

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES FINAL REPORT TO TEACHERS HEALTH FOUNDATION

Building teacher and school capacity to cope with
trauma impacts on children

March 2019



The Jack Brockhoff
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STRENGTHENING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES – SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The Strengthening School Communities study confirmed experiential evidence from previous disasters about the nature and extent of post disaster impacts on teachers and school communities after the Black Saturday bushfires, providing insights into future strategies to support the role of teachers in the recovery period.

This study consisted of several components using mixed methods to develop new knowledge and approaches. Firstly, an analysis of state-wide NAPLAN data demonstrated the extended impacts of the Black Saturday bushfires on the academic progress of primary school children in affected schools.

These findings about the post disaster impacts on student learning endorsed the associated qualitative findings about the changed demands on teachers in a post disaster environment. Schools are responsible for the academic and social progress of students as well as their health and wellbeing. Post disaster, a shift was required towards an increased emphasis on the wellbeing aspects of development whilst still maintaining high academic standards. Additionally, the boundaries of staff responsibilities for providing care extended from the students to include families as well, as the schools became community hubs for recovery in devastated communities.

Teachers' experiences of direct personal trauma arising from the disaster exposure and/or vicarious trauma experienced through supporting children and families, placed teachers at risk of reduced mental health and wellbeing. And yet, teachers tended to prioritise student and family needs above their own self-care.

The findings relating to teacher support needs were used to identify opportunities to upgrade the existing online program - Skills for Psychological Recovery – Teachers (SPRT). Due to changes in the online learning platform being used by the Department of Education and Training it was not possible to make direct modifications to the online program or implement wide scale trialling. However, an additional module addressing self-care strategies was developed and different delivery modes were piloted in a primary and a secondary school to provide guidance for future practice.

The current emphasis in a post disaster environment is on children's return to school as soon as possible to re-establish routines in a familiar and safe environment. However, rapid return to school for students may overlook teacher need for initial support and capacity building. The findings from this study suggest that an adjusted approach is required for future disaster events that includes an intensive support program for teachers prior to students' return following a disaster, and adjustments to affected schools' staffing and administrative requirements, as detailed in the study recommendations.

The Strengthening School Communities study has already had substantial impacts but not in the ways that were originally anticipated.

The analysis of academic impacts for students attending bushfire affected schools was conducted to increase understanding of changed student learning needs to inform the upgrade of the SPRT. However, this research made such an important contribution to the international evidence base that it was published in one of the leading children's health journals, attracted international media coverage and more importantly, directly influenced Victorian State Government policy and programs. The release of the findings coincided with the 10year anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires and contributed evidence to a decision to invest \$1million in State Government funding for additional programs to support student mental health, wellbeing and learning, and to support teacher mental health, wellbeing and professional capacity within the government education sector. State government found the research evidence about student academic impacts so useful that an additional \$200,000 was invested in further research about longer term academic impacts. This means that the Teacher Health Foundation grant of \$250,000 contributed to the release of an additional \$1.2million of state government funding to support positive outcomes for teachers and students at schools affected by disaster.

The original focus of the study was on the Skills for Psychological Recovery – Teachers (SPRT) online program, with a plan to upgrade, pilot test and disseminate the program widely as a means for teacher and school preparation for managing disaster and collective trauma impacts. This was hampered by departmental changes in IT support and their online platform. However, our research reshaped understanding of the contribution of SPRT anyway. It emerged the full program is no longer widely required because related teacher training is now available through programs addressing student mental health and resilience. The aspects in SPRT that were perceived as still offering something new related to experiences of mass trauma and to teacher self care and these are most relevant to teachers in the aftermath of a disaster event rather than as a preparatory tool.

The research findings also highlighted the changed demands and stressors affecting teachers in the aftermath of a disaster which can be difficult to address in a system focussed on student needs, including rapid return to school. This was discussed at great length with the expert advisory committee and as a result a series of study recommendations were developed to inform decision makers in the government, education, health and union sectors across Australia to ensure teacher health and support needs are met in the context of disasters – not just for their benefit but also to ensure they are able to meet their duty of care for their students.

The following recommendations for future practice draw on the collective findings from the Strengthening School Communities study and provide a proposal for best practice following a natural disaster or mass trauma event. These are not exclusive of other needs and related supports that students, teachers and parents may require including timelines, offline programmes and support, and flexibility in delivery and reporting. The term 'educational settings' is used to signify a range of potential settings including preschools, primary schools, secondary schools and tertiary education settings:

1. It is recommended that all staff in disaster affected educational settings be provided with an intensive support program delivered locally before students return which includes:
 - Establishment of a supportive workplace culture which offers 1) a sense of safety, (2) calming, (3) self- and community efficacy, (4) social connectedness, and (4) hope (based on Hobfoll et al's 5 essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention [1])
 - Key principles for supporting students who have experienced trauma, grief or loss
 - Guide to the unique impacts of place-based disaster compared to individual or family exposure to crisis events
 - Self-care strategies for teachers, principals and other staff in educational settings.
2. It is recommended that the intensive disaster response program offered to staff in educational settings be informed by some of the content from the original online Skills for Psychological Recovery - Teachers (SPRT) program.
3. It is recommended that the intensive professional staff support program is revisited and extended for all affected educational staff at key intervals (e.g. 1 month, 3 months, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years, 5 years) to address emerging issues and support staff capacity over time.
4. It is recommended that regular wellbeing checks, potentially conducted by the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), be offered to all school staff impacted by disasters as a way of destigmatising help seeking.
5. It is recommended that additional teaching and support staff and/or volunteers be seconded (or invited out of retirement) to educational settings as needed in the years following the disaster event to help meet the extra administrative, social, emotional and learning demands.
6. It is recommended that departmental administrative requirements and timelines are adjusted for disaster affected educational settings to acknowledge the additional demands on staff.
7. It is recommended that research be conducted to assess the feasibility, outcomes and impacts of this adjusted approach for staff involved in supporting disaster recovery in educational communities.
8. It is recommended that research be conducted to explore the different issues experienced by staff in different types of educational setting affected by disasters.

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BACKGROUND

Major disasters are collectively experienced events causing widespread destruction and human suffering and undermining the capacity of systems and services to respond and adapt [2]. The subsequent experiences of loss and social disruption can cause additional mental health and wellbeing problems for years afterwards [3-5]. The important role of education and schooling in supporting children and young people post-disaster is well recognised. However, schools often experience welfare demands that exceed their capacity and expertise [6]. This Strengthening School Communities study focused attention on the needs of teachers in preparing for and dealing with the impact of a natural disaster (or other form of collective trauma) on the school community, drawing on the experiences of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, Australia.

The 2009 fires in rural Victoria occurred in a period of extended drought and extreme weather conditions. Fires spread across the State in January and February of 2009 with the worst occurring on Saturday 7 February, hence the fires are now commonly referred to as the Black Saturday bushfires. The fires burned 400,000 hectares of landscape, resulting in widespread destruction and the loss of 173 lives including 35 children and young people [7]. Over 2,000 homes were destroyed, three schools and at least three pre-schools were completely destroyed, with alternative temporary structures used for up to two years. Over 70 schools and childcare settings in high impact areas were highly affected through building and student exposure, resulting in family, school and community level disruption for years after the event [8].

Following the Black Saturday bushfires, the Victorian Department of Education and Training and Phoenix Australia: Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (previously named the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health) adapted an international program Skills for Psychological Recovery to develop the online Skills for Psychological Recovery Teacher program (SPRT) (Trethowan and Nursey 2012). The original Skills for Psychological Recovery Program (Berkowitz et al 2010) was developed to assist the recovery of community members impacted by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in the United States. SPRT was specifically adapted to build the capacity of teachers to: 1) recognise signs of trauma in students, 2) deliver resilience promoting class activities for Australian children and youth from Kindergarten to Year 12, and 3) manage their own trauma responses. It was released in 2012, three years after the bushfires but had limited promotion and uptake, likely due to the time that had elapsed post-disaster and the staff changes within the Department that resulted in it no longer having a champion to drive its implementation and uptake.

AIM

The aim of the Strengthening School Communities study was to build teacher and school capacity to cope with disasters and other forms of collective trauma impacting the school community.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was conducted using a socioecological framework [9, 10] which recognises that teacher mental health, wellbeing and resilience is influenced by a wide range of interacting factors. The focus in this study was on the influence of student health and wellbeing, the school community, the local social and physical environment, and departmental policies on teacher health and wellbeing.

STUDY DESIGN

The study used multiple methods to achieve its aim including:

1. A quantitative analysis of existing data from children in Victorian primary schools affected by bushfires to guide teachers in relation to post trauma student impacts.
2. A workforce assessment of teachers' and other educational stakeholders' attitudes and beliefs about the relevance and value of training in disaster preparedness and trauma support, and identification of facilitators and barriers to widespread implementation of the SPRT program.
3. An upgrade of the existing online Skills for Psychological Recovery – Teachers program (SPRT)
4. Implementation and assessment of the SPRT

RESEARCH RESULTS

The **quantitative analysis** of state-wide academic data demonstrated reduced progress in reading for children attending high bushfire impact schools and in numeracy for children attending high and medium bushfire impact schools compared to their peers (see Appendix A for full details of the methods and findings). The release of these findings coincided with the 10 year anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires, providing highly influential evidence to inform state government action in providing additional support to bushfire affected schools – see project outcomes below.

Additional internal analyses of state-wide data from the School Entrant Health Questionnaire (SEHQ) identified that the individual children at most risk of poor academic outcomes four years after the bushfires were those with parent-reported speech and language difficulties and/or behavioural difficulties at school entry (one year prior to the bushfires).

The **workforce assessment** highlighted the changing nature of expectations placed upon schools and teachers in the aftermath of a large-scale event such as a natural disaster, and the self-care needs of teachers working within this setting (see Appendix B for full details of the methods and findings about teacher support needs). It showed that school staff may experience the impact of the disaster in both their personal and professional lives as they continue to work within a school and with students exposed to the same event. The impact of such a disaster event has ongoing repercussions for children's capacity to learn, their development, and their emotional processing and wellbeing, adding further complexity to teachers' role in the post-trauma setting. This tended to shift the traditional boundaries of the school, expanding classroom focus to a greater emphasis on student wellbeing and placing additional demands and expectations upon school staff such as providing support to parents experiencing post

disaster trauma and disruption. As a result of these cumulative stressors and the prioritisation of student wellbeing, school staff may not be able to exercise the self-care necessary to maintain their own physical and mental health.

Additional practical insights gained from the workforce assessments provided guidance in relation to preferred content and delivery formats for future implementation of the SPRT. This included the need for increased information about teacher self-care strategies, the importance of having supported group sessions in addition to self-directed online training and the potential role of Student Support Service Officers (SSSOs)¹ as facilitators of teacher engagement with SPRT. There were also suggestions that the program interface was becoming dated and would benefit from more engaging materials and interactive activities for trainees to consolidate learning. It was noted that the program provided important knowledge about the impact of trauma on children's behaviour and capacity to learn. While there was some debate about whether the theoretical aspects were necessary for teachers it was ultimately recognised that this provides a deeper understanding of trauma symptoms and behaviours. The program was valued because it had a solid evidence base and provided useable skills, whereas it was felt that a lot of existing practice is based on anecdotal evidence. It was noted that school commitment to the program was necessary for any benefits to be achieved, as staff would need to apply their learning and classroom activities for the knowledge to be retained.

An **upgrade of the SPRT** interface was considered but was not possible - initially due to changes in the Department of Education and Training IT support arrangements, and subsequently due to their shift to a new online learning platform. In the interim, a separate offline module was developed as part of the Strengthening School Communities study, offering an enhanced package of self-care strategies for teachers that could be delivered alongside the online SPRT program.

Piloting of the adjusted SPRT was conducted in one primary and one secondary school to gain insights into the experience of SPRT implementation with the additional module and adjusted delivery mode (see Appendix C for details of methods and findings). In summary, schools found it difficult to set aside time to do the program but teachers that did do SPRT found it highly relevant. Having the flexibility to complete the online training individually at one's own pace was valued by all interviewees, but so was the opportunity to share ideas and impressions with colleagues at different points throughout the training. Teachers reported that there was some degree of overlap with other programs or initiatives they were involved in, however they noted that many of their school's staff members are not involved

¹ Student support services in Victoria assist children and young people faced with learning barriers to achieve their educational and developmental potential. They provide strategies and specialised support at individual, group, school and area levels.

in this other training and may therefore stand to benefit even more from SPRT. Teachers also pointed out that SPRT differed from other training they had received in its focus on disasters and on talking to children about their emotions. It was noted that classroom activities that rely too much on writing are less engaging for students and less inclusive for those who struggle with writing – more engaging formats and more group work were recommended. Students generally found the activities enjoyable and helpful, with some attributing changes in their thoughts and behaviours and those of their classmates to SPRT, even a short time after participating in the program. Many secondary students were not available for review at the end of the program because it was delivered so close to the end of the school year.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

The final project outcomes are reported below against the original proposed project outcomes (shown in italics):

1. *The research will result in improved knowledge and understanding of the longitudinal impact of trauma on children and the implications this has for teachers and schools.*

Important new findings about the impacts of the Black Saturday bushfires on subsequent academic progress in primary school were identified in the analyses of Victorian data from the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). These findings were published in leading international journal *Child Development*² (see Appendix A). It directly resulted in government investment of \$1 million in 2018-2019 for additional academic and social and emotional support programs for teachers and students in schools with high bushfire impact, and an additional \$200,000 for extension of the University of Melbourne research to follow the academic progress of the same cohort of children across secondary school. This will reveal if the learning issues extended into secondary school over time, providing guidance about where and when supports are required for teachers and school communities.

The associated findings about *predictive* risk factors for individual children's learning outcomes post disaster have been shared with the Department of Education and Training and are being prepared for publication.

² *Child Development* is ranked the top international journal for Social Sciences/Social Work and ranked 4th internationally out of over 300 Child Health journals.

2. *Resources will be reviewed, updated and developed to assist teachers and schools in dealing with trauma.*

The workforce assessment research findings have been prepared as a draft publication providing insights into the demands on teachers following a disaster (see Appendix B). These findings have been shared by Professor Lisa Gibbs in presentations for Victorian Department of Education and Training staff, and at state and national seminars for the Disaster Resilient Australia-New Zealand School Education Network (DRANZSEN), and in planning meetings for the suite of programs to be offered to schools as part of the \$1 million investment in additional support programs (noted above). The results have also been shared in a meeting with the Australian Education Union Victoria with an opportunity to have further discussions about how best to share the findings with union members.

The SPRT was reviewed and updated to assist teachers and schools to deal with staff and student trauma following an emergency event. The pilot assessment demonstrated it was well received and provided further insights into the program to improve delivery. The online platform supporting this program has now been replaced by an alternate learning platform by the Department of Education and Training. This means SPRT will need to be re-programmed to fit the new online platform. It was not possible to do this in time for the roll-out mentioned above of additional support programs for disaster affected schools, so the existing online SPRT program was circulated by the Department as a recommended resource for Student Support Service Officers. The Department and the teachers involved in the pilot have noted that there are now alternate teacher professional programs offering related content in terms of child mental health, but not in the context of disasters. Discussions are progressing to determine future applications of the SPRT (see recommendations for this study).

3. *Professional development will be available for teachers and Student Support Service Officers (SSSOs) to enable implementation of an evidence-based disaster preparedness and resilience program within the school community.*

The SPRT was made available to schools and SSSOs in regions with high disaster risk. Current high demands on school staff reduced their capacity to participate in a pilot. There were indications it is likely to be of greatest interest and relevance to schools in the period following an emergency event.

An unanticipated positive outcome of this study was that the publication of the findings about student academic impacts contributed to the investment of \$1.2 million in additional mental health support and professional development programs for teachers and students in 2019 and for further research. The support programs on offer included:

- Emotional Literacy through Visual Arts (ELVA) – teacher training in use of visual arts to increase the emotional literacy of staff and students
- University of Melbourne Network of Schools (UMNOS) – collaborate with schools on issues of shared interest and benefit from online professional learning modules in addition to workshops, online collaboration and learning community, events and showcases
- Feuerstein Method – teacher training in a cognitive skills development program that uses instruments and mediation to improve cognitive functioning.
- Getting Ready in Numeracy (GRIN) - GRIN is a strategy developed by Monash University for supporting students who have fallen behind in the learning of mathematics. The GRIN Intervention Program is a professional learning program for mathematics teachers and tutors.
- Additional mental health support programs
- Community partnership grants.

A total of 37 schools applied for access to these programs. All but one of the schools are participating in 2 or more of the programs offered.

In addition, regional staff of the Department of Education and Training were sent a suite of suggestions for building capability in SSSOs in their support of teachers following a critical incident affecting the school community. This included access to SPRT.

4. *The research and program implementation will influence government and school policy regarding disaster preparedness and resilience.*

We have engaged closely with the Department of Education and Training, DRANZSEN³, Victorian and NSW school staff on our advisory committee, and Teachers Health Foundation throughout the study to inform ongoing decision making about appropriate support for teachers and school communities after disasters and emergency events.

This study and our recent paper in *Child Development* about the impacts of disasters on child academic progress were referred to by the Victorian Minister for Education, Mr James Merlino, as part of a reflection on the 10 year anniversary of the Black Saturday bushfires - as noted in the **Parliament of Victoria Legislative Assembly Daily Hansard Wednesday 6 February 2019**, providing the context for the government investment in additional support programs for school and in research to further understand and respond to disaster impacts for school communities.

³ Disaster Resilient Australia-New Zealand School Education Network

The media coverage of the findings also contributed to public debate the impacts of disasters on school communities. It included interviews for ABC 774 and ABC Radio National, ABC Online, BBC, New York Times, Australian GP Magazine, Online Science news outlets and Leader papers.

CONCLUSIONS

The Strengthening School Communities study aimed to build teacher and school capacity to cope with disasters and other forms of collective trauma impacting school communities. It employed mixed methods for the different components of the study to contribute new knowledge and insights including identification of reduced academic progress in primary school students in bushfire affected areas, changed expectations and demands on teachers, and clarity about learning and support needs. Changes in the Department of Education and Training IT support arrangements and online learning platform made it necessary to adjust the planned approach for trialling the SPRT. The broader focus on mental health and resilience in schools has resulted in teacher and student exposure to a range of school programs addressing similar content to the SPRT. However, unanticipated benefits arose from the release of the findings about student academic progress which resulted in delivery of additional mental health/wellbeing and professional capacity building programs for teachers in bushfire affected schools. The combined findings from the different components of the Strengthening School Communities study also highlighted the need for a changed approach to disaster recovery in schools to more adequately address teacher support needs. This resulted in a series of recommendations to inform decision makers in government, education, health and union sectors on how best to support teacher needs in disaster contexts for their direct benefit and also to enable them to fulfil their duty of care to students. These recommendations will be released and disseminated as a proposal for best practice to guide government, education, health and union sectors across Australia to ensure teacher health and support needs are met in the context of disasters.

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