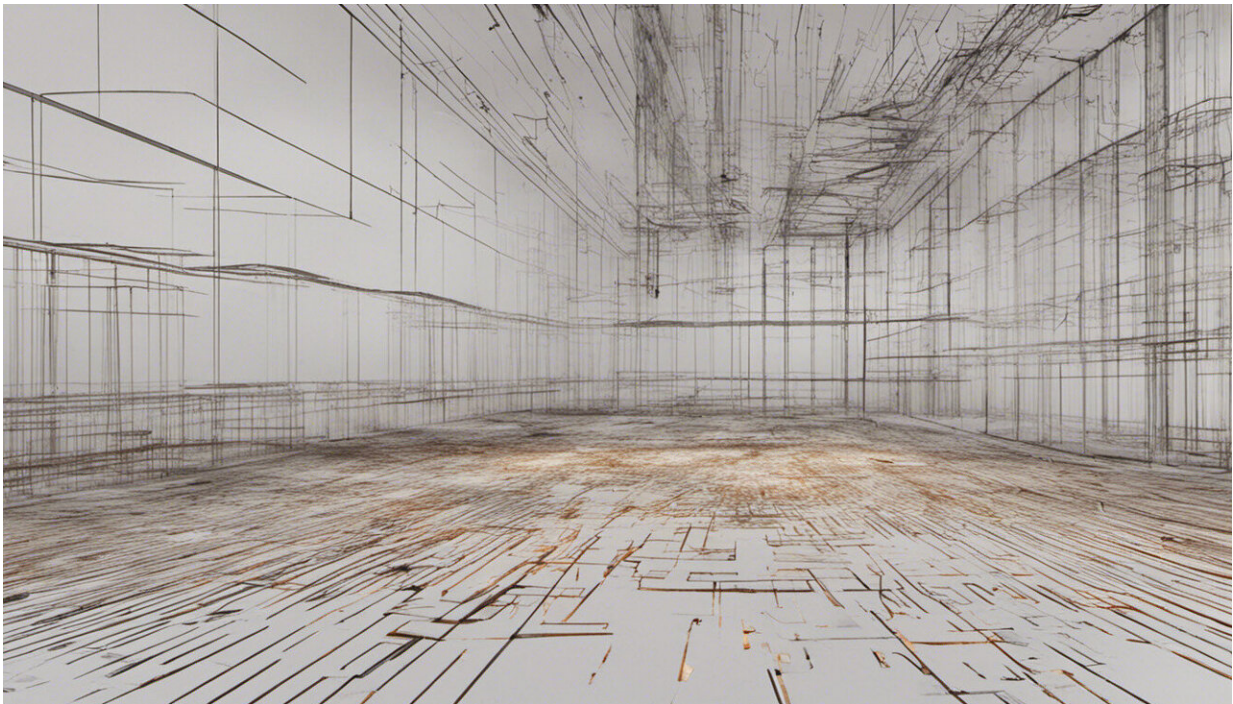


Precarious employment in education impacts workers, families and students

May 28 2019, by Michael Mindzak



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Recent announcements in Ontario about public education have been controversial, with changes including [larger classroom sizes, mandatory online courses and curriculum revisions](#). However, perhaps most significantly, the imposed changes will lead to the [loss of teaching positions](#) across the province.

With government priorities focused on educational austerity, schools will have to do more with less.

Often, within such discussions are highly politicized debates emerging over issues such as teacher compensation and working conditions. Some believe teachers to be an [extremely privileged group](#) in Ontario, afforded positions which include strong salaries, benefits, pensions and [vacation time](#). Others counter that teachers [work](#) in a profession with [long hours](#), extensive overtime and challenging classroom conditions.

Nevertheless, such arguments continue to miss the mark as they do not fully highlight the range of workers involved in [education](#). What remains obscured is the significant impact such changes will hold for education workers across the province.

[My own research into the issue of teacher unemployment and underemployment](#) in Ontario over the past decade revealed a concerning reality for many teachers. In fact, beneath the typical full-time, permanent model of the classroom teacher lies an enormous labour force of educators and education workers who largely function on the margins as precarious workers.

A more precarious reality

Precarious employment can be understood as forms of work which [deviate from what sociologists have defined as the "standard employment relationship."](#) Such a relationship is generally understood as one where a single employer provides full-time, year-round permanent employment and often includes benefits other than wages.

Precarious employment can include forms of temporary, [part-time](#) and contractual work, or jobs which do not provide a living wage as well as the state of being self-employed. Estimates place at least 30 to 40

percent of [all workers in Ontario](#) in [precarious employment](#) and increasingly include workers once thought of as [professional](#).

For [over a decade now](#), thousands of teachers across Ontario have existed within such an environment, with short-term, contractual and uncertain employment conditions being the norm rather than full-time, permanent positions. These jobs range widely —from receiving daily calls in the morning as an [occasional \(supply\) teacher](#), to [part-time contracts ranging from a few weeks or months at a time](#).

Indeed, the changing landscape of precarious education work has resulted in some teachers leaving their home countries to secure employment overseas.

While the data remain sparse, there are likely tens of thousands of such teachers across the province. Many new teachers can often expect to remain in such positions for five to 10 years [before finding full-time employment](#) in Ontario. Precarious employment can impact teachers in numerous ways, including scheduling uncertainty, multiple jobs, continuous job searching, income variability and unpaid work expectations.

Far beyond teachers

However, teachers are not the only group of education workers feeling the pinch today. Precarious forms of employment have become increasingly normalized across the education sector. In 2017, labour action by Ontario college instructors [highlighted the precarious nature of work](#) in the [post-secondary setting](#). In addition, there remain a plethora of insecure groups of workers in education which often include [educational assistants](#), [early childhood educators](#), [daycare workers](#) and [school bus drivers](#) who face precarious work daily and the challenges associated with it.

These are front-line workers who engage with students and children each day, ensuring not only students' learning but also their health, safety and well-being. To ignore that the conditions of their work impact the quality of education, and that the work they do with students inside and outside of the classroom is an integral part of school experience, remains problematic.

Models for future generations

The situation facing teachers in Ontario today reveals the [changing nature of work and the global trend](#) which has pushed more and more workers into precarity.

The experience of precarious work is not only economic, but rather personal, social and psychological—it impacts individuals as well as families and communities. All educators are [human beings, workers and taxpayers](#), and continued attacks on them will largely serve only to push effective teachers out of the system adversely impacting our students.

The recent political decisions in Ontario also reveal how the challenge of [teacher un\(der\)employment](#) is not simply a supply-side problem of "[too many teachers](#)." It is also largely a demand-side issue where policy decisions dictate both the number of teachers and educators within schools and the nature of their work. Such policy choices, made unilaterally and ideologically, serve to further alienate teachers from a profession which they often love. One only needs to look south of the border where [teacher shortages and attrition are the norm](#) largely due to poor working conditions.

The working conditions of teachers and educators should enable them to be models for students—who, let's hope, may themselves all thrive in the future with good jobs and decent work conditions.

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