Spotlight

Teaching: A valued profession

Contents

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land, sea country and waterways from across Australia. We honour and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Teachers serve a vital role in our society; they act as mentors, experts and role models for future generations.

The significance of the teaching profession is reflected in the demands of the job – specialised expertise, strong interpersonal skills, adaptability and a learning mindset. It would therefore follow that teachers are valued by society, and current evidence supports the notion that they are (Heffernan et al., 2019; Leahy & Selwyn, 2019; Roy Morgan, 2017).

The impacts of COVID-19 on the perceived value of teachers have not yet been realised or measured. With the closing and reopening of schools, the shift to remote learning, and the uncertainty on the impacts of all of these changes on students' academic outcomes and wellbeing, there may have been a concurrent shift in rhetoric around the value of teachers. Certainly in the preceeding few months, teachers have spoken out about being treated as "babysitters" (Anonymous, 2020; McGowan, 2020), while the public and media have spoken out about teachers being "heroes" (Olle, 2020; Victoria, 2020). The Queensland Teachers' Union president Kevin Bates has said, "There's a feeling that they are not being respected for the education professionals that they are." If there is a shift in perceptions, it will not be easy to untangle whether the shift is towards a negative or positive perspective on the value of teachers in Australia.

A recent analysis of media articles from the month of April demonstrates the complexity in untangling public versus teacher perceptions during the COVID crisis (Wilkinson and MacDonald, 2020). What is clear from current evidence is that teachers have been working longer hours during periods of lockdown to meet the needs of their students (Ziebell, Acquaro, Pearn, and Seah, 2020; Phillips and Cain, 2020). It also seems that the demands of remote learning have fostered greater collaboration between carers and teachers as both schools and families have grappled with the changing face of education during the pandemic (Ziebell, Acquaro, Pearn, and Wee Tiong Seah, 2020). Given the importance of strong relationships between schools and families for student outcomes, it is possible that this experience, despite the significant challenges it has posed, may yield some benefits in the long run if learnings are carried forward.

So, why is it important that society values teachers? There is a strong positive correlation between the way teachers are perceived and student performance (Dolton et al., 2018). The more teachers see themselves as valued by society, the higher students rank among the top performers on international PISA tests (Burns & Darling-Hammond, 2014; Gonski et al., 2018; Schleicher, 2018a; Viac & Fraser, 2020). In countries where teaching is highly respected relative to other professions, parents are more likely to encourage their children to become teachers (Dolton et al., 2018), thus, the respect or status accorded to the teaching profession contributes to its desirability as a career for young people.

Australian teachers themselves take personal pride and satisfaction in what they do. Teachers occupy positions of trust and confidence in the community, and are bound by a professional code of ethics (Forster, 2012). Teachers also consistently report that recognition and respect from the community for the daily challenges they face in their role is important (MacBeath, 2012). Unfortunately, teachers also report that they do not think the Australian public appreciates them (Heffernan et al., 2019).

Clearly, teachers contribute to the wellbeing and success of future generations. As research has shown, the value society places on teaching is linked to the attractiveness of teaching as a career, teachers' sense of worth in the profession and their ability to impact student academic achievement. The way teachers are perceived in society (including teachers' self-perception) can impact the entire lifecycle of teaching including the recruitment of new teachers, and the retention, job satisfaction and performance of all teachers. As such, it is worth reflecting on how the public and teachers themselves view the profession, and ways to continue attracting and retaining quality teachers.

At a glance

- Only 45% of Australian teachers in lower secondary schools believe that the teaching profession is valued by society, but public opinion suggests otherwise. The wider Australian public esteems teachers on their honesty and work ethic, and believe they occupy positions of trust and respect.

- Skewed reporting or portrayals of teachers and the state of schooling can have negative implications on whether teachers feel appreciated for their work.

Public perceptions of the profession

Results from the 2018 OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicate that only 45% of Australian teachers in lower secondary schools believe that the teaching profession is valued by society (OECD, 2020a). While this represents a 6-percentage-point increase from 2013 and is higher than the OECD average of 26% (OECD, 2014a, 2020b), it shows Australian teachers generally do not feel appreciated for their work. In contrast, teachers from Asian countries report that they believe the teaching profession is valued by society (64%) (OECD, 2020b), notably in Shanghai (China), Singapore and Korea where student performances on international tests are also higher (OECD, 2019b).

The Australian community, however, appears to value the profession more highly than teachers think. School teaching was viewed as a profession with high honesty and ethical standards by 81% of 648 Australians aged 14 and over who participated in a telephone survey (Roy Morgan, 2017). This was a 4-percentage-point increase from 2016, and a new record high for the profession since the survey was first conducted in 1976. Teaching was ranked 4th out of the 30 different professions polled, above engineers, dentists, police, high court judges, state supreme court judges and university lecturers, but below nurses, doctors and pharmacists (all in the top 10 professions) (Roy Morgan, 2017).

What is TALIS

The Teacher and Learning International Survey (TALIS) collects internationally comparable information on teachers, school leaders and the learning environment in schools. The large-scale survey gathers teachers' and school leaders' beliefs, perceptions and accounts of their activities to help countries develop and refine policies to support a high-quality teaching profession. The 2018 survey involved 48 countries and economies. While focused on lower secondary education, the survey also included perspectives of primary and upper secondary teachers and school leaders, and nine countries who participated in the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). In Australia, 6,603 teachers and 453 principals from a representative sample of primary and secondary schools participated in TALIS 2018.

TALIS produced two volumes on the 2018 findings: Volume 1 – teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners; and Volume 2 – teachers and school leaders as valued professionals. For the full reports, visit: https://www.oecd.org/education/talis/

The discrepancy between how teachers perceive they are valued and how the public perceives teachers was exemplified in a 2019 study performed by researchers from Monash University. Only 29% of teachers felt that the Australian public appreciated them (Figure 1), whereas 82% of the public felt teachers were respected and 93% of the public felt that teachers were trusted (Figure 2) (Heffernan et al., 2019). The Australian public generally agrees that teachers are valued, respected and trusted; however teachers do not appear to be aware of this perception.

Figure 1

Teachers' perceptions of public appreciation (n = 2,444, adapted from Heffernan et al., 2019)

"I feel that the Australian public appreciates teachers"

- Strongly agree — 1%
- Agree — 28%
- Disagree — 56%
- Strongly disagree — 15%
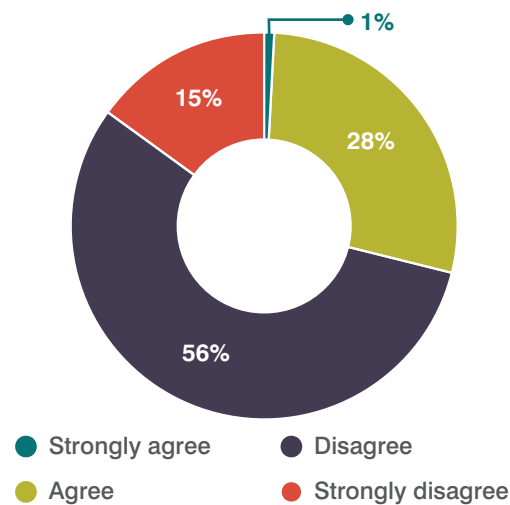
Figure 2

Public perceptions of respect and trust for teachers (adapted from Heffernan et al., 2019)

Respected (82%)

- Don't know — 3%
- Not respected — 15%
- Moderately respected — 19%
- Well respected — 63%

Trusted (93%)

- Don't know — 3%
- Not trusted — 4%
- Moderately trusted — 60%
- Trusted — 33%
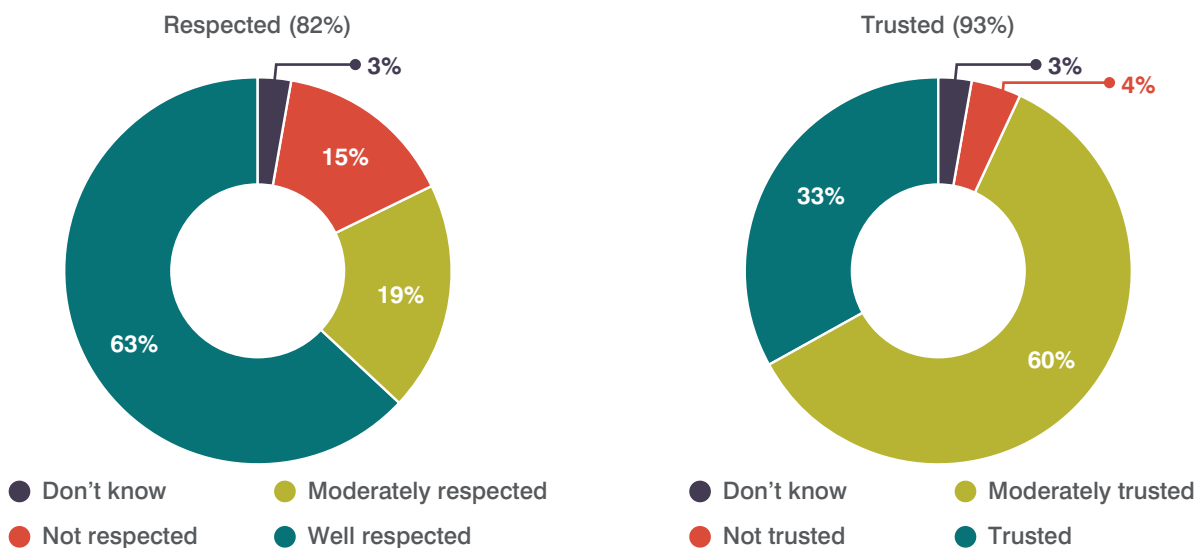
While the public seems to be in agreement that teaching is valued, sometimes media that refers to teachers has a negative slant. A review of message systems that impact public perceptions of teachers and teaching in Queensland, which included content analysis of relevant newspaper headlines and articles between April 2017 and March 2018, found that over half of the 270 relevant articles expressed a negative attitude toward the teaching profession, while only 31% were positive and 14% were neutral (Bahr et al., 2018). Similarly, a qualitative study of Australian news articles between 2009-2011 found that portrayals of teachers and their work tended to sensationalise or reinforce dominant media narratives (Baroutsis, 2019). These distorted representations of teachers and their work can be damaging to the reputation of the profession and teachers' perception of their own value.

In some cases, reports on the state of the teaching profession rely on limited, outdated and unrepresentative information, or international data conflated to the Australian context. A case in point is the issue of teacher attrition within the first five years of teaching. The attrition rate is regularly claimed to be between 30% to 50% for Australian early career teachers. Multiple sources have disputed these figures as there is no nationally linked dataset confirming actual numbers (AITSL, 2016; Buchanan et al., 2013; Weldon, 2018). The issue is compounded by the various interrelated factors contributing to attrition, and a lack of clarity and consistency in definitions of 'attrition' and 'retention' (AITSL, 2016). This example demonstrates how misinformation can be pervasive, particularly when complex issues are oversimplified and stripped of context.

Skewed portrayals of teaching in the media do not appear to match community sentiments towards schools. A 2019 survey canvassing public opinion on education found that "most of the Australian public do not see schools as being in crisis or failing but currently performing OK or better" (Leahy & Selwyn, 2019, p. 18). This finding suggests perceptions about the state of schooling are not as dire as often reported.

An Australian parliamentary inquiry into the status of the teaching profession demonstrated that community leaders and politicians have an important role to play in leading public perceptions of teachers ("Status of the teaching profession," 2019). This inquiry found that the current media approach to messaging on this topic is largely negative and can be derogatory towards teachers in situations where student test results are sub-optimal. For example, findings from a national survey of 2,052 Australian adults on the state of schooling suggest that "politicians, news media and other commentators can afford to be more positive in framing these debates" about the relationship between teaching quality and student performance on international assessments (Leahy & Selwyn, 2019, p. 17).

At a glance

- Surveys have shown that Australian teachers take personal pride and satisfaction in what they do.

- Teachers' level of job satisfaction is strongly linked with their perceived value in society, self-efficacy and performance.

How teachers value the profession

Australian teachers are generally fulfilled and gratified in their work, and report being highly satisfied with their jobs (90%) (OECD, 2020a). High proportions of Australian lower secondary teachers agree that the advantages of being a teacher outweigh the disadvantages (87.8%) and if they could decide again they would still choose to work as a teacher (82.8%); both figures are higher than the OECD average of 76% and 75.6%, respectively (OECD, 2018a) (Figure 3). Only 6.1% regretted the decision, which is below the OECD average of 9.1% (OECD, 2018a).

Figure 3

Teachers' satisfaction with the profession (results based on responses of lower secondary teachers, OECD, 2018a)

Australia average	OECD average
87.8%	76%

"The advantages of being a teacher clearly outweigh the disadvantages"

Australia average	OECD average
82.8%	75.6%

"If I could decide again, I would still choose to work as a teacher"
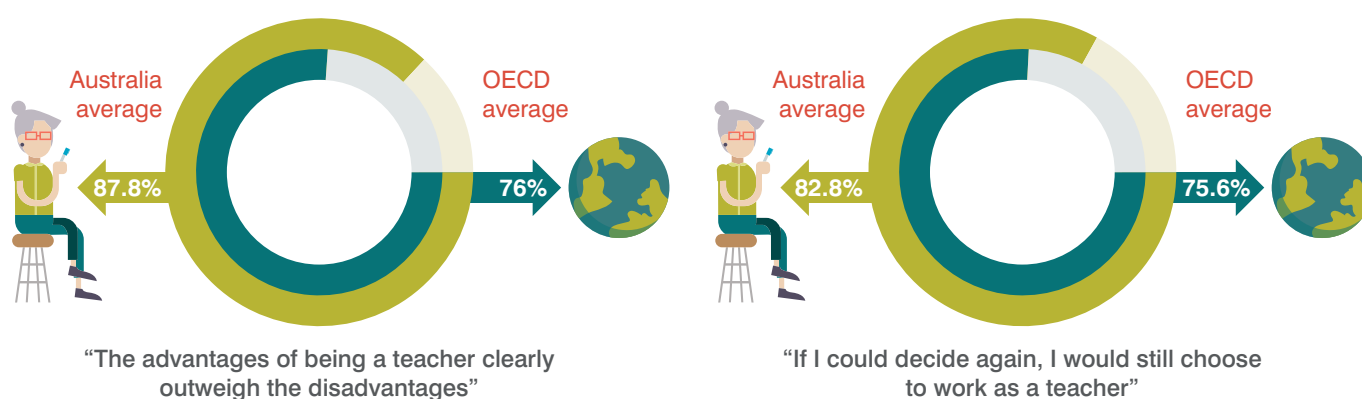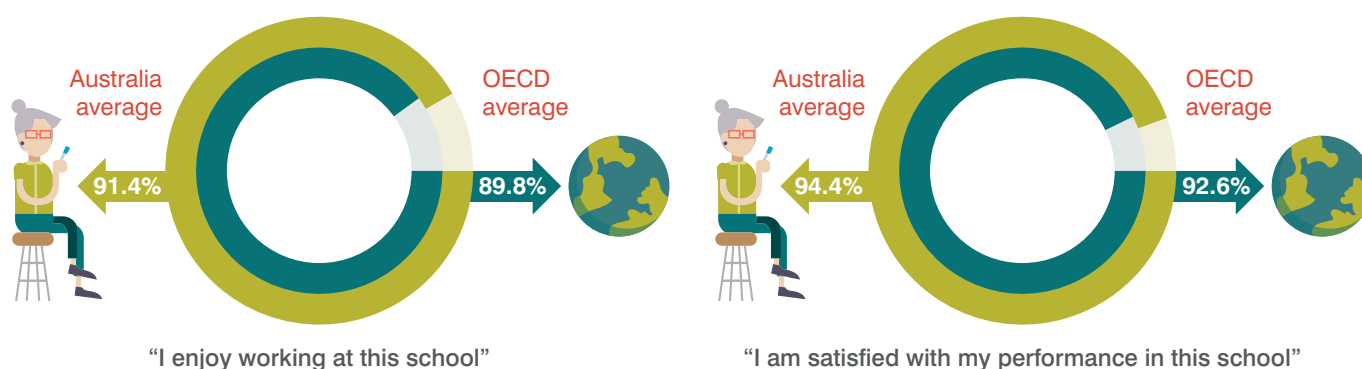
Australian teachers also report satisfaction with their current work environment (OECD, 2018a):

- They enjoy working at their school (91.4%), which is slightly higher than the OECD average of 89.8% (Figure 4). Only 25.4% would like to change to another school if that were possible, compared with the OECD average of 20%.

- They are satisfied with their performance in their school (94.4%), which is also slightly higher than the OECD average of 92.6% (Figure 4).

- They would recommend their school as a good place to work (84%), on par with the OECD average of 83.4%.

Figure 4

Teachers' satisfaction with their current work environment (results based on responses of lower secondary teachers, OECD, 2018a)

Australia average **91.4%**   OECD average **89.8%**

"I enjoy working at this school"

Australia average **94.4%**   OECD average **92.6%**

"I am satisfied with my performance in this school"

The 2018 TALIS results are fairly consistent with the 2013 Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey, which demonstrated that teachers – 89.2% of primary teachers and 85.2% of secondary teachers – were satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs (McKenzie et al., 2014).

Job satisfaction is positively associated with teachers' attitudes about their work, performance and self-efficacy (OECD, 2020a). Reported self-efficacy as well as levels of job satisfaction are also strongly linked with how teachers perceive the status of the profession (as indicated by the extent to which they feel valued in society) (OECD, 2020b). The social standing of teachers, according to the general public and teachers in particular, can have a large impact on recruitment, retention, job satisfaction and performance, and ultimately, on the effectiveness of an education system to support learning growth (Dolton et al., 2018; Schleicher, 2018b).

What teachers say

"I love how special teaching can be as a profession. Yes it has its seasons of hardship, challenges and difficulties, but I believe it takes a special person to be able to teach, to connect, inspire, advise, encourage and see the potential in a student that they themselves sometimes don't see. In my home community I love watching my past students grow, becoming young adults, and reaching milestones such as driving cars, getting jobs or having families, and knowing in some way I was a part of their journey into adulthood."

– Head of student services department in remote Indigenous community school, Thursday Island, Torres Strait

"My favourite component of teaching is seeing the creativity and passion of students. It's great when you give students a problem to solve and they come up with a completely different solution or design then you'd ever imagine. Students who are eager to learn, combined with collaboration with colleagues who have a shared vision, makes teaching a very rewarding profession."

– Teacher in K-12 school, ACT

"I love that teaching is not a static profession and we are encouraged to continue to develop and improve our practice. When I reflect back to my first year as a graduate teacher, I am amazed at how much I have grown both as an educator and as a global citizen. Teaching has taught me to be more open, receptive and empathetic."

– Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT), SA

"Teaching is fantastic! We get to support our students to be the best people that they can be. I especially love the 'AHA' moments – when students have been working at a particular task and they finally get it. They are so excited to know what they know, and their smiles of achievement say it all."

– HALT teacher in K-12 school, NSW

"I love the sense of continuous improvement, both in real time and in planning. Students, teachers and teaching teams all get better at what they do. We are all better on Friday than we were on Monday. It is such an exciting opportunity to feel that growth every day. The problems of the future are being solved today with the attitudes of our young people. The hearts and hands to be bold, be curious, be respectful. Teaching touches the future, and teachers make those links every day."

– HALT middle school teacher, ACT

At a glance

- Across the globe, teachers highly value their contribution to their communities and young people's development. In Australia, 93% of in-service teachers agree with this sentiment, which is 3% higher than the OECD average.

- In Australia, teaching is perceived as a challenging, rewarding and satisfying career. Australian Initial Teacher Education commencements, which increased by 27% between 2008 and 2017, suggest teaching continues to appeal to those interested in a career in education.

Why people become teachers

Teachers enter the profession for different reasons and with varying expectations. Many value the opportunity to make a difference in their community by contributing to young people's academic and socio-emotional development, including students who are socially disadvantaged (Howes & Goodman-Delahunty, 2015).

Results of the 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) show that, for most Australian in-service teachers (93%), contributing to society or young people's development is an important motivator for joining the profession, which is higher than the OECD average (around 90%) (OECD, 2019a). Those who are motivated to pursue a career in the teaching profession also tend to report high levels of job satisfaction, suggesting that the attractiveness of the teaching profession contributes to people wanting to become teachers and staying in their jobs (Viac & Fraser, 2020).

In 2017, initial teacher education (ITE) commencements represented 5% of all commencing higher education students in Australia, a figure that has remained steady over the past decade (AITSL, 2019b). The total number of students commencing an ITE program in 2017 increased by 5% from 2016. Between 2008 and 2017, the total number of ITE commencements increased by 27%. Many factors such as population growth may partly account for this increase. Nonetheless, overall numbers of ITE commencements over the last decade suggest teaching remains an attractive career choice.

An empirical study in Queensland[1] measuring teachers' motivations and perceptions of teaching found that, along with a desire to contribute to society and children's well-being, teachers' perception of their role and the work they do is also a critical factor in their decision to join the profession (Wyatt-smith et al., 2017). The study respondents perceived teaching, whether as a first or subsequent career, as a "demanding profession" and "requiring significant expertise" (Wyatt-smith et al., 2017, p. 6). People are also more likely to be attracted to teaching as a career when they perceive the status of the profession to be high in their society (McKinsey and Company et al., 2007).

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1   The 2017 empirical study in Queensland measured the motivations toward, and perceptions of, teaching of 1,165 participants registered as teachers between 2006 and 2016. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a validated survey tool.

What teachers say

Working in a school is the most rewarding job and life experience I have had to date. Knowing that you can ultimately shape a young person's future by providing a solid, culturally responsive and grounding education is the best feeling. I love meeting my past students who have graduated, to see how they have grown into strong young people is a special thing.

– Head of Indigenous education in secondary school, NSW

I love that teaching is about opening doors, making amazing things possible for children who may not have otherwise had the opportunity. We are a United Nations Global Peace School and the philosophy is driven by the ethos that every child is entitled to a high-quality education - there should be no barriers. I feel privileged to have the opportunity to share learning experiences every day in a humbling, inspiring and motivational environment. Schools are places full of opportunity, hope and brave resilience.

– HALT primary teacher, SA

I love being able to have an impact on young peoples' lives. I enjoyed teaching students to read, where they can access new information independently and the world opens up for them. I love to make students aware of society, and how everyone can contribute to a society in which we respect and support one another. I also love to help students develop their character. I teach my students about challenges, and focusing on having a Growth Mindset, and perseverance when things are difficult. I believe these things teach essential life skills and a love for learning – and as a teacher, I love to be a part of my students' life journeys.

– HALT primary teacher, WA

I have wanted to become a teacher since I was seven years old. I have always had a huge amount of respect for teachers, and over the years developed to love the idea of teaching as my career. Teachers, along with other adults in my life, made a significant and positive impact upon shaping who I am today. I want to be able to have that same kind of impact upon young people.

– Preservice primary teacher, TAS

I grew up in a small country community where I always loved working with and helping young people, especially in sport and recreation which has certainly supported my pathway to teaching. I'm really passionate about inclusion and creating welcoming and safe spaces and environments for all people. I always loved the idea of being a teacher, however growing up I didn't come across many male primary school teachers, so I had to question whether that was a pathway I could take. This sparked a desire to continue on this pathway in order to support and provide various perspectives to our young people.

– Preservice primary teacher, SA

At a glance

- Valuing the teaching profession matters for self-efficacy and the profession's ability to attract and retain teachers.

- In Australia, certification and continuous high-quality professional learning support teachers' belief and ability in what they can achieve, and satisfaction in their work. Where teachers feel capable, worthy and satisfied in their work, they are also motivated to remain in the profession.

Attracting and retaining quality teachers

Recognition of expertise is shown to contribute to improving the status of the profession, and consequently, to attracting high-quality candidates and retaining a strong teaching workforce. A Grattan Institute Report on attracting high achievers to teaching proposes various incentives and ways to promote the status of the profession, such as launching an advertising campaign similar to the Australian Defence Force recruitment campaigns (Goss & Sonnemann, 2019).

Quality teaching can be inferred based on students' learning growth and achievement, quality processes such as collaborating with other teachers and giving meaningful feedback to students, and reported self-efficacy (OECD, 2018b). Studies have shown that self-efficacy is positively related to student achievement and teachers' job satisfaction (OECD, 2018b). Moreover, collective efficacy – the level of shared confidence that teachers have in their collective abilities to guide students to success – not only impacts student learning, it also leads to teacher self-efficacy (Hattie, 2012). This feedback loop benefits both teachers and students. Teachers who are confident in their abilities and persist through difficulties tend to positively influence student outcomes and gain a greater sense of job satisfaction, making them less likely to leave the profession (Herbert-Smith, 2018).

In Australia, there is a strong association between teachers' job satisfaction and having participated in impactful professional learning. Continuous professional learning helps teachers improve their self-efficacy and satisfaction, along with the necessary skills (OECD, 2014b, 2016). A review of nine studies that investigated the effectiveness of professional learning found that, on average, 49 hours of professional learning can boost student achievement by 21 percentile points (AITSL, 2018).

What is high-quality professional learning?

By contributing to job satisfaction, continuous high quality professional learning (HQPL) can be an effective mechanism for the retention of teachers (OECD, 2019c). Effective HQPL practices are relevant, collaborative and future focused, and pervasive in that they are embedded in the school's structures and routines. The collaborative aspect of HQPL, which helps build strong working relationships among teachers, has a powerful flow-on effect as it promotes change beyond individual classrooms to improvements for the whole school or educational setting, as well as outside and across learning communities. For more information, see https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/improve-practice/improving-teacher-professional-learning

Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) Certification

For more information on the benefits of certification, see AITSL's Spotlight publication: https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/research-evidence/spotlight/spotlight_halt.pdf

In Australia, beginning teachers get paid relatively well, with starting salaries that are higher than the average among OECD countries (OECD, 2019c). A good proportion of Australian secondary teachers (67%), which is higher than the OECD average (39%), also report being satisfied with their salaries (OECD, 2020a). That said, Australian teachers with typical qualifications do reach the top of the incremental salary scale more quickly than the OECD average (Ingvarson, 2018; OECD, 2019a) and compared with other tertiary-educated workers (Sonnemann & Nolan, 2019). As in any profession, recognition and reward for experience and expertise are important factors in the attractiveness of a profession and its viability as a long-term career option.

It is worth considering the role of incentives in developing a high-achieving teaching workforce in Australia. The national certification for Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALT) is a form of high-quality professional learning, recognition and career progression, and is associated with increased teacher influence on the performance of colleagues and reduced teacher burnout (Frank et al., 2008; Pucella, 2011). When AITSL surveyed 300 HALTs in 2018, many echoed these benefits, including the broadening of a classroom teacher's sphere of influence and the professionalisation of teaching in the eyes of the community (AITSL, 2019a). In some cases, HALT expertise is recognised in local enterprise agreements and can have remunerative benefits depending on the jurisdiction (AITSL, 2019a). As of 30 June 2020, 726 teachers had achieved certification at the Highly Accomplished or Lead career stage.

Conclusion

Evidence suggests there is a positive correlation between how teaching is perceived by teachers and society, and student academic achievement (Burns & Darling-Hammond, 2014; Gonski et al., 2018; Schleicher, 2014; Viac & Fraser, 2020). In Australia, it is clear the public values teachers and agree they occupy positions of trust and respect, yet this sentiment is not reflected in how teachers perceive their own value.

A considerable body of research indicates that teaching quality is the single biggest in-school factor impacting student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hattie, 2008; OECD, 2019c). This leads to a large, and necessary, focus placed on developing, recognising and retaining quality teachers. Societies where a large proportion of teachers feel valued are more likely to have successful education systems (Schleicher, 2018b).

Teachers in Australia consistently report that they value the opportunity to make a difference in students' lives and are generally satisfied with their career choice. Where teachers believe they are valued in society, as well as being satisfied with their jobs, they also have positive attitudes about their work and ability to influence student achievement. They are more likely to engage in continuous professional development, improve their sense of confidence and satisfaction, and remain in the profession (OECD, 2019c).

The recent and ongoing disruptions to education due to the COVID-19 pandemic have emphasised the crucial role teachers play in the lives of Australian young people. It is critical to leverage any positive changes in societal perceptions of teachers that have occurred as a result of COVID-19 to create lasting change.

The social standing of teachers, from the perspective of society and teachers themselves, has important implications for teacher self-efficacy, and the recruitment and retention of teachers. To sustain an effective education system, the general public, as well the media and those who have the power to influence public perception, have a crucial role to play in elevating the profile and promoting the value of teaching in Australian public life.

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