

TEMPORARY TEACHERS AND PRECARIOUS WORK

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Meghan Stacey et al. provide a historical context to the introduction of the temporary teacher category and its implications of precariousness of work and the impact on workload and career expectations...

Recently, around 5500 temporary teachers and support staff in NSW accepted a conversion to permanent status (NSW Government, 2023). This announcement represents new gains in the effort to address what we refer to below as the ‘recommodification’ of the teaching profession over the past twenty years, through growing work insecurity. In this article, we explore the origins and effects of the ‘temporary’ category of teaching work in NSW public schools.

THE RISE OF TEMPORARY TEACHING WORK IN NSW

In a recent journal article (McGrath-Champ et al., 2022), we used historical case and contemporary survey data to explore how the category of temporary teaching work has grown since its creation.

Established in 2001, the temporary teaching category was initially introduced in response to the ‘commodification’ of teaching labour that was taking place through a growth in casual work throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when the proportion of casual employment grew to 20%. This had considerable implications for teachers, and especially women teachers, with women engaged in child-bearing effectively forced to resign from their permanent roles and return as casual teachers when their caring responsibilities allowed. There were, additionally, concerns that long-term casuals were completing very similar work to that of permanent teachers, but without appropriate recompense. The temporary teaching category presented a clear improvement on this situation.

Fast-forward to 2017, however, and while the casual proportion of the workforce had remained relatively stable since the introduction of the temporary category, at around 10%, analysis of union membership figures indicated that temporary teachers had grown to account for around 20% of the workforce, while permanent positions had declined from around 85% to about 70%. According to the NSW Government, the proportion of permanency has since been even lower, sitting at around 63% (NSW

Government, 2023). The introduction of the temporary category, initially established in an effort to ‘decommodify’ the teaching profession, had instead led to an overall increase in precarity across the workforce, through what we describe as a process of ‘recommodification’.

The union has taken a range of actions over the past twenty years to manage this recommodification of work. This has included negotiations with the Department to achieve or maintain provisions under the three-yearly Staffing Agreement; monitoring of, and court action to ensure, the appointment of teachers to permanent instead of temporary positions; and efforts to secure professional development provisions for early career teachers in temporary roles. The announcement of the conversion of a further 5500 teachers and support staff to permanent status so far this year, and with more slated to come, represents but the latest response to a series of efforts made in this area by the union.

IMPACTS OF TEMPORARY WORK ON JOB QUALITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

In a second recent article on this topic (Stacey et al., 2022), we conducted a deep-dive analysis of our survey data to explore the impacts of fixed-term contract work for temporary teachers.

Workload data indicates that teachers employed in a fixed-term capacity (i.e. in a ‘temporary engagement’) undertake a similar nature and amount of work to those in permanent roles, especially when compared with teachers working in a casual capacity. For example, while 72% of permanent teachers and 70% of temporary teachers felt their work ‘always’ requires them to ‘work very hard’, only 58% of casual teachers felt this way. Similarly, while 36% of permanent and 37% of temporary staff felt their work required ‘too great an effort’, this was true for only 27% of casual staff.

Yet interestingly, although temporary teachers were undertaking similar amounts of work to permanent teach-

ers, they sometimes felt as though they were actually working harder. We understand this reflects a perception that they needed to ‘do more’ than permanent employees to keep their jobs. As one respondent explained, “there is a huge expectation that teachers put their hand up for extra roles ... which adds to the pressure [teachers] (particularly temp teachers as we do more) feel”. Teachers’ careers were felt to be “at the whim of principals who pick and choose according to who toes the line ... jumping through hoops to retain their position and add to their CV in order to gain permanency”. This loss of control over work negatively impacts job quality, as teachers described having to “take whatever is handed to you” as “workload rules go out the window”.

Overall, respondents expressed a frustration that they were not “deemed worthy of permanent employment”. Indeed, only 27% of respondents in fixed-term contract positions indicated that they were in these roles by choice. There are also gendered implications here, with women respondents much more likely to be temporary than men, suggesting potential, gendered ‘scarring’ effects on women teachers’ career progression.

THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYMENT SECURITY IN TEACHING

It has been heartening, in recent months, to see that the NSW Government is working with the Federation to continue to address the concerns raised by fixed-term contract work in teaching. Promoting the attractiveness of teaching as a career is a particularly important priority today, and employment security is a key part of what has, historically, made school teaching a high-quality job. Protecting this feature of the profession is essential if the workforce is to be effectively supported moving forward.

REFERENCES

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