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Crafting the inspirational teacher: governing through affect as policy response to teacher recruitment in Australia

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ABSTRACT

As policymakers address a teacher attrition crisis, this paper examines how the Australian policy response mobilises affect to address and manage teacher recruitment. Drawing on affect theory and governmentality, we analyse a case study – the Australian Government's *Be That Teacher* campaign – as a policy instrument that seeks to cultivate among would-be-teachers desirable feelings and aspirations aligned with state priorities. Our analysis shows how a sentimental and idealised figure of the 'inspirational' teacher is mobilised as a form of affective governmentality through two interconnected dynamics: (1) the construction of teaching as emotionally fulfilling and morally meaningful work through narratives of inspiration, care, and personal transformation; and (2) the individualisation of responsibility for recruitment, retention, and teacher wellbeing through affective appeals that articulate positive public sentiment while obscuring the structural causes of teacher attrition. Together, these dynamics demonstrate how affective governmentality aligns personal attachment, public feeling, and policy priorities, and how such strategies risk reproducing the very conditions that they seek to address.

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Introduction

In line with global trends, Australia has a teacher turnover problem. This turnover has been associated with challenging working conditions, excessive workload, occupational stress and burnout, and the low status of the profession (Creagh et al. 2023; Hogan and Thompson 2025; Longmuir 2026) which has negative impacts on students, staff, and communities (Heffernan et al. 2022; Lawrence et al. 2022). Against this backdrop, teacher recruitment and retention have become objects for intensified political management. For instance, the Australian Government recently identified five priority areas of intervention in their *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* (Australian Government: Department of Education 2024). Our primary analytical focus in this paper is on one policy priority within the plan, 'elevating the status of the profession' (Australian

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Government: Department of Education 2024, 3), which was advanced through the 2023 *Be That Teacher* recruitment campaign (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023c).

The recruitment campaign invited teachers to showcase their story of inspiring students by way of the *Be That Teacher* website (bethatteacher.gov.au). The campaign aimed to recruit new teachers by bolstering public awareness of the 'inspirational' work using these editorialised written and video stories. Drawing on affect theories, we analyse the *Be That Teacher* campaign materials, ministerial announcements, and media releases to explore how affect is mobilised as a mode of governmentality.

The analytic of affective governmentality (Harmat 2023) is useful for capturing how government campaign material and political rhetoric utilise (and combine) specific imagery, artefacts, tropes, and linguistic repertoires to evoke and circulate affects, feelings, and sentiments about teaching and teachers. Here, affective governance involves aligning public sentiment with a romanticised and heroic image of teaching and teachers' work. We situate this affective form of governance within entrenched forms of neo-liberal education policy that frame 'quality' teachers as the 'lynchpin' to school education improvement, student success, and social transformation (Clarke 2012, 304).

The paper proceeds by reviewing evidence on teacher attrition and workforce policy in Australia before developing the theoretical framework of affective governmentality and applying it to the *Be That Teacher* campaign and accompanying policy materials. The conclusion reflects on the implications for both the analytical framework and for teacher workforce policy more broadly.

Background

Teachers' working conditions

Like research conducted in other countries (Cano et al. 2017; Cheng, Fan, and Wan Lau 2022; Capone and Petrillo 2020; Janzen and Phelan 2020; TES 2024; Perryman et al. 2023) Australian research shows that teacher turnover, attrition, and retention are closely related to job satisfaction, workplace conditions, and teacher wellbeing. For example, 46% of Australian teachers reported they were considering leaving their jobs within 12 months due to workload and stress (Black Dog Institute 2023). Successive Teaching and Learning International Surveys (TALIS) consistently rank Australian teacher job satisfaction and well-being below the OECD average (see Freeman, O'Malley, and Eveleigh 2014), with six in ten reporting stress higher than the OECD average (Thomson and Hillman 2020). Rates of stress, illness, and attrition continue to be a pressing issue in Australia, where teaching continues to be characterised as extraordinarily demanding and emotional work (see Karnovsky and Kelly 2025). For example, a survey of over 22,000 Australian teachers found that 86% find their work 'emotionally demanding' while 58% reported that their stress was being caused by excessive workload while around 50% of these teachers feel 'worried' and 'miserable' on a regular basis (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership 2025). On-going second-hand trauma, emotional burnout, and fatigue help explain the challenges of teachers' contemporary

work and the conditions of the profession's attrition and retention crisis (McKittrick-Sweitzer 2023; Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison 2024).

Australia's teacher workforce issues have indeed worsened in the past decade (Freeman, O'Malley, and Eveleigh 2014; Thomson and Hillman 2020), with teachers reporting work intensification and stress from burdensome administrative and accountability responsibilities (Heffernan et al. 2022; Windle et al. 2022). Australian studies show that growing numbers of teachers feel unsafe at work due to student and parent behaviour (Longmuir et al. 2025), while deteriorating conditions contribute to burnout and demoralisation, particularly among mid-career teachers, with significant effects on retention (Kassandrinou et al. 2023; Longmuir 2026; Santoro, 2011). Similar patterns are documented internationally – in England, North America, Canada, East Asia, and Europe – where poor working conditions are consistently identified as central to the attrition crisis (Cano et al. 2017; Cheng, Fan, and Wan Lau 2022; Capone and Petrillo 2020; Janzen and Phelan 2020; TES 2024; Perryman et al. 2023).

Perceptions of Australian teachers

In Australia, perceptions of the teaching profession are marked by a persistent paradox whereby the public often values local teachers while disparaging the profession more broadly (Australian Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1998). Although teachers are generally trusted, many report feeling devalued and misunderstood, with stereotypes about 'short hours' and 'long holidays' enduring despite contrary evidence (Heffernan et al. 2019; OECD 2020, 2024). Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2020) notes that negative or skewed portrayals of teaching can undermine teachers' sense of professional recognition. We have noted that the recruitment campaign analysed in this paper aligns with OECD claims that elevating the social status of teaching may support both recruitment and retention (OECD 2024).

Teacher attrition policies in Australia and the marginalisation of working conditions

Internationally, teacher workforce policy tends to emphasise issues of supply and demand over retention, working conditions, and teacher wellbeing (McPherson and Lampert 2025). This policy orientation persists despite evidence that attrition is driven less by shortages of entrants and salary levels, and more by deteriorating working conditions, work intensification, and declining perception of teacher wellbeing (Arnold and Rahimi 2025).

Like elsewhere, teacher attrition has today become a pressing political issue in Australia as endemic workforce shortages threaten the public school system's ability to staff all classes (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023b). In response, policymakers, researchers, and public commentators have variously framed the workforce shortage as a problem related to the quality of teacher preparation courses, induction of and quality of new teachers, poor workforce supply, the status and perception of the profession, and the remuneration of teachers (e.g. Australian Government: Quality Teacher Program 2012; Australian Government: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2014). The supply-side focus on teacher recruitment and retention is

supported by little evidence of sustained improvement in retention rates, and there are few comprehensive reviews or rigorous appraisals of the effectiveness of such strategies (Ingersoll 2001, 2003; See et al. 2022).

National teacher workforce action plan

As a federated nation, responsibility for Australia's teacher workforce supply and management typically rests with the education departments of each of its seven states and territories. McPherson and Lampert (2025) found their workforce strategies consistently emphasised supply side factors, such as improving recruitment and using scholarships to attract people to teaching. These priorities have given rise to state-based teacher recruitment using social media and web-based marketing campaigns (e.g. New South Wales Government 2025; Queensland Government 2025). In response to teacher attrition issues being raised in the press in 2022, the federal Labor government stepped into the workforce shortage issue to coordinate and resource a national response to what it characterised as a 'crisis' (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio, 2024a). This federal intervention culminated in the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* (Australian Government: Department of Education 2024), a report of a working group of stakeholders, and a community consultation process on an early draft. This action plan contained five priority areas and twenty-seven strategies addressing these priorities. The NTWAP is a coordinated, cross-jurisdictional policy aligning Commonwealth, state, and sectoral actors around a shared agenda to 'attract, train and retain' teachers (Australian Government: Department of Education 2024, 3) by combining short-term incentives (e.g. bursaries, migration), medium-term reforms (e.g. ITE redesign, workload reduction), and longer-term workforce planning (e.g. data infrastructure). The plan emerges from a prolonged trajectory of teacher shortages, intensified by COVID-19, and reflects a policy tradition shaped by federal-state collaboration yet dominated by labour market logics prioritising recruitment over structural reform (Australian Government: Department of Education 2025; McPherson and Lampert 2025). As Hogan and Thompson (2025) argue, workforce policy has long constructed teaching as a governable and optimisable labour force, while systematically marginalising issues such as workload, a pattern that aligns with neoliberal reform trends across OECD systems, where supply-demand logics privilege efficiency while deferring structural concerns about working conditions (Cochran-Smith, Piazza, and Power 2013; Greenblatt 2018; Marotta et al. 2025).

Elevating the status of the profession

Our study singles out the policy priority of 'elevating the status of the profession' because it is most directly related to the perception problem of Australian teachers and operationalised a response to this issue through the highly visible public campaign, *Be That Teacher*. We argue that the campaign reflects a broader shift in Australian teacher discourse, from problematising teachers through deficit and disciplinary framings (Mockler 2014; Stacey 2017) to affective constructions of the 'good' or 'inspirational' teacher. It, therefore, provides an empirically rich case for analysing how affect operates as a modality of governance within contemporary teacher recruitment and retention policy. By analysing campaign materials alongside ministerial announcements and media

releases, we reveal a wider governmental rationality at work, namely the construction of the ‘inspirational teacher’ as an organising trope for managing teacher recruitment. We suggest this figure, which embodies neoliberalism’s individualising logic of responsibility, animates public appeals to personal fulfilment, purpose, and impact as policy solutions.

Theoretical framework

In this section, we argue for the relevance of an affective turn in the humanities for exploring educational policy and political rhetoric. We then elaborate on the concept of affect governmentality and how we mobilise affect as an analytic in our examination of communicative and coordinative policy discourse.

An affective approach to studying political governance

Policy objectives are often framed through appeals to reason, evidence, and expertise, they are also sustained through affective attachments generated by images, narratives, and ideals (A. M. Phelan 2022). Our affective approach to studying policy and political rhetoric emerges from an understanding that affect and emotion are inseparable from discourse and representation (Schaefer 2019). This perspective aligns with Ahmed’s (2004, 23) account of how ‘words for feeling’ and ‘objects of feeling’ circulate, accumulate, and generate political effects. Affect thus facilitates the circulation of normative cultural logics and desirable practices (Matus 2015), enabling policy discourse to mobilise crisis, hope, and moral urgency (Mockler 2014; Sellar and Lingard 2018). As such, public sentiments may function as relatively stable regimes of meaning and affect (Slaby and Bens 2019), but their political significance lies in the fact that such sentiments can be intensified, redirected, or attached to particular ideals more attuned to policy objectives.

Zembylas (2023) concept of affective governmentality is particularly useful here because it extends affect theory by highlighting how governments produce affective investments in normative ideals and visions, construct affective relations between individuals and publics, and secure modes of self-governance within individuals and populations (cf. Sauer and Penz 2017). Affective governmentality draws together affect theory and Foucault’s (1997) notion of governmentality. The latter explains the governing of individuals and populations as the conduct of conduct, that is, as the exercise of power through ‘the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics’ (108). Bringing affect theory into conversation with Foucault’s (1997) governmentality allows for a more direct examination of the entanglements of affect and power (Zembylas 2022b).

Affect in political discourse

Our analysis takes, as a starting point, the exploration of political discourse problematising teachers and schools, which can be understood as both coordinative and communicative. Coordinative discourse refers to the shared cognitive and normative frameworks through which policymakers, experts, and stakeholders operate as epistemic

communities (Nordin 2014). Communicative discourse, by contrast, functions in the public domain, where political actors seek to legitimate policy by persuading citizens of its necessity and appropriateness (Schmidt 2008). In the context of teacher workforce policy, communicative discourse operates not only to propose solutions but also to restore public confidence by signalling that a government is responding effectively to crisis (Jäger 2001).

Yet this work of securing public confidence is not achieved through rational argument, evidence, or policy design alone. Our concern, therefore, is with how affect functions as a key modality through which the desired effects of policy discourse are achieved. From this perspective, affective governmentality provides a way of examining how policy discourse governs not only through rationalities, institutions, and techniques of communication and coordination, but also through the organisation of affect. This paper draws on this twinned analytic, which places affect and governmentality on equal footing, to analyse how the *Be That Teacher* campaign mobilises affective registers of joy, inspiration, pride, and moral purpose, attaching them to normative visions of teaching in ways that support particular policy objectives.

Operationally, affective governmentality directs analytical attention to the affectively charged words, images, narratives, and representations through which policy discourse renders normative ideas desirable, offers particular subject positions, and attaches feeling and value to particular visions of teaching.

Research approach

The research aims to answer the following question: How does the *Be That Teacher* campaign mobilise affect as a policy response to teacher recruitment and retention? We use methodologies drawn from critical policy analysis (Ball 1990) and Rizvi and Lingard's (2009, 5) notion of a policy text as any 'vehicle or medium for carrying and transmitting a policy message' and which is expressed within 'the framework of a border discourse that assumes authority' (12). Using this expansive conception of policy, we searched for, collected and analysed policy documents, media texts, and official communications related to the *Teacher Workforce Action Plan* and the *Be That Teacher* recruitment campaign. Drawn from internet searches, the analytical corpus comprises 17 core texts (see Figure 1) from January 2022 to December 2025, when the Action Plan and campaign were formed and enacted.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) texts in which action plan and campaign were discussed or presented with an emphasis of texts demonstrating the operation of an affective register; (2) the texts originating from Federal or state government sources, such as ministerial announcements or commentary in media; and (3) texts being publicly accessible through government websites or media sources. As the recruitment campaign website was decommissioned during this study, we accessed the archived website through the non-for-profit Internet Archive Wayback Machine (Internet Archive 2024). We do not include the stories told by teachers in the recruitment campaign to respect ethical boundaries around consent and to maintain focus on political rhetoric. Admittedly, this exclusion does, in effect, privilege state/political perspectives. All texts were dated, archived, and assigned unique identifiers.

Doc ID	Title / Description	Source / Author	Document Type	Date	URL
Government policy documents					
D1	The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan	Australian Government: Department of Education	Government policy document	2024	https://www.education.gov.au/national-teacher-workforce-action-plan
D2	Teacher Quality: Evidence Review	Australian Government: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade	Government policy document	2014	https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/evidence-review-teacher-quality.pdf
D3	Funding Recipient Guidelines 2011–2013	Australian Government: Quality Teacher Program / Dept of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations	Government policy document	2012	https://www.education.gov.au/download/1002/quality-teacher-program-funding-recipient-guidelines-2011-2013/706/document/pdf
D4	A Class Act: Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession — Chapter 4	Australian Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training	Parliamentary inquiry report	1998	https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_Employment_and_Workplace_Relations/Completed_inquiries/Pre1999/teachers/report/index
Ministerial press conferences					
D5	Press Conference – Sydney	Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio (Jason Clare)	Ministerial press conference transcript	July 2022	https://ministers.education.gov.au/clip/press-conference-sydney
D6	Press Conference – Launch of 'Be That Teacher' Advertising Campaign	Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio (Anthony Albanese, Jason Clare, Prue Car)	Ministerial press conference transcript	Oct 2023	https://ministers.education.gov.au/anthony-albanese/press-conference-launch-be-teacher-advertising-campaign
Media releases					
D7	National Campaign Launched to Encourage More Australians to 'Be That Teacher'	Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio (Jason Clare; Prue Car; Tony Buti)	Media release	Oct 2023	https://ministers.education.gov.au/clip/national-campaign-launched-encourage-more-australians-be-teacher
D8	Public Education Foundation	Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio (Jason Clare)	Media release	May 2024	https://ministers.education.gov.au/clip/public-education-foundation
D9	AI Pilot to Help Tackle WA Teacher Workloads	Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio (Jason Clare)	Media release	Aug 2024	https://ministers.education.gov.au/clip/ai-pilot-help-tackle-wa-teacher-workloads
Ministerial interviews					
D10	Interview – Sky News Afternoon Agenda	Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio (Jason Clare)	Ministerial media interview	2023	https://ministers.education.gov.au/clip/interview-sky-news-afternoon-agenda-3
Government and institutional websites					
D12	Considering a Teaching Career?	Australian Government: Department of Education	Government website	2025	https://www.education.gov.au/considering-teaching-career
D13	In Focus: Teacher Wellbeing and Career Intentions	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)	Government research report	2025	https://www.aitsl.edu.au/atwd/in-focus/teacher-wellbeing-and-career-intentions
D14	Teach NSW	New South Wales Government: Department of Education	Government website	2025	https://education.nsw.gov.au/teach-nsw
D15	Teach Queensland	Queensland Government: Department of Education	Government website	2025	https://teach.qld.gov.au/
D16	Be That Teacher campaign website (archived) — bethatteacher.gov.au *	Australian Government (accessed via Internet Archive / Wayback Machine)	Campaign website (archived)	2024	https://web.archive.org/web/20240629235343/https://www.bethatteacher.gov.au/
D17	Spotlight: Teaching — A Valued Profession	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)	Government research spotlight	2020	https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/spotlights/teaching-a-valued-profession

Figure 1. Text corpus.

Close and iterative readings of the texts were independently conducted in 2025 by three researchers (the authors of this paper). Framed by the above-mentioned theories of affect, the process involved ‘reading for affect’, which directed our attention towards affectively charged words, images, narratives, and representations. We recorded

instances where these affective mechanisms appeared to attach feeling and value, such as hope, inspiration, or care to particular policy ideals. We then identified patterns across the materials, including the use of crisis discourse, attribution of responsibility for problems, solution narratives, affective register through tone and appeals, and the discursive positioning of teachers, government and publics. Emerging patterns were then compared and discussed across the research team to refine the interpretation. An intertextual analysis then explored how key messages and rhetorical frames circulated and were amplified across the various texts and textual events. This enabled us to identify both the deliberate construction of narrative coherence across the policy apparatus and the distinctive deployments of affective appeals.

Analysis

Across the campaign materials and political rhetoric, our analysis identifies two interconnected dynamics through which affective governmentality operates. First, the campaign constructs teaching as a morally fulfilling and emotionally rewarding vocation through narratives of care, inspiration, and personal transformation. These affective appeals invite prospective teachers to invest in an ‘inspirational’ professional identity centred on purpose and making a difference, rather than the material conditions of the work.

Second, the campaign individualises responsibility for workforce sustainability by framing recruitment, retention, and wellbeing as matters of personal vocation and affective disposition rather than structural conditions. In this way, affective governmentality operates to align public feeling with policy priorities, rendering existing conditions politically tolerable.

Theme 1: constructing the inspirational teacher

The *Be That Teacher* campaign operationalises the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan’s objective of ‘boosting respect’ for and ‘elevating’ the teaching profession (Australian Government: Department of Education 2024, 3). Central to the Plan is the assumption that improving public perceptions of teachers can help address workforce shortages. To this end, the policy commits 10 million (AUD) dollars’ worth of federal funding to a national strategy designed to ‘celebrate the great work teachers do every day’ and encourage ministers and education stakeholders to publicly promote teachers’ social value (25). The campaign and accompanying ministerial rhetoric, therefore, position affective recognition and positive public sentiment as key instruments for responding to teacher attrition.

Putting this approach into practice, the key strategy of the *Be That Teacher* campaign is to recruit new teachers through emotionally resonant storytelling. The website (Internet Archive 2024) is designed with a header in the form of a question: ‘Who will you inspire?’ This is followed by the description:

Many of us have that one teacher we remember. The teacher who helped us to learn and grow, who gave us the confidence to explore and master new talents and skills. The teacher who encouraged us to strive for more and helped us reach our potential.

Be That Teacher is a joint Australian, state and territory government initiative which aims to showcase the value and importance of teachers and encourages Australians to consider a career in teaching.

Teachers across Australia share why they choose to teach and their inspirational stories about the lasting impact they have had on their students. (Internet Archive: www.bethatteacher.gov.au landing page, para. 1 2024)

Several tiles with ‘real’ teacher images and names from around Australia form the central design of the website, with the viewer able to ‘hear my story’ of each profiled teacher (Internet Archive: www.bethatteacher.gov.au landing page 2024). Hyperlinks are provided to both ‘watch’ and ‘read’ other ‘inspiring’ teacher videos and stories, followed by a call-to-action button encouraging other teachers to submit their own stories, because as the website states:

Teachers inspire, shape and guide future generations. Their work has a lasting impact beyond the classroom. We know there are thousands of teachers across the country with inspiring stories. (Internet Archive: www.bethatteacher.gov.au landing page, para. 2 2024)

The campaign takes the approach of highlighting stories of teachers inspiring students to succeed, love learning, find their purpose, and so on. We now examine the figure of the inspiring teacher through the editorialised framing of the stories on the website and how these affectively laden stories are amplified by political rhetoric.

The campaign is designed to generate affective responses and attachments to the mythos of the heroic and inspiring teacher. It does this by focusing the campaign on the figure of the ‘influential’ ‘*one* [emphasis added] teacher we remember’ (Internet Archive: www.bethatteacher.gov.au landing page, para. 1 2024). The campaign’s core messaging spotlights individual teachers’ achievements through brief, emotionally charged vignettes of transformative student encounters. Eight of these teacher stories are presented on the landing page, paired with objects and artifacts such as letters, certificates, clothing, drawings, and technologies that the teacher holds to the camera, displaying a material reminder of that student. The videos, downloadable posters, and written text aim to vividly illustrate that being a teacher creates the conditions to inspire young people, helping them learn and grow, find meaning and purpose in education, and to make a ‘lasting impact’ for ‘future generations’ (Internet Archive: www.bethatteacher.gov.au landing page, para. 1 2024). This approach, which appeals to and evokes culturally enduring and idealised images of the caring teacher and teaching, contrasts sharply with recent political and professional discourses that have emphasised, if not outright questioned teacher competence and quality (Mockler 2014). As we argue in the next section, the campaign recruits teachers by cultivating positive affects around the teacher and teaching.

Political rhetoric around the launch of the campaign, particularly from Education Minister Jason Clare, amplifies the campaign’s affective register, suggesting the minister understands the power of emotive narratives of individual teachers making a difference to move the public towards achieving policy outcomes. As the Minister stated when launching the *Be That Teacher* advertising campaign at a press conference:

These ads are going to win awards. I don’t want to kibosh them, but the first time I saw them, I don’t mind saying that I burst into tears, and if you haven’t seen them yet, get a box

of tissues. And can I thank the eight teachers that are the real heroes of these ads, six of whom are here today. Heroes without superpowers, ordinary people that do extraordinary things. This is no ordinary job. Being a teacher is the most important job in the world and we don't have enough of them. (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023c)

Minister Clare's evocative words and other public statements frequently celebrate the inspirational and influential work of teachers, as well as challenging negative stereotypes; for example, labelling the claim teachers only work 9 am–3 pm as 'rubbish' (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2024b). This is unlike the political rhetoric that stokes mistrust and anxieties about the competence of public school teachers through a discourse of derision (see Mockler 2014; Shine 2015). It appears that Clare's political goal is to amplify the campaign by sharing positive and affectively charged narratives to move public sentiment. His media statements demonstrate how affective governance operates by evoking positive feelings and sentiments about teachers (Shoshana 2021). For example, the trope of the 'hero' teacher is an important axis of the contemporary discourse, with Clare casting these public servants as 'extraordinary' individuals who achieve great things under difficult conditions.

Notably absent are appeals to the practical benefits of teaching, such as superannuation, or family-friendly holiday periods, as well as recognition of teaching as a collegial profession. Instead, its primary appeals are affectively charged: individual accomplishment, satisfaction in making a difference, and sentimental narratives of teachers finding purpose in inspiring young lives, lives they will be remembered for transforming.

Theme 2: responsibilising the individual, affective appeals, and structural displacements

Clare amplifies the affective register of the campaign through televised appearances on national news media. In a television interview with Sky News (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023a), the Minister admits again to being moved to tears by a teacher's story, thereby reinforcing the campaign's emphasis on the one passionate, life-changing teacher. Clare responds to the interviewer's description of a featured teacher's story who caringly supported a student with special needs. The interviewer prompts him with: 'You told people before you watch, you'd get a box of tissues ready. I can see why. They're tear jerkers, aren't they, Jason?' The Minister takes this cue, confirming being moved by the story, stating, 'I cried when I saw that ad, mate'. He continues:

Who wouldn't want to be that teacher in that moment that had that opportunity to have that experience with that little boy? It really is the most important job in the world, and we don't have enough teachers. That's just the truth of it.

These statements echo the *Be That Teacher* campaign framing outlined by the Minister at the national press conference; that is, that solutions to teacher attrition operate partly within the realm of affect. Phrases like 'I burst into tears' conjure and circulate affects of the passionate, inspiring teacher. The campaign and policy rhetoric transmit bodily sensations about teachers to showcase their individual excellence and profound impact.

Instead of rational arguments or facts to entice people into the profession, the Minister deploys sentimentality to foster affective investment in the individual inspirational teacher ideal. State and Territory education ministers also echo this affective dimension in their discourse, sharing personal stories that universalise the experience of teacher inspiration. These echo and redeem the campaign's carefully crafted messaging, also signalling bi-partisan and national agreement and legitimating targeted government responses.

Working together through positive affect-infused rhetoric, these policy actors circulate a normative cultural logic, namely the teacher who strives to inspire young people. For example, Minister Prue Car (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023b) evokes a certain educator of theirs, universalising her experience in support of the campaign: 'We all have *a* [emphasis added] teacher who changed the course of our lives for the better, and mine was my English teacher.' Minister Carr then promotes teaching as an 'admirable profession' where those who make it their 'vocation' can make 'a difference'. Meanwhile, Minister Dr Tony Buti (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023b) aligns his personal history with the profession: 'As a former teacher, I know how rewarding a career in education can be and how *a* [emphasis added] teacher can inspire the mind of a student.' Evoking progressive and enlightenment notions of education as the great social leveller, Minister Buti construes teachers as a 'central part' of education, a 'crucial steppingstone,' and 'the bridge that can change a person's life forever' so we must see 'their immense value and the critical role they play in our society.' Framing teaching as a 'visceral force' (Zembylas 2022b, 511) and teachers as 'central' to societal progress, the ministers cultivate public affective appreciation for the profession. Yet, even as they underscore teaching's affective power, their rhetoric reinforces the campaign's individualised, self-responsibilising frame, despite aims to elevate the collective status of teachers.

In this sense, we see how 'policy seeks to invoke certain affective dispositions at the point of enactment' as political authorities channel the public's attention and feelings into normative, sentimental meanings about teachers generally, whilst reinforcing positive and optimistic narratives of individual teachers (Zembylas 2022b, 512). As Minister Clare (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023b) states: 'this campaign is all about changing the way we as a country think about our teachers, and the way our teachers think our country thinks of them.' Although the word 'think' is used, the appeal here is not to rational thought but the affective force of certain ideas, akin to Massumi's (2011) notion of 'thinking-feeling' or the inseparability of cognition and bodily affectivity. The minister's support and messaging amplifies the campaign's goal of generating and shaping prospective teachers' affective investments in the ideal teacher (cf. Zembylas 2022b).

With Minister Clare urging the Australian public to be moved by 'that teacher' who 'inspires and changes young lives,' our analysis shows a concerted and strategic attempt to mobilise a politicised sentiment (Slaby and Bens 2019). Moreover, the public is urged to share in the glow of a positive and 'rewarding career' like the 'more than 300,000 teachers with stories' in Australia 'just like' those featured in the campaign (Ministers' Media Centre: Ministers of the Education Portfolio 2023b). However, although the campaign and rhetoric foreground the inspirational and impactful moments of teaching, these perpetuate the image of the singular heroic teacher and thus sidesteps the structural challenges impacting the profession and contributing to high teacher attrition. The

campaign thus directs public affect towards an idealised myth of teaching and, by elision, away from material and structural responses to the workforce crisis.

Discussion

In this paper, we examined how the *Be That Teacher* campaign mobilises affect as a policy response to teacher recruitment and retention. Our analysis identified two interconnected dynamics at play in the campaign and accompanying ministerial discourse. First, the campaign constructs teaching as emotionally rewarding and morally meaningful work through sentimental narratives of inspiration, care, and personal transformation. While this represents a more positive portrayal of teaching than prior deficit-oriented discourse, the campaign ultimately elides the problematic workplace conditions teachers face by focusing on the ‘one teacher’. Its logic is that each teacher should endure challenges via moral purpose in knowing they mattered to those in need. Yet, as we showed in the literature examining teacher’s working conditions within Australia, these challenges stem from the (re)organisation of teacher’s work, systemic and structural inequalities, persistent under-funding, and standardisation regimes that render education untenable, where teachers struggle to find hope, meaning, or purpose (Ball and Collet-Sabé 2022).

Second, these affective appeals further individualise responsibility for teacher workforce sustainability by framing recruitment, retention, and wellbeing as matters of personal vocation rather than as outcomes of the material and structural conditions of schooling. Operating in concert with the NTWAP, the campaign’s efforts to ‘conjure optimism’ (Sellar and Zipin 2019, 573) about teaching by foregrounding care, inspiration, passion, and positivity rooted in individual achievement, constitute what Berlant (2011) describes as a cruel kind of fantasy. The campaign, in which Clare declares among other things that teaching is the most important job in the world, offers a ‘fictive hope’ (Sellar and Zipin 2019, 579) to potential teachers, hiding the difficult realities of a demoralised and demanding profession. The analytic of affective governmentality illuminates how governments craft and circulate affective investments in policy responses to workforce crisis (e.g. the inspirational teacher), which marginalise structural interpretations of teachers’ work. The feelings mobilised through ministerial rhetoric are not merely personal expressions of a romanticised and heroic image of teaching, but politically productive, strategically shaping public sentiment, aligning collective perceptions with policy aims.

We argue that the *Be That Teacher* campaign marks a shift in Australian teacher discourse, from competency deficits and disciplining (Mockler 2014; Stacey 2017) to the ‘good’ or ‘inspirational’ teacher. While this latter figure evoked by the campaign aligns with contemporary education policy that has ‘reconstituted [teachers] as a self-entrepreneur who adds value’ to themselves and the school (Holloway and Brass 2017, 378), its positive affective turn signals new policy terrain in which affect is operationalised to shape teachers’ self-management practices (Zembylas 2022b).

As our analysis of Themes 1 and 2 demonstrates, the campaign activates what Slaby and Bens (2019) term ‘political affect’, enjoining viewers to feel, think, and act in certain ways. In doing so, the affective experience of teachers’ work circulates as a relation of

power (A. Phelan 2025), through which popular visions of teaching can serve governmental objectives (Zembylas 2022b, 512).

Affective governmentality stirs public attachments to objects, people, ideas, and in this case teaching's positive and fulfilling aspects. Unlike prior deficit framings of teachers (Ball 1990), the campaign's text, images, and videos serve as 'vehicles for feeling' (Ahmed 2004, 151), eliciting sentimental affective responses that bypass so-called rational deliberation but which 'may give rise to conscious sensation perceived as feelings' (Verweij et al. 2015, 7), like the warm feeling one may experience when Minister Buti speaks of teachers changing children's lives.

At a collective level, these affective relays are an extension of state power, materialising on the 'very surface of collective bodies' (Ahmed 2004, 46), reinforcing and shaping individual commitments and motivating collective action. However, the potency of these sentiments is rooted in their reliance on unrealistic images and affects of teaching. The campaign frames teaching through the image of the inspirational, self-sacrificing saviour teacher, a fabrication that serves as a standard for thought, affect, and practice (Britzman 2003, 30). These cultural images are 'super-human role models' (Weber and Mitchell 1995, 3) that position teachers in a realm apart from everyday reality, masking the emotional lives of teachers behind an idealised appearance (Britzman 2003). In this way, the campaign draws on a 'fantasmic' ideology (Clarke 2012, 304) that centres educational success on the figure of the distinctive excellent teacher, thereby downplaying the challenging structural and material conditions shaping teaching as a collective enterprise (Heffernan et al. 2022).

Conclusion & implications

This research challenges the capture of teachers' feelings through the mobilisation of affect as a political instrument. While the *Be That Teacher* campaign seeks to elevate the profession symbolically, it operates within a narrow affective register that stabilises a fantasmatic heroic image of teaching that remains structurally unattainable. From the perspective of affective governmentality, such recruitment strategies reorient the terms on which teacher dissatisfaction can be expressed by foregrounding individual admiration and emotional reward, thereby depoliticising teacher sentiment and collective action. These appeals frame teaching as a morally superior vocation, thereby displacing (or obfuscating) organisational injustices and in turn recasting teacher wellbeing as an individual disposition rather than a structurally mediated condition. Repoliticising teacher feeling, therefore, requires situating wellbeing within the broader political economy of schooling and recognising that professional care and morale is produced through institutional arrangements. It also requires resisting idealised constructions of the hyper-individualised heroic teacher which obscure the collective dimensions of professional life. Addressing recruitment and retention instead demands renewed attention to the material and relational conditions of teachers' work.

In this sense, the moral purpose of teaching should not rest solely on the inspirational capacities of individual educators, but on collective efforts to build equitable and adequately resourced schooling systems. Future research might therefore examine how alternative policy framings that foreground structural accountability rather than affective

celebration shape teacher identity, morale, and professional commitment over time. This includes how policy manoeuvres align with the wider discourse of teacher wellbeing that underscores a parallel policy response to teacher attrition (Wilkins et al. 2025). As argued elsewhere (Karnovsky and Gobby 2024; Karnovsky, Gobby, and O'Brien 2021), the mobilisation of the heroic teacher and the individualisation of wellbeing through wellness culture and positive psychology together reinforce the expectation teachers develop coping strategies for navigating the structural challenges of the profession.

This paper has argued that the coordinated policy response to the teacher recruitment and retention problem operates affectively, namely, producing a vision of the idealised, positively rendered teacher as life-changer, perpetuating the idea that teachers are central to students realising their dreams and potential. This policy response to teacher ill-being exploits hegemonic romanticised images of 'that one teacher', a form of governmentality focused on feeling, sense and sentimentality, which we argue works to forge attachments to idealised visions of teaching out of step with the realities of the profession in Australia.

Disclosure statement

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