

When teachers' voices are silenced

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Around half of teachers experience vocal fatigue at some point during their careers, sometimes to the extent of having to change profession. Although some countries are more seriously affected than others, the unions agree that there is an urgent need to increase awareness of the issue.

For Sophie Defour, teaching literature was a dream. And a personal triumph to boot. She is from a modest background, grew up in a popular area of Saint-Étienne (central-eastern France) and fell in love with literature in her first year of secondary school. Despite her good grades, her parents didn't encourage her to go to university: in their eyes, finding a job at the earliest opportunity was the way to go. But Sophie Defour stuck to her guns, insisted on going to uni and worked for seven years to finance her studies, passing her *Certificat d'Aptitude au Professorat de l'Enseignement du Second degré* (CAPES – teaching qualification) at the first attempt. 'I was very proud of what I'd achieved,' she remembers with a smile, 18 years after the event, in her apartment in Saint-Étienne.

Her celebrations were short-lived. Like many teachers in the early stages of their careers, she was posted to a difficult school in the Saint-Étienne area. She was there for seven years. 'It was an area of great social deprivation; many of the pupils spoke French

as a second language. One of them had burns on her feet because she used to ferry hot water to her house. I spent three years shouting to assert my authority, to no avail. Then, one fine day, I simply lost my voice,' she says.

A short rest changed nothing. It's 2010 and Sophie Defour, now 29 years old, still has no voice. She is soon diagnosed with stretched vocal cords. The injuries are significant. Although she ultimately regains her voice, her vocal cords will remain fragile for the rest of her life. The main tool of her job has been permanently damaged.

Around half of teachers affected

Like her, several million teachers in Europe experience voice-related issues. National-level scientific studies paint a similar picture across the continent. In France, the teaching union UNSA estimated in 2018 that around half of all teachers regularly experience voice-related problems. A

similar proportion was recorded in the Netherlands in 2006, in Italy in 2009, Spain in 2010 and Finland in 2017. In 2019, the French foundation MGEN suggested that 16% of teachers were unable to conduct lessons because of a voice-related issue during the school year. Vocal fatigue had already prompted a quarter of them to see a specialist. Teachers are two to three times more likely to experience voice problems than the general public.

'It's a significant public health challenge that's elevated by a number of risk factors,' says Angélique Remacle, a speech therapy researcher at the University of Liège, who conducted a study measuring the voice usage of around a hundred Belgian teachers in different types of school. 'The first issue is gender-based: women's vocal cords vibrate at twice the rate of men's, making them more vulnerable to vocal fatigue. This is a key point given that women teachers are over-represented in the earlier stages of education where teachers use their voices more.'



↑ Sophie Defour, a secondary school literature teacher, at home in Saint-Étienne on 31 January 2025. 'I spent three years shouting to assert my authority. Then, one fine day, I simply lost my voice.' Photo: © Théophile Simon

Around half of all teachers regularly experience voice-related problems.

In addition to allergies and acid reflux, which can affect the vocal cords, she notes two other key factors: the length of time the voice is used and the intensity of its use. 'A teacher may have learned to project his or her voice effectively, but speaking too loudly or for excessively long periods doesn't give it time to recover. This is particularly true in classes of young children where the ambient noise is often greater. The natural human reaction in a noisy environment is to raise your voice, making the problem worse,' she continues.

The consequences are not restricted to teacher wellbeing. 'Teachers' vocal problems have a negative impact on pupils' learning because they have to put more effort in to hear and understand a damaged voice,' points out Angélique Remacle. 'This is another argument in favour of doing more preventive work with teachers in the early stages of their careers and providing better support to those who already have vocal problems.'

Lack of support

Such preventive and supportive measures are still too few and far between. Sophie Defour can attest to this. Once her injuries were diagnosed, she felt abandoned on all sides. 'No one offered any solution. My superiors initially refused to change my timetable. My surgeon and colleagues advised me to change careers,' she remembers. 'But abandoning the job of my dreams was out of the question. I searched the internet for alternative ways forward, so that I could use my voice as little as possible. I came across the history of education and realised that the "bus-driver" style where the teacher is the only person steering the class is not the only model.'

'Flipped classroom teaching', very much in vogue in the Nordic countries, is of particular interest to her. In this method, pupils learn new content at home, discuss it in class and become active participants through various forms of engagement. Like the conductor of an orchestra, the teacher merely

guides the progress of group work. And thus puts less strain on the voice. ‘I’ve adopted flipped teaching with great success, supported by new technologies,’ she notes. ‘I could have carried on much longer with a lighter workload. But, after five years, management finally turned me down. The consequence? My injuries worsened.’

After more than 10 years fighting on her own, discouraged by soul-destroying red tape, Sophie Defour has now decided to abandon the vocation that she strove so hard to pursue. It’s a real rift for her. ‘I would like teachers affected by vocal fatigue to know that they are not alone; there are solutions, and they don’t have to throw in the towel. The establishment must provide better support,’ she concludes bitterly.

And yet the issue was identified long ago by *Éducation Nationale* (the French education authority). A hundred years ago, the education ministry cited vocal health as one of the prerequisites for becoming a teacher, and, since 2003, the voice has been classed as one of three occupational hazards for teachers alongside musculoskeletal and psychosocial disorders. ‘Things have fallen way short on the ground though. During their initial training, student teachers are given patchy instruction through modules on “body and voice” over 12 or 18 hours depending on the region. There are measures in place in terms of in-service training, but they are much too few and far between. The policy on prevention still falls short. We need a clear, uniform national programme on this issue,’ says Corinne Loie, the speech and language therapist with responsibility for prevention, who for 25 years has been working to improve awareness-raising measures across the country at MGEN – the organisation that provides social protection to public-sector education workers in France.

Women’s vocal cords vibrate at twice the rate of men’s, making them more vulnerable to vocal fatigue.



↑ In Germany and Austria, vocal fatigue is less of a concern, partly due to the smaller class size and the tendency to move away from the traditional classroom layout. Simple solutions, such as placing tennis balls on chair legs, help reduce noise and promote a healthier teaching environment. Photo: © Belga

‘It’s not an issue in Germany’

France is not alone in this area. On the other side of the English Channel, Wayne Bates of the NASUWT, one of the main teachers’ unions in the UK, responds to Corinne Loie. ‘There is no mechanism at national level during initial or in-service teacher training,’ he says with regret, speaking in Birmingham. ‘As a result, teachers are left to themselves and tend to link their concerns about their voices with students’ bad behaviour. And vocal fatigue is more than simply a discipline issue.’

Ireland is behind the curve as well. ‘I’m not aware of any public policy to protect teachers’ voices,’ notes David Duffy of the TUI union. ‘So, by the time a teacher approaches us for advice about vocal fatigue, it’s often too late. They’re on the point of giving up their careers to protect what’s left of their voices.’

In the absence of any public policy, the unions find themselves on the front line. The NASUWT and the TUI are using what means they have to organise training for young teachers at the start of their careers. In Portugal, the FNE union conducted two major national campaigns on the issue in 2014 and 2015 by hosting seminars in schools, distributing tens of thousands of leaflets and holding discussions. It then submitted a list of recommendations to government.

By contrast, in Germany and Austria, vocal fatigue is not really a reason for concern. ‘It’s not an issue in Germany,’ Maïke Finners, the Chair of the largest German teaching union the GEW, tells us. ‘I think there are two main reasons why. First, voice training is provided as a matter of course to young teachers during their initial training. And, second, classes in Germany do not follow the “bus-driver” format. Pupils work in small groups, and teachers are often supported by assistants who have responsibility for special needs children.’

Barbara Schweighofer from the Austrian union *GÖD-Lehrer* agrees. ‘The format of classes means that Austrian teachers do not have to talk all day long. Our concerns are more in relation to teachers’ hearing and mental health,’ she explains. ‘Having said that, it may be that we don’t get to hear about it as an issue because of associated taboos. Some teachers regard problems with their voices as shameful.’

From Dublin to Birmingham via Vienna, the unions agree on one point: vocal fatigue among teachers is something that isn’t talked about enough. ‘No one knows the real extent of the problem,’ David Duffy concludes. ‘It’s very difficult to mobilise and raise awareness of it as an issue. There is an urgent need to step up work to raise awareness among teachers.’ ●