

Teachers' work during the COVID-19 pandemic: Shifts, challenges and opportunities

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Introduction

Reports of teachers' work intensification have become common over the last decade, so it seems important to ask: how are teachers coping with the additional demands and changes brought by COVID-19?

Even before the pandemic, results from the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) indicated that globally, teachers had experienced an increase in hours between 2013 and 2018 (OECD, 2019). There were also other reports, coming in from around the globe, of unmanageable teacher workload, with research emerging out of New Zealand (Bridges and Searle, 2011), the Republic of Ireland (Morgan and Craith, 2015), the UK (Burrow, Williams and Thomas, 2020) and South Korea (Kim, 2019), to name a few.

In Australia, TALIS data indicate that not only have the hours of Australian teachers increased, they are also higher than the

OECD average (Thomson and Hillman, 2019). There have also been a number of state-based investigations into Australian teachers' work and workload, with a series of union-affiliated reports produced between 2016 and 2018 across the states of Western Australia (Fitzgerald et al, 2019), Victoria (Weldon and Ingvarson, 2016), Queensland (Rothman, Ingvarson and Matthews, 2018), Tasmania (Rothman et al, 2017) and NSW (McGrath-Champ et al, 2018). Together, these reports confirm a consistent pattern of high work hours experienced by teachers, seemingly slightly higher in WA, NSW and Victoria compared with Queensland and Tasmania. These surveys also show that much of teachers' time is spent outside of required school time. The Victorian survey, for instance, found that planning and preparation was undertaken by a large majority of respondents during evenings (93 per cent) and weekends (83 per cent). Work hours

Rises in administrative bureaucracy and competition between schools appear to be driving the intensification of teachers' work.

across states are also consistently reported to be increasing, with 'administration' and 'data collection' a common concern. This coheres with TALIS data, which confirms that Australian teachers' greatest source of stress is too much administrative work (Thomson and Hillman, 2020).

Two of the above workload studies were undertaken by this authorship team – in NSW (McGrath-Champ et al, 2018) and WA (Fitzgerald et al, 2019). These two reports are part of a series of studies we have undertaken in recent years, exploring teachers' work and workload within the context of devolved and otherwise market-oriented schooling structures. Together this body of research primarily addresses two key themes: teachers' and principals' work and workload; and how those relate to education policies of devolution and school choice. When COVID-19 emerged in early 2020 we added to this research with an online survey that examined teachers' experiences of the pandemic, including how it had impacted upon their work and workload.

In relation to teachers' pre-COVID-19 work and workload, there is evidence that pressures on teachers appear to be creating a need for teachers to 'triage' their work tasks – decide what is most pressing and act accordingly (Stacey, Wilson and McGrath-Champ, 2020). Indeed, for some teachers, making this decision is difficult, as all teachers report undertaking a very wide range of activities across multiple temporal patterns (daily, weekly or, for such things as reporting, less frequently than every week, McGrath-Champ et al, 2018). We also found there is an increasing proportion of teachers on fixed-term contracts, but these 'temporary' teachers carry similar workloads, despite their more precarious employment (McGrath-Champ, Fitzgerald, Gavin, Stacey and Wilson, under review). While much research

has documented the unique workload pressures upon school principals (Riley and See, 2017; West, Peck and Reitzug, 2010), our studies showed that many classroom teachers, both permanent and temporary, are experiencing similarly high workload hours and demands.

The pressures described by teachers and principals are also, we have argued, related to current contexts of devolution and marketisation. Rises in administrative bureaucracy and competition between schools appear to be driving the intensification of teachers' work. Our research highlights that the 'tsunami' of paperwork experienced in NSW (Fitzgerald et al, 2018) is perceived as primarily for accountability and compliance purposes. Meanwhile, for principals, much of their workload pressure is identified in our studies as being related to new managerial responsibilities around staffing and budgets, resulting from devolutionary measures in the states of NSW and WA (Gavin and McGrath-Champ, 2017; McGrath-Champ et al, 2019). Devolution can also serve to create new opportunities – and pressures – for schools to forge market 'niche', adding new dimensions to workload in many schools; and contributing to processes of residualisation, which can mean particular and complex challenges in some schools more than others (Fitzgerald et al, 2017). This dynamic represents one mechanism through which pressures on teachers, whilst consistently high, are not exactly identical everywhere, as the market sorts and sifts students along social and racial lines, creating highly contrasting contexts, and associated context-specific demands, on school staff (Parding, McGrath-Champ and Stacey, 2017; Stacey, 2020).

What recent studies collectively tell us, is that the conditions for teachers' work were already in dire straits by the time the COVID-19 pandemic hit. A large majority of

teachers were already under considerable pressure. The pandemic, overlaying this state of affairs, has produced two further shifts to teachers' work, which are:

1. teaching in 'COVID-wary classrooms'; and
2. teaching via remote learning.

Heavy demands for up-skilling, particularly for the second of these shifts, teaching via remote learning, and the development and implementation of new public health understanding within schools, have created new and additional challenges for the teaching profession.

In this paper, we present initial data from a large, system-wide survey of teachers in NSW public schools, undertaken during the first phase of the pandemic in Australia, in order to document the nature of these shifts. These data provide teachers' voice on some of the challenges, and difficulties they face in relation to professional work during the pandemic; and also the opportunities they have identified within the flux of change that has occurred in 2020. In the following sections we provide the context and methodological details of the study, followed by an outline of the shifts and challenges, as well as the opportunities reported by more than 10,000 teachers.

The survey

The survey was conducted online during the school holiday break between school terms 1 and 2 in 2020 (launched 17th of April). The pressures upon teachers were already evident anecdotally and via the media, and the term break provided a window where teachers might find the time and opportunity to respond. At this point teachers had experienced both teaching in COVID-wary classrooms, as the early pandemic took hold, and 'remote

learning', where lessons were shifted to online mode to cater for children not attending school.

Although there was no official closure date for NSW public schools, schools had shifted to remote learning for substantial proportions of their students from mid-March. On Monday 23 March, 60 per cent of students attended school, but one day later (Tuesday) this had dropped to 25 per cent and, by Friday of that week (27 March), only 10 per cent of students remained for face-to-face teaching in classrooms (NSW Teachers' Federation, NSWTF, 2020). This necessitated some teachers continuing to work on school premises. On Friday the 27th, for example, while 10 per cent of students attended, 80 per cent of teachers were on site. However in the following week this number dropped to around 50 per cent (NSWTF, 2020). Throughout this 'remote learning' period, substantial proportions of teachers continued to work on school premises, while the remainder managed remote teaching and learning from their homes. Lower numbers of teachers worked on-site following the school holiday break. NSW public schools officially 're-opened', with all but high-risk students encouraged to return to classroom lessons, on 25 May (Raper, 2020).

The invitation to participate in the survey was distributed to public school teachers, via an email from the NSW Teachers' Federation. In the COVID-19 survey a total of 21.5 per cent of the union's membership completed the survey (n=11,789). With the union representing 82 per cent of all public school teachers in the state of NSW, this sample can be considered broadly representative. The profile of the responding teachers is seen in Table 1. Data were collated and analysed independently by the researchers. The study was undertaken with ethical approval of the University of Sydney. Although more

than one in five teachers responded to the questionnaire, it is important to consider the possibility that teachers who did not respond may have held different views. It is possible that some teachers did not respond because they were too busy and time poor. It is also possible that some teachers did not respond because they had disengaged with the issues of their profession, or were otherwise unmotivated or unable to comment.

types of work. More than three quarters of teachers reported an increase in at least one aspect or type of their work during the early pandemic.

A large majority of teachers reported that during this pre-remote learning period there were increases in the complexity of their work, administrative tasks and lesson preparation time. More than half reported an increase in school meetings. Smaller numbers reported that their work hours, student welfare issues and collection and reporting on data had increased.

For many teachers, concerns regarding increasing work demands were overlaid with personal anxiety regarding their own risk of contracting COVID-19; and/or the risk of their family members and their students doing so. Approximately one in four teachers reported that they were in 'high risk' categories, leaving them vulnerable if they contracted COVID-19. Of the 25 per cent self-reporting that they were at risk, 10 per cent were over 60 years (or over 50 years and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander), 6 per cent said they were immunosuppressed, 5 per cent said they had chronic lung disease, 5 per cent other

More than three quarters of teachers reported an increase in at least one aspect or type of their work during the early pandemic.

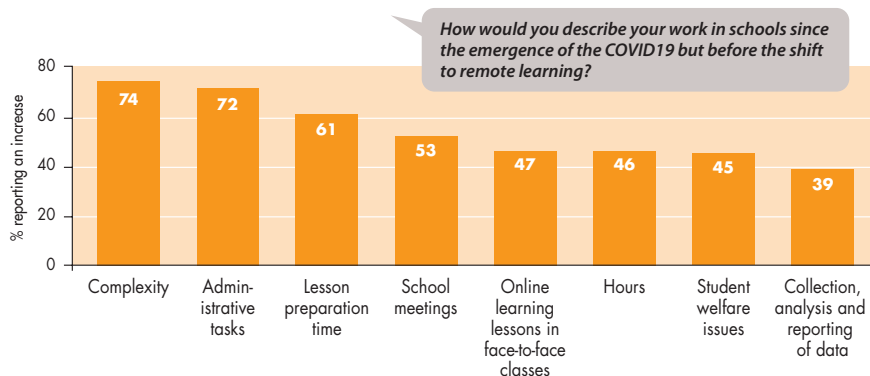
Shifts and challenges

We asked teachers to reflect upon their work during the progression of the pandemic. Asking them, first, to reflect back on the initial stages where classroom and school activities were maintained but there was growing awareness that the pandemic would require a shift to remote teaching and learning, and preventative measures of isolation and social/physical distancing became necessary. We asked teachers if they had experienced change in eight different aspects of their work. Figure 1 shows the proportions who reported an increase in aspects and/or

Table 1. Participant profile – gender, age, employment status and school location

		Metropolitan		Provincial		Remote		Total	
		count	%	count	%	count	%	count	%
Age	Number	8165		3064		560		11789	
	Average	43.5 years		44.3 years		42.7 years		43.6 years	
	Standard deviation	11.5 years		10.9 years		11.6 years		11.4 years	
Gender	Female	6704	82.2%	2446	79.9%	456	81.6%	9606	81.6%
	Male	1439	17.7%	611	20.0%	102	18.2%	2152	18.3%
	Non-binary or different identity	8	0.1%	5	0.2%	1	0.2%	14	0.1%
Employment status	Permanent	6258	76.7%	2230	72.9%	412	73.7%	8900	75.6%
	Temporary	1660	20.4%	717	23.4%	136	24.3%	2513	21.3%
	Casual	237	2.9%	112	3.7%	11	2.0%	360	3.1%

Figure 1. Increases in work demands after emergence of COVID-19, but prior to the shift to remote teaching and learning



chronic disease and 2.5 per cent said they were pregnant. Approximately 3.5 per cent were at high risk in relation to more than one of these categories.

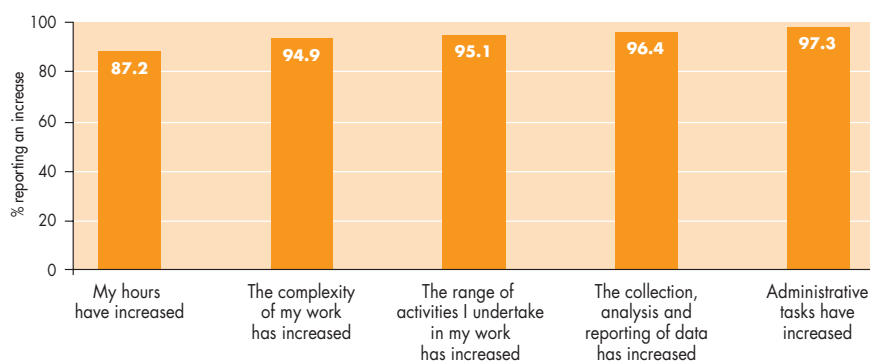
Qualitative comments by teachers made it clear that these early workload changes were made in anticipation that schools would close, that teachers were busy making preparations for when that would happen, but that uncertainty regarding how and when schools would respond made working during this period very difficult. In open comments made on the questionnaire, concerns regarding these shifts in work were often discussed, not only in relation to the anxieties that teachers felt in relation to their personal, family and students' risk; but also in relation to how teachers were currently valued, or undervalued, by their

communities – and, most specifically, by the government. Many teachers' comments suggested that they were striving hard, with additional work, despite feeling at risk and undervalued.

The increases felt during the initial COVID-19 phase compound the increases reported in our 2018 survey of teachers work. In that survey we asked teachers to reflect upon changes to their work over that last five years and found resounding agreement that their work was perceived to have changed, particularly in relation to an increase in administrative and data tasks (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 makes it clear that there has been an experience of intensification of teachers' work since 2013, while Figure 1 suggests

Figure 2. Teachers' report on changes in their work 2013 to 2018 (McGrath-Champ, Wilson, Stacey and Fitzgerald, 2018)



that that process was escalated further at the beginning of the pandemic. This shift, over a much shorter timeframe, included increases in the complexity of teachers' work, additional administrative work and a strong focus on lesson preparation (creating pen-and-paper and online platform packages in anticipation of the forthcoming shift to remote learning). Although the focus and complexity of their work had shifted, less than half of teachers reported an increase in working hours – although it must be remembered that these were already high (McGrath-Champ, Wilson, Stacey and Fitzgerald, 2018; Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Wilson and Stacey, 2019; Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson and Gavin, 2018; Stacey, Wilson and McGrath-Champ, 2020).

Teachers' work intensified again when the pandemic necessitated a shift to remote learning for the majority of students. Again, relative to pre-pandemic conditions, teachers reported escalations in complexity, administration tasks and lesson preparation time. However, the proportion of teachers that reported such rises during this phase of the pandemic was higher than that of the pre-remote phase (see Figure 3).

During the remote learning phase a large majority of teachers (75 per cent) also

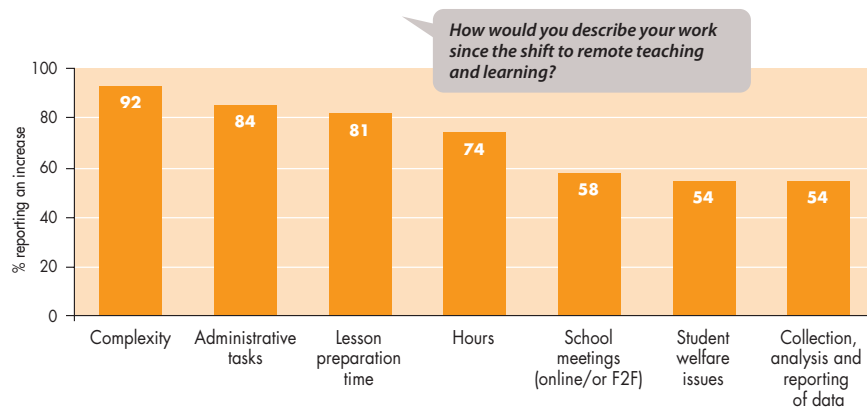
reported an increase in working hours. As with the pre-remote learning phase, smaller but still substantial proportions (>50 per cent) reported increases in school meetings, student welfare issues and data collection, analysis and reporting. It must be remembered that many NSW teachers continued to work on school premises, teaching both in-class and at-home students through remote learning systems.

Further analysis showed that these shifts were felt to similar degrees regardless of the level of school socio-educational disadvantage. As with the pre-remote learning period, the change was felt most in relation to the complexity of teachers' work.

Previous studies have demonstrated intense escalation in the complexity of teachers' work, and conflicting demands placed upon them through work overload (Fitzgerald et al, 2018; McGrath-Champ et al 2018). These circumstances necessitate prioritisation of some tasks over others along the lines of triage (Stacey et al, 2020). Also, this is occurring amidst perceived reductions in central and divisional support for teachers' work, complex shifts in funding, and most significantly, the experience of massive increases in administrative demands, datafication and policy compliance reporting requirements.

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Figure 3. Increases in work demands after the shift to remote teaching and learning

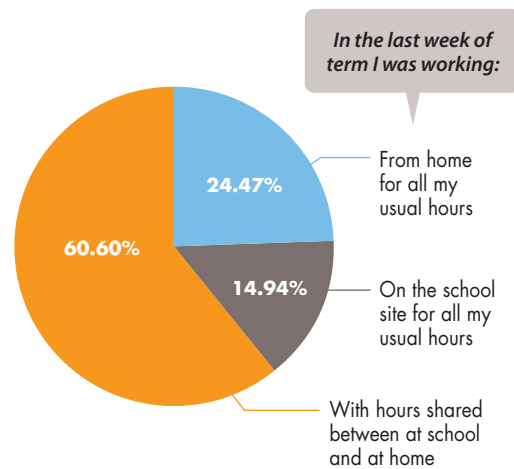


From the perspective of respondents, these changes are driving escalation of teachers' workload. In a report to the NSW Teachers Federation, based on our earlier, large-scale study of teachers' work in NSW public schools, it was documented that while teachers retain focus on matters directly related to working with students in teaching and learning, there is a bulk of evidence that many were struggling, even prior to the pandemic, to preserve this student focus in the face of new work activities and demands (McGrath-Champ et al, 2018).

Teachers felt they were juggling many tasks in early 2020 – for more than 16 per cent of teachers this included maintenance of their full teaching load on school premises; balancing face-to-face contact with a small number of students in their classroom, whilst also delivering remote learning for the large majority. Others, some 60 per cent, taught their classes from both school classrooms and at home; whilst only 24 per cent of teachers were working solely from home for the duration of the pandemic 'lockdown' in NSW. For more than half of the teachers these challenges were overlaid with additional student welfare issues, school meetings and increased data collection and reporting (see Figure 4).

In contrast to the pandemic response in many other parts of the world (UNESCO, 2020), Australia implemented only partial school closures – as schools were kept open for the families of emergency responders and essential workers. Less than one per cent of NSW public school teachers reported that their school was 'closed' at the end of Term 1, the peak of the first wave, and these 85 teachers were in schools where confirmed cases had resulted in an acute response, with the school completely closed for cleaning.

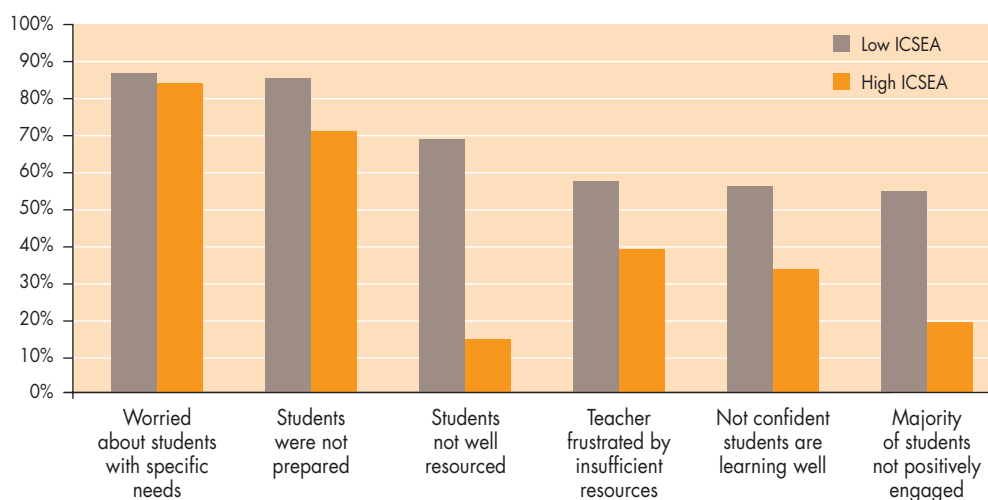
Figure 4. Teachers' work arrangement in the last week of Term 1



The majority of teachers reported that their school was 'partially closed' (49 per cent) or 'not at all closed' (50 per cent).

Many teachers held concerns about how the pandemic was impacting upon their students. Figure 5 shows that teachers reported that students were not prepared for the shift to remote learning; and teachers were almost universally worried about their students who have special needs. However, teachers in low-ICSEA schools were substantially more likely to report other concerns, when compared to teachers in high-ICSEA schools. Few teachers in disadvantaged schools reported that their students were well resourced, positively engaged and learning well via remote learning. Additionally those teachers felt frustrated by insufficient resources for remote learning. These findings are consistent with another survey that found a large minority of educators – 39 per cent in Australia and 42 per cent in New Zealand – reported being only 'somewhat confident' or 'not at all confident' in their school's ability to meet students' learning needs online (Flack et al, 2020).

Figure 5. Percentage of teachers who agree or agree strongly with the following



Together these preliminary findings suggest a sharp pandemic-induced amplification in the intensity and demands of teachers' work, which is experienced alongside teachers' personal and professional concerns regarding the preparedness and resourcing for that change. As a one-off event the pandemic experience in NSW in early 2020 was relatively short-lived and teachers have now rebounded to 'business-as-usual', albeit with restrictions on certain school activities. At time of writing, for instance, music ensembles can proceed, although a 3-metre distance must be kept from 'players of non-reeded woodwind instruments' (NSW Government, 2020). However, as the pandemic extends both temporally and globally, the shifts in teachers' work that it has instigated need further research and careful reflection.

When we consider that the pandemic-shifts in teachers' work overlay recent escalations in teachers' working hours and intensity, the likelihood of detrimental knock-on effects on the teacher workforce is high; particularly if there are ongoing waves of pandemic and extended periods of educational adjustments. We have seen just such a case in the state of Victoria,

and elsewhere around the globe as many countries enter second waves of the pandemic.

Further documentation of the changes, and research analysis of their impacts is needed if we are to steer carefully through a protracted COVID-19 pandemic or other future pandemics. Whilst substantial attention has been drawn to the potential impact upon students (eg, Sonneman and Goss, 2020; Dorn et al, 2020) further attention needs to be focused on understanding the impact upon teachers. Already under duress from workload and work intensification, additional imposts from teaching amidst high-risk circumstances, with sudden shifts in the manner in which their work must be done, has the attendant likelihood of endangering teachers' physical and mental health. In addition, this risk is situated within a profession that is already documented by the NSW Public Service Commission's having high levels of work stress (in 2017, 60 per cent of teachers reported in 2017 work stress at unacceptable levels, compared with 41 per cent for the public sector overall).

Opportunities

Whilst many impacts outlined above are burdensome and negative, teachers in our survey nevertheless voiced positive views on some of the experience. We asked teachers to tell us whether they agreed with a list of potentially positive outcomes from the pandemic and also provided opportunity for them to make their own assessment of positive outcomes that were not on that list.

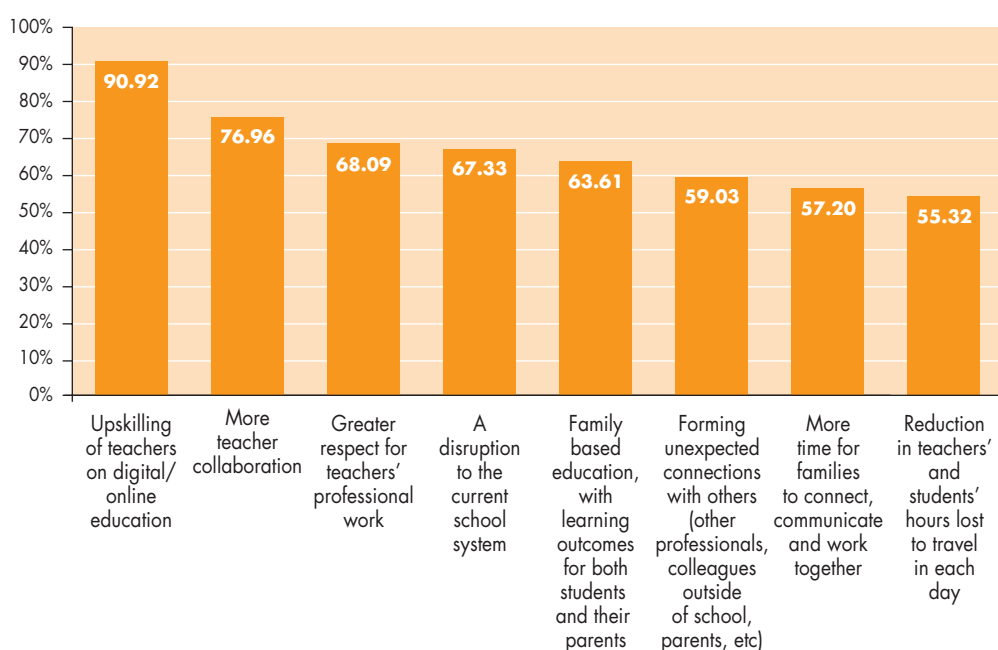
Despite the demands the pandemic put upon teachers, very high proportions agreed that there were also positive outcomes. Figure 6 shows the proportions that agree/agree strongly on the eight potentially positive outcomes. More than half of the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that each of the eight suggestions was a positive outcome. More than 90 per cent of teachers agree or strongly agree that the upskilling of teachers on digital and online education was a positive outcome; and more than 75 per cent

reported more teacher collaboration as a positive outcome. However, it was the third-ranked positive outcome, ‘greater respect for teachers’ professional work’ that attracted the most attention in the qualitative comments.

More than 1,310 qualitative comments were added by teachers in relation to the potential positive outcomes of COVID-19. Comments ranged from single line to several paragraphs. This large proportion (>10 per cent) suggests many teachers were motivated to elaborate on their response to the preceding quantitative items and add their personal perspectives on positive outcomes from COVID-19. A random selection of 600 of these comments was analysed and coded into themes in NVivo12. Twenty-two themes covered a range of positive outcomes, including those listed in Figure 7. Teachers were asked directly about the positives in Figure 7, but many expanded upon these with their personal comments.

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Figure 6. Percentage of teachers who agree/strongly agree on positive outcomes from COVID-19 pandemic



While upskilling of teachers was the positive outcome most teachers agreed with (Figure 6), in the supplementary qualitative comments it attracted less attention. In fact teachers commented on the upskilling of students via remote learning more frequently than the upskilling of teachers – and many argued that the situation had provided a strong stimulus for students to broaden their ICT skills, which were often assumed to be high as ‘digital natives’ but in fact often had large gaps. The lack of comments on teachers’ upskilling may be because it was an obvious and uncontroversial outcome, which needed little additional explanation; and teachers clearly wanted to point out the additional benefits of student upskilling.

The most dominant theme in the qualitative data related to the potential of the pandemic to help lift ‘understanding of the value of teachers’. Many teachers who had rated this as a positive outcome provided further insight in comments, specifically outlining

- that this was a hope, or aspiration, rather than established and backed by evidence:

I do hope that the community and students start to see the value of teachers in the classroom and the work we do, which is taken for granted the majority of the time...

Hopefully the community values the time, energy and commitment of teachers. Hopefully learning is also shaken up so that when school returns priorities are better adjusted.

- that this positive hope was also curtailed by public discourse that suggested some corners of society, and government, were displaying less understanding of the value of teachers:

After a few days of home-based learning in NSW, there was some positivity around how amazing teachers are. But now I tend to find that the general public’s attitude is resentment towards teachers who are ‘not really working’ and are ‘making us do ‘soooooo’ much work with our kids.’

- Many teachers felt frustrated and offended by poor public, and in particular government, acknowledgment of the risks they exposed themselves to as they continued to work; and the efforts that they had expended to support their students and their families:

Although there has been greater respect in some areas, our Prime Minister and many media outlets are still continuing to make alarmist and negative comments regarding the shift to online learning. When your Prime Minister comments that online learning is babysitting – it shows how little respect teachers truly have. And it is a slap in the face after all the hours and hours of work we have been doing to support students and families at this time, let alone supporting our own families. Disappointing.

And:

Even though there is an increased acknowledgement for the work of teachers, from my recent ‘distant’ interactions, parents want teachers back more so as babysitters so they can work from home ... not because parents are worried about their kids missing out on education. I am offended by the statement that teachers have a greater risk of catching COVID from fellow teachers, when we are crammed into rooms with snotty, coughing, sneezing students who CANNOT keep their

The most dominant theme in the qualitative data related to the potential of the pandemic to help lift ‘understanding of the value of teachers’

distance. What about students who have disabilities or who are at risk? What about teachers who have kids of their own who are disabled or at risk?... What about teachers who care for others at risk?

Many additional comments expanded on less equivocal positive outcomes, in relation to

- the opportunities provided for families to learn together;
- the opportunities provided for everyone to reflect on what's important in life;
- the building of positive relationships between teachers, students and families;
- improved engagement and outcomes for some students via remote learning;
- the chance to highlight and fix perceived problems in education;
- the chance to improve lesson plans, assessment and feedback.

The qualitative data reflected a wide diversity of views, but frequently even the most positive comments were tempered by acknowledgement that these were based on hope and 'wishful thinking' rather than confidence that positive outcomes were well-established and sustainable. Many conveyed a sense of disillusionment, as teachers reflected on the poor status their profession now carried in society. Significantly, in the quantitative data, more than 67 per cent of teachers viewed the 'disruption to the current school system' wrought by COVID-19 as a positive outcome. This suggests that many teachers feel that change is needed – even if it may not be the particular changes wrought by COVID-19 in itself.

Teachers' welcoming of the 'disruption' of COVID-19, might well be interpreted as a symptom of the general unease that many

felt with teaching in the pre-COVID world, in which they were subjected to increasing work hours, workload, and increases in administritivia, whilst experiencing a decreasing respect for the profession. Teachers' comments often suggest that, at the very least, the pandemic has shone a light on what they do; and they are hopeful that parents, communities and governments will develop greater respect for that. As one teacher put it,

I do agree that there have been some positives. There has most definitely been a disruption to the current system – but not necessarily in a bad way. I think there have been some changes in people's ideas that will be a benefit in the future. I also think that many people have a new found respect for what teachers do and how they do it.

Conclusion

In this paper we have reported on a preliminary analysis of the changes NSW public school teachers have experienced in their work as a result of COVID-19. These were foregrounded by research documenting increasing work hours, intensification of work demands and complexity and poor status of the teaching profession, even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. When it did, the first wave brought substantial new demands upon an already stretched profession, with an acute rise in work demands, particularly relating to complexity. The rise was felt to a moderate degree in the early pre-remote learning period and subsequently was felt more intensely when teaching and learning moved to remote systems.

The qualitative data from teachers' comments on the questionnaire highlighted

The qualitative data from teachers' comments on the questionnaire highlighted the importance of esteem for the teaching profession.

the importance of esteem for the teaching profession. How teachers feel they are viewed by society, including political leaders, tempers how they feel about their work. Teachers often report that they do not mind working hard, and they strongly value what they do. However, many comments reflect on the low status of the profession; and many appear to yearn for greater validation of teachers' work.

The unusual circumstances of COVID-19, whilst enormously disruptive and with many negative impacts, appear to have provided a fleeting moment of potential validation for teachers. It may be this which is one of the most important 'opportunities'

produced by the COVID-19 pandemic: a chance to tackle the esteem we feel for and show to teachers, so as to bolster the ultimate sustainability of the profession.

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L-R: Rachel Wilson, Meghan Stacey and Susan McGrath-Champ

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About the Paper

The authors report on a system-wide survey of teachers in NSW public schools, undertaken during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. They document shifting workload demands, including up-skilling, teaching via remote learning, and increased administrative requirements. Drawing on data and comments from the more than 10,000 teachers who participated in the survey, they identify professional challenges and difficulties faced during the pandemic; and also opportunities emerging from the flux of change occurring in 2020.

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