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‘THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT TEACHERS’: MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF TEACHERS AND THEIR WORK IN AUSTRALIA

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Nicole Mockler summarises her extensive analysis of how teachers are represented in the Australian media, and the links between the resulting deficit-based discussions and education politics and policy…

In October 2023, the ‘Be That Teacher’ campaign, the national advertising campaign designed to make teaching look more attractive as a career and to stem the teacher shortage, launched. At the time, Federal Minister for Education, Jason Clare, said:

‘This campaign is all about changing the way we as a country think about our teachers, and the way our teachers think our country thinks of them.’ (Clare, 2024)

At the time of the joint launch, the NSW Minister for Education, Prue Car, similarly noted that “restoring pride and respect to the teaching profession is key to our plan” (Clare, 2024).

As a researcher with a focus on how teachers and their work are represented in the public space, this interested me greatly. While there’s a lot that could be said about the ‘Be That Teacher’ campaign, the question that interests me the most about it is how far an advertising campaign can be expected to counter ideas about teaching and teachers’ work that are aired over and over again in media and policy spaces?

I started thinking about representations of teachers in the media almost 20 years ago, in the course of my doctoral studies. For the next 15 years or so I conducted quite a few small-scale studies, where I analysed a small and well-chosen collection of articles, usually around a set focus and/or timeframe, to identify themes and patterns. In some of this work, I explored media attention to things such as the MySchool website (Mockler, 2013), and the National Plan for School Improvement (Mockler, 2014); and also media representations of early career teachers (Mockler, 2019). Small studies like these allow you to engage deeply with individual texts and to really illustrate how and where particular assumptions and ideas are embedded and how they then get amplified into the public space. What they don’t do is allow you to identify and track patterns over time, or to make broader statements about the work of the print media in relation to education. And so, in 2018 when I found myself in the very privileged position of having a two-year research fellowship that allowed me to learn a new set of research methods, I set about conducting a 25-year analysis of representations of teachers in the print media, which was published in the book *Constructing Teacher Identities* (Mockler) in 2022. To conduct the analysis, I used a set of methods that fall under the umbrella of ‘corpus assisted discourse analysis’. First, I constructed what I call the ‘Australian Teacher Corpus’ or ATC, a collection of all media articles from the twelve national and capital city daily newspapers that include the words teacher and/or teachers three times or more. The book reported on the analysis of the 65,604 articles published from 1996 to 2020, but the ATC has since been extended to include articles published in 2021, 2022 and 2023, so it now includes over 71,000 articles. That’s an average of about 50 articles a week, every week, for 28 years. We talk about teachers a lot.

Back in 2021, I did a quick search for how many articles came up using the same parameters for accountants, public servants, nurses, lawyers and doctors, and found that far more column inches were devoted to teachers. About twice as many, for example, as were devoted to nurses in the years from 1996 to 2020. So clearly there’s a large appetite on the part of journalists, editors, and, presumably, readers of newspapers for stories about teachers and schools.

Given that there’s such a lot of coverage, there’s also a lot of findings out of this analysis, so I’m going to focus here on just three aspects of the analysis.

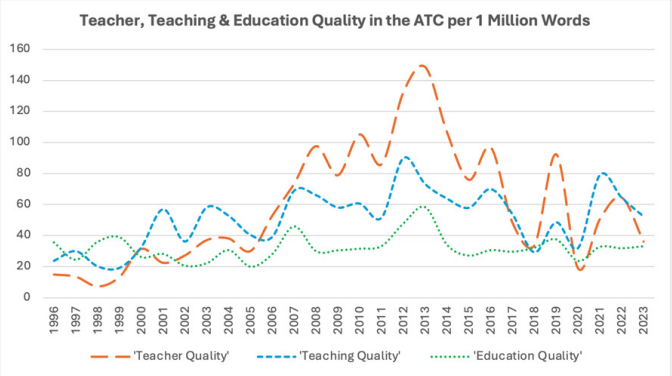
First, the ATC is replete with words and phrases that essentialise or homogenise teachers: teachers should…; all teachers…; every teacher…, and so on. These constructions appeal to the news value of 'superlativeness', one of a number of strategies whereby newspapers develop a sense of newsworthiness in stories (Bednarek & Caple 2017). The effect of this is to first, emphasise high intensity, and second, to make teachers' work appear simple, as though there is a single right choice in any given circumstance.

'*Teachers should*' provides a good example of this:

Randomly selected instances of *teachers should* from the ATC	
teachers should	be paid according to how their students succeed.
teachers should	be given clear, concise road-maps of what to teach,
teachers should	be using social media in the classroom.
teachers should	have one core function: to provide a system of standards and assessments
teachers should	have the flexibility to decide how they taught their students.
Teachers should	not be spending time organising sausage sizzles and other fundraising events
teachers should	not adopt a cookie-cutter approach to learning
Teachers should	always affirm, respect and support children
Teachers should	approach the problem by starting a general discussion in the classroom
Teachers should	arrive in classes prepared and have thought about how they are going to present material
teachers should	clearly explain that it's necessary to allow other students to learn,
teachers should	grow up to at least the age level of those who they are supposed to be teaching.
teachers should	keep the interests of students and the quality of education in mind and administer the tests.
teachers should	make sure children had enough to drink during a dust storm and to be a little more careful
teachers should	take the time to get to know their students and find out how they learn best.

This small cross-section of the approximately 2300 instances of teachers should points to many contradictory positions on what teachers should do (e.g. *teachers should be given clear, concise road-maps of what to teach vs teachers should not adopt a cookie-cutter approach to learning*). They contain advice for teachers about the need to *affirm, respect and support children*, to *get to know their students*, and to *arrive in classes prepared* [having] *thought about how they are going to present material,* suggesting that these things are not already part of teachers' professional repertoires. *Teachers should* also points to level of disrespect displayed toward teachers in the print media, from the insulting claim that *teachers should grow up to at least the age level of those who they are supposed to be teaching*, to the no less insulting but arguably more tempered |*teachers should be paid according to how their students succeed*. Statements such as these, just two examples amongst a great many in the ATC, amplify messages of contempt toward teachers while also rendering their work simple and denying its complexity. All of which undermines teacher professionalism, normalising these attitudes for their readers.

Second, I was able to track through this analysis, the rise of the discourse of *teacher quality* since the mid-2000s, with attention to teacher quality outstripping general discussions of *quality* (for example of teaching, or of education or schools) in the ATC.



My analysis highlighted that discussions of *teacher quality* are almost invariably linked to a deficit assessment of teachers: stories of high or outstanding *teacher quality* are rare, while stories about declining *teacher quality*, or the need to improve it, dominate. When they're prevalent in the media, discourses of teacher quality have the effect of making teachers responsible for the structural and systemic issues that proliferate in education, rather than pointing to what needs to be done at a structural level. The emphasis on *teacher quality* effectively lays blame for systemic failures on individual teachers, in a way that more nuanced discussions of teaching practice, even when we're talking about the possibility of improving it, do not. Good teaching is practised rather than embodied (Gore, et al., 2004) – it's a set of practices we engage in rather than a state of being – and real improvements in *quality* require good professional learning and support for teachers from early career into and beyond mid-career.

Finally, the ebb and flow of the three quality discourses shown in the graph above, highlight the way that discussions of teachers and their work, and particularly deficit-based discussions, are intimately linked to education politics and policy. The height of the *teacher quality* discourse, in 2012/13, was closely linked to the Gillard Government's National Plan for School Improvement (2012), which constituted the Government's response to the original Gonski review and was the catalyst for the Australian Education Act (2013). Similarly, the 2007/8 peak reflected the early years of the Rudd-Gillard 'Education Revolution', while the 2019 peak coincided with the release of the 2018 PISA results and discussions by Education Ministers and other policymakers around curriculum and *teacher quality* reform.

So, while it's admirable that our Federal and State education ministers hold aspirations around "changing the way we as a country think about our teachers" (Clare, 2023), a systematic analysis of 28 years of print media coverage suggests that an advertising campaign, on its own, is unlikely to get us there. Media coverage of education, and specifically of teachers and their work, is heavily tied to discussions of education policy, largely led by politicians themselves. With the common positioning of teachers within those policy and media discussions infused with notions of deficit, it's unlikely that the way we as a country think about our teachers will change without these discussions themselves changing. And for that we're going to need more than promises of greater respect.

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