



**Leaving teaching- lack of resilience or sign of agency?**

Journal:	<i>Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Papers
Keywords:	teacher attrition, resilience, agency, motivation

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Manuscripts

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**Highlights**

- **Attrition- a challenge**
- **Attrition- positive experiences from teaching**
- **Chasing challenges**

For Peer Review Only

## Leaving teaching- lack of resilience or sign of agency?

### Abstract

Alarming numbers of teacher attrition are reported in many countries, including in Norway. Whereas most of the research tells about personal and professional negative experiences which have a harmful impact on teachers' resilience, a different approach is taken in the current paper. Four cases of leavers are purposefully selected because they represent qualified teachers who left the profession, not because they were unhappy with the job or had negative experiences, but because they needed more space and autonomy than they had as teachers. The findings show that their motives for teaching were mainly intrinsic, they were successful teachers, however, they became restless and left their secure jobs to start afresh, and they succeeded. We suggest that it is time to examine the strength of the leavers and accept that teaching is not a lifelong 'call' for some of its best people. It is time to seek new ways to revive the profession.

### Keywords

**Teacher attrition, resilience, agency, motivation**

### Highlights

- **Attrition- a challenge**
- **Attrition- positive experiences from teaching**
- **Chasing challenges**

“The school environment became too narrow, too slow and the leadership was afraid to implement changes. I needed more action. That is why I left” (ex-teacher).

Several authors in this special issue point out that teacher attrition is an increasing problem internationally (Schaeffer, Long & Clandinin, 2012). Likewise, in Norway, Tiplic, Brandmo and Elstad (2015) report that 33% of Norwegian teachers who started to teach in

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2  
3 municipalities and counties (school owners) in 2006 had left the profession by 2011. Roness  
4  
5 (2012) found that 40% of graduating teachers from Norwegian post-graduate teacher  
6  
7 education programs either did not commence teaching or left within 18 months. We were not  
8  
9 able to find documentation of the attrition rate of more experienced teachers. The above  
10  
11 figures are alarming as they do not only point to a problem in the educational sector, but also  
12  
13 in society as a whole. High levels of attrition require an ongoing need to attract new teachers  
14  
15 to the profession. This places the profession of teaching at risk and diminishes the quality of  
16  
17 instruction available to students in school. Maintaining and developing a quality society  
18  
19 depends on future generations being well prepared to be at the forefront of a competitive  
20  
21 global world (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Norges offentlige utredninger [NOU], 8, 2015).  
22  
23 Ronfeld, Loeb and Wyckoff (2013) found that a high turnover rate has a negative impact on  
24  
25 student achievement, and they provide possible explanations such as restlessness in the  
26  
27 teaching staff as there is no time to build collegial and trusting relationships, and the  
28  
29 institutional knowledge gets lost when teachers leave and new teachers come in.  
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33  
34 Christophersen, Elstad, Solhaug and Turmo (2016) pinpoint attrition as a challenge for  
35  
36 education systems internationally, including in Norway.  
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39 Attrition is a complex concept which cannot be understood by looking at the numbers  
40  
41 in isolation. Gu and Day (2013) suggest that external factors such as student behaviour,  
42  
43 mandatory documentation requirements and accountability pressure affect teachers' resilience  
44  
45 to stay in the profession. They also declare that the motive to become teachers is often the  
46  
47 wish to make a difference to children's life and their resilience is weakened when they  
48  
49 discover that they are not able to practice teaching according to their beliefs and values.  
50  
51 Resilience is a key factor to staying in the profession (Day et al., 2007). It is assumed that the  
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53 more resilient teachers are, the more likely they are to continue teaching in spite of external  
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55 and personal challenges impacting their job.  
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3 Does this mean that those who leave the profession lack resilience, and the remedy to  
4 reduce attrition is to strengthen the individual teacher's resilience? The claim that we want to  
5 put forward in this paper using four Norwegian cases as examples is that it is not always lack  
6 of resilience that makes teachers leave the profession. For some it might be lack of challenges,  
7 slow decision making processes and few career opportunities that make people leave. Some  
8 people want to be agents of their professional careers and experience being restricted as  
9 teachers. The teaching profession did not meet their expectations, not because it was too  
10 demanding or too difficult, but because it did not have space for new ideas, innovations,  
11 development and autonomy. In this article, we have selected four narratives of leavers, and  
12 the stories tell about strong, resilient people who felt restrained by the profession. Their  
13 resilience is enacted outside teaching. We therefore support Gu and Day's (2013) claim that  
14 "The nature and extent of resilience is best understood then as a dynamic within a social  
15 system of interrelationships" (p. 25). Furthermore, we claim that leaving teaching is not  
16 always an issue of resilience as it can be enacted in other contexts. As a backdrop, we refer to  
17 research on teachers' working environment and motivation for teaching, each of which is  
18 briefly introduced below.

### 38 **Working environment**

39 Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) identified challenges new teachers face concerning  
40 socialization into teaching and understanding the micro politics of their school contexts. Other  
41 researchers stress the importance of relationships with students, colleagues, and the school  
42 leadership (Smith, Ulvik & Helleve, 2013, b) in sustaining teachers' motivation. Boyd et al.  
43 (2007) found that the strongest predictor for decisions to leave the school and the profession  
44 among New York's teachers, was related to their perceptions of school leadership and  
45 administration. Lack of feedback and support often influenced teachers' decisions to leave.  
46 Furthermore, many teachers experience feelings of isolation (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

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3 Cooperation among teachers, regular, supportive communication with school leadership  
4  
5 (Peters & Pearce, 2012), and a trusted dialogue partner, and/or mentor, have been found to  
6  
7 strengthen teacher' resilience, and prevent burnout (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daylay, 2006;  
8  
9 Smith & Ingersoll, 2004, Borman & Dowling, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

11 How teachers perceive their working environment might also depend on global  
12  
13 tendencies of marketization of the educational system. Hargreaves and Goodson (2006)  
14  
15 describe the period from the mid-1990s as the age of standardization, marketization, and  
16  
17 accountability, a tendency which seems to be strengthened, especially when observing the  
18  
19 extensive attention the OECD PISA tests receive internationally. Teachers' autonomy is  
20  
21 affected and they have to relate to new implementation requirements and intensified work  
22  
23 demands.  
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### 27 **Motivation for teaching**

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29 Motivation for teaching is important to understanding the problem of attrition and retention.  
30  
31 Here we highlight the work of Watt and Richardson from Australia alongside the doctoral  
32  
33 work of Dag Roness from Norway. Watt and Richardson (2007) developed a quantitative  
34  
35 instrument, *Factors Influencing Teaching* (FIT scale) within their longitudinal *Factors*  
36  
37 *Influencing Teaching – Choice* project. They conducted an international comparative study in  
38  
39 four OECD countries: Australia, Germany, Norway and USA (Watt et al., 2012). They found  
40  
41 similarities across national contexts in the motivation for choosing teaching, such as intrinsic  
42  
43 motivation (working with the subject matter and the act of teaching), perceived teaching  
44  
45 ability, the desire to make a social contribution and finally, positive prior learning and  
46  
47 teaching experiences. Factors related to extrinsic motivation (job security, salaries, time for  
48  
49 family) were scored comparatively lower across all four settings (Watt et al., 2012). Similar  
50  
51 findings are also documented in more recent studies which point at altruistic and social utility  
52  
53 motives as the main drivers for people choosing the teaching profession (Watt, Richardson &  
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3 Smith, in press). These findings align with the Norwegian findings from Roness' PhD project  
4  
5 (2012), where he ascertained that altruistic and intrinsic factors were more important than  
6  
7 extrinsic factors such as long vacations, salaries, etc. Roness followed the 2006 cohort of post  
8  
9 graduate certificate in education (PGCE) students from Norwegian Universities over a period  
10  
11 of 30 months; examining their motivation for teaching at the entrance to and at the end of  
12  
13 teacher education (12 months), and 18 months after graduating as qualified teachers. He found  
14  
15 that, after 18 months in the profession, 40% of the 2006 cohort were no longer employed as  
16  
17 teachers. In the initial 4-year primary and lower secondary school teacher education program,  
18  
19 research indicates that disappointment and disillusionment among newly qualified teachers  
20  
21 appears to be connected mainly with individuals who commenced their teacher education  
22  
23 programme with high intrinsic and altruistic motivations (Roness & Smith, 2010). For this  
24  
25 Norwegian group of teachers, the teaching profession fell short of their expectations (Roness,  
26  
27 2012; Smith, Ulvik & Helleve, 2013a).  
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31  
32 Another useful distinction is found in Watt and Richardson's (2008) longitudinal study  
33  
34 collecting data from 510 Australian teacher education students at the beginning and just prior  
35  
36 to receiving their qualification papers. The researchers came up with three clusters of  
37  
38 students, first the *highly engaged persisters* who intended to spend their professional life as  
39  
40 teachers in the classroom, working with children. They saw teaching as a call. The second  
41  
42 cluster is the *highly engaged switchers* who had other career plans after having tried out  
43  
44 teaching. They sought new challenges, and often had a five-year plan for switching  
45  
46 professions. When they worked as teachers they were highly engaged and successful, but they  
47  
48 were in constant search for new challenges. The third group was the *lower engaged desisters*,  
49  
50 those who were disappointed with the job, it was too much work, not enough support and they  
51  
52 felt that children did not appreciate education. These teachers are likely to represent what  
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3 Ingersoll (2001) called healthy turnover, and too little turnover might lead to stagnancy  
4  
5 (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).  
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7  
8 It is, however, the second cluster, the *highly engaged switchers*, which form the  
9  
10 population of interest to us in this article. These teachers are well-educated and dedicated.  
11  
12 After working successfully as teachers, they are ready to move on searching for new  
13  
14 challenges/careers. In this case, the reasons for leaving teaching are not necessarily negative,  
15  
16 but reflective of how many young people today seek new opportunities. The Danish  
17  
18 researcher, Krejsler (2005), calls these highly educated professionals ‘competence nomads’,  
19  
20 and sees teacher turnover as a societal development, which is not necessarily related to  
21  
22 negative classroom/school experiences. Teachers with higher ability and better qualifications  
23  
24 measured by entrance scores to teacher education and advanced degrees are more likely to  
25  
26 leave the profession (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Consequently, when looking at attrition,  
27  
28 how to support teachers in strengthening their resilience is, perhaps, not always the answer.  
29  
30 There might be other reasons than lack of resilience which need to be examined, and these  
31  
32 reasons are not found in the statistic, but in the stories of the leavers.  
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### 36 **Context**

37  
38 The context of the current article is a wider research project in which a team of five  
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40 researchers interviewed 24 Norwegian ex-teachers. The target population, teachers who have  
41  
42 left the profession, is a hard-to-reach population. As there are no formal attrition lists,  
43  
44 sensitive ethical issues regarding accessing and approaching participants have to be  
45  
46 considered. Therefore, a chain referral sampling strategy (snowball sampling) was used to  
47  
48 strategically access networks of school principals, professional organisations, teacher  
49  
50 educators, and ex-teachers to ensure a wide range of participants to be approached (Noy,  
51  
52 2008, p.330). The advantage of the snowball sampling technique is that it reaches populations  
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54 with common characteristics that are not formally linked in existing databases. We  
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3 acknowledge, however, the limitations with snowball sampling that need to be addressed such  
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5 as not disturbing the privacy of the informants and be alert to extreme voices being featured  
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7 (Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003; Noy, 2008).  
8

### 9 10 **The study**

11 For the purposes of this paper, two members of the larger research team (the authors) selected  
12  
13 four cases from the data pool. The selection of the four cases was purposive: our purpose was  
14  
15 to tell the stories of people who had left teaching, but not because they found it too hard, too  
16  
17 challenging or were unhappy with the students and lacked resilience to continue. On the  
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19 contrary, the four stories are told by people who enjoyed teaching and working with children,  
20  
21 who felt competent and experienced success, but who wanted to go on, try out jobs in which  
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23 dynamics, changes and challenges were at a higher level than in teaching. These stories are  
24  
25 individual narratives selected with a specific purpose in mind, and are not representative for  
26  
27 all who leave teaching. Three interviews took place in 2014 and one in 2016, and all the  
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29 informants are still working. However, they went into and left teaching at different points of  
30  
31 their career. Our intention is to show a different aspect of attrition than what is presented in  
32  
33 the mainstream literature, which Schaefer, Long and Clandinin capture below:  
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38 In framing the problem of beginning teacher attrition....., there is a suggestion that  
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40 beginning teachers who leave the profession (a) are not resilient, (b) are not  
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42 resourceful enough, or (c) are not committed enough to stay in the profession. Thus,  
43  
44 those who leave the profession are often seen as having deficits, or as being deficit”  
45  
46 (Schaefer, Long & Clandinin, 2012, p.10).  
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### 49 50 **Method**

51 Narrative inquiry has been used as the research method in this paper (Connelly & Clandinin,  
52  
53 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995). First, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with  
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55 the four participants. The interviewees were asked about their teacher education  
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3 qualifications, years of experience in teaching, why they decided to be teachers and what they  
4  
5 enjoyed in teaching. Next, they were asked why they chose to leave teaching and about their  
6  
7 current job. Finally, they responded to questions about what they missed in teaching and what  
8  
9 could possibly make them return to teaching. The interviews were transcribed and written in  
10  
11 narrative form by the two authors. All participants had agreed that the transcribed interviews  
12  
13 could be used for research purposes, thus further agreement was not sought. The questions  
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15 triggered reflections over a longer period of time in the participants' life, from motivation at  
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17 the entrance to teacher education, throughout their teaching career until exiting the profession,  
18  
19 and about their current occupations. The stories tell about their professional journeys which  
20  
21 are affected by who they are and the context in which they operate, personal as well as  
22  
23 professional. In this respect the narratives are what Clandinin, Downing and Huber (2009) call  
24  
25 *stories to live by*. The four stories we analyse in this article reflect shifting personal and  
26  
27 professional landscapes.  
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### 31 **Analysis**

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33 The narratives were read and reread by the two authors, first with a vertical view to look at the  
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35 specifics in each of the stories and then in a horizontal perspective searching for  
36  
37 commonalities in the four narratives. A frame for analysis was found in a recent paper by  
38  
39 Harfitt (2015) who analysed the narratives of two teachers in Hong Kong who left teaching  
40  
41 and returned to the profession. Harfitt's four themes were "(1) the imagined life of a teacher,  
42  
43 (2) the teacher's personal landscape, and (3) facilitating factors in the decision to stay or leave  
44  
45 (personal and professional)" (p.26). We also added two more themes (4) current professional  
46  
47 landscape, and (5) current perspective on the teaching profession. In reporting the results,  
48  
49 excerpts from each of the narratives will be presented under each theme.  
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### 53 *Participants*

54  
55 John (pseudonym)  
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3 John is 40 years old and had a 4-year teacher education program specializing in  
4 physical education and history. Later on, he continued with his studies and completed a  
5 master degree in history. He has been teaching for nine years in a lower secondary city  
6 school. His mother was a teacher, and his father worked as an engineer. It was a natural  
7 course to proceed to higher education after secondary school, yet it was not so evident that  
8 John would choose teacher education. But he had a positive model in his mother who talked  
9 enthusiastically about her work and the joy of working with children. John had tried it out by  
10 being an assistant coach for a football team for young children, and he really enjoyed the  
11 relationship with the kids, and especially the respect he felt he gained from them, alongside  
12 the autonomy he saw the main coach enjoying. So, he said to himself: "Why not teaching,  
13 children in school were probably not different from the young football players?" and with a  
14 good education he would be confident in the role as a teacher.  
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29 John found teaching difficult the first year, more difficult than he had expected. The  
30 children did not seem to enjoy school as much as they enjoyed the football practice, and there  
31 were lots of restrictions on what he could do and could not do as a teacher. But, most of all,  
32 the parents' meetings scared him. The parents seemed to blame him if their daughter/son did  
33 not do as well as they expected, and few questioned what they could do to support their child  
34 or how they could work together. However, in the second year, John found a lot of confidence  
35 in the good relationship he had established with the children, and the fear of the parents  
36 correlated negatively with the increased experience and confidence. John was happy as a  
37 teacher, did well, and he felt he was acknowledged by colleagues, the leadership of the school  
38 and the parents. He continued with coaching young football teams all this time. After five  
39 years of teaching he found time to take a qualifying course as a football coach, and he was  
40 asked to be the assistant coach of the adult team. For four years John had a full teaching job  
41 and coached football, but little-by- little he felt that the freedom he had as a coach was nearly  
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3 non-existent in his teaching job, especially in relation to physical education. There were too  
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5 many general goals and documentation of achievements of the goals, and John experienced  
6  
7 that the individual child was lost in the administrative bureaucracy. The fun of sports and  
8  
9 physical activity was lost in external requirements in 'an attempt to make the subject more  
10  
11 academic'. When an offer of a full-time coaching job for a team in a higher league came up,  
12  
13 John decided to go for it, and left teaching. Today he has been a successful coach for nearly  
14  
15 five years, enjoys it, and finds that he uses much of his knowledge from teacher education and  
16  
17 the experience as a teacher in his current job. But as a coach, he decides how to work with the  
18  
19 individual player and with the team, he is the professional, he can try out new ideas, and is  
20  
21 responsible for successes as well as failures. Every week there is at least one game packed  
22  
23 with tension and excitement, something he missed in teaching. John does not think of going  
24  
25 back to teaching, yet he talks fondly of the relationship with the children as the best part of the  
26  
27 job. But 'today teaching is too restricted, teaching has become technical, you are just expected  
28  
29 to do what others tell you to do'.  
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33  
34 Liv (pseudonym)  
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36  
37 Liv was prepared as a primary school teacher, and she started her four-year teacher  
38  
39 education as a single mother with two children. The main reasons for deciding to become a  
40  
41 teacher was the holidays, not because they were long, but because she would be free at the  
42  
43 same time her two children were on school holiday. Liv worked as a teacher for five years  
44  
45 before she decided to leave the profession in 2011. She truly enjoyed teaching, enjoyed the  
46  
47 relationship with the children and felt she learned something new every day. However, her  
48  
49 main reason for choosing the profession was that she thought she would have more time with  
50  
51 her own children, she believed it would be a job that suited her life situation, being a single  
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53 mother of two school children. But her experiences of teaching were different. She felt that  
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55 the job took over her life and was much more demanding than what she had foreseen. In the  
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3 beginning she accepted it as a fact of being new to a job, it takes time to settle in, to find a  
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5 routine and it would be less time consuming as she gained experience. This was, however, not  
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7 the case, the job continued to eat into her leisure time, correcting papers and planning during  
8  
9 the weekends, and the holidays became holidays just in the name. Planning, preparing for  
10  
11 teaching new curriculum and staff meetings took much of the leisure time she wanted to  
12  
13 spend with her own children. After five years she decided to make a change and left teaching  
14  
15 to become a cleaner on an oil-rig in the North Sea. She took courses and is now the head of  
16  
17 the cleaning staff on the rig. Today she has more time to spend with her children who are with  
18  
19 their father when she is on the rig (two week periods), and then she has four weeks at home  
20  
21 and plenty of time for the children. The pay is much better as well, and she enjoys the close  
22  
23 collegial relationships which often develop in such a close space as the oil rig. The services on  
24  
25 the rig are good, food and laundry are taken care of. Liv also feels she has the energy to  
26  
27 continue her education in economics and management, and she sometimes accepts invitations  
28  
29 as a replacement teacher when she is on-shore. She does not think of returning to school as a  
30  
31 full-time teacher, not as teaching is today with the salary being disproportionate to the heavy  
32  
33 workload, mainly caused by the extensive documentation requirements. “The best teachers are  
34  
35 on sick leave or leave the profession” commented Liv.  
36  
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40  
41 Liv exhibits strong resilience in having the courage to make positive choices when she  
42  
43 was unhappy with teaching, choices which opened new opportunities for family life,  
44  
45 education and further job opportunities.  
46

47 Ole (pseudonym)

48  
49 Ole is a male in his 60s. When he started to teach in 1975, he had a master degree in  
50  
51 foreign languages and teacher qualification (certification) in physical education. He worked as  
52  
53 a school teacher and principal almost continuously until 1990. Thereafter, he worked in the  
54  
55 private sector. Throughout his working life he has taken a variety of further higher education,  
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3 among which were mentor and principal education and a master degree in economics. He still  
4  
5 continues his personal professional education.  
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8 Ole was always told that he would be a good teacher and chose teaching because he  
9  
10 had a hold on kids, and they had a hold on him. He enjoyed interacting with people, especially  
11  
12 young people and to have a positive impact on their lives in a period when impact from an  
13  
14 adult has a lot to say. In some ways his most important job from a social perspective was  
15  
16 being a school leader responsible for 300 students and almost 40 teachers. The most positive  
17  
18 experience from school was meeting young people, especially those who were perceived as  
19  
20 losers. He lost his own father in the age of 12 and enjoyed being a father figure to the “tough  
21  
22 kids”. He received much positive feedback on his role as educator and leader.  
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26  
27 However, even though he appreciated to work in the school system, the pace in  
28  
29 schools was too slow to fit his personality. He characterises himself as impatient and curious.  
30  
31 He bubbles with energy and wants to be part of decision-making processes. From the time of  
32  
33 his teacher preparation, he knew that he would not stay in the classroom, but move on in his  
34  
35 career and become a school principal. However, after some year he understood that the  
36  
37 progress and perspectives in schools were too narrow to make him happy. Ole realised that at  
38  
39 meetings, highly qualified people wasted time on trivial matters, and he asked himself  
40  
41 whether he could achieve his potential within the system. It was not a question about money,  
42  
43 but he thought that he would never manage to stay happy only being with the kids. He  
44  
45 enjoyed it, but at the same time strived for something more.  
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49  
50 In 1990, Ole went into business and had a successful career. He took a master’s degree  
51  
52 in economics and lots of other courses. He soon became the manager of a huge company with  
53  
54 300 affiliations and thousands of employees. Ole’s company profited well, and he eventually  
55  
56 had more money than he could ever spend. In his late 50s he sold his shares in the company,  
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3 took some years off and went sailing and did whatever he wanted to. However, after a while  
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5 he became restless and his energy led him to new jobs and he started to study law.  
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8 Ole does not see it as a possibility to start working as a teacher today, possibly if he  
9  
10 were ten years younger? But then it would have to be in a leadership position. Sitting at the  
11  
12 end of the table, summing up and in the afternoon carrying out what was decided the same  
13  
14 morning is more within his way of working. However, he sees quite a few similarities  
15  
16 between working in the private sector and being a teacher. It is about listening,  
17  
18 communicating and respecting people. That is what gives success. He is using his knowledge  
19  
20 and skills in economics and pedagogy all the time, so nothing he did previously has been  
21  
22 wasted. If he had stayed in teaching Ole thinks he would have become frustrated and thereby  
23  
24 not a very good teacher. Reflecting backward, he sees it was a right decision to leave  
25  
26 teaching. Reflecting backward, he sees it was a right decision to leave  
27  
28 teaching.  
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30  
31 Anna (pseudonym)  
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33 As a child, Anna always planned to become a teacher. She was a clever girl and the  
34  
35 school was a good place for her to be. In upper secondary school, she became the editor of a  
36  
37 school newspaper. She enjoyed it and also thought about doing something that included  
38  
39 writing.  
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42  
43 As a student, Anna decided to become a psychologist, and studied psychology for a  
44  
45 year. She then moved on to studying English before she eventually went into teacher  
46  
47 education, which was her very first plan. She worked as a teacher for about four years in a  
48  
49 primary school, first as a substitute teacher before she followed a class from level 1-4.  
50  
51

52  
53 Anna really enjoyed being a teacher. She managed her tasks well, the colleagues were  
54  
55 great and the school was new and well equipped. The staff was young and cooperated well to  
56  
57 develop their teaching and teaching material, and Anna said that they worked long hours  
58  
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2  
3 because it was fun. Anna's most positive experience as a teacher was interacting with people,  
4  
5 the children and colleagues. Teaching was not only about transmitting knowledge; it was also  
6  
7 about developing people. She enjoyed having an impact. However, the workload could be  
8  
9 heavy. The young teachers were idealistic and wanted their teaching to be exciting. Anna also  
10  
11 struggled with her principal sometimes, an old-fashioned man in a modern school. However,  
12  
13 what is mentioned as negative here played a minor role.  
14  
15

16  
17 In 1980, Anna was, to her surprise, accepted into a two-year journalist education  
18  
19 program, and left teaching. Nothing in her work conditions made her leave. Partly she left  
20  
21 because of her dream about doing something else in her life, and partly because she had met a  
22  
23 man who lived in the town where the journalist education program took place.  
24  
25

26  
27 After finishing her new preparation, she first worked as a journalist, then in many  
28  
29 different companies and had a successful career in communication as a consultant, leader, and  
30  
31 director before she finally started a company with a group of people. There she became the  
32  
33 top leader for one of the biggest departments. To begin the company, she left a secure job  
34  
35 once more. However, it all went well and today the company is well known in Norway.  
36  
37

38  
39 Looking back and talking about why she left teaching, Anna claims that it might have  
40  
41 had to do with her personality. She still has good contact with some previous colleagues and  
42  
43 meets them from time-to-time. Some of them have been in the same school all the time, and  
44  
45 Anna cannot understand how they are able to manage. They are doing the same tasks; they  
46  
47 talk about the same things; nothing happens. However, while some become bored being in the  
48  
49 same situation, Anna says, others find it safe and good. Anna thinks that she might have  
50  
51 continued in school if there had been more career paths for teachers. Only a few, she said, can  
52  
53 become leaders. Thinking about it, Anna could have gone back to teaching after some years.  
54  
55 So why did she not go back? she asks rhetorically. It could have something to do with salary,  
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3 or with habit. At one stage, however, she might have said yes if someone did ask her to go  
4  
5 back. Then she would have a job paying less, but a job where she could follow her own heart,  
6  
7 and she would certainly appreciate long holidays.  
8  
9

### 10 **Findings**

11  
12 Below the four narratives are analysed according to the themes previously mentioned in this  
13  
14 article. Narrative fragments from the exemplars are used to illustrate our interpretations.  
15  
16

#### 17 1. The imagined life of a teacher

18  
19 The four leavers had various reasons for becoming teachers. John was expected to enter  
20  
21 higher education and was motivated to choose teacher education by his mother's enthusiasm  
22  
23 for the work as well as by his personal experience as an assistant football coach working with  
24  
25 young children. Thus he imagined his life as a teacher would be a job which gave him  
26  
27 personal satisfaction working with motivated children who enjoyed going to school. In this  
28  
29 respect, John was not disappointed. However, other aspects of teaching related to external  
30  
31 demands caused him to leave at the end.  
32  
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34  
35 Liv had more extrinsic motives for deciding to become a teacher as a single mother of  
36  
37 two children. She wanted to have more time to spend with her children, not having to find  
38  
39 placements for the children during the school holidays when she was at work. She imagined  
40  
41 her life as a teacher would enable her to enjoy the holidays together with her own children,  
42  
43 and when she realised this was not the case, she decided to leave the profession for which she  
44  
45 had spent four years of her adult life preparing.  
46  
47

48  
49 Ole became a teacher because people told him it suited him, and he enjoyed being a  
50  
51 leader from a young age. Missing his own father whom he lost when he was a young boy, he  
52  
53 imagined himself to be a father figure, especially for students with problems. He enjoyed  
54  
55 socializing with young people and found that they enjoyed being with him. Ole's motivation  
56  
57 for being a teacher can be characterized as intrinsic and, to a certain extent, also altruistic. He  
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1  
2  
3 wanted to achieve his true potential, and support young people growing up. When he decided  
4  
5 to leave teaching, he found that he could not reach his potential in the school system,  
6  
7 something he thought might have a negative impact on the quality of his work.  
8

9  
10 Anna enjoyed school and planned at a young age to become a teacher. However, she  
11  
12 had many interests and many paths she could follow and when starting her university  
13  
14 education, it was not obvious that she should become a teacher. When she eventually went  
15  
16 into teaching, her central motive was to interact and communicate with people. The same  
17  
18 motivation guided her further career when she left teaching to follow another interest of hers  
19  
20 to write. Even if she enjoyed her work, Anna cannot imagine a whole career at the same  
21  
22 workplace. For her that would be boring.  
23

24  
25 The imagined life of teachers has to be considered in relation to the motives for choosing  
26  
27 teaching, and in these four narratives we find that these motives are intrinsic (John, Ole, and  
28  
29 Anna), as well as extrinsic (Liv). Besides Ole, the three others did reflect a strong altruistic  
30  
31 motivation for teaching. Ole found ways to support the weaker youngsters also outside the  
32  
33 educational system. We did not find evidence of social utility motives in the texts other than a  
34  
35 statement by Anna who said that teaching is an important profession for society (Watt &  
36  
37 Richardson, 2012; Watt, Richardson & Smith, in press). The four cases reflect more personal  
38  
39 reasons for becoming a teacher, intrinsic in the way they talk about the pleasure of teaching  
40  
41 and leading children, and extrinsic in form of expected holidays.  
42  
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## 45 2. The teacher's personal landscape

46  
47 This theme relates to how the participants experienced teaching and the working environment.  
48  
49 Common to all four is that they were not unhappy with the practice of teaching itself, and  
50  
51 John says that even though it was challenging in the first year, he started to enjoy the job as he  
52  
53 gained more experience. He emphasizes that he especially enjoyed the relationship with the  
54  
55 children and felt competent in the other aspects of teaching, including handling demanding  
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3 parents. John was happy with his colleagues and leadership. It was the increased external  
4 requirements that made him question his future as a teacher. Liv also talks about enjoying  
5 teaching, and again the relationship with the children is mentioned as one of the most  
6 satisfying aspects of teaching, and that this is what she misses most when looking back. In  
7 addition, she developed a kind of intrinsic motivation as she experienced she was engaged in  
8 an ongoing learning process as a teacher. In the case of Ole, he was happy being in charge of  
9 the young people. He always received positive responses both as teacher and principal, and  
10 contrary to most teachers he never seems to have struggled with the workload. Actually  
11 teaching was never enough for him; he participated in a range of side activities. In school,  
12 there was gradually a lack of challenges, and Ole found decision processes slow and often  
13 related to trivial matters.

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27 Anna was excited by her work as a teacher from the very beginning. It was a busy  
28 occupation, but she enjoyed preparing lessons together with good colleagues and to teach her  
29 students and see them develop. When Anna left teaching it was not because she did not like to  
30 be a teacher, but that she also wanted to try out something else.

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35  
36 The four narratives do not align with the mainstream literature on teacher attrition in terms  
37 of having unhappy or unsatisfactory teaching landscapes. Neither did we see evidence of  
38 deficit or lack of resourcefulness and resilience (Schaefer, Long & Clandinin, 2012). Yet, our  
39 four participants in the sample of convenience still decided to leave teaching, but because of  
40 reasons exhibiting strength and not weakness.

### 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 3. Facilitating factors in the decision to stay or leave (personal and professional)

48  
49 In our analysis of the four narratives, we found that the reasons for leaving teaching were both  
50 personal and professional. With respect to the professional, John felt his professionalism was  
51 impacted by external demands on how to teach and the increased demand for documentation.  
52 His experience was that he could not enact his pedagogical beliefs and values, especially in  
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3 physical education where differentiated achievements were for him at the heart of the subject.  
4  
5 Personally, he had continued educating himself as a football coach and when the offer came  
6  
7 to be the head coach for an adult team, he decided to take the big step and leave teaching.  
8

9  
10 Liv's reasons for leaving were mainly personal, she had expected to have more time to  
11  
12 spend with her own children, which did not materialise because for her, a dedicated teacher,  
13  
14 the workload stole much more time than she had expected. Work requirements are, however,  
15  
16 also related to the profession, especially in the current era of accountability and external  
17  
18 demands. After having taught for five years, and even enjoying it, she decided that this was  
19  
20 not what she had foreseen and was brave enough to leave teaching and start a completely new  
21  
22 career. This is not a sign of deficit or not being resourceful, on the contrary, Liv took charge  
23  
24 of the situation and made productive changes on behalf of her children and herself.  
25  
26

27  
28 While John and Liv recently left teaching, both Ole and Anna left before what  
29  
30 Hargreaves and Goodson (2006) call the age of standardization and marketization. Ole and  
31  
32 Anna do not mention external demands or not being allowed to be the teacher they wished to  
33  
34 be. Still they both wanted more opportunities and challenges than the school system could  
35  
36 offer them.  
37

38  
39 Ole's experience, as a resourceful and energetic person, was that he had no space for  
40  
41 development and did not see enough changes and innovations. The reasons for leaving were  
42  
43 closely related to him as a person, and also to characteristics of the profession which,  
44  
45 according to Ole, is a slow profession where people are afraid to make decisions and change.  
46  
47 Likewise, Anna sees that leaving teaching is related to personality. She needed changes and  
48  
49 found few alternative paths in teaching except for being a school leader. Teaching, thereby,  
50  
51 became for her a profession with few prospects.  
52

53  
54 In our convenience sample, we did not find personal weaknesses as reasons for leaving  
55  
56 teaching, perhaps just the opposite. The four cases exhibited personal strength and resilience  
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3 to take charge when they are unhappy with the situation, and they were not passive recipients  
4  
5 of putting external demands into practice when these go against their personal beliefs, values  
6  
7 and needs. They enacted agency at a deeply personal level.  
8

#### 9 10 4. Current professional landscape

11 The four narratives reflect that the participants are happy with their current professional  
12  
13 landscape and do not regret having left teaching. It would not be right to say they have “found  
14  
15 their place” in life as they all appear to be on the move and open for new challenges. John  
16  
17 enjoys the autonomy he professionally experiences as the head coach of a close to top level  
18  
19 Norwegian football team. He is fully aware of the responsibility he has for successes and for  
20  
21 failures, but he has the freedom to experiment whenever he finds it right to do so. This keeps  
22  
23 him on his toes, as he constantly has to be on the lookout for new knowledge, new ideas and  
24  
25 to become better acquainted with each player. At the personal level he enjoys the excitement  
26  
27 related to every game, and the uncertainty embedded in the job.  
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31  
32 Liv, who left teaching for very different reasons, has found a job with more quality  
33  
34 time for her children, even though she works hard when she is offshore, on the rig. The four  
35  
36 free weeks she earns after every two weeks work on the rig provides her with energy to widen  
37  
38 her education in new directions (economics and management) and to take on assignments as a  
39  
40 replacement teacher for a day or two when the school asks. She is, in a way, in touch with the  
41  
42 profession, but does not want to return to it. Professionally she has become the head of the  
43  
44 cleaning staff on the rig, which she regards as an achievement of hers.  
45  
46

47 Ole seems to be the kind of person constantly seeking challenges. In his 60s, he is still  
48  
49 taking on new responsibilities both for his own and the benefit of others. However, looking  
50  
51 back, his experiences from the education system has been useful in the various initiatives and  
52  
53 jobs he has been engaged in post-teaching.  
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3 Anna, in some ways, misses teaching. However, all her working life she has sought  
4 new challenges and also left a secure job to grow her own company alongside others. For the  
5 latter part of her career, she has chosen to remain in this company where she has decision-  
6 making power within her department.  
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11 The decision to leave teaching seems to have had a positive impact on the current personal  
12 and professional life of the four participants. At the same time, none of them look back at  
13 teaching with bitterness or frustration. It appears as if they grew out of it in search for new  
14 opportunities and challenges, and for Liv, also to improve her personal and financial situation.  
15 Lack of resilience or burnout does not seem to be applicable to the four cases reported in this  
16 article originating from Norway.  
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#### 25 5. Current perspective on the teaching profession

26 Each of the four cases is critical of the system that directs teaching. John claimed that due to  
27 the extensive external demands and requirements, teaching had become technical as the  
28 teacher is de-professionalised becoming more of a technician than a pedagogue or subject  
29 expert. Liv looks at teaching in a similar way when she discussed the workload of teachers  
30 and when she claimed that the best teachers are on sick leave or leave the profession. Due to  
31 extensive time consuming documentation, the good teachers do not have time to teach,  
32 according to Liv. Moreover, she feels that the salary is not commensurate with the amount of  
33 work teachers have to do. On the other hand, Liv is happy to accept replacement assignments  
34 where she continues to enjoy the children and the act of teaching without the time-consuming  
35 responsibilities.  
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49 Ole left school in 1990 looking for more challenges. The question is if personalities  
50 like Ole will find what they are looking for in today's education system with more external  
51 demands. Anna, like Ole, seems to need more changes and challenges than the school could  
52 provide. There are still few career paths in the Norwegian school system other than being a  
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3 school principal. Anna suggests that it would be beneficial to have people coming back to  
4  
5 teaching with new experiences and perspectives.  
6

7  
8 Critical voices about the teaching profession can be heard in the current perspectives  
9  
10 of four Norwegian former teachers. The critical voices are not aimed at the profession itself,  
11  
12 nor at the children or the colleagues, and only, to some degree, at the leadership (Ole). The  
13  
14 criticism is more systemic and more aimed at the external directives teachers are obliged to  
15  
16 enact.  
17

### 18 19 **Discussion**

20  
21 Statistics on teacher attrition in many countries, including Norway, are disturbing, and  
22  
23 research points at a number of causes which cause the high turn-over rates, personal as well as  
24  
25 contextual (Scafer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012). As useful as statistics might be to provide a  
26  
27 general understanding of the situation, Rinke (2008) recommends that it is equally important  
28  
29 to listen to the teachers' own stories in a longitudinal perspective to shed light on and provide  
30  
31 a deeper understanding of the reasons why teachers leave or stay in the profession (Lindqvist,  
32  
33 Nordänger & Carlsson, 2014). Moreover, most of the research on attrition documents negative  
34  
35 experiences and problematic contextual aspects with a harmful effect on resilience and often  
36  
37 results in burnout prior to attrition (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). The research picture of  
38  
39 teacher attrition is a rather bleak one. Understandably, the discussion is to a large extent  
40  
41 centred on how to keep qualified teachers in the profession, in other words, how to reduce  
42  
43 attrition and increase retention. Whereas we acknowledge the importance of keeping  
44  
45 motivated and good teachers in the profession, the individual stories of some of the leavers  
46  
47 tell about positive experiences with teaching. The reasons for leaving seem to be related to the  
48  
49 personality of the leavers. They reflect a kind of uneasiness in people who are in a constant  
50  
51 search for new challenges and achievements. Furthermore, some recent literature questions  
52  
53 the unquestioned acceptance of the perspective that people stay in the profession they are  
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3 educated for throughout their working life (Krejsler, 2005; Rinke, 2008; Watt & Richardson,  
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5 2008; Hess, 2009). The stories of the competence nomads (Krejsler, 2005) or highly engaged  
6  
7 switchers (Watt & Richardson, 2008), the positive stories, are not often reported in the  
8  
9 attrition literature. In this article, the stories of four successful teachers, and leavers, have  
10  
11 been presented and analysed. We furthermore discussed the findings in relation to selected  
12  
13 literature on resilience, motivation and teaching as a career. According to Fletcher (2013)  
14  
15 most definitions of resilience are based on two key concepts: adversity and adaptation. When  
16  
17 looking at resilience in teaching, teachers work within what they experience as a difficult  
18  
19 context for various reasons, personal and/or professional, and resilience is shown in the way  
20  
21 they adapt to the situation, either by professional growth and resourcefulness, by staying in  
22  
23 their comfort zones by accepting the situation as it is, to give up on personal values and  
24  
25 beliefs (impediment), or in the worst circumstances, turn to self-destructive actions  
26  
27 (Richardson, 2002). When discussing resilience, it commonly means how to cope with  
28  
29 adversity while staying in the same context. Looking at the four cases presented in this paper,  
30  
31 all of them decided to leave teaching, not because they found the job too difficult, on the  
32  
33 contrary. they all enjoyed teaching. They left because they saw opportunities outside the  
34  
35 profession which would better suit their personal needs and characteristics. Does this mean  
36  
37 that they lacked resilience? If looking at the common perception of resilience, then the answer  
38  
39 would be yes, they lacked resilience for staying in teaching. However, by looking at  
40  
41 Richardson's (2002) three 'waves' of research on resilience; (1) examining the qualities of  
42  
43 resilient people, (2) looking at the coping strategies, and (3), "the identification of  
44  
45 motivational forces within individual and groups that lead them to self-actualization in their  
46  
47 lives" (Fletcher, 2013, p.17). It seems to us that John, Liv, Ole and Anna were driven by  
48  
49 motivation to self-actualization beyond the context of teaching. In this respect neither of the  
50  
51 four left teaching because of lack of resilience. Their leaving was more because they  
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3 exhibited agency and took steps to close one door to open new doors with unknown  
4  
5 possibilities. They “exhibited capacity for autonomous action, a process through which they  
6  
7 intentionally transformed their worlds and thereby took control of their lives” (Oolbekkink-  
8  
9 Marchand, Hadar, Smith, Helleve, & Ulvik, 2016, p.38).  
10

11  
12 The motives why the four cases became teachers in the first place differ, in that John  
13  
14 was motivated because of a positive role model (his mother) and enjoyment of coaching  
15  
16 children, Liv wanted to have more time with her own children, Ole was told he would be a  
17  
18 good teacher and enjoyed being the leader, and Anna got to teaching after trying out various  
19  
20 other forms of education. None of the four talked about altruistic reasons for choosing  
21  
22 teaching, a form of motivation often found in the group Watt and Richardson (2008) call  
23  
24 *highly engaged persisters*. They were intrinsically motivated (enjoyed teaching- being with  
25  
26 the children) or extrinsically (Liv), to improve the quality of life. However, they took the job  
27  
28 seriously, enjoyed teaching and were successful and respected within their work environment.  
29  
30 Still, they wanted something more and were confident enough to leave a secure job they  
31  
32 enjoyed, to seek new challenges. The four cases fit the cluster that Watt & Richardson (2008)  
33  
34 call *highly engaged switchers*, who outgrew teaching, wanted diversity and to try out new  
35  
36 things in life. In Watt and Richardson’s study, however, this cluster was formed by young  
37  
38 and highly competent people, often from well-educated families. In our study none of them  
39  
40 were young when they decided to leave teaching, and it might seem that their successful  
41  
42 teaching experiences strengthened their agency enactment. Rinke (2008) suggests that  
43  
44 teaching is today seen by many as an exploratory profession which is one of several careers  
45  
46 people will have in life. Hence, teacher attrition will be impacted by such views, and reasons  
47  
48 for attrition should not always be viewed as deficits within the leavers or within the context.  
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51  
52 A question to be asked, however, is whether the profession offers opportunities for people like  
53  
54 John, Liv, Ole and Anna? Teaching has been called a flat profession (Danielson, 2007; Tye &  
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3 O'Brian, (2002), and it is often middle career teachers who experience boredom and lack of  
4  
5 motivation. Day (2007) calls this the watershed in the career, and it seems that the profession  
6  
7 does not know how to handle this phase. A teacher will do very much the same type of work  
8  
9 ten years into the job as she did in her first year, and for some, the lack of challenges might  
10  
11 lead to searching professional excitement outside teaching and attrition. In Norway there is no  
12  
13 career ladder for teachers, the only possibility is to take on a leadership position as a  
14  
15 department head or principal. Still, Ole worked as a teacher and principal, but it was not  
16  
17 enough for him. The slow decision making processes and waste of time by highly competent  
18  
19 people did not fit his energetic personality. Anna experienced much of the same, and John felt  
20  
21 restricted in terms of making independent decisions and needed more autonomy. Liv felt  
22  
23 teaching was too demanding without awards. The question is, would a career ladder in  
24  
25 teaching have kept our four leavers in the profession? This is difficult to say, yet countries  
26  
27 which have succeeded in building career ladders for teachers seem to have improved their  
28  
29 education systems including retaining motivated teachers in the profession (Mourshed,  
30  
31 Chijioke & Barber, McKinsey report, 2012). The career phases are not related to seniority, but  
32  
33 to additional formal qualifications, increased and varied responsibilities, and to financial  
34  
35 incentives. Remijan (2014) studied teachers with hybrid positions and found that those with  
36  
37 hybrid positions with less teaching time were more highly motivated than those who  
38  
39 continued with the same job years into their careers. A variety of hybrid positions could be  
40  
41 having a part-time job in school and a part-time job outside education, of which Liv is a kind  
42  
43 of example. She takes on replacement assignments when she has time on-shore. It is, perhaps,  
44  
45 time to look at teaching not as a career long call, but as one, of several careers people will  
46  
47 have (Hess, 2009). By doing so, we would need to change the perspective on attrition as only  
48  
49 being negative and a result of lack of resilience. Perhaps the teaching profession itself is too  
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51 restrictive for certain kinds of ambitious and autonomous people?  
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## Conclusion

In this article, we have presented and analysed four narratives of leavers from the teaching profession. The four cases were purposely selected to represent strength and resourcefulness, creativity and energy and not deficits and unhappiness with teaching. Our claim is that these positive stories are underrepresented in the literature on teacher attrition which to a large extent relates to resilience issues, adversity and adaption within the teaching context. In this paper a different picture of the leavers is illuminated, and we suggest that more research should look into and examine the strengths of people leaving teaching, and at the same time seek new ways of developing the teaching profession as a less restrictive career which offers opportunities to people who do not fit into a one-size-fits-all system. We support Rinke's (2008) suggestion that research on attrition and retention should include quantitative as well as qualitative methods, and that we should take special notice of the individual stories of the leavers and stayers.

The limitations of the current study require caution in not seeking any generalisations of the findings. Four cases of successful people were purposefully presented, and these were taken from a snowball sample of 24 cases. The 24 cases probably represent people who wanted to talk about their teaching experiences and were biased in that way, and moreover, the selection of the four cases discussed in this study was a sample of convenience and not representative of the total population. However, through analysing these narratives we have developed new knowledge and a deeper understanding which shed lights on the complexity of teacher attrition. The leavers form a diverse group and we have little knowledge about the strong and resilient ex-teachers and their stories post-teaching. We hope to inspire other international researchers to engage in future research looking for strengths and not only deficits in the stories of those who too often are only represented in the statistics.

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