

The Canberra Times

## FORUM

FEATURES  
OPINIONS  
ANALYSISINSIDE: Labor  
needs more  
strategic biteJACK  
WATERFORD

# How 2020 transformed teaching

Educators are reflecting on what they learned from the challenges of 2020, and how we can do things differently.

## ANALYSIS

Sarah Lansdown

WHEN the bell rang on the first day of school for 2020, teachers knew their classes would be a little different.

Children had just witnessed vast areas of Australia be burned in the fierce bushfires that had dragged on for months, bringing smoke to the capital for days on end.

Alfred Deakin High School English teacher Kerrie Trott said the fragility of students was evident.

"There was a vibe that people had kind of been a little unsettled and weren't necessarily as refreshed as they might have been at the start of a normal year," she said.

"People were more sensitive to the fact that everyone was going through something, whether it was directly affecting them or not ... 2020 was a different kind of start to the year I think. Obviously we could never have predicted how the rest of it would unfold."

The bushfires, smoke and freak hailstorm were only the beginning of challenges teachers would face in this very eventful year.

In late March, ACT teachers were forced to set aside their prepared lesson plans and rework their programs into a remote learning format.

As the school year winds up, teachers are reflecting on how this tumultuous year has changed their practices for the better.

### Opportunity to learn

Taylor Primary School Principal Belinda Fenn said it allowed the staff to look at everything they did with a new lens.

"It's made us reflect, look deeper into our practice and really ask questions like, 'what was the learning in this?'" she said.

Early research into the experiences of teachers in Australia and abroad suggests many other educators have been deeply considering their practice this year.

The *Teaching and Learning in COVID-19 Times* project was launched by Associate Professor Louise Phillips at James Cook University in Singapore and has so far surveyed 675 educators from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the US.

Dr Melissa Cain from the Australian Catholic University, who is part of the Australian research team, said the responses showed teachers cared very deeply about the students' learning but also their wellbeing.

Only two respondents said they would quit teaching altogether, while most responses indicated educators were more flexible and adaptable than they ever realised.

"The good news is that teachers were

really resilient," Dr Cain said.

"They cared very much about their students and wanting to keep up quality education. And so they looked everywhere, to their colleagues, to social media, Twitter, TED talks, anywhere they can find information about how to do this well."

### Work life balance

The survey also revealed teachers had an increased workload and many struggled to separate family and work life.

"It just blended in and they felt they were not good teachers and not good parents at the same time because they couldn't keep those separate," Dr Cain said.

Some teachers shared experiences of sitting in front of a computer for 12 hours a day and that some of their students had checked out of school work by 10am.

Mrs Trott had to find diversions for her busy two-year-old daughter for the times when she had to deliver her lessons.

"At the times where I needed to be with my students I tried to organise something else for my daughter or somewhere for her to be or ... tried to get her down for a really quick nap.

"It was definitely a juggling act. She did help mummy do quite a bit of work."

Mrs Fenn recognised the extra work that was involved with remote delivery and encouraged her staff to post no more than



Principal Belinda Fenn with year 2 teacher Kate Foster-Lomas at Taylor Primary School in Kambah. **Picture: Matt Loxton**

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two tasks per day.

"We really said two and that doesn't sound like a lot when you think we spent six hours here, but when you deliver it remotely, the time that it takes in between to prepare and provide feedback to 25 children, you need all those other hours in the day to do that and I know that."

### Technology takes over

In the key transition years of kindergarten and year 7, students had only just started forming friendship and learning their new school routine. They were then thrust into the world of Zoom, Google Classroom and Seesaw. "They felt quite isolated which was quite heartbreaking as well," Mrs Trott said. "A lot of them, because of the restrictions, they couldn't go out and connect with their friends."

She said it was difficult to develop a relationship with students through a screen and she was relieved to get back to face-to-face lessons.

Year 2 teacher at Taylor Primary School Kate Foster-Lomas set tasks for her students which encouraged them to get away from technology and explore their world.

She was very impressed by students' creativity when they were asked to create a collage of their special place off the back of the picture book *Where the Forest Meets the Sea*.

While it was difficult to replicate whole-class floor work, she was able to break students into smaller groups to do writing and reading workshops.

Rochelle Burton, chief executive of teacher professional development consultancy Eduinfluencers, said the rapid switch to online learning had some benefits among the 50 NSW and ACT schools she was working with.

"What I noticed in the transition back to face-to-face learning is that it really helped some of them adapt and change some of their teaching practice, to use more technology in the classroom but also just modify some of the ways in which they're engaging with certain students," she said.

Mrs Burton said teachers said differentiated learning was key during the period.

■ Continued Page 28