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Research Article

Teacher Wellbeing During a Pandemic: Surviving or Thriving?

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Abstract: As cases of COVID-19 surge across the world, research has begun to emerge which considers the implications of school lockdowns on student learning, engagement, and achievement. Yet as face-to-face teaching and learning recommences, it is not only students who will need help adjusting to ‘the new normal’. While 2020 has seen a dramatic increase in the workload of teachers, many of whom have negotiated a continuity of learning in adverse circumstances, we must remember that long before COVID-19 disrupted schools, teachers were already at risk of burnout. The novel coronavirus has further exacerbated the stresses facing teachers, and as countries continue to navigate periods of remote education, recognising and supporting teacher wellbeing should be a key priority. In recognition of the contributions of teachers and the influence they yield over student learning, this article considers the importance of creating conditions for supporting teacher wellbeing before, during, and after the current pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic pedagogy, teacher wellbeing, social capital, collective efficacy

1. Introduction

As a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world have closed schools and educational institutions in an effort to flatten the curve and contain the spread of the coronavirus. As of May 2020, school closures have impacted almost 70% of the world’s student population, or approximately 1.2 billion students (UNESCO, 2020). Depending on where students live in the world, education has remained face to face, or moved to either synchronous or asynchronous remote schooling, or a blend of both. Delivery of content may occur through live lessons, streaming of educational content via devices or television, parent facilitated content and knowledge exchange, or perhaps, depending on access to resources, no learning at all. It is however, crucial to acknowledge that not all pedagogy during a pandemic is delivered equal, as not all students have access to the technologies that enable remote learning. As a result, students are living vastly different educational experiences during the pandemic. Coupled with economic recessions, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is a recipe for inequity, marginalisation, attrition, disengagement, and stress across the education profession (Masters et al., 2020).

2. Lessons from lockdown: An Australian perspective

Although many countries have now closed schools around the world, Australia's federal government has fought to keep schools open, citing the research based on inequity (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020), mental health (Lee, 2020), and learning losses (Azevedo et al., 2020) as a greater risk to young people than COVID-19 itself. Although there is evidence from past and present pandemics linking decreased rates of viral transmission to the closure of schools (Markel et al., 2007), schools have opened, then closed, then opened, then closed in many parts of Australia, as the novel coronavirus forces schools into remote teaching and schooling. The unknown is also disruptive: in Melbourne, Victoria, students and teachers have now experienced a semester (or nearly 6 months) of remote learning, as the state experiences a second wave far less predictable than the first. Here, many schools have drawn upon their existing expertise in online learning methodologies, yet the emergency nature of remote schooling as a result of COVID-19 has led to rapid and contrasting approaches to teaching and learning.

In many countries, there are now concerns about learning losses, and who is responsible for ensuring quality education provision during a pandemic. Australia is a notable example for examination, as an education system susceptible to inequity between schools on the basis of resources (Parker et al., 2018), but also a system with a long history of remote learning, and one heavily invested in improving teacher quality. Indeed, in Australia, the previous months demonstrate that there are great challenges in enhancing the quality of remote schooling offered to students. Though research is still emerging remote schooling appears to offer different experiences for students between schools (Chase & Taylor-Guy, 2020). Equity of access has been inconsistent across the country (Masters et al., 2020), with the students most at risk and also being the most vulnerable to learning losses: Students impacted by neurodiversity or disability, or otherwise marginalised by gender, race, resources, parental support, or socioeconomic status. There is increasing pressure on students and their families and in turn, there has been additional stress, anxiety, and overload for those responsible for ensuring continuity of learning: teachers.

Teachers have largely done what they can under very difficult circumstances. The official government stance opposes school closures in Australia, yet as schools have reopened, a second wave of infections has also struck, particularly in Melbourne, Victoria. New cases stemming from school transmission are regularly announced, though there remains little information on whether school closures are effective in containing COVID-19 outbreaks (Viner et al., 2020). While the majority of adult employees in Australia continue to be advised to work from home, teachers are expected on site. Anxiety amongst teachers is growing, as new research begins to demonstrate the possibility of schools being sites of known infection (Stein-Zamir et al., 2020). Children increasingly appear to be carriers and spreaders of COVID-19. Recent research from Germany, a worldwide leader in testing and tracing, shows transmission rates amongst children to be comparable to the adult population (Jones et al., 2020). A case study from the United States shows the impact of child 'super spreaders' (Szablewski, 2020). Most alarmingly, and in contrast to most public messaging as to the impacts of the virus on children and young adults, the new coronavirus has been linked to a deadly new Kawasaki-like illness in children (Amirfakhryan, 2020; Toubiana et al., 2020; Viner & Whittaker, 2020).

With the latest research into COVID-19 shifting the narrative that only the elderly and infirm are at risk, concerns as to the transmission of the virus in children have become tangible. While funerals and weddings remain restricted, classrooms of 30 students often stay open. Although research as to the spread amongst children and within schools is limited, teachers have a right to experience fear and anxiety, and to feel undervalued in their profession (Asbury & Kim, 2020). Teachers are arguably at greater risk of infection than other frontline workers due to a lack of protective equipment, a lack of testing amongst asymptomatic children, and often inadequate hygiene measures in the most disadvantaged schools. There is also the added challenge of differentiating between generally unwell students, and COVID positive children, who may present with different symptoms to what we are seeing in adults.

3. Supporting teacher wellbeing during a pandemic: Why does it matter?

Educators have a marked influence on the lives of students, but for teachers, the education profession is also one of the most stressful professions within which to work (De Nobile, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2008). Teacher wellbeing contributes to work satisfaction and productivity, and most importantly, demonstrates a positive influence on the levels

of student wellbeing and academic achievement (Spilt et al., 2011). Research also indicates that improving school performance has a positive impact on school wellbeing, and improving teacher wellbeing also improves student outcomes (Briner & Dewberry, 2007). Yet, educators often rate their wellbeing as lower than other comparative social professions (Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012), and attrition rates of professionals are an ongoing issue: In fact, stress and overall wellbeing are often cited as key reasons educators choose to stay or leave the profession (Naghieh et al., 2015). In an attempt to combat the stress facing teachers, schools across Australia (and abroad) have embraced wellbeing initiatives to support both staff and students (Acton & Glasgow, 2015). While schools in Australia focus heavily on supporting the wellbeing of students, initiatives that address and support staff wellbeing are more nascent.

Wellbeing interventions now exist at early career (Le Cornu, 2009; Spilt et al., 2011) and established teacher levels (Soini et al., 2010). Face-to-face as well as online professional development approaches that aim to foster resilience and autonomy, coaching in learning communities, and emotional regulation development can also support educator wellbeing levels. However, many current wellbeing approaches are either tokenistic, reactive, or designed for organisations that are not schools. In fact many 'wellbeing' approaches ignore the complexities of school culture and fail to offer responsive mechanisms that support the unique needs of staff in education contexts today. Indeed, it is not only individual foci on wellbeing that matters, it is also access to community resources, and participation in a shared experience that is crucial for supporting school staff and students. Day and Qing (2009) argue that stress from the role is exacerbated by the fact that "many teachers work in environments that are hostile to their wellbeing" (p.16), and certainly, maintaining wellbeing when potentially exposed to COVID-19 adds further stress to the daily role of teachers. Many teachers have been expected to transition their classes to fully online formats with only a week's notice, under the promise that this form of emergency schooling will not last forever. But such reactive activities that focus on the now, and not the future, are not conducive to mental health or wellness.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a rapid movement to remote schooling (Ferdig et al., 2020), and in the current context, it is crucial to recognise the enormous pressure facing teachers. The stress compounds an already weary profession, as the uncertainty of expectations grows. Teacher wellbeing matters, as teachers who experience amotivation and anxiety are also less effective in supporting student wellbeing, and student outcomes. Although the teaching profession already faces unique challenges and pressures from students, families, and a constantly changing system, the COVID-19 pandemic will likely lead to further anxiety and weariness within the profession. This is not only an Australian issue, but an issue that extends to all countries impacted by COVID-19. Just as we must ensure that students who leave school during a pandemic return, so must we support our educators to learn, reflect, and improve their practice as a result of school closures and remote schooling. There are many possibilities to do things differently, and to create a system that supports, rather than stifles, educators.

4. People, then pedagogy

The stress of returning to the classroom during a pandemic will be a further blow to a profession that has experienced major upheaval in supporting teaching and learning over the past months. We must acknowledge the challenges of motivating teachers during the current pandemic, and support the education profession's most valuable asset. Empathy and respect for the teaching profession is long overdue, and a focus on cultivating teacher wellbeing is crucial. Before COVID-19, the teaching profession was already struggling to support and retain high quality teachers. Burnout, stress, and fatigue have been noted as impacting heavily on the engagement of educators, which in turn impacts on the quality of education students receive. Stress and burnout will likely increase now and beyond the current pandemic.

Indeed, most initiatives target individual wellbeing alone, and fail to consider the need for organisational level wellbeing interventions that recognise the cultural complexities of schools and educational organisations (Naghieh et al., 2015). The need for a bridge between the individual and the relational is pertinent in schools, particularly as more students as well as educators meet the criteria for anxiety, depression, and trauma-issues sure to surge as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, in order to enhance the wellbeing of staff in schools, "professional learning efforts targeting teacher wellbeing should aim for more than simply reducing stress and burnout" (Cook et al., 2017, p. 15). Here, the concepts of collective teacher efficacy (Donohoo, 2018) and social capital (Putnam, 2001) become crucial.

Indeed, while positive psychology-based interventions (Kern, 2014; Seligman et al., 2009) aim to cultivate positive patterns of thinking and feeling, there should also be a recognition of the need to support relationships within the broader school context, rather than focusing on individual level change (Dabrowski, 2019). Facilitating enhanced social capital in organisational cultures (Putnam, 2001) can lead to a collaborative and proactive approach to building relationships and community bonds. Creating conditions for wellbeing can move schools away from reactive ‘solutions’, to a place where teacher wellbeing becomes part of the fabric of a school, informing its strategic intention, while supporting staff, students, and families.

5. Exploring pandemic possibilities in education

COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges for schools, staff, and students. But in this pandemic, we have also seen creativity, innovation, and opportunity. As communities emerge from varying states of isolation, schools offer a chance for communities to rebuild, to create a new normal in which partnerships can form between teachers, families, and communities. This crisis offers many opportunities for the development of respectful and relevant communications between teachers and families (Emerson et al., 2012) that can facilitate ongoing relationship building beyond face-to-face meetings (Hohfeld et al., 2010). Importantly, cultivating such relationships create opportunities for shared bonds between student families and teachers, sharing the load of enhancing student outcomes.

Although educators face enormous challenges in their roles, responding to teacher wellbeing can be helped by exploring mechanisms that can support teachers at an individual and collective level. Individual health and wellbeing is intricately tied to the health of our communities and our interactions with others (Turkle, 2017), and it is likely that our connectedness has been lost in a haze of social distancing, track and trace protocols, and prohibited relationships. Thus, the current difficulties facing the teaching profession can be eased through two key areas of focus for school systems, leaders, and teachers: (1) fostering self-determination and agency and (2) building collective efficacy and social capital. Both areas involve cultivating supportive relationships with students, parents, and colleagues to enhance student outcomes. It also involves recognising the invaluable contributions teachers make to the education system. Indeed, supporting relationships within the broader school context, rather than blaming individuals for their inability to cope with the realities of the teaching profession is key. As Berryhill et al. (2009) conclude, “making changes in individuals when the system is part of the problem leaves basic structures intact and is unlikely to affect the problem ... policymakers should consider making changes for teachers rather than in teachers” (p. 9).

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to impact on schooling for the remainder of 2020, and perhaps beyond, and we must remember that the disparities in opportunities to learn are not the fault of educators, but a broader and more problematic issue of inequity within our education systems. To support student wellbeing and return to the focus on improved student outcomes, schools, systems and parents must acknowledge and address the wellbeing of teachers as a matter of urgency. Teachers need help as they continue to work to support students, and as we emerge from lockdown, it is important to recognise and learn from what teachers have done under the most difficult of scenarios, and invite educators to be part of a broader conversation on how schools, teachers, and parents can emerge from the current crisis stronger, together. Teachers were important long before COVID-19, but perhaps it will take a pandemic to finally recognise the contributions, and challenges, of educators.

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