



TEACHER WELLBEING AND COVID-19

*CSI Response for Teachers
and Schools*

Author

Dr Meera Varadharajan

Contact

Meera Varadharajan. | m.varadharajan@unsw.edu.au



Teachers play an important and influential role in the lives of their students, and in many cases, their families, and the community. Their duties and responsibilities extend far beyond meeting learning outcomes, to caring for the social and emotional needs of their students. But who's looking out for our teachers? The health and safety of teachers and their families must be a priority as they try and balance the different demands at work and home. Our fact sheet explores the importance of:

RECOGNITION | ACKNOWLEDGEMENT | SUPPORT

The current pandemic has shifted our ways of teaching and learning like never before. Education disruptions has meant that schools are having to continuously adapt and adjust based on current medical advice like shifting to remote learning, preparing staff, students and parents for remote teaching, keeping schools open for some students, then moving back to face to face learning when it was ready to do so after easing of lockdown restrictions and then again having to close schools temporarily as a result of sporadic outbreaks among the school community.

Schools in Victoria are particularly facing further challenges with the second wave of outbreaks, forcing schools to shift to full remote learning for the second time. While schools and staff have shown determination, skill, innovation and adaptability in dealing with the evolving changes, COVID-19 is testing their resilience, inner strength and coping mechanisms.

Schools are complex institutions, with many people coming together to achieve common outcomes of education and student well-being. Major disruptions to teaching and learning, such as what we are experiencing now, are not just challenging by itself, but has widespread ramifications to mental and physical health, education, and economy. Disruptions pose an even greater challenge for schools that are disadvantaged, and the current pandemic has exposed the widespread inequalities in education^{1,2}. Research shows that nearly half of the national student population are affected because of COVID-19 in one way or the other, either due to perpetuation of existing inequities or with new issues¹.

Children and young people who belong to vulnerable groups, such as those who live in poverty, in stressful family conditions, who have special learning needs, who live in remote communities or who otherwise lack access to basic material, social and emotional needs are doubly disadvantaged by the pandemic. As well, a whole new paradigm of 'futures uncertainty' has been created for *all* young people, in the light of disruptions to their learning and schooling, with implications for what lies ahead beyond schooling. There has been a sharp jump in the number of students seeking help to cope with anxiety and stress³. The concerns for young people's state of mental health and well-being is real and concerning.

Teachers' roles

Teachers' play an important and influential role in the lives of their students, and in many cases, their families, and the community. Their duties and responsibilities extend far beyond meeting learning outcomes, to caring for the social and emotional needs of their students. COVID-19 has shed light on the important role that teachers play in supporting students' learning and well-being.

Adapting to new and sometimes, uncertain situations and events, is not an uncommon feature in the lives of teachers, like dealing with unexpected student behaviour, teaching classes with different student levels and abilities and making adjustments to timetables and lesson plans as a result of curriculum changes⁴. In fact, their role requires adaptability on a regular basis to navigate the demands of their everyday work in schools and classrooms.

During the recent bush fire crisis, we have even seen teachers responding adaptively to become ‘educarers’, providing empathy, stability and security to students when they were feeling anxious and uncertain about the future of their families and loved ones.

As educators, a high level of multi-tasking is usually part of the routine, and multiple hats are worn in schools and in classrooms, for example, as teacher, advisor, mentor, administrator, lesson planner, classroom manager, support worker to name a few⁶. Teaching is both a rewarding as well as an extremely challenging profession. Teachers’ roles have increasingly become complex, requiring them to work with a diverse student population, an ever-crowded curriculum using limited resources, dealing with parents and community, and still be expected to provide quality learning opportunities for students. In the absence of ongoing training, mentoring and other support mechanisms, high workload levels combined with stressful conditions in classrooms are known to result in emotional exhaustion, burn-out, ultimately leading to teacher attrition from the profession^{6,7}.

Why is teacher well-being important?

Even though teachers are used to new and uncertain situations, the pandemic has thrown a whole set of complex and unexpected challenges. Actions, based on medical advice, are needed to be swiftly understood and interpreted, appropriately implemented, and suitably communicated to students and their families. Learning methods and tools need modification, while adapting to students’ individual needs and circumstances as best as possible. In the face of uncertainty around the pandemic, flexibility and the ability to shift between learning modes, with provision of appropriate support to students is key, but this is by no means an easy task. Remote working has substantially increased teachers’ workload, with a recent study indicating that some teachers were working an extra 20 hours per week⁸. Those who teach in low socio-economic or disadvantaged schools face additional barriers, having to perform their roles with less support and less resources, consequently compounding the existing challenges and inequities facing these school systems². Reduced opportunities for teachers to collaborate and work with colleagues is shown to impact their performance and commitment to the profession⁹.

The health and safety of teachers and their families is also a priority as they try and balance the different demands at work and home. Teachers are supporting their students, while also managing their own physical health, stress, anxiety, and supporting their family’s needs.

In addition to this, because women disproportionately represent the teaching profession, they are worse off during the pandemic due to the nature of their work as described above as well as having to be the primary carer of their families, including caring for their children’s health and educational needs. Being a woman **and** being a teacher during the pandemic has been a double whammy. Teachers’ mental health and well-being can truly be tested, with far reaching implications both for themselves and for those under their care.

In Australia, the well-being of teachers is often a neglected area, with little research and policy examining this issue. There is a lack of advocacy and there is no accredited peak body that focuses on providing information and guidelines for supporting the health and well-being of teachers in schools. Often teachers lean on their peers and experienced colleagues to talk about these issues to try and support each other. During the current crisis, though there has been some research conducted on students’ well-being, there has been no tracking of data to see how teachers are generally faring during the current crisis and whether they are being adequately heard and supported. A survey of more than 3000 teachers across Australia and Zealand indicated that teachers from low SES schools are very concerned about the level and adequacy of support available for their students as well as their level of preparation to cope with the move to online learning². For instance, they are four times more likely to be worried about their students’ lack of access to technology and two times more concerned about the lack of support from family members, as compared to students from high SES schools. These trends show teachers’ emotional

health and anxiety levels are higher in least advantaged schools. This is worrying given teachers' key role in supporting the well-being of students from vulnerable backgrounds, including preventing or ameliorating the potential long-term effects of COVID-19. Teachers' mental health is strongly associated with the academic and social success of their students⁹.

Teachers' mental health can no longer be ignored, and we need to do much better to prioritize the wellness of teachers.

Strategies to consider:

1. Encourage school colleagues and senior executive to collaboratively develop and design a teacher well-being plan including stress-management techniques.
2. Generate support from senior executive and leadership staff to recognise and acknowledge challenges and ongoing hurdles.
3. Explore online modules on well-being and resilience strategies^{10,11,12} that are endorsed by accredited education authorities.
4. Apply adaptability and adjustment skills to current and future scenarios that maybe unfolding as a result of the pandemic.
5. Where available, enlisting the support of school psychologists and counsellors who have complementary and specialist skills, to communicate their feelings.
6. Recognise and accept uncertainty and what is achievable within the current situation.
7. Being part of or establishing supportive network of colleagues and friends within local community. Online teacher support groups can be useful to help gain a shared understanding of the causes of stress and suggestions to overcome them.
8. Wider community appreciation and valuing of teachers' professional roles to student contribution.

Teachers make up a crucial component of the social fabric of our society. Our concern for schools and students during COVID-19 should also extend to teachers and their families. Failure to recognise and provide suitable support might leave some teachers vulnerable and unable to cope with their professional and personal demands, severely impacting their mental and physical health. Some might even be forced to re-consider leaving teaching, resulting in not just a huge loss to the profession and to students they teach, but will add to the current economic burden facing our society.

References

1. Brown, N., Te Riele, K., Shelley, B. & Woodroffe, J. (2020). Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians. Independent Rapid Response Report. Hobart: University of Tasmania, Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment.
2. Flack, C. B., Walker, L., Bickerstaff, A., & Margetts, C. (2020). *Socioeconomic disparities in Australian schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Melbourne, Australia: Pivot Professional Learning.
3. Education Review (2020). Jump in number of students signing up to anxiety programs since Pandemic, July 23, 2020. <https://www.educationreview.com.au/2020/07/jump-in-number-of-students-signing-up-for-anxiety-program-since-pandemic/>
4. Collie, R. J., & Martin, A. J. (2016). Adaptability: An important capacity for effective teachers. *Educational Practice and Theory*, 38(1), 27-39.
5. Education Review (2020). How teachers become 'educarers' in national emergencies, January 15 2020. <https://www.educationreview.com.au/2020/01/how-teachers-become-educarers-in-national-emergencies/>
6. Pillay, H., Goddard, R., & Wilss, L. (2005). Well-Being, Burnout and Competence : Implications for Teachers.. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 30(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2005v30n2.3>
7. Kipps-Vaughan, D., Ponsart, T. & Gilligan, T. 2012, 'Teacher Wellness: Too Stressed for Stress Management?', *Communique*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 4-1.
8. Ziebell, N., Acquaro, D., Pearn, C., & Seah, W.T. (2020). Australian Education Survey: Examining the impact of Covid-19. A report summary. Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne.
9. Green, J.F., & Bettini, E. (2020). Addressing Teacher Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Teachers College Record, July 31, 2020. <https://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=23395>
10. Education Services Australia. Principal and Teacher Wellbeing. <https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/professional-learning-courses/principal-and-teacher-wellbeing/>
11. Building Resilience in Teacher Education. <https://www.brite.edu.au/>
12. Teacher Wellbeing. <https://www.teacher-wellbeing.com.au/>