

South Australian counsellor and educators speak on conditions in schools

Sue Phillips
30 January 2020

Sue Phillips, the national convenor of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and a writer for the World Socialist Web Site, recently spoke with a pre-service teacher, an English as an Additional Language teacher (EAL) and youth counsellor about the conditions in South Australian (SA) schools.

At the end of December an Australian Education Union and South Australian state Liberal government agreement on wages and working conditions narrowly passed a union ballot, in the face of widespread anger and opposition from educators. The sell-out deal has done nothing to address inadequate staffing and resources, crushing workloads, poor wages and growing casualisation.

A union survey last year found that in an average classroom of 28 students, teachers reported that five students often require individual education plans and six students for whom English is not their first language. Another five have learning difficulties that are not diagnosed and not funded, eight others require emotional or behavioural support and three others have disabilities.

Added to this is the increasing casualisation of the workforce. Nearly one third of teachers, 56 percent of Student Support Staff on contracts, 90 percent of Early Childhood Workers and 51 percent of Aboriginal Education Workers are employed on insecure contracts.

Diane is a pre-service teacher in training. She has completed two placements in SA schools and one in the state of Victoria. Diane is due to finish her final placement in Term One, 2020, and hopes to gain a teaching position in a primary school.

Sue Phillips: Tell me about your teaching experiences in schools?

Diane: My first placement was in a suburban Adelaide school, a typical public school with 800 plus students and 30 in each class, if not more. I had a Year 4 class, one of the smaller classes, with only 28 kids. We also had a couple of special need students.

The biggest issue was the students with learning difficulties. I can't really say they were students with disabilities because they weren't [officially] diagnosed. There is so much pressure on the teacher because there are no additional services or support staff. We had to efficiently plan to support those students—over and above teaching 26 other kids. A generic lesson is not suited to all of them because every student has different learning abilities.

Five students might understand the generic lesson, the rest won't, or vice versa. So, you've got to focus on supporting students with specific learning issues. In one case there was one student who was in grade 4, but learning at a grade 1 level, and we had to plan for the student. Because of the lack of resources, all we had was for him to sit at a desk with worksheets.

It would be different if they were only one year behind, but this student was three years behind. So basically, it was just a simple fix of

giving him worksheets, while we're focussing on 27 other children. That was my first teaching placement, so I was surprised to see that.

SP: Were you given specific training at college to deal with the complexity of classrooms?

Diane: No, we've not been taught how to support students with disabilities. Every student is different and we should plan for that. We are not taught about students who are a long way behind when there seems to be no medical reason behind it. They are just a "troubled" student. I've almost finished my degree, and I still couldn't tell you how I would handle such a situation, other than giving students worksheets.

SP: Do you expect to get a job after your training concludes?

Diane: I would like to go in on a contract. There is no guarantee. It's a very tough market. I'm expecting that my first job will be as an emergency teacher, temporarily replacing absent teachers, because it's that sort of industry.

You have to resign yourself to what you can get just to get your foot in the door. A job is a job for me at the moment, and if I have to, I'll try and get a job as a Student Support Officer [SSO]. That's not ideal, I haven't studied for six years to be an SSO, but it's a job. Hopefully, it will take me somewhere from there.

Rosalind is a long-standing teacher of nearly three decades. For the last 11 years she has worked as a teacher of English as an Additional Language, educating refugee, migrant and international students.

SP: Could you say something about your school?

Rosalind: Our school takes any student in South Australia who doesn't have the English level to cope with mainstream schooling. Some are refugees, some are international students and some are migrants. We teach much smaller class sizes than in regular schools.

I predominantly teach refugees whose literacy levels are often lower in their own language than we would expect for similar aged students in Australia. They have had very disrupted schooling. Technically, I have a maximum of 10 students although my current class has 11 students. The refugee students are from everywhere. From Pakistan, Syria, Myanmar, Nepal and African countries such as the Congo. Our international students can be from China, Vietnam, Japan, while migrants can be from anywhere—Russia, Spain, Italy.

Trauma is a huge part of our students' lives. In my last class, there were significant numbers. The things they've seen and been through, you just can't imagine. There are lots of things to deal with, apart from teaching them English. We've all had some training to deal with trauma but it's an ongoing, daily thing in the classroom.

SP: Could you speak about teacher workload?

Rosalind: Every teacher understands that extra administration tasks are killing us. I don't understand why they keep giving us more. This

means we spend less time providing quality teaching and making the curriculum more accessible for my students. It is beyond frustrating. I absolutely love teaching and going to work every day. I get quite cranky every time I have to do a tedious administrative task.

Here in SA the [Education] Department is rolling out “One Plan”, which means individualised learning plans for students with special needs. The plan could apply to a student who has a disability, who is under guardianship of the Minister, or an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It is now expected that all these students require an individualised learning plan.

The learning plans have to meet certain criteria. I have heard teachers who have students with multiple and severe learning needs and that it takes 15 to 20 hours to write one of those plans. They have to consult with every agency involved with the student’s wellbeing. It’s crazy that the classroom teacher is responsible for all of that. Special Ed is not a compulsory requirement when you are studying teaching. But you have to be a Special Ed expert now on day one when you come into your class.

Everybody has a child with needs in their class, no matter where you teach. You are now required to put that into a document, with expertise and knowledge of all the programs and support services and how they should be implemented.

I feel my job is like a buffer between what the Department thinks should happen, and what we know really should happen in the class. No wonder teachers are leaving.

Parents should expect the best education for their children, it should be individualised, if needed, absolutely. But the government just says, “Yeah, yeah that’s right. Off you go teachers and provide a quality service.” But there is no consideration or understanding of how much time that takes, how student numbers and the number of students with needs impact on teachers. The people we live with—and share our lives—see how hard we work and the hours we put in.

Kerri taught for six years in the Catholic system in South Australia but was unable to secure a permanent job. She then retrained as a counsellor.

SP: Tell us something about your teaching experience?

Kerri: After teaching in Japan for 12 months, I came back to Australia with a burning desire to become a teacher, so I did a post-grad degree. My degree did not give me the skills I needed to teach. I learnt most of my experience on the job, liaising with other teachers, and just being in a classroom with kids and trying to cater to the various student needs. I did subjects like special needs. However, that does not equip you to teach special needs children.

I am all for inclusion—I support it whole-heartedly. However, we can’t have inclusion without the necessary skills, experience and resources to support those children, and the other children within the class.

SP: Why did you leave teaching?

Kerri: I worked mainly in the Catholic system. It was really difficult to get permanency. I would reapply for jobs every 12 months. Not just for one job but you’d have to write maybe eight, nine or ten different applications, go through an interview process, and hopefully pick up a job for another 12 months.

I did that for six years. From that I thought, I am frustrated. I can see that children have got significant emotional and social problems and I can’t help these kids. So, I decided to do a diploma of counselling.

I found it difficult to get employed in a school as a counsellor because the Department tends to employ school principals in a dual role of counselling and administration, so I work privately. I go into

some schools and work one-on-one with trauma kids, but what I am seeing now is that it’s far more complex. As society has become more complex, so too have our kids. It’s not uncommon nowadays to see second and third generation trauma in kids in classrooms.

SP: How does this complex situation impact in classrooms?

Kerri: What I am seeing is teachers, not only new graduates, working extraordinarily hard to get the best possible outcomes for their students. However, they’re dealing with very, very complex students, meltdowns, extreme behaviours and learning difficulties, and then we’ve got a lot of special needs children on the autistic spectrum.

We have got kids with auditory processing difficulties, and then add large class sizes to the mix, then add parents to the mix. I am not saying that in a derogatory way. I mean that it is very difficult to understand the complexities of a classroom until you’ve been in and taught in that classroom and you’ve tried to manage perhaps 28 or 32 students, all with varying needs.

Generally, parents don’t understand the kind of stress that teachers are under. Then you add the extra administration that teachers need to deal with, the curriculum and so on.

As a counsellor, what stands out for me is the trauma in kids, seeing children have meltdowns, seeing the effect of that on other children in the classroom. It traumatises children who see that. Years ago, problems like that were the exception rather than the rule, whereas these days it seems to be fairly common.

SP: So why do you think this situation is intensifying?

Kerri: Society is becoming more complex, and we don’t teach our kids how to handle their emotions. I’ve worked at what one would consider really middle to upper class schools, and I’ve worked in lower socio-economic schools. I think it just gets hidden a lot more in some of the “better” schools. It’s still there, it’s just suppressed more. If we’re looking to really help these kids, suppressing these emotions and getting them to conform and to sit in desks might help the teacher temporarily, but it’s not doing anything long term to address the trauma.

I think getting professionals like psychologists and social workers to actually work in schools might help alleviate some of the teachers’ stress. There is no point in a child sitting in an office, trying to hold it together, for a meeting with a Child Protection Officer or whatever. Psychologists and social workers need to be in a classroom to see that child have a huge meltdown. They need to observe that child and how they relate to their peers.

We are looking at kids who are self-harming, having all kinds of social issues, violence, and unprotected sex at very young ages. We need to be looking, really closely at how we’re managing these kids, or rather how we’re not managing them. What we’re doing at the moment isn’t working.



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