Chapter 4
“If I Could Just Teach”

This chapter explores how various pressures, such as the international competitions referred to above, are leading to onerous reporting and accountability, which distract teachers from the core business of teaching, and may be sapping them of the time, energy, creativity, agency and will essential for good teaching. The chapter examines the proliferating complexity of being a learner and teacher in the twenty-first century, and at concomitant cognitive and emotional load for teachers. It also investigates other issues such as student resistance to learning, and their possible links to teacher attrition and burnout. It discusses teachers’ experiences against a framework of demands made on, and support offered to, the teacher. This chapter also introduces some of the above issues, and others affecting teachers, as a means of setting the scene for the chapters that follow in this section.

Disclaimer
n a repudiation or denial
HarperCollins, 1999, p. 445
a statement that denies something, especially responsibility.
Google Online Dictionary

Introduction

I argued in Chap. 2 that teachers are not only costly to produce, but easily lost or damaged. In addition to the dynamics discussed in previous chapters affecting teacher numbers, the retention of teachers has been problematic for some time in Australia (Buchanan et al., 2013), as elsewhere (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Rinke & Mawhinney, 2017; Kim, 2019). Teacher workloads and responsibilities have risen markedly of late. Manuel, Carter and Dutton (2018, p. 5) surveyed 211 English secondary school teachers in NSW, and summated their respondents’ concerns thus:

Administrative and accountability compliance demands associated with monitoring and reporting of student and teacher performance; high-stakes test preparation, associated data gathering, administration and heightened expectations from the school executive,
students, parents and the wider community; the speed of centralised curriculum change and policy reform; and diminished resources and support, including inadequate support for implementing new curriculum.

Respondents of Manuel et al.’s study reported working, on average, 58 h per week. They recounted “intensification of aspects of their workload that were not directly related to teaching and learning, and the impact of this on their capacity for high quality teaching and commitment” (p. 13). Day (2017, pp. 2–3) argues that “there can be little doubt that teachers this century face unprecedented national pressures to comply with policy agendas through increasingly interventionist systems of surveillance of the quality of their work and its measurable impact on pupil progress and attainment”.

Some aspects of the above educational climate change apply to most professions, with, for example, the intrusion of ceaseless email and phone access, and response-immediacy expectations that have become the norm—but as with climate change, a new normalcy does not make for healthy or sustainable being. These issues will be discussed mainly in their capacity to distract teachers from the real work of teaching—the work they were educated—and some would say, born—to do. A stereotypical view of a classroom, and a recollection for some, is that of a teacher being distracted from the work at hand by off-task student behaviour. Now, distractions come from multiple sources. Just as students need to be held accountable for any interruptions to education they cause, any of us disrupting the core business of education might need to spend some time out, reconsidering our behaviour. If education is a right, then supporting it is a responsibility; none has a right to disrupt it. The urgency of the disruption is probably in the eye of the disruptor—but this alleged urgency needs to be open to questioning.

**Pressures on Teachers’ Time and Energy**

A quest for “effectiveness” has dominated political responses to perceived declines in student performance. Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2018) report “the seduction of effectiveness”, arguing that “a generation of policy designers have valorised certainty over complexity; formulaic mantra as opposed to differentiation; and narrow, utilitarian economic values as opposed to social and inclusive mores”. I would add, “control over free rein”. They continue, “effectiveness has a pernicious appeal that eschews professional judgement and constructive feedback and makes claims to be evidence-based without challenging the nature of the evidence itself” (p. 37, emphasis in original).

A question arising from this chapter for those claiming to work in support of education is: (how) am I assisting, or frustrating, the work of educators? Those calling for constant vigilance against the authorities, have at times invoked the Latin proverb: quis custiodet ipsos custiodes? Who guards the guards? I also want to ask, quis docet ipsos magistros? (in my poor Latin). Who teaches (and supports in other
The demands on teachers are high and unrelenting. The 2018 TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey, OECD, 2019) garnered responses from over 260,000 teachers in 47 countries. It investigated “five pillars’ of teachers’ work: requisite knowledge and skills; the profession’s prestige; opportunities for career advancement; collaboration among peers; and professional responsibility and autonomy. Participating teachers reported that almost a quarter (22%) of their time was consumed with classroom management, which displaced teaching. Only 22% of new teachers have an assigned mentor. (“Assigned”, not “chosen” also raises concern.) Respondents indicated that pre-service education didn’t universally prepare teachers adequately; initial teacher education in ICT was reported by only slightly more than half of the respondents (56%), and teaching in a multicultural context by just over one in three (35%).

Attention to Teaching Standards

Teaching Standards are one response to concerns about student underperformance. In their entirety, the Australia’s Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2017) operate at four levels, as outlined below:

- **Graduate level**: to be demonstrated for a student to graduate from their Initial Teacher Education course.
- **Proficient**: a requirement for registration as a teacher, and is to be accomplished within 3 years of graduating. Casual teachers (known by various names in different jurisdictions, such as supply, or relief teachers) have a longer period, 5 years, in which to gather evidence and demonstrate proficient status. Some non-permanent teachers have shared concerns about this, with difficulty in getting their school to support them to attend requisite in-service courses, some of which attract fees (Burke, Aubusson, Schuck, Buchanan, & Prescott, 2015).
- **Highly accomplished**.
- **Lead level**.

Attainment at highly accomplished and lead levels is discretionary, except for those teachers seeking promotion. Fees of slightly over $600 and $700, respectively, apply to applicants for highly accomplished and lead levels in NSW (NESA, 2019a). While the Standards may form helpful guidelines, particularly for neophyte teachers, a focus on teacher performance (Manuel et al., 2018) may distract and detract from focusing on students’ progress (Buchanan, Harb, & Fitzgerald, accepted). Anecdotally, uptake of these higher levels is low.
A discrete standard operates for school principals (AITSL, 2015). It resides within the contexts of a global economy and society, an inclusive Australia, and the uniqueness of each school within its community (p. 7). It operates through three lenses:

- The Leadership Requirements lens encompasses three requirements: vision and values; knowledge and understanding; and personal qualities, social and interpersonal skills.
- The Professional Practices lens embodies five professional practices: leading teaching and learning; developing self and others; leading innovation, improvement and change; leading the management of the school; and engaging and working with the community.
- The Leadership Emphasis lens assumes four focuses: operational, relational, strategic and systemic (p. 12).

This is a noble but exacting amalgam of principles, particularly considering the day-to-day management and leadership of perhaps 100 staff and 1000 students or more, negotiating with parents and the system jurisdiction, engaging (with) the community, budgeting, overseeing toilet repairs, etc.—presuming available funding. The devolution of budgeting to schools has meant that principals, many with little related experience or training, must manage and balance their, possibly substantial, school’s budget. Some principals of smaller schools might also teach part or full time, adding considerably to workload, and perhaps compromising the attention required by their students. Such principals are likely to have considerably smaller staff and student numbers. Nevertheless, they must deal with the same torrent of cross-desk administrivia.

**Student Behaviour**

While it is difficult to quantify such things, most teachers and others would agree that the student behaviour has become more problematic in recent years. Similarly, while comparisons are elusive, it may be that the number and seriousness of student infractions in Australian schools exceeds those in some of the jurisdictions with which our students’ performance has been compared, such as Shanghai. Of course, meek acquiescence is not a desirable student outcome; numbers of Australian students recently took strike action to call for action on climate change. I am heartened by their defiance of authorities, including their dismissal of a comment by Australia’s Resources Minister, that “the best thing you learn about going to a protest is how to join the dole [unemployment benefits] queue” (ABC News, 2018).

Nevertheless, we casually invoke the expression “classroom-ready teacher” (Buchanan & Schuck, 2016); what, though, of the teacher-ready class (room)? A group of students armed with a sense of the importance, purpose, pathways and privilege of education, its cost to others, and concomitant responsibilities on themselves,
Pressures on Teachers’ Time and Energy

and associated benefits? In 2010, Buchanan (pp. 208–209) reported that student discipline may have become “an issue that dare not speak its name, either by practising teachers, systems or researchers”. It is perhaps an issue that few wish to acknowledge. For teachers, it concedes defeat, and for those employed on a day-to-day basis, as casual teachers, it may be an invitation not to be re-employed. Neither are senior teachers or school jurisdictions keen to concede signs of defeat or failure in this regard. In recent years, however, more attention appears to have been brought to the issue. (I’m claiming no credit here.) The figures are nevertheless alarming. In 2018, 45% of principals and deputy/assistant principals reported threats of violence against them, with reports of physical violence increasing from 27% of principals in 2011, to 37% in 2018 (Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, 2019, p. 17). Concerning classroom discipline, teachers may find themselves bearing increasing responsibility, alongside diminishing authority. They may be criticised by parents for disciplining, or for not disciplining. Understandably, this drains teachers (Aldrum, Klusmann, Lüdtke, Göllner, & Trautwein, 2016; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010), with inherent student disrespect and antisocial behaviour (Hastings & Bham, 2003). Even the literature appears to recoil from holding students responsible for their behaviour, with titles like “teacher perceptions of misbehaviour”, and “mediation through the teacher-student relationship”, which is possibly implied as the teacher’s (sole?) responsibility.

Australia has recently engaged in public debate about standards of behaviour in our parliament, and, specifically, allegations of bullying and intimidation levelled, in particular, at women. A former Foreign Minister and Deputy Party Leader, Julie Bishop, claimed, “it is evident that there is an acceptance of a level of behaviour in [the Federal Parliament in] Canberra that would not be tolerated in any other workplace across Australia” (Branley, 2018). Several women, including Ms Bishop, left the party at that time. I don’t wish to diminish the seriousness and extent of the apparent problem in our corridors of Parliament, but I believe that many of us might be shaken to witness the behaviour and attitudes of some students in some classrooms. Armstrong (2018, p. 997) refers to behaviour management in schools as a “wicked problem”; it is among the greatest concerns and preoccupations of my pre-service students. Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison and Belway (2015) observe that in the United States, while suspension rates have plateaued since the turn of the century, they remain high. According to Losen et al. (2015), 3.5 million students in the US were suspended at least once during the 2011–12 school year. They contend that the attainment gap can’t be narrowed until the discipline gap is addressed. They question whether discipline is being administered equitably along gender and racial lines. Skiba and Losen (2016), among others, question the value of suspensions more broadly. It is easy for armchair observers such as myself to criticise schools, systems or students regarding policy and behaviour. Suffice it to say, though, that the behaviour of some students is unacceptable, and potentially threatens not only education, but also the safety and well-being of other scholars. I trust that, at least, this section might prompt further related debate. I will discuss some tentative ways forward in the final section.
**Accountability and Paperwork**

Paperwork, including that for pedagogical preparation, has proliferated for teachers of late. Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson, & Gavin (2018) report a paperwork “tsunami”, with Australian teachers’ working hours among the highest in the OECD. Kanbayashi and Nadezhda (2016) argue that paperwork and busy work have actually declined for teachers in Japan since the 1950s, but that overall workloads have increased, largely due to increased time devoted to extracurricular activities. This increase runs against the trend for most workers in Japan, whose working hours have diminished in the same period.

Illustrating paperwork and accountability, field trips are an important component of a child’s education and exposure to the world, and are mandated by some syllabus documents. But in our state schools, a risk assessment must be undertaken, and a risk management plan developed as part of an approval process for any field trip (NSW Department of Education Policy Library, 2018b). I am advised by a teaching colleague of a nine-page RMP for a swimming carnival. Many parents take their children to the local pool without incident. Some older children even attend unsupervised. On the one hand, it is only reasonable for a teacher, and even more so a large organisation such as the Department of Education, to be highly vigilant to minimise risk of harm to children. And to the extent that these measures may have prevented injury or worse, they are laudable. Potentially, though, this policy is occasioning a retreat from excursions, to the impoverishment of the child. When field trips do occur, their preparation comes at an opportunity cost of either professional preparation for teaching, and/or a teacher’s personal life and energies. The precautions vastly exceed those undertaken by “a reasonable parent” taking their children to, say, a local zoo. It is worth recalling that a teacher acts *in loco parentis*. One might ask what reasonable precautions a responsible parent might be expected to take when taking their child/ren out and about. Naturally, institutionalisation of an outing requires higher levels of risk-prevention—parents rarely escort 25 or more children. The Department’s excursion policy contains 28 sub-sections, under six headings. Arguably, field trips assume greater importance in a time when, it appears, increasing numbers of children inhabit “small worlds” in which they might rarely venture beyond their house, or, increasingly commonly in Australia, their apartment, except for school (Live Science, 2019).

Teachers are expected to develop and maintain at least a working familiarity with myriad policy documents, from, alphabetically, Aboriginal Education to Workplace Learning, in New South Wales (NSW Department of Education Policy Library, 2018a). A brief scan of the NSW DoE Policy Library site unearthed 90 current policy documents. These are all arguably valid, but may present a bewildering array of demands, particularly to the beginning teacher or beginning principal. They have the potential to complement teaching and learning, or to obfuscate it.
Lack of Support

Regrettably, colleagues and the school executive can’t always be relied on for support. Riley, Duncan and Edwards (2009) surveyed 800 Australian teachers about bullying in schools. Colleagues and executive were identified as the alpha bullies, followed by parents, then students. Bullying was categorised as follows: personal confrontation; diminution of professional standing; workload, and working conditions and environment (p. 6). More than 90% of respondents had experienced or witnessed each of the following: withholding of information, imposition of impossible or unreasonable deadlines or targets, attempts at undermining or belittling work, and withholding of praise (pp. 2–3)—presumably from colleagues or superiors in the main. It would seem reasonable that teachers should instinctively recoil from some of these behaviours. Some bullying behaviour was directed at students, and not all was aimed at beginning teachers; some in power are equal-opportunity bullies, it appears. Student bullying of teachers has been reported elsewhere. In South Africa, for instance, Woudstra, van Rensburg, Visser and Jordaan (2018) reported that of their 153 respondents, 62.1% had suffered verbal bullying, more than one in three (34.6%), physical bullying. Smaller proportions (27% and 6.6%, respectively) reported indirect or cyberbullying; Garrett (2018) draws attention to its silence in academic, policy and public discourse. A teaching colleague of mine, who wished to remain anonymous, reported, “unwarranted criticism during staff meetings (e.g. my reports were held up as an example of poor report writing), making derogatory comments about my teaching in front of both students and parents, inconsistent application of professional standards and expectations, extreme micromanaging and undermining initiatives that I led”.

Curriculum

One problem that teachers do not have is insufficient material to teach. Curricular reforms typically load content and material into the curriculum, partly because of fears that other jurisdictions are doing so. This expansion does a pas de deux with expanding knowledge—that in itself is probably inevitable and arguably meritorious, but adds to the teacher’s and the student’s burden. Moreover, as Manuel et al. (2018) observe, the necessity for teachers to familiarise and resource themselves for constantly updated curricula further adds to workload. This will be discussed in more detail in Chap. 5, where some possible alternatives to current curricular structures will be considered.


**Australian Classroom Demographics**

One current characteristic of the teach-force is the flight of men from the profession, particularly in the early years of schooling. McGrath and Van Bergen (2017) tracked the proportion of male teachers in Australian schools over a half-century, from 1965 to 2016. From these figures, they extrapolated a vanishing point for male teachers in another half-century, by 2067. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018a), the proportion of single-parent families remained steady between the last two censuses, in 2011 and 2016, at about 15.8%. This would equate to about four children in an average class of 25. Of Australia’s 900,000 single parents in 2016, more than 80% were women (ABS, 2017). This may exacerbate any potential problems related to the scarcity of men in teaching. Television (advertising, sit-coms and the like) offer few positive male role models. Ditto news programmes. Male-absent families are not the only problem to affect our students’ application to school and learning. What follows is a snapshot of some of the challenges faced by Australian society, including schools and teachers.

Unemployment sits at just over 5%, about one in 20 adults looking for work; this statistic is soon to soar. Underemployment affects 8.4% of eligible workers (ABS, 2019a). The number of divorces granted in Australia increased slightly from 2016 to 2017, in a context of fewer people marrying. The median length of an Australian marriage is 12 years (ABS, 2018b). I am surmising here, but the eldest child/ren of such a marriage might be, on average, about 10 or 11 years old, and, of course, any subsequent children younger again. Fyfe and Cook (2019, p. 22) report that “schools are often the setting for disputes over access to children, with teachers and principals left to enforce court orders”. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018c) reported in 2007 that 45% of the population would experience mental illness in their lifetime. In 2017/18, just over one in every five Australians had a behavioural or mental condition (ABS, 2019b). The increase from the previous year was mainly attributed to a rise in anxiety and depression. Homelessness increased 4.6% in the 5 years to 2016 in Australia (ABS, 2018d). According to the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS, 2018), one in every six Australian children is living in poverty (about four or five in an “average” class). About one woman per week in Australia is murdered at the hands of her current or a previous partner (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2018). Suicide rates increased in Australia during the period from 2008 to 2017, from 10.9 to 12.6 per 100,000 people (ABS, 2018e). The ABS (2018f) reported 1808 drug-induced deaths in 2016. While this represents a reduction in the per-capita rate, it is the highest number on record. And the deaths are only the tip of the ice(etc.)berg.

Teachers, these are the children the village presents to you, to educate. Thank you. And amid all these complications and preoccupations (“is my maths textbook at mum’s place, or dad’s place?”) you succeed in educating them. And you regularly

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1 In the 2 years to 2016, the male proportion of primary teachers was decimated, falling from about 20–18% (The Conversation, 2017).
2 Or at mums’ place or dads’ place?
manage to make the classroom a desirable place to be, perhaps most notably, but also most thanklessly, for those children who might be living uncertainty if not turmoil outside school. None of this is to present our young people in deficit mode. It’s just that they often carry more than their books and other equipment (minus their maths book some days?) to school. And, of course, illness and/or injury beset the adults and/or children in any family, for shorter or longer periods. Accordingly, concerns beyond (and/or at) school might be competing for some of your students’ cognitive bandwidth. And complicating your work. I dip my mortar board to you.

Remember, too, the multicultural and multi-able nature of Australia’s classrooms, raised in the previous chapter. As mentioned there, this is joyously enriching, but does demand more from teachers in helping their students learn, while coping with acquiring English as a subsequent language, and, for some, processing the traumas that led them to become refugees, or dispossessed in other ways, or rising to the challenge of disability.

Inequality of wealth—or inequality of poverty?—is on the increase (ACOSS & UNSW, 2018). There are pragmatic, as well as “touchy-feely” implications here. We sometimes speak of a brain drain. But what of a heart drain, where people in the caring professions—teachers and nurses, including casual teachers—can’t afford to live in the wealthiest areas? A case of the poor disenfranchising the wealthy, through denial of service? Poverty-related concerns and worries—hunger, for instance—will also impinge upon a student’s, and their parent’s or parents’, capacity to prioritise and support school learning.

Suffice it to say that not everyone feels the luck in the “Lucky Country” (Horne, 1964). The above statistics are disturbing to the extent that they may reflect an education system that has not served Australia well or provided a sound basis for its young. But perhaps here I’m falling into the trap of seeing school and teachers as the main or only cause of our downfall, or cargo cult for our salvation. Realistically, teachers have limited capacity to change a family’s or community’s circumstances. In any case, such problems, one or more of which might be affecting a significant proportion of students in any given class (and in some classes more than others), are going to impact significantly on a young person’s capacity to recognise, and to take full advantage of, the school’s wares. Their resultant attitudes and behaviour are likely to affect not only them, but also those around them, and their teachers, diverting them in their quest to understand. I hope I haven’t already scared off any prospective teacher (or prospective parents—keep making babies—but nurture them as best you can!).

There are further insecurities for the young in our schools. Some of these effects might motivate them to work and study harder, or may have an opposite, demotivating, demoralising or alienating effect:

• Our young people may well be facing a climate change crisis, among other environmental degradations, largely of my generation’s making. The crisis is likely to take hold only when I am dead, or old enough to welcome death.
The young may also be facing a housing crisis, a shrinking and deterioration of their habitat, again, largely of my generation’s making—although we intended them no harm as we inflated home prices.

They may also be facing a work-related crisis, with, *inter alia*: the onset of automation, the great human redundancy, and the “gig economy”—such a grand example of “Newspeak”\(^3\)—and such a festive-sounding euphemism—I’m using euphemism euphemistically here. Employers/owners are likely to warm to automatons that will work unquestioningly and unceasingly, won’t divert from task, or trouble themselves with issues industrial or ethical. Fortunately, teachers will be troubling themselves with industrial and ethical issues for some time to come, given the complexity of teaching and learning.

My generation has also flocked to China as a two-dollar shop, engorging its monetary and military might. It may turn out that the price we paid for all our shiny Chinese gewgaws is higher than we originally anticipated, to be borne by future generations.

Covid-19.

Perhaps our young people’s sole remaining comfort is their belief that their music is better than my generation’s. I haven’t the heart to tell them.

Attention by teachers to such issues comes at a cost, and can contribute to teacher burnout and teacher walkout (Molloy, 2019; Schipp, 2017). Of course, some of these worries, such as climate change, are no respecters of educational jurisdictions, and confront children everywhere, negating any national school league table disparities. Indeed, the effects might be more catastrophic in high-performing, low-lying locations like Singapore and Shanghai. And possibly the younger generation has always been more fearful than their elders about the future. I grew up during the Cold War, ("1984 and all that"), and the threat of nuclear annihilation,\(^4\) brought about largely by the previous generation. Then again, that generation fought and died against fascism (for which my generation, in its adolescence, wasn’t unfailingly grateful). Yet there is hope; technology will deliver today’s young people beyond their wildest daydreams (and nightmares—remain vigilant).

**Supporting Teachers’ Work**

In principle, specific support mechanisms are available to beginning teachers. These include the provision of mentors and reduced face-to-face teaching time, but provision thereof appears somewhat sporadic (Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan, Varadaradjan, & Burke, 2018; Hunter Institute of Mental Health, 2019). Moreover, mentor relationships should be supportive, and work in the service of a mentee’s goals, to minimise “judgementoring” (Hobson & Malderez, 2013, p. 89). Schuck, Aubusson,

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\(^3\)Ironically, from an Australian perspective, Newspeak was Orwell’s (1949) language of Oceania.

\(^4\)This threat hasn’t greatly diminished. It’s just that we talk about it less now. Which is probably not a positive development.
Buchanan and Russell (2012) undertook an international study investigating early career teachers’ satisfaction with their work. They theorised a two-dimensional model, support and demand, and found that high demand (characteristic of almost all beginning teachers’ lives) is manageable in contexts of high support. Numerous beginning teachers report finding themselves teaching the more difficult classes in the more difficult schools. When developing the timetable the year before, it might be difficult to assign a problematic class or student to a known staff member. Much easier to assign said student or class to a new teacher who will graduate next year, arriving to replace dear old Syd, who’s retiring. It would be regrettable if a mentality prevails, however, of allocating the most difficult classes to new teachers “because that’s what they did to me when I started”. Would it be unfair to call that out as a form of ritual, systemic hazing? Anecdotally, such treatment isn’t limited to new teachers.

Beginning teachers may be more likely than their more experienced counterparts to secure employment as casual, or supply teachers (Schuck et al., 2016). All of the above-mentioned difficulties amplify for casuals. The most inexperienced teachers are likely to find themselves with the least support, particularly in terms of dealing with student behaviour infractions. This is toxic not just to the teaching experience, but also undermines the learning experience.

Supporting teachers includes letting them do what they do best—teach. I referred briefly in Chap. 1 to popular movies, and the scripting of the actors’ lines, and in Chap. 2, to teaching undertaken by programmed automatons. In some circles, this programming and scripting appears to be coming closer to reality. Direct instruction poses one threat to the quality of education and to the standing of the teaching profession, as I see it. It may be an appropriate, even ideal, approach, if the aim is for the student to parrot what is said by a teacher. Direct instruction has been shown to stifle higher order thinking. Zhang et al. (2016) found that children engaged in collaborative interaction, as opposed to direct instruction, acquired and were better able to transfer skills in decision-making. I accept that rote-learning is at times an appropriate building block for greater things.

Given the limitations—technical and pedagogical—of automating or stage-managing learning and teaching, it is regrettable that so much of what happens in schools, and universities and so much of teachers’ work, is becoming increasingly micro-managed, and only tenuously, if at all, connected to the core business of school, i.e. pedagogy. Experienced teachers have little use for lines and numbers for colouring in; they are capable of adorning their own canvases. Anecdotally at universities, it appears routine for staff to receive feedback on subject outline documents pertaining to the use of colons and similar fundaments, rather than advice on quality pedagogy. Sadly, in my own work I no longer find it remarkable to be asked to replace a colon with two semicolons, or to insert a finger space before a capital letter; forgive me—the exact details escape me. Over the years I have become habituated to this level of feedback. Don’t get me wrong; I love, for example, a well-placed apostrophe, but such placement falls short of contributing to the heart and mind of education. I’m not singling out my employer for criticism here; this is industry-wide,

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5“Programmed automatons” now strikes me as a contradiction in terms.
apparently. Similarly, regarding assessment, I am no longer a novice, and can mark holistically. Multiplying the number of subjective decisions made on an assignment might look more convincing to the uninitiated, but does not remove the subjectivity of the exercise.

**Teacher Retention and Attrition**

As reported in Chap. 3, at the end of 3 years’ teaching, half of the “Teach for…” (Australia, America) candidates had left (The Guardian, 2018b; Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin & Heilig, 2005). There may be several reasons for this: some who enter a Teach for… programme are career-changers, so they might be expected to keep seeking new horizons. They may have been attracted to teaching by push factors rather than pull factors, and they may have harboured unrealistic expectations of teaching. They have been away from schools for longer than those who proceed directly into teacher education from school, and so the changes they experience will be greater. Moreover, such teachers might enter the profession with a certain sense of privilege—by definition the profession, and, in particular, the Teach for… programmes, attempt to attract leaders in their field—candidates who might have become accustomed to receiving accolades both in their former work lives and during their studies. The loss of second-career teachers is lamentable, given their greater experience-based capacity to contribute to school renewal and re-visioning (see Varadharajan & Buchanan, forthcoming). In any case, such a high attrition rate is alarming. It questions the outcome value of a short-term strategy to relieve teacher shortages. More research is needed into various aspects of this new teacher education approach.

Perhaps those most likely to stay in teaching are those who have known nothing else. In terms of push factors, these teachers cannot make informed comparisons with other professions and their working conditions. In terms of pull factors, all other professions will remain unfamiliar, and therefore, perhaps, forbidding. Some of the teachers who remain, then, might be doing so by default? The Teach for… attrition statistics are particularly stark if the US National Center for Educational Studies (2015) statistics of 17.3% attrition for teachers generally is taken into account. While Teach for… programmes do not require previous workplace experience, some graduates may be in a position to make informed comparisons with at least one other career. Their attrition rate is suggestive of the conditions and satisfaction levels of teaching vis-à-vis their previous profession/s. If it is on this basis that many Teach for… recruits are leaving, then teaching is not scoring well on the league table of professional attractiveness. That so many of these teachers leave so soon is costly and unfortunate, and most likely symptomatic of things unwell with the teaching profession. Or it may reflect the abbreviated pre-service preparation offered.

Moreover, for every teacher who acts on their intention to leave the profession, many more harbour intentions of doing so. A National Education Union (2018) survey of about 8000 teachers in England found that 81% had considered leaving
the profession in the previous 12 months. The main cause was unmanageable work-
load. Teachers’ altruism is “susceptible to being whittled away under the weight of
unreasonable and unmanageable workloads” (Manuel & Hughes, 2006, p. 26).

Teacher attrition is a problem more broadly. One might adopt a laissez-faire market
approach, in terms of matching jobs and people, but a cynic might argue that the
attrition rate keeps alive a teacher preparation industry, at considerable cost to the
public purse—I say this at my own peril. Moreover, for each teacher who leaves
the profession for push factors—overwork, underpay, dearth of support and respect,
etc.—there is a pathway of disillusionment. Even if one wishes to reduce education
to a market approach, surely, business is the art of providing a satisfactory product,
one of which the “seller” can be proud, and in which the “buyer” (the teacher, as
well as the student, parent and community) can be confident. Moreover, success in
business derives from dealing with people—employees, customers, passengers and
clients.

Much of the above can lead to resignation on the part of teachers, in both senses of
the word. Rinke and Mawhinney (2017) report that their 24 ex-teacher participants,
“were pushed and pulled into teaching, pushed and pulled out of teaching, and pushed
and pulled around their passions (p. 360, emphases in original). For some, it’s a rough
ride.

For those entering or about to enter the teaching workforce, take heart—the profes-
sion might not (and need not!) be quite the graveyard depicted above. Weldon (2018)
asserts that commonly cited attrition figures of up to 50% in the first 5 years may lack
a strong evidence-base. Indeed, the dual narratives of high attrition, and a rising mean
or median age of teachers seem to be mutually contradictory, as does the duality of
high attrition and difficulty for some beginning teachers in securing work, particularly
if, as is reasonable to assume, large numbers of “baby boomer” teachers are currently
retiring. The US’s National Center for Educational Studies (2015) conducted a longi-
tudinal study of over 150,000 teachers who graduated in 2007. Five years later, only
17.3%, about one in every six, had left teaching. Nevertheless, this still equates to
more than 26,000 teachers nationally leaving the profession within 5 years. This
could be seen as worrying in terms of the public investment in teacher education.

Weldon (2018) distils six reasons for teacher attrition. These are (p. 71).

- Demand effect—teachers unable to find regular employment.
- Personal effect—leaving for personal or family reasons, such as illness.
- Compatibility effect—leaving due to feeling unsuited to the role.
- Career choice effect—leaving to pursue an alternative career.
- Environment effect—leaving due to lack of support, school and leadership culture,
  workload, etc.
- Performance effect—teachers sacked/de-registered due to poor performance or
  illegal activity.

I will discuss each of these in turn. As Weldon points out, not all of these reasons
for leaving are necessarily negative. Naturally, personal and family reasons can affect
employees in any profession. Data on the proportion of teachers this happens to, vis-a-
vis other professions appears scarce. Petrone (2019) ranks education as the profession
with the fifth highest attrition, after (with attributed reasons) technology (demand and competition), retail (transformation to e-commerce), media and entertainment (gig economy), and professional services. Weldon notes, for example, that more women than men appear to interrupt their careers for child caring. Such women might be replaced by other women of childbearing age. The fact that teaching is a workforce peopled by more women than men has sometimes been interpreted as a symptom of poor conditions, such as low remuneration. This may well be part of the equation. Gender pay gaps in sport, which typically disadvantage women, suggest that this bias might be operating more broadly. Women worldwide earn less than men. The World Economic Forum (2019a) contend that this is because work done by women is ipso facto, less valued. If so, an argument can be mounted that everyone (well, at least all of us who get to go to school—and that proportion, happily, is increasing globally) is now disadvantaged, because we devote less money to attract teachers because women outnumber men in the workforce. When I was at school, I recall that my female teachers were paid less than their male counterparts. Even in those endarkened days, that struck me viscerally as well as intellectually as grossly unjust and indefensible. I suspect that lower pay rates are also a further symptom of an “anyone can teach” mentality. Salary increases might be awarded more on the basis of sympathy for the poor, put-upon teacher, than in recognition of teachers’ intellectual work. Pay rises are typically forthcoming only after several industrial strikes shaming the government—but not shaming them sufficiently to prevent the same ritual dance a few years later when teacher salaries lag behind again. The WEF (2019b) also predicts that it will take, on current trends, about 202 years to neutralise the gender pay gap. I wonder if, together, we could hurry that date along a bit? I’ll be old by then. As an aside, it’s curious that in some football codes in Australia, we impose a ceiling cap—you’re not allowed to pay the members of a team more than a certain amount in total. And this cap appears to be routinely breached. Footballers. Imagine living in a society where we had to be hosed down in our enthusiasm to pay teachers more. And—delicious irony—all because we wanted (them) to perform better in league tables!

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6The WEF site contains some interesting statistics and compelling arguments that might make for engaged discussion in classes of boys, girls or mixed. “Bias impoverishes all of us, even though it disproportionately disadvantages its targets. Discuss.”

7My male teachers may have caned us with more vim. Beyond that, I can discern no difference in gender performance. Caning is a competency increasingly less required of teachers nowadays. My education might be characterised by a carrot-and-stick approach. Although I cannot ever recall being offered carrots by my teachers.

8Don’t get me wrong. I like sport. But I sometimes think the excitement is disproportionate to the importance. I listen to, say, cricket commentators getting so excited when someone hits the ball. Hard. And it goes a long way. That sequence of events no longer holds the element of surprise over me. I sometimes wonder how excited the commentators would become if something really important happened on the pitch. Like an outbreak of measles.
The profession may be well rid of poorly performing teachers, depending on the adequacy of the judgements that have been made on their inadequate performance (Weldon’s performance effect, above, and, possibly self-judged compatibility). Leaving to pursue another career is likely to be an amalgam of the new career’s attractiveness relative to that of teaching. Inability to find steady employment (demand effect) may be a factor of some of the other decisions to leave teaching. Some issues may be the fault of neither the teacher nor the profession. For example, it may be that the prospective teacher is unwilling, or indisposed, to travel far from home, or cannot afford to live in an area where there are teaching vacancies. Inability to secure a teaching job may also be a casualty of poor planning or irresponsibility on the part of governments or teacher education providers, preparing more teachers than are needed to offset resignation and retirement. A prospective teacher who is unwilling to travel might be fairly criticised for having undertaken teacher education in the first place. But, of course, circumstances can change between deciding to become a teacher and graduation. New carer responsibilities might commence, for example.

This leaves Weldon’s (2018) remaining two motives: environment effect and compatibility effects. Compatibility effect may find its origins, in part, in uninformed decisions made on the part of the prospective teacher (exacerbated by the “anyone can teach” notion?). To the extent that this is so, then it is not just the profession that suffers from such misconceptions, but also at least some prospective teachers. The environment effect is more squarely placed at the foot of the profession, some of its more senior members, its systems, jurisdictions and the government. An environment for good teaching is an environment for good learning.

It is unlikely that most teachers leave for one of Weldon’s reasons alone. It is possible, for example, that the nature of the work itself (as in any line of work) may have effects on matters such as health and relationships. The extent to which this impacts the teaching, as opposed to other, workforces, merits investigation.9

In most of the above cases, however, the decision to leave teaching is unlikely to be taken lightly, given a multi-year investment, associated tuition fees and forgone wages, in learning to become a teacher. This, apart from any emotional investment, in teaching, self, learning and learners.

Teacher stress has been shown, unsurprisingly, to correlate with burnout and attrition (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Brewer (2018) defines burnout as “the development of negative emotions, cynical thoughts, and physical and mental exhaustion as a response to stressors associated with one’s career”. Blackman (2017) refers to the taboo of discussing teachers’ mental health. Skaalvik and Skaalvik sought responses from over 760 schoolteachers to identify the most significant stressors in their work. The respondents noted four main contributors: classroom management/discipline; demotivated students; value dissonance (misalignment with school values) and time.

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9In deference to footballers, I recognise that they, too, have short career lives. And as we’re belatedly discovering, their work (our entertainment) also has debilitating effects on their health in the long-term. Teaching is not alone in scarring its employees. This is common to other professions, such as police and the armed forces—but are these curious comparisons to make with teaching?
pressure. By far the greatest was time pressure. No doubt the factors operate cumulatively; demotivated students may be seen as a cause of discipline problems. In the light of the other three stressors, a feeling of not belonging to the school and its values is likely to be particularly alienating. Some of this dissonance with school values might also be part of the cause of student disengagement.

Mérida-López and Extremera (2017) found a negative correlation between emotional intelligence and teacher burnout. Clearly, the attributes that teachers bring to their work are pivotal. Emotional intelligence and resilience can only last so long if not refuelled. What happens when circumstances overwhelm a teacher? Moreover, resilience might be used to encourage acquiescence. We say that the teacher is key. But perhaps it’s the student who’s central to some of these dynamics? Shen et al. (2015) analysed surveys from over 1000 physical education students and their teachers. They found a negative correlation between teacher exhaustion and students’ perceptions of teacher autonomy support. In other words, the more that students perceived support from their teachers, the less exhausted teachers became—perhaps because of improved student behaviour? I’m not placing the locus of responsibility primarily on students to lift their teachers’ morale, just observing that they have the agency to do so, and that they might reap the benefits.

**A Note of Hope**

If time pressure is the foremost problem, then remedies should not be elusive. A behaviour management and modification plan for this time-pressure troublemaker might include smaller classes, lower face-to-face teaching demands and/or a devolution of some duties (some paperwork? Playground supervision?) to other, additional staff. This may be costly, but current circumstances are also costly for many teachers, and therefore for the profession in terms of teacher burnout and replacement, and painful falls from league table ladders. Starting salaries for teachers in Australia are competitive according to Weldon (2015) but become less so as teachers proceed in the profession unless they seek promotion, which typically trajeccts them beyond the classroom and face-to-face teaching. It hardly needs to be said that salary increases will present the profession to the public in a more prestigious light. If, as the literature and common sense suggest, teachers are the foremost factor in teaching, and given what we demand of them, higher recompense would not be unreasonable, and would be a token of the village’s estimation of learning.

Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan and Russell (2012) used a mixture of support and demand as one means of measuring the life-work of a teacher. An adaptation of this model might entail support, challenge and autonomy/agency. Whether part of, or separate from, support, this is likely to fuel a teacher’s desire to continue—knowing that they can make a difference for good—and are trusted so to do. This will be reprised in the final chapters.

One effective if not essential way to support students, and get the most out of the education system, is to support its teachers. Every other player can be a part of this:
other teachers, students, the school executive, parents, the community, the media, education jurisdictions and governments (Day, 2017). Ways in which this might be done will be touched on in the remaining chapters, and discussed more fully in the final section of the book.

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