

DEV04108

Leaving Teaching

Peter de Vries

Faculty of Education

University of Technology, Sydney

The majority of this paper consists of a short story titled “Leaving Teaching.” The story is a distillation of the experiences of three male primary school music teachers who left the profession, one of which was myself. In combining our experiences into the short story a rich, thick description has been created that explains what factors may impact on male teacher attrition, specifically in the primary school. The short story mode is one of the artistic modes of presenting educational research that emerged in the 1990s. It has the potential to allow audiences to view teaching in new ways, as well as engage audiences who might not normally read more traditional representations of educational research (i.e., articles in refereed academic journals).

The retention of teachers, and in particular male teachers, is a source of growing concern in Australia. This has been acknowledged by Education Queensland, which has introduced a “Male Teachers’ Strategy” (2001) to plan for the attraction, recruitment and retention of male teachers in Queensland State Schools. With the Australian Council of Deans of Education (1998) prediction that there would be a shortage of teachers in both primary and secondary schools by 2004 having proved to be true, the issue of teacher retention is more important than ever.

However, finding solutions to avoid teacher attrition is not simple. It is clear that there is a higher rate of attrition amongst teachers with less than ten years teaching experience (Bobbit et al., 1994; Heyns, 1988; Ingersol, 2001), but the causes are many and varied, and are not restricted to job-related reasons (Dinham, 1997; Ingersol, 2001; Shen, 1997). Shen specifically identifies personal characteristics, school characteristics, and teachers’ perceptions of school- and

profession-related issues as reasons for attrition. Dinham goes further, suggesting that the connection between teachers' work and their personal lives can lead to resignation from the profession.

Retaining quality teachers in the teaching profession is a priority, considering there is a higher rate of attrition in the teaching profession than in other professions (NCES, 1997), which ultimately results in enormous economic costs (Darling-Hammond, 2003). In a comprehensive overview of teacher attrition literature, Darling-Hammond (2003) identifies four factors that strongly influence teacher attrition: salaries, working conditions, preparation, and mentoring support in the early years of teaching.

In order to understand more about the complex issue of teacher attrition, and in particular male teacher attrition, rich, thick descriptions of teachers' careers leading to the point of leaving the profession can be valuable. Such descriptions can take the form of case studies, which can allow multiple interpretations, and as Stake (1998) indicates, allows the reader to learn as much about the case in question without generalising beyond the case. Case studies can provide "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1988, p. 16), particularly if the audience is presented with a complete description of the case. Unfortunately, case study reports do not always contain such thick descriptions. Rather, the description is often distilled, generally through a number of illustrative quotes, and subsequently interpreted by the researcher.

Surely the ideal case study would be one where the audience is presented with the entire description of a case. This would allow the audience to draw their own conclusions about the

case, thus allowing for multiple interpretations. The short story is a mode of presentation that can allow this to occur. In taking on the role of researcher and writer, the author's case can be represented as a complete description, thus a story is being told, which as Bassey (1990) indicates, is one of a range of purposes for educational case studies. Being a "short story", it can be presented in one of two modes – as a written text for individuals to read, or read aloud. Due to its relative brevity reading aloud a short story is ideal for the 20-30 minute format of conferences. In this period of time a story can be presented, allowing time at the end of the reading to generate discussion between audience members.

During the 1990s artistic modes of representing the many and varied experiences of teaching came about (e.g., Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Miller & Kantrov, 1998; Richardson 1994), allowing researchers to portray aspects of their own and others' teaching experiences in the form of novels, short stories and poetry. Using such modes of artistic representation in telling teacher stories can allow the writer-researcher to "investigate the problematic rather than reduce it to a more manageable explanation of what occurs in the classroom" (McMahon, 2000, p. 138). Writing about teaching in such a way has the potential to provide "the reader with new ways of seeing" (Pirto, 2002. p. 441). That is, this form of representing teaching becomes more than observation, documentation, and data analysis.

The remainder of this paper will be the short story titled "Leaving Teaching", which examines why David, a primary school teacher, decided to leave the teaching profession. When planning and subsequently writing the story McMahon's (2000) criteria for judging an artistic account of teaching were adapted:

- 1) has an artistic mode of representation been used to capture the situation?

- 2) does the story have the capacity to elicit response? (e.g., is it aesthetic enough to warrant interpretation?)
- 3) does the writer's interrogation of the aesthetic rendering yield greater insights? (e.g., does the interpretation touch universal chords?) (p. 138).

David's experiences are grounded in my own teaching experiences and the experiences of two other male teachers I worked with who have subsequently left primary school teaching. The decision to combine the experiences of three male teachers who left the primary school classroom in the form of the one character, David, was made because as a writer I felt that the multiple experiences would enhance the possibility of the story touching universal chords with audience members involved in the teaching profession.

Initially we individually wrote down dilemmas that we, as male primary – and specifically male primary music – teachers faced, and which led to exiting the profession. A number of the issues we individually identified overlapped. However, there were still certain issues that were only identified by one or two of us. I wanted to “pack in” all of these issues so that audience members would get as broad a picture as possible of issues effecting male teacher attrition, hence combining our experiences into the one character's journey.

With the short story written, I asked the two ex-teachers to assess the story according to McMahon's criteria, and subsequently made modifications based on their assessments. In addition I wanted to know if my representation was a credible representation of their experiences. For the most part they agreed it was. Some parts of the story were “tweaked” – particularly dialogue between teachers.

The story will not be followed by analysis. Rather, I will leave it to audience members to draw their own conclusions as to how David's exiting from teaching could have been prevented – or even if this is desirable - and how this may have implications for combating future teacher attrition.

David was in his first year teaching when a middle-aged male colleague took him aside and said, "Get out."

"Of what?" said David.

"This," he said, with a sweep of his hand. They were in the staff room. "Teaching. Get out now while you still can."

"But I want to teach," said David.

His colleague snorted. "You say that now, but wait until you've been at it as long as I have. Do yourself a favour - get out now while you can. Take it from me, there is nothing in this life quite as bad as being a male primary school teacher."

At the time David could not comprehend what this veteran teacher was saying. But now, after nine years teaching, he kind of got it. Just one year shy of his long service leave, he had decided to quit his job. He had decided to say good bye to teaching.

"But why?" said his mother, a primary school teacher with just five more years until retirement.

"It's a regular pay check, the holidays are good, and male teachers are in high demand. You've got a job for life in the classroom."

“It’s a lot of things,” David said. “This is not a sudden decision. I’ve been thinking about it for a couple of years now.”

He’d first consciously thought about it nearly three years beforehand. It was the second week of February. A Wednesday afternoon. David had a grade five class that year. The kids had just come into class from lunch. They were hot and sweaty, as was David. The city was going through a heatwave. “Okay,” said David, “we’ve got some maths to catch up on.”

Half the class groaned. The other half were too exhausted to groan. “Mr Williams, we’re always catching up on maths,” said Josh, who was one of his best when it came to maths.

“Tell me about it,” said David.

The class laughed. And David realised that he’d said this aloud – something which he’d only meant to say in his head. He wiped sweat from his forehead, realising he’d been wiping sweat throughout February and into most of March ever since he’d been teaching. Afternoons were unbearable, too hot to operate in. For him and his kids. But despite annual requests/demands from teachers and parents for air conditioning, none came. The school did not have the money for it, and despite endless promises the state government still had not come through with any funding.

“What about singing?” said Josh. “Instead of maths.”

Half a dozen children nodded, brightening up.

“Yeah,” voices murmured. Voices soon joined by others at the thought of something other than maths.

“I’ll get your guitar,” said Josh, standing up before David could put a lid on it.

“Okay,” he said, smiling despite himself. Despite knowing that Bob McDonald, his teaching partner, would not be happy. Bob had already begun a maths lesson with his class.

David knew the sound of his class singing would soon distract the children on the other side of the double teaching area. “Sam, close the folding doors please,” said David.

Bob was not a fan of music. “It’s a frills subject,” he’d once told David. “Like art and dance and drama. They’ve got a place – the school concert at the end of the year, when we’ve finished with the real teaching.”

It wasn’t the most sensitive thing to say to David, considering the amount of music teaching he did in the school. Although he had a grade five class, he only taught them two days a week. The remaining three days he taught the rest of the school music; half an hour for each class. Meanwhile his grade five class was taught by two supply teachers on the three days he taught music. As much as David loved teaching music, he felt guilty about leaving his class in other hands for so long.

David moved to what his class called their “Music Space”, a corner of the room that was carpeted, with musical instruments in boxes and posters of musicians and musical instruments on the walls.

“Okay,” said David, “let’s warm up with ‘The Underwear Song’.”

It was a class favourite – a novelty song, an easy one to sing, great for warming the voice up.

The class sung it once. Requests came to sing it again. David complied. But half way through the second rendition the folding door opened and in strode Bob. David stopped strumming the guitar, but his class kept singing until they reached the end of the song.

“*Mister* Williams, I am trying to teach next door. Could you please have the courtesy not to indulge in music at this point in time. According to your teaching timetable your class’s music time is nine on a Wednesday morning. You may correct me if I’m wrong, but I do not think it is nine o’clock on a Wednesday morning.”

David went red in the face. His voice caught in his throat. And before he could find it, Bob had left the room.

He looked at his class. Some waited for him to speak. Others were looking at the departing Bob. David was awash with embarrassment and humiliation. He briefly closed his eyes. When he opened them his embarrassment had turned to anger – at Bob’s pettiness, at the heat, at the lack of support he got from the administration team in trying to teach music in the school *and* run his own class.

It was at that moment when David first contemplated throwing it all in.

He got over it. Kind of, anyway. He took a sick day the following week. He talked things over with a friend who also taught at the school. “Hang in there, David,” she said. “It’s a short term. Only six more weeks until the holidays.”

He hung in there, making a conscious effort to really enjoy the good parts of teaching – namely teaching the kids. He was polite but distant towards Bob.

By the time the holidays came around the afternoon temperature was cooler; there was no longer any real need for air conditioning. A quarter of the teaching year was nearly over. David felt okay again.

During that first holiday of the year David joked with his girlfriend Belinda about one day changing professions. “The problem is,” he said, “I’m not really qualified to do anything else.”

“So go back and study part-time,” said Belinda.

David thought about this and liked the idea. He had missed study. It had been six years since he’d graduated from university with his teaching degree. There had been no time for study

since. There wasn't really time now, but he figured that if he was ever going to do it, now was the time to make a start.

Most of the holiday period was spent at universities or on university Web sites, perusing courses. At the conclusion of his searching David realised that what he'd most like to do was a Masters degree in Education which culminated in a research project. He was excited at the idea of doing research – something meaningful to him that might also result in change in the workplace. The only problem was the time-frame - four years part-time - and the fees that went with that. The other alternative was a Graduate Certificate in Web design, something he'd been interested in for awhile. That could be done in just a year - at night and during holidays.

“But a Masters in Education isn't going to get you out of teaching,” said Belinda. “Go with the Web design.” Belinda was a physiotherapist.

David knew that this made sense if he did want to eventually leave teaching. But deep down, despite the setbacks he'd encountered, he still wanted to teach. At least now, away from school, he felt as if he did.

On the first day back after the holidays he had a meeting with Russell, the school principal. Russell had done his Masters in Education. “Go for it,” he said. “I loved it, it kept me up with current ways of thinking in the profession, plus the whole research side of things is great. I got a real buzz from it.”

“Well I'd like to do it,” said David. “It's just the time factor.”

Russell smiled. “It'll mean giving up your weekends.”

David nodded. “Sure. And then there's the course fees. They're not cheap.”

“But they're tax deductible.”

“What about, um, getting sponsorship or partial funding from the school or the Department?”

Russell looked at David for a split second before laughing. “That’s a good one. Mate, you’re about ten years too late for that. You know we’re operating on a shoestring budget here, Dave. And as for the Department, well they just don’t put aside that kind of money for professional development any more. I’m sorry.”

“Fair enough,” said David.

But later on he decided it wasn’t fair enough. If a teacher wanted to improve his skills, in his own time through further study, why did the Department not support him with financial aid? In the long run it would mean a better teacher, wouldn’t it?

David decided not to make a decision about study. It was only April, and he didn’t need to enrol for a second semester start until May or early June if he did decide to go ahead with more study.

Three weeks later David did decide to go ahead with further study, in Web design. The reason was a simple one – a parent complaint about how he “handled” a child in a music lesson. Jarred, the child in question, was in grade two. David had just taught the class a song and was demonstrating how to play a chase game that accompanied the song. He did this in the same way he had always demonstrated music games, by showing children how to play. This meant standing in a circle with the children. It also meant holding hands with children – one on his left, one on his right, as the circle needed to be enclosed. Jarred was on his left.

“My son says you held his hand,” Jarred’s mother said to him the following day. “You *touched* my son.” Touched. Making it sound like David had done something dirty, something that was wrong.

He was called into Russell's office. "David, sit down." Very formal, unlike their chat three weeks beforehand. "She's making an official complaint, which means I've got to do this."

"This" was interviews with Jarred, his mother, other children in the class, and David. The interviews were carried out over a period of three days. On the fourth day Russell called David back into his office. "I'm convinced you did nothing wrong."

"Thank you," said David, relieved.

"Nothing abusive that is. But you did hold the boy's hand."

David was dumbfounded. "But I was showing the class how to play a game. I've been doing this for years."

"Then I guess it's time to stop. Any kind of touching – particularly from a male teacher – can be misconstrued. Which is what has happened in this case. Learn from this, David."

David left the office in a daze. When he made it to his classroom he placed his head on his desk. He started to fall asleep, but was awoken by the bell. His class stormed into the room. There was still an hour of the teaching day left. So he lifted his head and he taught.

That evening David got drunk quickly, logged onto the site of the university that offered the Graduate Certificate in Web design, and requested an enrolment form.

Half an hour later, when Belinda arrived home from work, David was grinning from ear to ear. "I'm doing it," he announced. "I start the Web design course next semester."

Belinda smiled. "Good for you."

From the very first lecture David knew he was going to enjoy Web designing. He stayed up late at night working on assignments. In the morning he awoke feeling not quite refreshed. It was only after the morning tea break at school that he really fired up and got into his teaching.

The year came to an end. David had done extremely well in the subjects he was enrolled in. He spent his Christmas vacation doing two summer school subjects. He was totally immersed in Web design.

A new school year began. David knew he had a grade three class, a year level he had never taught before. He had planned to spend some of his vacation reading syllabus documents and preparing the first term's work.

He didn't get around to it. "I've never started a school year this underprepared," he told Belinda.

"You'll be okay," she said.

And David believed her. He figured he would pillage resources and ideas from other grade three teachers. He'd even take some of his grade five planning and modify it for grade three. He told himself he'd been teaching for a long time now and it would be easy.

It wasn't. Teaching music three days, then winging it with his grade three class. Often not even leaving lesson plans for the supply teachers when he went off to teach the rest of the school music.

David felt his class slipping away from him. He lost his passion and excitement for teaching, opting to simply teach things he'd taught before in the same old way, no longer trying new ideas, not seeking out new resources.

He stopped going to the staff room. He spent his lunch hours in his classroom, in front of a computer, working on his Web design assignments.

At the end of the school day he'd be out the door by 3.15, and home in front of his computer by 3.50.

Midway through the year David completed his Graduate Certificate. His final assignment had been the design and implementation of a Web site for a make-believe company. David's lecturer was very impressed. "Are you interested in any work?" he asked.

David hadn't thought about actually working in Web design so soon. "Sure," he said.

"I'll give you a call in a month's time then. I've got a few jobs coming my way, but there's too much work for me. I'm happy to farm some out to you."

"Great," said David, who awoke the following morning fresher than he had been all year. And happier. As he drove to work he decided he'd do something different with his class – they'd design their own Web page. He started thinking about the possibilities of putting the children's work on it. It would be great. He was sure of it.

David told Russell what he would be doing, integrating all Key Learning Areas into this one project – the Web page.

"That sounds great," said Russell. "How about I put you down to inservice the staff on this? We need more IT training."

David forced a smile onto his face. "Sure."

That evening he stayed back at school setting up the four computers in his classroom for the Web page project. Four computers were nowhere near enough, but that's all he – and most other teachers in the school – had. Only by 8 p.m. the four had become two. Two of the machines had crashed.

Not that David was surprised. The machines were nearly ten years old; third-hand machines that had been donated to the school by a local business.

David went home.

"Where have you been?" asked Belinda.

He told her about the computers crashing. "It'll be a month before they're fixed," he said. The school's "preferred" (read cheapest) computer repairer was not renowned for its speedy turnaround. "So what happens to my project over the next month? And even when they do come back this is sure to happen again. The machines are so old, and they're so slow. I'm working in the most primitive conditions."

"So get out," said Belinda. "You said you'll be getting some Web design work soon."

"But that won't be a regular thing."

"So supplement it with something else. What about piano bar work? You did that for years."

"I haven't played in a while."

"So start playing again."

David had paid his way through university playing piano in pubs and clubs. Even when he had started teaching he did occasional weekend gigs. But over the last three or four years he'd stopped playing regularly. In fact he hadn't had a paid job for nearly two years.

David went to his piano and started practising.

Over the next two weeks David practised four hours a night. He contacted his old agent who was happy to have him back on the books.

Things started slowly, with occasional weekend weddings and corporate dinners. This suited David, who by this time was also working on a Web design project his lecturer had passed onto him.

Then came the offer of a regular club gig: Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday nights. "I don't know," he said to Belinda. "I won't finish until eleven and I've got to be up early for school on Thursdays and Fridays."

Belinda didn't pressure him. David decided to think about it over the next day.

The next day was a Tuesday. The previous week a new student, Jacob, had been placed in his class – a student who had left a nearby school because his parents believed the principal of the school had victimised him. “Look,” said his mother, “I know my son's no angel, but kids are kids, right?”

David had had his fair share of children with behaviour problems over the years. He'd found that patience, talking to the children one-on-one, and advice from other experienced teachers helped pave the way for modifying “inappropriate” behaviour. There were, however, extreme cases when additional support was needed, where such children spent time out of the classroom with a Special Needs teacher. But over the last couple of years these teachers were spending less and less time at David's school.

Having witnessed Jacob try to stab another class member in the back with a pencil, and the following day simply walk out of class because he “felt like it”, David had requested assistance from a Special Needs teacher.

“Can't do it, Dave,” said Russell. “Sorry, but other more extreme students take priority.”

“I think this fellow's pretty extreme, Russell.”

Russell smiled. “You're a pro, mate, you'll be right.”

And that was that.

Each day had been difficult, thanks to Jacob. David could never let his guard down, because he knew that if he did Jacob would do God knows what.

On Tuesday morning he did. David had set his class some maths to do, mainly so he could think about his future, specifically whether he'd take the club gig.

There was a scream. From Lily, the girl sitting next to Jacob. “He bit me!”

David looked up. He saw Jacob chomp down on Lily's arm. David ran to the child and immediately placed pressure on the side of his face. "Let go, Jacob."

Jacob did. He turned to David and bit him instead. David let out a howl of pain.

Minutes later Russell was there. He and David managed to pick up the writhing Jacob, who was attempting to bite both Russell and David.

Later that day, as Jacob sat in the sick room colouring in, David knocked on Russell's office door.

"Nice little workout, huh?" said Russell, grinning.

"Yeah, great fun," said David. "So he'll be suspended, right? For how long?" Russell paused. David knew what he was going to say. "No way," said David. "You've got to, you saw what he was doing. It was totally unprovoked."

"Suspending the kid won't help him."

"It'll help me and the rest of my class."

"I realise that, but I've decided ..."

David tuned out. He thought about the piano gig and decided he'd take it. Enough was enough.

Over the next month David spent less and less time preparing for school. He was focused on a new Web design project that had come his way from his lecturer. This one required more hours than the first. David started taking sick days – one a week over a four week period. He was coming to school tired. Teaching was a chore. What he looked forward to was being in front of a computer, designing. And playing piano. He'd forgotten how good that felt.

"I can't keep this up," he told Belinda. "I'm exhausted."

"So resign from teaching."

It made sense. David knew it. He wasn't doing any good at school. He was losing his temper with children, which he had rarely done in the past. His lessons were not interesting. And he was barely civil to Russell.

“You're right, I'll resign.”

But when he turned up at school the next day he just couldn't go through with it. He looked around at the children playing in the quadrangle. The excitement in their voices. And as he passed, children littered him with “hello”s and smiles. David realised he was valued by the children – or at least he had been until very recently. He enjoyed working in this school. Or had enjoyed it.

He applied for a term's leave. Russell approved it.

The next twelve weeks sped by. David completed the Web project and two days later found himself with another. The combination of this and his piano gigs meant he was bringing home more money each week than he did as a teacher. And the best thing of all was the freedom. He did not have somebody like Russell breathing down his neck all the time. He was picking and choosing what to work on and when to work on it.

Yet he still found himself thinking about teaching. And even missing it.

“So you haven't actually resigned yet?” his mother said.

“No,” said David. There were two weeks of his leave left. Russell had phoned him that morning, asking him what his plans were. (“We miss you, David. The kids miss you. Music isn't the same without you.”)

“Well that's all right then,” said David's mother. “You can go back.”

He could. If he chose to. Or he could just walk away. David took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and came to a decision.

References

Australian Council of Deans of Education. (November 1998). Teacher supply and demand to 2004.

Bassey, M. (1999). Case study research in educational settings. Buckingham: Open University Press

Bobbit, S.A, Leich, M.C., Whitener, S.D. & Lynch, H.R. (1994). Characteristics of stayers, movers, and leavers: Results from the teacher follow-up survey: 1991-1992. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Clandinin, D.J. & Connelly, F.M. (1996). Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Teacher stories – stories of teachers – school stories – stories of schools. Educational Researcher, 25(3), 24-30.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). Keeping good teachers. Educational Leadership, 60(8), 6-13.

Dinham, S. (1997) Teaching and teachers' families. Educational Researcher, 24(2), 59-88.

Education Queensland. (2001). Male teacher's strategy.

www.education.qld.gov.au/workforce/diversity/equity/male-teachers.html accessed 15 February 2003.

- Heyns, B. (1988) Education defectors: A first look at teacher attrition in the NLS-72. Educational Researcher, 17, 24-32.
- Ingersol, R.M. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. American Educational Research Journal, 38(3), 499-534.
- McMahon, P. (2000) From angst to story to research text: The role of arts-based educational research in teacher inquiry. Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, Spring, 125-146.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). Case study research in education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, B. & Kantrov, I. (Eds). (1998) Casebook on school reform. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). Projections to 2007. Washington. DC: NCES.
- Pirto, J. (2002). The question of quality and qualifications: Writing inferior poems as qualitative research. Qualitative Studies in Education, 15(4), 431-445.
- Richardson, L. (1994) Writing: A method of inquiry. In N Denzin and Y Lincoln (Eds.) Handbook of qualitative research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 516-529.
- Shen, J. (1997). Teacher retention and attrition in public schools: Evidence from SASS91. Journal of Educational Research, 91, 81-88.

Stake, R. (1998). Case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), Strategies of qualitative inquiry. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 86-109.