

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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# Social capital: a vital ingredient for retaining foreign language teachers

Shannon Mason<sup>1\*</sup> and Cristina Poyatos Matas<sup>2</sup>

\* Correspondence:

shannon.lee.mason@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Relations, University of Nagasaki, 1-1-1 Manabino, Nagayo-cho, Nishisonogi-gun 851-2195 Nagasaki, Japan

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article

## Abstract

**Introduction:** A major source of concern across a number of English-speaking countries is the loss of language teachers from the profession. In a global era where the ability to engage across languages and cultures is seen as vital for international engagement, this poses a significant problem as teacher shortages continue to challenge the efficacy of language education programs. And yet, there are very few large-scale studies which investigate the career attrition of foreign language teachers. The Australian mixed methods study reported here investigated the relationship between social capital and the career retention of 227 foreign language teachers.

**Results:** The findings expand our understanding of language teacher attrition, by showing that teachers who felt professionally valued and who had strong relationships with their colleagues and administrative leaders were less likely to leave language teaching. It was also found that social bonds with other foreign language teachers were an important form of social capital proactively sought by many language teachers, to help them overcome their professional isolation and thus maintain their professional standards. However, these strong social bonds were found to play a role in promoting language teacher attrition, as they provide teachers with a ladder to other career opportunities.

**Conclusions:** This study concludes that some language teachers are lacking in social capital, and that this lack of social capital is a key driver in career attrition. Therefore, there is a need to develop policies, and engage in practices, which facilitate and encourage the further development of language teachers' social capital. The conclusion of this paper explores ways to move forward to improve the retention of language teachers.

**Keywords:** Second/foreign language education, Social capital, Teacher attrition, Teacher retention

## Introduction

Monolingualism, even in the *lingua franca* English, is an economic and social disadvantage for nations as well as individuals in an interconnected and international world (Kirkpatrick & Sussex 2012; Lo Bianco et al. 1999). That is why foreign language teachers play such a vital role in the internationalisation process of individuals to become 'world citizens', able to move across languages and cultures (European Commission 2012; Koda & Kamera 2013; Qi Gu 2012).

Despite fifty years of political rhetoric in Australia, and numerous programs with intentions to improve the state of foreign language education, the field remains in crisis. Across the nation over the past 30 years, student retention rates until the end of secondary schooling have fluctuated between ten and fifteen per cent, making it the least popular learning

area (Poyatos Matas & Mason 2015). In some states, like Queensland, the rates are as low as 6.84 % (Department of Education & Employment 2014). One of the most cited factors contributing to this poor state of language education in Australia is a shortage of foreign language teachers (Nancarrow 2000; Weldon 2015). Numerous government reports have identified a shortage of teachers as a key obstacle standing in the way of widespread quality foreign language education across the country (Australian Curriculum, Assessment & Reporting Authority 2011; Australian Language & Literacy Council 1996; Liddicoat et al. 2007; Nicholas et al. 1994; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group 2014). While the true extent of the problem is hidden behind a lack of comprehensive and accurate data, anecdotal evidence suggests that foreign language teachers in Australia are leaving the field prematurely more so than teachers of other disciplines (Australian Language & Literacy Council 1996; Rix 1999), and often for other areas within the education system (de Kretser & Spence-Brown 2010; Mason 2010). It has been suggested that language teachers are the 'single most important controllable variable in successful language learning' (p. 28) (Lo Bianco 2009). Therefore, understanding why foreign language teachers prematurely leave the field is a crucial step in addressing the foreign language education crisis.

Social capital is a well-established conceptual theory that has helped to explore a wide range of social phenomena (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Grootaert & van Bastelaer 2004; Keeley 2007; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2001; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2010; Putnam 2000; Putnam & Feldstein 2004). The important role of social capital can be seen in the professional standards discourse. One of the seven *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* is an ability to 'engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community' (p. 19) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2011). *The Standards* underpin the accreditation of teacher education programs, as well as the registration of teachers in each state. In addition, the *Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of Languages and Cultures* (Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations 2005), which serve as a guide to assist foreign language teachers 'to understand and develop their own practice' (p. 2), advises teachers to become 'part of a professional educational community and ... establish professional relationships with other languages and cultures teachers, with teachers in other disciplines, with students, with parents and with school communities' (p. 5). As such, social capital is seen by educational authorities as a vital tool that teachers need to have and to further develop as they progress through their careers and develop into professionals of a high standard.

While the conceptualisations of social capital are as varied as its applications, there has been, until recently, little understanding of what elements of social capital are relevant to the issue of teacher attrition and retention. To fill this gap in knowledge, a recent study by the authors analysed the existing body of knowledge in Australia to identify the forms of social capital relevant to this specific context (Mason & Poyatos Matas 2015). As a result of this study, a new conceptualisation of social capital was proposed, which encompasses five socially-bound elements, each of which are able to be cultivated and developed in order to facilitate teacher retention. These elements, which make up the definition of social capital for this study, are:

1. *Value of teachers and teaching*, that is, the value that is given to teachers and education in schools and society
2. *Presence and quality of leadership*, meaning active participation and support by those involved in the decision making processes that affect the daily work of teachers

3. *Quality of relationships with members of the school community*, including colleagues, students, and parents and the wider community
4. *School culture*, understood as the extent to which schools promote and act 'on positive values, is inclusive of cultural diversity and fosters positive, caring and respectful relationships between all members of the school community' (Noble 2014)
5. *Presence, quality, and nature of support*, which can be formal or informal, school based or external, and employer-led or teacher-led.

To move forward in our understanding of the role that social capital may play in foreign language teacher attrition, a mixed methods study was conducted with 227 participants, which tested the impact of these five factors. The study hypothesises that language teachers with higher levels of social capital will be more likely to stay, and conversely, those with lower levels of social capital will be more likely to leave. In order to examine this hypothesis, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the state of the social capital of language teachers in Queensland?
2. Do statistical relationships exist between language teachers' social capital, and their retention or attrition from the field of language teaching?
3. If yes, how and why does social capital affect teachers' decisions?

## Methods

The study adopted a mixed methods, explanatory sequential design, with two phases, beginning with the collection and analysis of quantitative data through an online questionnaire, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews (Driscoll et al. 2007). The interviews were conducted with selected participants to gather rich, personal data to help tell the subjective stories that lie beneath the numbers (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011; Kaplowitz 2000).

## Procedures

After being granted approval to conduct research by the relevant educational authorities, invitations to participate in the study were sent via principals to all foreign language teachers in state, independent and catholic schools in Queensland during 2012 (except those in the Cairns Diocese of Catholic Education, where permission was not granted). During the year, information materials on the nature of the research project were developed and disseminated at teacher conferences, formal and informal meetings, in person as well as via social media, in an effort to potentially find 'all possible cases that fit particular criteria using various methods' (p. 220) (Neuman 2011), in this case being those currently teaching a foreign language in Queensland primary and secondary schools. The Modern Language Teachers Association of Queensland (MLTAQ) was also vital in assisting with promotion of the study. The MLTAQ is the largest and oldest network of foreign language teachers in Queensland, and is 'the peak professional body representing teachers of Languages throughout the state' (Modern Language Teachers' Association of Queensland 2016).

What made this study unique was that it also sought input from former foreign language teachers, enabling the testing of differences between those who have stayed in

the field, and those who have not. For the purpose of this study, a former foreign language teacher was defined as a teacher who left voluntarily, for reasons other than retirement, with no intention of returning to teaching a foreign language in schools. It has been argued that a major barrier to attrition studies is the time and financial cost of locating those who have already left (Lobo & Poyatos Matas 2010), as some may move interstate or overseas, and in some cases, particularly if the departure was unpleasant, may not be willing to discuss their experiences. This was also the experience of the researchers in this study, who had difficulties obtaining data on former teachers from educational authorities. Therefore, network sampling was adopted as part of the recruitment process, as it is considered to be one of the most appropriate and effective ways of recruiting hidden populations (Neuman 2011). Accordingly, all contact with current teachers included a request to pass on an invitation to be involved in the study, to any known former colleagues.

### **Instruments**

The online questionnaire developed for the initial phase of the study was open for the duration of 2012. Through multiple choice and short-answer questions, data were collected about participants' demographic, employment and workplace characteristics. The questionnaire included twelve Likert items which gathered data regarding the five elements of social capital (Table 1). In addition, data were also sought regarding participants' membership of the MLTAQ and their involvement in generic or discipline-specific induction or mentoring programs. Open-ended questions to former teachers about the reasons for their departure also provided extra qualitative data.

In the first phase of the study, foreign language teachers were classified into two groups: former and current teachers. The questionnaire data revealed more nuanced groupings, including seven types of current teachers, and three types of former teachers (Fig. 1). Fifty-two per cent of questionnaire participants indicated a willingness to be further involved in the study. From these participants, one teacher who fit each of the ten identified categories was randomly selected to give their own personal and unique perspectives of the issues of concern to foreign language teachers as they navigate through, and make choices about, their careers.

Interviews took place during 2014. As the aim of the quantitative phase of the study was to elicit personal stories, teachers were posed a range of open-ended questions that began with the prompt, 'tell me ...'. For example, participants were encouraged to 'tell me the story of how you came to be a language teacher', and 'tell me what you enjoy about your job'. They were also guided to talk about issues concerning social capital by inviting them to 'tell me a time when you had to seek support', or 'tell me about your relationship with your colleagues'. The broad questions allowed teachers to tell their own narratives and voice professional issues relevant to them. Each interview lasted between 48 and 92 min, and the length was driven by the participants themselves.

### **Participants**

A total of 227 participants from the Australian state of Queensland completed the questionnaire, including 180 current foreign language teachers and 47 former foreign language teachers. The majority of participants were female (87 %), native speakers of

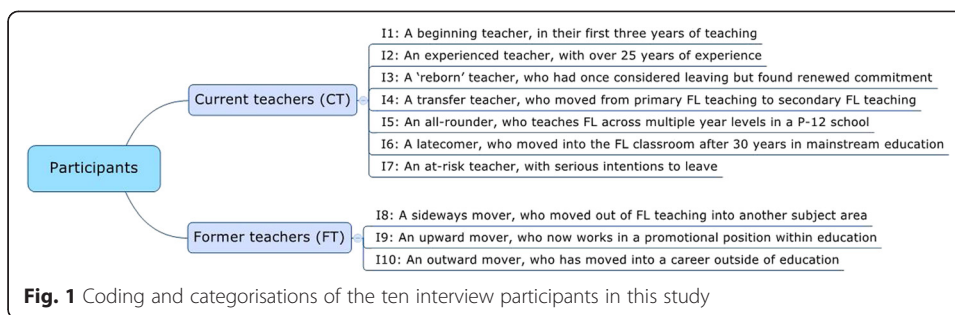
**Table 1** Likert items measuring the social capital of 227 foreign language teachers

	Descriptive analyses		Correlations												
	Mean	SD	Chosen to stay or not	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
Questionnaire items			-												
A. I generally have a good relationship with my students	4.48*	.637	.109	-											
B. I generally have a good relationship with parents/carers	4.14**	.773	.130	.632**	-										
C. I feel supported by my colleagues	3.91**	1.067	.153*	.422**	.492**	-									
D. I feel supported by my admin team	3.60**	1.233	.163*	.331**	.316**	.629**	-								
E. I am seen as a valued member of the school community	3.53*	1.147	.137*	.411**	.458**	.601**	.597**	-							
F. Languages is seen as an important part of the curriculum	2.81**	1.236	.175**	.366**	.372**	.527**	.499**	.669**	-						
G. I read the MLTAQ mailing list	3.34	1.083	.083	-.003	-.012	.019	-.006	.021	.058	-					
H. I meet informally with other language teachers	2.96	.895	-.108	.144*	.151*	.154*	.066	.121	.101	.182**	-				
I. I attend other formal network meetings	2.57	1.078	-.129	-.059	-.046	-.042	.015	.069	-.013	.185**	.387**	-			
J. I respond to the MLTAQ mailing list emails	2.36	1.059	-.011	.004	.030	-.033	-.030	.083	.054	.606**	.197**	.252**	-		
K. I attend MLTAQ meetings	1.93**	1.149	-.225**	-.125	-.018	-.033	-.088	.062	.091	.287**	.157*	.316**	.372**	-	
L. I attend MLTAQ conferences	1.90**	1.103	-.193**	-.025	.031	-.075	.014	.046	.079	.292**	.104	.293**	.443**	.622**	-

Items A-F ranked on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5)

Items G-L ranked on a 4-point scale from never (1) to often (4)

Significance at  $p < .05^*$  and  $p < 0.01^{**}$



English (76 %), who worked full-time (64 %) in state schools (67 %). Forty-four per cent of participants taught solely within secondary schools, 38 % solely in primary schools, with the remaining 19 % teaching across both sectors. Collectively the participants taught seven different languages, including, in order of frequency, Japanese (41 %), French (19 %), German (16 %), Italian, (9 %), Indonesian (7 %), and Chinese and Spanish (both 4 %). The profile of the average current foreign language teacher emerged as a female teacher of Japanese, 40–44 years of age, permanently employed full-time in a state high school in an urban area of Queensland. The average former teacher had a similar profile, with an average of fourteen years of experience at the time of their departure.

The interview participants in the second phase of the study were not chosen to be representative of the whole population, but rather to elicit stories and opinions from the different types of teachers identified during the first phase of the data collection. The ten participants, listed in Fig. 1 along with their descriptors, included a mix of genders, languages, locations, employers and sectors.

**Data analysis and interpretation**

To investigate the state of foreign language teachers’ social capital, percentages, means and standard deviations of all variables were calculated, and where appropriate t-tests (for ordinal variables) and chi-square tests (for categorical variables) were conducted to determine significant differences between the two groups under investigation: those who have stayed in the profession, and those who have not. Non-parametric tests were also conducted on Likert scale variables to determine any correlations with the dependent variable, as well as between the independent variables. Spearman’s Rho correlation coefficient was selected in this case because it is suited to rank-order data, and because it gives ‘a clearer measure of the actual strength of the association by minimizing the influence of extreme values’ (p. 193) (Elliot & Woodward 2007). For the purpose of comparability and consistency, the discussions of the findings focus on the corresponding p-scores for each type of analysis. In all cases, significance was at the  $p > 0.05^*$  level and the  $p > 0.01^{**}$  level (2-tailed).

The qualitative data collected from the ten interviews were transcribed, reviewed and analysed according to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process for thematic analysis. Themes that related to social capital were identified and further divided into positive, negative, and neutral mentions depending on their context in the conversation, with an aim ‘to discover patterns across individual narrative interview texts or to explore what may create differences between people in their narrated experiences’ (p. 227) (Wertz et al. 2011).

**Results**

Eight of the twelve items included in the teacher questionnaires revealed significant differences in means between former and current teachers, as seen in the first column of Table 1, reflecting ‘real’ differences rather than products of chance. Moreover, to investigate the strength and direction of these relationships, correlation coefficients were calculated for each item. The results of the analysis (see Table 1), showed a number of significant correlations, both with the dependent variable (chosen to stay or not) and between independent variables, showing a high level of interrelatedness. Differences were not seen between primary and secondary teachers, or between teachers of different languages, suggesting that issues relating to teacher attrition and retention are present across the spectrum of language teachers.

Positive statistical correlations were found between retention and teachers being supported by their colleagues ( $r_s = .153, p < .05$ ), teachers being supported by their administrative teams ( $r_s = .163, p < .05$ ), teachers being seen as a valued member of the school community ( $r_s = .137, p < .05$ ), and languages being seen as an important part of the curriculum ( $r_s = .175, p < .01$ ). This means that as teachers agreement with these statements rose, so did the likelihood of retention. Two more items were correlated to retention, although in these cases were negative. Thus, as teachers’ attendance at MLTAQ meetings ( $r_s = -.225, p < .01$ ) and MLTAQ conferences ( $r_s = -.193, p < .01$ ) increased in regularity, the likelihood of remaining in the field decreased, or in other words, they were more likely to leave. These findings were contrary to the study hypothesis, and indeed much of the literature regarding the role of professional associations. The authors’ interpretation of these unexpected findings is explained in the discussion section.

Additional questions were also posed to teachers to determine further aspects of their social capital, and the responses to these questions are shown in Table 2. No significant differences were found between former and current teachers’ responses to these questions. Responses to the open-ended questions posed to former teachers are shown in Table 3, and showed that a lack of social capital, in particular a lack of value and support, is highly influential in teachers’ decisions to leave foreign language teaching.

The results of the thematic content analysis of the qualitative interview data are shown in Table 4. The analysis uncovered six themes relating to social capital, with a total of 144 mentions across the ten interviews. The most commonly mentioned theme was that of collegial relationships and support, which had an almost equal number of positive and negative mentions. The theme with the most negative mentions was that of value and belonging. A selection of quotes is presented in the discussion section of the paper, to help contextualise and explain the results of the data analyses.

**Table 2** Categorical social capital factors

	All teachers	Current teachers	Former teachers
% of participants who engaged in induction or mentor program	38.0	41.4	26.1
% of participants who engaged in an foreign language induction or mentor program	15.4	14.2	19.6
% of participants who were financial members of the MLTAQ	72.1	69.7	72.1

**Table 3** Analysis of responses from former foreign language teachers to open-ended questions (*n* = 47)

What were the reasons for your departure from the field?		What, if anything, would have ensured your continuation?	
Theme	n	Theme	n
Lack of support	9	Support	10
Working conditions	8	Value, respect, appreciation	10
Lack of value	6	Better job opportunities	7
Administrative decisions about program	6	Improved work conditions	4
Classroom and behaviour management issues	3	Nothing	4
Lack of job satisfaction	2	Opportunities for professional development	3
Toxic principal	2	More confidence in ability	2
Lack of proficiency	1	Autonomy	2
Unhappy workplace	1	Increased salary	2
Low student interest	1	Removal of proficiency exam	2
'Unbearable' students and parents	1	Less isolation as an itinerant teacher	1
Itinerancy	1	Opportunities for promotion	1
Stress	1	Better HR management	1
Frustration	1		

**Discussions**

The quantitative and qualitative findings have shown that social capital has a significant impact on foreign language teachers' career movements as well as their ability to develop professionally, as expected of them by their professional bodies (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2011; Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations 2005). Specifically, the analysis and interpretation of the data has led to six key findings. These findings are presented in this section, in light of the statistical evidence, and complemented with personal stories from the viewpoints of teachers themselves. The findings are also linked to the existing body of knowledge and the social capital conceptual framework used to interpret the analysis of the data. The implications for stakeholders are also outlined.

**Table 4** Social capital themes and mentions from interviews with ten foreign language teachers

	# of positive mentions	# of neutral mentions	# of negative mentions	Total # of mentions
Collegial relationships and support	22	4	20	46
Value and belonging	10	0	35	45
Administrative r'ships and support	7	1	13	21
Student relationships	8	1	8	17
External networks of teachers	9	0	0	9
Community r'ships and support	1	0	2	3
Totals	57	6	78	141



**Finding 1: Foreign language teachers and foreign language education is not highly valued in schools or in the wider Australian society, and this lack of value plays a significant role in teacher attrition**

The lack of professional and societal value toward teachers has been identified as one of the factors contributing to the attrition of teachers in Australia (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd 2012; Buchanan 2009; Fetherston & Lummis 2012; Howes & Goodman-Delahunty 2014; Zhang & Gong 2014). However, the problem for foreign language teachers is arguably compounded by the low level of prestige of their discipline in the curriculum (Lo Bianco 2009; Zhang & Gong 2014). This study supports the findings of previous studies that have linked the existing lack of value for foreign language teachers with career attrition in a number of English-speaking countries (Mason 2010; Swanson & Huff 2010; Wilkerson 2000).

In this study 58 % of teachers (127/219) believed that they were seen as an important member of the school community, while only 35 % (78/221) believed that foreign languages were seen as an important part of the curriculum. A significant correlation was found between these perceptions and teacher attrition. Complementing this data is the prominence of value in former teachers' decisions to leave the field, as well as teachers' interviews, which were sprinkled with phrases like 'just a language teacher' and 'not a real teacher'. It can be argued that this low sense of value can result in a low sense of professional identity, which has been linked to teacher attrition in a number of international studies (Hochstetler 2011; Hong 2010; Schaefer 2013). Low levels of value were particularly expressed by the primary school teacher interviewees, who often felt they did not have the same level of value as classroom teachers. Some saw that their role was relegated to babysitter; someone who merely provided the classroom teachers with their allocated planning time (Mason 2015). The role of foreign language education in schools as felt by many foreign language teachers can be summed up in this quote:

'I don't see that it's valued. I see it as its part of the curriculum, and it has to be there. That's how I see it. It's valued for, when the school puts on a concert the school always likes me to prepare a couple of items in [the target language], so that it looks good, and the kids have fun. But no, I don't think it's of great value I think it's part of the curriculum so they have to do it'

(I7: CT: at-risk teacher).

The key implication of this finding is that foreign language teachers need to be in workplaces where they are valued for their contribution to students' academic and social development. To be valued is a basic human need. Workplaces who value their employees are rewarded with workers who are generally happier, healthier, more motivated and more productive (American Psychological Association 2012). Without providing workplace environments that are conducive to all teachers feeling valued, stakeholders are at risk of pushing teachers away from the field, as teachers seek to find alternative employment to fill this void.

**Finding 2: A lack of supportive leadership also contributes to foreign language teacher attrition**

Strong leadership has been shown to play a role in social capital development (Minckler 2014) and in teacher retention (Boyd et al. 2011; Williams 2004). This study

supports these findings, with lower levels of support from administrative teams being correlated to attrition. In this study, 20 % of participants (43/220) were unsatisfied with the support they receive from their administration, showing higher levels of dissatisfaction compared to their levels of dissatisfaction with students, colleagues and the wider community. In the interview data, 13 of the 21 mentions of administrative leadership were negative, and these negative mentions were mostly aligned to a lack of understanding about the role of foreign language education and a lack of support for foreign languages in schools. Finally, responses to the open-ended questions from former teachers showed not only that leadership is an important issue for teachers (Table 3), but also that it can be seen as a contentious issue, as it revealed some of the most emotive responses of the study, as shown in Table 5.

The voices of the former teachers themselves, and the statistical findings of this study, make a strong case for supportive leadership of foreign language in schools. Indeed, the AFMLTA (Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations 2005) *Professional Standards* state ‘accomplished language teaching can only occur in an appropriate and supportive context’ (p. 2). The leadership of individual schools is reflected in the decisions made about the foreign language program, and to what extent the subject, and its teachers, are supported and integrated into the school. Strong leadership fosters the development of relationships, teacher morale, and a positive school culture. When this is missing in a school, it is likely that foreign language teachers will soon follow.

**Finding 3: Being connected to schools, and particularly to teaching colleagues and administrations, is also important in the facilitation of foreign language teacher retention**

Strong relationships with members of the school community have been identified as an important factor for retaining teachers in studies both in Australia (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd 2012; Boylan & McSwan 1998; Buchanan 2009; Fetherston & Lummis 2012; Mason 2010) and internationally (Cancio et al. 2013; Kolbe 2014; Williams 2004). The

**Table 5** Specific mentions of leadership in open-ended questions asked of former teachers (n = 47)

What are the reasons for your departure from the field?	What would have ensured your continuation in the field?
*Fed up with lack of support from Principal/admin	*More administration support
*Discouraged by administration actions to sideline language study	*Greater support from admin
*Lack of support by superiors	*A school principal and staff who valued LOTE just a tiny bit
*Principal had worst people management skills known to man or woman	*A supportive administration that could have helped me through the stress
*Principal and admin which classified all LOTE [Languages Other Than English] teachers as a waste of space	*Kill the headmaster
*60 staff left my school in 2.5 years, thanks for [sic] the headmaster. I was one of the 60.	*Support from [governing body]
* [governing body] lack of support	*Emphasis given further up the chain [to foreign language]
*No interest or demand from admin/principal or head office	*More understanding and supportive principals

quantitative results of this study support these findings, in particular they show a statistical correlation between unsupportive relationships that some foreign language teachers have with their colleagues, and their premature departure from the profession.

Deeper analyses of the qualitative data revealed that positive mentions concerning workplace relationships tended to be aligned with stories of mutual understanding and respect. The sources of negativity, however, differed for each type of relationship. As already discussed, a lack of support for and understanding of the role of foreign language education inhibited the development of relationships with administrative leadership. For relationships with colleagues, difficulties commonly arose as a result of a misalignment of expectations about the role and responsibility for the education and management of their mutual students, as evidenced in this quote:

‘When you’re going into 13 different classes, there’s bound to be some personality conflicts and philosophical conflicts. There was one teacher who would stay in the room and if a student was what she considered to be misbehaving, she’d yell at the student, even though it was my class but she’d want to run things her way, she yelled at a student about respecting me and she probably did it with the best of intentions but it really undermined my authority’

I4: CT: transfer teacher).

All ten interview participants, despite their different teaching contexts, made at least one reference to feelings of a lack of connectedness or belonging to their school. This comment reflects the struggle felt by one former teacher, and in this case was cited independently by the participant as one of the factors that led to his ultimate departure from the field:

‘I never felt I was truly a part of the school community. I’d be forgotten from lists, PD [Professional Development] wouldn’t be arranged for me on pupil-free days, just little things, but it all relayed to me that I wasn’t an important part of the school’

(I10: FT: outward mover).

The best outcomes occur when teachers work together (Pil & Leana 2009). Therefore, space should be given to foreign language teachers to build relationships with other members of their school communities, to encourage professional growth and mutual support, particularly when facing career challenges. If foreign language teachers do not receive adequate professional support from their school community, they are much more likely to leave their discipline area, and put further pressure on foreign language teacher supply across the state.

**Finding 4: The culture of many schools is such that it is not supportive or inclusive of foreign language education, and as a result teachers can experience challenges in developing their social capital**

Numerous reports over the past few decades have highlighted the alienation that many foreign language teachers experience in Australia while trying to integrate into their school communities (Australian Council of State School Organisations 2007; Blatchford et al. 2011; Lo Bianco et al. 1999; Lo Bianco 2009; Nicholas et al. 1994). In this paper, a

lack of value for foreign language education, a lack of leadership, and a lack of strong relationships in schools are all elements that can contribute to a negative school culture that is neither supportive nor inclusive of foreign language education or its teachers.

The culture of a school influences the decisions about how foreign language programs are delivered and to what extent they are supported. Quantitative data from the ten interview participants and the 47 former teachers (coded as FT1, FT2, etc.) gave a glimpse into these negative school cultures. The anecdotes included a teacher who had their budget allocation spent in other parts of the school without their knowledge (FT35), and another teacher worried about the future of a class set of tablet devices which she received after applying for a grant, and were being taken by other teachers (I7). Other teachers had their programs cut or reduced despite initial success (FT6, FT16, FT46, I4), while others still had issues with their workload and allocated planning time (FT16, FT18, FT35, FT43).

Indeed, many of the participants in this study worked under arguably intense conditions. They were responsible for the foreign language education of between ten and 650 students, with an average of approximately 170 students for current teachers, and approximately 190 students for former teachers. Weekly class schedules were highly varied and so determining an average was all but impossible. Foreign language lessons varied from 30 to 210 min a week, with a range of lesson breakdowns. Some schools delivered programs that ran for only one semester (approximately 20 weeks) or one term (approximately 10 weeks) of the academic year, even in the compulsory years of foreign language education.

In light of this finding, further analyses were conducted to determine any statistical relationship between these working conditions and teachers’ social capital. As shown in Table 6, several negative correlations were shown. Specifically, as the number of students increased, teachers’ relationships with students and the wider community decreased. Moreover, as the number of schools increased, relationships with colleagues, students and the wider community also decreased. Parallels can be drawn from studies investigating the effects of class size, with students in larger classes receiving less individual attention and fewer interactions with the teacher, and thus have more difficulties developing relationships (Blatchford et al. 2011).

Intensification of teachers’ roles has been of concern in recent times (Australian Education Union 2014; Wilson 2015; Zipin & White 2002). For foreign language teachers, particularly those in primary schools, intense working conditions are nothing new, with a government report into the state of foreign language education concluding that the intense nature of many teachers’ roles posed ‘problems for the overall quality of language teaching in Australia, but also has an impact on issues of teacher supply and retention which cannot be ignored in the policy context’ (p. 117) (Liddicoat et al. 2007).

**Table 6** Correlations with working conditions and workplace relationships

	Administrative support	Collegial support	Student relationships	Community relationships
Number of students	.028	-.095	-.140*	-.158*
Number of schools	-.020	-.172*	-.163*	-.269**

Correlations significant at  $p < 0.05^*$  and  $p < 0.01$  level\*\*

In analyzing the interview data, seven out of the eight negative mentions of student relationships were related to a lack of time to develop relationships with students, as opposed to the one mention that related to the students themselves. Working with large numbers of students for short periods of time, sometimes working across multiple schools, means that it can be challenging for foreign language teachers to develop relationships with their students. The heightened difficulties for foreign language teachers compared to mainstream classroom teachers were highlighted by one interviewee, who had moved to foreign language teaching after a long career in mainstream education:

‘You have to develop a rapport with three- or four hundred students ... When you are a classroom teacher you develop a rapport with a group of 28 students. And once you’ve done that after the first week or so, they’re working with you. Whereas, when you are a language teacher, that aspect is much more difficult because you only see these students at short bursts of half an hour or an hour or 40 min, so you’ve got to work really hard to develop a relationship with individual kids in a short space of time’

(I6: CT: latecomer).

While the number of students or schools a teachers engages with is generally not under the control of the teachers themselves, it is determined by state and school policies about how foreign languages are delivered. Overall, the findings of this study confirm the difficulties many foreign language teachers experience in Australia to become integrated members of their school communities, and reveals that the structure and delivery of foreign language education is not conducive to the development of teachers’ social capital. Administrators and employees need to recognise the complex nature of foreign language education, and work to build more positive school cultures and equitable working conditions for teachers. Neglecting to address these problems compromises foreign language teachers’ access to social capital, which in turn plays a vital role in teacher retention, as well as their professional growth.

**Finding 5: The lack of formal and informal support for foreign language teachers within schools has led many to proactively seek and create their own opportunities to connect professionally with their peers**

Support structures and procedures in schools to allow for the building of relationships were rare for the teachers in this study, with only around 15 % of participants (32/227) engaged in an induction or mentoring program that was designed for their specific role as foreign language teachers, rather than a generic program for teachers of any discipline. Considering the evidence which shows that programs that are specific to the needs of foreign language teachers are more effective than generic programs (Brown 2001; Ewart 2009; Kissau & King 2015; Wilkerson 2000), more effort is needed to develop and implement programs that are specifically designed for foreign language teachers.

During the interviews three participants spoke of mentors within their schools who helped them in their jobs, but in all cases the support provided was informal and the relationships were instigated by the teachers themselves. While two teachers praised regional-based support that had been available to them in the past, they lamented the fact that this support was lost as a result of budget cuts:

‘... at one point there were language advisors and regional coordinators who did that (supported foreign language teachers) according to their capacities to do it ... but I’ve seen an awful lot of people start doing what I do and left doing what they do or getting out of it as quick as they could, because they were just dumped and left’

(I5: CT: all-rounder)

As is the case for the wider population of foreign language teachers across the world, many teachers in this study were the sole teacher within their discipline (Bulgrin 2007). Around 45 % of current teacher participants (77/173) were the only foreign language teacher in their school at the time of data collection, and a further 20 % (33/173) were one of two foreign language teachers. This shows that many teachers were professionally disconnected from a space that could potentially provide discipline-specific support from other foreign language teachers in their schools, making it more difficult to develop into accomplished professionals. As such, professional associations can provide ‘empowering spaces’ for foreign language teachers (Lamb 2012). The importance of connecting professionally and socially with other teachers in the same discipline area seems to be recognised by teachers associations in Europe (Lamb 2012). In this study, almost 70 % of respondents to the questionnaire were current members of the MLTAQ. In 2014 the membership of the MLTAQ was approximately 680 (H. Best, personal communication, May 27, 2014). In the same year, the membership of the English Teachers Association of Queensland (English Teachers Association of Queensland 2015) was around 400. Although the exact number of English teachers was not available, due to the heavy focus of first language literacy in all years of schooling, English teachers constitute a much larger population than foreign language teachers. The larger membership of the MLTAQ shows that foreign language teachers feel a need to seek connections with other foreign language teachers more so than other teachers, possibly as a result of their socio-professional isolation.

While interview participants made only nine mentions of external networks with other foreign language teachers, they were all positive in nature. Comments were made about the supportive role of the MLTAQ, of other networks of foreign language teachers, and of online connections. This poignant advice was given to teachers, during an interview with a participant with over 25 years of experience:

‘That would be a huge secret I think (to my longevity in the field), teachers that burn out and leave are the ones who never make connections, with their own staff and ... it’s very rare that primary schools have more than one language teacher ... they’ve got to make connections in their network, even if it’s just an email, they’ve just got to be part of a larger community’

(I1: CT: experienced teacher).

Foreign language teachers in this sample felt the need to connect with each other to overcome their professional isolation, and this is seen across the foreign language teaching population worldwide (Lamb 2012). In a study of these very networks, Endicott (2011) showed the effectiveness of grass-roots, teacher-led networks of foreign language teachers in providing support and opportunities for Queensland teachers to develop professionally at a time of curriculum change. Many of these networks were a response to the lack of professional development opportunities that were

available to them that catered to their specific needs. An example of a currently active network of foreign language teachers is the Central Queensland Language Teachers Network, which has over 70 members in regional Queensland. Members meet based on their needs, with some joining meetings virtually due to their remote location. The importance of this network in providing support and professional development for teachers was recognised by the regional department of education, which for several years provided funding to employ the network coordinator for two days a week to strengthen the network, although that funding has since been cut (J. Aaron, personal communication, Aug 17, 2015).

Bourdieu (1986) sees social space as multidimensional, and this is seen in the various methods that foreign language teachers harness to connect with their peers. The results of the study indicated a higher likelihood of connections occurring in online and informal spaces rather than at formal conferences and meetings (Table 1). At the time of data collection the MLTAQ mailing list was one of the most active online environments for foreign language teacher communication in Queensland. Almost 20 % ( $n=8$ ) of former teachers in this study responded 'not applicable' to questions regarding the mailing list, most likely as they left the field before the emergence of social media. The recent proliferation of social media platforms, and a growing recognition of social media as an effective tool for professional development (McCulloch et al. 2011), means that further investigation is needed to better understand if and how social networking can best be harnessed to provide support for teachers and to improve teacher retention.

**Finding 6: Active engagement in formal and informal support outside of schools can be used as a ladder to improved career opportunities**

The findings in this study show that teachers with strong social connections with other foreign language teachers, formed through attendance at MLTAQ meetings and conferences, are more likely to leave the field. This is contrary to much of the research in the field which suggests that strong relationships aide in retention (Waddell 2010). It is possible that for those who moved out of foreign language teaching, strong social capital assisted in their transition away from teaching, providing them with social networks that have been shown to be powerful agents in the job market (Gayen et al. 2010; Haynes et al. 2014). This is supported by the fact that 67.4 % of former teachers (31/47) had moved into other jobs within the education field. This double-edged sword of strong social capital was also shown in a study of 99 US teachers, whereby those who moved into promotional positions within the education system were those with larger and more diverse social networks (Thomas 2007). Another possible explanation is the use of network sampling to locate former teachers. The very nature of network sampling is such that those who have, or had, strong social relationships with their peers are those who are more likely to be reached. As such, teachers who left due to professional isolation and lack of strong relationships with other foreign language teachers would have been, by definition, more difficult to locate. This is acknowledged as a limitation of this study and thus there is a need to conduct further studies with larger samples of former foreign language teachers to strengthen the reliability of this finding.

### Limitations and future directions

There are several limitations to this study in regards to the sampling of the participants. The sample includes a wide breadth of teachers from different contexts, and is double the size of the average teacher attrition study in Australia (Mason & Poyatos Matas 2015). Nevertheless, without baseline data on foreign language teachers (Australian Language & Literacy Council 1996; Liddicoat et al. 2007), and without a probability method of sample selection, the study provides important insights, but it is with caution that generalisations are made about the wider population (Traugott et al. 2004). Secondly, the methods for recruitment and voluntary nature of the study means that the sample may be skewed toward those who have strong opinions about the issues under discussion, those who are members of the MLTAQ, and former teachers who continue to have connections with other foreign language teachers.

The questionnaire design brought both benefits and weaknesses to the study. Due to the size of the state of Queensland, which covers approximately 1,700,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Geoscience Australia 2015), online delivery allowed access to teachers across all areas of the state, in this way reaching rural and remote areas, without the usual time and financial constraints. The self-reporting nature of the data collection tools, potentially allowed for social desirability bias, a phenomenon where 'respondents believe there are norms defining desirable attitudes and behaviours, and that they are concerned enough about these norms to distort their answers to avoid presenting themselves in an unfavorable light' (p. 257) (Tourangeau et al. 2000). Emphasizing the need for honesty and ensuring confidentiality were efforts made to try to reduce this bias (Nancarrow & Brace 2000).

Moving forward, large-scale, longitudinal studies of foreign language teachers beginning in their pre-service education and into their careers are needed to allow researchers to follow teachers as decisions are made about their careers, and to determine accurate rates of attrition. Studies of the social capital of foreign language teachers in other states and countries are important to determine if the findings of this study are replicated in other contexts. Areas that require more rigorous investigation include the role of discipline-specific support programs, and emerging online support structures.

### Conclusions

Overall, the evidence documented, quantitative and qualitative, statistical and anecdotal, showed clearly the vital role that social capital plays in the career paths of the participants. In particular, the perceived lack of value for foreign language teachers and foreign language education in schools, the poor leadership experience, and negative school cultures were reported by many teachers as having a major negative impact in their careers, as they translated into poorly resourced language education programs and intense working conditions in schools. This in turn affected the quality of the relationships that the language teachers could establish with members of their school communities. Moreover, the presence, quality, and nature of support that teachers received was generally reported as being low. As a result, many foreign language teachers are disadvantaged professionally as they are unable to develop enough social capital to maintain the Australian professional standards expected of them, and to sustain them in their jobs. The study also found that the low social capital in schools has led foreign language teachers to proactively seek and create their own networking opportunities outside of their own workplaces to find the social connections they need. In what might



be seen as a double-edged sword, these professional connections have been utilised as ladders to positions outside of foreign language teaching, often within the education system, where teachers seek strengthened social capital to fulfill their professional needs. As such, the five elements researched impacted on the ways in which the participants were able to develop their professional social capital and, as a result their willingness to stay or leave their jobs as language teachers.

Foreign language teachers themselves are making efforts to build their social capital in an effort to sustain their careers and to develop professionally. However, educational employers and school leaders must facilitate inclusive, supportive and positive workplaces where professional relationships are fostered with all members of the school community, and where all teachers and disciplines are treated fairly and equitably. To be afforded time and space to connect with colleagues and to be valued for one's contribution are simple requests. Due to the longstanding lack of support for language education at the grass-roots level in Australia, making sustainable changes to the language teacher attrition problem requires higher level policy decisions which reflect a real value for language education. This involves the development and assessment of substantive education policies which are serious about supporting language teaching quality, and supporting language teachers to make it happen. Otherwise, language teachers will continue to leave a teaching field that cannot afford to lose them.

#### Abbreviations

AFMLTA: Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations; FT: former teacher; MLTAQ: Modern Language Teachers Association of Queensland.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

#### Authors' contributions

SM participated in the design of the study and completed the data collection and data analysis, and was involved in the writing of the manuscript and the interpretation of the results. CPM helped to draft the manuscript and participated in the interpretation of the results. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### Authors' information

This study is part of a PhD study currently undertaken through Griffith University by SM and supervised by CPM.

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#### Author details

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Relations, University of Nagasaki, 1-1-1 Manabino, Nagayo-cho, Nishisonogi-gun 851-2195 Nagasaki, Japan. <sup>2</sup>School of Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University, Nathan Campus, NO6, 2.21, Klummp Road, Brisbane, Queensland 2111, Australia.

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