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An evaluation of teacher stressors in an era of COVID-19: An initial analysis

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Abstract

School lockdowns prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic has required teachers to work in a climate of rapid and significant adaptation. In this paper, which is part of a larger study, we provide a summary of the effects the COVID-19 school lockdowns in 2020 had on teacher stress. The paper outlines firstly the specific teacher stressors that existed before 2020 as well as the additional stressors that became apparent during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, as identified in scholarly literature. Secondly, the paper provides a brief overview of the responses from teachers in the 48 schools within Adventist Schools Australia (ASA) to an online survey designed to explore their workplace stressors surrounding the school lockdowns in 2020. Overall, there was a general increase in workplace stress during the COVID-19 school lockdowns, but it was not to the degree that has been reported in previous literature.

Introduction

In their day-to-day work, school teachers experience many types and levels of stress. The sources of such stress are often referred to as stressors. The stressors that teachers in schools experience have

been well documented by a number of educational researchers and this research has been extensively reported in past literature. Teachers report feeling pressure about issues related to student engagement, classroom management, job security, workload and technology, to name a few. When these pressures are left unchecked, or grow to levels that cause teachers to feel overwhelmed, a reduction in teachers' physical and mental health may occur. Additionally, their career choices can be impacted, causing many teachers to leave the teaching profession. Consequently, the availability of teaching staff can be impeded. Studies of teacher stressors have the potential to identify areas of greatest stress and mitigate some of these negative consequences.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, previously identified stressors have extended to include the multiple challenges associated with closing physical school campuses and the implications of these closures for teaching school-aged students in online contexts. Although the worldwide pandemic has been with us for more than a year, research into the impact of the pandemic on teachers in schools is in its infancy. To augment the already documented stressors that beset teachers and their work in schools, this study investigated school teachers' perceptions of the workplace stressors they have encountered since the COVID-19 pandemic. During the study, teachers within the Adventist Schools Australia organisation reported on how well their

schools' identified and managed workplace stressors associated with COVID-19. Teachers' perspectives were sought on the period when schools were in lockdown (when face-to-face teaching ceased) and the period when face-to-face teaching resumed. Teachers' perspectives of the future of their schools are also reported, especially in terms of the ongoing implications of how their school responded to the changes and restrictions imposed on their work due to COVID-19.

Background

The background literature used in this study is reported in two distinct stages. The first provides a summary of studies which report teacher stressors in and outside the classroom prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to identify the nature of these stressors, the second stage of the literature review outlined the additional stressors placed on teachers since the pandemic, including the stressors experienced during the school lockdowns in 2020.

The stressors of teachers most frequently reported in literature prior to the COVID-19 pandemic are summarised in Table 1. Other reported stressors include: pressure from governments and political pressure (Sabin, 2015); poor school leadership (Meyer, Macmillan, & Northfield, 2009); community pressure (Clement, 2017); poor teacher wellbeing (Bower & Carroll, 2017); lack of supervisor support (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011); and poor working conditions (Alhija, 2015). Often, teachers experience multiple stressors simultaneously. For example, Hanif, Tariq, and Nadeem (2011) report issues with salaries, teacher status in society, school environments, and demographic issues such as teacher age or gender. Richards (2012) found a different set of teacher stressors, including accountability, lack of parental support, overloaded classrooms, lack of control over decisions that impact them or their students, little time to relax, assessment pressure, and generally not feeling valued. The stressors identified by Clement (2017) illustrated another type of teacher stress that she believes are causes for concern for the whole community. These practical day-to-day concerns included teacher work/life balance, constantly changing curriculum, job longevity, the classroom environment, the large preparation load and the wide range of student needs.

While it was expected that teaching would become more difficult during the school lockdowns in 2020, and that general uneasiness would prevail with students and teachers and their families during this time, a whole new series of issues that impact teacher roles was identified in the literature. For example, Zhang et al. (2020) found student issues that would normally be present were heightened

during periods of school lockdown. These included student stress, behaviour and mood, as well as dealing with those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The ability of teachers to deal with maintaining student learning, and equality of assessment performance and marking, were also problems identified by teachers (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

The mental health of teachers and students was of major concern during school lockdowns (Lee, 2020). These mental health concerns were related to all students, but especially for students with pre-existing mental health conditions. For many such students, school is the place where they access their mental health support in terms of peer support groups and face-to-face sessions with counsellors or other support staff. These students often benefit from having regular routines and the stability of a fixed program. Helping not just these, but all students, learn using an online platform is a challenging task for teachers especially when dynamics in the home are upset and previous issues are heightened. For example, students are more likely to experience

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Table 1: *The top six teacher stressors prior to the COVID19 pandemic, as identified by the number of studies reporting each stressor*

Stressor	No.	Key references
Classroom management issues/ discipline	10	Aldrup, Klusmann, Lütke, Göllner, & Trautwein (2018) Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2017) Ferguson, Mang, & Frost (2017)
Workload	8	Alhija (2015) Spilt, Koomen & Thijs (2011) Hanif, Tariq & Nadeem (2011)
Managing relationships with colleagues and administrators	6	Clement (2017) Mackenzie (2007) Pang (2012)
Time	4	Sabin (2015) Richards (2012) Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2017)
Facilities / Resources	4	Sabin (2015) Richards (2012) Center & Steventon (2001)
Teaching unmotivated students	4	Richards (2012) Alhija (2015) Center & Steventon (2001)

“students are more likely to experience domestic violence during school lockdowns ... having too few computers or workspaces or... parents not having the ability to pay school fees ... widening the [SES] learning gap”

domestic violence during school lockdowns (Cluver et al., 2020). Other issues include families in lower socio-economic areas having too few computers or workspaces for all the family to use or, according to Nicola et al. (2020), parents not having the ability to pay school fees when unemployed. This can result in widening of the learning gap between households with high and low incomes (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Some teachers have also struggled with changed management of their teaching practices during COVID-19 (Viner et al., 2020) and have reported fears around what would be different for them after their school re-opened and whether changes would be permanent or ongoing (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020).

This paper briefly overviews the first part of a study which investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workplace stressors of teachers in the 48 member schools of Adventist Schools Australia (ASA). Specifically, this study compared teachers' self-reported levels of stress before, during, and after the school lockdowns in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

during the school lockdowns in 2020, in order to identify the nature of these stressors. Both stages of this literature review considered global research on the understanding that, though different countries experienced the pandemic in different ways, the types of stress created by lockdowns in schools was similar across different countries and cultures.

The second stage of the study involved consultation with school leaders in ASA schools to help design a second survey of YES/NO teacher responses to more extensively explore areas of teacher stress. Table 2 provides a summary of the research questions being addressed in this stage of the study along with the type of literature and survey used to answer these questions.

The target population for the two stages of the survey was the cohort of approximately 1200 teachers in the 48 ASA schools across Australia. The National Director for ASA, who requested and sponsored the study, requested on behalf of the researchers that all teachers should be invited to participate in the surveys. After responses were filtered (i.e., removal of responses from teachers that were not teaching at

Table 2: Summary of instruments used to answer the research questions

Research Question	Type of Survey	Source of Survey Items
How do ASA teachers perceive their stressors relative to the researched pre-COVID teacher stressors, and how did these stressors change from before COVID-19, during the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020 and after the COVID-19 school lockdown?	Four-point Likert-style survey where participants rate their stress levels (i.e. none, mild, major, or extreme) on each of 26 potential stressors a total of three times (i.e. before, during and after the COVID-19 school lockdown). Participants were also invited to write an extended comment at the end of the survey.	Derived from identified teacher stressors in and outside the classroom prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
What was the impact of COVID-19 on ASA teachers and students relative to literature-researched impacts?	Twelve YES/NO items with participants invited to write extended responses to explain their reasoning for each item.	Derived from identified additional stressors placed on teachers since the pandemic.

Methodology

The first phase of this study was a comprehensive literature review, conducted in two stages. During the first stage of the literature review, teacher stressors were identified inside and outside the classroom prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. A list was made of these stressors and this list was used to construct a first survey which used a series of Likert-style items for participants to rate their stress against each identified stressor on a four point scale before, during, and after the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020. The second stage of the literature review examined additional stressors placed on teachers since the pandemic, including those experienced

ASA schools before the pandemic etc.), there were 356 (30% of the target population) and 317 (26% of the target population) responses to Part 1 and Part 2 of the survey, respectively. The quantitative and qualitative data provided in the survey responses were analysed and cross-correlated, then these responses from the ASA teacher cohort were compared to other teachers as reported in the literature.

This project is currently in its final phase where questions identified from the responses to the two surveys are being pursued in more depth using representative focus groups from a sample of the schools surveyed. The results of this final phase of the study will be reported in a further publication.

Results

The quantitative data gathered from the first survey provided interesting insights into the self-reported levels of stress experienced by teachers before, during, and after the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020. Across the 26 potential stressors that participants reported on, an average of 92% of teachers experienced ‘no’ to ‘mild’ stress prior to the pandemic, with only 8% reporting ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress. Of all stressors, workload caused the highest level of stress prior to the pandemic with 23% of teachers reporting this as a ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress.

Stress levels increased during the school lockdowns with, on average, 33% of teachers reporting ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress across the 26 potential stressors, with workload remaining the greatest stressor at 69% of participants reporting ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress, followed by time management (60%). Other stressors that over one-third of teachers reported as causing ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress during the lockdowns were: facilities and resources; pressure from parents and community (including church); directives from government bodies; negative emotional state; general wellbeing; teaching unmotivated students; exposure to frequent

changes; differentiated abilities in the classroom; class administration requirements; changed school environment; and changing curriculum requirements.

Stress levels decreased when schools reopened, but these remained higher than prior to the pandemic with 19% of teachers reporting ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress, on average, across the 26 potential stressors. Only workload (44%) and time management (35%) were reported by more than 30% of teachers as causing ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress after the school lockdowns. Potential stressors that were reported as providing ‘no’ or ‘little’ stress at the start of the pandemic for over 80% of teachers, and remained this way during and after the school lockdowns, were: lack of supportive supervisor or team; interactions with colleagues; interactions with school leadership; status in society; having my opinions heard; and employment security.

An inductive thematic analysis of the comments offered by the teachers in their survey responses revealed a number of issues that were observed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 3 outlines the major themes that emerged from this analysis, along with some illustrative quotations from participants’ comments.

“Stress levels decreased when schools reopened, but these remained higher than prior to the pandemic with 19% of teachers reporting ‘major’ or ‘extreme’ stress [cf. 8%]”

Table 3: *Thematic map of major issues revealed from the qualitative responses in the first survey*

Major Theme	Slant ¹	Illustrative quotations from participants
Views of leadership (school administration) A child labourer	Positive	‘Overall, our school and leadership team handled teaching and learning as well as the daily running of the school activities in a professional, calm, cool and collected manner that helped everyone remain focused and give their best by trusting in God, abiding by regulations while demonstrating flexibility, and mixing requirements with well-being.’
	Negative	‘I felt that our school admin team didn’t know how to lead ... a very reactionary style of leadership rather than being proactive and left many staff feeling undervalued and unappreciated. This in turn had a big impact on staff morale and well-being.’
Online learning/ technology	Positive	‘As a team, I feel as though we transitioned into online/remote learning fluently.’
	Negative	‘Online learning wasn’t that effective, students were not that engaged as in Face-Face teaching, low morale and reduced work ethics.’
Workload	Positive	‘This was to ease the stress put on the students and their parents, but I found that it allowed us time to put together quality online lessons and keep up with marking and providing students with feedback.’
	Negative	‘Covid lockdown created double the workload for the same pay. So glad it’s over!’
Support	Positive	‘The school admin staff have been very supportive during Covid which has made it less stressful.’
	Negative	‘My ongoing and biggest stress is the amount of high needs students and lack of support staff that are employed by the school to give them small group assistance.’

Note: While half of these comments in Table 3 are positively slanted and half are negatively slanted, this proportional allotment of qualitative data in this table is not intended to represent the actual proportional allotment of comments offered, as participants offered more positive comments than negative.

In addition to these major themes, the subsidiary themes that were revealed through this analysis indicated teachers also noticed changes that occurred in their teaching community (including teachers and students), communication methods, emotions and stress, engagement in learning, and their views of God. When describing how they believed the COVID-19 school lockdown in 2020 would influence the future, the teachers in the study mainly commented on issues related to time, and the lack of it, for example, “Not enough time in the day to fix the issues”. Others were concerned about how students would be able to catch up on their learning, for example, “Unfortunately, many of my students did not engage at all with the online lessons, meaning that there were many gaps in their learning when we returned to school”.

Discussion

While the results of this study revealed a number of COVID-19 related stressors that were encountered by teachers, including stressors that teachers observed students and their parents dealing with, the teachers’ perspectives represented in the survey responses were largely more positive than those reported in recent literature about the impact of COVID-19 on schools, teachers, students and learning (Bailey & Schurz, 2020; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020; Cluver et al., 2020; Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020; Viner et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). For example, unlike the struggles experienced by many teachers with changing management practices within the school (Viner et al., 2020) and teachers fears associated with changes within schools (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020), the results of this study (especially in the quantitative data) did not indicate that teachers experienced undue high levels of stress during the periods of school lockdowns or afterwards. While many stressors were identified by teachers, these were not nearly as extreme as those reported in other studies. Instead, the teachers in this study were particularly appreciative of their school’s leaders and managers; this result is not evident in recent literature about COVID-19 effects on schools.

Some of the teacher stressors identified in the literature before COVID-19 included pressure from government sources and perceived stress related to political issues (Sabin, 2015). However, apart from the stressors identified by teachers about government health-related guidelines, this study’s participants did not focus on stressors external to their school. The primary type of stressors mentioned by the teacher-participants in this study were associated with teachers’ concerns about internal school issues such as workload, the use of technology and the support

teachers received from their colleagues and school leaders. This emphasis on inward-looking stressors rather than stressors emanating from external sources reported elsewhere, for example by Hanif, Tariq and Nadeem (2011) and Clement (2017), may be due to the intense nature of the changes that were enacted at the school-based level. That is, teachers may have felt the need to concentrate their efforts on the crucial task of teaching their students using new and online methods and this intense focus, along with a concerted effort to engage in urgent professional learning activities, may have diverted their attention away from external stressors.

Some of the issues reported preCOVID-19 by researchers, such as Hanif, Tariq and Nadeem (2011) and Clement (2017), included teacher concerns about salaries, community pressure and teacher status in society. While some of these concerns were also recognised by the teachers in our study, these stressors tended to be mentioned in minor terms and were outnumbered by stressors about student-centred and learning-focused issues such as online learning, engaging students and gaps in student learning. Although some of the stressors reported by the teachers in this study were different in nature to some of the stressors reported in the literature prior to COVID-19, some of the stressors reported in this study were similar to previous studies that cited concerns about teacher workload, the changing curriculum, teacher preparation and students’ varied needs (Clement, 2017). Similarly, many of the issues reported by teachers in other schools about the impact of COVID-19 were also mentioned by the teachers in our study. For instance, some teachers found that the additional pressures on teachers and students during COVID-19 magnified pre-existing problems as also found by Zhang et al. (2020), and that students mental health was a source of worry for teachers Lee (2020). The quality of student learning and assessment practices were noted by teachers in our study, echoing the concerns outlined by other researchers (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020).

As findings from educational research studies continue to be published about the impacts of COVID-19 on teachers, schools and students, our understanding of the restrictions and challenges of this pandemic will be extended. Alongside this growing awareness, no doubt some key lessons will be learned about the importance of humanising learning processes (in both online and face-to-face contexts) and the value of students’ and teachers’ wellbeing. For example, just last year, a principal from an Adventist school in New Zealand wrote an article in this journal titled *Rethinking Learning in Lockdown* (Hurlow, 2020). He reminded us of the role of relationships in learning and predicted that

“
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“this notion will be at the forefront of our thinking and planning as schools open once again, ensuring to the best of our ability that our students are feeling positive and confident about their learning so their education flourishes” (p. 5).

Additional issues reported in the literature since the onset of the COVID-19 era will be discussed in future articles about this project.

Limitations and future research directions

This study purposefully sought the perspectives of teachers in the Adventist Schools Australia organisation. A more varied range of perspectives could have been gathered about how COVID-19, and its associated school lockdowns and restrictions, created stressors for teachers across a range of school systems. To supplement the teachers' perspectives, it would be interesting to investigate the perceptions of students, administration school staff (e.g., principals), parents and community members about the effect COVID-19 has had on schools, students and teachers.

The study outlined in this article could be replicated within other school systems or it could be replicated a year or so later in the same school system to determine long term and/or widespread effects on schools as a result of COVID-19. Future iterations of this study may also be conducted to further investigate aspects of some of the results of this study. For example, the quality of student learning may be investigated longitudinally to determine the longterm impact of the virtual teaching and learning used during school lockdowns on student learning outcomes and satisfaction levels.

Conclusion

Several notable findings have been identified in this study thus far, which began with considering the basic common stressors detailed in the literature review conducted in the early phase of the study and then analysing them through the lens of the experiences Adventist Schools Australia teachers had before, during, and after the COVID-19 physical school lockdowns in 2020. The comparison between the teacher stressors identified in our literature review and the stressors revealed in the results of our survey shows that, although the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 did cause an overall increase in stress, the general tone of teachers' responses was positive. One example of this is in how teachers expressed appreciation for the way their school's management handled the unique circumstances. The relationships teaching staff have with other staff, as well as parents and students, is also another area which held relatively low impact with regards to causing teacher stress, even with the added pressures of the

COVID-19 lockdowns.

Some findings from this first phase of our study were consistent with previous research, notably, that workload and time management were the major stressors for teachers before, during and after the COVID-19 school lockdowns. Also, while stress levels have decreased since the lockdowns ended, they remain higher than before lockdowns began, suggesting more work in this space is needed to mitigate the impact. Other workplace stressors identified in this study, including support and wellbeing levels, changing communication methods, bridging learning gaps, re-motivating students, managing both a lack of time and an expanded workload in the future, and a need to be recognized by school managers. This will facilitate the formation of strategic responses that aim to reduce workplace stress experienced by teachers as they adjust their teaching practices during, and after, the COVID-19 pandemic. **TEACH**

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