
Research Brief

Teacher wellbeing: Protective and risk factors for Australian teacher stress¹

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Overview

Stress is a part of life. It is a healthy reaction to the demands of work and life. However, exposure to too much stress for a prolonged period of time can damage teacher self-esteem, wellbeing, and teaching practices. For example, Australian teachers who retired from teaching as a result of stress are more self-critical than teachers still teaching (Bernard, 2016). In Australia, work-related stress claims in the education sector are second only to the health sector (Safe Work Australia, 2013).

Ramifications of teacher stress go beyond their individual problems. Who teachers are and what they do in the classroom matter for student learning and outcomes (Hattie, 2009). Stressed teachers tend to treat their students with little empathy and use more reactive instructional strategies, such as threats and punishments (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008; Pillay, Goddard, & Wilss, 2005). Up to one third of Australian teachers and between 40 and 50% of North American teachers leave their profession in their first five years (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Gallop, 2014). Public school teacher turnover in the US costs more than \$7 billion per year (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007). Whilst stress is not the sole factor leading to teacher attrition, it does play a critical role in teachers' decision to leave their profession.

These individual, organisational and societal ramifications of teacher stress highlight the need for providing support for stress management (Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016). This brief reports the findings of a mixed methods design study (Title: Teacher Wellbeing: A Key to School and Community Success) conducted at 21 public schools in Queensland and New South Wales².

This Research Brief, Teacher wellbeing: Protective and risk factors for Australian teacher stress, investigates the relationship between psychological, physical, relational and occupational aspects of teacher wellbeing. It highlights risk factors for teacher stress as well as protective factors and the resources that can be utilised by teachers in times of stress. This will be followed by Research Brief, Teacher wellbeing: Mindfulness-based intervention for teachers, which reports the effects of a mindfulness-intervention on teacher wellbeing, along with its implications for teaching and learning.



¹ This Research Brief refers to the work in Hwang, Y.-S., Medvedev, O. N., Krägeloh, C., Hand, K., Noh, J.-E., & Singh, N. N. (2019). The role of dispositional mindfulness and self-compassion in educator stress. *Mindfulness*, 10(8), 1692-1702. Detailed information about statistical analyses and findings can be found in this article.

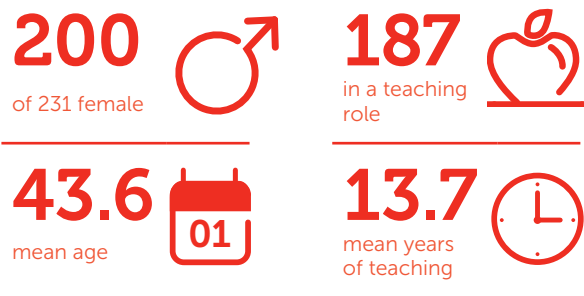
² This research is supported by a medical research grant awarded by Teachers Health Foundation.

Research Brief: Protective and risk factors for Australian teacher stress

Research Sample

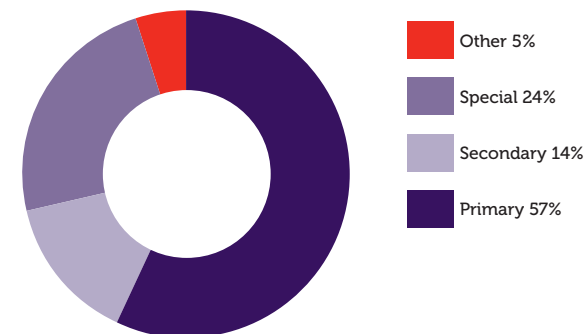
Who

Of the 231 participating teachers, 200 were female, 176 were in a relationship and 187 were working in a teaching role. The remaining teachers' roles included paraprofessionals and (deputy) principals. Their age ranged between 18 and 70 years (mean = 43.6 years) and years of teaching ranged from less than one year to 45 years (mean = 13.70 years).



Where

The participating teachers were from 12 schools in Queensland and 9 schools in New South Wales. Of the 21 public schools, 12 were primary schools, 5 were special schools, 3 were secondary schools and 1 school provided primary and secondary education.



How long

Full time teachers in primary, secondary, and special school settings reported average weekly working hours of 51.95, 50.97, and 42.56, respectively.



What

The participating teachers completed online surveys. Survey questions concerned perceived stress, uncontrolled and emotional eating behaviour, sleep quality, student-teacher relationship, relationships with a close partner, job satisfaction, mindfulness and self-compassion (Figure 1). The survey data were analysed to understand inter-relationships among wellbeing domains and protective and risk factors of teacher stress.

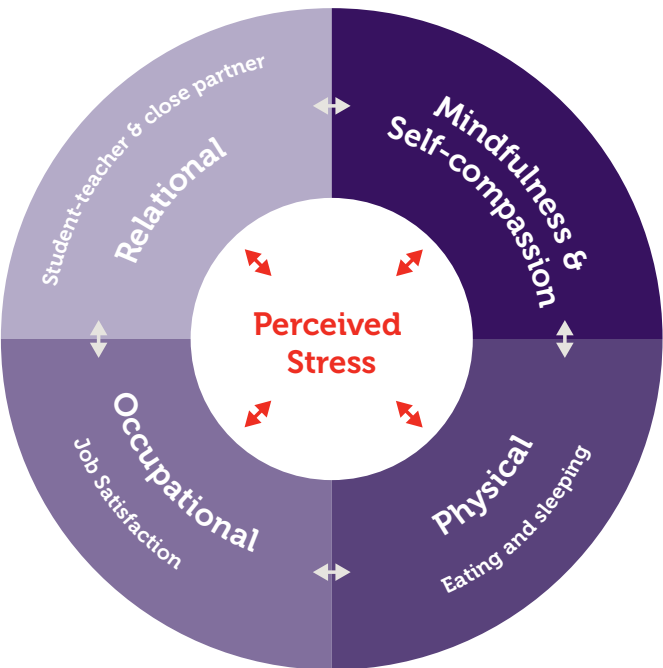


Figure 1. Domains of teacher wellbeing investigated in this study



Inter-related domains of wellbeing

For the participating teachers, both mindfulness and self-compassion were linked to almost all domains of wellbeing. Teachers with greater mindfulness and self-compassion showed lower levels of perceived stress. They also showed lower levels of conflict with students, avoidance and anxiety in their relationship with a close partner, emotional and uncontrolled eating behaviour and sleep problems.

Teacher stress was linked to relational strain experienced at work and home. Teachers with higher levels of perceived stress showed higher levels of conflict with students, and anxiety and avoidance experienced in the relationship with a close partner. Having positive relationships with students however was associated with lower levels of perceived stress. Relational constrain at work and home were also linked. Anxiety and avoidance experienced in the relationship with a close partner were associated with higher levels of conflict with students as well as lower levels of positive relationships with students. Teachers with higher levels of perceived stress also showed poor sleep quality and uncontrolled and emotional eating behaviour that denote teacher physical wellbeing.

Protective factors for teacher stress

Age, job satisfaction, self-compassion and mindfulness were protective factors for teacher perceived stress (Figure 2). Being older and having high job satisfaction predicted lower levels of perceived stress. Experiencing higher levels of mindfulness and self-compassion and having positive relationships with students also predicted lower levels of perceived stress. Of these protective factors, self-compassion was the strongest predictor of lower teacher stress, followed by mindfulness, age and job satisfaction. This indicates being self-compassionate and mindful, getting older and having higher levels of job satisfaction can protect teachers from stress.

Risk factors for teacher stress

Poor sleep quality, conflict in the relationship with students and anxiety in the relationship with a close partner were risk factors for perceived stress (Figure 3). Gender, career stages (e.g., early career) and school settings (e.g., primary, secondary) did not make significant effects on predicting teacher stress. Notably, all significant protective factors explained over 50% of variance in perceived stress, whereas all significant risk factors explained only an additional 8%. This result can be interpreted as indicating that the capacities of these protective factors are much stronger than the capacities of risk factors.

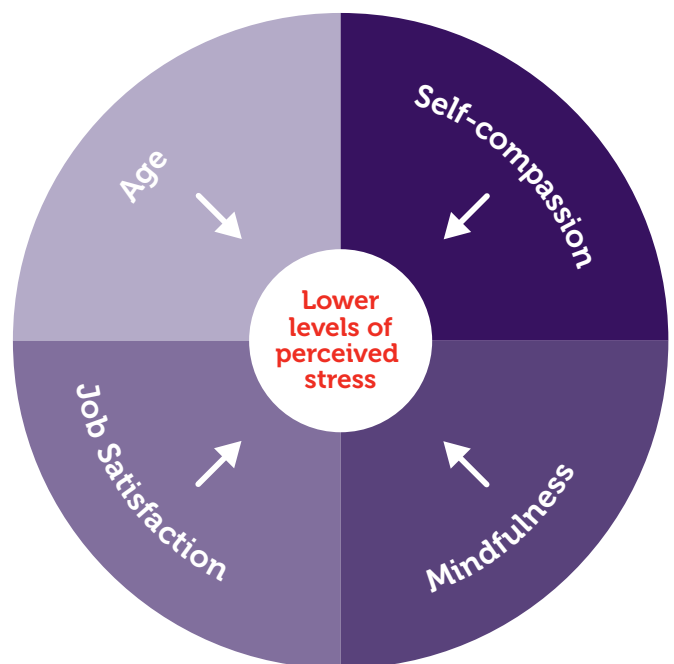


Figure 2. Protective factors for perceived stress in teachers.

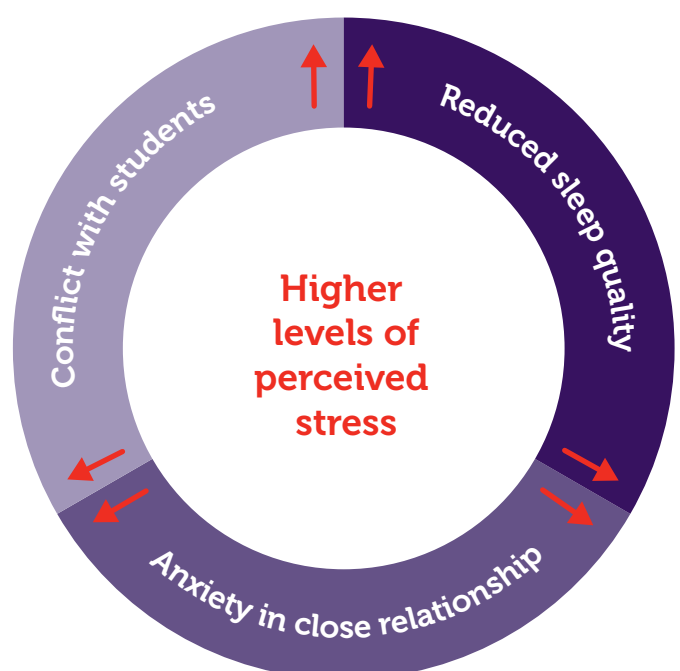


Figure 3. Risk factors for perceived stress in teachers.

Implications for teacher wellbeing

The findings with 231 Australian teachers highlight the inter-related nature of wellbeing domains and the role of mindfulness and self-compassion in addressing compromised teacher wellbeing. Perceived stress is linked to almost all domains of compromised wellbeing under study. They include eating and sleeping problems, relational problems with students and a close partner and job dissatisfaction. International research suggests that teachers experience a greater impact of work stress at home than that of home stress at work (Cinamon, Rich, & Westman, 2007; Thomas, Clarke, & Lavery, 2003). Dealing with student behaviour and parents is particularly responsible for negative effects of work stress on home stress (Cinamon et al., 2007).

Australian teachers in this study also showed a statistically significant correlation between conflict with students at work and anxiety in relationship with their close partner at home. According to an Australian study involving 5,247 school principals who were formerly teachers, over 80% reported a close partner as the greatest source of social support to deal with stress at school (Riley, 2017). However, teachers who lose their work engagement because of difficult interaction with their students are less likely to invest in the relationship with their close partner, and this in turn influences their partner's mental health (Bakker, Petrou, & Tsaousis, 2012). Teacher stress can jeopardise support they need to meet their work demands.

Implications of this study for teachers include the development of protective factors for perceived stress and the reduction of risk factors. Some factors, such as age, obviously cannot be altered, while others can. As protective factors for perceived stress, mindfulness and self-compassion can be learned and practised by teachers for stress management. However, it is important to note that teacher stressors include societal issues, such as changes in education policy and test-based accountability (Ryan et al., 2017), which require a systematic approach to address them. Learning and practising mindfulness and self-compassion is only one of many possible approaches that can protect teachers from stress.

Building on this understanding the next brief presents the effects of a mindfulness-based intervention for teachers on their wellbeing. It also addresses some implications of teacher wellbeing for teaching and learning, and introduces what mindfulness and self-compassion are and how they can be practised.

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