by Amitai and Van Houtte (2022), Belgian beginning teachers reported high workload as the main factor to quit the profession. One participant mentioned that he was working long hours even during weekends that in the end he felt stuck in a vicious cycle which was affecting his family life and well-being. Moreover, in another study

conducted in the UK by Perryman and Calvert (2020), workload was also found to be the main reason for teacher attrition. The teachers also mentioned that the reality of the profession was worse than they expected because their workload consisted of things which they believed were not related to teaching, such as behaviour management, emotional work and interactions with parents. This gap between their expectations and reality can be attributed to the limited practical experience during their teacher education program (Zeichner et al., 2024). While beginning teachers may have been academically prepared for the job, they might not have encountered non-teaching aspects of the profession such as classroom management, emotional support and building relationship with parents. According to Zeichner et al. (2024), teacher education programs often do not provide adequate practical experiences which leave beginning teachers unprepared to cope with the challenges of the teaching profession. This lack of preparation may contribute to the onset of burnout, as teachers struggle to meet the unexpected responsibilities of the profession (Zeichner et al., 2024). As a result, a combination of burnout variables such as exhaustion and depersonalisation may lead to feelings of inefficacy and reduced self-esteem, which can negatively influence teachers' decisions to leave (Collie et al, 2018; Madigan & Kim, 2021). A report from Monash University in Australia emphasized that workload pressures, including administrative tasks and insufficient leadership support, contributed significantly to teacher burnout. This supports findings from the literature where participants frequently reported workload and lack of leadership support as key factors which influenced their decision to leave the profession. However, the report also noted a sense of belonging among some teachers, suggesting that this could act as a protective factor against burnout if it is adequately nurtured through systemic improvements (Longmuir et al., 2022).

Another interesting aspect which contributes to burnout is parent-teacher relationships (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Pedditzi et al. (2021) found that unrealistic parental

expectations increase the stress levels of teachers and can even lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Teachers have several responsibilities aside from teaching such as acting as mentors and catering for the emotional needs of their students. However, when parents have high expectations for their children, this can increase the emotional workload of teachers, which results in additional pressure and stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). When teachers are criticised by parents and unable to meet their expectations, they might feel inadequate in their role as educators and these feelings of inadequacy might lead them to burnout (Dung et al., 2024).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a shift in parental expectations which placed an additional stress on parent-teacher relationships (Pedditzi et al., 2021). Due to school closures during the pandemic, many parents were forced to take on the role of educators (Garrote et al., 2021). This shift, while being very challenging for parents because of the new demands and managing other priorities, also deepened the tensions between parents and teachers (Brown & Morgan, 2021). Parents not only had to juggle work and homeschooling, but it also shifted their perceptions of teachers and the education system. Since parents became responsible for their children's learning, some felt more confident in reevaluating and critiquing the work of teachers, which created an additional stress for teachers (Garrote et al., 2021). In addition, since parents were present during online learning, they had a better understanding of teachers' roles and felt more confident to question the effectiveness of the teachers' teaching strategies (Calear et al., 2022). Therefore, this additional pressure from parents negatively affected teachers by leaving them feeling undervalued, which contributed to burnout and influenced their intentions to leave (Shimony et al., 2022).

However, an Australian study highlights the discrepancy between how the public perceives teachers and how teachers think they are perceived (Heffernan et al., 2019). While 71% of teachers reported feeling underappreciated and overworked, public perceptions suggested otherwise, with 82% considering teaching a respected profession and 93% expressing trust in teachers. This gap became more pronounced during the pandemic, since parents became more involved in their children's education through online learning. While the challenges of the teaching profession were positively portrayed in the media, these acknowledgments were largely performative because little was done to support teachers who were struggling (Heffernan et al., 2021). Studies suggest that those who experienced remote learning firsthand were more likely to appreciate teachers' adaptability and resilience, but this recognition did not address the underlying challenges of workload, stress, and professional undervaluation (Heffernan et al., 2021).

### **Self-efficacy and job satisfaction**

Self-efficacy can be defined as someone's judgement about his or her own capabilities in executing actions in order to achieve a desired outcome (Bandura, 1986, as cited in Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). It was found that self-efficacy for teaching has an influence on teachers' job satisfaction and their career decisions (McLean et al., 2023). This is relevant in the case of ECTs as they are still developing their self-efficacy for teaching in the early years of their career (McLean et al., 2023). Research has shown that teachers demonstrated higher self-efficacy when they felt supported by the school community (Fackler et al., 2021). In addition, Bandura emphasized that self-efficacy, which is grounded in the social cognitive theory, highlights the importance of human agency and autonomy (1986, as cited in Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007).

As shown by McLean et al. (2023), self-efficacy for teaching has a significant influence on job satisfaction, especially for ECTs. According to the JD-R theory, when job resources such as school support and mentoring are present, they mitigate the negative effects of job demands by fostering a sense of competence and enhancing job satisfaction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Conversely, when these resources are lacking, it can lead to burnout and to attrition. This is supported with the findings of Li (2023) and Fackler et al. (2021), who found that inadequate resources contributed to lower self-efficacy and increased stress.

However, Ortan et al. (2021) noted that self-efficacy might be compromised in school settings where teachers feel that they do not have control over their students' learning. For instance, Perryman and Calvert (2020) talked about how accountability mechanisms imposed by school leaders have a negative impact on teachers' self-efficacy. These measures take away the freedom of teachers to design and have control over their lessons, and this makes them feel constrained in a system where they feel powerless (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). This is consistent with the findings of Li (2023), who found that teachers who doubt their abilities in the classroom might develop low self-efficacy, which might in turn lead to burnout and disengagement from their profession.

Additionally, Everitt (2020) found that some changes that school principals make such as imposing predesigned curriculum or pedagogical policies might take away teachers' agency, which creates this pressure to maintain high educational standards. Santoro (2021) referred to this dissatisfaction with school policies as demoralisation, a process where teachers begin to question their professional ethics. Demoralisation has also been linked to teacher attrition because they refused to work in a system which did not align with their values. Achinstein and Ogawa referred to teachers' decisions to leave the profession as

principled resistance, where leaving becomes an act of resistance (2006, as cited in Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022).

### **Mentoring and Induction**

In an Australian context, AITSL, responsible for developing national guidelines for teachers, emphasize the importance of mentoring and induction initiatives for beginning teachers. In a 2018 report, AITSL noted that evidence suggest the positive impact of induction programs on the transition of ECTs into the workplace and that it can also reduce teacher attrition in the beginning years (AITSL, 2018b). Teacher regulatory bodies in Australia also view mentoring and induction programs as being a valuable support for beginning teachers to move from the graduate stage to the other stages of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2018b). Formal inductions are highly valued by ECTs because they provide the opportunity to be introduced to the students and the school community, to meet their new colleagues and to better navigate the learning environment (AITSL, 2023). Inductions also help them build their confidence and build on their identities as professionals in a new work environment. For instance, some components of inductions include professional development opportunities, collaboration with other colleagues and other type of teacher-related support (AITSL, 2023).

However, recent statistics from the ATWD showed that from 2020 to 2022, there has been as decrease of 4% (60% to 56%) in the number of ECTs with 1 to 2 years of experience who reported receiving formal inductions. A greater decrease of 6% (from 65% to 59%) was also reported in the number of ECTs with 3 to 5 years of experience for that same period (AITSL, 2023). These declines suggests that fewer induction opportunities are being provided for ECTs to support them in the beginning years of their career. This reduction in

support might have adverse effects on ECTs such as higher stress levels, risk of burnout and lower satisfaction (Kelly et al., 2019).

Formal mentoring and induction programs, as discussed by AITSL (2018b), provide crucial job resources that help ECTs transition into their roles and cope with the demands of the profession. The JD-R theory suggests that these resources play a vital role in mitigating the negative effects of job demands like high workload and emotional stress, which could lead to burnout and early career attrition (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). However, a reduction in job resources could exacerbate stress and reduce job satisfaction, contributing to higher attrition rates among ECTs (AITSL, 2023; Longmuir et al., 2022).

While AITSL's data highlights the importance of formal induction programs, it does not adequately address how these programs evolve to meet the changing needs of ECTs. The emphasis on formal induction may also overlook the value of informal peer support networks, which can have a positive impact on ECT retention (Walters et al., 2020). Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data also raises concerns about bias as teachers may not report on their experiences accurately, which might in turn compromise the validity of AITSL's findings (Rosenman et al., 2011). Inductions should be viewed as an ongoing and adaptive process rather than a one-time event with limited professional development (Hudson et al., 2009). Another issue is the lack of understanding of the long-term impact of the induction programs. While these programs may provide short-term support, they often fail to address deeper structural problems such as workload or teacher autonomy (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The decline in induction opportunities (AITSL, 2023) may suggest broader systemic issues like financial constraints or administrative cuts, which remain underexplored in AITSL's reports.

A report by Heffernan et al. (2019) on the perceptions of teachers in Australia further corroborate AITSL's (2023) findings and highlights a significant reduction in formal induction opportunities. The report identifies systemic issues such as funding cuts, which may contribute to the reduction in mentoring programs. While the report offers general recommendations to address these gaps, it fails to provide effective strategies for improving access to such vital resources. This gap in the literature is particularly relevant as participants in this study described feeling unsupported during their beginning years due to a lack of support and mentorship from school leaders. These findings highlight the importance of having induction programs that are both continuous and adaptive, in order to address specific challenges rather than focusing exclusively on the initial onboarding phase.

From the perspective of the JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), induction programs act as job resources that help ECTs manage high job demands. However, a reduction in these resources can leave teachers more vulnerable to stress, burnout, and attrition (Kelly et al., 2019). Addressing these gaps is essential to developing more effective and sustainable support systems for ECTs, ultimately reducing burnout and improving retention rates.

### **Motivational factors**

Teachers reported that one of the most satisfying aspects of their career is their relationship with their students (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). More specifically, they have an intrinsic sense of worth knowing that they are trusted and are able to influence their students in a positive way (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022). According to the JD-R theory, these intrinsic motivators act as important job resources that promote engagement and resilience and help to cope with job demands like workload and emotional stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Moreover, in a study on retention by Perryman and Calvert (2020), teachers mentioned that



they felt inspired by their colleagues to become better educators because of the positive atmosphere and team spirit in their school. For some teachers, they find happiness in knowing that they are having an impact on their students' lives and are helping them become better adults (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). In line with this, a study by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) found that the intrinsic rewards of teaching, such as the personal fulfillment of making a difference in students' lives, were stronger motivators for teachers than external rewards like salary or status. This sense of personal accomplishment is particularly significant for ECTs who are still developing their professional identity and may find fulfillment in their relationships with students as a source of motivation to remain in the profession (Collie et al., 2016).

Additionally, a positive school environment and collegial support are key factors that influence teacher motivation. It was shown that teachers who work in a supportive environment where they feel valued by both their colleagues and school leaders reported enhanced job satisfaction and lower feelings of burnout (Beltman et al., 2011). Teachers who have access to professional development opportunities and a collaborative learning environment often report higher levels of motivation and engagement in their profession (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Moreover, a sense of professional autonomy where teachers are empowered to make decisions about their teaching, can contribute to greater satisfaction and stronger commitment to their students and the profession (Mullen et al., 2021).

## **Summary**

This chapter explored the key factors influencing ECTs attrition through the lens of the JD-R theory. The theory highlights how job demands (high workload, emotional stress) and job resources (support, training) interact to influence teacher well-being. When job demands exceed available resources, ECTs are more likely to experience burnout and ultimately leave

the profession. Factors such as inadequate preparation, workload, and lack of support were identified as key contributors to attrition. However, a gap exists in understanding the experiences of ECTs who have already left the profession, particularly in the Australian context. Therefore, this highlights the need for research focused on the perspectives of ECTs who have exited the profession to better inform retention strategies, especially in the beginning years of teaching.

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

### **3.1 Methodology**

This section will present the ontological and epistemological approaches as well as the theoretical perspective adopted for the purpose of my research, which was informed by Crotty's (1998, as cited in Al-Ababneh, 2020) framework of social research. The methods, data collection, analysis and ethical considerations are also outlined.

### **3.2 Ontology and Epistemology**

The researcher adopted an ontological approach of relativism which explains the possibilities of multiple realities that are uniquely and subjectively constructed based on individual experiences (Paleček & Risjord, 2013). Relativism fits the purpose of the current study as the researcher wants to understand the different realities that the participants believe in based on their teaching experiences and how these same experiences influenced their decision to leave the teaching profession. Moreover, the researcher adopted an epistemological stance of constructionism to explore how the participants subjectively construct their understanding and experiences of working in schools. Since constructionism involves the meaning that comes from human interactions with the different realities of the world, the researcher is interested in finding out how participants create meanings based on their personal values and the different interactions in a school environment (Amineh & Asl, 2015).

### **3.3 Theoretical Perspective**

The researcher wants to understand how the participants construct their realities based on their subjective experiences of teaching and interacting in a school environment. As such, a social constructivist approach is best suited for this study as it focuses on the complexities of human interactions and making meaning from experiences (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

### **3.4 Design**

This study adopts a qualitative methodology with an inquiry-based approach (Creswell, 2012) centred on exploring the narratives of individuals about their experiences of teacher attrition. The study also adopts a cross-sectional design as the researcher wants to study the views of the participants at one point in time and because it was a suitable approach due to the short timeframe to conduct the research.

### **3.5 Participants**

The researcher recruited 6 exit Early Career Teachers (ECTs) as participants (those who have recently left the profession <5 years). Table 1 outlines the participants demographics. Since age can be considered as sensitive information for some people, the researcher asked the participants about their age range instead of their actual age. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling, whereby the researcher put a call out in Australian teacher support groups on social media (Facebook) to recruit ECTs who have left the teaching profession. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling technique used to recruit participants based on specific characteristics which are fit for a research purpose (Campbell et al., 2020). One of the main reasons for choosing purposive sampling is to better match the sample to the aims and objectives of the research. For instance, since the researcher aims to explore the experiences of exit ECTs, the researcher recruited exit ECTs as participants who are more likely to provide useful data which will be relevant to the research question (Campbell et al., 2020).

**Table 1***Participants demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age range	Years of teaching experience	Teaching	State	Current profession
Sally	Female	25-29	3 years	Early childhood educator	NSW	Rehabilitation counsellor
Jane	Female	30-34	2.5 years	High school (English) teacher	NSW	Research assistant
Rachel	Female	30-34	4.5 years	Primary school teacher	NSW	Healthcare
Renee	Female	30-34	4.5 years	Primary school teacher	ACT	Behaviour support practitioner
Sarah	Female	35-39	4 years	Primary school teacher	ACT	Psychologist
Paul	Male	45-49	2 years	Early childhood educator	QLD	Support worker

### **3.6 Data Collection**

A semi-structured interview (Appendix A) with open-ended questions was used to collect data. This type of interview was chosen as provides the researcher with some flexibility in collecting data relevant to the topic of interest, which is teacher attrition (O’Keeffe et al., 2016). The interview protocol was developed based on insights found in the literature (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Wyatt & O’Neill, 2021). Specifically, the themes in the literature guided the researcher in a brainstorming process about potential questions that might elicit these themes or even gain new insights, ideas and unexpected revelations from participants. The researcher developed 18 interview questions and chose the ones which were more relevant to the research question. Then the researcher classified the questions under 4 main categories such as personal background and motivation, education and training, professional experience, and reflection and improvement. The researcher collaborated with her supervisor, who helped in editing the final draft of the interview protocol. The final draft consists of 11 questions and some prompts to guide the participant. One example of a question is “How was your experience at the last school you worked at?”.

### **3.7 Procedure**

The researcher sent an ethics application to Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) to ensure that the highest ethical standards are adhered to. The researcher began the data collection process once ethical approval was granted from the committee. The participants were recruited via a call out posted into Australian teacher support groups on Facebook. The important details about the study were provided to the participants on an information sheet. A Qualtrics QR code and link to the information sheet (Appendix B) were attached to the call out (Appendix C) so that the participants are able to read and provide consent directly through Qualtrics. The contact details of the chief investigator and co-investigator were provided on the information sheet in the event that the

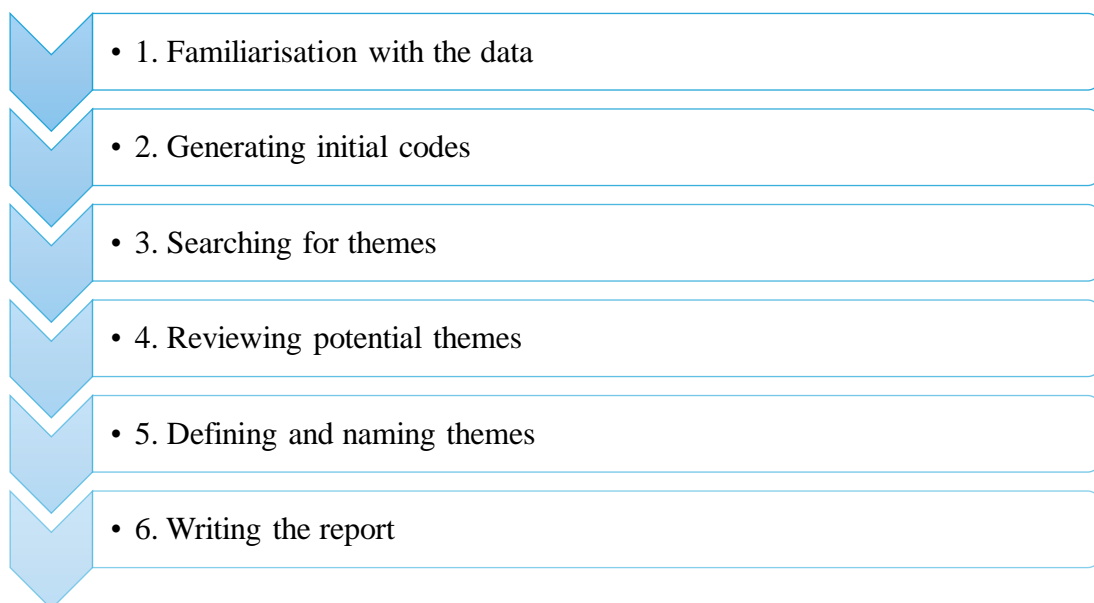
participants might want to have more information before giving their consent to participate in the study. Once read, the participants provided their consent on Qualtrics. The participants were also asked questions about inclusion criteria to ensure that they meet the requirements of the study. They also provided their email address on the form so that the researcher could contact them. The researcher contacted the participants to schedule interviews based on their availability.

The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The Microsoft Teams platform was chosen as it contains an integrated recording and transcription option which were used to record and transcribe the interviews. The interview schedule was used to guide the interview process. Prior to the start of the interviews, the participants were informed of their rights to withdraw from the interview at any time and that they may also choose not to answer some questions if they do not want to. They were also informed that the interviews would be recorded for analysis purposes, and that they have the option of switching off their cameras if they feel more comfortable. In order to contain the responses of the participants, at the start of the interview, the researcher informed them about the timeframe that they have for the interview (30 – 45 minutes) and that she might prompt them if they are going off topic or to move on to the next question. To address an ethical concern about harm, the researcher did a wellbeing check midway through the interview to ensure that the participants are comfortable with the interview process. She also did a debrief at the end of the interview so that the participants were able to express themselves and feel supported. Once the interviews were completed, the researcher checked the transcripts to make sure that the data was accurately transcribed. The researcher also engaged in member-checking by sending the transcripts to the participants via email. All the 6 participants replied that they would not make any changes to their responses. Finally, the data obtained was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

### 3.8 Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was used to analyse the data. This method of analysis is suited for the current study as it allows the researcher to systematically identify, organize and understand patterns of meanings and experiences from the participants' data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). RTA was chosen because it provides new researchers with a simplified and systematic way of learning the mechanisms of coding and analysing qualitative data. Specifically, the researcher opted for an inductive approach to thematic analysis, which is a bottom-up approach in finding meanings in the data. However, Braun and Clarke (2019) argued that it is impossible to be completely inductive as researchers will have some preconceptions about their data during the analysis process. Therefore, while inductive thematic analysis was the main approach used, it is fair to say that there was a combination of both inductive and deductive analysis. The six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2019) was followed for the analysis process. Figure 1.1 shows an example.

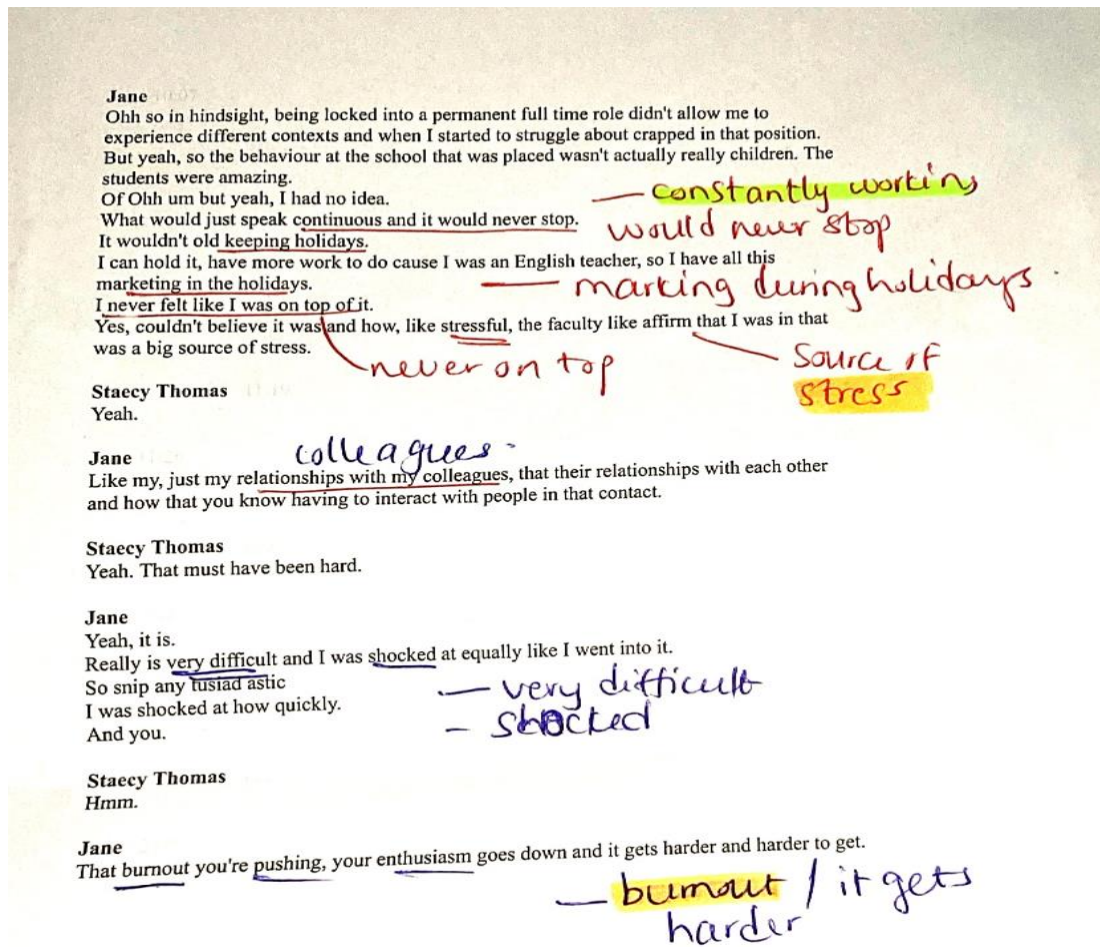
**Figure 1.1**  
*Steps for Reflexive Thematic Analysis*





1. Familiarisation with the data – the researcher familiarised herself with the data by reading the interview transcripts several times. The researcher also made notes of potential codes with each repeated reading as patterns, ideas or meanings started to emerge from the data. A reflexive journal was also used at this stage as the researcher wanted to record her thoughts and any potential ideas to discuss with her supervisor. Since the process of RTA consists of reflecting on the process of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), the reflexive journal helped the researcher to understand the codes, see patterns in data and understand her own biases during the coding process.
2. Generating initial codes – the second phase involved the systematic analysis of the data by generating descriptive and interpretive codes. The researcher used both semantic and latent codes. This was done in order to present the data as communicated by the participant and also to identify hidden meaning and assumptions which were interpreted by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Then the data was coded and highlighted on hardcopies of the transcripts to better compare and analyse the data. Figure 1.2 shows an example of initial codes generated.

**Figure 1.2**  
Example of codes



3. Searching for themes – the researcher reviewed the coded transcripts in order to identify similar codes which can be classified as a theme or subtheme. At this stage the researcher looked for potential themes that might be related to the research question.
4. Reviewing potential themes – this step involved the researcher to review the themes which are most relevant to the research question. This step can be divided into 2 parts. First, the researcher checked whether the themes match the coded data. This step is very important because if the codes do not match to a specific theme, the researcher

will have to go back to the second and third step. If there is a relation between the themes and the codes, the researcher can move on to the second part which involves checking the themes in relation to the whole data set. This is done to ensure that the generated themes represent the relevant information from the data, which answers the research question.

5. Defining and naming themes – this step involved the deep analytic work that shaped the whole analysis into details. Here the researcher defined the themes and presented the findings by using quotes from the transcripts. The writing started to take shape as the researcher analysed the evidence to support the themes. The researcher also linked the themes in a coherent manner to present the findings which will answer the research question.
6. Writing the report – the last step required putting all the information together and writing the final report. Even if this is the last step, the process of writing the report began from the informal writing of notes because in qualitative research, the writing and analysis process happens at the same time. In this last step, the researcher wrote the report by cross-checking the findings with the existing literature to tell the stories which was embedded in the data.

Finally, the researcher engaged in member-checking by collaborating with the participants so that they can double-check their data. This step ensured the collection of authentic data which will contribute to the overall validity and trustworthiness of the study (Busetto et al., 2020).

### **3.9 Ethics**

Ethical approval was obtained from Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC project number: 7488). The researcher approached participants on social media (Facebook) by putting a call out in Australian teacher support groups. A Qualtrics link

to the information sheet was provided so that potential participants have the choice to voluntarily participate in the research by giving their informed consent.

Since the researcher used social media to recruit participants and interviews to collect data, complete anonymity of participants cannot be ensured. However, the researcher made sure not to ask the participants identifying data such as name, age, or name of previous school they worked at. The only identifying information collected was their email address (which inevitably, some of them contained their names) in order to contact them to schedule interviews and for the purpose of member checking. Instead of providing their age, the participants were asked to give an age range so that the researcher can have some demographic information about them.

Moreover, the researcher took all possible steps to ensure that the data collected such as interview transcripts and recordings remain private and confidential. The researcher asked the participants to provide a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality and to protect their identity. No data, including identifiable, non-identifiable and de-identifiable, will be shared or used in future research projects without the explicit consent of the participants. The data collected will also be securely stored on a password protected computer and on Canvas, which is Flinders University' online platform once the research project has been submitted for marking. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for 12 months after publication of the results. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to university protocols.

In addition, considering the personal nature of the questions (departure from a profession), the researcher acknowledged that some participants might feel uncomfortable during the interview process. Necessary precautions were taken in order to minimise the risk of harm caused to participants during the research process. For instance, the interview questions were deliberately worded in a sensitive manner to limit any harm caused to

participants. Moreover, the participants were informed that they are free to withdraw from the study without giving an explanation or they might also refuse to answer any questions if they do not want to. Any data collected up to the point of their withdrawal would be securely destroyed. However, in the instance that a participant might experience some discomfort or distress, phone numbers of mental health helplines such as Beyond Blue (1300 22 4636) and Lifeline (13 11 14) would be provided to them. Beyond Blue and Lifeline are non-profit organisations offering 24/7 mental health support services and crisis support via call or online chat. The participants would be able to access free and confidential counselling services from these professionals. Finally, the researcher will ensure fair dealing by referencing all ideas from academic sources correctly.

### **3.10 Reflexivity**

Since the current study is of qualitative nature, the researcher will engage in reflective practice to understand how her beliefs and biases may have influenced the research process. The researcher is a 24-year-old female student studying Cognitive Psychology and Educational Practice. The researcher chose to study this topic as she is passionate about teaching and helping students achieve their best potential. Being an international student, the researcher was intrigued by the extent of the attrition issue in Australia. Moreover, since the researcher is an aspiring educational psychologist, she is interested in learning more about the school dynamics, teacher-student relationships and the challenges that teachers are facing in school settings. The researcher believes that the best way to tackle a problem is to understand where it might stem from. Hence, by studying the perspectives of teachers who have already left the profession, the researcher hopes to understand the real factors which are affecting the current generation of teachers and what can be done to better support them.

The researcher has previous experience working in schools and is currently working as an education support officer in a primary school. Since she spends most of her time around students and teachers, she has observed the interactions and dynamics in classrooms. The experience of the researcher will be valuable in helping her understand the frame of reference of the participants and she will be able to relate to them on a deeper level and have better engagement in the overall research process. The researcher also acknowledges that using an interpretivist perspective and given her position in being involved in the same world that she is studying, her subjectivity will be reflected in the analysis. Therefore, it is important to reflect on how her position as a researcher and how her beliefs and experience might have impacted on the overall research process.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Introduction

This study explores the experiences of early career teachers (ECTs) who have left the profession, aiming to understand the factors that influenced their decision to exit the profession. By examining the narratives of former ECTs, the research provides insights into the elements shaping their experiences, job satisfaction, and eventual decisions to leave. This study is guided by the following research questions:

What factors shape ECTs' experiences and career decisions, and how do these factors affect their job satisfaction and decisions to leave the teaching profession?

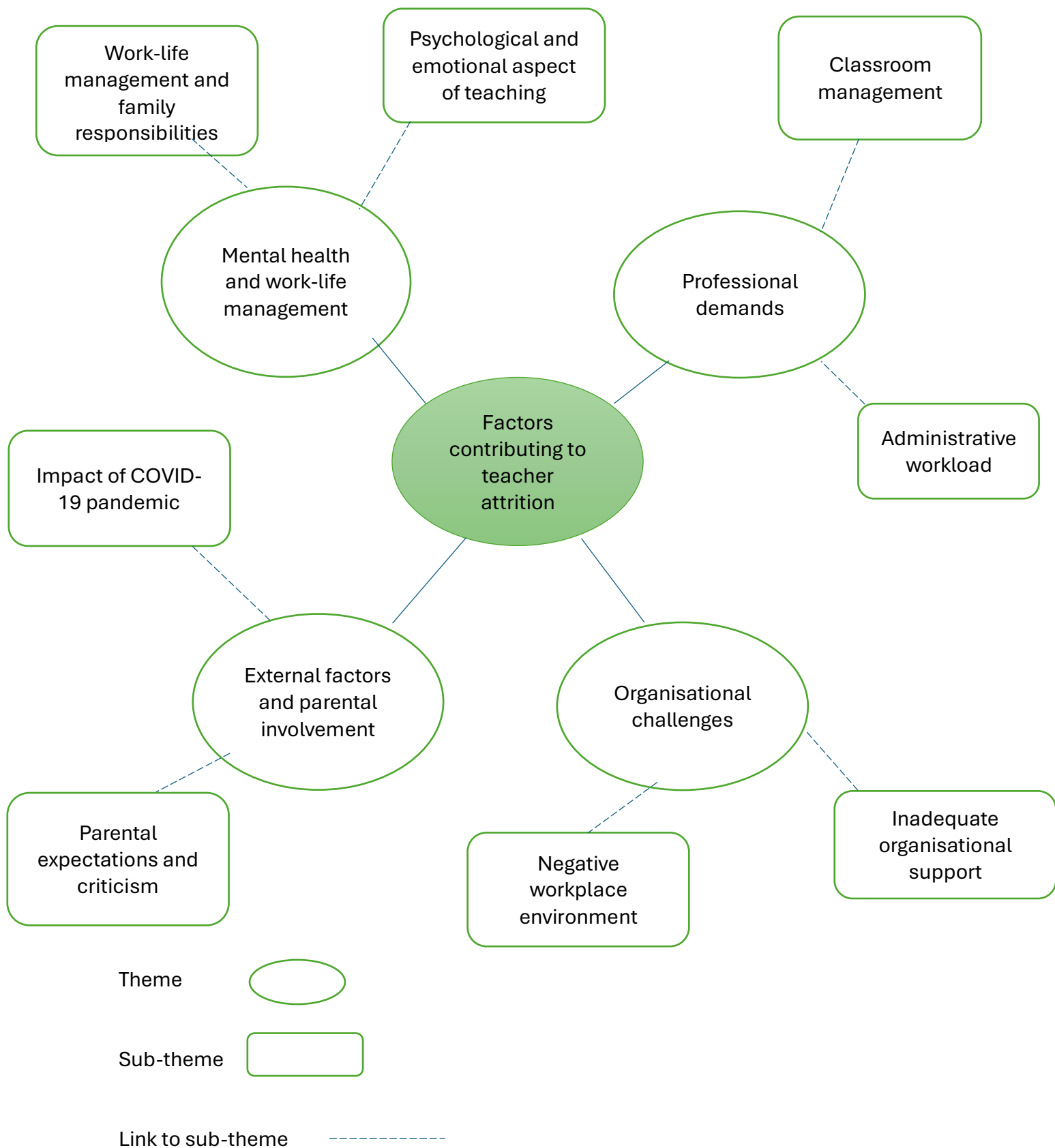
To answer this question, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to identify and construct four main themes from the participants interviews. Each main theme is supported by two sub-themes, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved. The identified themes are:

1. Professional demands
2. Organisational challenges
3. External factors and parental involvement
4. Mental health and work-life management

Figure 1.3 illustrates a thematic map representing the main themes and sub-themes. This chapter will delve into each of these findings of this study, offering detailed insights into the factors contributing to ECTs' decisions to leave the teaching profession.

**Figure 1.3**

*Thematic map representing the themes and sub-themes constructed*





## **4.1 Theme 1: Professional demands**

Teaching is a demanding job which requires teachers to juggle multiple roles that often extend beyond their classroom duties. The first theme explores the experiences of ECTs in managing their administrative workload, addressing students' behaviours and adapting to the realities of their professional roles.

### **4.1.1 Sub-theme: Administrative workload**

All the six participants reported that workload was among the most significant challenges they encountered. Teachers are increasingly required to complete additional administrative tasks alongside their teaching responsibilities. These additional duties cause considerable stress, as teachers struggled to excel in their teaching duties while meeting administrative deadlines.

To better contextualise this issue, participants were asked about their expectations before entering the teaching profession and how those expectations were different from reality. Four out of six teachers revealed that they entered the profession due to their passion for education and their desire to engage in hands-on teaching. Sarah, a former primary school teacher, expressed her motivation, "I believed passionately in educating our kids and giving them the best teachers that they can have." She had envisioned "spending a lot more time doing the hands-on teaching and a lot less time with the paperwork."

However, the reality was very different. Participants also noted their initial perception of teaching as a profession with relaxing holidays but quickly realized the actual purpose of the time off. Renee, a former primary teacher, explained, "During the holidays I would work from home the whole time... and in fact, most holidays you're actually at school." This

illustrates the extent of teachers' workload, as their so-called breaks were often consumed by catching up on professional tasks.

Another significant concern raised by five out of six participants was the perceived inadequacy of their teacher education program in preparing them for the demands of the profession. Jane noted, "the amount of admin tasks that are expected of you is insane and not at all something that university prepares you for." Similarly, Sarah remarked that while her teacher training provided a strong foundation in educational theories, it lacked sufficient practical experience. She stated that there was "a huge discrepancy between what we learned in class that we would do in the classroom and what we actually did in the classroom."

These reflections from beginning teachers highlight two interconnected issues: the burden of administrative workload and the gap between teacher education programs and the practical realities of the teaching profession.

#### **4.1.2 Sub-theme: Classroom management**

All the six participants reported that classroom management was one of the most complex and demanding aspect of their job, particularly in larger classrooms where they had to simultaneously address multiple behaviour issues. Specific challenges included anger management, violent behaviour, supporting students with special needs (or imputed disabilities), and completing extra documentation for behavioural issues. These challenges required significant emotional effort, often leaving teachers feeling emotionally and physically exhausted.

Participants highlighted that balancing demands such as managing classroom behaviour, catering to diverse student needs, fulfilling administrative duties, and keeping up with curriculum expectations were overwhelmingly difficult for them. A recurring concern among participants was their lack of preparation for behaviour management. Many noted that

university training did not adequately equip them with strategies to handle such challenges.

Renee, who taught in junior primary, expressed frustration:

You get nothing on behaviour support, you get nothing on classroom management, you have absolutely nothing on record keeping... there's just a lot of stuff that they don't teach you at all at university. (Renee)

The lack of preparation left ECTs feeling unprepared to meet the needs of their students while maintaining effective teaching practices. Sally explained the impact of this gap: "when you're an early teacher and you can't teach because you're spending your entire day guiding behaviour that makes you question whether you should be like doing the job." Managing students with special needs or imputed disabilities was identified as a particularly challenging aspect of classroom management. Four out of six participants described these experiences as both exhausting and distressing. Paul, who taught in early education, shared that he was "getting scratched and attacked by a couple of the kids...they were physically really violent." He further elaborated that "it was constant destruction, um, so, it was also affecting me... and the fact that it will be forever I just thought it would be horrendous."

Renee gave another distressing example by recounting her experience teaching a class with children requiring extensive behaviour support. She stated:

It was so hard and you're kind of fighting this battle... I couldn't have scissors in my class because some of these children had tried to stab each other... I had cuts all up and down my leg from one of them hiding underneath the table and stabbing me.

(Renee)

She eventually decided to leave the profession when that same boy who stabbed her threatened to kill her son, who was in the nursery room attached to the early childhood centre where she was working. She explained that it had become too much to handle.

Two participants (Renee and Rachel) noted that the time spent managing behavioural issues often came at the expense of their teaching duties, which left them feeling ineffective and guilty. Renee reflected: “the kids who wanted to be involved and were trying to listen... I just felt so guilty all the time because I could not be with them.” Rachel shared a similar sentiment: “there was not enough time in the day to do everything that needed to be done, and if children with um additional needs were in the classroom, you know they took over the day...”

These accounts highlight how the demands of classroom management, especially when supporting students with special needs or managing behaviour, contributed to stress and dissatisfaction among the participants. The cumulative emotional toll and perceived inability to meet both students’ needs and professional expectations had a significant influence on the participants' decisions to leave the teaching profession.

## **4.2 Theme 2: Organisational challenges**

Organisational support plays an important role in shaping teachers’ professional experiences. This is especially relevant for new teachers as early experiences will set the scene of how they view themselves as professionals and the outlook they will have on their career. This theme discusses organisational challenges such as inadequate organisational support, negative workplace environment and limited career progression opportunities and how these factors might influence teachers’ job satisfaction and their decisions to leave the profession.

### **4.2.1 Sub-theme: Inadequate organisational support**

All six participants expressed that the level of support they received as new teachers fell significantly short of their expectations. For these participants, organisational support

encompassed elements such as well-defined support structures, clear guidelines and expectations, leadership support, and access to adequate resources.

A lack of consensus around teaching expectations often left beginning teachers feeling uncertain and overwhelmed in their roles. Paul, who taught in an early childhood centre, described his experience as being in a “chaotic” environment due to unclear expectations. “There wasn’t as much sort of like support in terms of what to do...and a lot of difficulties in terms of what was expected.” Although Paul found some assistance through online discussion groups, these were inadequate in addressing his concerns or escalating them to leadership. He explained that issues like behavioural challenges were often ignored or poorly addressed by the management, “those challenges were not really talked about, or nobody really knew what to do... no agreement on how to tackle that.”

The issue of inadequate leadership emerged as a recurring theme, with five out of six participants reporting their negative experiences. Renee, who worked in a primary school, attributed her decision to leave teaching to the toxic leadership style at her workplace. She recounted instances of being shamed and micromanaged, stating:

There was a lot of shaming too... so the leadership was like maybe you should go back to uni cause you haven’t actually learned how to do this properly. (Renee)

Renee also described the harsh micromanagement she faced. She explained that they were: “intense micromanagers being like what’s this... what’s this what’s this what’s this sort of thing?” The lack of constructive leadership support and such demoralising interactions ultimately led her to resign from her job.

In contrast, Sarah, another primary school teacher, had a more positive experience with the leadership team at the school. She noted that while her principal was relatively hands-off, her deputy principal was highly active and supportive. Sarah explained, “she dealt with all the

behaviour management issues” which provided some relief and allowed her to focus on teaching her students.

These findings highlight a critical gap in organisational support for new teachers. The lack of support from seniors, unclear expectations, and mentorship opportunities created significant barriers to the participants’ professional growth and well-being. For many, this inadequate organisational support was a decisive factor in their decision to leave the teaching profession.

#### **4.2.2 Sub-theme: Negative workplace environment**

Negative workplace environment had a significant impact on the participants’ professional experiences, contributing to feelings of disempowerment, stress, and dissatisfaction. This sub-theme highlights the impact of unsupportive colleagues, hostile staffroom cultures, and limited career advancement opportunities, which reinforced perceptions of teaching as a dead-end job.

Participants described experiences of collegial disengagement, where requests for advice or support were met with indifference or dismissiveness. For instance, Renee who worked in early childhood, explained that her attempts to seek guidance from senior staff were often ignored, leaving her to manage complex challenges by herself. She shared, “I was saying constantly, I’m like, I need more support, I need at least another person in the room with me...and the director was like I need to get the work done.”

The issue of being intimidated by senior staff was also highlighted by Sally, who also used to work in early childhood. She recounted her experience, “there’s no sort of structural thing in place to support your career so it’s really dependent on whether the senior educators liked you, which was quite confronting...”

Another challenging aspect of the profession which had a significant impact on the participants’ experiences was the work environment. Four out of six participants reported that

they faced hostile and unsupportive work environments characterized by negative staffroom cultures which was an additional source of stress for them. Jane, a former high school teacher, expressed her frustration:

The faculty that I was in that was a big source of stress...it was just umm my relationships with colleagues and their relationships with others and having to interact with people like that was just um hard. (Jane)

Jane attributed this hostility towards her due to being new in the profession. She stated:

It's just starting your new teaching job...after a certain amount of time I thought umm people would respect me in the role, but it was really hard because they were really rude and horrible to me. (Jane)

Jane's perspective is echoed in Paul's experience, who described the internal conflicts within his workplace as particularly difficult. He observed:

There was a lot of internal fighting between the colleagues that's the thing that I really didn't understand, where every colleague would disagree with what everybody else says in terms of what is a good outcome or what would be useful, and it was quite negative and quite hostile. (Paul)

Paul's experience of constant disagreement and negativity among his colleagues contributed to a toxic work environment that added a pressure on his professional life. Such a hostile environment served as a significant source of stress for Paul, further illustrating the detrimental effect of toxic workplace cultures on teacher well-being and job satisfaction. The negative workplace dynamics described by participants not only contributed to feelings of stress and hostility but also fostered a sense of professional stagnation and disempowerment. Four out of six participants spoke about experiences where their ability to

exercise autonomy in their work was constrained by rigid structures and unsupportive leadership. This lack of professional agency and autonomy left them feeling undervalued and powerless to address ongoing challenges effectively. For example, Sally expressed her frustration about the constant scrutiny of her teaching style. She remarked, “if you’re going to sit there and actively look for something wrong in how someone teaches, you will always find something.” She further explained that teaching encompasses a diversity of approaches, “there are many different ways to educate... and it’s just, it’s never going to match everybody’s expectations all the time.” This highlights the lack of respect towards teachers’ professional approaches and contributed to feelings of disempowerment.

Similarly, Rachel, a former early childhood teacher, discussed the lack of opportunities for professional growth within the field, emphasizing that, “there is nowhere for you to develop there... you just stop learning, and you are stuck into this place that just become like, it’s a dead end.” This sentiment was also shared by Sarah, also a former primary teacher, who noted that teaching careers had limited progression. She stated, “there’s not really anywhere to advance to... it gets to the ceiling very very quickly unless you want to go into admin executive kind of things.”

### **4.3 Theme 3: External factors and parental involvement**

External factors such as the impact of uncontrollable events and parental involvement, were highlighted as significant factors shaping teachers' professional experiences. Teachers are increasingly navigating the demands of an evolving education landscape, where unprecedented influences such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated the challenges of the profession. In addition, shifting parental expectations have further intensified teachers' stress and feelings of accountability. This theme explores the ways in which the pandemic



and increased parental scrutiny have shaped teachers' experiences and influenced their decisions to leave the profession.

#### **4.3.1 Sub-theme: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to the teaching profession, requiring educators to adapt quickly to new methods of teaching while managing personal and professional stress. This sub-theme explores how participants navigated the blurring of work-life boundaries, feelings of isolation, and the challenges of teaching through the pandemic. It also examines the impact on student learning, particularly for younger children, and the sense of disconnection from colleagues and the broader school community.

Five out of six participants spoke about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the difficulties faced in supporting student development and maintaining professional connections during that stressful period. Rachel highlighted the challenges associated with online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for young students in kindergarten. She spoke about the impact on social-emotional development, stating that children missed critical opportunities to “learn how to sit and listen and compromise and be part of a team.”

In addition, Renee, who started her first year of teaching in the same year the COVID-19 pandemic began, reflected on the isolating nature of teaching during this difficult time. She described her experience working from home as “very isolating” and admitted that she “didn’t feel part of a team.” Renee also highlighted the blurring of work-life boundaries during that time. She explained: “I felt like there was no boundaries for work hours from home...the boundaries were blurred.” Her experience illustrates the emotional and professional challenges posed by online teaching, including feelings of isolation and difficulty maintaining work-life balance.

Jane, who taught in a selective high school, described the pressures of delivering lessons through the school's online platform during the pandemic. She noted, "there were high expectations of the work we were putting and how we were delivering lessons online." Jane also reflected on the challenges of addressing learning gaps once students returned to the classroom. She explained:

You could tell that some kids were doing work at home, and some of the kids who had missed a lot of content... it's like trying to figure out how to move forward once you get everyone back and you don't know what to do. (Jane)

Jane characterized this period as "anxious" for both teachers and students, highlighting the uncertainty and stress associated with adapting to post-pandemic teaching.

These findings illustrate the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching practices and teacher well-being.

#### **4.3.2 Sub-theme: Parental expectations and criticism**

Another theme that was constructed based on the participants' experiences was the increased parental expectations and criticism they faced, which added significant pressure to their roles as beginning teachers. All six participants mentioned how the challenges such as difficult relationships with parents, emotional labour, and the impact of parents taking on teaching roles at home exacerbated their teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For instance, Sally, who worked in early childhood education, highlighted the challenges of navigating parental expectations and perceptions about her role as an educator. She explained, "the parents were a huge challenge," noting that many parents failed to recognize the value of her work. Sally reflected on feeling dismissed, stating, "a lot of them just didn't think that what you did was important or that it mattered and that you were just babysitting." She spoke about the emotional demands of her work, emphasizing that teaching was "emotionally

exhausting” and requiring significant effort and skill, especially in early childhood education. Moreover, this sense of being undervalued was also supported by Paul, who faced similar critiques from parents. Paul stated that these critiques undermined the value of his work, as some parents “just didn’t think what you did was important,” further reinforcing feelings of frustration and a lack of professional recognition.

The shifting nature of parental involvement and the challenges of meeting their expectations were further highlighted by Sarah. She expressed her frustration while sharing her experiences about parents who were quick to criticize rather than work alongside teachers to address challenges. She explained:

You want parents to be involved but you want them to believe their kids when they are having a difficult time but also work with the teachers to understand rather than just attacking the teachers. (Sarah)

Sarah further emphasized the unrealistic demands placed on teachers, describing parental expectations as “astronomical.” She questioned, “how are we gonna be their eyes and ears and organisation when we have 25 other students to manage? It is just not reasonable.” This highlights the emotional pressure caused by balancing parental expectations while managing the needs of an entire classroom full of students.

These accounts highlight how parental expectations and criticism were an additional source of stress for the participants during the pandemic.

#### **4.4 Theme 4: Mental health and work-life management**

Another significant theme that was constructed based on the participants’ accounts is the aspect of mental health and the emotional and psychological toll that the teaching profession had on them. This theme explores the significant psychological and emotional challenges

experienced by teachers as they balance the demands of their professional roles with their personal lives.

#### **4.4.1 Sub-theme: Psychological and emotional aspect of teaching**

The psychological and emotional aspect of teaching was a significant concern for participants. All six participants reflected on the impact that the teaching profession had on their mental health and emotional well-being. The participants described feeling increasingly exhausted and disillusioned, with some expressing that teaching no longer felt like a fulfilling or rewarding career. This sub-theme explores the psychological and emotional effects of teaching, examining how the emotional and mental strain contributed to feelings of fatigue, disengagement, and a diminished sense of satisfaction in the profession.

Sally, a former early childhood teacher who entered the profession with passion and optimism, described how the emotional toll of teaching gradually eroded her enthusiasm. She recounted, “I genuinely was passionate about teaching... and then it’s kind of like strips your passion away when you think about all this.” While she reflected on the early enthusiasm of starting out in the profession, she noted that the emotional investment required in teaching eventually fades away when educators' basic needs are not met. She noted that while every job has its challenges, the teaching profession requires constant emotional energy, which can become unsustainable:

If the only reason you are there is the emotional investment, that emotional investment runs out, it dries out. People are not unlimited sources of energy and passion. (Sally)

Sally's experience provides a good example of how the emotional and psychological demands of teaching can lead to burnout, particularly when the rewards of the profession no longer feel sustainable.

In addition, Jane highlighted the how a school culture which prioritizes excellence over the well-being and mental health of its staff can lead to burnout. She emphasized how this lack of support for teachers led to emotional exhaustion. She explained that "the pushing for excellence was burning people out." Jane further elaborated on the difficulties of managing her own mental health while supporting students' needs: "When you are struggling with your mental health, it is challenging to support kids' mental health... there's no time to reflect and be like, oh how am I gonna be a good teacher?" The lack of time to reflect on her practice and care for herself only intensified the psychological impact of her work.

In line with this, Renee described a pivotal moment when a student threatened to kill her son, which was the final push for her to leave the profession. "The big breaking point was when that boy threatened to kill my son," she shared, recounting the emotional distress that this incident had caused. During her emotional turmoil, Renee found herself questioning her ability to continue in the profession. It was during this difficult time that Renee decided to seek support from her psychologist, who reminded her that her well-being should not come at the expense of her work. "Your mental health cannot come at the expense of this." Renee further added that just two days after that incident, she made the decision to resign from teaching. This moment highlighted the profound psychological impact of teaching, illustrating how personal and professional boundaries can be compromised when educators are under extreme amount of stress.

Moreover, Rachel also spoke about the intense emotional labour of teaching. She described how often educators have to take on the role of caregivers without the necessary tools to manage their own emotional well-being. "We became psychologists without the degree," She

also shared that after taking time off due to health issues, she felt anxious about returning to work, particularly because of the constant behavioural challenges that she had to deal with in her classroom. “Dealing with behaviour issues and worrying about how this would affect my health, I knew I had to make a decision,” she said. She further explained that this anxiety ultimately led her to resign because she had to make a decision to protect her mental health.

#### **4.4.2 Sub-theme: Work-life management and family responsibilities**

This sub-theme explores the challenges that the participants faced in balancing the demands of their professional roles with family responsibilities. For three out of six participants, the unsustainability of the teaching profession and personal aspirations such as starting a family led to significant emotional and practical tensions. The following examples highlight how these challenges impacted on teachers' well-being and their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Sally, a former early childhood teacher, commented on the financial and personal difficulties associated with sustaining a teaching career. She explained:

In early education, you are working with a demographic of primarily women and women who love children, so it's unsurprising that many of them went off and had their own children, and it did not make financial sense. (Sally)

She further reflected on the value of teaching, especially in early education. She elaborated, “teaching is so important ... and I feel like we are letting everyone down, so that's why some people stay longer because they think it matters.” Her experience highlights how personal and financial considerations often influence educators' decisions to leave the profession even if they acknowledge the importance and impact of teaching in the lives of young students. Similarly, Jane spoke about how her desire to start a family influenced her decision to leave teaching. She explained:

I was at a point in my life where my partner and I wanted to start a family, and we both thought that teaching would be an ideal job for that, but it didn't work around having kids. (Jane)

She ultimately concluded that the teaching profession was not compatible with her aspirations of becoming a mother. She said, "I could not be a good mom while doing that job." Her experience relates to the pressure that some teachers might feel when trying to find a balance between their professional responsibilities and family priorities.

In line with this, Rachel further highlighted the unsustainability of teaching, particularly for ECTs. She expressed her frustration:

It is impossible to expect a first-year or second-year teacher to run a classroom, guide behaviour, do assessments and all that and still come to work the next day and not feel exhausted. (Rachel)

Rachel emphasized how these demands reduce her capacity as a professional, which lead to her burnout and eventual decision to leave the profession.

In summary, this study sheds light on the multifaceted factors that shape ECTs experiences and their decisions to leave the profession. The themes explored in this chapter demonstrate how the intersection of professional, emotional, and personal factors influenced participants' job satisfaction and career decisions. The findings highlight that ECTs' decisions to leave the profession are deeply intertwined with the external pressures they face, including the impact of the pandemic and increasing parental expectations. In addition, mental health challenges and the difficulty of balancing personal responsibilities further contributed to the pressure on ECTs, making the profession unsustainable on the long term.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the key findings of this study in relation to the research question: What factors shape early career teachers' (ECTs) experiences and career decisions, and how do these factors affect their job satisfaction and decisions to leave the teaching profession? The discussion presents these findings with existing literature, using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework to provide a critical analysis of the factors influencing teacher attrition. The findings are also considered in the context of the Australian educational landscape, highlighting the challenges and implications for further research. The study identified four main themes from the participants' interviews, each of which provided insights on the complex interplay of factors contributing to teacher attrition.

### **5.1 RQ: What factors shape early career teachers' (ECTs) experiences and career decisions, and how do these factors affect their job satisfaction and decisions to leave the teaching profession?**

The four themes which were constructed from the analysis are: professional demands, organisational challenges, external factors and parental involvement and finally mental health and work-life management. The findings of my study align with existing research, supporting the JD-R framework's premise that job demands and resources significantly impact teacher well-being and retention. The challenges identified in this study are consistent with those found in previous literature, both globally and within the Australian context. For example, the impact of excessive workload and inadequate support on teacher burnout is well-documented in the literature (Granziera et al., 2021; Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Perryman & Calvert, 2020).



The findings reveal that ECTs face significant job demands such as excessive workload, behaviour management challenges, and administrative responsibilities. These excessive job demands acted as stressors and contributed to emotional exhaustion, dissatisfaction, and a sense of incompetence, leading many participants to ultimately leave the profession. These findings are aligned with previous studies which emphasized the excessive demands placed on teachers and their relationships between stress, burnout and teacher attrition (Buchanan et al., 2013; Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

The findings of my study provide additional context specific to the Australian educational landscape, highlighting unique challenges faced by Australian ECTs. For instance, the increased workload and emotional pressure experienced by teachers during the pandemic reflect broader global trends but also highlighted the need for more support in terms of mentoring and induction programs, especially for beginning teachers (AITSL, 2018b). One such measure could involve the development of targeted mentoring programs, as recommended by AITSL (2018b), to provide ECTs with sustained professional guidance and emotional support during their initial years. These programs could help mitigate the pressures of excessive workload and emotional pressure while fostering professional growth and resilience.

The JD-R framework offers a valuable lens for understanding these findings since it highlights the imbalance between job demands and job resources as a key contributor to stress and burnout. While the participants in my study described entering the profession with enthusiasm and optimism, the lack of adequate organisational support and the overwhelming demands they encountered quickly depleted their emotional and physical resources. This imbalance highlights the need for interventions that target both systemic and social factors that positively influence teacher well-being and retention rates.

## 5.2 Professional Demands

Participants reported that high workloads, administrative tasks, and the need to manage student behaviour created an unsustainable level of stress. This finding supports earlier research by Amitai and Van Houtte (2022), who identified workload as a primary driver of teacher burnout. Teachers in this study described their initial enthusiasm for teaching being gradually eroded by excessive administrative burdens and insufficient preparation for managing behavioural challenges, echoing Zeichner et al.'s (2024) findings.

Through the JD-R framework, these findings highlight an imbalance between job demands and available resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). While teachers were expected to meet increasingly complex job demands, the lack of sufficient resources, such as adequate mentorship programs, left them feeling vulnerable to burnout. This highlights the importance of improving teacher preparation programs to better equip new teachers with practical skills to manage behavioural issues and to complete their administrative duties (Zeichner et al., 2024)

In addition, this current study highlights how administrative responsibilities often left teachers feeling that they were performing tasks unrelated to their core purpose of teaching, which led to frustration and a reduced sense of job satisfaction. This aligns with the findings of Jomuad et al. (2021), who argued that administrative demands shift teachers' focus away from meaningful teaching practices, which creates a sense of dissatisfaction. For the participants in my study, such administrative demands were not only a source of stress, but it also impacted on their self-efficacy, which made them reconsider their choices to stay in the profession (McLean et al., 2023).

Moreover, the lack of preparation for behaviour management, as mentioned by all the participants, reflects broader concerns raised by Amitai and Van Houtte (2022) about the gap

between theoretical training and the realities of classroom teaching. Participants expressed that they felt unprepared to handle challenging behaviours, especially when they had to deal with students with additional needs, which led to increased stress and professional dissatisfaction. This emphasizes the need for targeted professional development programs focused on behaviour management strategies, particularly for ECTs who are still building their skills to address such challenges (AITSL, 2023; Collie et al., 2018).

The JD-R framework provides a useful lens for analysing these findings. Excessive job demands, including workload and behaviour management depleted teachers' emotional and physical resources which eventually led to burnout. Furthermore, the absence of job resources, such as adequate mentorship and emotional support, meant that teachers did not have the necessary tools to cope with such job demands. This imbalance is particularly significant in the context of ECTs who have been found to be more vulnerable to burnout in the absence of adequate support structures (Kelly et al., 2019; Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

In summary, these findings highlight the need to address challenges across both teacher preparation and at a systemic level. Teacher preparation and induction programs should be adapted to better address the complexities of a changing and modern educational landscape (AITSL, 2023). There should also be an emphasis on comprehensive behaviour management training, including special needs and ongoing mentoring opportunities. Moreover, school and system-level policies must prioritize reducing administrative burdens and fostering professional autonomy to alleviate stressors that contribute to teacher attrition (Mullen et al., 2021). An organised approach which consists of addressing all of these domains is essential for creating a sustainable teaching environment which caters for teachers' well-being and job satisfaction.

### **5.3 Organizational Challenges**

Organisational support emerged as a critical factor which influenced participants' experiences. All six participants expressed a lack of leadership support, toxic workplace cultures, and limited opportunities for professional growth. These findings align with earlier studies by Beltman et al. (2011) and Longmuir et al. (2022), which highlighted the role of organisational support and leadership practices in improving teacher retention.

The JD-R framework could be used to explain these findings as a lack of insufficient job resources. Teachers who lacked access to job resources such as clear guidelines, mentorship, and adequate leadership support were found to be more vulnerable to the negative impacts of job demands, which intensified their feelings of disempowerment, burnout, and professional dissatisfaction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This absence of structured support is consistent with the findings of AITSL (2018b), which emphasized that formal induction programs play a vital role in easing the transition for ECTs. However, recent data from AITSL (2023) indicate a decline in formal induction programs, suggesting that these vital resources are becoming less and less accessible to ECTs. A decline in such support systems may exacerbate the impact of stress and burnout on teachers, which will in turn impact on their decisions to leave the profession (Kelly et al., 2019).

In addition, Perryman and Calvert (2020) found that accountability measures imposed by school leaders often leave teachers feeling micromanaged and lacking autonomy, which can further impact on self-efficacy and motivation. These findings reinforce the sub-theme of diminished autonomy, emphasizing how bureaucratic constraints and rigid structures can erode teachers' sense of agency and professional identity (Li, 2023). This lack of agency is also supported by Everitt (2020), who found that pre-designed curricula and rigid pedagogical structures negatively impacted on teachers' autonomy and professional identity, which led to feelings of dissatisfaction and attrition.

In contrast, McLean et al. (2023) highlighted the role of adaptability as a protective factor against workplace stressors. Highly adaptable teachers were found to maintain emotional resilience and problem-solving capabilities even in unsupportive environments. However, while adaptability may buffer some negative effects of organizational deficiencies, it cannot replace systemic support structures. As Granziera et al. (2016) argued, adaptability can be developed through scenario-based learning in teacher preparation programs, yet the absence of such targeted training leaves many ECTs unprepared to navigate workplace challenges.

#### **5.4 External factors and parental involvement**

This section discusses external factors, particularly the increased expectations and scrutiny from parents, which emerged as a significant factor which influenced the participants' experiences during the pandemic. All six participants highlighted how increased parental expectations, and criticism intensified the pressure and contributed to emotional strain, which exacerbated the already demanding nature of teaching, especially during the pandemic. Several participants recounted that their professional expertise was undervalued, with Sally stating, "a lot of them just didn't think that what you did was important or that it mattered and that you were just babysitting." This perception of being undermined contributed to feelings of inefficacy and demoralisation, supporting Santoro's (2021) findings on the role of demoralisation in teacher attrition.

These findings are also aligned with those of Peditzi et al. (2021) and Dung et al. (2024) who similarly observed that unrealistic parental demands place additional emotional burdens on teachers, increasing their workload and diminishing their sense of professional efficacy. This links back to the sub-theme of external factors, showing how parental expectations and accountability measures increase stress and contribute to burnout. Brown and Morgan (2021) further highlighted how these dynamics were exacerbated during the

COVID-19 pandemic, as parents took on homeschooling responsibilities. While Brown and Morgan's (2021) study primarily focused on parental perspectives, they also noted the increased tensions between teachers and parents, which reinforced the link between external factors and burnout.

While Heffernan et al. (2021), suggested that parents who experienced remote learning were more likely to appreciate teachers' adaptability and resilience. None of the participants in my study reported feeling valued by parents during the pandemic. Instead, they described increased scrutiny and criticism, which contributed to feelings of being undervalued and intensified their emotional strain. While Heffernan et al. (2019) identified a discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of their professional worth and public perceptions of respect for the profession, my findings suggest this gap persisted during the pandemic and may have widened due to increased parental involvement in online learning.

In light of these findings, a JD-R perspective offers valuable insights into addressing the organizational deficiencies that exacerbate these challenges (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Perryman and Calvert (2020) support that reducing accountability pressures and promoting teacher autonomy are essential steps to take to restore professional agency and mitigate the adverse effects of excessive job demands.

### **5.5 Psychological aspect and work-life balance**

The participants' experiences revealed the profound psychological impact that teaching during the pandemic had on ECTs. They reported that burnout and emotional exhaustion were contributing factors to their eventual decision to leave the profession. These findings are in line with Maslach and Leiter's (2016) burnout model, which posits emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished personal accomplishment as core components of burnout.

Participants reported being overwhelmed by the emotional demands of their roles, with Jane's experience providing a poignant example: "When you are struggling with your mental health, it is challenging to support kids' mental health... there's no time to reflect and be like, oh how am I gonna be a good teacher?" Jane's reflection underscores the cyclical nature of emotional strain, where personal struggles are exacerbated by professional demands, leaving little opportunity for self-care or growth. This dynamic reveals a critical gap in organisational support. Rather than addressing these challenges with structured interventions such as mentoring programs or access to mental health resources, participants described feeling left to navigate these pressures independently. The JD-R framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) illustrates how sustained emotional demands, when unaccompanied by adequate job resources, lead to psychological strain and burnout. One surprising finding was the depth of emotional investment described by the participants and their initial passion for teaching, which was gradually eroded. While prior studies have noted emotional labour as a factor in teacher burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), this study highlighted how emotional exhaustion often developed from a mismatch between teachers' intrinsic motivations and the realities of the profession.

In addition to the psychological pressures experienced by participants, challenges related to work-life balance further compounded their difficulties, particularly for female teachers juggling caregiving responsibilities alongside their professional roles. Many perceived teaching as an unsustainable career path after starting a family. These findings are supported by Bacher-Hicks et al. (2023) who examined the challenges of caregiving responsibilities on women in the teaching profession. Renee's account illustrated this struggle: "I went on maternity leave, and I was like, oh, I don't know if I can go back to teaching ... like I didn't think it was a viable aspect for my health and my family." Her experience highlighted how

the inflexibility of teaching roles exacerbates work-life struggles, which can lead to higher attrition among women (Koner et al., 2024).

## **5.6 Limitations**

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences and challenges faced by ECTs, there are several limitations to be acknowledged. Firstly, the relatively small sample size and reliance on self-reported data limit the generalizability of the findings. As Creswell (2012) noted, smaller sample sizes often restrict the ability to extend findings to broader populations. A second limitation relates to time constraints. Given the small timeframe, it was not possible to conduct a more in-depth exploration, resulting in a small sample size and a narrower scope of study. A larger sample size could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences of ECTs and offered greater insights into the broader patterns of teacher burnout and retention. A third limitation is the researcher's newness to the research process may have influenced various aspects of the study, from conducting interviews to analysing and interpreting data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). While necessary precautions were taken to limit this by adhering to interview guidelines and following the steps outlined in Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis framework, this lack of experience may still have impacted the depth of the analysis. These limitations suggest areas for improvement in future research, particularly in expanding sample sizes and refining research methodologies to enhance the robustness of findings. Furthermore, the examination of multiple perspectives such as including teachers who have remained in the profession, could provide a more balanced and comprehensive view of the factors influencing teacher retention (Perryman & Calvert, 2020).



## **5.7 Implications and recommendations**

The findings from this study highlight some key areas for improving teacher retention, particularly for beginning teachers. One important recommendation is enhancing mentorship and induction programs which many participants reported was lacking. Strengthening these systems can provide essential support to ECTs, helping them navigate the challenges of their beginning years in the profession. This aligns with the broader recommendations in the literature, such as those from AITSL (2018b), which emphasize the importance of structured induction in improving teacher retention. The study also points to the importance of targeted professional development, particularly in classroom management and time management skills. Participants in my study reported feeling underprepared for the administrative tasks required of them, leading to stress and burnout. Collie et al. (2016) support that professional development incentives tailored to address these needs could help teachers manage their workloads more effectively and reduce stress. Several participants expressed their frustration with the lack of supportive leadership, highlighting the need for school leaders to foster a positive and supportive work environment. As AITSL (2023) suggests, leadership training that prioritizes empathy and clear communication could improve teacher satisfaction and retention.

## **5.7 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the findings of chapter 4 based on the research question: "What factors shape ECTs' experiences and career decisions, and how do these factors affect their job satisfaction and decisions to leave the teaching profession?" The findings revealed the interplay of organizational, external, and psychological pressures that shaped ECTs' experiences, contributing to stress, burnout, and attrition. Using the JD-R framework, the analysis highlighted how the imbalance between high job demands and insufficient resources, such as inadequate leadership support and declining induction programs, which exacerbated

these challenges. These findings highlight the importance of systemic improvements, including more adequate mentorship, supportive leadership practices, and family-friendly policies, to mitigate these challenges and foster teacher retention. Addressing these gaps is essential for sustaining the teaching profession, improving ECT well-being, and creating more sustainable teaching environments.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A – Interview Schedule

Interview schedule

**Study:** Teacher Attrition and Retention: Views of Australian Early Career Teachers

**Researcher:** Staecy Thomas

### **Introduction sentence:**

Hello, my name is Staecy Thomas. I am currently studying a Master of Cognitive Psychology and Educational Practice at Flinders University and today I will be interviewing you about your teaching experience.

Thank you for participating in this study. I want to remind you that you have the right, without a reason to pause or withdraw from this study at any time during the interview. You may also choose not to answer some questions if you don't want to. Moreover, I would like to make sure you are aware that your interview is being recorded and will anonymously be used later for data analysis purposes. You may turn off your camera if you would feel more comfortable.

We will have around 30 to 45 minutes for the interview so I might give you a heads up if we are running out of time so that you can wrap up your answer. I will also check-in with you midway through the interview to see how you are feeling.

### **Demographic questions:**

Which pseudonym would you like to use?

What is your age range?

Which gender do you identify as?

What is your current occupation?

**Personal background and motivation:**

1. Can you tell me why you chose teaching as a profession?
2. What were your expectations before you started teaching?  
-How are your expectations similar/different now that you have experienced the teaching profession.

**Education and training:**

3. Where did you study?  
-Can you tell me about your academic journey?  
-How would you describe your teaching education program?

**Professional experience:**

4. Can you tell me about your professional journey?
5. How was your experience at the last school you worked at?
6. What were your other responsibilities aside from teaching?
7. Can you tell me about the type of environment that you worked in?
8. How would you describe the leadership style at that school?
9. In what ways did you feel supported at work?  
-What were the challenges that you faced? / how did that affect you?
10. Despite the challenges that you mentioned, can you think of some motivating factors about your last job?

**Reflection and improvement**

11. As a former teacher, what do you think could be done to support and encourage teachers to remain in the profession?

12. What are your future career goals?

**Thank you for your time and for participating in this research!**

## Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet

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### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

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**Title:** Teacher Attrition and Retention: Views of Australian Early Career Teachers

#### **Chief Investigator**

Dr Peter Walker

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

Flinders University

Tel: 0417204365

#### **Co-investigator**

Marie Staacy Jennifer Thomas

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

Flinders University

Tel: 0402583252

My name is Staacy, and I am a Flinders University Masters student. I am undertaking this research as part of my degree. For further information, you are more than welcome to contact my supervisor. His details are listed above.

#### **Description of the study**

This project will investigate the views of exit Australian Early Career Teachers (ECTs) about teacher attrition and retention. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

### **Purpose of the study**

This project aims to explore the views of exit ECTs about the motivations and challenges they faced in school settings, and how these might have impacted on their decisions to leave the profession

### **Benefits of the study**

The sharing of your experiences will help to provide a better understanding about the attrition issue and will help school leaders find solutions to better support ECTs.

### **Participant involvement and potential risks**

If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to:

- attend a one-on-one online interview with a researcher that will be video/audio recorded. The interview will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes.
- respond to questions regarding your views about the motivations and challenges of teaching and about your experience working in schools.
- While the interview has been designed in a sensitive manner to limit any harm caused to participants, the researcher acknowledges that talking about past experiences might be triggering for some people. The researcher will take caution to limit any harm caused to the participants during the research process. However, if you experience feelings of distress as a result of participation in this study, you can contact either Beyond Blue or Lifeline, which are non-profit organisations offering 24/7 mental health support services and crisis support via call or online chat. These services are free and confidential. The phone numbers are listed below:
  - Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636
  - Lifeline – 13 11 14

### **Withdrawal Rights**

You may decline to take part in this research study. You may also choose not to answer some questions. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you may withdraw at any time without providing an explanation. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator to have your data removed from the study or you may just refuse to answer any questions. Any data collected up to the point of your withdrawal will be securely destroyed.

### **Confidentiality and Privacy**

Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided by you. Researchers will take all possible steps to ensure privacy and confidentiality will be adhered to at all times. Participants are allowed to choose a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes.

The research outcomes may be presented at conferences, written up for publication or used for other research purposes as described in this information form. You will not be named, and your individual information will not be identifiable in any research products without your explicit consent.

Due to the small sample size / participant group size anonymity cannot be guaranteed. However, it is unlikely that participants will be identified by other colleagues as the researcher will use a pseudonym and any demographic information will remain confidential.

No data, including identifiable, non-identifiable and de-identified datasets, will be shared or used in future research projects without your explicit consent.

### **Data Storage**

The information collected will be stored securely on a password protected computer and/or Flinders University server throughout the study. Any identifiable data will be de-identified for data storage purposes unless indicated otherwise. All data will be securely transferred to and stored at Flinders University for 12 months after publication of the results. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to university protocols.



**How will I receive feedback?**

On project completion, a short summary of the outcomes will be provided to all participants via email.

**Ethics Committee Approval**

The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC project number - 7488).

**Queries and Concerns**

Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office team either via telephone (08) 8201 2543 or by emailing the Office via [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au).

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which is yours to keep.

## **Appendix C - Facebook call out and poster**

### *Facebook call out and poster*

Hi everyone! 🙌😊

My name is Staegy, and I am currently doing a research project on teacher attrition. More specifically I would like to study the views of exit Australian early career teachers (ECTs) to understand why teachers are leaving the profession. If we can identify the factors which are contributing to teacher attrition, we can provide more targeted support to current teachers and to create a better future for those who would like to join the profession!

#### **Inclusion criteria**

In order to participate in the study, you should be an exit early career teacher (ECT).

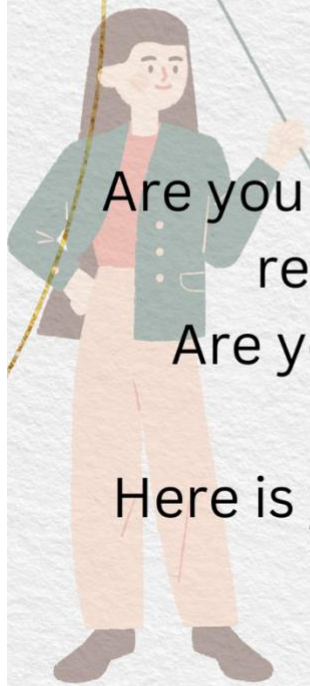
An early career teacher (ECT) is someone who have been in the teaching profession for five years or less than five years. An exit ECT is someone who have left the teaching profession. We are looking for ECTs who have left the profession in the last five years.

📄 If you are interested to take part in my study, please feel free to scan the QR code or click on the link below: [https://qualtrics.flinders.edu.au/jfe/form/SV\\_1FUjlkO1pG6a6Ee](https://qualtrics.flinders.edu.au/jfe/form/SV_1FUjlkO1pG6a6Ee)

Your input would be critical in this conversation!

Thank you 😊

# TEACHER ATTRITION: VIEWS OF AUSTRALIAN EARLY CAREER TEACHERS



Are you an early career teacher who has recently left the profession?

Are you passionate about making a difference?

Here is your chance to make your voice heard!

We are looking for individuals to participate in an individual online interview to share their teaching experiences.

**If you would like to participate, scan the QR code for more information or you could contact the co-investigator, Staecy Thomas at [thom1684@flinders.edu.au](mailto:thom1684@flinders.edu.au)**



This project has been approved by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project number 7488)