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The Pressing Need to Raise the Status of the Teaching Profession: The Launch Story of the Teachers of Australia Social Media Campaign

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Abstract. This paper presents the start-up methodology for a project that leverages the opportunities that social media affords to give teachers voice and agency. In response to negative press about teachers in mainstream media, coupled with research that shows that teachers are working hard to meet student academic and wellbeing needs, the researchers employed the assertive technologies of social media and started a campaign to promote the work of pre-service and in-service teachers. The paper presents the theorising behind the start-up methodology for the social media campaign and outlines a response to an identified opportunity. It argues that social media provides new opportunities for professional connectedness, story sharing and collegial support.

Introduction and Background

Social media platforms are providing new opportunities for advocacy and connectivity for teachers. In an environment of increasing academic pressures, many teachers turn to social media for support and ideas (*cf.* Forte, Humphreys, & Park, 2012; Ranieri, Manca & Fini, 2012). Although teacher use of social media is a relatively new research frontier, many Australian pre-service and in-service teachers have tens of thousands of followers on Instagram and Twitter, and hashtags like #aussieed, #aussieteachertribe, and #teachersdownunder attract thousands of followers also. Furthermore, professional groups and associations are prolific on social media platforms. For example, Perth WA Teachers Community (over 16,500 members), QLD Teachers (over 10,700 members), Australian Early Childhood Teachers (over 8,900 members) and Teach Starter (over 365,000 likes) on Facebook (2020).

Although teacher presence is strong on social media platforms, there is an evident need to promote the value of the teaching profession in Australia. First, there is a teacher shortage across Australia. Although the shortage varies between states and sectors, both attraction and retention are challenges for recruiters (Weldon, 2015). Second, these challenges are compounded by negative perceptions about the profession: the social status of the profession has “suffered greatly,” according to the recent parliamentary inquiry into the status of the profession (Parliament of Australia, 2019, p. 1). Reasons behind the alleged status slump include dominant negative representations in mainstream media and deficits-based reform (Parliament of Australia, 2019). Third, the work of teachers is important. In addition to curriculum-based learning, teachers play a vital role in promoting the health, wellbeing and development of young people (Author, 2019). With 288,583 full-time-

equivalent teachers working in Australian schools in 2018 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019) their role is significant. Striking a balance between student wellbeing and academic performance agendas is challenging (Author, 2019). Many teachers take it upon themselves to check in with students of concern, absorbing performativity pressures to protect students' wellbeing (Author, 2019). Managing tensions between academics and wellbeing was described to be like “juggling with both hands tied behind my back” or “tightrope walking between two pitching ships in a storm” (p. 20). The teaching profession evidently needs supportive structures for its success.

What is not yet fully understood is how assertive technologies like social media can be used to support teachers. How do social media platforms support the work of teachers? In response to this situation, the authors launched the Teachers of Australia social media campaign, which reaches thousands of people each week and has a growing online network. This paper outlines the processes that led to the creation of the campaign, which are illustrated in Figure 1. It provides a theoretical background to the social media campaign, by discussing the pressures that teachers manage, the need to champion the profession and the opportunities that social media affords. Further, the usefulness of social media networks in advocating for and championing the profession are discussed and the start-up methodology behind the Teachers of Australia social media campaign is outlined as a response to the pressing need to champion the profession. We drew upon phenomenological and narrative inquiry methodologies in our theorising and in the development of our response.

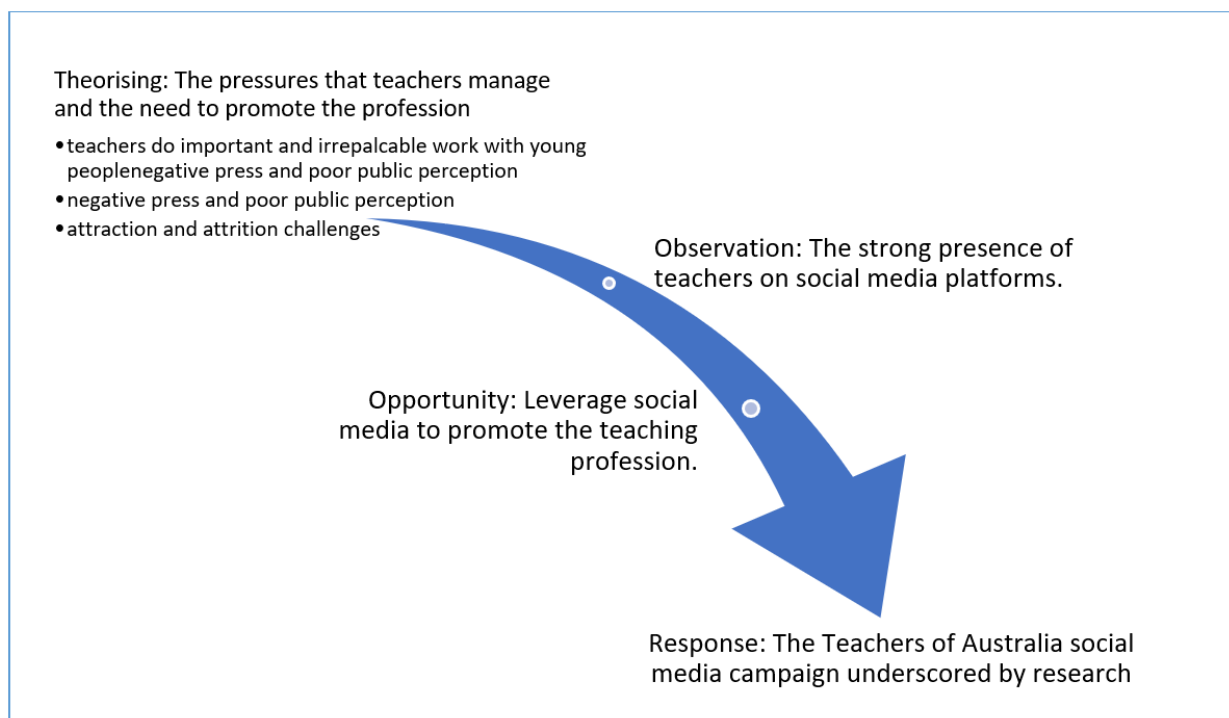


Figure 1. The processes of theorising, identifying opportunity and response that undergirds the Teachers of Australia social media campaign.

Theorising: The Pressures Teachers Manage and the Need to Promote the Profession

To contextualise the need for a campaign that champions the work of teachers, this section of the paper discusses the pressures that teachers manage in their practice. Pressures include performativity agendas that currently pervade Australian education systems, the

uprise of student wellbeing concerns and mental health issues, the compounding effects of isolation for remote teachers and the unique challenges that early career teachers face.

The Impacts of Academic Performativity Agendas on Teachers

While performance and assessment regimes are not new to education, since the turn of the century, society and policy have demanded more formalised, macro-level progress “results” (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2017). School reviews, policy reforms, benchmarking conversations and decision-making agendas are fuelled by assessment data and the accountability cultures and practices that have been devised around these assessments. National (and international) comparative performance measures (eg; MySchool website, NAPLAN, PISA¹) highlight teaching and its relation to student outcomes. The comparative reporting of student academic performance has become one of the powerful message systems of formal Western education.

Within this accountability-driven topography, a teacher’s responsibility to students’ academic performance is highly visible. The work of teaching is now more public - often discussed, scrutinised and interrogated by many stakeholders, including parents, schools, systems and the media. The accessible and online nature of this data has meant academic performance is a prioritised discourse for portraying education systems (including teachers) in mainstream media (Baroutisis & Lingard, 2018). Ball (2003) warns that flowing deeply within regulated and governed performance discourses dwells the “terrors of performativity” (p. 215) where stakeholders’ intended and unintended agendas can be felt by the teacher. As regulated practices dominate school imperatives, teacher autonomy erodes and these pressures are reconfiguring what it means to be a teacher, professionally and personally (Biesta, 2017).

Keddie, Mills and Pendergast (2011) explain, “performative and competitive schooling cultures of high accountability and compliance suggest an undermining and mistrust of teachers and their practice and a denial of teacher agency” (p.76). This positions “teachers as liabilities, and in doing so aligns them with modes of education that are as demeaning as they are deskilling” (Giroux, 2016, p.15-16). Ideas from media commentary (eg. Bahr, 2019) and stories from teachers for general audience (eg. Stroud, 2018) point towards the impact of such ideas on the teaching profession. A negative public image and low levels of autonomy are contributing to high levels of attrition. There is an evident need for platforms the provide teachers with voice and agency so they can generate their own narratives.

Notwithstanding, amid accountability and performativity pressures, teachers continue to motivate, enthuse and engage students on a day-to-day basis. Their commitment and passion for learning keeps them motivated (Day & Smethem, 2009). Biesta (2017) proposes that amid academic performativity tensions, desires and conflicts, teachers need to trust their students and enact their freedom to “*teach as dissensus*” (p. 82) by addressing the obvious

¹ **My School** is an Australian website sharing data about schools including student profiling, NAPLAN results, funding levels and sources, attendance and enrolment numbers. **NAPLAN** (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) is an Australian standardised *sample* assessment tool implemented nationally once a year in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. **PISA** (Programme for International Student Assessment) is an International standardised assessment tool implemented every 3 years. A sample of 15-years-old students from around the world (including Australia) are tested to measure their knowledge in reading, mathematics and science.

and not so obvious needs of their students, attending to all things that matter, including social and emotional needs. To achieve this, teachers are turning to teaching colleagues for additional support and motivation: cooperation and collaboration between teachers (Salhberg, 2010) and supportive cultures and school environments serve to safe-guard teachers' professional identities, sense of self-efficacy and professional relationships (Canrinus et al, 2012). It is not surprising that teachers are desiring professional interactions, often on social media (e.g. Forte, Humphreys, & Park, 2012; Ranieri, Manca & Fini, 2012), where minimal direct judgement is given compared to the structured and regulated interactions they face daily in their schools.

Teachers Bear the Burden of Student Wellbeing Concerns

In addition to academic performativity pressures, teachers also bear the burden of youth mental health (Roffey, 2012). One of four young people in Australia are reported to experience a mental health issues each year (Headspace Australia, 2018). A report prepared by Goodsell et al. (2017) for the Australian Government Department of Education and Training that used data from the Young Minds Matter survey showed that one in seven school students in Australia (approximate ages 5–18 years) live with a mental disorder (Goodsell et al., 2017). Teachers work with the associated behaviour challenges: according to the Goodsell et al. Report (2017) ADHD is the most common mental health disorder affecting Australian school students, followed by anxiety disorders and oppositional disorders. Bowman, McKinstry and McGorry (2017) reported anxiety and depression as the “leading contributors to the burden of disease for young Australians” (p. 278), with social anxiety disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder being the most common.

Students with mental health disorders have poorer academic performance results, more absences from school, poor connectedness, and low engagement (Goodsell et al., 2017). According to the Mission Australia Youth Survey, young people aged between 15 and 19 years in Australia ranked coping with stress (43.1%) and school and study problems (33.8%) as their top two concerns (Carlisle et al., 2018). Australian students reported higher levels of schoolwork-related anxiety than the OECD average, according to a recent analysis of OECD data by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2018).

Support available to teachers varies significantly between schools and locations in Australia. As explained further below, teachers working in isolated or less-resourced schools have less support. Nevertheless, wellbeing concerns are prevalent in all contexts and teachers everywhere are bearing the social burden of mental health. This in turn raises serious concerns for teaching wellbeing and sustainability of the profession.

Teacher Wellbeing Concerns

Teacher wellbeing impacts student wellbeing (Roffey, 2012). There has been an increased focus on teacher wellbeing in recent years due to rising concern about attrition in the profession. Acton and Glasgow (2015) argue that teacher wellbeing ought to be prioritised as a strategy for managing performativity measures. A review of teacher wellbeing in New South Wales, Australia, showed that teacher wellbeing can be negatively impacted by workload, burnout and stress, relationships with students, parents, colleagues and leaders, and change fatigue (McCallum et al., 2017). The concern for teacher wellbeing is not limited to Australia: a comprehensive review of wellbeing issues that significantly impact Canadian teachers highlighted the wide range of factors that contribute to the trend of higher levels of

stress, burnout and departure from the chosen career, than in many other professions (Gray, Wilcox & Nordstokke, 2017). Teachers, whether beginning or experienced, often internalise their experiences with students, which ultimately affects their wellbeing and esteem (Collie et al., 2015; Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). In addition, a mismatch between feeling responsible for students' wellbeing and being equipped to help them with mental health concerns causes stress amongst teachers (Ekornes, 2017). Teachers share their concerns and stresses, and methods for dealing with such, using the #teacherstress hashtag on social media.

The Unique Challenges for Early Career Teachers

Transition into the profession can be challenging for early career teachers, and they will likely benefit from intentional mentoring and support (McCallum et al., 2015). A key finding of the Gray, Wilcox and Nordstokke (2017) study was that more needs to be done to “better support early career teachers as they acclimate to the high demands of the profession” (p. 205). One way to support transition is to create physical spaces for new teachers that enhance socialisation and a sense of belonging to the community (McCallum et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, preservice and early career teachers often turn to social media for support and have a very strong presence online. They share resources, outfits, classroom décor, and updates on their thoughts and feelings. All these topics are new and exciting for an early career teacher. They connect on social media through hashtags like #preserviceteacher and #firstyearteacher, and celebrate attaining registration and employment. There is an evident opportunity for teacher educators to join these conversations.

The Compounding Effects of Isolation for Remote Teachers in Australia

In addition to the pressures articulated above, teachers working in remote contexts experience the compounding effects of isolation. Attracting and retaining quality teachers to remote areas has long been a significant logistical, organisational and bureaucratic challenge for education providers (Author, 2018; Buettel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon, & Murphy, 2011; Lake, 2007). This is despite financial efforts made by stakeholders (e.g. The Remote Area Incentives Scheme, RAIS, DoE, 2017) to attract and retain staff in remote regions (Dow, 2004). The difficulty is a result of personal, social, technological and professional isolation (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Hudson and Hudson, 2008) and more specifically, related to issues of transition and teacher wellbeing.

According to Lake (2007) remoteness refers to isolation from social ties, administration, technical (e.g. intermittent internet connectivity) or discipline-relevant expertise and resources. Many of these issues faced by teachers in isolated communities are connected to readiness, or more specifically, lack of readiness or lack of preparedness to teach in communities characterised by racial and cultural complexities, lack of resourcing in comparison to urban schools, the demands of *living in a goldfish bowl* and expectations of complex classroom management challenges (McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004). These challenges are sometimes compounded by inadequate housing and extreme weather conditions (Buettel, Adie & Hudson, 2011).

Notwithstanding, remote teachers have a strong presence on social media, connecting through hashtags such as: #outbackteacher, #teachinginthebush and #remoteteaching. Recent research shows that social media is used by remote teachers to raise awareness about their

work (Authors, 2020). Recommendations arising from this research included generating more online support for remote teachers and providing wellbeing leave (Authors, 2020).

New Opportunities That Social Media Afford

Use of social media is riddled with contradictions. It has been blamed for the uprising of social anxiety and addiction (e.g. Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths, 2017); and praised for its networking capabilities (e.g. Ranieri, Manca & Fini, 2012). Like many assertive technologies, it can be used for both good and evil: with vulnerable groups of people being most likely to be exploited by social media predators or at risk of addiction (Andreassen, Pallesen & Griffiths, 2017). The most compelling evidence for using a social media campaign amongst a population of teachers is that they are already prolific in that space (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin & Selwyn, 2018). Educational research has traditionally been conducted within institutions; however, teachers are increasingly occupying non-traditional spaces like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. Social media networks are being used as learning environments, both for students and for professional communities of practice (Ranieri, Manca & Fini, 2012). The outstanding characteristic of social media for formal or informal learning is its capacity for interaction: participants can contribute, like, comment, recommend and share (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016) and it is seen as a place of gathering (Veletsianos, 2013). Siemen's theory of digital connectivism (2005) purports that learning is reliant upon connections, and that technological environments support non-linear and complex learning. Indeed, the work of teachers is complex (as discussed above) and online environments provide opportunity to teachers to discuss issues, share stories and support one another (Lantz-Andersson, Lundin & Selwyn, 2018, Ranieri, Manca & Fini, 2012; Veletsianos, 2013).

Our Response to the Situation: The Start-Up Methodology of the Teachers of Australia Social Media Campaign

As a research team, we could not be bystanders with the knowledge that teachers were subject to generic negative representations in traditional media that rarely foregrounds teachers' perspectives (e.g. Donnelly, 2019; Urban, 2019), but also know that teachers were leveraging non-traditional platforms like social media to voice their perspectives. Therefore, as a group of researchers and teacher educators we decided to wade into the controversial and contested world of social media by creating our own social media campaign.

The initial conceptualisation of the Teachers of Australia project was inspired by the Humans of New York project (Stanton, 2015), which portrays people of New York through photographs and stories. We saw an opportunity to re-humanise the teaching profession in Australia through the sharing of photographs and stories. This idea came after previous research conducted by the lead researcher (Author, 2019) that demonstrated that teachers are simultaneously managing/balancing/prioritising student wellbeing concerns and academic performance improvement agendas. The vital role of the teacher was undeniable, and the need to champion the profession was salient. We could not ignore the opportunity that social media presented.

Forming A Research Group and Defining our Scope

The Teachers of Australia research group came together in response to a school wide invitation from the lead researcher. In our first meeting, the purpose of the research project was presented to and refined by the group:

The *Teachers of Australia* project will tell the stories of the great work and immense heart of teachers, with the purpose of lifting the profile of the profession for the sake of teachers' wellbeing and connectedness. Leveraging social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook and Twitter) the Teachers of Australia project will champion the work of Australian teachers by publishing photographs and stories of changed lives. It is hoped that this endeavour will improve retention of teachers within the profession, attract high quality candidates to the profession, both of which will have positive on-flow effects for children's learning.

Collaboratively, we refined our research questions:

What is the reach and effect of a social media campaign that showcases the positive work of teachers?

How do social media platforms support the work of teachers?

The group saw an opportunity to research teacher wellbeing. Accordingly, we set three specific foci for underpinning investigation: (a) analysis of the content of teachers' stories in the campaign, (b) further investigation of teachers' experiences and views of managing the competing imperatives of academic performativity and student wellbeing concerns, and (c) an inquiry into how and for what purposes teachers use social media. Parts (b) and (c) incorporated inquiry into the effects of teachers' experiences on their wellbeing. This qualitative research draws upon an interpretivist research paradigm and the methodologies of narrative inquiry and phenomenology. Interpretivism is concerned with social agency, the ways we interact in society and the meaning that is generated from these interactions (Walter, 2006). For this project, an interpretivist paradigm foregrounds the experiences and stories of teachers. Although Siemen's theory of connectivism might have been a possible theoretical paradigm for this project, our focus is more on generating meaning around teachers' experiences and stories, and the tool of social media supports this inquiry (not vice versa). Furthermore, connectivism is a young theory that is yet to be widely tested (Goldie, 2016). Phenomenology is a study of lived experiences with the purpose of extracting essences of participant meanings (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Narrative inquiry enables prosaic description of participant experiences (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014).

Surveying Social Media Platforms to Assess Teacher Presence and Activity

Before launching our campaign, we investigated the ways that teachers use social media and discovered a very strong presence across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We were aware of many professional networking groups on Facebook, and a propensity for policy, 'best practice' and research discussions and debates on Twitter. However, it was the strong presence of Australian teachers on Instagram that surprised us most. There is a very large community of teachers on Instagram that frequently shares resources and classroom décor ideas. Many of these posts are designed to direct people back to Teachers Pay Teachers where many teachers have a side hustle; however, there is also a lot of classroom design and #teacherinspiration posts. It became very clear to us that we needed a different presence if we were going to stand out on such a crowded platform. Amidst the shiny laminated colourful classroom resources posts, we opted for portrait head and shoulder photographs of teachers

and initially decided upon a faded colour scheme as a distinguishing feature during the beginning months of our campaign.

Developing a Business Case

This project needed multiple institutional approvals before its launch. Research ethics approval was sought and granted so that the content of teacher posts and their photographs can be used for research purposes. To receive institutional marketing approval, we needed to demonstrate social media capacity and prepare a business case. In this process we defined the audience (teachers of Australia) and demonstrated this audience might need a social media account of this kind. Our rationale was as follows:

There is high attrition within the profession in the first five years after graduation. Although the remuneration is comparable with other professions, and the lifestyle is envious, many of our current Education students find themselves having to defend their career decision, having the answer the question, “Why would you want to be a teacher?” Overall, it is hoped that by championing the work of Australian teachers that this campaign might contribute to retention in the profession in a time of a teacher shortage. Up to 25% of beginning teachers may leave teaching within the first five years (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). Across Australia 5.7 % of teachers are leaving the profession in any year (AITSL, 2017).

The subsequent aims of the social media campaign were:

1. promote the teaching profession in a public forum
2. create a virtual community of practice where teachers can connect with each other and their stories
3. attract quality candidates to the profession.

We were very pleased to receive marketing approval for this project and acknowledge the social media skills of one of our administrative staff as key to demonstrating capacity.

Recruiting Story Tellers

Upon approval, the search for teachers who would be willing to share their stories and photographs commenced. Finding willing participants has been a challenge throughout the project and has required ongoing invitations from the research team. Recruitment ebbs and flows with the busyness of the academic calendar. To date our most effective strategies have been direct invitations and word of mouth. We aim for an organic, authentic build that is not reliant upon boosted or sponsored posts. We use hashtags to attract new followers, and genuinely interact with other Instagram accounts to affirm the work of teachers. We are not for profit. Our goal is to promote the profession, and it is important that followers know that there is no hidden agenda.

The Approach: Unashamed, Positive Championing.

There is enough “teacher bashing” (Bahr, 2019) in the media. The Teachers of Australia campaign is unapologetically positive. Notwithstanding this stance, it also aims to be authentic. We willingly broadcast real perspectives of hard work, difficult conditions and the emotional toll of working with children and families. Nevertheless, the main impetus behind the stories is to broadcast why teachers love teaching. Teachers have an opportunity to share their motivations and beliefs in their stories. This primary focus is a good fit in a

profession that is motivated by care and a duty to future generations (Ghoulami, 2011). See Plates 1 and 2 for example stories from the Teachers of Australia campaign. These stories are actively shared by the teacher educators in our research team with pre-service teachers and their wider professional networks.


| | |
|---|---|
|  | <p>“Hey, Mum!” a student exclaims, only to instantly recoil as they realise the faux pas they have made. While their classmate’s chuckle at the slip-up, I can’t help but feel honoured that the slip-up was made. It highlights the strong bond teachers form with their students over the year and the countless hours they spend together. From day one of the school year, the twenty-something students sitting eagerly in front of me become “my kids”. Because they are “my kids”, I want them to know that no matter what is going on around them, they have at least one person who will fight for them. I want them to know they have at least one person who wholeheartedly believes in them. I want them to know they have at least one person who will go to any lengths to help them. It may sound cliché, but this devotion doesn’t always come easily. It is, however, so worth it when students realise how much you care for them. For that feeling alone, I will continue to feel slightly proud every time a student calls out, “Hey, Mum!”</p> |
|---|---|

Plate 1. Example story #1 from the Teachers of Australia campaign.

Plate 1 is a strong example of the narrative style of submissions to the Teachers of Australia campaign. Story and voice are foregrounded in the project, giving teachers the opportunity to share their experiences and sense of purpose.


| | |
|---|--|
|  | <p>I am passionate about history and teaching the subject. I am not afraid to dress up in re-enactment outfits mostly ancient history. I also present Viking lectures to Year 7 every year in a Viking outfit with weapons and shield. It is my 42nd and last year of teaching due to health issues and I intend to give my students I have the best effort I can to assist them to achieve their best but most of all, have a lifelong love of history, modern and ancient. I have taught in State and Catholic education and experienced a wide range of teaching conditions. My students are always my number one priority to engage, interest and impart an understanding of the importance of history in their lives. I will miss that aspect of teaching above all when I retire at the end of 2019.</p> |
|---|--|

Plate 2. Example story #2 from the Teachers of Australia campaign.

Plate 2 juxtaposes teacher passion and health concerns. This sample shows a strong desire to do the job well and prioritise student engagement but sets this against a backdrop of health issues and early retirement. A future direction of this project will be the qualitative analysis of the submitted stories.

Our Reach to Date

The Teachers of Australia social media campaign began in December 2018 and has grown to over x combined followers on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. To date, x stories have been shared and 22 teachers have agreed to participate in research about how they use social media. At the time of writing this article, this data was still being analysed. Further, this social media project has also been used as a recruiting platform for research into how teachers balance the competing imperatives of academic performance and student wellbeing (authors, 2020; authors, in press). Some unanticipated outcomes have also arisen from the project. In 2020, teachers in the Teachers of Australia social media network reached out for support during COVID-19 lockdowns. Through Instagram and Facebook we were able to connect teachers from around Australia with teachers who were suffering the effects of lockdown in remote parts of Australia, and then later in Melbourne. Teachers volunteered to send care packages to one another during this time. We received very few teacher stories in 2020, and we attribute this to the effects of COVID-19 as the demands of teaching online and the ongoing ramifications of COVID-19 were taxing on the profession. As a result, we turned the focus of our social media campaign to supporting one another and then later presenting research findings as an encouragement for teacher health and wellbeing. We have learnt that social media needs to evolve and adapt to the needs of the audience, and that stories, connection and support are priorities for teachers.

Concluding Remarks: Our Story is Unfolding

This paper forms two main conclusions. First, there is an evident need to better understand teachers' experiences and stories to find ways to better support their vital work. Subsequently, there is a need for strong qualitative research that foregrounds teachers' voices to complement, balance and give context to research that foregrounds performance outcomes. Second, there is also a pressing need to take teachers seriously regarding social media use, and better understand how they use it for connectedness and support. Evidently teachers are passionate about their jobs (e.g. Plate 1), but the social and emotional burden can take a toll on their wellbeing (e.g. Plate 2). Social media reaches beyond traditional institutional and geographical boundaries and provides new opportunities for connecting and supporting people. It also provides opportunities for the sharing of stories from the profession and for phenomenological and narrative analyses of these stories. This work is still ahead of us.

Geolocation: Australia

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