

Are teachers overworked?

Dennis Sleigh

These days it is not at all unusual to hear that people are working longer hours than they are paid for, and the proportion of the over-worked seems to be increasing. This trend is certainly showing no signs of abating in professional life, and naturally, teachers are prominent among those being affected. Funnily enough, when doctors or nurses or social workers complain, they seem to get an understanding audience – but what about schoolies? Sad to say, the sympathy seems limited to those who really know the truth – close family members and friends. Why is this?

An obvious suggestion is that teachers are still widely regarded as having ridiculously short hours, excessive holidays, and an easy task to perform. As educators, we might well bristle at such inaccurate perceptions, but the truth is that we are all inclined to judge others on our own perceptions, and for most people, because they have had prolonged experience of teachers in action while they were school pupils, they foolishly believe that teachers start work when the bell rings, end their day when the children go home, and have ten weeks' holiday every year. If only...

Towards the end of last year, the Victorian Branch of the AEU issued another detailed and very well argued report, the *School Staff Workload Study*, which again reported that full-time teachers were working

approximately 53 hours per week. The report was very detailed, discussing the data provided by more than 13,000 teachers, principals and education support staff across the state. It was, however, more than a statistical whinge about being overworked, and it deserved a much wider audience than it received. Victorian teachers had provided a lot of useful information to a reputable research group, in the hope that the truth would emerge.

The truth is that, among other things, the data provided clear reasons why so many highly trained educators are leaving the profession in the early years of their employment. The questions asked, the comparisons made with previous reputable reports, the conclusions drawn from the data all unite to demonstrate that this report, prepared by the very credible Australian Council for Educational Research, is a document that deserves to be treated seriously.

We can become blasé about these reports of course, especially if we have family and friends who are unable to get work, but the truth is that we cannot continue to ignore them. When the report was released by the Victorian Branch of the AEU last October, the Branch President, Meredith Peace, spoke about “an unsustainable school staff workload” that was “having an impact on student learning and welfare”. In a cynical world, where we tend to listen to those whose views we accept and to criticise those whose views



are outside our experience, we might say “What would you expect from a union, especially an education union?” However, given the nature of the report, what is needed now is something better than the knee-jerk reaction that so often greets controversial reports commissioned by special interest groups.

The time has come to openly examine the findings and see what is going on. The same report tells us that while a clear majority of educators have a positive outlook on their role, there is a growing feeling of the workload becoming unmanageable. Are we going to take this warning seriously, or will it be a case of national mourning when we discover that our education system is collapsing? We all know the hysteria that accompanies the annual release of international assessment results such as PISA and TIMSS, but do those affronted commentators ever make the connection between student performance and reasonable teacher input. We cannot hope to top the world’s academic results if the people charged with nurturing those results are actually prevented from doing their job.

When we examine the report, we read some alarming trends – and although they have been reported on in other places over the years, we seem to have ignored the changes as they

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impacted on what is happening in schools. If the data collectors had used erroneous methods or had reported on their findings inaccurately, we could ignore them – just as we ignore the data about how many people watched a recent political event in another country – but there is no valid reason to question this material. The reputation of the researchers is very impressive and their results are undeniably credible. Why, then, are we not hearing more about them?

When we read (on page 38) that “just over one-third of teachers in all schools indicated that their workload often or nearly always affected their health” and that “about one-third of teachers regularly think about leaving the teaching profession”, we cannot shrug our shoulders and say “That’s too bad for the teachers!” This examination of the responses by principals, teachers and education support staff is not simply a token glance at working conditions by



a concerned union. It is, by logical extension, a detailed reflection of the daily experiences of hundreds of thousands of children in our nation’s schools, since conditions probably vary little across jurisdictions. These students are our children and our grandchildren, and if their future growth and development are being disadvantaged, we need to hear about it. If our teachers are being overworked, our children are suffering – it is as simple as that.

I don’t particularly care who sits at the top



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of the international assessment schedules in any year – the results keep changing, anyway. What I do care about is that at a time when education should be better than it has ever been – with more money available, better teacher preparation being offered, greater awareness of the possible partnerships between all involved in education – we are hearing that our keen and enthusiastic young teachers see no future in their career choice and that dedicated and proven educators, including those who genuinely love their job, are saying that they cannot get on with what they want to do because they are constantly being distracted from their true calling: to educate children.

Not long ago, I spoke with a highly respected colleague who told me that in the short time since I had retired from schools, her work as a primary school principal had exploded, with an incredible doubling of paper work being demanded by head offices. When I asked her whether this was adding to the value of the students' experiences and education, her response was both predictable and scathing. In a similar vein, I also spoke with a classroom teacher whose prowess in the classroom, especially with children experiencing difficulties in learning, was legendary. She told me that for all of her life she had tried hard to make allowance for those children who had particular needs – and I knew this to be true. She admitted that there were some children who missed out in the past, youngsters whom she intended to support in special ways until other priorities interfered. Again, I had no doubt she was being completely honest. "Today, however," she told me, "it is no longer enough to have these plans in mind and then execute them; instead, I have to put into writing all the ideas that I might have, about how to help each individual child." She then asked me whether I thought that she was more likely to be able to help these children because she had documented all of her plans.

She answered her own question by saying that, having undertaken all the paper work that was now demanded, she was too exhausted to implement the plans. Ironically, the system administrators seemed to think that just because something was written down it was reality; she disagreed. "As a well-trained professional, I tried to meet the unwritten plans that I formulated for each of my students, and I like to think that I helped most of them most of the time. How does it help me as a professional to have to keep writing plans for each person?"

It would surprise no-one who has been to school or who has paid any attention to the media in recent years that teachers are negatively impacted by the unruly behaviour of students and the Victorian survey repeated these claims. I was somewhat disappointed to learn that, in dealing with their various challenges, the teachers did not always feel supported by their colleagues or by the school leadership. This

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feeling that support is not readily available is not, of course, limited to student management; it seems to apply to a range of other issues. Since the feeling is experienced by over half of the teachers in primary and secondary, it must emerge as a serious warning that all is not well. This seems to me to be just one of the many flags being waved by concerned educators as they reflect on their professional environment.

When it comes to principals, the figures show a different perspective, as one might expect, but the differences are less marked that I would have anticipated or hoped for. Experiences of professional support by colleagues (fellow leaders) and by regional offices were much lower than I would have predicted. Frequent thought about leaving the role was more common than seems desirable. Hours worked (about 60 per week for principals in both primary and secondary) were in line with my previous thoughts. The ever-elusive home-work balance seems to be missing from the lives of about four-fifths of all principals, but a very pleasing majority (almost three out of four in primary and four out of five in secondary) look forward to the school day. Secondary principals (39%) spend almost twice the time leading teaching and learning than their primary colleagues (22%) are able to, and I was quite surprised here, and so the data continues to pour forth.

The report is full of these nuggets of education, and it not only deserves to be read carefully by educational leaders in all States; it also deserves joint discussion between system administrators and school personnel with a view to drawing valuable lessons from the report's comprehensive data.

Sadly, today we have quite a lot of reasons to believe that reports such as this will be filed in Head Office and allowed to gather dust, without leading to changes. If this is the case, it is not merely an insult to the organisers and the researchers, and to the 13,000+ respondents who took the time to answer the detailed questions; it will also be a Government insult to all parents with children at school.

It is not good enough to dismiss this type of report as "union-driven self-seeking by teachers". It must be studied to find out what is wrong with our schools today. No-one pretends that we are doing as good a job in teaching as we should be, even though we have a lot to be proud of; instead, we must critically evaluate what we are doing and compare it with what we think we should be doing in order to provide the future citizens of this nation the best possible



education. Failure to take up this challenge will mean that a decade from now, we will still be asking ourselves why our schools are not better than they are.

Readers are urged to do three things:

- 1 Obtain and study a copy of the report, the *School Staff Workload Study 2016*.
- 2 Tell parents what the document says and explain their children are being impacted by issues raised.
- 3 Let our political leaders know that the rich suggestions in this report could lead to enhanced education, and improved results for all in our schools.

Australian schools do a great job, whichever particular system we might consider, but all can do better. There are limits to the money available for education (just as there are in health, transport, defence) but when informed professionals make concrete suggestions about issues to be addressed, only a foolish leader would refuse to consider them.

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