Why we need to think about how we talk about teachers

By Nicole Mockler
University of Sydney

Remember when former Morrison Government minister Stuart Robert lashed out at “dud” teachers? In March, the then acting education minister said the “bottom 10 per cent” of teachers “can’t read and write” and blamed them for declining academic results.

This is more than just a sensational headline or politician trying to get attention. My research argues the way teachers are talked about in the media has a flow-on effect to how people feel about becoming a teacher, and how current teachers see their place in the community.

So, when we talk about the shortage of teachers in Australia, we also need to look at media coverage of teachers in Australia.

My new book examines how teachers have been represented in the print media for the past 25 years. When you look at the harsh criticism and blame placed on teachers, it’s no wonder we are not attracting enough new people to the profession and struggling to retain the ones we have.

My research

In a world-first study, I explored how school teachers have been portrayed in Australian print media from 1996 to 2020. I looked at more than 65,000 media articles from all 12 national and capital city daily newspapers, including all articles that mentioned “teacher” and/or “teachers” three times or more.

With an average of 50 articles per week for 25 years, and a total word count of more than 43 million, my analysis is one of the largest of its kind.

While a lot has been written about teachers in the media over the years, this is the first study to systematically analyse such a large number of articles, representing such a complete collection of stories about teachers in newspapers, published over such a long time.

So what did I find? A lot. But here are three key findings that are critical when it comes to the way we think and talk about teachers and their work.

We are fixated on “teacher quality”

First, my research charts the rise and rise of attention to “teacher quality”, especially between 2006 and 2019. This period covers the start of the Rudd- Gillard “education revolution”, which reframed education in Australia as all about “quality”. It ends with the start of COVID-19, when reporting on teachers and education temporarily concentrated on home schooling.

My analysis found the focus on “quality” was [placed] far more on teachers than, say, teaching approaches, schools, schooling, education systems or anything else.

Why is this an issue? It puts the emphasis on the purported deficiencies of individual teachers rather than on collective capacity to improve teaching.

It detracts from system quality – the systemic problems within our education system. “Teacher quality” is a way for politicians to place the blame elsewhere when they should be committing to addressing the root cause of these problems: inadequate and inequitable funding, excessive teacher workload, unreasonable administrative loads or teachers being required to work out of their field of expertise.

Teachers’ work is made out to be simple (it’s not)

The second key thing I found is media reporting on teachers consistently talks about their work as simple and common-sense, as though all decisions made by teachers are between two options: a right one and a wrong one.

The phrase “teachers should” appears about 2,300 times in my database. Examples include, “teachers should be paid according to how their students succeed”, “teachers should not adopt a cookie-cutter approach to learning”, “teachers should arrive in classes prepared” and “teachers should not be spending time organising sausage sizzles”.

Research conducted in the 1990s, and still widely referred to by scholars, found teachers make roughly 1,500 decisions in the course of every school day.

Recent research, including some I’m currently doing with colleagues, suggests teachers’ work has greatly intensified and accelerated over the past 30 years. So it’s likely 1,500 decisions per school day is now a very conservative estimate.

These decisions include everything from “what texts will we focus on in English next term?” to “should I ditch what I’d planned for this lesson so we can keep having this conversation because the students are absorbed by it?”.

It also includes social decisions, such as “do I intervene right now and potentially escalate what’s going on at the back of the classroom or just keep a close eye on it for now?”.

Every single one of those decisions is complex. And yet, in media coverage, claims of what “all teachers” or “every teacher” can, should or could do come thick and fast.

Teaching is relentlessly difficult, and while not everyone needs to understand that – in the same way not everyone needs to understand exactly how to conduct brain surgery – we do need to pay some respect to the 300,000 or so Australian teachers who navigate the profession every day. Just because the complexity may not have been evident to us in our 13 years as school students doesn’t mean it wasn’t there.

Teacher-bashing is the norm

Finally, I found stories about teachers were disproportionately negative in their representations. I did find “good news” stories in my research, but they were outnumbered by articles that focused on how teachers, collectively and individually, don’t measure up.

This included the linking of “crises” to “poor quality” teachers. Take, for example, former education minister Christopher Pyne’s comment that: “[...] the number one issue, in terms of the outcomes for students, is teacher quality, in fact [the OECD] said eight out of 10 reasons why a student does well in Australia or badly is the classroom to which they are allocated. In other words, the teacher to whom they are allocated.”

In other words, “teacher-bashing” is the norm when it comes to stories about teachers in the Australian news media.

The PR around teaching needs to change

As we consider what to do to improve teacher numbers in Australia, we need to think about the way we talk about teaching and teachers in the media.

If all people hear is that teachers are to “blame” for poor standards and they should be finding their demanding, complex jobs easy, this is hardly likely to encourage people into the profession. Nor does it give those already there the support and respect they need to stay.

Nicole Mockler is an Associate Professor of Education at the University of Sydney. This article was first published at The Conversation website and is reproduced here with permission. The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and do not wholly or necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the SSTUWA or AEU.

Authorised by Mary Franklyn, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.