Australian Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 37 | Issue 4 Article 1

2012

Why Western Australian Secondary Teachers Resign

Tony Fetherston
Edith Cowan University, t.fetherston@ecu.edu.au

Geoff Lummis
Edith Cowan University, g.lummis@ecu.edu.au

Recommended Citation
Fetherston, T., & Lummis, G. (2012). Why Western Australian Secondary Teachers Resign. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 37*(4).
http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n4.1

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol37/iss4/1

Secondary Teacher Resignation in Western Australian: An Anthology of Existences

Tony Fetherston
Geoffrey Lummis
Edith Cowan University

Abstract: In recent years, Western Australian school have faced a significant increase in the number of secondary school teacher resignations. By analysing qualitative data gathered from interviews of 11 recently resigned secondary teachers and three senior level administrators, the researchers sought to begin to understand the reasons behind a teacher attrition rate that has increased markedly since 2003. By placing the teachers' experiences within a framework of critical social theory, the paper outlines how collisions with power and the negative discourse encountered by teachers established their subsequent pathway to resignation. In outlining these pathways, we have provided an anthology of their existences.

Introduction

All Australian States and Territories are experiencing shortages of teachers now and are expected to do so into the future. (DEST, 2002) This shortage is a particularly serious problem for the Western Australia, whose economy is characterised by a shortage of, and competition for, skilled labour focussed in one of the world's largest mining areas. Shortages of experienced secondary teachers also have implications for the quality of students seeking entrance into local universities and a pathway, in the long term, into the renewal of both sectors.

In September 2009, the Western Australian Technology and Industry Advisory Council (WATIAC), stated that Western Australia, with 10 per cent of the nation's population, accounted for 36 per cent of the nation's total exports (2007-2008). WATIAC notes that:

> The view formed and presented in this report is one of a continuing tight demand-supply balance in the Western Australian labour market. (WATIAC, 2009, p. 4)

Warnings of labour shortages in Western Australia underscore the need to address the factors contributing to teacher resignation because an effective and efficient labour market depends to a large degree on the ability of the public and private school system to graduate students who undertake further education or training at the post-secondary level. In turn, this depends on the availability of a well-trained and remunerated (and contented) teacher workforce.

The State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia claims that over 80 per cent of the vacancies in Western Australian public schools, at the beginning of the 2007 and 2008 school years, were for secondary school teachers, with the largest number of vacancies occurring in the Science, English, Mathematics, and Design and Technology learning areas (SSTUWA, 2010).

A major factor dramatically affecting the supply of teachers is the resignation rate. This tripled between, 2003 and 2007. This statistic motivated the researchers to seek to shed light on the reasons why Western Australian secondary teachers resign at a time when the booming resource-based economy requires not only skilled industry professionals but also experienced, competent and committed secondary teachers. (SSTUWA, 2010)

Background

Back in 2002 the Commonwealth of Australia's Department of Education, Science and Training publically expressed a concern over the number of Australian teachers leaving the profession, declaring that:

> The true extent of teacher attrition in Australia, and the factors driving teachers' decision to resign, are areas deserving further investigation (DEST, 2002, 19 cited in Manuel 2003, 1).

We sought to understand the reality behind the rhetoric. Insights provided by the families and friends of teachers suggested that it would be worthwhile to pursue this aim. As an anxious partner of a secondary teacher explained:

> *I don't like it very much when my wife arrives home from school…and tells me that when she asked a…student for his homework he told her: 'Go f*** yourself!' And then at 11pm that night when I asked her why she was still typing like crazy, she told me that the student was in detention and she had to prepare extra material for him to work on while he was in detention.*
> *Bullying at school can demoralise, demotivate and devastate. Proper systems, facilities and management are necessary to save careers. Can you think of another job where you face the risk of being bitten, spat on, verbally abused, sworn at, threatened, physically attacked with furniture or have a knife pulled on you while you try to go about your normal work?*
> *[Some] incidents…have been reported in newspapers. Dozens of other similar incidents are 'hushed up' or 'kept in house'.*
> *But in many cases it's the day-after-day verbal abuse and disrespect that finally wears a teacher down and sends them into early retirement – or another career.* (Cited in SSTUWA, 2010, 1-6)

A number of hypotheses have been proposed in relation to the causes behind teacher attrition. Buckley, Schneider and Shang (2004) suggested that there were teacher factors, school factors and community factors**.** Teacher factors included: wages, idealism and teacher preparation courses; school factors included working conditions, organisational factors, the lack of resources and accountability; community factors government policy, budgeting policy, and public stereotypes of teachers' hours of work. Some of the above are explored in this study. What really stands out for us as researchers is the personal cost and suffering experienced by the teachers in this study that were abused by either by students, parents, senior colleagues and/or the 'system'.

Both the public and private education systems are facing labour shortages, but our research was conducted mostly with teachers who had resigned from the former. We know that resignations increased from 286 in 2003 to 908 in 2007 and the number of teacher resignations due to other work has increased from 58 teachers in 2003 to 210 teachers at the end of 2007.

Within the Government sector alone, it is expected that 30 per cent of the teaching workforce will retire in the next five years.

> …The number of resignations due to retirements in the public education system has increased significantly from 162 in 2003 to 300 in 2006. …It should be noted that there are over 3,000 teachers who are of retirement age (55 and over) and in excess of 1,000 teachers who are over 59 years of age currently employed by DET. (DET, 2007, 6)

The resignations due to factors other than retirement or taking up work are of most interest to the researchers, with almost a quarter of teachers quitting within their first three years of entering the public school workforce. (SSTUWA 2010)

Data Gathering and Analysis

In late 2009, we placed advertisements in all of Perth's community newspapers inviting recently resigned secondary teachers to participate in our project. Interested teachers either emailed or telephoned the researchers to book an interview. From 2009-2010, eleven recently resigned teachers were interviewed.

Teachers represented both the public (eight) and private (three) sectors and their teaching experience ranged from two to 28 years (mean 16 years). This indicated that for most teachers involved in the study the decision to resign was not taken lightly, and that because of their time in the profession that they had been attracted to, they enjoyed teaching at least until recently. We also interviewed a retired director (public sector), a metropolitan secondary principal (public sector), as well as a recently retired principal with many years of country service (public sector).

Interviews were semi-structured, using an open framework, which allowed for focused, conversational, two-way communication with the teachers. The majority of questions were created during the interview, allowing both the interviewer and the person being interviewed the flexibility to probe for details. We discussed issues and tested developing hypotheses over 30-60 minutes.

Many teachers used the interview opportunity to vent their anger and frustration. We found the interview process extremely confronting and spent a great deal of time after each interview in a debriefing session to process the intensity of emotion shared by the teachers. We were extremely careful not to turn the interviews into a counselling session. Much of the rich material covered cases that are easily identifiable by other teachers and principals. Therefore, we have avoided the inclusion of specific material that could assist in identification of the interviewees.

The overwhelming impression gained from these interviews was that the teachers interviewed had been involved in constant pedagogical and educational change over the previous ten years (with one exception) and had adapted well, but had resigned because of a range of factors that had combined to build up until they decided to leave the profession.

Interviews were analysed through the use of *Artichoke* (Fetherston, 2009), a computer program designed for handling this kind of qualitative data. Each 30-second segment of the interviews was open coded. This process of open coding the participants' beliefs, as well as the patterns among their statements (Freebody, 2003) by establishing the frequency of the topics reflected in their beliefs, proceeded in a process similar to inductive analysis. Strauss and Corbin's suggestions (1998) about open coding guided the process used to code the data gathered in this study.

The participants' belief comments were identified from interviews, journals and questionnaire data. These statements typically began with phrases such as 'I believe….' To ensure reliability in qualitative research, examination of trustworthiness is crucial. Patton (2002) states that validity and reliability are two factors that any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analysing results or judging the quality of the study. We need to be able to convince our readers that our research findings were 'worth paying attention to' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 290).

We would have welcomed more teacher responses, but believed that the eleven respondents, self selected from the advertisements, offered a random sample. The amount of information collected was rich and confronting. These offered a valuable insight into the factors associated with secondary teacher resignation. We triangulated data by asking different questions and by seeking different sources. Besides teachers, we interviewed two experienced secondary principals and a former director with extensive public sector experience.

Our findings can be verified easily because we used software that directly linked themes we established directly to the primary source: the interview. *Artichoke* is especially valuable in this regard, as themes are always directly linked to particular audio segments that support a theme, and are easily accessed on a computer. We also conducted member checking of the main themes and carried out extensive peer debriefing, where we continually tested out working hypotheses. To assist transferability, we report data to allow judgements about transferability to be made by readers.

The main themes we established are now reported below. To support the themes, anecdotes are used, and while not necessarily typical, they are used to highlight the impact of developed themes. Similarly, quotations are used to also assist readers in developing an understanding of the themes and quotes used are those that are typical of what respondents said.

Bullying

Six teachers described bullying of some kind as a significant factor in their resignations. Systemic bullying was very evident:

> *They would crush you! [And] bullying is the dominant culture - you shut up and do what you are told and don't ask too many questions.* (Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 2's views of this culture suggested a possible result of this kind of pressure:

> *Most teachers are pursuing promotion in order to reduce classroom time and to get away from classroom behaviour problems.*

Respondents identified at lease three distinct types of bullying. In student-student bullying:

> *I saw other students bullying other students.*
> (Interviewee 1)

The immediate effect of student-student bullying (and other types – below) is on the social environment of the school and a consequent effect on morale of staff and students. One teacher, was bullied by her head of department:

> *I never experienced anything like this in my life - never had anxiety, never had depression*. (Interviewee 6)

This person who had worked in a number of schools in a 20-year career, suffered a depressive episode, the result she believed of bullying. She was physically bullied over a two-

year period. After the first incident she confronted the man, but she did not report it. A similar incident occurred again and this time she reported it. After an investigation by the private school involved that lasted for a school term, and in which many teachers and students were involved except the complainant. She was suspended (not an uncommon occurrence for whistle blowers) and the situation ended in the courts.

This is an example of poor administration in action, an administration that seemed more concerned with public perceptions than with human rights, and now clinically depressed, the competent, experienced teacher finally resigned.

Administration-Teacher and System-Teacher Bullying

School administrations were seen to be supportive of (or at least complicit) in all instances of bullying described by interviewees:

> *It is made clear to you it is their way, or out the gate!* (Interviewee 2)

When this teacher sought to seek support from the administration because of an untenable classroom behaviour issue (a clearly disturbed student consistently disrupted the class and was often abusive), he was attacked by the school administration. This seemed to the teacher to be because:

> *He had the gall to call the administration into question*. (Interviewee 2)

A common theme amongst all interviewees was that if you call the:

> *Administration into question in any official way then you are going to face the wrath.* (Interviewee 2)

Often, these encounters resulted in a feeling that the only option was to resign.

Interviewee 2 was a competent, mature teacher, who had previously been successful in a career outside teaching and had decided that teaching was his calling. This interviewee believed that bullying was the dominant culture in the schools he worked in (administration-teachers, student-teacher, teacher-teacher, parents-teacher). He knew of teachers who had been assaulted by parents within the school. In these cases the school leadership went to considerable lengths to keep the problem away from district office, to not to inform the Department and to minimise the public relations damage. Another teachers stated:

> *It will reflect badly on the school, which is code for it will reflect badly on my leadership as a deputy. …Bullying - most definitely - leadership did not stand up for the staff and so they were compliant in the bullying. (Interviewee 3)*

One relieving deputy in a low-achieving, difficult school was the exception. She supported her staff and took on the issues, but unfortunately was not kept on at the school. We can only speculate that a possible reason may have been that she was not playing the public relations game.

In contrast to her other employment experiences, a teacher noted: *I worked 15 years in the private sector and was never bullied. The Education Department bullies people, as do the principals*. (Interviewee 6)

This bullying atmosphere perceived by the interviewees was almost always compounded by:

> *Disgraceful management skills...* (Interviewee 6)

> *The system also is capable of bullying you. I spilt my guts to the staffing people and they said you have to go to where we tell you to go or else you will be retired on medical grounds. I have that in an email.* (Interviewee 7)

This method of dealing with valuable staff is insensitive and lacks any pretence of negotiation.

Student-Teacher Bullying

Students swearing at teachers was a common occurrence according to these teachers and was regarded by us as a form of bullying:

> *I would be called into class with the red card - come quick emergency - there would be swearing, things thrown across the room, verbal assaults, threats of physical assault.* (Interviewee 3)

This was a common occurrence according to Interviewee 3, who was a union representative, and so she began to tally these incidents and recorded three to four instances of verbal bullying or threats per day over a long period. She witnessed one physical assault in her year at the school and was *'chested'* herself once in that time by a boy. Despite reporting this to school administration nothing happened. These constant incidents wore her down and eventually she resigned and is now happily employed in private industry.

Outcomes-Based Education (OBE)

All the teachers we interviewed were involved in the State's transition to an OBE. The introduction of a system that sought to measure students' achievement in terms of what they were able to do against a series of prescribed 'outcomes' was an initiative of the Western Australian government when the present Premier Colin Barnett, was Minister for Education.

In 2000, the Curriculum Council of Western Australia released details of how OBE was to be implemented and the period over which this was to occur. Secondary teachers in particular had to confront a decade of unprecedented change, increased workload and a great deal of public debate regarding both OBE and another initiative, the Western Australian Certificate of Education. The polemic website PLATO, emerged as an on-line forum that was highly critical of these initiatives and their impact upon teachers.

Many of those we interviewed reflected on the extremely public debate over the alleged shortcomings of OBE. For seven of them, being part of change was a significant factor in their resignation. Interviewee 1 felt that:

> *They were not really listening to teachers [and it was]* was *causing more inconsistency and was an assessment driven system [and it was] not improving learning*.

Interviewee 3 thought that:

> *[Although] she had little problem with the courses due to her long involvement many colleagues did.*

Interviewee 5 stated that:

> *It has been an absolute disaster in its implementation and I am so glad I am not a full-time teacher.*

There were concerns amongst all these teachers about the standard and rigour of students' work:

> *Lower ability kids, there was no compulsion to pass any test or exams, no bars or anything to jump over*. (Interviewee 2)
> *It allowed standards and expectations to drop [and this had an affect] of less discipline and rigour in students work.* (Interviewee 6)
> *Not work to their potential for higher ability students.* (Interviewee 6)
> *[Nobody] is being pushed anymore!* (Interviewee 7)
> *My main concern is the lack of challenge the kids are getting.* (Interviewee 5)

There were concerns with implementation and the reasons for it:

> *OBE was all about doing what they want when they want. When we went outcomes I wonder how many teachers left. Not because of outcomes but it would have been a big part of their decision making process a tipping point.* (Interviewee 8)
> *There was change for change's sake - we couldn't see the improvement in learning.* (Interviewee 1)
> *There was little support and guidance in its implementation.* (Interviewee 9)

The time required for assessment was also a concern:

> *The bulls*** of this OBE is driving me to distraction especially the time consuming nature of the assessment - it takes too much of my teaching time.* (Interviewee 8)

The overall effect of OBE on these teachers who resigned was to leave them frustrated, feeling less good about themselves as a teacher and worried about the standards of learning, leading to low morale and eventually hastening their decisions to resign.

> *Everyone is disheartened with this level system.* (Interviewee 11)

Behaviour Management

Interviewee 2, underscored the serious issue of behaviour management:

> *Very often you can find yourself in positions where you are dammed if you do or damned if you don't with students. At the same time they can be virtually unmanageable. I've had classes that have 30 to 35 psychopaths. I'm opposed to streaming on the basis of behaviour.*

For Interviewee 2, his class was a significant factor in him resigning. It is sad that an experienced teacher should call a class of students 'psychopaths' but it is a term that should alert those outside the profession to the difficulties facing some teachers in front of classes of adolescents.

Teacher stress is increased enormously when placing students with confronting behaviours together to create a class. The rationale for streaming this way is that the other non-streamed students can have more learning time without constant interruption from difficult and unmotivated students. However a moment's reflection will help us recognise that these classes are '*virtually unmanageable'* (Interviewee 3), and we then understand the frustration inherent in the use of the term "psychopaths".

For Interviewee 3 his school seemed to be dysfunctional, noting:

> *Staff leaving this school followed a pattern of teachers arriving at the school and staying only a few weeks, encountering the behaviour management problems and then leaving*. (Interviewee 3)

Although we did not interview any teachers in this short-stay category, there appears to be anecdotal evidence of some numbers of teachers resigning after a very short time in the classroom.

Behaviour management consumes enormous personal and systemic resources:

> *It would be nothing to go and help other teachers - there would be swearing, things thrown across the room, threats... and this was on a daily basis.* (Interviewee 4)
> *Larry Lawyers abound and students know exactly their rights and teachers feel quite disempowered in regard to discipline. By giving them their rights they expose good kids to this kind of behaviour.* (Interviewee 7)
> *They are a minority but they are there and they are mixed with very gentle students.* (Interviewee 4)
> *[Some] teachers end up crying because the students that they are trying to help show them such much disrespect - they are a minority - but it's that poor it's destroying the teachers. Because students have a right to be there they are destroying the learning of the other students.* (Interviewee 7)
> *Parents send their students to private schools because they don't want their child to be around the 5 to 10 % of yobbos in school that the system won't deal with.* (Interviewee 11)

Interviewees were asked whether all teachers experienced the same difficulties.

> *All teachers were experiencing this. Some teachers controlled things better and I thought I might get to that stage.* (Interviewee 11)

However, Interviewee 11 resigned before getting to that stage.

Why Do a Minority Of Students Behave The Way They Do and Why Do Schools Seem To Respond So Ineffectively?

The answer to this question is complex but according to the teachers we interviewed a satisfactory answer would go a long way towards keeping teachers from resigning. Several interviewees alluded to what they thought might be happening. It was:

- a reflection of society as a whole;
- a breakdown in control: as well as
- a decline in respect for parents in the home.

The answer as to why students (and teachers) behave the way they do probably lies in a curriculum that is unsuited to the needs of the 5-10 per cent of students who are legally required to participate in a non-motivating learning situation. This sentiment was expressed by the two principals interviewed giving some validation to the view.

Leadership

School leadership is a demanding vocation for which many administrators are poorly trained.

Teachers follow a promotional path that takes them from the classroom, for which they have received the bulk of their training, into a complex management position for which they have usually received little preparation. It is understandable, therefore that school administrators may not be adept at building shared visions, being transparent, protecting staff, listening actively, communicating often, celebrating, enabling and the many other facets of managerial behaviour that constitute effective leadership these days.

These abilities are required in all good leaders and in schools we must add further abilities such as financial management, timetabling and human resources management. Traditional ways of working seem to be embedded in the administration of many schools: they survive changes in personnel and may be difficult to reform. For one teacher:

> *[Coming from] private enterprise the level of leadership was non-existent. I came across deputies that were sincere but hamstrung by the system. At the same time I came across deputies and principals that would cut you adrift without a moment's thought. At university it is promoted as a collegial system but out there it's every man for himself.* (Interviewee 2)

This lack of leader/administration support was a significant factor for seven of the 11 interviewees:

> *If I had leadership support I would have stayed despite the $7,000 difference in salary.* (Interviewee 3)

The results of poor administration are often played out in increased workloads for teachers:

> *The job they expected you to do and the time allocation for it - was ridiculous!* (Interviewee 10)

In this particular instance, perhaps it was inexperience on the principal's part and a lack of understanding of the local context as:

> *We had six acting Principals in two years.* (Interviewee 3)

The question that we may need to ask at a later time is 'Why do principals resign?'

The perceived lack of support from administrators meant that:

> *We were left to support each other - we were left to flounder. No support from DET or the principal.* (Interviewee 3)

Administrative staff were said to often choose to protect the reputation of the school rather than protect the teachers:

> *They didn't want to do anything because it reflected badly. The amount of suspensions was kept to a minimum. I felt totally let down by the leaders in the school.*
> (Interviewee 7)
> *My Head of Department physically assaulted me and when I confronted him he just showed me his lawyer's card. What teacher carries around a lawyer's card? My Principal, I won't say he was weak, but it was just easier to get rid of me rather than a Head of Department. I miss the kids so much. The school played hardball and just bullied me to get rid of me, as I was less likely to make a fuss.*
> (Interviewee 6)

The lack of training for administrators meant they reverted to familiar ways of working in their dealings with teachers:

> *Managing staff is different to managing students but they treat staff like students.* (Interviewee 9)
> *They are under qualified in handling HR issues.* (Interviewee 6)

Interviewee 6 resigned and is now running a sophisticated HR operation in private enterprise.

Seven of the eleven teachers who resigned found their school administrations unsupportive:

> *The bottom line is they will demand that you accept that this [their approach] comes with the territory and if you don't like it – tough.* (Interviewee 7)

Interviewee 8 was nostalgic for administration staff: '*People you could respect'*. He found it sad that he could no longer look at the top ranks of the Education Department and say:

> *Gee they are fine people, great people, great professionals, fine intellects, I wish I could be like that.* (Interviewee 8)

Media Perceptions

Three of the interviewees found that portrayals of teachers in the media, particularly in the State's metropolitan daily, as a factor in their decision to resign. Most of this 'bad' publicity occurred during the implementation of OBE, which the West Australian newspaper opposed vigorously. As disclosed:

> *The lack of support at a Curriculum Council level [was obvious], and publicity in the paper about that [was a factor]. We all felt shell shocked at the bad publicity from the West Australian Newspaper. They were anti teachers and anti outcomes education*. (Interviewee 1)
> *We didn't get any support from the Minister [in the media]. He was quite condescending and quite critical.* (Interviewee 3)

Resignation pathway

We sought out experienced school administrators to help us to develop our emerging ideas about resignation.

Administrator Interviewee 2 offered us a beginning in understanding of the pathway that leads to teacher resignation. The first step, we thought, is the new demands that are made on teachers, demands that require teachers to change long-established practices. An example is the introduction of OBE. These new demands occur in the context of teachers already being asked to do too many things. Fatigue builds up in the individuals concerned and is exacerbated if they have inadequate skills to cope with the new demands. This is further compounded if no assistance is given to help teachers develop the appropriate skills.

The lack of formal administrative skills among school leaders inhibits organisational sustainability as well as hindering transparency. Fatigue generated by unaudited human resource expectations eventually creates serious wellbeing issues among teachers. Workload pressures in the form of demands for improved outcomes to support the policy initiatives increase. Personal stress levels build up to higher and higher levels. While many teachers may appear to be coping some teachers just reach a point where they no longer can deal with the pressure, and therefore the quality of their working experience spirals downwards.

Administrator Interviewee 1 identified four key issues in this resignation chain:

- teachers only have finite time to respond to new initiatives;

- there are low levels of skill existing;
- the stresses are amplified because of an increasing demand; and
- the level of complexity required creates stress because of the rate of change.

Although most of the teachers interviewed had little regard for the Western Australian Education Department's administrators, this view was not reciprocated according to Interviewee Administrator 1, who claimed that:

> *Senior staff in the main have a lot of compassion for teachers in crisis…many executive people have experienced the pressures first hand and know what is happening*.

He attempted to put teacher resignation into what he believed was a more balanced context. He described a teaching system that was complex and:

> *…full of different individuals with different thresholds and needs. Most teachers coped somehow with change, most teachers do a fantastic job considering the complexity of their job, and most teachers remain in stable relationships, but some teachers can encounter issues that become extremely stressful. For some, a relatively minor incident is the last straw.* (Interviewee Administrator 1)

Both teachers and senior administrators provide a picture of an organisational iceberg, with only the tip of the problem exposed to the public. According to State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia: 'some 300 assaults on teachers were reported to DET in the first semester of 2009…most staff do not make formal reports…' (SSTUWA, 1)

As we identified during our interviews with teachers, often a tipping point occurs and one final incident becomes a major flash point for a serious crisis, and then the ability to recover is very marginal. It is at this crisis point that the system encounters the personal pain and the serious human cost (as well as loss of social capital, which takes a generation to replace (16 years mean experience plus at least four years' training). This crisis, underscores the strategic implications for the university sector and its role in addressing the State's skills shortage.

How Do We Conceptualise and Explain This Situation?

The foregoing conveys a sense of a system that is complex and subject to many interacting variables but which has parts that are not functioning in the way intended. It would be easy to separate out and blame any of the separate players in the incidents described above (and perhaps this is what sometimes occurs), but from an outsider's point of view it is apparent that students, teachers and administrators are all to some extent victims of the system and all are to some extent damaged.

So how can we unpack this complexity and begin to understand why things are the way they are? Is it possible to generate some kind of framework that allows us to understand what's going on?

Dewey: 'Mis-educative'

A starting point is to accept that in most cases described above, the system is operating in such a way for those involved that it is what Dewey (1938) called 'mis-educative'.

What the participants experienced was mis-educative, because the incidents did not contribute to personal growth (in particular in students) and did not lead participants to a point where they could understand or appreciate their present or later experience. Indeed the teachers we interviewed had also internalised this 'mis-educative life-world' as their expectations failed to match the actuality of the unfolding dysfunctional episodes in schools. There seemed to be a consensus amongst the interviewees that they all felt that they were at a loss to interpret in a meaningful way why things had turned out the way they had.

Dewey (1938) recognised that the 'one permanent frame of reference' in education is that there is 'an organic connection between education and personal experience'. The experiences suffered by teachers, students and administrators have halted or distorted the growth of their further experience in schools 'engendered callousness' and reduced 'the possibilities of having richer experience in the future' in schools.

It appears that students, teachers and administrators may have 'lost the impetus to learn' at school and we believe that this represents a first tentative hypothesis in our attempts to understand this situation. To take our understandings further we also need to comprehend why, in reaction to the many situations described earlier, it was too easy for participants to go back to the familiar responses rather than facing the difficult, but necessary, task of developing empirical and experimental approaches that could lead to educative experiences and sustainable solutions.

However, while Dewey's pragmatic views take us some way into, and through, the situations we have described we need to turn to another philosopher for further insights. We are drawn to the work of Foucault in our explorations because it is clear that power is in operation and flowing through these situations and we need to understand how power operates in this context.

Foucault: 'Anthology of Existences'

In 1979 Michel Foucault was working on a book called *The Life of Infamous Men* (Foucault, Gordon, et al 1980, 76) that he conceptualised as the 'anthology of existences'.

The idea for the book came to him while he was reading an internment register drawn up at the start of the eighteenth century and came across what he termed 'lowly lives reduced to ashes'. What he then tried to create in the book was a sense of the real lives that were played out in just a few sentences in the register. These were lives that had not been endowed with 'any of those grandeurs which have been established and recognised – those of birth, fortune, saintliness, heroism or genius' (1980, 79).

What brought these lives to his attention was a desire that they should not 'belong to those billions of existences which are destined to pass away without a trace' (1980, 79). His interesting idea, which is of some relevance to this study, was that:

> What rescues them from the darkness of night where they, and still perhaps, have been able to remain, is an encounter with power: without this collision, doubtless there would be no longer a single word to record their fleeting passage (1980, 79).

Power had rendered the lives listed on the internment register in some way at least slightly notable. So here we have a first clue, as to an addition to our theoretical framework, which might lend explanatory power to our descriptions above.

What has bought these teachers in our interviews to our attention is that they too have had lives without 'any of those grandeurs' but have had collisions with power. These teachers have described to us the factors leading to that collision and the effects of it. They have also

brought to our attention the lives of their students, lives that also would be indistinguishable from all the other students' lives except they too have had a collision with power and so have become notable.

Teachers in this study had collisions with fellow teachers, students, parents and with administrators, both near and far. It is indisputable at this stage, and a key point, that their lives would not have been the subject of our study without such collisions.

We, as researchers, can only reconstruct events through the trace that these games and relations with power leave. Clearly, most of those we interviewed and the students that endured the collisions did not escape its traps, and for both students and teachers this has resulted in mis-educative experiences.

How can we Understand How These Collisions With Power Resulted in the Effects They Did and Why Some People are Damaged by These Collisions While Others (Mostly Administrators) Escape its Worst Effects?

The answer might well lie in the nature of the confrontation. According to Foucault, if we can avoid giving a semiological analysis of the events that occurred, then we can possibly expose their 'violent, bloody and deadly character' and not reduce our explanation to 'a pacified and Platonic form of language and dialogue' (Foucault, Morris & Patton 1979b, 33).

(It is interesting to note at this point the sanitised language employed by Interviewee Administrator 1 in his interview: it seems an excellent example of a pacified form of language and dialogue).

Teachers and the 'yobbo' students (for example) do indeed experience the emotionally and physically violent, the emotionally bloody and the deadly. Our problem can now be phrased something like 'how are truths produced inside this discourse?' Or even more exactly, 'how is the truth that a teacher must leave produced inside this system?'

One result of taking this approach to our understanding is that we accept that collisions with power produce new knowledge. For example, from our interviews we noted that:

> *The school played hardball and just bullied me to get rid of me, as I was less likely to make a fuss.* (Interviewee 6)

The lack of training for administrators meant they reverted to familiar ways of working in their dealings with teachers:

> *Managing staff is different to managing students but they treat staff like students*. (Interviewee 9)

When there has been a collision with power in these situations new knowledge is generated, but we suspect that every situation is unique, therefore uncommon and not easily linked to previous experience. Answers cannot be found in the manual nor have participants been trained in how to react. The situation is similar to that of a pilot facing a mid-air crisis; while there are general principles in play, each situation is unique and unlikely to have been documented in the manual. Each crisis generates a wealth of new knowledge, under stressful circumstances, in the minds of people involved.

As with the mid-air crisis, we hope that all survive so that their knowledge about survival can be captured but, like many mid-air crises, the situations described here have resulted in many 'not surviving'. In that sense, this study is an attempt to find out how the wreck has occurred. When viewed this way, it is obvious that administrators have little time and resources to be able to unpack the situation (like the mid-air crisis) and have to generate a

different kind of response: they are under pressure in the 'bumpy moment' (Romano, 2006) to generate a response to the situation.

It is possible to identify the truth or knowledge produced in these and similar situations and to do so we return to where we started in this section: (Dewey) and add to our first assertion regarding teachers "colliding with power":

> *When teachers collide with power, administrators do not attempt the, task of developing an empirical and experimental approach to the problems, which could lead to educative experiences and sustainable solutions. This (to perhaps overplay the analogy) is due to lack of time and resources because they are in the midst of a (mid-air) crisis.*

The 'yobbos' and Power

If discourse and knowledge are produced when collisions with power occur then how can we begin to understand what is occurring in a situation such as:

> *I would be called into class with the red card - come quick emergency - there would be swearing, things thrown across the room, verbal assaults, threats of physical assault.* (Interviewee 3)

The concept of negative power might be useful. Negative power is usually linked to concepts of 'master' (interestingly teachers were once called 'school masters'). The image of a 'master' is of one who knows the law, speaks the truth and of being one that censures and forbids. Linking this particular negative instance of power to the idea of 'master' reduces the procedures of power to the laws that operate when the 'master' intervenes in a collision of power: that is, power is in operation when the master intercedes, either by invitation or by confrontation.

This model of the operation of interdiction power in schools has been present since students started gathering in groups of thirty or so in one room under the control of the teacher ('master'). This means that the rules of operation are well honed and taken for granted by most in this situation. Operating under these accepted laws of interdiction means that a schema of power operates that is reasonably homogenous at all levels of the system:

- at the teacher-student level;
- at the administrator-teacher level; and
- at the district office-administrator-level.

And it is this schema that, when viewed from a different form of consciousness, allows us to view these interdictions as bullying. Because power in interdiction terms is only thought of in negative terms, then it is about 'refusal, delimitation, obstruction, censure' (Foucault, 1980, 53), and these attributes are easily spotted in our descriptions above. It is power that says 'No!' Therefore, any confrontation is seen as a transgression. So when a teacher confronts an administrator the operation of power is operating negatively and the teacher is perceived as transgressing, with the discourse of correction coming into play. We hypothesise that this is internalised by the teacher as a tipping point. And so resignation may ensue.

The operation of power in interdiction is a speech act: stated, uttered and brought to everyone's attention. This speech act then automatically forbids other kinds of discourse. For example discourse around more positive effects of power, such as negotiation, discussion of perceptions and discussion of time required for resolution is forbidden. This helps us to understand why in the heat of the moment people revert to standard forms of interaction. The rules have been set a long time ago and have been in operation for a long time. The manifestation of power takes on 'the pure form of "thou shalt not" ' (Foucault, 1980, 53).

Power becomes the subject of the discourse and it doesn't matter at this point of confrontation whether it is conceived as real or imagined. At the point of interdiction people involved are saying 'yes' or 'no' to power but the important point is that there is a choice. At this point natural rights could be denunciated, social contracts could disappear and the love of the 'master' could disappear. Because power is operating in negative terms in the interdiction, the role of the 'sovereign' (the more powerful, the one with institutional power) is to forbid and the role of the 'subject' is to accept and say 'yes'. Power operating this way means that administrators lay down the law ('*It is made clear to you it's their way or out the gate!'* according to Interviewee 2).

In the interviews above it is clear that in confrontations the participants were saying 'yes' to power. (The 'yobbos' in their 'yes' was not saying 'yes' to the 'master' view of power but teachers we interviewed may well have subscribed to it.) The 'yobbos' were

actually saying 'yes' to another form of negative power that recognises that the 'yobbo' has considerable power in the interdiction situation. For example, if the teacher has too many confrontations or loses the confrontations, they come under surveillance by the administration. Thus, whenever a confrontation with power occurs, both sides are operating on different rules and the inevitable occurs.

As long as 'yobbos' reject the 'master' view then confrontation builds and the discourse becomes limited to winning or losing, to sovereign/subject discourse. Similarly if teachers reject the 'master' view when dealing with administrators, then the only way they can win is to resign. This relatively simple view has to recognise that the operation of power is entwined with other kinds of relationships (such as kinship – see for example, descriptions of Lebanese youth in the western suburbs of Sydney; also such as notions of family and of sexuality) and is modified by these other relationships.

The domination inherent in the interdiction is subject to inertia, dislocation and resistance. For example, if a student doesn't resist during an interdiction, then a different outcome results from that when (often inevitably) a 'yobbo' resists. In fact there can be no relations of power without resistances and these resistances are very real, as they are often formed where this negative power is exercised at the point of interdiction. The resistance is real and is not coming from outside the situation. It is entwined with the power and is inseparable from it making the situation difficult to resolve at the point of interdiction.

We also need to understand that the operation of power in these situations is in service to something: what interests are being furthered by the operation of power in this way, under these rules? The teachers we interviewed were telling us clearly that in their dealings with administrators, the power operating was in service to the administrators' interests.

If, in an interdiction by an administrator, a teacher does not participate in the forming of knowledge (that is, does not participate in the assurance and exercise of power) then: *'You are going to face the wrath'* (Interviewee 2). This is the penalty for not accepting the rules of the game. Teachers may refuse to play the game for many reasons. They may recognise intuitively that by generating the knowledge they are handing more power and knowledge to the other in the interdiction and so choose not to participate.

A further assertion in this paper then is that teachers who no longer wish to participate in the exercise and assurance of power in the system do so by resigning. Further, we hypothesise that the tipping point for resignation occurs during an interdiction, during a collision with power. Resignation is one part of many separate systems of disciplining that operate in schools. Disciplining as represented by resignation is one of the ways in which power works, but it often works by concealing itself through 'caring' mechanisms ('you may be happier somewhere else').

In this paper we have described overt manifestation of power that is presenting itself as *the* reality. Accompanying this disciplinary aspect of power is a discourse that establishes what is normal behaviour and then grounds and analyses the debate from that stance. This discourse specifies the norm, engages in surveillance, distinguishes 'normal' from 'abnormal', and mostly originates in, yet surrounds, the teacher.

So we see that teachers who resign have often been under surveillance from students, other teachers, administrators and even the media: ('*We all felt shell shocked at the bad publicity from the West Australian Newspaper. They were anti-teachers and anti-outcomes education…*[Interviewee 1]'). And from another teacher: '*After a term of investigation by the private school...*[Interviewee 6]').

Norms are established and those that did not fit were often labelled to establish them as outsiders ('depressed'; 'whistle-blowers') or put under pressure to become 'normal': ('*It is made clear to you it's their way or out the gate!* [Interviewee 2]').

We see the same disciplinary aspect of power in operation with students. They are put under surveillance (behaviour management contracts, reporting, removal to other classes, behaviour forms to be completed by teachers, etc.). Often the next step is to label those who choose not to participate in this negative power game 'psychopaths' or 'yobbos' so as to establish them as outsiders. Following this the resignation of a student may occur either voluntarily (truanting) or be forced (suspension).

Interestingly, this negative aspect of power that operates and manifests itself in an interdiction between a teacher and a student can result in the disciplinary aspect of the power being manifested on the teacher. This happens if the teacher professes not to know how to deal with these students, or has constant confrontations. This can result in the teacher resigning through the sequence described - surveillance, vilification, discipline and eventually, resignation. The path to exclusion for students is very similar.

Conclusion

Teacher resignation is a major problem in Western Australia, whose economy is characterised by a shortage of skilled labour in one of the world's largest mining locations. Local universities require a strong and stable secondary school sector to provide them with quality tertiary entrants to meet the demands of economic expansion for the social benefit of the nation. More importantly, teachers should feel safe in their workplace.

This paper set out to try to understand why secondary teachers in Western Australia resign. It began by collecting, analysing and reporting 11 teachers' stories about their resignations. It became clear when examining the many harrowing stories from teachers that this aspect of their lives was poorly understood. We began to look for some kind of explanatory framework that would allow us to understand why teachers resign. Our search resulted in our making the following assertions:

1. The experiences suffered by teachers, students and administrators have halted or distorted the growth of their further experience in schools; all these people may lose 'the impetus to learn' at school through these experiences.
2. When teachers collide with power, administrators do not attempt to develop approaches to the problem that could lead to educative experiences and sustainable solutions. This is due to lack of time and resources, because they are in the midst of a crisis and each crisis is unique.
3. Teachers who no longer wish to participate in the exercise and assurance of power in the system resign. The tipping point for resignation occurs during an interdiction, during a collision with power.
4. Teachers follow a path to resignation that involves being watched (surveillance), becoming labelled as abnormal, being subject to discipline, and eventually resigning. The path to exclusion from school for students is very similar.

References

Department of Education and Training (ND). WA teacher demand and supply projections. Government of Western Australia: Retrieved (December 14, 2010) from *www.det.wa.edu.au/education/.../wateacherdemandandsupplyprojections.pdf*

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.

Romano, M.E. (2006). "Bumpy moments" in teaching: Reflections from practicing teachers. *Teaching & Teacher Education, 22*(7), 973-985.

Foucault, M. 1979a. The life of infamous men. In Power/knowledge : selected interviews and other writings. New York; Pantheon Books
Foucault, M. 1979b. Power, Truth, Strategy. Sydney: Feral Publication.
Freebody, P. (2003). *Qualitative research in education: Interaction and practice*. London: Sage.
Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
Manuel, J. (2003). Have we 'mistaken the symptom for the problem'?: Exploring issues of early career teacher retention and attrition. Curriculum Leaership: An electronic journal for leaders in education (1 January 2002). Retrieved (December 14, 2010) from http://cmslive.curriculum.edu.au/leader/have_we_mistaken_the_symptom_for_the_problem*:_ex,4622.html
Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
Plato The Educational Watchdog The Top Education News Stories from 2007. Retrieved (December 14, 2010) from http://www.platowa.com/documents/noteworthy_2007.html
State School Teachers' Union Western Australia (2010). Teacher supply and training. Retrieved December 14, 2010, from http://www.sstuwa.org.au/sstuwa/teacher-supply
State School Teachers' Union Western Australia (2010). Anti-violence campaign. Retrieved December 14, 2010, from http://www.sstuwa.org.au/sstuwa/violence-in-schools
State School Teachers' Union Western Australia (2010). Punchbag: Our teachers deserve better! Retrieved December 14, 2010, from http://www.sstuwa.org.au/news/sstuwa-articles/behaviour-violence-bullying/451-punchbag-our-teachers-deserve-better
Strategy Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, Eds. Sydney, Australia: Feral Publications, 1979, pp. 76-91.
Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. In (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
Western Australian Technology and Industry Advisory Council (September, 2009). Managing *Western Australia's economic expansion: The need for people and skills. East Perth: Author.*