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Coping through the unknown: School staff wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Approximately one quarter of all teachers experience feelings of stress throughout their careers, for many this leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout. In this article we present a case study that explores the wellbeing of three teaching staff from an Australian Primary School, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping devised by Lazarus and Folkman was used as the framework to interpret this group of experiences. The findings indicated that the additional stress induced by fear of the ‘unknown’ imposed by the pandemic further intensified the emotional toll experienced by participants. These emotional responses included feelings of guilt about their providing the best education for students, anxiety about the unknown implications on schooling and frustration at the lack of communication and inconsistent decision making by people holding leadership positions. Despite this, these teaching staff shared many positive strategies for coping and grow through the experience.

Research in the field repeatedly highlights the importance of teacher wellbeing in relation to facing the many day-to-day challenges in delivering effective teaching practice (Aulén, Pakarinen, Feldt & Lerkkanen, 2021; Hascher & Waber, 2021). Specifically, studies have shown that teacher wellbeing is negatively associated with psychological constructs such as teacher stress and burnout (Burić, Slišković & Penezić, 2019) and positively with teacher coping, resilience and professional growth (Beltman, Mansfield & Price, 2011), as well as teacher motivation and commitment (Cameron & Lovett, 2015). In 2020, life changed dramatically because of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) and the impact on the teaching profession was significant worldwide. However, given the unique circumstances brought about by COVID-19 it is important to understand the idiosyncratic nature of teaching as experienced by teachers in the context of different countries during the pandemic. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of primary school teachers in a small school in an outer suburb in Victoria, Australia.

Context of the study

Schools in Victoria, Australia, experienced many disruptions due to the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers and teaching support staff were faced with the challenge of adjusting and adapting to new health regulations, repeated lockdowns and unwanted media attention on the profession at a time where teachers were trying to navigate a ‘new normal’, especially in curriculum design and implementation of pedagogical practices that aligned with online delivery. The national literacy and numeracy testing program (NAPLAN) was cancelled (Urban, 2020). Navigating suitable class sizes (Burin, 2020), dealing with parental confusion (Duffy, 2020b) and issues with social distancing characterised many schools (Riches, 2020). Easter holidays were unusual at best: no catching up with friends or family and a growing sense of the unknown for educators moving forward. As such, there was a sustained sense of anxious confusion for families (Baker, 2020b) and uncertainty within the education system.

As the instability of Term Two was ending, and students returned to campuses, the effective administration of schools and the effects of the lockdown on student learning were a continuing feature in the media. Teachers, students and schools were persistently affected, with dozens of schools and early childhood learning centres closed due to infections across the state (Department of Education & Training, 2020). Teaching staff commenced the Winter holidays with an unsettling, yet familiar, sense of the unknown. Despite assurances that schools were safe, the largest outbreak in the state was attached to a private school in the western suburbs of Melbourne (Bucci, 2020). What followed in Term Three and into Term Four was an extended and difficult lockdown as case numbers escalated. Research has shown that there were substantial and sustained effects on students and their families during these periods of home learning while juggling work and domestic life (Varela & Fedynich, 2021; Wang, Pang, Zhou, Ma & Wang, 2021). Teaching staff had to accept the responsibility to adjust their practices and negotiate unfamiliar synchronous online platforms, such as Zoom or WebEx (an online platform for educational delivery in Victoria), for teaching and
learning, as well as deal with their own isolation and the needs of their families.

This opening contextual material points to significant disruption that had an impact on the wellbeing of teachers and school staff and affected their ability to cope. In this situation there were potentially adverse effects for teachers, and other education staff, including the possibility of burnout, which can impact students’ learning, connectedness and educational outcomes (Gu & Day, 2007; Miller, 2021).

As researchers we were interested in understanding how this period of rapid change and needed adjustment by education staff was experienced and how these staff members were able to cope. We were especially interested in the impact of the pandemic and lockdowns on primary school education staff. Thus, the goal of this small qualitative case study is to examine the nature of the experiences of three education staff in one primary school and investigate the reported effects at a personal and professional level. Our research focus is this: How did Victorian primary school education staff cope with the changes brought by the Covid-19 pandemic? More specifically we developed the following research questions:

1. What were the experiences of primary school teachers and school support staff during the Covid-19 pandemic, both personally and professionally?
2. What were the most significant stressors for primary school staff during Covid19?
3. What coping strategies did teachers and support staff employ in response to the stress of the Covid-19?

In order to understand these experiences and engage with the research questions we needed a guiding theory that enabled us to interpret the experiential data and investigate the notion of coping. We found the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1984) useful because it provided a dynamic and multifaceted way of appraising stress and examining the efficacy of strategies to deal with stress, especially in the context of profound change. This theory is explained in detail in the conceptual framework below.

In sum, this article presents a small-scale study of school staff and their experiences of stress and the strategies used for coping during the pandemic of 2020. Despite the small number of participants, we believe that it contributes to an evolving body of empirical research about the experiences of teachers and other school support staff during this period of change in 2020 and has insights for the work of education staff beyond 2020.

Literature review

In this section we consider the literature that relates to the research focus of this article. As informed by the literature, the authors consider the notions of change, coping, job efficacy, resilience, teacher burnout and the support teacher wellbeing and coping in the midst of change.

Change in the workplace

Due to the recent and unprecedented nature of the pandemic internationally, research about the effects of change is emerging but limited (Aperribai, Cortabarria, Aguirre, Verche & Borges, 2020; Jain, Lall & Singh, 2021), particularly in Victoria, where residents have faced some of the longest lockdowns in the world (Russell et al., 2020). As of 2021, there is only a small body of research that deals with the implications of this change for students and schools, and even less literature about the effects of COVID-19 lockdowns, and the movement to remote learning, on the wellbeing of teachers (Pressley, 2021; Watson, 2020)

Coping

Learning to cope is an important factor in dealing with change, especially rapid change Folkman and Moskowitz (2004). observe that ‘cop-
‘the main sources of stress experienced by a particular teacher will be unique to him or her and will depend on the precise complex interaction between their personality, values, skill and circumstances’ (p. 29). Interestingly, Lei (2017) suggests that one of the keys to improved teacher resilience in the face of profound change is to ‘stay positive in a traumatic situation’ (p. 25). Moreover, several studies within the broader literature have pointed to how educators successfully cope with stress through strategies that focus explicitly on resilience (Botwinik, 2007; Clement, 2017; Richards, 2012; Yong & Yue, 2007). Navigating the changes caused by a global pandemic could be described as traumatic and has amplified the intensity of environmental stressors, especially for teachers.

In the context of understanding teacher wellbeing, teacher burnout is closely aligned with the concept of ‘appraisal’ that is how an individual processes and decides that the experience is a stressor. For example, McCarthy et al. (2019) found in their research that much of the variance in burnout symptoms was due to ‘variance between teachers not between schools’ (p. 296). These differences in personality and characteristics not only affect teacher stress but they can lead to different levels of resilience (Chang, 2009). Observes that ‘though many teachers experience burnout, there are some who stay engaged and revitalised. How do they keep themselves energised?’ (p. 214). Considering these issues, this study focused on the individual and how they personally have coped with the stress of teaching through COVID-19 and all the profound and life-affecting changes it has brought.

Teacher burnout

One of the possible outcomes of significant change, a lack of job efficacy in response to this change and ineffective coping strategies is burnout (Shoji et al., 2015). Burnout, as defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981), is a ‘prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job’ and has three main elements: 1) depersonalisation or cynicism, in which there is a detached response to the job, 2) low self-efficacy whereby there is a sense of lack of achievement, and 3) exhaustion in which there is a ‘depletion of one’s emotional and physical resources’ (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001, p. 399). In reporting the data in this study, we focus on emotional exhaustion, as this has been found to be a core component in studying teacher burnout (Keller, Chang, Becker, Goetz & Frenzel, 2014).

It should be pointed out that there is substantial overlap between job efficacy, perceived self-efficacy and burnout, and there is a complex interaction and temporal association between the constructs. As such, while they have been treated separately in this article for sake of clarity, they are, in fact, coextensive and interdependent (Molero Jurado, Pérez-Fuentess, Atria, Oropesa Ruiz & Gámez Linares, 2019).

Teacher burnout has long been studied (Freudenburger, 1974; Blasé, 1986; Farber, 1984; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978), with many early researchers assuming that stress and burnout were interchangeable as key terms. However, an individual can be stressed without experiencing burnout (Guglielmi & Tatro, 1998). Furthermore, it has been suggested that stress is not necessarily always negative; in fact, ‘a certain amount of stress is needed to motivate action’ (Farber, 1984, p. 326). Although this early research is valuable, and there is a wide variety of literature on the topic of teacher stress, the most influential research appears to be over forty years old, and the relevance of the findings about burnout in a COVID-19 impacted 2020 might need to be revised (Gewinn, 2021).

Leadership support

In terms of considering the coping outcomes of educational workers, the level of leadership support is critical. Social support plays an important role in coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), and many studies have shown the significance of this support, especially from leadership, when dealing with stress in the workplace (Burchelli & Bartram, 2006; Farber, 1984; Sarros & Sarros, 1992). Other factors include a respectful workplace (Sarros & Sarros, 1992) and approachable colleagues (Burchelli and Bartram, 2006). Supportive and approachable leadership is crucially important in stressful situations (Gu and Day, 2007) and schools can reduce teacher stress by implementing strategies such as consulting staff on managerial decisions, improving teacher agency (Klassen, 2010) and providing positive feedback (Kyriacou, 2001).

Research has shown that supporting teachers, both socially and professionally, helps reduce incidents of teacher burnout. Gu and Day (2007) found that staff collegiality had a positive effect on professional outlooks, while teacher dissatisfaction with support has been a contributing factor for teacher emotional exhaustion (Fiorilli, Albanese, Gabola & Pepe, 2017). The importance of this social support cannot be undervalued as it is key to preventing teacher burnout and improving overall teacher wellbeing. Previous literature has, therefore, highlighted the various environmental stressors in teaching and how they can have a significant impact on the individual stress levels of teachers and how stress can be mediated by their ways of coping (Auën et al., 2021). As such, stress and coping constructs are inexplicently intertwined and best understood conceptually as transactional and interacting.

Conceptual framework

A well-known model for understanding the relationship between stress and coping is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman contended that a person’s capacity to cope and adjust to challenges, and problems, is a consequence of the interactions (transactions) between a person and their environment. Specifically, the model promotes understanding of how people react to, appraise and cope with stressors that can have an impact on their psychosocial and emotional wellbeing (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

Furthermore, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping has been widely used for research exploring the impact of environmental stressors in different workplaces (Matheyn et al., 1986; O’Connor & Clarke, 1990; Sarros & Sarros, 1992), as well as the teaching profession (Herman, Reinke & Eddy, 2020; McCarthy, Lambert, O’Donnell & Melendres, 2009). For example, Chang (2009) drew on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping to suggest that during a person’s primary appraisal of a situation, if the situation is seen as a threat to an important goal or commitment, the stronger the emotional response will be. Chang employs this ‘transactional model’ to understand the negative emotions and exhaustion experienced when a person is faced with significant job stress. The negative emotional responses that occur as part of this stress response are frequently anxiety, guilt, and frustration, or even anger and possible burnout. Chang brings attention to the importance of reappraisal in considering stress and coping. Reappraisal is defined by Lazarus and Folkman as the attempt to reinterpret an emotional situation in a way that alters its meaning and changes its emotional impact. However, unlike Lazarus and Folkman’s ‘concept of reappraisal’, Chang suggests that reappraisal should be viewed in terms of a process of regulating one’s emotions through coping. Despite the differences in how appraisal was conceptualised, Chang’s findings highlight the importance of the concept of ‘reappraisal’ and how it can help regulate an individual’s response to environmental stressors induced by change in the workplace and perceived threat.

According to Lazarus and Folkman, dealing with stress has two coping mechanisms: First, ‘emotion focused coping’ which aims to reduce unpleasant emotions through disclosing the emotion, for example speaking to a friend or an emotional release such as crying. Second, there is ‘problem-focused coping’ in which the person deals with the problem rather than the emotion: they try to find ways to solve the problem to reduce the potential stress. Lazarus, in later research, (2006) states that problem-focused coping and emotion focused coping intersect and complement each other (Lazarus, 2006).
From a psychological perspective, personality and temperament can influence how one perceives life events and responds to challenges and problems. By definition, temperament refers to an individual’s behavioural style; that is the ‘how’ of behaviour. Personality describes ‘what’ a person does or ‘why’ they do what they do (Rothbart, 2011). In the context of the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, personality and temperament underpin the process of appraisal. Moreover, ‘the process of categorizing an encounter and its various facets, with respect to its significance for wellbeing’ (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984, p. 31). These appraisals can then lead to stress which has been defined as ‘a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources or endangering his or her wellbeing’ (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984, p.19). Therefore, if an individual appraises the situation, and it is perceived to be a threat, then there is a strong likelihood the experience is seen as stressful.

The intensity of the stress depends on the importance of the commitment or goal that is being threatened (Spill, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). First, a person encounters a primary appraisal, where it is established whether the event is a threat to a commitment or goal, and if it is potentially positive or irrelevant. If the event is found to be a threat to the goal, then a secondary appraisal is required. During this phase, the available resources are analysed, and a person might ask, ‘what do I have here that will help me?’ If resources are found to be insufficient this leads to stress.

Given the idiosyncratic nature of how individuals appraise and reappraise stressful events or situations, we expect that teacher’s experiences to the stressors brought about by COVID-19 in different countries, are unique to their contextual situation. Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of individual teachers and how they responded to the situational challenges when confronted with the repeated lockdowns as experienced by teachers in Australia during the pandemic.

Methodology

This small case study research focused on the coping experiences of three teaching staff at a primary school on the Mornington Peninsula in Melbourne, Australia who were known colleagues of the first author. The school has about 400 students and 30 staff. The names of the consenting teacher participants (Table 1) are given as pseudonyms for anonymity. The three teaching staff include two highly experienced educators and one teacher in her first year.

Participants were invited to express their personal reflections of their experiences in a reflective diary from April to June 2020. Entries were made at their discretion. The journal entries served to identify discussion points of the participants especially in terms of specific emotional responses to the pandemic.

The interviews facilitated the use of stories as data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and offered an opportunity for participants to share their personal experiences and coping practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the Winter holiday time, using Zoom due to the lockdown. Participants volunteered their time to be a part of the study, and no incentives were given. Guiding questions were employed but considerable flexibility was allowed to facilitate participant voice and depth of exploration of stress and coping experiences.

The participant’s diary entries were read before the interview and employed to construct relevant interview questions for each participant.

| Pseudonym | Age | Role | Experience (in years) |
|------------|-----|------|----------------------|
| Chloe      | 40  | Senior teacher | 16 |
| Rebecca    | 23  | Foundation teacher | 0.5 |
| Elizabeth  | 60  | Teaching support staff | 18 |

Interviews ran for approximately 45 min each and were transcribed using Express Scribe Transcription Software. Only the interview data is referred to in the findings below. No member checking or further contact was possible due to constraints caused by lockdowns and the availability of participants.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data collected by the first author. The first author then did preliminary thematic coding and analysis of the data according to emergent themes from patterns in the data and made connections to the selected conceptual framework and the research questions. After transcription and preliminary analysis, the three authors read the data, draft coding and analysis work of the first author separately and then met to discuss an approach to analysis. It was decided that a combination of thematic and individualised multiple case studies would be used to structure the reporting of findings from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Stake, 2006). This enabled a sense of capturing the situated personal experience of participants but also enabled the exploration of several broad themes that link to evidence in the literature. Detailed analysis using the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping was undertaken in terms of the individual data and interwoven with the themes so that some comparison across individual cases became possible. All three authors were involved in developing and writing the individual cases and thematic analysis.

Results

In this section, interview data is analysed using the model of Folkman and Lazarus (1984), with a focus on the perceived threat to personal goals during the pandemic and teacher appraisal of their situation, including the resources that were available. In addition, attention is given to how the three teachers coped with the stress due to the lockdown and the coping strategies employed, emphasising the ways that the ‘problem focused’ or ‘emotion focused’ strategies co-exist, and the reappraisal of the COVID-19 event as threat. Findings and discussion are presented using labels from the Lazarus and Folkman model as a thematic and integrated sequence to better contextualise the data.

The event- global pandemic

COVID-19 brought many changes to school, home, and work life for these three teachers, as evidenced in the interview data. It became the overwhelming new reality for them, and points to major change as a catalyst for stress (Yong & Yue, 2007). The participants in the project were all affected by this dramatic change both personally and professionally. Chloe and Elizabeth recall watching the situation overseas in its infancy during the start of the school year in late January, with little understanding of the impact it was about to have on their lives.

Elizabeth stated: ‘I think we thought it was an overseas thing and we weren’t quite sure what was going to happen’, while Rebecca described the situation as rapidly going ‘pear shaped’.

The initial shock of mid-March 2020 was felt by them all, as the state was locked down and school had to scramble to move online. Consequently, it was the changes brought by the escalating event of COVID-19 spread as it impacted Victoria, that triggered the need for appraisals, considering the heightened stress for the teachers and the necessity of coping.

Appraising the new reality

Appraisal is a form of evaluating, and the teachers in this study had to evaluate their personal and professional response to the COVID-19 reality that was thrust upon them.

Primary appraisal: the threat to the goal

Collectively, the participants all made primary appraisals of the situation based on an educational goal, which was to fully support the
learning needs of their students. However, COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdowns was a clear threat to that goal. As a graduate teacher, Rebecca, barely one term into her career, said: ‘I found my feet and I was then ripped away from that, having to learn something completely different’. Having finally felt she was performing her job successfully after her internship in 2019, she then was not able to perform her educational role in the same way, as everything had changed in terms of her connection to her students. Rebecca thus felt a high level of threat to her educational goal as a beginning teacher.

Chloe, as an experienced teacher, initially appraised the situation positively and was ready to meet the challenge of doing online teaching and facilitating online learning. Yet for her, it was a fair bit of frustration in terms of as teachers we knew what we needed to do, and we understand the technology, but we were being held back by the uncertainty of the lockdown situation and unpreparedness in terms of leadership and technology support; therefore, she felt she was not able to perform her job to the best of her abilities because of the unpredictability of what she faced. Elizabeth was faced with a different situation as at the time she was on partial leave from the school due to medical reasons. She immediately recognised the threat to her job satisfaction and ability to maintain interpersonal connection: ‘I didn’t get to finish the term, I didn’t get to say goodbye to the kids, or be part of all the stuff around online stuff in remote learning’. Clearly all three participants appraised the lockdown and the necessity for online learning as a threat to their goal of job efficacy.

**Secondary appraisal: assessing the resources**

The situation was appraised by all three to be a threat to their commitment, especially Rebecca as an inexperienced teacher still finding her way in the teaching profession. According to Folkman and Lazarus (1984), secondary appraisal is the phase in which resources are assessed for sufficiency to meet the demands of the threat. Chloe immediately began focussing on the technology needed to do her job. She noted: ‘our school is not very tech savvy; we’re held back a little bit with technology and so I think I had friends at other schools who were doing Zoom meetings and recording lessons and we were nowhere near that’. She could clearly see the required resources; in this case staff preparation, technological support, and consultation from leadership were not sufficient to undertake her work in the way she felt was required and had urgent concerns she was ‘going to be overwhelmed and over-worked’. Chloe is an experienced teacher with a wide network of teacher colleagues beyond the school.

Accessing this network allowed her to see what other schools were doing and make comparisons. She acknowledged, ‘I guess because I had that comparison with other teachers and other schools, I felt like we were really behind’. She had the foresight to see what was ahead for education, and from this forward thinking she had the capacity to plan; however, she was concerned as she knew her school wasn’t as prepared as they should have been.

Elizabeth, when appraising her resources regarding other risks, after having breast cancer in the previous year, was faced with having no adequate preparation at all. After a visit to her oncologist during Term One, she was told not to return to school in a face-to-face capacity. Describing her reaction to this news, she puts it bluntly: ‘Right, that’s it then, you’re not going back to school today’. It happened abruptly for her, and she had no time to prepare herself for the task of working online that was to come. In contrast to Elizabeth’s years of experience, Rebecca was just finding her feet in the classroom and felt ‘kind of sheltered within teaching’ in working closely with her more experienced colleagues, so when the changes were announced she found that ‘it was just a whirlwind, I couldn’t get my head around one thing because then it would change’. As a graduate teacher with less than one term in the classroom, she simply didn’t know what resources she would need to apply to reduce the threat to her performance as an educator. Her lack of experience meant she did not have the personal resources, in this case the perceived self-efficacy, which would be sufficient to meet the demands of working remotely in an online context.

The participants felt they had no control over the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) changes and that many school level decisions that were being made related to technology implementation rather than preparation and training for complex online teaching environments. Chloe noted that ‘leadership were also not listening, they were not open to our concerns and I guess the lines of communication weren’t really open, it was sort of one-sided communication, there was never any teacher input into anything’.

She felt that the pedagogical changes for teaching online needed to be addressed and dealt with quickly. She described ‘frustration, in that the technology can’t be that hard to implement, why are we being held back so much, why weren’t we allowed to just get in there and get going and prepare’. She could see that staff needed training and a knowledge of the online platforms they were about to use, but she could also see a problem for leadership: ‘I don’t think they had the knowledge of the technology’.

Rebecca shared these concerns with going online. She felt she ‘had to go online like you were really self-assured in what you are doing, and I had absolutely no idea’. She was worried about the lack of training she had received to begin this phase: ‘We didn’t really do practice runs or anything like that, so we never knew how it was going to look before we did it’. Elizabeth was also worried about her lack of readiness, as due to her sudden departure from school previously, and then coming back to online learning, she ‘didn’t get to be part of all the education around online stuff in remote learning’. She was not a part of any collegial conversations; she also did not have the material resources needed to go online, as school support staff are not provided with DET laptops.

Clearly there were several reasons as to why the resources were insufficient to meet the demands presented. There was a lack of leadership and collaboration with staff in terms of professional learning. There was no online training and preparation given, and there was a lack of positive beliefs and feelings of confidence about the changes wrought by COVID-19. Even Chloe, who was able to use foresight to come up with personal solutions, felt her abilities and ideas were being hindered. It is evident, therefore, that all three participants appraised demands to far outweigh the resources that were available. In sum, the changes brought by lockdown had not only been appraised as a threat to their professional efficacy but created unprecedented demand for which they had insufficient resources.

**Stress and the emotional responses through the unknown**

The secondary appraisal and lack of resources led to high levels of stress for all three participants. This stress was manifested in different ways for each of them. How an individual responds to stress is dependant on their personality, as well as characteristics such as age and experience (Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1978). They each displayed signs of exhaustion, one of the dimensions of job burnout as defined by Maslach (1981). In addition, Chang (2009) states, ‘emotions are aroused by the appraisals we make about events’ (p. 206). The three participants in this research all made negative appraisals of their capacity to perform their educational roles in the context of moving online, and this process clearly resulted in stress. This stress was initially expressed as negative emotions for each of them and the differences in their responses, although faced with the same event, lead to diverse emotional responses. For Chloe this emotional exhaustion presented as frustration; for Rebecca it exacerbated her already present anxiety; and for Elizabeth it included feelings of guilt.

**A frustrated Chloe**

Frustration is considered the ‘most frequently experienced unpleasant emotion reported by teachers’ (Chang, 2009, p. 207) and it was a
word used often by Chloe to describe her experience Sarros and Sarros (1992), clarified ‘the importance of supervisor and principal support cannot be underestimated as a critical resource’ (p. 8). Chloe felt not only unsupported by leadership, but that ‘we’re treated very much like their students rather than we are professionals’. This led to feelings of frustration as she ‘could really feel the pressure from the parents’ and could clearly ‘see the parents were stressed which was making me stressed’.

Leadership at the school had originally dissuaded teachers from communicating with families, a decision that Chloe disagreed with. She de-spaired, ‘I just didn’t understand why leadership were stopping us from communicating with parents. This increased the frustration for Chloe, as her goal was to be an effective teacher, and this was becoming increasingly difficult without being able to communicate with families. She also was extremely frustrated by the ‘really slow approach’ taken by leadership and the lack of ‘communication and collaboration and leadership lack of asking for the teachers input’, which is a key strategy for supportive leadership (Kyriacou, 1978).

Chloe stated:

I had that comparison with other teachers and other schools I felt like we were really behind, so I guess it was a little bit of anxiety but probably more frustration about that the technology can’t be that hard to implement, why were we being held back so much, why we weren’t allowed to just get in there and get going and prepare.

This and other interview responses suggest there was ultimately no staff consultation. She was frustrated not only by being disconnected from her students’ families primarily, but also by the sense that she knew what would work but wasn’t being asked. She strongly believed during remote learning ‘as a teacher you want to make sure that you are delivering things correctly and that you are doing your job, which is to teach, not just to deliver activities’ and she felt she was unable to do this. She reported that ‘in terms of doing my job properly, I wasn’t doing that’. She believed that she had the solutions and resources that would meet the demands but was unable to use them.

An anxious Rebecca

The first year in the classroom is often a stressful time for beginning educators (Greer & Greer, 1992). Teacher self-efficacy is a constant source of stress for many graduates (Rieg et al., 2007), and for Rebecca this desire to do her job well produced constant feelings of ‘self-inflicted anxiety’. This teacher anxiety is often ‘triggered by a lack of preparedness to teach’ (Chang, 2009, p. 207), and for Rebecca, this was most certainly the case. She stated: ‘I think the planners were hard because we were writing them without knowing how it was really going to be introduced and how it was going to be set up’. She put a lot of pressure on herself: ‘I was disgusting, my brain just went full graduate teacher, and it was a mess’. Rebecca was trying to do the best she could but recognised that ‘I put a lot of pressure on myself because I always want it to be really well done’. However, she was finding it hard, as ‘things obviously didn’t go to plan’.

This underlying state of anxiety intensified as time went on: ‘I build all these things up in my little mind and so I put extra stress and extra pressure onto myself, which is just me, it’s not anything that has even happened’. Rebecca found that being ‘stuck at home on your own’ was quite a challenge as she didn’t have the support she would have in a school environment, she hadn’t ‘had that time with my mentor’. Farber, in his early research (1984) found teachers perceive that leadership prefer people who don’t ‘make waves and don’t have problems’ (p. 329). Rebecca’s perspective when feeling unsure was to find her own solutions: ‘I don’t want to seem like a pestere’, she stated in the interview, so instead she decided ‘rather than ask for help I just try and work something out, I would rather just figure it out on my own’. However, this decision resulted in creating a greater sense of anxiety as she stated: ‘putting pressure on myself trying to be this Wonder Woman’.

Elizabeth’s sense of guilt

Guilt is an emotion many educators feel ‘due to the nature of caring and feeling responsible for students’ (Chang, 2009, p. 208) and for Elizabeth this was an emotion that was experienced often over the course of the first half of 2020. She felt she was letting her team down by ‘not being part of that team’ as preparations were made for remote learning. However, most of her guilt was due to the children she works with. She stated in the interview: ‘I’m support staff, so I’m there to support and I knew there were a couple of my kids doing it tough’.

This made her feel ‘guilty as I wasn’t there for them, … I wasn’t there for the teachers to support …them’. She expressed this feeling further when reflecting on her sense of self-worth and job efficacy: ‘It’s just like half of you wasn’t there; you were just this home person instead of the person at work’. Elizabeth, due to her earlier absence from school, recounted feelings of isolation and this continued as school returned to face-to-face towards the end of Term Two. Because of her medical condition she was unable to be there in person: ‘When everyone went back to school, I didn’t and there was no more remote learning for anyone, so that was it, I had no contact with any of them’. So, for Elizabeth, in addition to feelings of stress and isolation she also experienced guilt because of not being present for the students she works with.

In sum, for the three participants these negative emotions were a direct consequence of COVID-19 lockdown and the perceived lack of practical support for their professional work. Chloe was frustrated with decisions that were out of her control, Rebecca was feeling anxious as a graduate teacher, while Elizabeth felt a sense of guilt at not being present to support her students and professional colleagues.

Coping through the unknown

Folkman and Lazarus (1984) consider that stress leads to coping responses and that these coping responses could be defined within two key distinctions: ‘problem focused coping’ and ‘emotion focused coping’. The participants in this research all coped in similar ways. However, it is important to note that these strategies for coping were specifically in response to the conditions imposed by COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. All the participants coped by

1. Connecting with others. Speaking with friends and family about their situation and what was happening for them in the complexity of their employment
2. Physical exercise. All participants stated that they exercised regularly and that this was one of the few freedoms in lockdown.
3. Creating new opportunities for professional practices. All the participants tried to create new routines for their work and attempted to develop new skills for online learning.

These strategies can be defined within the parameters of problem focused and emotion focused coping and are explored below.

Emotion focused coping

Several of the key findings within the stress and coping research domain involve the importance of social support and exercise (Botwinik, 2007; Clement, 2017; Richards, 2012). Social support and exercise sit within the range of emotion focused coping and were used frequently as coping strategies by all participants. Chloe walked her dog regularly with a friend, following social distancing rules ‘in terms of debriefing on the day and just getting a clear head and a clear mind ready for the next day I think definitely helped’. Rebecca also found the benefits of exercise, by taking home equipment from her gym ‘I exercised for my brain, my brain needs it otherwise I think I would have a mental breakdown’. This correlates with the findings of Rieg, Paquette and Chen (2007) who found that graduates used physical exercise to ‘expunge anxiety’ (p. 221). Rebecca would also converse with her mentor
via the phone at the end of most days, regularly discussing the highs and lows of the day: ‘She’d kind of just blurt and rant and we’d go cool, you’ve vented, that’s good, and then we’d hang up’. As Rebecca shares an office with her mentor this inability to ‘navigate time’ together was a direct effect of COVID-19 restrictions, however the regular debrief on the phone was a suitable alternative.

Elizabeth found social support through connecting with school staff via regularly held WebEx: ‘It was just nice to see your friends, because it is a family’. The importance of these staff meetings was highlighted for Elizabeth when an online staff meeting was cancelled. She reflected: ‘It did affect me, when I saw that, and I was surprised that it affected me; it showed how much I was looking forward to seeing everyone’. Elizabeth would have received that social support at school normally through engaging in her many roles in the school: support staff member, librarian, and keeper of the multitude of school animals. This social support and exercise were vital elements to school staff coping throughout Term Two.

Problem focused coping

Due to the unprecedented challenge to schooling brought by COVID-19 in Term Two, 2020 problem focused coping strategies were especially important to deal with technological change. School environments were an altered pedagogical space and the three participants in this project were stressed and experiencing negative emotions as a response to this situation. Problem focused strategies were utilised to cope.

For Chloe, the stress resulting from a lack of control over decisions taken by leadership was dealt with through teamwork, problem-solving with her colleagues: ‘having a team where we are all so collaborative...we took each other’s expertise and worked with that’. This collaborative approach by the team as they settled into online learning also has the benefit of reduced workload: ‘I think that alleviated a lot of workload and a lot of stress’. This workload decrease is important, as extra hours worked by teachers are ‘detrimental to staff mental health’ (Garrick et al., 2017). Both Chloe and Rebecca also coped by reducing their workload as they could shut down their computers when they chose. Their problem-solving was about the efficient allocation of time so that their wellbeing was protected. For Chloe it ‘was good that we were able to finish at 3:30 and close everything down on [Microsoft] 365, because you spend so much of your day sitting online’. Rebecca stated: ‘I would try and log off about 4 o’clock if I didn’t have any meetings’.

For Elizabeth it was the ability to stick to routines: ‘I’d still get up and do my same routine in the morning as if I was going to school’. Her solution to dealing with all the uncertainty that surrounded her was to maintain a sense of order in her life. For all participants the problem solving strategies became important for coping with the profound change to online education and not being with others in a school setting.

An individual’s ability to cope is dependent on the availability of resources and ‘constraints that inhibit the use of these resources’ (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984, p. 158). For these teachers, there were many constraints placed on the available resources. They moved through the emotional responses by talking to friends and family and exercising for their mental health. They were all able to apply a problem focused approach eventually as they upskilled to deal with the situation and took control of their workload and time management. Therefore, these two coping strategy classifications did indeed co-exist for each of the participants and in fact complemented each other.

Reappraisal

The ‘problem focused’ and ‘emotion focused’ strategies used by school staff to cope with the stress of educating through a global pandemic have been explored throughout this article, and it has been shown that they are indeed interwoven. Educators utilised a mixture of both strategies to cope through change experiences. As these three participants moved through the experiences of teaching online, there were clear opportunities for reappraisal. Elizabeth was reassured once she attended school and met with the IT support and was set up with everything needed for online learning. She stated: ‘I was part of all that and included in the class meetings with the kids that I’ve worked with’. Chloe felt relieved once her team was working collaboratively online: ‘The whole remote learning experience was a really good experience for a teacher to go through in terms of learning about technology and how to enhance your teaching with technology, I think it was fabulous PD’. Through reframing her experience, she saw it as pivotal to effective professional learning.

Rebecca learnt to reappraise with the pressure she was putting on herself: ‘Why am I pretending like I am [dealing with this situation]. I should just try and embrace the fact that we’re at home, and so I did!’ By letting go of the perception that she must be excellent in this environment, she relaxed into the role and the experience then became a positive for her: ‘It showed I could do more, and I was ready to do more and not be blanketed’. As a result, her confidence grew dramatically through this experience. Through this reappraisal process and consequent acceptance of the situation, the stress was still present but had been reappraised as a challenge rather than a threat. It was recognised as ‘potential for gain or growth’ (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984, p. 33) and this ensured teaching staff could eventually feel that they were doing the job to the best of their abilities, given the resources available.

Reappraisal is treated as a discrete construct in this section, following the model of Lazarus and Folkman. However, this construct should also be understood as intricately connected to emotion regulation and so properly sits in emotion-focused coping as described above.

The ‘Transactional Model of Stress and Coping’ (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984) conceptualises the ways in which people react to, appraise and cope with stressors influence the impact of stressful conditions on their wellbeing. Individuals who have experienced profound stress will often find something positive has resulted from the experience (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004), and this was the case for these three participants. The changes brought by COVID-19 initially produced negative emotional responses, including high levels of stress, which manifested as guilt, anxiety and frustration. These are all signs of emotional exhaustion, as a dimension of job burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). However, all three participants overcame these initial effects, adapted and positively reappraised their experiences.

For Chloe it was the satisfaction of learning new skills and improving her teaching, eventually done on her own terms. While for Rebecca it was the fact that she was able to not only ‘embrace’ the situation ultimately, but her confidence grew as she supported her team with her excellent knowledge of digital technology.

As Elizabeth reflected in her post interview journal entry, it became ‘such a rollercoaster ride!!!’ However new skills and knowledge were taken from the experience of 2020 for subsequent lockdowns that Victoria experienced in the second half of 2020 and beyond into 2021.

One of the primary recommendations from this research is the importance of teacher’s having a voice and expressing their needs. The best way to manage this is through supportive leadership that fosters a collaborative work environment, enabling teachers to be involved in the decision making and utilise their expertise effectively. It was clear through the response of Chloe as an experienced teacher that a lack of ability to air concerns was an ongoing issue, not only in Term Two but for the rest of 2020:

As a team, we had received feedback from our students and knew what worked and what didn’t. We knew the platform was successful and the value of WebEx meetings in keeping the students engaged and a sense that we were teaching the students to the best of our ability. The only form of anxiety was again created from the leadership team. Big changes were put in place without a lot of collaborative
Discussion

The findings indicated that the additional stress induced by fear of the ‘unknown’ imposed by the pandemic further intensified the emotional toll experienced by the teachers interviewed in this study. While the origins of the inherent fear of the ‘unknown’ stems from human evolution, recent neuroscience research highlights when human brain is constantly trying to predict what will happen next so the mind and body can prepare for the possible outcome accordingly. Fear of the unknown (FOTU) is defined as, “an individual’s propensity to experience fear caused by the perceived absence of information at any level of consciousness or point of processing” (Carleton, 2016, p.5). In the context of this study, it is therefore not surprising that the three teaching staff members interviewed reported feeling frustrated by not knowing what to expect from day to day during the pandemic.

The educators interviewed expressed feeling intense emotions when trying to cope with the unknown. These findings align with education workforce research that recognises the emotional labour of teaching as teachers work to manage the day to day challenges of the profession (de Ruiter, Poonrhuis & Koomen, 2021). The findings of this study highlight that the COVID pandemic amplified the intensity of their teaching experiences especially considering the consistent demands and expectation in terms of curriculum delivery on online platforms and maintaining educational outcomes for their students. Their emotional responses manifested as feeling anxiety about the unknown implications on schooling and guilty about the impact of online learning for their students. While not unexpected, the emotional labour and subsequent stress experienced by these teachers during the pandemic was mediated by their attempt to reinterpret an emotional situation in a way that alters its meaning and changes its emotional impact. Each teacher identified strategies that involved connecting with others (colleagues or friends), physical exercise and reappraising professional challenges and problems as opportunities for professional development, especially in the area of technology use in learning.

Interestingly, the participants described the ‘need’ for strong school leaders who can communicate and problem solve Smith and Riley (2012), highlighted the importance of leadership skills of school leaders in times of crisis. They contended that effective leadership skill is fundamentally different from those generally required as part of the ‘normal’ school environment. Leadership in times of crisis is about dealing with events, emotions and consequences in ways that support and empower staff in the pursuit of teaching and learning excellence. The findings from this study are consistent with a review conducted by Dirani et al. (2020) which identified the importance of the decision making processes and how they occur in unpredictable and unclear contexts during times of crisis. Collectively, the findings suggests that school leaders required specialised training to build knowledge and skills around how to support staff and cope in times of crisis such as COVID-19.

Conclusion and recommendations

The transactional theory of stress, often used to conceptualise teacher stress, emphasises the importance of coping at the same time as environmental stressors. In the context of this study the environmental stressor was the impact of the COVID pandemic on teaching practice. The transactional model encourages the use of healthy coping strategies to reduce the level of workplace stress. The present study findings indicated that the teachers interviewed in this study had the ability to cope by using strategies such as connecting with others and making the most of social supports, regular physical exercise and professional learning about student engagement during online delivery. However, the absence of leadership support emerged as a major contributor to increased teacher stress for these teachers during the pandemic. Given that the transactional model of stress proposes that stress and burnout occur when individuals have limited strategies and personal characteristics to adjust to change. In terms of intervention and support, teachers look to their role models, many of whom are school leaders, for support and recognise the importance of embedding the notion of teacher wellbeing and self-care into school management policy and processes.

Future research is warranted to explore the key components required to promote positive teacher wellbeing, coping and professional resilience. In the context of environmental stressors such as the COVID pandemic, teacher stress and potential burnout can be mediated through effective leadership teams that prioritise teacher wellbeing and provide the necessary support to teachers during a crisis and beyond.

Declaration of Competing Interest

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.jproci.2018.05.113.

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