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8-18-2020

## TALIS: Stress levels among Australian teachers

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### Recommended Citation

Thomson, Sue. (2020) 'TALIS: Stress levels among Australian teachers', *Teacher*, 18 August 2020.

<https://www.teachermagazine.com.au/columnists/sue-thomson/talis-stress-levels-among-australian-teachers>

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# TALIS: Stress levels among Australian teachers

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The OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey provides a voice for teachers and principals internationally. Australia is one of 48 countries that participated in TALIS 2018, and ACER has just released the second report on the data gathered – *Teachers and school leaders as valued professionals* (Thomson & Hillman, 2020). The foci of this second volume are career opportunities, collaboration, autonomy and prestige. The results reported in this article are those from lower secondary school teachers and principals.

## Experiencing stress at work

This year has put enormous pressures on teachers and schools worldwide. While not being able to provide data on the current state of stress amongst teachers and school leaders, data from TALIS 2018 are able to highlight some of the key areas for teacher stress in previous times.

For the first time in TALIS, the 2018 survey asked teachers how much they experience stress in their work (*not at all; to some extent; quite a bit; a lot*). Almost six in 10 Australian teachers (58 per cent) reported feeling *quite a bit* or *a lot* of stress in their jobs, significantly higher than the average across participating OECD countries of just under half (49 per cent). Nationally, 24 per cent of teachers felt *a lot* of stress, compared to an average of 18 per cent across OECD countries.

Perceived levels of stress were higher in Australia amongst female teachers than male teachers, with 26 per cent of female teachers, compared to 20 per cent of male teachers, reporting *a lot* of stress. They were higher amongst teachers at publicly managed schools (28 per cent of teachers) than privately managed schools (20 per cent), and amongst younger teachers (30 per cent of teachers under 30) than older teachers (19 per cent of teachers over 50).

Worryingly, Australia had the largest difference in stress levels between teachers working in schools with high concentration of disadvantaged students (more than 30 per cent of students from economically disadvantaged homes) compared to those working in schools with low concentration of disadvantaged students (less than or equal to 30 per cent of students from economically disadvantaged homes).

On average across participating OECD countries, 18 per cent of teachers from the less disadvantaged schools reported *a lot* of stress, compared to 20 per cent of teachers from more disadvantaged schools. In Australia, the comparative figures were 21 per cent and 31 per cent respectively. This difference of 10 percentage points was not only the highest among OECD countries, but across *all* countries that participated in TALIS.

TALIS also asked teachers for their perception of the extent to which their job negatively affects their mental and physical health (*not at all; to some extent; quite a bit; a lot*). Around one-quarter of Australian teachers (24 per cent) reported that their job negatively impacts their mental health *quite a bit* or *a lot*, and 21 per cent reported that it negatively impacts their physical health *quite a bit* or *a lot*. These were similar to the OECD averages.

Of course an important element of work-life balance is having the ability to unwind after work hours or being able to switch off from work responsibilities. Only eight per cent of Australian teachers consider that

their work never leaves room for their personal life, compared to the OECD average of six per cent.

## Sources of stress

Beyond the magnitude and impacts of stress, it is also useful to explore the factors that contribute to teachers' stress in their work. A relevant conclusion of the research conducted in this area (OECD, 2020) is that the prevalence of stress differs depending on its sources. For example, stress linked to classroom activities and student interactions seems more predominant than stress related to the support received from the school and the government.

TALIS 2018 sought to further explore the issues behind stress by asking teachers to what extent a series of work-related tasks constituted a source of stress (*not at all; to some extent; quite a bit; a lot*). The sources of stress for teachers were classified into three different groups following the TALIS 2018 Conceptual Framework (Ainley & Carstens, 2018): workload stress; student behaviour stress; and stakeholder relations.

### Workload stress

Workload stress shows a strong association with teachers' work-life balance and burn out. A lower proportion of Australian teachers than on average across the OECD reported major sources of stress (*quite a bit or a lot*) for the following: 'having too much lesson preparation' (Australia 30 per cent, OECD 33 per cent) and 'having too many lessons to teach' (Australia 25 per cent, OECD 28 per cent).

A higher proportion of Australian teachers than on average across the OECD reported major sources of stress as 'having too much marking' (Australia 43 per cent, OECD 41 per cent), and around 25 per cent of teachers both in Australia and across the OECD reported stress from 'having extra duties due to absent teachers'.

However, the major source of stress for Australian teachers was ‘having too much administrative work to do’ (Australia 55 per cent, OECD 49 per cent). The first TALIS report (Thomson & Hillman, 2019) showed that Australian teachers spend significantly more time on non-teaching tasks than in nearly every other OECD country. Australian lower secondary teachers spend 25 hours per week on non-teaching tasks compared to the OECD average of 18 hours per week.

The Australian average is the fourth largest in the OECD, with performance of management and administrative tasks being a significant contributor to the higher non-teaching hours. Australian teachers spend the third highest number of hours on management and administration in the OECD.

### **Student behaviour stress**

Managing classrooms and student behaviour is an important source of stress reported by teachers. Results from TALIS 2013 showed that job satisfaction and self-efficacy declined as the proportion of students with behavioural problems increased (OECD, 2014). Three indicators in TALIS 2018 examine this: ‘being held responsible for students’ achievement’ (reported as a source of stress by 37 per cent of Australian teachers and 44 per cent of teachers across the OECD); ‘maintaining classroom discipline’ (reported as a source of stress by 28 per cent of Australian teachers and 38 per cent across the OECD); and ‘being intimidated or verbally abused by students’ (reported as a source of stress by 13 per cent of Australian teachers and 14 per cent across the OECD).

### **Stakeholder relations**

The third source of stress for teachers is their ability to respond to the requirements and needs of evolving educational systems and stakeholders. The additional tasks generated by these responsibilities can create extra work pressure on teachers and can negatively affect teachers’ sense of professional wellbeing. In TALIS 2018 Australian teachers report these responsibilities as a source of stress less than the

OECD average. Thirty-eight per cent of Australian teachers reported 'keeping up with changing requirements from local, municipal/regional, state or national/federal authorities' as a source of stress (OECD average 41 per cent), while 24 per cent reported 'addressing parent or guardian concerns' as a source of stress (OECD average 34 per cent). Of course, the situation in 2020 will most likely have had an impact on these reports.

Shifts in societal expectations regarding the inclusion of special needs students in regular schools has also brought about additional demands for teachers, with 25 per cent of Australian teachers reporting 'modifying lessons for students with special needs' as a source of stress (OECD average 31 per cent).

## Conclusions

TALIS shows that, internationally, teachers who report experiencing *a lot* of stress at work are more likely to want to leave teaching within the next five years. They also experience lower levels of both self-efficacy and wellbeing. While the data from 2018 show most Australian teachers are happy with their salaries and conditions, less than half feel they are appreciated by society. The significant number of teachers experiencing stress in combination with the large proportion who feel unvalued presents a potentially worrying picture for Australian schools.

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*The Teaching and Learning International Survey 2018. Australian Report Volume 2: Teachers and School Leaders as Valued Professionals*, by Sue Thomson and Kylie Hillman (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2020) is available at <https://research.acer.edu.au/talis/> (<https://research.acer.edu.au/talis/>).

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