



# **A study of work stress and coping among primary school teachers in New Zealand**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article reports on a research study of the perception of work stress among twelve participant primary school teachers in the Wellington region in New Zealand. Specifically, it focuses on the way the participants' perceive work stress and its contributing factors, and the coping strategies they employ. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen to analyse semi-structured interview data. The interviews examined the way teachers make sense of their stress experiences and five overarching themes emerged: (i) teaching as relentless work, (ii) intrinsic motivation as sustaining factor, (iii) reality of high stress levels, (iv) emotional elements of teaching, and (v) lack of desirability of teaching role. This study shows that the participant teachers' perceived stress ranged from moderate to high levels due to high workload, multiple sources of stress, the emotional demands of the role and the frustration and constraints they face in role performance. In contrast, however, the participants also derived joy from their role and used positive coping mechanisms to cope with work demands. This study found that certain positive coping strategies, such as teaching experience, cognitive reframing, and seeking social support, are learned over time and come with experience. This article contributes to the literature on teacher stress in the New Zealand context and offers recommendations for mitigating stress and supporting the well-being of primary school teachers.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

There is an almost universal agreement that the education environment today is more dynamic and the role of teachers more complex than at any time in history:

It's vital that we all realise teachers do far more than teach: they are the most critical contributors to our civic society ... we need to recognise that the skills, efforts and selflessness it takes to run a classroom are just as valuable (and rare) as those needed to run a boardroom. (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019, p. 1).

Teaching is considered a highly stressful profession (Johnson et al., 2005; Newberry & Allsop, 2017), and various media reports have noted the high

levels of stress among New Zealand teachers (Clements, 2016; Franks, 2019; Walters, 2019). In 2018, primary school teachers participated in two strikes in an attempt to force action with regard to concerns they had held for a number of years. “They’re asking for support for children with additional needs, a career framework, time to teach and time to lead; and a pay jolt across the board” (Writes, 2018, p. 1). These demands point towards increased workload and stress of teaching along with reduced pay and value given to the profession.

While research on teacher stress in New Zealand before and after the major 1989 reforms has been conducted (Galloway et al., 1984; Manthei & Gilmore, 1994; Manthei & Solman, 1988; Whitehead, 2001; Whitehead & Ryba, 1995), little recent qualitative research has been undertaken to examine work stress in New Zealand primary school teachers today. This study aimed to address this research gap and provide insights into teachers’ perceptions of stress, the contributing factors and teachers’ coping mechanisms. The findings from this study can help decision makers and society to understand the stressors of the teaching role and support improved teacher well-being.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The term ‘teacher stress’ has been coined and may be defined as “the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher” (Kyriacou, 2001, pp. 28). Burnout, as defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981), occurs when teachers undergo stress for prolonged periods of time and begin to experience feelings of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a loss of personal accomplishment. Teacher stress and retention is clearly a major concern in many countries (Galton & McBeath, 2008; Johnson et al., 2005; Stoel & Thant, 2002). Teacher wellbeing in this literature is often described in terms of how stress is affecting teacher burnout and problems with retention (Roffey, 2012).

To gain an understanding of how stress has been conceptualised and theorised over the years, this study focussed on approaches to ‘psychological stress’ developed within the field of cognitive psychology (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this context, stress is viewed as a relationship (‘transaction’) between individuals and their environment that is appraised as significant for a person’s well-being and in which the demands tax or exceed available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986). This theory has been particularly influential in shaping stress and coping related research over the past few decades (Biggs et al., 2017). Two critical processes mediate this person-environment relationship: the cognitive appraisal and coping. This study, based on this model, seeks to examine teachers’ perceptions of work stress, how it is viewed in the context of factors contributing to their stress, and how teachers cope with work stress.

Thus, perceived stressors from the environment are a key aspect of this model and teachers deal with a wide variety of stressors on a daily basis. A number of stress causes for teachers, including high job demands, student misbehaviour, poor working conditions, poor relationships at work, role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, poor school ethos and lack of developmental opportunities, were revealed in many studies (see Hanif, 2004, for a detailed review). Kyriacou (2001) noted that sources of stress experienced by a

particular teacher are unique and depend on the precise complex interaction between the teacher's personality, values, skills, and circumstances.

Another key element of the model is the available coping resources that determine experiences of stress. Coping strategies adopted to deal with work-related stress are generally classified in the research literature as problem-focussed or emotion-focussed (Greenglass, 2002) – that is, aimed at managing the source of the stress, or the individual's response to it. In their qualitative study of beginning teachers, Lindqvist et al. (2020) found that new teachers experienced conflicts that were both interpersonal (with students, parents and colleagues) and intrapersonal (being 'good enough'; establishing boundaries related to time and engagement; suppression of emotions) as they started out in teaching. In order to cope with these challenges, the beginning teachers used various strategies including collaboration, conformity, influencing and autonomy.

In the New Zealand context, teaching is one of the largest professions, with 33,519 primary school teachers in 2018 (Careers Government New Zealand, 2020). Several early studies have already reported stress in New Zealand teachers (e.g. Manthei & Solman, 1988), and Beckley (2011) also found that more than 39% of teachers in New Zealand considered teaching either very stressful or extremely stressful, an increase of 13.6% from 1996 to 2011. Research in New Zealand shows that teachers have higher burnout scores than the average for workers in the human services sector (Milfont et al., 2008) and teachers recorded significantly higher scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) emotional exhaustion sub-scale than a normative sample of US teachers (Whitehead et al., 2000).

The educational sector in New Zealand has undergone enormous legislative and organisational change over recent years. In 2018, the nation witnessed two primary school teacher strikes and eventually teachers went into negotiations for better conditions (Jones, 2018). Between 2010 and 2016 there was a 40% drop in Initial Teacher Education enrolments; around 40% of teachers leave before their fifth year of teaching because of low pay and heavy workload (Writes, 2018). This situation has been exacerbated by 'baby boomer' teachers retiring. A New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) survey in 2019 of New Zealand teachers and principals leaving the profession found that 81% of primary school teachers left because of work/life imbalance and 76% left due to workload/burnout (SchoolNews New Zealand, 2019). While teacher stress is widely reported, there has been a gap in recent academic research in this area in the New Zealand context, with qualitative research to investigate the phenomenon of work stress among teachers being long overdue.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research questions**

In this study, the specific research questions were:

- How do primary school teachers appraise their experiences of work stress?
- What are the factors contributing to work stress among primary school teachers?
- What coping mechanisms are employed to manage the demands of the teaching role?

### **Qualitative approach**

The current study adopted a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews, to capture teacher perceptions of stress and related factors. Data analysis was carried out using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. This approach enables an understanding of the way individuals make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). IPA also allows for lived experiences of teachers to be recorded. The data analysis consisted of two stages: (i) the participants making sense of their world; and (ii) my making sense of the participants' sense-making. This two-stage interpretation process also aligns with the conceptual model for the research project (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which places emphasis on how the individual subjectively assesses the stressful situation, as well as their abilities and options in coping with it.

### **Sample**

This research used a small, purposive sample, aligned with an IPA approach (Smith & Osborn, 2008), comprised of 12 teachers from eight primary schools in the Wellington region of New Zealand. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Open Polytechnic Ethics Committee. Select schools in this region were sent an information sheet, with a request for the participation of the teachers. Interviews were scheduled with 14 teachers, who expressed an interest in participating in the research. Twelve teachers provided consent to use the data for analysis and this was the final sample for the study. Please refer to Table 1 below for information on the sample.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Probably the best way to collect data for an IPA study and the way most IPA studies have been conducted is through semi-structured interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In this study, semi-structured interviews of 60 to 90 minutes were used to obtain an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions of stress, work-related factors affecting stress and coping mechanisms employed. The interview schedule covered topics such as: work role and perceptions of stress; transaction between person and environment; individual factors and approaches to coping; and outcomes of stress.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then confirmed with the participants by sending them the full interview transcript, along with a consent form approving its use in analyses. The analysis of the interview transcripts was based on IPA process outlined by Smith & Osborne (2008) using NVivo 12 software to organise and analyse qualitative data. I engaged with the text through reading and re-reading the transcripts and started generating codes for all transcripts. The codes generated were checked against data for correctness, so this phase resulted in a long list of different codes identified across the data set. Subsequently, I grouped codes into broader themes and sub-themes based on conceptual similarity in relation to the research questions. In a subsequent stage, I refined the theme structure—checking themes and sub-themes against coded data extracts to ensure a coherent pattern and fit with the data. I also analysed and reviewed relationships among themes and sub-themes. The key themes and relevant sub-themes are presented and discussed below.

**Table 1:** Sample details

	Participant numbers			Total
	Full Time	Part Time		
Full-time/part-time teaching	11	1		12
Teaching experience (years)	15 + Years	6 to 8 Years	3 years	
	7	4	1	
Gender	Male	Female		
	2	10		

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results are discussed here in terms of five over-arching themes that emerged through the analysis of the interview data: (i) teaching as relentless work, (ii) intrinsic motivation as sustaining factor, (iii) the reality of high stress levels, (iv) emotional elements of teaching, and (v) a lack of desirability of the teaching role. Each of these broad themes had related sub-themes which are discussed in detail below. These themes and sub-themes are reflective of the three research questions and were supported by the data.

### Teaching as relentless work

The teachers perceived teaching to involve excessive role demands, and a shared sense that a characteristic of this profession was the never-ending and relentless work.

#### *Expanded role*

This sub-theme was evident in the transcripts of all participants, who experienced an expanded role and an excessive workload. One teacher mentioned the many roles and responsibilities of the role, which meant the workload was never-ending:

*I mean from 9 to 3, the focus is the children and then after that, organising everything that needs to take place between 9 and 3. It's all...the analysing any kind of assessment data; it's all the meetings, organising different resources, organising different events at school, planning, all of the different curriculum areas and learning objectives, meeting with colleagues; just all of the other stuff, meeting with parents – lots and lots. It actually never stops; there's always more that I could be doing.*

It emerged that conscientious and dedicated teachers took on many extra tasks, as they felt a need to do their best for the children, as expressed by a teacher:

*so we've got teachers who run a choir, teachers who run dance clubs, teachers who run after school running clubs and things like that and that's just because they want to.*

Thus, teachers' perception of work overload arose from the unending job demands, the additional tasks in the teaching role, and, to some extent, their own need to do their best for the children.

#### *Time-related demands*

All participants perceived time-related demands and pressures in terms of excessive hours of work, including working in their own personal time, at weekends, during break times and school holidays. One teacher expressed displeasure about the high work hours and the amount of work to be done at home:

*I have never, ever had in teaching a 40-hour work week – ever. I don't know if it's possible. I think it easily climbs to 60 when you think about the amount of work at home that you have to do.*

It was perceived that time-related demands were challenging and took away time from core aspects of the job that involved the children: *"It's the time. The lack of time to do what I want to do for the children."* The number of hours the participants reported to be working was alarming, involving their personal time, evenings and weekends. They were being paid only for their 40-hour workweek and such long work hours were reportedly not conducive to their health and well-being. In their meta-analytic study, Wong et al. (2019) demonstrated that long working hours had a positive relationship with occupational health problems; particularly, the category 'related health' showed the strongest association with long working hours. The health measures in this category were short sleep duration, sleep disturbance, sleep problems, exhaustion and injuries.

#### *Work–life balance as a challenge*

This sub-theme was evident in the transcripts of nine participants who found balancing work requirements with family and personal life to be very challenging. One teacher commented: *"But just actually keeping a work–life balance is probably the most challenging, challenging thing."* The teaching role also showed blurring of boundaries, crossovers and spill-over effects as expressed by one participant:

*The schools and what we're involved with there's no firm lines between where the roles begin or end. But unfortunately, you know families and things often I'll cancel plans and say, "I'm sorry I can't make dinner tonight because I just have to do some work."*

These aspects of the role were perceived as causing stress and affecting personal and family well-being.

#### **Intrinsic motivation as sustaining factor**

Another central theme was the intrinsic ability of the job to be a source of satisfaction and motivation, which gave rise to positive approaches for coping with the work demands and were linked with a strong intention to continue with teaching. This key theme is represented in three sub-themes, including *teaching as a source of joy*, *positive coping strategies*, and *positive intentions to stay*.

### *Teaching as a source of joy*

This sub-theme was evident for all participants and came across as joy derived from interacting with children, facilitating their learning and building relationships with them. One participant stated:

*Enjoyable is definitely the children. I feel like I've got such good relationships with the children. That's the fun part, like actually getting to teach them and see them learning, getting their questions .... There are children that come do this each morning, to fill you in on their day. Well, that's the important stuff.*

It was clear that the core task of teaching was rewarding and fulfilling. Spilt et al. (2011) postulated that teachers have a basic need for relatedness with the students in their class and internalise mental representations of teacher-student relationships, which provide a framework to guide responses and affect teacher wellbeing in the long run. This intrinsic satisfaction with the core job of working with children seemed to be a positive factor in dealing with the job demands and stressors.

### *Positive coping strategies*

This sub-theme was evident in the transcripts of all participants. A range of positive coping strategies were used such as taking the mind off work matters, developing hobbies and interests outside school, seeking social support, organising and prioritising work, using cognitive reframing strategies and relying on experience with teaching to manage the workload and stress.

Amongst a range of positive coping, the role of teaching experience in developing strategies to cope, which included cognitive reframing, choosing one's work environment and social support was mentioned:

*When I first started teaching, I didn't want to tell anyone that I was stressed or I was having any trouble because you go, "I can't let them know I'm struggling because then they'll think I'm not a good teacher." But then you learn that we're all struggling, so it's fine. Definitely, I have started talking to people more and working in a school where I'm comfortable – I like my boss, I like everyone I work with. I know that it's a safe environment to say what I need to say, that definitely helps. I probably talk way too much now.*

It appears that experience in a teaching role is associated with competence in positive coping. A study on experienced and novice teachers' ability to cope found that "in addition to receiving a lower level of professional support from their superiors, novice teachers generally lack ways to articulate their own needs to colleagues" (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014, p. 1). Caspersen and Raaen further elaborate that "experienced teachers seemed more capable of taking advantage of the support offered" (p. 13). So, there might be significant differences between novice and experienced teachers' in their ability to cope well with work stress. This resonates with the novice teacher in this study indicating that coping strategies in the second year of teaching changed in the sense of understanding what works best.

### *Positive intention to stay*

This sub-theme was evident in the transcripts of seven participants, who indicated strong intentions to continue teaching in the primary school context, as exemplified by one teacher:

*So, yeah, staying in a profession, yes. That's even without a pay rise. I'm staying in the profession without the money. And if I could stay at the same school? Yes.*

Two participants expressed interest in extending their role such as entering into secondary teaching or some other kind of consulting role in educational pedagogical approaches. Three participants did not want to continue in teaching because of the workload and wanted to consider doing other things, including one who mentioned trying teaching in a different context. It could be inferred that service professions such as teaching offer intrinsic job satisfaction and help the people to cope with the job stressors because of their motivation to continue in the profession. Those who mentioned moving away from teaching liked the core job but disliked the workload.

### **Reality of high stress levels**

This central theme noted the high-stress nature of primary school teaching. As emerged from in-depth interviews, stress levels ranged from moderate to high in these participants, with negative effects on both the participants and others around them. The stressors arose from multiple sources in the school environment and from the resentment due to the frustrations, constraints and challenges that accompanied performance of the role. This key theme is presented in four sub-themes as below.

#### *Pervasive stress*

This sub-theme was common to all participants with teachers' reporting prevalence of stress. Six teachers' reported high stress levels in the role; one teacher reported moderate-high levels of stress; and five reported medium-moderate levels of stress. It appears that stress often escalated as the term progressed, in response to the build-up of demands from varied tasks. One participant experienced high stress levels in relation to 'pinch points', which were specific events causing stress. Another participant experienced moderate levels of stress in relation to the constant demands of the role. One participant had in the past experienced extreme stress to the point of burnout and she had to take a term off:

*Generally, high stress. I remember having a break couple of years ago. I was completely burned out. I was leading this, leading that, doing my classroom job. I had a very difficult class. It was awful, because I was putting in so much effort and energy that there was nothing for myself. I was drained at the end of every day. It was awful. So, I took a term off. It was a really, really bad experience. Overall, just overloaded.*



It was evident that high demands in the job were associated with moderate to high levels of stress; burnout could develop in extreme cases and is a cause for concern given the severity of this condition. In fact, a global survey of 35 countries has found New Zealand teachers have the biggest workloads in the world (Dolton et al., 2018). According to a NZEI Te Riu Roa survey report (2019), teachers and school leaders report significant job strain and associated negative health impacts that far exceed the general population. Teachers also scored slightly worse than school leaders in all health and wellbeing measures, with burnout and stress being the two most worrying.

#### *Stress from multiple quarters*

This theme was mentioned by all participants with stress being a product of combination of stressors in the environment. There were commonalities of stressors reported by the teachers, such as report-writing, which was mentioned as a major source of stress by seven participants, a time-consuming process contributing to increased work demands. One participant reported the way paperwork and administrative work was a major source of stress, as it generally accentuated the workload:

*The workload, especially Term 2 and Term 4 – we've got reports, so the workload goes up and people are busy. I do tend to be more stressed and more frustrated at the end of those types of periods.*

It emerged that low-decile schools had a higher proportion of child-based stressors stemming from socio economic factors, as the quote by a teacher from a low decile school indicates:

*One of the biggest stresses would be student based. Tailoring the work to actually meet their needs and where they're able to be successful. I have kids [sic] with significant behavioural issues. So a significant part of my teaching is helping them to modify their behaviour...Another big stress would be where I'm teaching. Being a decile one school, and knowing that I'm failing these students.*

It appears while there were many commonalities of stressors reported by the teachers', yet there could be differences in stress levels among teachers from high decile v/s low decile schools which might need further investigation.

#### *Frustrations, challenges and constraints of the role*

This sub-theme was mentioned by all participants, with a shared perception that a number of elements of work were unnecessary, unreasonable and lacking in adequate resourcing but nonetheless had to be carried out as part of the role requirements. Unreasonable expectations placed on teachers and the lack of support to carry out the role were common frustrations as expressed by this teacher:

*I think for all teachers, I think that the demands of the job for most teachers is unreasonable, it's what's expected...The expectations are that teachers are responsive to individual children's needs and you would show that in your planning. "OK, I have got two children*

*learning English in my class, I've got one child who is dyslexic, I've got one child who's dyspraxic...And this is what I'm doing for them." And I need to show that in my planning, I need to show this in my daily programme. That's what [takes] hours every day. That's what takes up the time and there's none of the extra support. The expectation on me is that I'm teaching...children, I'm responsive to their needs, I'm meeting their individual needs, and that they're showing progress based on where they were. And being able to do that...it's more than full time.*

All the participants perceived frustrations and challenges in the role and with resource-related constraints that could add to the stressors already being experienced. Similarly, a New Zealand study by Penrice in 2011 already identified in-school intensification experiences by six experienced rural teachers as constraining their teaching practice.

#### *Negative effect of stress on self*

This sub-theme was mentioned by 11 participants who perceived stress to have affected them at a physical, emotional and behavioural level. Physical health issues such as epilepsy, stomach issues, colds, and influenza were attributed to stress of teaching along with general tiredness and exhaustion. Reported cognitive effects were worry, feeling the mental load, catastrophising, and losing rationality. The emotional symptoms participants mentioned include being upset, anxious or frustrated, and behaviourally withdrawing from certain situations.

At another level, stress also could be destructive crossing over to the recipients of care as perceived by a teacher from a high decile school: "Stress can be destructive when I have so much pressure on me that the children I teach stop being my first priority." Another teacher mentioned symptoms of burnout:

*I think that when you're stressed and that cup is getting emptier and emptier, you've got less to give into your job. When it's times of really high workload, if there's a stressor or I'm worried about something, I can't be 110% because I don't have as much of myself to give to my job.*

The one participant who did not perceive negative effects of stress saw this as being due to personality factors combined with the high-decile rating of their school, with past experience at lower-decile schools helping them to re-think and manage the stress encountered.

#### **Emotional elements of teaching**

Teaching is unique in terms of the emotional elements of the role and while this helps to form a connection with the role, it contributes towards the stress experiences of teachers as well. While participants mentioned emotional exhaustion and emotional labour, emotional connect with the role was also associated with internally driven stress.

*Strong emotional element*

This sub-theme was identified by all participants, seen as high-energy demands of the job, taking a toll on their health or likely negative effect on health. One participant expressed feelings of emotional exhaustion arising from the energy demands of the role:

*I often feel guilty...that I have no energy left for my own family...that's a major one, just general tiredness. I am a quite extroverted person but I feel like I give everything to my job and then when I get home, I just collapse...I need that time to recharge and sometimes my family find it hard that I just want to lie on the couch and go to sleep because I just don't have anything left to give.*

The teaching role for the participants in this study involved a level of 'acting' or 'emotional labour'; that is, displaying certain feelings to meet the requirements of the job (Hochschild, 1983). A participant exemplifying this phenomenon states:

*If you want to put a point across to a child that might have pushed somebody, then you have to act really upset and disgusted that that person made that choice. But you're overdoing it because you're trying to portray that feeling of disappointment to the children, even though deep down it wasn't a big deal. But you overdo it, so you always dramatise it and that's exhausting. We're pretty much acting all day, when you think about it.*

*Internally driven stress*

This sub-theme was mentioned by seven participants as an internal pressure to accommodate the workload and do the best despite the challenges encountered. A teacher expressed feeling accountable and pressured in relation to the children's progress:

*I think as a good teacher I'm very aware that if five children even don't make a good amount of progress, that's actually on me and it's my fault. It's my job to help them make progress and to identify why they're not and to call in help if I need all that.*

It was clear that primary teaching involved emotional demands and internally driven stress and pressure based on personal expectations of teachers towards their own performance, in addition to the external stressors. These effects are also likely to have an adverse impact on teachers' emotional health and overall well-being.

**Lack of desirability of teaching role**

The final theme emerging from the interviews was the participant teachers' perception that their role is not respected and valued by society. Narratives of teachers leaving the profession were shared, as were perceptions of the need for more support being required for teaching and teachers.

*Lack of perceived 'mana' (prestige/respect)*

Mana is the Māori word for authority, prestige, honour, respect. This sub-theme was mentioned by seven participants who perceived that teachers were undervalued and disrespected by society. One participant expressed feelings of sadness about the negative perceptions in society of the role of teachers, although she personally saw her role in society as significant:

*then when you read the comment sections of articles and people [say], "teachers don't work that hard" or "teachers have all this time off, teachers do this, teachers do that", that's really damaging to think that your role in society is so minuscule to some people. Whereas actually, to all those kids [sic] in front of me, my role in society is massive and actually, I believe it is as well.*

Despite their strong self-belief, several teachers found the negative misperceptions and myths around teachers and teaching damaging and this contributed to their negative feelings. Hall and Langton (2006) also reported that "teaching is not a high status occupation, because despite requiring significant skills and training, and having a major influence on the lives of others, it does not have the ability to deliver fame, fortune or power – the essential elements of status" (p. 10).

*Loss of teachers from the profession*

This sub-theme was mentioned by nine participants: three teachers were considering moving away from teaching in present context; others spoke about the loss of teachers from the profession and not recommending teaching as a career choice to their families and friends. One participant said she was contemplating a change in profession because of the demands of the job:

*I've looked at other jobs and things. I have six years of education. I've got a degree. I've got post-graduate qualifications. There's so much that I could do.*

The loss of good teachers from the profession was a sad reality for some as mentioned by another teacher:

*I'm seeing young teachers start, they last three or four years and they're out, because it's too much. The support isn't there for them to do the best that they can. And we're losing really good teachers.*

Thus, it was clear that these participants believed that teaching in its current form was not appealing in the long term. This issue needs serious attention, as demand for teachers is high. Primary school teachers appear on Immigration New Zealand's regional skill shortage list. Demand for primary school teachers is expected to remain high. This is due to high birth rates in the early 2010s, which means more children at primary schools are expected until 2025. In addition, a large number of teachers are expected to retire by 2023 (Careers Government New Zealand, 2020).

### *Need for support*

This sub-theme was mentioned by ten participants with shared perceptions of the level of support needed to ease the pressures and work overload being faced in their role. One teacher made note of factors required to support teachers:

*Teacher's aides in classrooms to support all the complex learning and behaviour needs children have. More release time from the classroom, to do assessment and planning etc. Two days per term is nowhere near enough. Professional development for teachers to continue upskilling.*

It emerged from the interviews that societal perceptions of teaching need to improve and better respect must be accorded to teachers along with improved conditions of work and needed support to enable them to remain in the profession long-term. This would also help to attract people towards the teaching profession, as indicated above.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

It is generally difficult to make generalisable claims from qualitative research such as this study. Nevertheless, the findings show similar themes across most teachers and different school settings and these can be linked to other existing literature. A subsequent quantitative study could be used to test how prevalent these themes are for teachers across a larger set of primary schools in New Zealand. Future study in this area might also try to investigate differences in stress levels among teachers from high decile versus low decile schools, as deciles are reflective of the socio-economic position of a school's student community and might link with stress among teachers. Another key area of future research could be to investigate differences in stress experiences among novice and experienced teachers as this study found that teachers might develop, for example, competence in positive coping with increasing experience in the role.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated work stress among primary school teachers in the Wellington region of New Zealand and found that the participating teachers were experiencing high levels of stress. Key influencing factors included expanded role and time demands, multiple stressors in the work environment, a strong emotional element of the role, and frustrations and constraints faced in role performance. The stress resulted in a lack of work-life balance and a negative effect of stress on self, which was compounded by a perceived lack of desirability and mana accorded to the teaching role, and the need for support that is lacking in daily practice. The participant teachers also derived joy from their role, however, and used positive coping mechanisms to cope with work demands. Most of the sample group intended to stay in the role.

This study found that certain positive coping strategies, such as teaching experience, cognitive reframing, and seeking social support, can be learned over time and might come with experience. Therefore, it might be helpful to

provide targeted professional development in these coping strategies for new teachers who might feel overwhelmed with role demands and exit the teaching profession early, even before having a chance at developing competence in positive coping. Along with this approach, however, much support and societal respect and value needs to be accorded to this profession to make it attractive in the long-term. Policymakers and school administrations must act to listen to voices of teachers and bring positive changes, such as investing more resources into schools and education, to enable a nurturing school environment for staff and students. To conclude, mitigating teacher stress and promoting teacher well-being should be a priority, as this has flow-on effects for children, schools, the wider society and the community.

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