Perceptions of Australian Schooling: What Matters in 2021

Document Version
Final published version

Citation for published version (APA):
Heffernan, A., Bright, D., Longmuir, F., & Magyar, B. (2021). *Perceptions of Australian Schooling: What Matters in 2021*. Monash University.

OPEN ACCESS

PERCEPTIONS OF AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING:
WHAT MATTERS IN 2021

AMANDA HEFFERNAN,
DAVID BRIGHT,
FIONA LONGMUIR,
AND BERTALAN MAGYAR

Contents

Executive Summary

This report shares findings of a nationwide Australian study into public perceptions of the teaching profession and of schooling. The study was commissioned as a follow-up to our previous research into teachers' and public perceptions of teaching as a profession. This research draws on a nationally-representative sample of the Australian public to develop a deeper understanding about perceptions about effective teaching and schooling today.

This public survey was administered to a nationally-representative sample of the Australian public through a contracted market research company (YouGov) and focused on perceptions of teachers and the teaching profession, including the current challenges faced by teachers and schools. The sample of participants is weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data.

There are five key themes addressed within this research:

- Public perceptions of teachers, teaching, and schools

- What the public values in teachers

- What the public believes schooling should do

- Public perceptions about teaching as a career

- The impact of COVID-19 on public perceptions of Australian schooling

Our study gives insights into what the public values about teaching, what they see as important in schooling, and perceptions of the challenges facing teachers today. The findings of this study can contribute to evidence-based policy-making and inform public discussion and awareness about policy and practice.

This report can be read in conjunction with our previously-released research brief, which reported on findings from the same study: The Impact of COVID-19 on Perceptions of Australian Schooling

Introduction

Teaching is a profession that affects all Australians. There are about 288,294 teachers working with almost 4 million students in 9,542 schools across Australia (ABS, 2021; ACARA, 2019). Teachers play a vital role in every community and they have far-reaching influence; their work shapes the future of Australia. The Australian Government recognised that the teaching profession is one of great importance and in November 2018 announced an inquiry into the status of the profession, with the intent of ensuring that teaching is 'fulfilling and rewarding for educators' (Wernert, 2019, p. 1). Research has reported a looming teacher shortage, particularly for teachers in specialist areas and in rural and remote schools, and 'alarming' rates of teacher attrition (Allen et al., 2019, p. 99).

This research study follows up on a previous study conducted in 2019, focused on public and teacher perceptions of teaching and schooling. The original study was commissioned in response to ongoing concerns about recruitment and retention of educators (Allen et al., 2019; Gallant & Riley, 2017; Shine, 2015) and concerning reports about the wellbeing of teachers and school leaders (Beausaert et al., 2016; McCallum & Price, 2015).

In this study, we wanted to better understand the public's perceptions of teaching and schooling in Australia. Our nationally-representative public survey focused on perceptions of teachers and teaching, providing us with nuanced insights into the current state of these issues across Australia. The findings of this study will support ongoing public discussion about teaching as a profession.

In the following report, we share the findings of each topic that was investigated through the survey and offer key points that will contribute to ongoing discussion about the teaching profession. This report is divided into three sections:

(i) Findings

Public perceptions of teachers, teaching, and schools

What the public values in teachers

What the public believes schooling should do

Public perceptions about teaching as a career

The impact of COVID-19 on public perceptions of Australian schooling

(ii) Implications

(iii) Methodology

Findings

1. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS, TEACHING AND SCHOOLS

We asked a number of questions designed to help us better understand the public's perceptions of teachers, teaching and schools in Australia.

1.1 PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS

Teachers play an integral role in the lives of all Australians. Our 2019 survey revealed that many teachers felt unappreciated by the Australian public. In 2020, we asked the public a number of questions about the ways teachers were perceived by the Australian community.

Around half of our respondents agreed that teachers were respected by parents (55%), students (51%), and business organisations (48%). However, when asked if teachers were respected by politicians, only 40% of respondents agreed.

FIGURE 1: RESPECT FOR TEACHERS
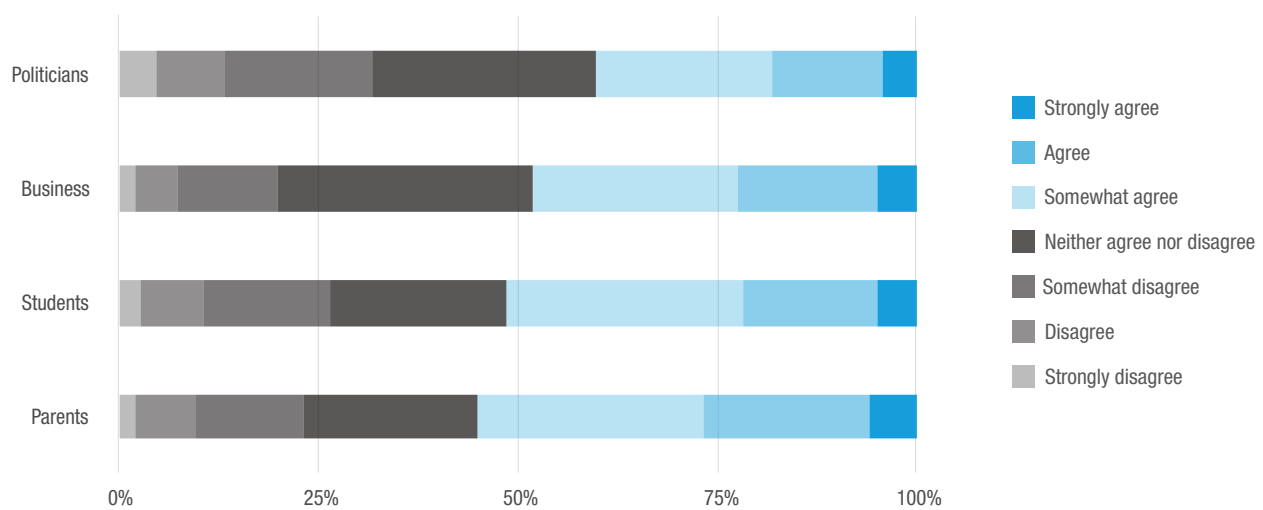
Participants were also asked to rate a broad range of 25 job categories, including four teaching occupations (school principal, secondary school teacher, primary school teacher and early childhood educator), in terms of their perceived social status. We asked:

"How do you rate the following occupations based on their current social status?".

The range of rating was between 1 and 10 where a low number would indicate low social status for the particular type of job. Occupations then were ordered based on their averages in the sample (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: STATUS OF TEACHING

	6	7	8	9	10

8.6

7.88

7.85

7.66

7.5

7.08

7.07

6.97

6.95

6.9

6.85

6.67

6.57

6.43

6.4

6.36

6.33

6.31

6.18

6.1

5.97

5.59

.41
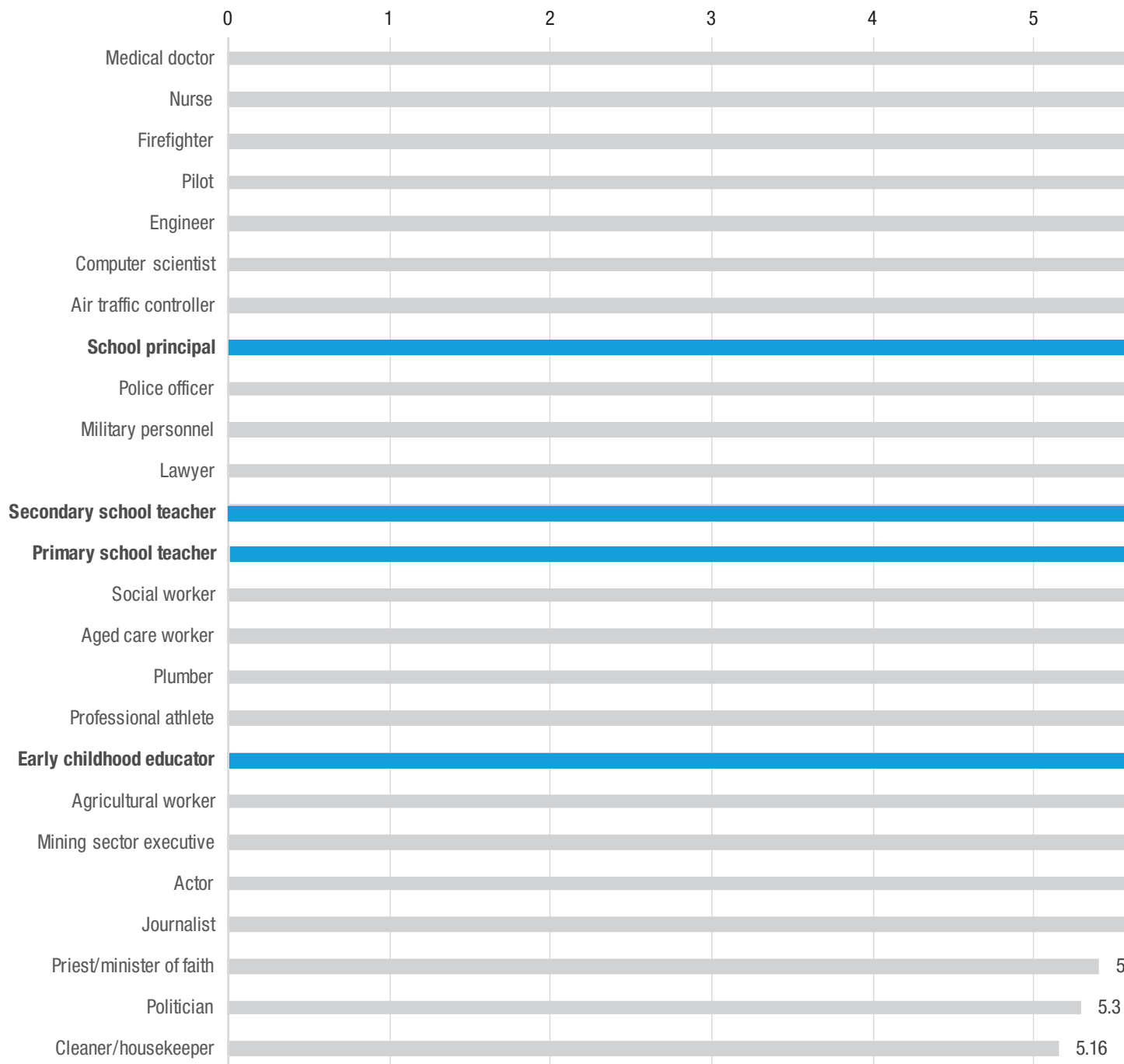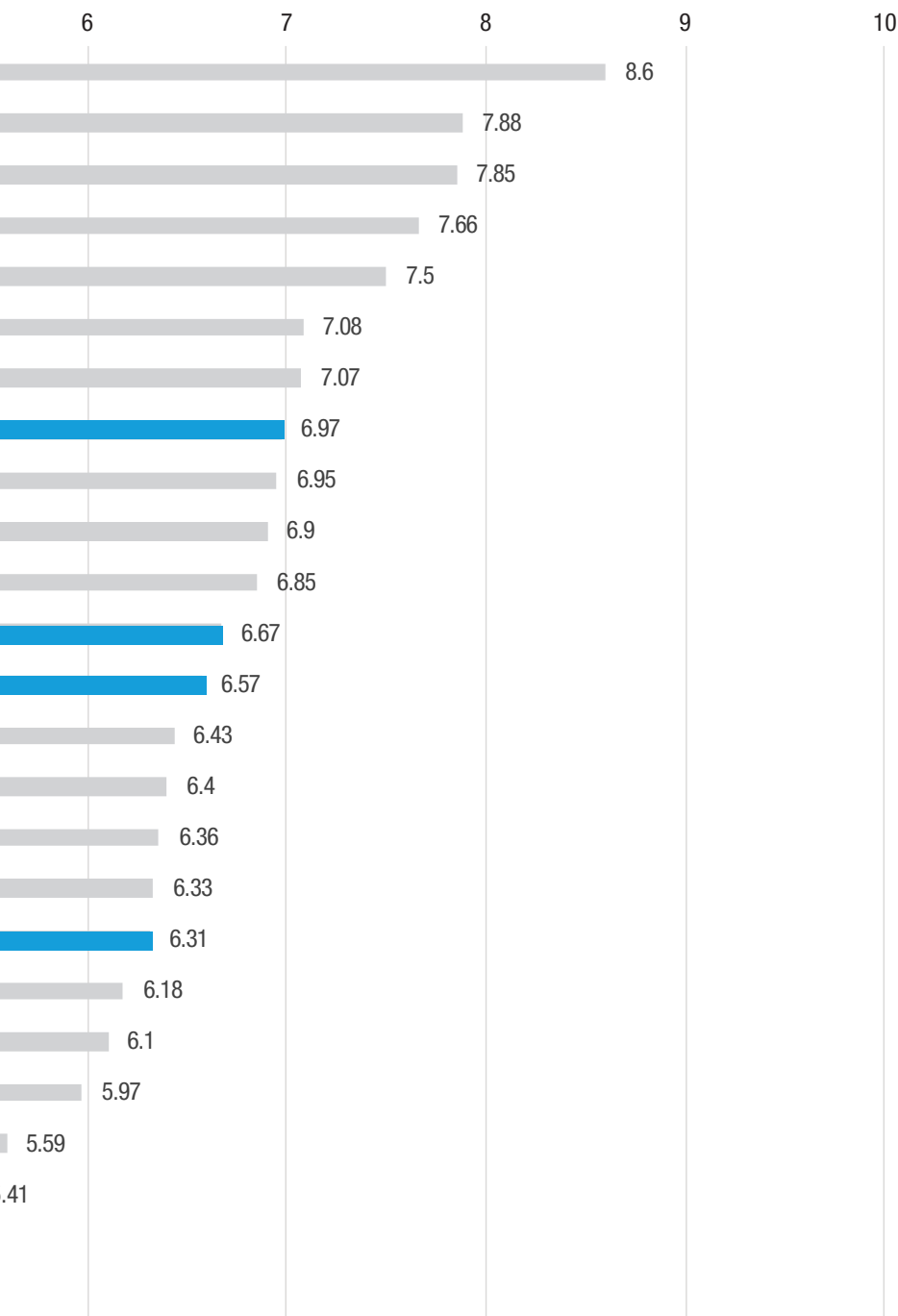
Health care professions such as medical doctors and nurses appear to be valued most while politicians are ranked the lowest among the occupations listed. The social status of the four teaching occupations sits in the middle of the rank order. School principal emerged as the highest rated teaching occupation, with secondary and primary school teachers ranked slightly below that occupation. The public does not appear to differentiate between secondary and primary school teachers in terms of social status as both are ranked very similarly. Finally, early childcare educators were perceived to have the lowest social status among the teaching occupations in our study. The public therefore may not fully appreciate early childhood educators whose undoubtedly valuable work has great social benefits. This is reflected in previous research which has highlighted the importance of redressing issues of status, pay, and recognition of the important work of early childhood educators in order to address retention within the profession (McDonald et al., 2018).

The survey also asked respondents if they agreed that "We can trust that teachers work in the best interest of students." Figure 3 shows that a substantial majority (72%) agreed. This reflects our own previous research which showed that the Australian public trusts teachers. It also aligns very closely with research that shows 82% of parents and 78% of non-parents in England trust teachers to make good decisions in the interest of children's education (Everton et al., 2007).

FIGURE 3: TRUST IN TEACHERS

Strongly Disagree 1.8%
Disagree 3.7%
Somewhat disagree 5.6%
Neither Agree nor Disagree 17.2%
Strongly Agree 10.3%
Agree 29.1%
Somewhat agree 32.4%
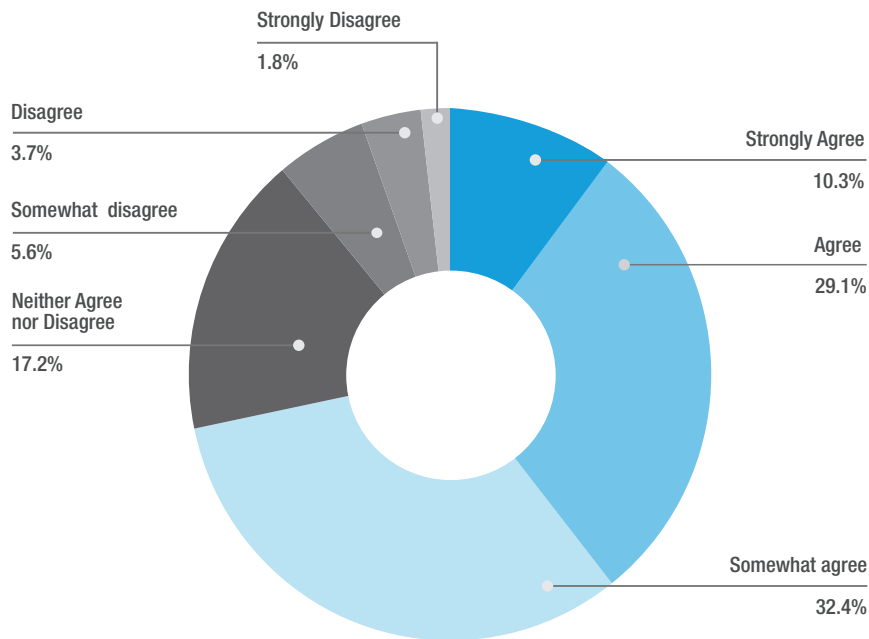
Respondents were also asked if they agreed that "Teachers in Australia care for the wellbeing of their students." Again, a substantial majority (76%) agree, as shown in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: CARING FOR STUDENT WELLBEING

Strongly Disagree 1.6%
Disagree 1.8%
Somewhat disagree 5%
Neither Agree nor Disagree 15.5%
Strongly Agree 14.2%
Agree 34%
Somewhat agree 27.9%
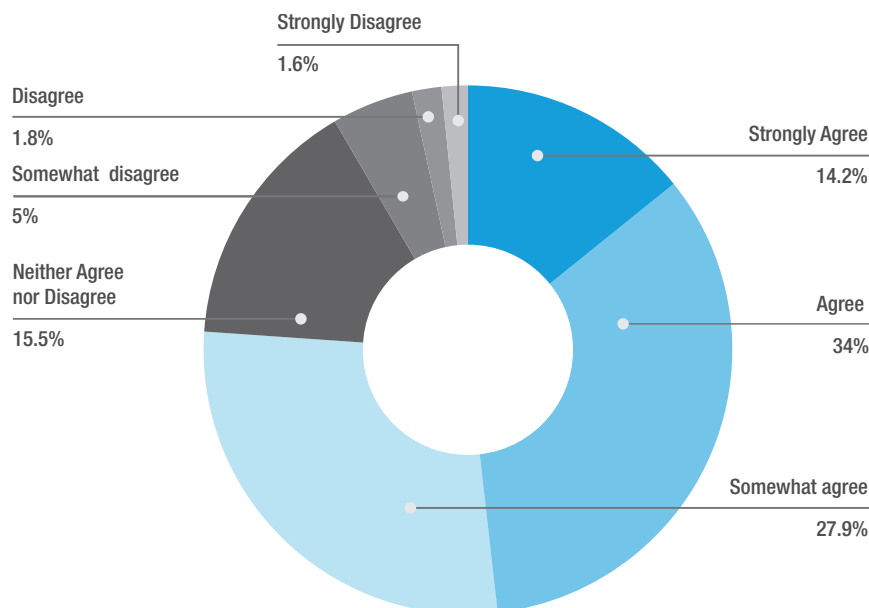
Overall, the survey provides evidence of a relatively high level of positive opinion towards teachers from the Australian public. However, there was one area of concern, with only 58% of respondents agreeing with the statement that "Teachers in Australia prepare students well for life after school."

FIGURE 5: TEACHERS IN AUSTRALIA PREPARE STUDENTS WELL FOR LIFE AFTER SCHOOL.

Strongly Disagree 4.6%
Disagree 7%
Somewhat disagree 13%
Neither Agree nor Disagree 17.3%
Somewhat agree 30.2%
Agree 21.2%
Strongly Agree 6.5%
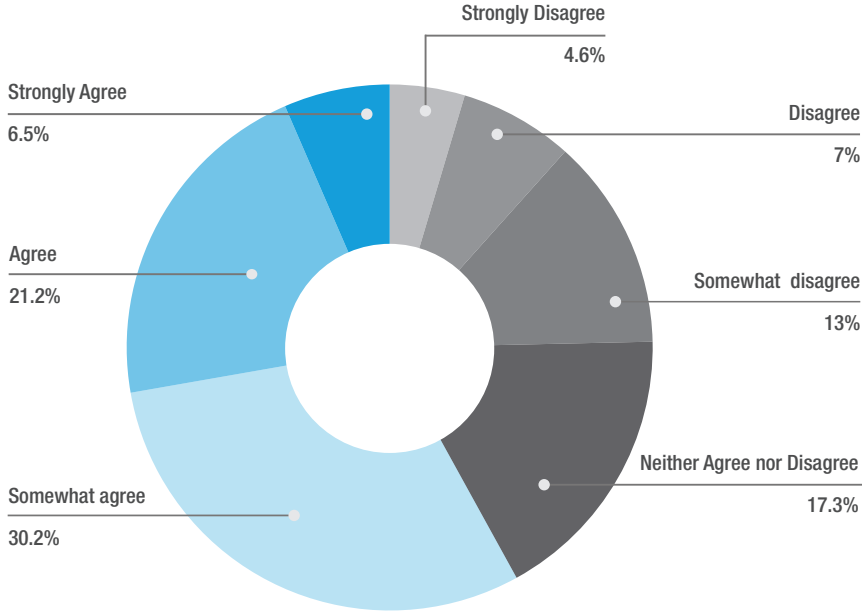
Given that our 2019 results that showed teachers didn't feel positively supported by the public, while at the same time the public felt teachers were well-respected, "we asked respondents if they agreed that media and social media portrayals of teachers were accurate". The survey showed that only 39% of respondents felt media portrayals and only 34% felt social media portrayals of Australian teachers were accurate.

This is important, given previous research which has shown perceptions of overwhelmingly negative portrayals of the profession (Shine, 2020). These findings suggest that there is further work to be done to celebrate positive stories of teachers and teaching within the media and to shift public discourses into more accurate portrayals of their work.

FIGURE 6: PORTRAYALS OF TEACHERS
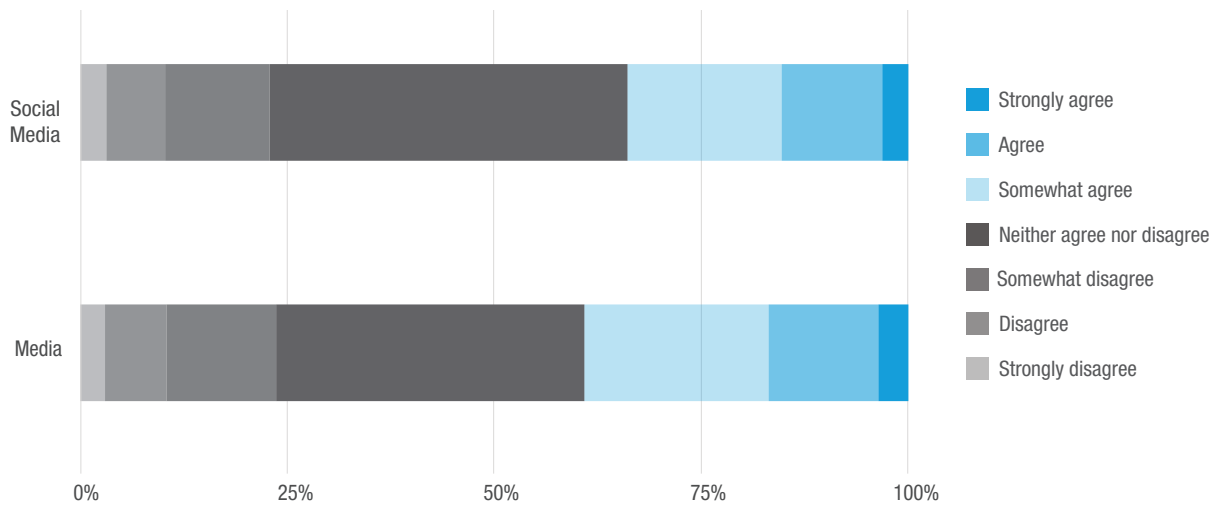
1.2 PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING

Participants were also asked the extent to which they agreed with a number of statements about teaching as a job or profession.

FIGURE 7: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING
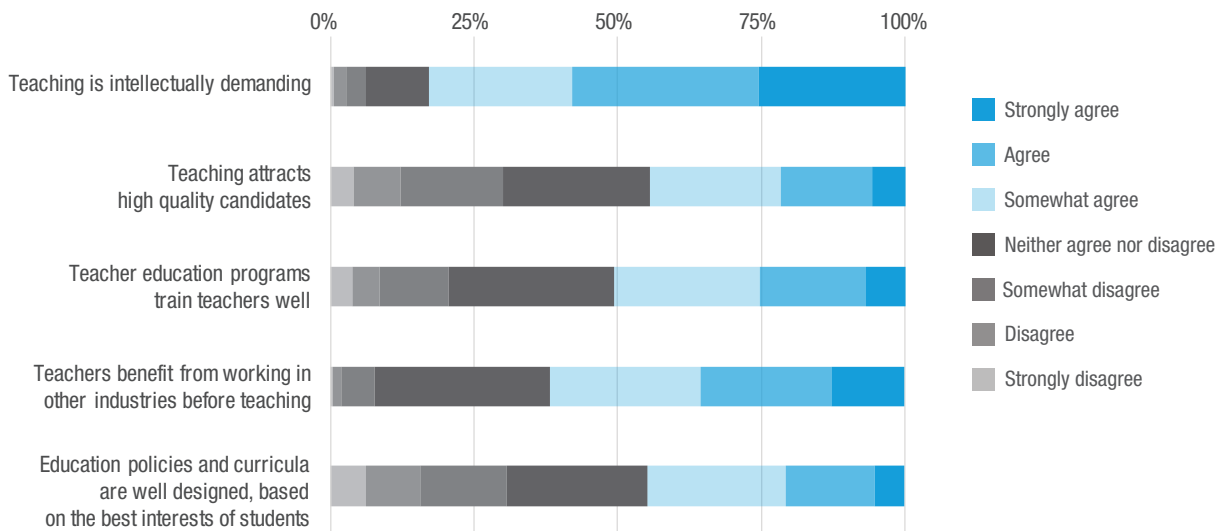
As is shown in Figure 7, 83% of respondents agreed in some form that teaching was an intellectually demanding profession. However, less than half (45%) respondents agreed that teaching attracted high-quality candidates, and only around half (51%) agreed that teacher education programmes prepared teachers well.

This lower perception may be the result of ongoing public commentary about teacher education and quality of applicants for the teaching profession. Public commentary that Australia's teacher education entry standards need to be higher to attract the 'best and brightest' implies that the current cohort of teacher education students, and current teachers, are not reflective of this - an implication that has been debunked by Gore et al. (2016). Further, public commentary questioning the quality of Initial Teacher Education in Australia has been described as contributing to an undervaluing of the profession (Simpson et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION POINT

While public perceptions of teachers and teachers remain positive, there are some concerns. The public respects and trusts teachers, and believes that they work in the best interests of their students. However, while they see teaching as intellectually demanding work, they are less confident that teachers are well-prepared for their jobs, less confident that teaching attracts high-quality candidates, and less confident that teachers are preparing students for life after school.

2. WHAT THE PUBLIC VALUES IN TEACHERS

Our 2019 study found that while there was trust and respect for teachers expressed by the public, many teachers did not feel valued or appreciated. To understand the ways that the public value teachers in 2020 we asked the public participants about the important characteristics of teachers and also invited them to reflect on teachers that had been influential in their lives.

2.1 INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHERS

Participants were asked to rate each characteristic on a seven-point scale of importance. Figure 8 presents this data by combining the ratings to suggest those characteristics which were considered significantly important (extremely, very or quite important), those that were considered moderately important (somewhat or moderately important) and those that were considered minimally important (not important or of little importance).

As is shown in Figure 8, all of these eight characteristics were generally thought to be significantly important by the majority of respondents with p*assion for subject matter* being rated as significantly important by the highest percentage of participants. *Passion for subject matter* also had the largest proportion of participants rate it at the highest end of the importance scale, with 32.4% of participants rating it as extremely important. *Creativity* was least often rated as significantly important (78.5%) and the fewest participants rated this characteristic as extremely important (17.1%).

FIGURE 8: CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHERS*
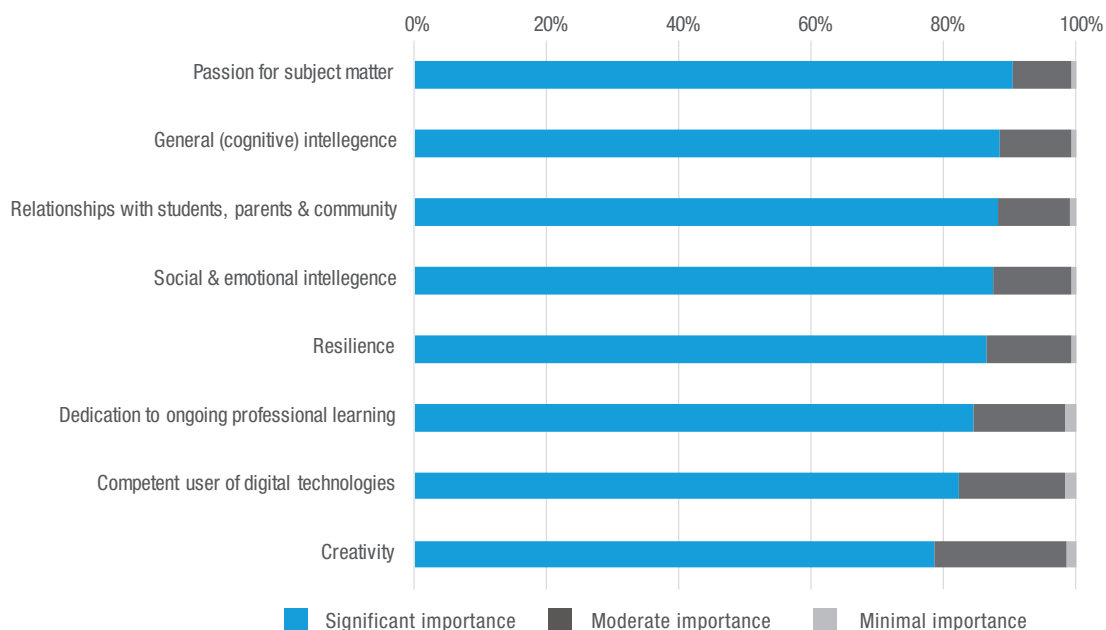
* Characteristics are presented in the order of decreasing importance. The original seven point scales were collapsed into three categories for ease of interpretation.

2.2 INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS

To further consider the ways that the public value teachers, we asked participants to reflect on teachers that had influenced their lives. We asked participants to nominate the number of teachers who had influenced them and then to describe what made these teachers influential.

FIGURE 9: INFLUENTIAL TEACHERS
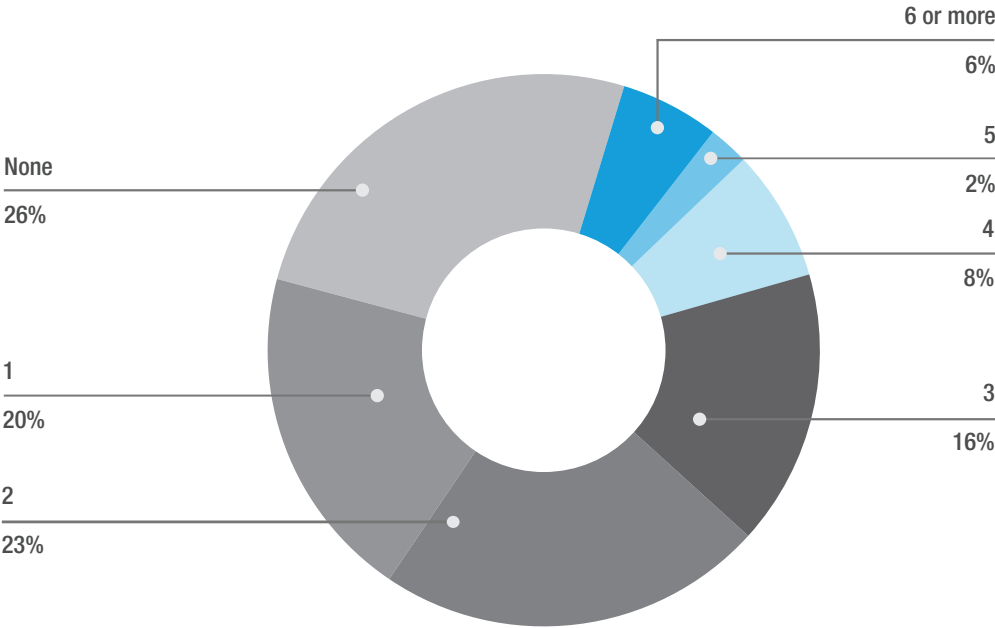
The majority of participants (74%) had at least one teacher whom they felt had been influential for them. Almost 60% identified between 1 - 3 teachers as influential.

Descriptions of what made teachers influential were provided by 749 of the participants Following the removal of 14 non-informative responses (e.g., "do not know", or "cannot remember" and so on) a thematic analysis has been conducted on the 735 meaningful comments. Table 1 presents the themes and their prevalence in the responses.

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIONS OF INFLUENTIAL TEACHERS

THEME	PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES	ILLUSTRATIVE RESPONSES
INDIVIDUAL CARE, ENCOURAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS	54%	- Engaged with me at a level I could understand, treated me with respect and encouraged and supported me on what I wanted to do and achieve. - They engaged my will to learn. They nurtured my emerging intelligence and motivation to learn and succeed - Caring, took time to learn more about me - Listening, caring for you as an individual, not just a number and seeing to my wellbeing and happiness.
SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE AND PASSION	20%	- Complete passion and love for the subject. - Able to transmit their own passion for the subject to their students - Their enthusiasm for the subject matter
EXCEPTIONAL TEACHING	19%	- Tailoring work to students, in depth and creative lesson/study plans and teaching - They were extremely competent, and they understood and knew how to engage with the material
PERSONAL TRAITS	13%	- They were friendly - General personality - Funny - Creative
WENT BEYOND THE ROLE	4%	- Willingness to give of their time when required. - Went above teaching as a job - Gave up their lunch time to help me catch up

Note- percentage totals do not equal 100 as some comments were coded to multiple themes.

Table 1 shows that over half of those who provided a description of what made their teachers influential focused on the individual connections that were developed and the care and encouragement that teachers show to students. There were many responses coded to this theme that shared insight into how a teacher, or teachers, helped students feel valued and important. There were several that spoke of teachers influencing career choices and life outcomes with the care and interest that was shown.

Subject knowledge and passion and that teachers had great teaching skills and abilities were also commonly commented on. Many comments covered these three themes in combinations, as this comment illustrates, "*Passion for the subject they were teaching, clearly dedicated to helping their students achieve the best results they could and set them up for life after school*".

The themes of subject passion and individual care and connection reflect the findings of the participants' indications of characteristics that they felt were most important in teachers. Figure 8 shows that *passion for subject matter* and *relationships with students, parents and community* were rated as important by most participants (90% and 88% respectively).

Teachers' career motivations have been connected to their feelings of making a social contribution (Butler, 2017) and making a difference to the lives of their students (Watt et al., 2017). This study shows that a large majority of the public (74%) felt that teachers were explicitly influential in their lives. These influences were most commonly reported as relational and often about personal connections and care for individuals. This is an important insight, not only as it provides evidence of the value of teachers, but also in discussions on the focus of teachers' work. With teaching standards and best practice metanarratives often focused on instructional quality dimensions (Barnes, 2021), the importance of the relational should not be forgotten.

DISCUSSION POINT

The public values teachers and can articulate the positive influence that teachers have on lives. Efforts to continue to acknowledge the broad positive influences of teachers' work is important and could support teacher retention and attraction.

3. WHAT THE PUBLIC BELIEVES SCHOOLING SHOULD DO

There are ongoing discussions in the media and public discourse about the content schools should teach, the types of skills they should develop in students, and the values and perspectives they should include in their curriculum and pedagogy. We wanted to better understand what the public felt schooling should be about today, so we asked questions about what sort of skills they felt should be taught in schools.

3.1 PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

It is unlikely that the general public would closely follow the pedagogical and technical details behind curricular design efforts, yet we would expect that adults have reasonably solidified views on what skills and capabilities schools could or should emphasise in teaching. We therefore wanted to explore the perceived relative importance of certain types of skills and capabilities. We asked:

"In your opinion, how important is it for schools to help students to develop in the following areas?"

FIGURE 10: SKILLS TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS*
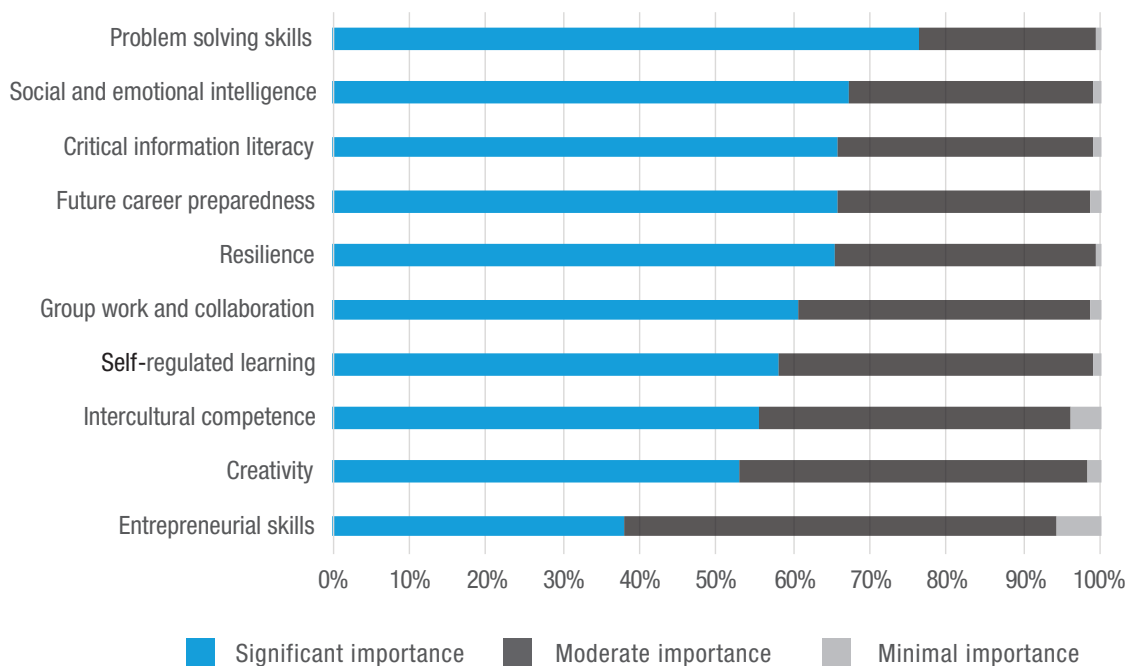
* Skills are presented in the order of decreasing importance. The original seven point scales were collapsed into three categories for ease of interpretation.

Our analysis enabled us to arrange the above ten skills into four clusters based on overall perceived importance.

Problem solving skills are valued most in our sample, with 76.5% of participants rating it as significantly important.	The second cluster comprises the following four skills: social and emotional intelligence (67.2%), critical information literacy (65.8%), future career preparedness (65.6%) and resilience (65.5%).
The third group of skills include group work and collaboration (60.5%), self-regulated learning (58.1%), intercultural competence (55.5%) and creativity (53.1%).	The public's ratings of these final four skills are fairly similar, yet they are noticeably lower than the top five skills described above. Finally, entrepreneurial skill is perceived by far as the least important area of capability building in schools, with only 37.9 percent of participants viewing it as significantly important.

Schools are essential sites of formal education, and the Australian curriculum has been developed to assist all young learners to become successful, confident, creative, and well-informed citizens (ACARA 2021a). Covering the learning period between foundation and Year 10, ACARA distinguishes between eight core learning areas (English, mathematics, science, health and physical education, humanities and social sciences, arts, technologies and languages), one optional learning area (work studies, only in Year 9-10), seven general capabilities (literacy, numeracy, ICT capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social Capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding), and three cross-curriculum priorities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, engagement with Asia, and sustainability).

In addition, curriculum developers have identified seven curriculum connections (financial literacy, food and fibre, food and wellbeing, multimedia, online safety, outdoor learning, and respect matters) which are conceptual themes to "allow educators to draw connections across the dimensions of the Australian Curriculum" (ACARA 2021b, n.p.). From this exhaustive list it is clear that teachers in Australia would need to cover a lot of ground to equip learners with all the capabilities perceived important beyond school and throughout their life course. What complicates matters even further is that the curriculum undergoes periodic reviews and modifications to reflect the dynamically changing society and economy[1].

[1] The Australian Curriculum is currently being reviewed and will come into effect in 2022 (ACARA 2021c).

[2] Independent sample T tests were conducted for the comparisons based on gender. The reported differences were statistically significant at the .01 level.

3.2 PERSPECTIVES ON SKILL DEVELOPMENT - DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISONS

The numerical findings reported so far and depicted in Figure 10 refer to all participants in our study. We wanted to better understand whether the perceived importance of skills development in schools was influenced by certain demographic characteristics. For this reason, we conducted a series of analyses based on gender, whether the respondent had a school-aged child at home, age, educational qualification, working status, income, and language spoken other than English at home, geographical location, size of household, voting preference at the 2019 federal election, and education sector for children.

We first explored whether gender would influence the perception of skill development in schools. We found statistical evidence suggesting that women rated the importance of the following skills higher than men did: problem solving, social and emotional intelligence, group work and collaboration, future career preparedness, entrepreneurial skills, intercultural competence, resilience, and self-regulated learning.[2] We found no differences between women and men with respect to the perceived importance of the development of creativity and information literacy skills in schools.

We also wanted to find out whether having a school-aged child at home would have any impact on the perceived importance of skill development in schools. In our study we had 176 people (17.39 %) with a school-aged child at home. These parents rated the importance of the development of the following three skills higher than those without such children: group work, creativity, and entrepreneurial skills.[3] The remaining seven skills were perceived very similarly between the two groups.

We expected that age may also influence public perceptions regarding the importance of skill development in schools. Our statistical analyses revealed that age is positively related to critical information literacy and resilience.[4] These findings suggest that older people perceive the development of critical information literacy and resilience more important than younger people do.

We conducted additional group comparisons based on the following demographic measures: educational qualification, working status, income, and language spoken other than English at home, geographical location, size of household, voting preference at the 2019 federal election, and education sector for children. The relevant statistical tests demonstrated no evidence for significant relationships between these and the ten perceived importance of skill development measures.

---

[3] Independent sample T tests were conducted for the comparisons based on having a school-aged child at home which was coded as a binary measure. The reported differences were statistically significant at the .01 level.

[4] The corresponding Pearson correlation coefficients were significant for critical information literacy (R=.117, p<.001) and resilience (R=.102, p<.001).

DISCUSSION POINT

The public saw problem solving skills as most important, and entrepreneurial skills rated the lowest by respondents in our study. It is noteworthy that, in contrast, parents of school-aged children did rate entrepreneurial skills as being of importance. The public emphasis on skills that would prepare young people for a changing world (including problem solving skills, critical information literacy, and future career preparedness) are reflective of public perceptions of needing to prepare young people for a rapidly changing future. Similarly, the importance of social and emotional intelligence and resilience are traits that would support students to move confidently into that future.

4. PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING AS A CAREER

We asked a number of questions designed to better understand the public's perceptions of why teachers might join the profession, and what might affect their decisions to remain in or leave the profession.

4.1 ATTRACTING TEACHERS TO THE PROFESSION / PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT BECOMING A TEACHER

4.1.1 Motivations for becoming a teacher

Respondents were asked about why they think people become teachers. Lifestyle benefits, such as holidays, are commonly discussed in the media or discourses about education (Shine, 2020). In contrast, the findings of this survey showed that these lifestyle factors (specifically long periods of holidays) were not seen by the public as a strong motivating factor for joining the profession.

The responses revealed an understanding that motivations related to teaching as a higher calling. There was a recognition from members of the public that teachers' motivations relate to working with young people, making a positive contribution to society, doing interesting work, and positively influencing the next generation.

4.1.2 Encouraging a young person to become a teacher

We asked respondents whether they would encourage a young person in their lives to become a teacher. When we asked this in our previous study, 59% of respondents said they would not. We wanted to better understand the responses to this question and the possible implications for attracting teachers into the future, so we broke down possible responses by schooling sector and asked respondents to elaborate in more detail.

We asked people to respond to whether they would encourage young people in their families to become teachers, with the following possible responses:

1. No, under no circumstances

2. Maybe, as a part-time job only

3. Yes, as a good full-time profession

4. Yes, as a great career for the long term.

We saw an important distinction between response 3 (as a good full-time profession) and 4 (as a great long-term career) because this could indicate the difference perceptions of the job as being good (with a sense that it is perhaps only for a certain period of time) or being something that could be rewarding and engaging for an entire career. Responses indicated that people largely saw teaching as a good profession to be part of, but less so as a long-term career. Table 2 shows the difference between responses about teaching as a good job or a long-term career.

Of interest is the difference between people seeing the principalship / leadership as a more appealing long-term career option.

TABLE 2: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AS A GOOD JOB VS LONG-TERM CAREER

	AS A GOOD JOB	AS A LONG-TERM CAREER
EARLY CHILDHOOD	41%	15%
PRIMARY	51%	22%
SECONDARY	50%	19%
PRINCIPALSHIP	38%	30%

Research has previously shown the importance of having career pathways for teachers that recognise and highlight the complexity of their work, and that provide opportunities for experienced teachers to remain within the classroom while being able to have a positive influence within the school and wider schooling systems (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Wills et al., 2021). For example, additional salary increases and teacher leadership opportunities for highly experienced teachers in a number of Australian states have been noted as a way of encouraging teacher retention, through programs such as AITSL's Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) program.

DISCUSSION POINT

There may be more work to do to show the benefits of a long-term career as a teacher, including raising awareness of the types of different challenges available to teachers, different types of responsibility, and leadership opportunities that are available to teachers that do not necessitate a move into school leadership positions.

4.2 PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHALLENGES FACING TEACHERS

We asked members of the public for their perceptions on what makes teaching challenging, and on the key reasons teachers leave before retirement.

Largely, responses showed that members of the public are aware of the complexity of teachers' work. The majority of responses recognised the challenges raised by:

Student disengagement with learning
19% said it was an 'extremely challenging factor' in teachers' work, with a further 80% describing it as a challenging factor to varying degrees

Mental health and wellbeing of selves or colleagues
13% described this as an extremely challenging factor, with a further 85% describing it as a challenging factor to varying degrees

Increasingly complex student needs and diverse needs in classrooms
15% described this as an extremely challenging factor, with a further 84% describing it as a challenging factor to varying degrees

Administrative demands on teachers' time
11% described this as an extremely challenging factor, with a further 88% describing it as a challenging factor to varying degrees

We also asked an open-ended question about why teachers might leave before retirement. The responses were analysed thematically with the following reasons recurring in responses:

- Burnout, health & wellbeing, stress
- Insufficient pay for the conditions and complexity of the job
- Parental demands & increasing expectations, aggression, etc
- Lack of support from politicians, policymakers, admin, communities
- Increasingly challenging student behaviour & needs
- Declining interest/job becomes boring / not what they went into the job to do.

These responses indicate that the respondents had an understanding of the particular challenges facing teachers today. Their comments align with research into teachers' work more broadly, which shows that teachers' work is deeply complex, increasing in intensity, and having a serious impact on teachers' health and wellbeing (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018; Stacey et al., 2020). Teachers enter the profession to make a difference, but find the demands of the role 'outstrip' their capacity and subsequent ability to remain within the profession (Perryman & Calvert, 2020, p. 18). Without meaningful and prompt attention to these issues, there is a serious risk to the strength and capacity of the teaching workforce in Australia.

DISCUSSION POINT

Respondents demonstrated an understanding of the challenges facing teachers today. While members of the public recognise that teachers go into the profession to make a difference, there is an awareness that teaching is a highly complex and challenging profession. There are clear implications for the attractiveness of teaching as a profession.

5. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING

In early 2020, we released a research brief sharing findings from this study that related specifically to how COVID-19 and the shift for many Australian schools to remote learning impacted upon public perceptions of schooling. The importance of school has been at the forefront of much debate and discussion during 2020 and 2021, with school closures and lockdowns forcing issues of schooling directly into the living rooms of many Australian families.

Below are the key findings and the full research brief can be found here.

5.1 MANY PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS' WORK IMPROVED AS A RESULT OF COVID-19.

41.6% of respondents said that their perceptions of teachers' work had improved as a direct result of COVID-19. The increase in positive public perceptions of teachers' work reflects an awareness of how teachers responded to the challenges faced during the crisis. Importantly, our findings showed a correlation between respondents who had a school-aged child at home and more positive perceptions of teachers' work during COVID-19. This suggests that people who experienced remote learning first-hand were more likely to have a more positive perception of teachers' work as a result.

5.2: THERE WAS WIDESPREAD RECOGNITION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF ENSURING ALL STUDENTS HAVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY THAT SUPPORTS THEIR LEARNING

The shift to remote learning highlighted issues of equity and access for students in different school contexts. The survey asked how important it was for students from low socio-economic households to be provided with subsidised or free access to laptops and other devices necessary to complete their schoolwork at home. A substantial majority (91.9%) of people responded that it was important with 68.7% indicating it was "quite", "very" or "extremely" important.

5.3: THERE IS PERCEIVED MERIT IN A HYBRID OR MORE FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO SCHOOLING.

The COVID-19 pandemic opened up new modes of learning for schools around the world. Early in the pandemic, suggestions were already being made that hybrid or blended learning would continue to be a feature of Australian schooling post-pandemic. 76.6% of participants were in support of rethinking the way we 'do' schooling into the future by creating a more flexible model where students attend school but have the option to take some classes online.

5.4: PARTICIPANTS ARE MORE CAUTIOUS ABOUT THE IDEA OF FULLY VIRTUAL SCHOOLS IN POST-COVID-19 TIMES

When asked to consider the importance of having virtual (fully online) school options for students, 35.9% of participants said it was 'of little importance' or 'not at all important'. The majority of remaining responses were more cautious, with 35.1% of respondents seeing it as 'somewhat' or 'moderately' important. The remaining 29% of respondents were more supportive of the importance of the idea.

5.5: SHIFTING TO REMOTE SCHOOLING DURING COVID-19 WAS SUCCESSFUL IN AUSTRALIA

Our survey findings suggest that the Australian public largely perceived the shift to remote schooling during COVID-19 as successful. 56.7% of respondents agreed that the shift to remote schooling during COVID was successful. 36% of those participants 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statement.

Implications and Discussion

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHERS

The findings of this study reflect high levels of public trust for Australian teachers, and an awareness that teachers care for the wellbeing of their students. This is important to be read in conjunction with the findings within this report that emphasise the influential role teachers have played in developing respondents' social and emotional development, their perceptions and beliefs of their ability as learners, and their self-confidence. The role of teachers continues to be recognised as important and influential, and this should be centred in discussions about the teaching profession more broadly. Discourses about failing schools and teacher quality have been noted by previous researchers (Mockler, 2020; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2018). These discourses of crisis rarely account for the importance of the relational work of teachers, and do not reflect the high levels of public trust and respect for teaching that we found in this study and in our previous work (Heffernan et al., 2019; Heffernan et al., 2021).

Respondents indicated that they do not feel that media and social media portrayals of teachers are accurate. This is important, given previous research that highlighted that these portrayals can skew towards the negative and that they have an influence on teachers' sense of their own work, but also on public perceptions of the profession (Baroutsis & Lingard, 2017; Shine, 2020).

WHAT THE PUBLIC VALUES IN TEACHERS

The survey findings indicate that members of the public placed a great deal of importance on teachers who are passionate about their subject matter, and who are able to make meaningful connections with their students. This reflects research from Allen et al. (2020) which found that while academic learning is most commonly prioritised in schools, what people remember the most is the relational work that teachers do every day. These findings emphasise the importance of teachers as formative influences on people's lives.

The reflections from respondents emphasised the importance of teachers having built meaningful relationships with their students. Comments indicated that teachers were most influential when they nurtured students' confidence and capacity, encouraged them in their learning, and cared about students as individuals. This is an important insight, not only as it provides evidence of the value of teachers, but also in discussions on the focus of teachers' work. With teaching standards and best practice metanarratives often focused on instructional quality dimensions (Barnes, 2021), the importance of the relational should not be forgotten.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

The survey findings show that respondents placed value on schools developing skills in students that would prepare young people for a changing world, including problem solving skills and critical information literacy. The importance of social and emotional intelligence and resilience were also recognised as important skills and traits that would support students to move confidently into an uncertain future. This is important to consider alongside our previous research findings into the impact of COVID-19 on perceptions of Australian schooling (Heffernan et al., 2021), where the public consistently recognised the importance of schooling as a site of development for student social and emotional wellbeing, and their interpersonal development. It is worth noting that demographic background characteristics generally do not appear to influence the public perception of skill development in compulsory education.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AS A CAREER

Concerns have long been raised in Australia about a forthcoming teacher shortage as a result of an ageing workforce and higher attrition rates of early career teachers (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Kearney, 2014). Schools in rural and remote locations, and particularly complex schools, are already finding it difficult to recruit and retain teachers (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013; Lampert & Burnett, 2016; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011). The findings from this survey indicate that there is still work to be done to raise the status of teaching as a profession and desirable long-term career. Importantly, members of the public recognised that teachers go into the profession for reasons including the opportunity to work with young people and make a positive contribution to society, do interesting work, and positively influence the next generation.

Public perceptions of teaching as a profession have previously been shown to reveal that the public trusts and respects teachers (Heffernan et al., 2019) and this study echoes these findings. Of note however, is the finding that the public largely viewed teaching as a 'good job' rather than a long-term career. This may be due to their awareness of the challenges of teaching, and the long-term impacts on teachers' health and wellbeing, as revealed in their responses about the challenges facing teachers and the complexity of teachers' work. We have previously noted the positive perceptions of teachers' work that have arisen as a result of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Heffernan et al., 2021). This tells us that members of the public developed a heightened awareness of teachers' work, and have a clearer understanding of what it means to be a teacher today.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING

The increase in public appreciation of teachers' work as a direct result of remote learning reflects an important shift in public opinion. Those who were closest to the work of schools during remote learning in 2020 reported an even higher appreciation for teachers' work than they had previously had. Schooling has been opened up directly into the homes of many Australian families and issues associated with remote learning brought discussions about equity and access to education, as well as the future shape of schooling, to the forefront. The findings about the perceived merit in a more flexible approach into the future would need to be read in tandem with previous findings about teachers' workloads so that more work would not simply be added for teachers, who are already reporting critical levels of work pressure. However, the findings provide insights into the possibilities of more flexible ways of working and learning for educators and students alike. This would need to also be considered in light of our findings that the public emphasised the importance of maintaining a sense of belonging and connection for students, and the value of schooling for students' social and emotional development.

Methodology

This survey was conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc Australian panel of 71,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. The report presents an analysis of data generated by a nationally-representative survey of 1012 Australian adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 2nd - 7th December 2020. An original 96 item questionnaire was developed to collect a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to understand the public perception of teachers and teaching in Australia in the context of lockdowns and remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample was weighted to be broadly representative of Australian population measures in terms of gender, age, region and socio-economic status. The full set of demographic characteristics with the relevant response categories is available in Appendix Table 1.

APPENDIX TABLE 1. FULL SET OF DEMOGRAPHIC MEASURES IN THE SURVEY SAMPLE (N=1012).

	N	PERCENTAGE
AGE RANGE (IN YEARS)		
18-24	108	10.7
25-34	184	18.2
35-49	263	26
50-64	256	25.3
65+	201	19.9
GENDER		
Men	501	49.5
Women	511	50.5
STATE		
New South Wales	295	29.2
Victoria	268	26.5
Queensland	215	21.2
South Australia	103	10.2
Western Australia	91	9
Tasmania	22	2.2
Northern Territory	6	0.6
Australian Capital Territory	12	1.2
SIZE OF HOUSEHOLD		
1	199	19.7
2	370	36.6
3	176	17.4
4	158	15.6
5	59	5.8
6 or more	31	3.1
Prefer not to say	19	1.9
EDUCATION LEVEL		
Primary school	3	0.3
Some Secondary School	114	11.3
Completed Secondary (Year 12 or equivalent)	160	15.8
Certificate, Diploma, TAFE	309	30.5
Bachelor Degree (including Honours Degree)	265	26.2
Graduate Diploma, Masters or Doctoral Degree	155	15.3
None of these	6	0.6

WORKING STATUS		
Working full time (35 or more hours per week)	351	34.7
Working part time (8-34 hours a week)	223	22
Working part time (Less than 8 hours a week)	45	4.4
Not working - retired	172	17
Not working - looking for work	115	11.4
Not working - not looking for work	106	10.5
ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BEFORE TAX		
Less than $20,000	72	7.1
$20,000 - 29,999	111	11
$30,000 - 39,999	77	7.6
$40,000 - 49,999	80	7.9
$50,000 - 59,999	77	7.6
$60,000 - 69,999	58	5.7
$70,000 - 79,999	62	6.1
$80,000 - 89,999	43	4.2
$90,000 - 99,999	56	5.5
$100,000 - 119,999	79	7.8
$120,000 - 149,999	76	7.5
$150,000 - 199,999	54	5.3
$200,000 and above	40	4
Prefer not to say	127	12.6
SPEAKING A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH AT HOME		
No	829	81.9
Yes	183	18.1
HAVING A SCHOOL-AGED CHILD AT HOME		
No	836	82.6
Yes	176	17.4
EDUCATION SECTOR FOR CHILDREN		
Public	114	11.3
Independent	33	3.3
Faith-based	29	2.9
N/A	836	82.6
VOTING PREFERENCE AT THE LAST FEDERAL ELECTION IN 2019		
Liberal-National coalition	318	31.4
Labor	291	28.8
Greens	93	9.2
Other	127	12.5
Did not vote	76	7.5
Did not disclose	107	10.6

References

ABS. (2021). Schools. Available at: https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release

ACARA. (2019). *National Report on Schooling in Australia 2019*. Available at: https://acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/acaraweb/docs/default-source/assessment-and-reporting-publications/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia-2019.pdf

ACARA. (2021a). *F-10 curriculum*. Available at: https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum

ACARA. (2021b). *Curriculum connections*. Available at: https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/curriculum-connections

ACARA. (2021c). *Australian Curriculum Review*. Available at: https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/consultation

Allen, J., Rowan, L., & Singh, P. (2019). Status of the teaching profession - attracting and retaining teachers. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 47*(2), 99-102.

Allen, K., Grove, C., May, F. S., & Gamble, N. (2020). *"I Wouldn't Be Who I Am Today without These Incredible Teachers": A Social Media Analysis of the #thankyourteacher Campaign: World Teachers Day Report 2020*. Monash University. doi:10.1080/1359866X.2019.1581422

Ashiedu, J. A., & Scott-Ladd, B. D. (2012). Understanding teacher attraction and retention drivers: Addressing teacher shortages. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *37*(11), 23.

Barnes, M. (2021). Framing teacher quality in the Australian media: the circulation of key political messages? *Educational Review*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1907317

Baroutsis, A., & Lingard, B. (2017). Counting and comparing school performance: An analysis of media coverage of PISA in Australia, 2000-2014. *Journal of Education Policy, 32*(4), 432-449.

Beausaert, S., Froehlich, D. E., Devos, C., & Riley, P. (2016). Effects of support on stress and burnout in school principals. *Educational Research, 58*(4), 347-365.

Butler, R. (2017). Why Choose Teaching, and Does It Matter? In H.M.G. Watt, P.W. Richardson, and K. Smith (Eds.) *Global Perspectives on Teacher Motivation* (pp. 349-376). Cambridge University Press.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2004). Stayers, leavers, lovers, and dreamers. Insights about teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55(*5), 388-392. doi:10.1177/0022487104270188

Everton, T., Turner, P., Hargreaves, L., & Pell, T. (2007). Public perceptions of the teaching profession, *Research Papers in Education, 22*(3), 247-265.

Gallant, A., & Riley, P. (2017). Early career teacher attrition in Australia: inconvenient truths about new public management. *Teachers and Teaching, 23*(8), 896-913. doi:10.1080/13540602.2017.1358707

Gore, J., Barron, R. J., Holmes, K., & Smith, M. (2016). Who says we are not attracting the best and brightest? Teacher selection and the aspirations of Australian school students. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 43*(5), 527-549.

Heffernan, A., Longmuir, F., Bright, D., & Kim, M. (2019). *Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching in Australia.* Monash University.

Heffernan, A., Magyar, B., Bright, D., & Longmuir, F. (2021). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Perceptions of Australian Schooling.* Monash University.

McCallum, F., & Price, D. (2015). Teacher wellbeing. In F. McCallum & D. Price (Eds.) *Nurturing Wellbeing Development in Education: From little things, big things grow* (pp. 122-142). Abingdon: Routledge.

McDonald, P., Thorpe, K., & Irvine, S. (2018). Low pay but still we stay: Retention in early childhood education and care. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *60*(5), 647-668.

McGrath-Champ, S., Wilson, R., Stacey, M., & Fitzgerald, S. (2018). ***Understanding work in schools: The foundation for teaching and learning.*** Sydney, NSW: NSW Teachers Federation.

Mockler, N. (2020). Discourses of teacher quality in the Australian print media 2014–2017: a corpus-assisted analysis. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 41*(6), 854-870. doi:10.1080/01596306.2018.1553849

Mockler, N., & Groundwater-Smith, S. (2018). *Questioning the Language of Improvement and Reform in Education: Reclaiming Meaning*. Routledge.

Perryman, J., & Calvert, G. (2020). What motivates people to teach, and why do they leave? Accountability, performativity, and teacher retention. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 68*(1), 3-23. doi:10.1080/00071004.2019.1589417

Shine, K. (2015). Reporting the 'exodus': News coverage of teacher shortage in Australian newspapers. *Issues in Educational Research, 25*(4), 501-516. http://www.iier.org.au/iier25/shine.pdf

Shine, K. (2020). 'Everything is negative': Schoolteachers' perceptions of news coverage of education. *Journalism, 21*(11), 1694–1709. doi:10.1177/1464884917743827

Simpson, A., Cotton, W., & Gore, J. (2021). Teacher Education/ors in Australia: Still Shaping the Profession Despite Policy Intervention. In D. Mayer (Ed.) *Teacher Education Policy and Research* (pp. 11-25). Springer.

Stacey, M., Wilson, R., & McGrath-Champ, S. (2020). Triage in teaching: the nature and impact of workload in schools, *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, doi:10.1080/02188791.2020.1777938

Watt, H., Richardson, P., & Smith, K. (2017). Why Teach? In H. Watt, P. Richardson, & K. Smith (Eds.), *Global Perspectives on Teacher Motivation: Current Perspectives in Social and Behavioral Sciences* (pp. Xv-Xvi). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781316225202.001

Wills, J., Churchward, P., Crosswell, L., Spooner-Lane, R., Wise, J., & Jessen, S. (2021). Recognising the impact of highly accomplished and lead teachers. *The Australian Educational Researcher.*