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# “I feel very fortunate to still be doing what I love”: Later career Performing Arts teachers still keen and committed

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## **“I Feel Very Fortunate to Still be Doing What I Love”: Later Career Performing Arts Teachers Still Keen and Committed**

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### **Abstract**

The problem of attrition among early-career teachers has generated a substantial body of research. However, less research has been devoted to later-career teachers who survive and thrive. This article explores the career experiences of four later-career performing arts teachers who remain keen and committed to teaching. Informed by

seminal studies by Huberman (1989, 1993) and Day and Gu (2007, 2009) into teacher career trajectories, and using a phenomenological ‘lens’ of portraiture methodology, members of the research team undertook a series of in-depth interviews to gain insight into how these teachers maintain their positivity and commitment to teaching. Four key themes emerged: the fundamental influence of social networks, the ability to recognise and embrace one’s strengths, the importance of being adaptable in maintaining relevance and social responsibility, and understanding the difference one makes to the lives of students. Findings highlight the key mechanisms by which these later-career teachers rationalise and maintain their enthusiasm. Given they are not fixed, articulating these mechanisms as attributes to be encouraged, practiced, nurtured, and developed among all teachers may be the overall key finding of this study.

### **Introduction**

There is a wealth of contemporary research focused on early-career teachers, and in particular issues surrounding high attrition rates which result in up to 50% of new teachers leaving the profession within the first five years (Ewing & Smith, 2003; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Hong, 2012; Pillay, Goddard & Wilss, 2005). However, Day and Gu (2009) posit that the focus should instead be on assessing what keeps a teacher committed rather than on externally assessable loss. While much research into teacher career trajectories identifies a steady decline in motivation and commitment in later years of teaching (Fessler, 1985; Huberman, 1989; Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985), studies by Day and Gu (2007, 2009), Huberman (1989, 1993), Steffy (1989), Vonk (1989), and Meister and Ahrens (2011) have also identified teachers who remain positive and committed throughout their careers.

This study focuses on the professional lives of four later-career performing arts teachers in an attempt to understand what keeps them keen and committed despite increasing pressures of the job, such as diminishing resources and high extra-curricular loads. This study has particular currency given the unique and diverse roles performed by secondary performing arts teachers in schools, and their susceptibility to high levels of stress and teacher burnout (Anderson, 2002, 2003; Ballantyne, 2006, 2007; Donelan, 1989; Faust, 1995; Haseman, 1990; Kelly, 1999; Wales, 1999). Further, the focus primarily on performing arts teachers, rather than that of teachers generally, stems from the researchers’ teaching background and passion for quality performing arts in schools.

### **Later-Career Teachers**

There are a number of studies that demonstrate a degree of consensus about teacher career trajectories, with most identifying and describing distinct career phases (Day & Gu, 2007,

2009; Huberman, 1989; Meister & Ahrens, 2011; Steffi, 2005; Vonk, 1989). However, these studies note that career phases are not linear and deterministic. Rather, there can be variations in the timing of the relevant stages and, importantly, teachers may move backwards as well as forwards between phases due to personal and organisational circumstance (Huberman, 1989; Meister & Ahren, 2011).

Seminal work conducted by Huberman (1989, 1993) described five distinct phases of teaching:

1. Survival and discovery (1-2 years of teaching)
2. Stabilization (4-6 years of teaching)
3. Experimentation (7-25 years of teaching)
4. Serenity and/or Conservatism (26-33 years of teaching)
5. Disengagement (34 years +).

Huberman identified the final phase of teaching (Phase 5: Disengagement) as characterised by gradual withdrawal. In Huberman's study, slightly less than half of his participants expressed scepticism about structural reform, yet; government piloted initiatives or proposed curriculum changes were met with resistance or outright hostility. Almost the entire sub sample described itself in terms of 'disengagement,' rechannelling their energy either outside the classroom context, or towards more specialised work within the classroom (Huberman, 1989, p. 354). Some of this cohort were described as being bitter and unhappy towards stakeholders, including government or senior administration. Huberman posited this attitude may have been caused by a sense of privilege resulting from seniority, but he characterised all participants in his study at this phase as becoming disinvested.

Day and Gu (2007) utilized and extended Huberman's (1989) framework, and identified six Professional Life Phases (PLPs):

1. Beginning PLP (0 – 3 years)
2. Middle PLP (4 – 7 years)
3. Middle PLP (8 – 15 years)
4. Middle PLP (16 -23 years)
5. Late PLP (24 – 30 years)
6. Late 31+ years of teaching

This more nuanced understanding of the phases of teaching was developed through their VITAE project, a mixed method, four-year longitudinal study involving 300 teachers in 100 schools across seven local authorities in England. The study investigated factors contributing

to teachers' commitment and effectiveness at different phases of their professional lives across a range of schools of varying contexts. It explored the mediating impact of situated, professional, and personal events as key influences on teachers. As a consequence of their holistic research approach, they identified sub-groups within each phase of teaching originally identified in Huberman's work. Within the PLP framework, they described variations in teacher commitment, wellbeing, and effectiveness across each phase (Day & Gu, 2007, 2009).

Day and Gu (2009) labelled later-career teachers—teachers in the final two phases of their professional careers (PLP 5 and 6)—as veterans and defined them as those who have served in the teaching profession for 24 years or more. While Huberman (1989) categorised these teachers in his study as “disengaged,” Day and Gu (2007) offered a more nuanced understanding of the veteran cohort. They identified two distinct sub-groups:

1. Those continuing in teaching but with decreasing motivation
2. Those with a strong sense of motivation and commitment to teaching and a continuing sense of wellbeing.

They characterised the later sub group as those who:

demonstrated a high level of motivation and commitment and strong sense of ‘active’ engagement in the profession. These teachers showed a continuing interest in updating and improving their classroom knowledge and a strong desire to fulfil their sense of vocation before leaving teaching (p. 437).

For motivated teachers with 31 years or more experience (PLP 6), this period was categorised as “sustained commitment” (Day and Gu, 2009). Of the 22 participants in this phase of the study, Day and Gu (2009) identified 14 as maintaining “active” engagement in their teaching. This is in sharp contrast to Huberman's finding that this group was largely defined by serenity, conservatism, or outright disenchantment. Specifically, Day and Gu (2009) state:

...relatively less is known about the nature of the tensions and challenges facing those who have had a substantial amount of experience in teaching (i.e. so called ‘veteran’ teachers) and how and why they have managed (or not managed) to continue to fulfil their original call to teaching. (p. 441)

This is a group of teachers at a phase in their teaching careers who should, in theory, “...be at the peak of their expertise and teaching wisdom” (p. 455), and therefore, it can be argued, could be a model for their less experienced or disenchanted colleagues.

Other studies have also identified and described positive late-career teachers. Steffy (1989) explored this cohort and classified them as either in the “expert or master” career stage where they worked intuitively in the classroom, or the “renewal” stage where they continued to seek opportunities to experiment with new ideas. Vonk (1989) similarly identified two sub-groups of later-career teachers, with the first sub-group “teacher accomplishments” comprising teachers who displayed high level competencies and the second sub-group comprising re-energised teachers. Meister and Ahrens (2011) describe this cohort of teachers as enthusiastic and growing professionally. These teachers are motivated, enjoy working with students, are highly effective and look to further their pedagogy.

### ***The Risk of Teacher Burn-Out***

It is reported in the literature that all teachers, including later-career teachers, are more susceptible to burnout than other occupations due to the emotional demands of their role (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; Day & Gu, 2009; Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) define burnout as, “A syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment” (p. 1060). Studies in Finland reveal that teachers have the highest rate of burnout in comparison to all other human service sector jobs (Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Salmela-Aro, 2011), and burnout manifests itself as illness, job attrition, depression, and psychological problems (Lauermaann & König, 2016). Given that teacher burnout is a long-term process that occurs when a teacher endures prolonged exposure to high levels of stress (Pillay et al., 2005; Pyhältö et al., 2011), investigating ways later-career teachers sustain their commitment and avoid succumbing to burnout offers further justification for undertaking this study.

### **Methodology and Methods**

This study set out to understand how four later-career performing arts teachers remain keen and committed to their teaching. In order to learn about this phenomenon, individual interviews were undertaken with participants to hear their stories and perspectives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997). The interpretive and descriptive nature of this work falls under phenomenology, an interpretive theoretical perspective that generates knowledge about the lived experience of individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; van Manen, 2007). The aim of phenomenology is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of lived experience through asking what the experience is like pre-reflectively, before the individual has attempted to explain it themselves (van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (2007) explained, “Phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications” (p. 11). The recalled experience of participants was used to create individual portraits that communicated valuable

insight. Specifically, the use of a portraiture methodology involves listening *for* the participants as well as *to* them in an attempt to portray the nature of their experiences, and it acknowledges the experience of the researchers and their understanding of the environment as essential elements in the interpretative process (Schendel, 2009).

### ***Procedure***

Four later-career performing arts teachers were the participants in this study. For the purposes of this research, the term “later-career” is used to describe teachers over 40 years of age with over 20 years teaching experience as a compromise between the definitions of later-career teachers offered by Huberman (1989) and Day and Gu (2009). Ethics approval was obtained from the Catholic Education Office and the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA). Approval was also sought from the Education Department of Western Australia (EdWA) but retracted because of administrative difficulties within their ethics review system. Subsequent to ethics approval, the participants were selected from a range of participants involved in a wider study involving the development and validation of an instrument designed to empirically identify positive later-career teachers (Lowe, Gray, Prout & Jefferson, in press). Participants in the wider study were asked to complete a survey which identified their teaching specialisation and included the opportunity to volunteer for follow-up interviews. The participants were then selected for the present study based on their willingness to take part in in-depth interviews and their positions working in performing arts teaching areas. Given this study was not aiming at statistical generalisations, researchers focused on gaining deep insight into the ways these teachers, who had rated highly on the survey instrument, remained positive and enthusiastic. This small but purposeful sample size was similarly used by Meister and Ahrens (2011) investigating how four veteran teachers resisted plateauing. The following table (Table 1) outlines the age, school context, curricular, and extracurricular responsibilities of each later-career teacher in the present study.

Table 1

#### ***Performing Arts Teachers' Information***

Participant/Age	Teaching Experience	School Context	Role	Extracurricular Responsibilities
Simone, 50yrs	28 years	Private high school (girls)	Head of Theatre Arts (drama and dance)	Director of school productions and performance events
Luke, 48yrs	25 years	Private high school (co-ed)	Drama Coordinator	Director of school production and performance events. Theatre excursions program
Tanya, 56yrs	35 years	Private ballet school Tertiary tutor	Teacher Tutor	Study session workshops Production support
Tasha, 52yrs	30 years	Private high school (boys)	Head of Performing Arts	Director of school production Coordination of performing arts events

As part of the process of inquiry, participants were asked to describe their recollections in detail and thus were given guiding questions two weeks prior to assist in thinking about key concepts when recounting their experiences (Lichtman, 2009). There were 15 interview questions (Appendix 1), including questions such as:

- What do you believe are the most effective coping strategies any teacher can adopt?
- What advice would you give yourself if you were starting your teaching career this year?

Two semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each participant in a suitable venue located in their school to capture their experiences and feelings about teaching, with a particular focus on how they maintain a positive outlook on teaching. The interviews lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes in duration, were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analysed following protocols highlighted by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014).

As such, the sequence of activities for the analysis of each set of interview data was:

1. Data was collected through the interview and the transcript was generated.
2. Data was reviewed through a process of selecting, sorting, and sifting through the transcriptions in order to identify similar phrases and ideas.
3. The identified commonalities were grouped to form categories of generalised information. This information was represented in a data matrix of categories and their supporting phrases.
4. The process was repeated for the remaining interviews and the analysis assisted in identifying emerging themes.

Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant in order to protect their identity. Portraits were constructed from the data using first person voice and omitting the questions (Smyth & McInerney, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) and then emailed to participants for checking to minimise the chance of misinterpretation. Each participant responded positively to their portrait and did not wish to make any changes.

The researchers' search for strengths and possibilities as opposed to deficiencies is a key feature of portraiture methodology (Dixson, Chapman & Hill, 2005). For researchers, this meant that finding stories of resilience leading to success were key to answering the overarching research question: What positive coping strategies do later-career performing arts teachers utilise to maintain positive capacity for teaching?

A key marker of high-quality qualitative research proposed by Tracy (2010) is that of 'sincerity.' Accordingly, this study is characterised by "self-reflexivity about subjective



values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) and transparency about the methods and challenges” (p. 840). Notions of authenticity and genuineness are also key. To ensure we remained transparent about our own biases and goals, we spent time prior and during the study (data collection, analysis, and presentation) practising self-reflexivity. Liamputtong (2013) claimed that reflexivity is an essential characteristic in qualitative research as it supports the integrity that qualitative researchers claim and the nature of the knowledge. Johnson and Waterfield (2004) asserted that researchers must acknowledge their experiences, beliefs, and personal history. Therefore, in order to make clear our own experiences and knowledge of particular findings, we have outlined our experience, position, and identity as researchers.

## Results

### *Narrative Portraits*

Four portraits are provided to introduce the participants and provide insight into their work and the ways in which they manage challenges. While the individual portraits reveal similarities, each serves to highlight a different key factor of the teachers’ strategies for maintaining their enthusiasm and passion for teaching.

#### *Portrait 1—Simone*

*“You can’t cope at a school unless you have friends who are there to support you.”*

I am the Head of Theatre Arts, which is dance and drama. I teach nearly full time but have a little time allocated for my leadership role and also as someone who has a heavy extra-curricular load. I’ve seen a lot of change during my career particularly the involvement of technology which has changed so much about how we teach.

The best thing about my job is teaching and getting to work with the students. I love young people. I think they’re so much fun. They keep me young. The other part I love about my job is my staff - we have a great time. I’m really lucky in that I’ve got really enthusiastic teachers who are good to share stories with. It’s their support that helps me do what I do and enjoy it so much.

It’s a huge and challenging job. There are incredible amounts of paperwork, meetings and red tape. Just taking the kids to see a show at the Fringe Festival is now a multi-layered event to organise that involves every aspect of the school—nurses, risk management, leadership and finance. It’s just insane the amount of organisation that goes into it. We also deal with a lot of change and all the time. I’m of the opinion that

you have to look at why we're doing it and how it's going to benefit the kids. There's a quote, which is a great quote: If you don't accept change, you have to accept irrelevancy and risk being stuck in the past.

You can't cope at a school like this unless you have friends who are there to support you. I have about 10 or so friends here that I socialise in and outside of school with. Friends are vital. I love to share stories with them, laugh and have a chat over lunch. We give so much all the time as teachers and having a good social group to share the challenges with really helps. The support I have from my staff members and the opportunity to share our stories is so important to me. In times of personal and work-related stress, I have female colleagues my own age that understand. I can't imagine what it would be like if you didn't have someone to chat to every day and you just went in and taught and went home.

#### *Portrait 2—Luke*

*“The great advantage of being as old as I am is I'm now very confident in the classroom.”*

When I became a new dad, I realised I needed a more regular and reliable income. So, it was actually an economic decision to become a teacher. That was probably my mindset for the first three years until I became a good teacher and worked out why I was there. That realisation of why I was here, what I wanted to achieve, and that I was actually very good at teaching was probably the start of my career.

I've been teaching for over 25 years now. I've been at this school for 14 years and run the full curricula and non-curricular drama program. My job can be very stressful, riding all the changes and particularly managing large production budgets. Being the sole drama teacher is tough as I have to cope with all of this myself. I used to have a lot more support for all the extra things a drama teacher has to do. However, over time, it's been pared away. While support has diminished though, the expectations have increased such as accountability policies and procedures and I guess I understand why some of my colleagues have left the profession. I keep myself away from the 'negative Nancy's'. I don't want to be impacted by the negativity of some teachers around here. I'm enthusiastic about my teaching and take pride in the good work I do here.

I know that the stress of this job has impacted my health and I don't get to see as much sunlight these days with the long hours working here. However in saying that, when I've had personal challenges outside of work, teaching has been wonderful for keeping me on track. That's the best thing about my work is the teaching—that's the reason

I'm here. The face-to-face interaction with students, working on projects, collaborating on productions, and helping them hone their performance skills. Working with young people is wonderful fun.

Of course, teaching drama is fantastic. I like to try new ideas and improvise different approaches depending on how the kids are. If it doesn't work then I'll be open and honest about it. Kids have to see you making mistakes and taking risks even when they don't work out. The great advantage of being as old as I am is I'm now very confident in the classroom. I've become a bit of a sounding board too around here. Staff are quick to see me for another opinion or when they need help with the kids.

### *Portrait 3—Tanya*

#### *"I'm learning to teach all over again"*

I always wanted to become a dance teacher. I've danced since the age of three and loved the Art form but I also liked the idea of giving back. I've had many years teaching in primary schools, high schools and tertiary too. Now, I'm in a great situation where I'm doing a lot of different work from Year 11 and 12 dance at a specialist dance school to teaching university students. I feel very fortunate to still be doing what I love.

To cope with all the challenges of the job and constant changes, I've had to learn to be very adaptable and versatile. That's what you have to do—otherwise you're left behind. My teaching has become more theoretical now and less practical. I'm even teaching dance on-line now. The variety of work and new challenges keeps me keen. I never thought I would be sitting in front of a computer teaching dance. I'm really enjoying it though—it's very challenging. Now I'm teaching dance through writing, and so that's a different thought procedure, so I've had to learn to teach all over again. My work is much less physical now, which is good because as you get older your body starts to really change. Aging has forced me to change the way I teach. I'm in my 50s now and I'm one of the few teachers my age that are still in high schools or primary schools teaching dance. Dance is primarily a young person's profession. Aging has been a real challenge for me because dance is such a physical thing. When I got to my late 40s my hormones changed and my metabolism slowed down, I was more susceptible to injuries and then my confidence took a knock. My tool was my body.

I was so glad online teaching came in because I am able to still put my teaching into other avenues. I've loved it and it's shown me that I'm still adaptable and versatile. I've gone with changes and technology and can see that I still have many years ahead

of me in teaching.

*Portrait 4—Tasha*

*“Learning in the Arts puts kids on a trajectory for life.”*

I started teaching dance at a young age as I wanted to share the art form with others. I did a Bachelor degree with a double major in Drama and Dance, however, I really saw myself as a performer and so ended up travelling to America to dance and choreograph. Right at the peak of my career, I tore my hamstring and had to take a break from performing for a year. I picked up teaching dance again at a tertiary institution. However, when the kids came along, I took up a position at a high school for job security and higher salary.

After a couple of years teaching, I got a back injury which was agony. I had the operation and I came back three weeks later and finished a choreography I was working on. That’s the thing with us Arts people. We do our job, meet the deadline and work really hard. It’s a really strong work ethic. My back didn’t fully recover and after a while I realised I had to get off my back and so moved over to teach drama. That’s what I’m doing now – teaching young people drama. I’m also Head of Arts Faculty which incorporates drama, music, media and visual arts.

The job is absolutely manic. There’s so much paperwork, administration, meetings and accountability for everything. Of course, we have all the productions to do too which I really enjoy, but it’s full on. I seek professional development regularly as I love to learn from others and it’s important to be with all the latest ideas for our students’ sake too. Actually, I most enjoy directing and choreographing the productions. Teaching up in a space with kids and having important conversations. It’s exhausting though and a huge emotional investment. But, it’s so rewarding. I love seeing kids grow where they step into a bigger version of themselves and it goes further and further. It’s this expansion that happens and it’s amazing seeing a kid become a really potent performer or a really engaged student in your class. That phenomena, is the most powerful because it puts the individual on a trajectory for their life. This is what gets me through managing all this change and pressures in the job. I think, what’s really important for the kids.

### **Discussion**

The narrative portraits reveal influential mechanisms by which these later-career teachers maintain enthusiasm and stay committed to teaching. Consistent with Day and Gu (2007), these later-career teachers remain motivated and are still actively engaged in the profession.

They understand the importance and value of updating and improving pedagogy, and they possess a strong desire to fulfil their sense of vocation. Each of these factors will now be explored in turn, beginning with the place and value of social networks.

### ***Importance of Social Networks***

It is evident that all four participants face daily challenges in their teaching and leadership roles, particularly in managing the extra-curricular responsibilities that come with teaching in the performing arts. Consistently, the literature confirms the nature of teaching in the current education climate is both arduous and arguably more complex than it has ever been (Hargreaves, 2000; Le Cornu, 2013). Of particular concern overall is that a combination of factors, including challenging working conditions, can lead to burnout in later-career teachers (Day & Gu, 2009). For Simone, who manages a large staff and heavy extra-curricular program, the value of strong social connections with colleagues that share her enthusiasm for teaching is the key theme to emerge from her portrait. This conforms with findings in wider occupational studies by Vaillant (1977) that quality, sustained social connections are essential for one's ability to adapt to all stages of life, and in turn generate better stress regulation. Consistent with assertions by Churchill et al. (2016), the quality of Simone's relationships with like-minded colleagues plays a key role in maintaining her ability to give back to her students. Churchill et al. (2016) states, "The establishment and maintenance of high quality positive relationships is perhaps one of the most crucial *must-have* capacities in the make-up of the twenty-first century teacher" (p. 592).

While Simone, at times, is overwhelmed with the administrative demands of her position, she remains focused on the broader benefits for her students and the support she receives from colleagues sustains her ability to do so. Further, this level of connectedness is prominent in wider studies on job satisfaction, and it is documented in improving mental and physical health while helping negate the toxic effects of isolation (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Waldinger, 2010). Simone particularly benefits from collegial and empathetic relationships with women of similar age who understand the pressures of the job. Simone's social connections act as a buffer for the negative impact of work related stresses, as noted by Kinman et al., (2011). It is evident that Simone's workplace social connections have assisted her to maintain her commitment to teaching and generate renewal throughout her teaching career. Somewhat surprisingly, the importance of social connection, while highlighted in wider occupational studies, appears somewhat neglected in teacher career trajectory studies to date.

### ***Recognising and Embracing Strengths***

While it is apparent that all participants share a similar sense of confidence and pride in their

teaching abilities, this sense of pride is the central theme in Luke's portrait. While Luke came to teaching with an arguably questionable motive, he quickly found his aptitude for teaching. It is his self-belief in his pedagogical strengths as a practitioner that has helped him remain focused and enthusiastic despite increasing pressures and diminishing resources. This is largely consistent with the career trajectory literature (Day & Gu, 2007; Steffy, 1989; Vonk, 1989). As with all four participants, Luke is bound by often conflicting demands from administration, stakeholders, and a myriad of policies (Hargreaves, 2005; Meister & Ahrens, 2011; Pillay et al., 2005). As a consequence, Luke acknowledges that teaching has become a highly stressful and demanding profession and understands why teacher retention rates are falling (Le Cornu, 2013; Pillay et al., 2005).

Luke describes the pressures of managing a vibrant drama program as a sole operator in the school, and as such is potentially susceptible to the toxic effects of professional isolation. Like many later-career teachers, he not only holds a position of responsibility in his school, he has also had to integrate considerable policy and curriculum changes over his career (Day & Gu, 2009). Yet his self-described ability to teach well is marked by flexibility and the necessity of risk taking, and this has become his self-rationalised coping mechanism. It is evident that for Luke, his willingness to experiment and diversify his teaching is because he has the prior knowledge and confidence in his ability to do so, thus generating a perpetual cycle of renewal (Huberman, 1989). Both Huberman and Near (1984) reported that many later-career teachers begin to identify patterns and are content to repeat yearly teaching cycles, leading to feelings of stagnation and sameness. Only a small percentage are able to undertake critical reflection, and understand the importance of new challenges to keep them stimulated and engaged (Huberman, 1989).

Luke is seen as a leader by his colleagues, who often turn to him for assistance and guidance. While this may not be acknowledged as a formal job responsibility, this unofficial mentoring role was identified by Day and Gu (2009) as a key quality of the positive PLP 5 and 6 cohort. Almost all of this cohort had extra areas of responsibility in addition to their regular teaching role and this 'passive' form of leadership has also been acknowledged by Fransson and Frelin (2016) and Pillay et al. (2005). Given his knowledge, expertise, and pride in his teaching ability, Luke is a potentially valuable resource for younger, less experienced colleagues in navigating educational curriculum changes and support for peers who have become disenchanted or serene.

### ***Adaptability and Moving with the Times***

Throughout the phases of teaching, changing contextual circumstances, both personal and administrative, can significantly impact a teacher's commitment level. For Tanya, the many years of teaching and advocating for dance in a number of school contexts that didn't

understand her requirements and/or the nature of dance were challenging, yet her ability to maintain relevance and remain positive emerged as the strongest theme in her portrait. Her more recent experience of menopause and the effects on her physical health and self-confidence have been challenging yet she has rationalised this as an opportunity to embrace change.

Huberman (1993) stated that a key characteristic of positive later-career teachers in his study was their ability to accept and embrace educational change. While teaching dance in an on-line capacity would be a daunting prospect for most, for Tanya, it has been an opportunity to learn new ways to teach that have challenged and re-energised her. Tanya's ability to adapt supports the assertion by Kinman et al (2011) of the importance of ongoing emotional and task challenge throughout a teaching career, and White (2008) who noted the centrality of continuous challenge in maintaining career motivation.

Consistent with Day and Gu (2008), Tanya's capacity to sustain her commitment is influenced by her professional life phase and mediated by context (Day, 2008; Huberman, 1989). Notably, she has navigated personal challenges (menopause) as well as policies, values and beliefs (complex work in schools), and, as Fransson and Frelin (2016) suggest, her capacity to manage the intensity of these contexts has tested her commitment.

Tanya's ability to adapt and move with the times has enabled her to still practice and teach an Art form that she has always loved. Moreover, embracing the challenge of teaching in a virtual classroom has provided her with the physical means to continue teaching for many more years to come.

### ***Purpose and Making a Difference***

Like Tanya, Tasha has experienced a number of physical injuries that has seen her take on new roles in order to survive and thrive. Despite her personal challenges and "manic" job coordinating a large Performing Arts department, her love for making a difference to the students she teaches helps keep her focused and passionate about teaching and emerged as her overarching theme. Tasha participates in regular professional development, eager to expand her ideas and effectiveness in the classroom, and these are key qualities identified by both Day and Gu (2007) and Gibbs and Miller (2014). Tasha is far from serene and disengaged (Huberman, 1993) and does not fit the characteristics of a teacher remaining in the profession but with limited motivation (Day & Gu, 2007). It is evident that she has a strong sense of motivation and commitment, and she is actively engaged in the profession. But, unlike the others, Tasha is driven primarily by her love for her students.

Tasha sees her job as a performing arts teacher in terms of a social contract; transforming the

lives of young people, to set them up for future success so that they may make a difference to their world. This is also consistent with Day and Gu (1997) who describe the value in ongoing professional development and a strong desire to fulfil their sense of vocation before leaving teaching. During particularly stressful times at work, Tasha uses her sense of vocational duty as a motivational driver.

However, given Tasha's emotional investment in her students, coupled with the increasing pressures she faces as both a performing arts teacher and leader, it must be questioned how much longer she can sustain this commitment. Given that burnout is an equally insidious issue for later-career teachers (Day & Gu, 2009; Kinman et al., 2011) and long term emotional labour has the capacity to lead to teacher exhaustion (Kinman et al., 2011), it is imperative that senior leadership acknowledge and find ways to support these later-career teachers. Both Day and Gu (2007) and Acton and Glasgow (2015) identified in-school support as critical for feedback and encouragement, as well as reasonable role expectations. Without such support, not only do these teachers risk burnout, they also risk becoming disenchanted, bitter, or outright hostile (Day & Gu, 2009; Huberman, 1993).

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that all four participants in this study employ very different mechanisms to maintain their positive commitments to teaching. When the primary themes are stripped back, Simone is outwardly focused, surviving in a social space, utilising collegiality and shared experience as her main coping mechanisms. Both Luke and Tanya are more inwardly focused, using teaching craft, internal challenge, and risk-taking to maintain relevance in a changing educational environment as key motivators, while Tasha draws on her sense of vocational calling and social responsibility to her students. While some themes overlapped, such as the role of professional development for Luke and Tasha and the social contract for Simone, Luke, and Tasha, what becomes evident in each participant's story is that each one has independently rationalised their own primary coping 'theme.' While some of the mechanisms described have been identified in previous career trajectory studies, most notably those by Huberman (1989, 1993) and Day and Gu (2007, 2009), this study also reveals that social connection, widely identified in other occupational studies (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014; Vaillant, 1977; Waldinger, 2010) may also have a significant role to play in helping later-career teachers maintain their enthusiasm.

Also emergent is the sense that some participants operate in a fluid career state or phase. Both Tanya and Tasha, for example, have been confronted by personal circumstances which could have overwhelmed them, propelling them into a state of disenchantment, but have managed to find their own ways to cope and reinvent themselves. Disenchantment is not necessarily an inevitable career progression for teachers.



Contextually, also evident among these participants, is that two of them work in relative isolation within their schools. This is a common problem among performing arts teachers who often find they are the sole practitioners in schools and run the risk of professional isolation while managing large extra-curricular loads. Indeed, high workload emerged as a common denominator for all participants. Workload and isolation have been identified as powerful factors in burnout among performing arts teachers, and these factors are what set subject specialists apart from colleagues in other teaching areas who often benefit from closer working relationships in larger departments (Anderson, 2002, 2003; Ballantyne, 2006, 2007; Donelan, 1989; Faust, 1995; Haseman, 1990; Kelly, 1999; Wales, 1999).

Therefore, the first key finding of this study suggests that coping mechanisms are a learned skill to be encouraged, practiced, nurtured, and developed. The participants in this study have benefited from their abilities to engage in critical reflection, either consciously or otherwise, and deliberately grounded themselves in coping mechanisms that work for them. When combined with Huberman's assertion that career trajectories are not linear, and that teachers can move backwards and forwards depending upon circumstance, this finding suggests that all later-career teachers, if given the options and incentives, have the potential to reflect and re-engage.

The second key finding is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to finding and maintaining a positive outlook in teaching. All participants in this study employed widely different mechanisms: social, professional, and dutiful, and therefore, a suit of strategies is required, which need to be widely articulated.

Finally, and arguably most compellingly, is the emergence of social connection as a coping mechanism, as it appears to have been neglected in the teacher career trajectory literature to date. While potentially more difficult for performing arts teachers to maintain because of the often solitary nature of their roles, social connection may, nevertheless, be one of the most important strategies for performing arts teachers to cultivate and is what sets this study apart from other career trajectory studies. However, the researchers are under no illusions; this article reports on a small-scale study which has only investigated the mechanisms of four highly motivated later-career teachers. More research is needed into not just coping mechanisms of all teachers, but specialist teachers within schools who work in distinct and unique micro-environments. Despite the limitations of size and scale, this study has currency in terms of identifying the range of mechanisms employed by its later-career performing arts teacher participants, as well as the fluid nature of those mechanisms, which need wider articulation within the teaching profession. Indeed, harnessing these mechanisms may be key to not only re-engaging disenchanting later-career teachers but in nurturing the next generation of beginning teachers and, therefore, reducing high attrition rates.

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