

# Introduction

## The futures of teaching

*Viv Ellis and Marie Brennan*

This special issue of *FORUM* asks questions about the future of teaching – as a profession, as an activity, as a relationship with the taught and their communities, as well as with power, especially the state and its policies. The papers generate, clarify and respond to questions from different perspectives and interests, written by authors from Australia and the UK, primarily, but resonant and relevant to the many challenges internationally. The questions they address include:

- What should be the relationship between teachers, teaching and education policy?
- What might we imagine it means to be a teacher – and teach - in the future?
- What should be the relationships between schools and communities, young people and school systems?
- Is it possible to escape the class-based and colonial logics that have structured both how we prepare teachers and how they are permitted to teach?
- How can teaching – and school leadership – be sustainable, especially in a context where ever-increasing levels of responsibility and accountability are being demanded of the people who take on these roles?
- Fundamentally, what are the challenges currently faced by teachers and school leaders, and how can they be overcome to imagine new futures for teachers and teaching?

The authors put teachers' work into a broader international context and, through providing multiple perspectives on the challenges, actively seek to create resources for local public debate – new ideas, new language and new options for moving constructively towards reimagining teaching and schools. Each paper in this issue has been written to provoke discussions that create opportunities to shape a new, hopeful and future-oriented discourse about teachers and education more broadly in society. The starting point is that we, as a community of educators, have to become better both at identifying and clarifying the challenges, and coming up with *our own* ideas and tools beyond the usual policy toolkits of most mainstream political parties, whether a backwards-looking traditionalism or a market-driven neoliberalism.

Most work on futures has tended either to extrapolate on current trends or to imagine idealised, utopian institutions. However, futures need to be constructed *in practice*, in order to move forward from the current situation as it is. This is a challenge that cannot be answered with yet another political review, 'expert group' or academic

critique. Broader conversations beyond university and school settings will be essential. As well as those of the students, teachers and school leaders and the voices of the communities they serve need a much higher priority in debates about the future of education, beyond the often binary political discourse of ‘reform’, and well beyond the priorities of behavioural economists and the paternalist rhetoric of lobbyists’ ‘best bets’.

Given the environmental, economic and political upheavals currently confronting citizens, their governments and the planet, teachers and schools need to be able to orient upcoming generations to uncertain and difficult futures in ways that are cooperative, practical and draw on a range of knowledge resources. Addressing these challenges will require courage, creativity and hard work on the part of teachers, students and, indeed, teacher educators, alongside their communities. And it will be courage, creativity and hard work that take place at a time when, in many countries, both social and material infrastructures are breaking down, fractured by austerity and overwork as well as disinformation.<sup>1</sup>

Disinvestment in school buildings is a common feature of public education systems worldwide as is, at the same time, making teachers responsible for the success or failure of major planks of economic policy (often expressed, in England at least, as ‘social mobility’). So, although the political, economic and cultural drivers operate differently across international contexts, the outcomes of these breaking social, material and, indeed, psychic infrastructures are often strikingly similar. This breaking down of such infrastructure has multiple consequences – for professions such as teaching but also for the social contract, or social licence, of public institutions such as schools. The authors of the papers in this special issue address these questions directly.

## **Introducing the papers**

The special issue also builds on the work undertaken at Monash University in Australia between 2023 and 2024, supplemented by specially invited new papers that extend those earlier explorations, as well as a reflective response paper from a Norwegian critical friend. The papers range across questions of space and community-school relations and how these are reflected in school designs; how schools and educational institutions create or limit opportunities for students and teachers to thrive; how the media and tech industries position teachers and their work – showing the meaning and consequences of gaslighting and datafication; and what the possibilities are for humane and person- and values-centred leadership when compliance supplants true democratic accountability. As one might expect and as we have intended, the papers all spend some time clarifying the problems and challenges of the present situation for teachers and schools before moving on to developing ideas about how different futures can be made possible. They do so in different styles and varying lengths. Holding on to ‘hope’ of a different

future is a common theme, but so is the need to establish different relationships with policy – and with each other. There is a recognition that institutions such as schools and practices such as teaching have developed historically and are unlikely either to disappear overnight or to change direction abruptly. What does it mean to think for the future whilst coping with and caring for each other in the present?

The next paper, ‘Gaslighting a profession’ by Nicole Mockler, a professor at the University of Sydney, begins with an autobiographical reflection on talk about change and educational ‘transformation’ during the 1990s when she first became a schoolteacher. Situated in the Australian policy context where a very specific meaning of the ‘classroom readiness’ of the new teacher dominates, Mockler goes on to discuss the ‘demoralisation’ of teachers (a term she uses in preference to ‘burnout’) and the ‘institutional gaslighting’ of teachers. Rather than the provision of dubious ‘lesson banks’ of prepared resources, she says, teachers need instead to be allowed to be engrossed and excited by the core activities of their job. Thus, planning lessons for the specific children in the classes they teach is not seen as a low-level task that can be outsourced to artificial intelligence, but an essential responsibility they exercise in the service of a greater moral purpose. Mockler argues that allowing the whole person of the teacher (their ‘hearts and bodies’ as well as their intellect) to flourish in the classroom is central to the future of teaching, as a job and profession. Quoting Jennifer Nias, she adds: ‘Without feeling, without the freedom to “face themselves”, to be whole, they [teachers] implode, explode – or walk away’.<sup>2</sup>

In ‘Brains, birds and keys’, Jamie Lawes, a teacher at a secondary school in England, picks up on the importance of purpose for teachers and teaching – the moral purpose of education. Again, reflecting on earlier in his career, when he was asked during his teacher education course to draw an image that represented the purpose of education, Lawes paints a relatively bleak picture of the absence of the purposes of education in contemporary professional discourses of teaching – in fact, not so much the absence but the complete evacuation of purpose and meaning beyond instrumental target-setting. For Lawes, this is not a recent problem but rather one that has developed over several decades, leading to what he sees as a current crisis. In response, he argues for the reinsertion of the discussion of the purposes of education beyond the confines of whatever the government of the day’s policies are. Like Mockler, he is arguing for a more expansive view of what a teacher is and does, a view they argue is likely to be both sustaining and retaining of teachers’ expertise.

‘School space and the future of teaching’, from Benjamin Cleveland, an associate professor in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne, begins with the question: ‘What would schools look like if they were designed as great places for teachers to work?’. Cleveland points out that, more commonly, this question is asked from the students’ perspective, if asked at all.

Drawing on theories of strategic design, learning environments and school-community relations, Cleveland argues that school design will need to change if schools wish to attract and retain teachers into the future, cultivating ‘new forms of collegiality, belonging and teamwork’, in the same way that other workplaces have changed and in the way that some experiments in school design have shown are possible. Noting that schools have not always been designed and built as they are currently, he advocates for designs that foster professional community as well as task-focused collaboration, designs that pay attention to the ‘backstage’ aspects of teachers’ work, so vital for their professional growth.

Charlotte Wright, a teacher turned teacher educator at a university in the north of England, begins ‘Colouring inside, around, and outside the lines’ with an architectural reference to Zaha Hadid’s Port House in Antwerp, an image she uses to provoke discussion in her teaching of prospective teachers. Port House represents two radically different architectural perspectives in the same construct. Wright uses the discussion she has with her students to reflect on diverse perceptions of education policy. Referring to her own ‘suffocating’ experience of an ‘avalanche’ of policy and prescription during her career as a teacher, she nonetheless notes the apparently contradictory perceptions of policy by her students as an ‘anchor’ and a ‘springboard’, as both a way of securing a place in an unfamiliar landscape and (perhaps from a sense of resistance) as a jumping-off point to new ideas that overcome perceived limitations. Wright’s paper shows how preparing new teachers to see themselves as policy actors is possible and desirable, rather than mere targets of policy direction. As she concludes, ‘the space of the possible is always larger than the one we are assigned’.

‘The future of teaching’ by Greg Thompson, a professor at the Australian Catholic University, argues that efforts to address the multiple contemporary crises of teaching have focused too narrowly on measuring teacher workload, failing to account for the qualitative experience of time – ‘time poverty’ – that teachers endure due to workload *and* work intensification. Thompson critiques the growing policy and technological emphasis on delivering ‘time dividends’ through automation and efficiency, particularly via digital technologies and artificial intelligence. Rather than easing burdens, these interventions often increase pressure and erode the ethical and relational core of teaching. Drawing on sociological and philosophical insights, including the work of Bernard Stiegler, the author calls for a reimagining of teaching grounded in ‘intelligent professionalism’ – a framework that honours teacher autonomy, ethical commitments and the co-constitutive relationship between technology and culture. In conclusion, the paper poses three provocations that invite a reconsideration of the work, culture and technology that teachers deserve in a just educational future.

Kenny Frederick, in ‘A sustainable future for school leadership’, draws on her experience as a secondary head teacher in London as well as her more recent work

co-founding a charity for head teachers who are under increasing pressure and often at risk of being ‘disappeared’ from their jobs through dubious human resources practices. Springboarding from her charity’s most recent annual report, Frederick offers a number of recommendations that would help to make school leadership more sustainable. The first of these is to ensure that any education policy considers the affective dimensions of its impacts – the human demands that policies make on the leaders charged with and accountable for their enactment. Second, she proposes a new ‘defragmented’ and enabling set of governance expectations across all schools – including outlawing the bad practice of routinely using non-disclosure agreements (NDAs). Frederick also proposes changes to the uniquely bad English school inspection system, as well as using legislation to protect teachers from the ‘vexatious, abusive behaviour’ of some parents. The alternative, she asks bluntly, is that without these changes, will there be anyone left to lead schools?

In ‘Imagineering a future-oriented teaching workforce’, Marie Brennan urges us to integrate creative thinking and feeling with practical action. Brennan points to the indigenous Iriquois Nation principle for decision-making that requires consideration of a decision’s impact on seven future generations, coincidentally a principle enshrined in Wales in the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act of 2015.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the intent is to prioritise sustainable, long-term decision-making that will improve people’s social, cultural, environmental and cultural well-being. From her starting point that teaching as it currently stands is unsustainable (in the many senses of the word), Brennan proposes three guiding principles for action. First, drawing on Freire, she proposes a framework for teaching that ‘reads the world’. Second, drawing on recent postcolonial scholarship, she argues for an approach to change that Vanessa Machado-Oliveira has called ‘hospicing modernity’.<sup>4</sup> This approach involved working within and caring for the status quo – ‘caring’ for it – at the same time as helping to give birth to a better future. And finally, she suggests adopting a community-focused ‘problems that matter’ approach to curriculum and teaching.

K. David, in their essay on AI, policy and the work of teaching, speculates on the role of generative artificial intelligence in governing the future of education and the work of teaching. Referring to the example of the online ‘lesson bank’ Oak National Academy in England, K. David points to the insidious ways in which a ‘time-saving’ and ‘professionally supportive’ venture like Oak can have far-reaching and unpredictable consequences by creating new dependencies, obligations and accountabilities that are, at least at their entry-points, mostly invisible.

In the final paper, Tom Are Trippstad offers a reflection on both the concept of ‘the future’ in policy (and how it has come to govern education and the work of teachers) and the papers in this special issue. Drawing on an eclectic range of reading from Pixar’s *Monster’s Inc.* to Ulrich Beck, Karl Popper, Václav Havel and many others, Trippstad

shows how ‘the future’ has been coopted by policymakers to construct children and young people as ‘risky’ subjects, and teachers and teaching as mitigations against these economic, social and geopolitical risks. Arguing for ‘presentism’ and ‘piecemeal (social) engineering’, Trippstad urges teachers to live - and to teach their students to live – an ‘independent life’ by engaging most directly with that which makes us human.

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## Notes

1. Lauren Berlant, ‘The Commons: Infrastructures for troubling times’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34 (3), 2016, pp393-419.
2. Jennifer Nias, *Primary Teachers Talking: a study of teaching as work*, London, Routledge, 1989, p305.
3. <https://www.gov.wales/well-being-future-generations-act-essentials-html>.
4. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: facing humanity’s wrongs and the implications for social activism*, Berkeley, CA, North Atlantic Books, 2021.