Sustaining the secondary English teaching profession/al in uncertain times: Interim report

Every year VATE offers an $8,000 research grant to investigate significant contemporary issues related to teaching and learning in secondary school English. We asked for applications last year to investigate the current conditions for English teachers in Victoria. Fleur Diamond (Monash University), Scott Bulfin (Monash University), Jo O'Mara (Deakin University), Graham Parr (Monash University) and Amanda McGraw (Federation University) were awarded this grant.

This Interim Report focuses on Phase 1 of their project, a survey conducted over the period November 2022 to February 2023. VATE and the research team would like to sincerely thank the members who participated in the survey.

1. Project outline

Sustaining the secondary English teaching profession/al in uncertain times is a multi-institutional research project funded by VATE. The project generates valuable data about the current conditions of secondary English teachers' work in Victoria and how English teachers sustain their practice and professionalism in the face of significant challenges and uncertainties (including COVID-19). The project aims to inform and support VATE's efforts to develop the knowledges, identities, and professionalism of its members in uncertain times, while also contributing to state and national debates about the sustainability of the English teaching profession.

The study involves data generated in several forms, including a survey of English teachers, interviews and professional learning workshops. This report gives an overview of the survey data and some early analysis.

2. General information about survey respondents

The survey generated 179 responses across the period November 2022 to February 2023.

Over 85% of teachers identified as female (14% as male). No respondents identified as non-binary or gender diverse. Most respondents were experienced English teachers with between 6 and more than 25 years experience. Early career teachers (less than 5 years' experience) were the least represented (9%).

The most common educational qualifications were postgraduate diplomas (32%) and bachelor degrees (30%). Over 24% of respondents have a masters degree or higher (PhD) (n=53). Over 46% of teacher respondents currently teach in a government school. Teachers currently working in Independent-religious schools (30%) and Catholic schools (22%) were also well represented.

3. Current school interactions

The survey asked respondents to comment on how they felt about working in their current school, their relationships with colleagues and the support they felt or didn't feel in their current roles.

More than 85% of respondents felt that they worked in schools with a collegial environment. More than 60% felt supported in responding to complex student needs and more than 70% felt supported in responding to parents, family and carers. Even though more than 60% felt supported in responding to challenging student behavior, 30% felt more ambivalent or unsupported.

Despite these apparently positive indicators, the open-ended comments suggested that respondents may have interpreted 'support' to mean any support, including collegial, peer support when dealing with the challenges of student behaviour, complex student needs, and challenging interactions with family and carers.

Significantly, many respondents noted feeling support from immediate colleagues but not always from school leadership. There was a perception of misalignment between or a fracturing of relationships between classroom teaching staff and school leadership. Some felt that the marketisation of education has contributed to this state of affairs.

Other issues were nominated as having an impact on collegial culture and collaboration, such as stress and pressure at all levels, workload demands, increased and complex student needs, negative interactions with parents and carers, and performance expectations, particularly those associated with results in the VCE.

Sample comments:

- *"The whole team is doing the best they can, but the whole system is under pressure"*
- *"Supported well by other English teachers, not so well by principal class"*
- *"Leadership is very unsupportive. Staff morale is low. Everyone is burnt-out"*
- *"In a fee-paying school, sometimes parents' opinions or concerns can be prioritised in an attempt to 'keep the consumer happy'. Sometimes this conflicts with the school's willingness or ability to fully support their staff."*
- *"I find the behaviour of students, coupled with their individual needs (learning, wellbeing or other) has become increasingly difficult to navigate. The expectation placed on teachers to manage all this and help students excel in VCE is near impossible."*

4. Current school experience of teaching English

Teachers were also asked about their work as *English* teachers—their commitment to and confidence in teaching English, English faculty culture and their commitment to the teaching profession.

More than 80% of respondents felt they enjoyed teaching English in their current school, and more than 90% felt they had a strong identity as an English teacher. A similar number felt they had a clear sense of their role as an English teacher (92%) and a high level of confidence in their capacity to teach English (94%).

Almost 70% of teachers felt they worked in schools and faculties that had a culture of English teachers working together and where they felt supported to pursue professional learning as an English teacher (70%). Despite feeling that their schools or faculties have a culture of collaboration, a little over half of respondents (54%) disagreed that English teachers were given time to collaborate.

There was some ambivalence about commitment to remaining in the teaching profession, with just over half (54%), feeling somewhat or strongly committed. Almost a quarter of respondents disagreed with the statement, "I am committed to remaining in the profession". A substantial minority have plans to leave English teaching within five years or less (42%).

Workload and work sustainability were highlighted in the open comments as chief reasons for contemplating leaving the English teaching profession. In particular, class preparation, assessment and reporting were singled out as contributing to unsustainable workloads. Many comments noted qualitative feedback on written student work as a driver of workload issues faced by English teachers. The intensity of demands during the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of time to collaborate and plan were seen as contributors to burn-out.

Sample comments:

- *"I am taking 12 months leave from teaching next year as I need time away from a profession that has burnt me out professionally. I love teaching and I love my school - I simply need time to recover from what has been a terrible time for the teaching profession."*

- *"Unsustainable workloads. Time taken for English writing assessment and correction, along with everything else is unsustainable. The watchword here is unsustainable."*

- *"Due to the workload demands I have decided to leave the profession after 8 years, this is my last year of teaching. It was a difficult decision and I didn't want to leave but I realised my wellbeing should come first."*

- *"I won't last for longer than another 5 years if nothing changes."*

- *"Do not plan to leave teaching but I avoid English at all costs."*

- *"Burnt out. Don't think my mental health can sustain me in this profession for much longer."*

- *"I have just completed a Master of Speech Pathology after 2 years of full-time study; have been doing CRT work. I am completing this survey because I loved being an English teacher but found it unsustainable."*

5. Freedoms and constraints as an English teacher in current school

Teachers were asked to evaluate the level of freedom and constraint they experience in their professional practice.

Survey respondents indicated that they retain agency in many aspects of their planning, teaching and assessment. However, recent developments indicate that this agency is negotiated within school-wide guidelines and constraints. Most notable were feelings of constraint in

relation to text selection: 41% of respondents felt they were not able to select texts that respond to the needs and interests of their students. However, most (77%) felt able to explore innovative pedagogical approaches and teach for creative and critical thinking (76%). There were few signs that English teachers feel compelled to teach narrowly towards preparing students for standardised tests such as NAPLAN.

There are signs that schools are mandating school-wide instructional approaches. More than 32% of respondents indicated they are required to use a lesson planning template in their school. Furthermore, almost half (48%) indicated they are required to use a school-wide instructional model - e.g., HITS ('High Impact Teaching Strategies'). The open-ended comments painted a mixed picture with respect to English teachers' agency in planning for learning and having the professional autonomy to teach creatively and responsively. The theme that emerges is 'agency within constraints'.

Sample comments:

- *"We use a weekly curriculum planner; structured but still allowing some freedom away from daily lesson plans."*
- *"Hate the template and over planning."*
- *"Lesson planning and unit plan proformas are currently being rolled out by leadership."*
- *"My school is becoming very prescriptive in the way it approaches curriculum development and this is being driven by our directors of curriculum and leadership team. My fellow English teachers vent about the lack of autonomy all the time, and the fact that we are not able to differentiate as well as we could because of the restrictions being placed upon us."*

6. Belonging to a professional community

Teachers were asked to comment on their sense of connectedness to the profession and their involvement in various professional networks.

The survey highlighted respondents' very high levels of commitment to the English teaching profession (82%) and very strong identification as a member of the English teaching profession (93%).

While almost 80% of respondents felt that participating in English teacher professional networks was important for them, responses were more mixed in relation to opportunities for connection and professional networking.

Almost half of respondents disagreed that they had regular opportunities to connect with English teaching professional networks beyond their schools, or felt ambivalent (48%). A little more than half agreed that they had regular opportunities (52%).

Open-ended comments were overwhelmingly positive about opportunities provided by VATE. In fact, of 97 comments about professional networks, 85 mention VATE. These comments mentioned the following VATE initiatives: committee involvement, English Language and Literature networks, reading community of practice, state conference and other professional learning events. Other professional learning networks included the use of social media for professional learning and private providers.

Sample comments:

- *"VATE professional development has been incredible - introducing new ideas, stretching me as a teacher."*

- *"Think Forward Educators have been a vital network for me as a literacy specialist. I have not found secondary English teacher networks such as VATE particularly useful in supporting literacy improvement. Online networks such as Twitter (often UK teachers) have been an amazing source of support and PD."*

- *"Prior to COVID I used to connect with the English praxis group at Monash which was an excellent way to get outside classroom teaching. I'm studying and working at the moment, and this is also really helpful in terms of my network."*

- *"Regional teachers find it difficult to connect with professional networks, but beyond this, time is a precious resource that impacts on when and how teachers connect with other teachers."*

- *"In my department we pretty much have to beg for a day to attend the VATE conference. Subject specific conferences are not seen as valuable - whereas school-wide rubbish about impact factors and learning intentions are given whole day/whole school professional learning days."*

7. Challenges to English teaching over the past 2-3 years

The impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns and the move to remote schooling was significant for respondents. The responses indicate the resilience of English teachers' professionalism in Victoria, while also suggesting overwork and continuing challenges in the wake of COVID. More than 85% felt that during the COVID pandemic years they have been able to develop innovative approaches to teaching English. Significantly, 75% felt that during this time they have developed and grown as English teachers.

However, 83% felt that during this same time workload has been unmanageable. Some of the open comments highlighted the particular challenges of fostering the kinds of teaching and learning valued in the English classroom—e.g., discussion in the online environment. Furthermore, while more than half (55%) felt that English teacher professional networks were an important source of support during this difficult period, a significant minority were more ambivalent.

There was concern expressed in the open comments about the impacts on student learning and wellbeing and how an expectation that school return to 'business as usual' was not recognising the specific challenges of student learning and wellbeing needs, with significant impacts on teacher workload.

Sample comments:

- *"Online school was awful. The things I love and value most in the English classroom (especially discussion, group work, exchange of ideas) were very hard to recreate online, particularly with middle years students."*

- *"I think COVID has made me re-evaluate how much time I am willing to commit to work - on average I work 50-70 hours a week inclusive of face to face duties. … Remote learning was hellish as at times I felt I never left my study."*

- *"As English teachers know, one of the key methods of advancing a student's learning is through discussion which was non-existent during online learning sessions. This lack of development is having a serious ripple effect in all the students we are seeing in our classrooms."*

- *"Teaching English during lockdowns has been dehumanising and devastating. I have partially left the profession as a result (side step into my other qualification as a Teacher Librarian)."*

- *"Behaviour challenges in class have had a major impact on my teaching and how much I can do in one period. I am now abused almost daily by students. Some days I cry on the way to work; some nights I feel sick at the thought of what my days are like—misogyny and harassment are making me feel these kids are not worth it."*

- *"I think teaching during lockdowns made me a more responsive teacher. I spent a lot of time commenting on individual student work using Google Docs, especially with my Year 12 English and Literature students."*

8. Plans for the next phase of the study

The next phase of the research project involves face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with English teachers. These will be conducted online in the coming months (April-June 2023). Sixty-eight respondents to the survey indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The research team will invite these respondents to be interviewed. These interviews will be conducted online to reach English teachers across the state.

Topics for follow-up include:

- ways of sustaining an English teaching career (supports, resources, strategies, engagement)
- factors impacting plans to remain in or leave English teaching
- identity and belonging in the English teaching profession
- agency in planning, teaching and assessment in English teaching and learning
- agency in professional learning

- changes English teachers would like to see at school and sector levels to ensure English teaching is a sustainable career.

In addition to interviews, professional learning workshops for participants are also planned (second half of 2023). These workshops aim to support teachers to explore their practice, including issues related to the sustainability of English teaching as a profession. These workshops and the teacher texts produced through them will provide data to explore how English teachers are negotiating the challenges identified in the survey and interviews. It will also provide additional opportunities for VATE to support teachers through its various programs and activities.

9. Conclusions

The results of the survey portray a profession under considerable strain—the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are evident, but so are other factors such as workload and performance pressures that were developing before the pandemic. At the policy level, the turn to intensified work, performative understandings of teacher professionalism (e.g. VCE results), and a marketised school sector are having a significant and clearly discernible impact on the day to day realities of English teachers.

Despite this, there are vital signs of strong professional and collegial identity, cultures of collaboration, and a commitment to professional growth. VATE is seen to play an important role in professional learning and networks and hence in helping to foster a stronger professional identity amongst English teachers involved in VATE activities. An investment in professional identity has been found to sustain professional practice over time (Day & Gu, 2010).

Follow up data generation in interviews aims to develop more fine-grained and situated accounts of teachers' work and professional lives. The study will generate insights into opportunities to support the sustainability of the English teaching profession, and areas for advocacy for change.

Reference

Day, C. & Gu, Q. (2010). *The new lives of teachers*. Routledge.