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Examining COVID-19 related occupational stress in teachers in Ireland through a qualitative study using a thematic analysis approach

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ABSTRACT

Background: The teaching profession was dramatically affected by COVID-19 with school closures and ultimately the move to online learning. COVID-19 brought additional stress to an already demanding profession with the introduction of online teaching, teachers experiencing fear of infection and additional workloads accompanying the pandemic.

Aim: To examine COVID-19 related occupational stress in teachers in Ireland through a qualitative study using a thematic analysis approach.

Method: This study implemented two recruitment strategies for participants; email invitations to all members of ILSA and INTO, and email invitations with study information to school principals. A study specific questionnaire was devised with three questions offering free text responses. All responses were anonymous and analysed collectively. The Braun and Clarke thematic analysis method was employed to analyse participants’ responses.

Results: 224 participants responded to the survey, however not all participants completed all three questions. Initially 98 codes were generated from the data set, and subsequently reduced to 41 final codes. The codes were arranged into three final themes; Overburdened, Abandoned, and Consequences, representing occupational stress in teachers during COVID-19.

Conclusion: In the form of the three themes identified, participants described issues such as large class sizes, high workload, and out of work hours contact, among others. These issues contributed negatively to participants’ mental health and wellbeing with descriptions of being exhausted, isolated, stressed and experiencing burnout. Ensuring adequate awareness of, and paying attention to, teacher wellbeing is essential, such that optimisation of school environment can occur in light of additional burden associated with COVID-19.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2020 brought with it a change to both personal and work life. Ireland went into lockdown on March 27th 2020, and all workers were asked to work from home with the exception of essential workers. Over the course of 2020 and 2021 some professionals returned to work gradually while others had to adjust to working remotely from home for the foreseeable future. Many professionals’ lives were changed as they adjusted to new ways of working and living.

The teaching profession was dramatically affected by COVID-19. On March 12th, 2020, schools were ordered to close. In the midst of the unknown school reopening dates were repeatedly extended until ultimately the move to online teaching was announced. Teaching continued online until March 2021 when a phased reopening of schools was declared and teachers returned to the classroom.

Teaching is both a mentally and physically demanding profession (Kaur, 2011), made even more demanding when juggling work, personal and family life. This demand can be a source of occupational stress described as “ongoing stress that is related to the workplace” (Kaur,
(2021), and this prolonged stress can lead to burnout. Burnout is defined as “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed” (WHO, 2019). Teachers are exposed to a range of potential stressors daily as they are held to a high and scrupulous standard of daily accountability for not only their own actions but that of each pupil (Kaur, 2011). This constant monitoring alone can be a source of stress. Other recognised stressors include; excessive work hours and workload, large class size, changes to curriculum and lack of support (Kaur, 2011). The very real and evident threat of occupational stress and eventually burnout for teachers was present pre-pandemic and as such it is reasonable to expect the current pandemic will have exacerbated this risk.

Emerging data indicates COVID-19 has brought additional stress to teachers along with the above-mentioned pre-existing stressors. Online teaching brought challenges for not only students but educators as well. Not all teachers are equipped with the same technology knowledge and abilities, whilst some teachers may have found creating, recording and uploading video lessons manageable, some may not. This can cause stress and anxiety when trying to perform a difficult task without appropriate training and the isolation of working from home; without peer or colleague support. Additionally, not all teachers had the same level of access to technology and internet connection, causing inequality among colleagues’ performances and opportunity to learn new technology skills (Kaup et al., 2020).

A further challenge to online teaching is the ability to hold students’ attention and focus when not physically in the same room. Kaup and colleagues expand on this describing how issues like attention-span of students, poor audio and video quality and internet issues make it difficult for teachers to engage students (2020). As such, it can be argued these challenges can all cause teachers stress, anxiety, frustration and feelings of isolation all of which could potentially affect their wellbeing and performance. Past literature describes how a lack of physical support, isolation, anxiety, lack of resources and fear associated with the pandemic have mental affects that can hinder faculty from performing to their full ability (Kaup et al., 2020).

Despite the challenges of online teaching the reopening of schools was not necessarily welcomed by all teachers. Schools reopening meant many teachers had to return to the classroom unvaccinated. This brought with it an additional layer of frustration alongside fear and anxiety. Initially the vaccination roll-out plan was to prioritise teachers to receive early vaccination. However, the plan was revised and changed to an age-based vaccination plan which left many teachers feeling undervalued, vulnerable and in fear of infection while returning to the classroom for a full workday. Consequently, the threat of strike action by teachers occurred (O’Brien, 2021).

Emerging literature has shown an increase in stress, anxiety and depression among teachers following COVID-19, especially post school re-opening (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). These findings have been replicated in many different cultures with higher risk among those who are older and female (Al Lily et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). No study has been identified as relating to stressors among teachers working in Republic of Ireland. More recent studies have shown an accumulation of stress, with higher levels reported as the pandemic has persisted. Among a large sample of teachers in Spain (n = 1633), 50% reported high stress levels, 49% anxiety and 32.2% depressive symptoms. In this study teachers who were female, had children, and had chronic illness or cared for those with chronic illness had higher levels (Santamarías et al., 2021). Specific stressors have included COVID-19 related anxiety and contagion fears, and associated with vaccination intention and resistance to school re-opening, with students being seen as the main vector of infection (Weinert et al., 2021). Others studies have highlighted anxiety regarding new or additional teaching demands, degree of administrative support, and COVID-19 related stress linked to job insecurity, with fears of layoff following the economic downturn (Presley, 2021a; Aunión & Romero, 2020). Qualitative studies are extending our understanding of the specific way that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected teachers and contributed to work related stress. In a mixed method study, Pressley (2021b) reported on teachers acknowledging contagious fears as a stressor, but also perceiving employers to have unrealistic expectations of their roles and abilities, of as a consequence they experiencing themselves to be overwhelmed, with heavy workloads.

Stress and burnout in teachers during the pandemic in an Irish context is still under examined. This current research examines COVID-19 related occupational stress in teachers in Ireland using a qualitative approach providing an important insight directly from teachers themselves. Furthermore, it asks teachers what can be done to support them during this time, which could facilitate measures being put in place which teachers themselves have identified as being practical and helpful to their wellbeing.

The aim of this study is to examine COVID-19 related occupational stress in teachers in Ireland through a qualitative study using a thematic analysis approach.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

This study implemented two recruitment strategies. First participants were recruited through email invitations which were sent to all members of the Irish Learning Support Association (ILSA) containing 248 members, and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO) which has 43,000 members in the republic of Ireland. Secondly, study information with an invitation to participate was sent to the principals of a number of schools (n = 101), randomly selected from the department of education website, and stratified to include representation from mainstream primary, special primary and post-primary. Both teaching staff and principals were invited to participate in the study. Reminder emails were sent out to potential participants through the ILSA and INTO four weeks after the survey opened. Ethical approval was granted by University College Dublin (Ref: LS-19-103-Minihan-McNicholas).

2.2. Questionnaire

A Study Specific Questionnaire (SSQ) was devised, with three questions offering free text response options. The questions were constructed after examining existing literature on teacher stress and burnout pre-pandemic. The SSQ was available both online via a link to the survey and through a pen and paper version. The three free text response questions asked participants; (1) Have you any suggestions about what you think should change in your work to reduce the risk of burnout, (2) what can your organisation do better to support staff, and 3) please add anything you wish below regarding your overall experience of working during COVID-19. All responses were anonymous and analysed collectively.

2.3. Analysis method

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. All responses from participants were exported into a single word document. The Braun and Clarke thematic analysis method was employed, incorporating the following steps; becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Participants responded varied greatly in length from 1 word to 420 words (half an A4 page). Three researchers (BG, EM & AB) were involved in the analysis from the initial step of familiarisation with data to the final themes being defined and named. In line with best practice researchers (EM & AB) completed the following tasks independently to avoid biasing the data; reading through the data initially to gain familiarity, and assigning of codes. Once all the codes were developed, they were checked for duplication or multiple codes expressing the same thing. The codes were organised into main themes which the researchers felt
represented the responses by participants. The larger research team (EM, BG & FMcN) discussed the codes generated ensuring they represented the text that formed them, and the data set as whole. The codes and themes were discussed via regular Zoom meetings and telephone communications, and these were drafted and redrafted repeatedly until a mutual consensus was reached about the main themes. These final themes and codes were assembled into figures (Figs. 1–3). The names of the themes were worked on jointly by the researchers (EM & BG) ensuring the final theme names expressed what was said in the data. At the final stage of analysis, quotes were selected from the data set that the researchers felt were accurate examples highlighting the themes.

3. Results

In all, 224 participants responded to the survey, 89% of participants were female and the mean age of the sample was 44 (range 22–66, SD 10.23). Females were overrepresented in this study in comparison with the national teaching population (79%). Not all 224 participants filled in the free text responses, 210 participants responded to the first question, 169 responded to the second question and 157 responded to the third question. The survey examined teachers experience of COVID-19 related occupational stress with the use of three questions acting as guides for participants to discuss their experiences. Initially 98 codes were generated from the data set. Following de-duplication, these were reduced to 41 final codes. The codes were arranged into three themes; Overburdened (Fig. 1), Abandoned (Fig. 2), and consequences (Fig. 3).

3.1. Overburdened

The first theme to emerge from participants was being overburdened. This was evident from the early responses and continued throughout. Participants described sources that included a lack of boundaries around working hours, excessive workload and paperwork, unrealistic expectations, lack of resources and funding, and large class sizes. Some of the listed sources of stress may have been present pre-pandemic (large class sizes and lack of resources and funding) but were intensified by additional pandemic related issues.

Arguably the most dominant issues to emerge as contributors to feelings of being overburdened were the excessive amounts of paperwork, the large class sizes, and the lack of boundaries around working hours. These issues recurred repeatedly throughout participant responses and left participants feeling unable to cope with their sense of ever-mounting expectations being put upon them.

In line with this, participants often described feeling that more and more was being demanded of them. This was particularly the case when it came to new initiatives, DES Circulars, paperwork, and the extra workload that came with the pandemic such as disinfecting. One participant said “Where there used to be 20 things to juggle, now there seems to be 200 and there are only so many hours in a day” (Participant 9). When describing this sense of more being demanded of them, another participant stated “Stop taking on so many new initiatives and let teachers focus on the core curriculum” (Participant 15). Participants also described large class sizes as an issue, expressing this a participant stated “Class sizes are too large making it impossible for one teacher to handle the workload” (Participant 147). Large class sizes may have been an issue pre-pandemic, however the extra cleaning, disinfecting and social distancing measures accompanying the pandemic would have been harder to implement in a large class.

Participants described the amount of out of work hours contact teachers were experiencing as a potent contributor to being overburdened. This out of work hours contact by principals, colleagues, pupils and parents, was described as preventing teachers from disconnecting from their work and enjoying off time. One participant said “Stop sending emails and WhatsApp messages late at night and weekends work life balance affected and unprofessional” (Participant 4).

It is of interest, that despite a feeling of being over-burdened, some participants described unexpected positives such as having more time at home, more self-care, disconnecting and a slower pace of life. These components might be seen as protective from, or at least minimising the extent of, being overburdened. One participant described “The time spent at home during COVID-19 has helped me to put in place a set of self-care practices that have helped me to avoid burnout as much as possible” (Participant 137). While another stated “Covid19 has slowed down the frenetic pace of life” (Participant 63).

3.2. Abandoned

A dominant factor in many participants’ comments was the sense of...
being abandoned. It was evident from participants’ responses that there was a strong sense of participants feeling they were abandoned during the pandemic, particularly by the Department of Education. Participants felt the Department of Education did not treat them as a priority and attention to teachers and their needs was lacking during the pandemic. One participant expressed “The Department of Education have done nothing to support schools” (Participant 54). While another stated “The absence of any semblance of care… has left us feeling devalued, worthless…” (Participant 74). This sense of a general lack of regard for teachers’ efforts during the pandemic which in turn led to teachers feeling devalued was echoed also in participants descriptions of a lack of respect for the additional efforts of teachers.

Participants’ sense of the media’s negative portrayal of teachers from several sources were highlighted by many participants as also contributing to them feeling abandoned. A participant describes “The department need to find a way to reduce the amount of negativity from parents and the media, as it is quite simply, soul destroying when you commit your whole life to the betterment and education of children to be held in such contempt by
participants voiced issues such as a lack of representation for educators throughout the pandemic and a lack of appreciation and acknowledgement of the extra workload teachers and principals took on since the onset of COVID-19. With the move to online learning participants described being thrown into the unknown with inadequate support and guidance, which brought challenges and stress. One participant described the challenges of moving to online teaching “Online teaching has thrown us into a whole new environment, it takes more planning and organisation time, we have to learn new skills (from each other-no guidance from the department of education), we are working longer hours, up all night preparing and adapting lessons suitable for online teaching” (Participant 71).

Participants stated how they had to return to the classroom before they had received vaccinations and this resulted in fear of infection further intensifying participants worry and stress levels, “If being asked to return to classrooms at full capacity for 7 hours a day, we should receive access to vaccines soon” (Participant 146).

Additionally, participants felt there was inaccuracy or even dishonesty around reports of COVID-19 cases and risk levels in schools. Many participants stated schools were being depicted as safe workplaces during the pandemic and they felt this was not the case, that the risk of contracting COVID-19 was high. Participants expressed, “Give us the true numbers of contracted COVID 19 in schools” (Participant 105), “The department needs to get real about COVID, test staff and pupils appropriately, stop massaging incidence rates” (Participant 29).

3.3. Consequences

3.3.1. Mental health and wellbeing

Evident from participants’ comments and widespread throughout was the emotional affect working during COVID-19 had on participants and their wellbeing and mental health. Participants described in an array of accounts the negative impact the pandemic had on them emotionally and mentally. Participants described feeling isolated, pressured, frustrated, stressed, anxious, exhausted and burnt out. Recurring throughout the participants’ comments was evidence of how working during the pandemic had negatively affected them mentally. One participant expressed this as “Many teachers are completely exhausted and morale is very low” (Participant 7). While another describes stress and burn out “I’m up all hours of the night making videos for the week…I’m burning out and it’s affecting me by total lack of sleep and getting sick from exhaustion” (Participant 60). One participant describes the sense of loneliness “Losing all our breaks and interactions with colleagues was very lonely especially during a stressful day” (Participant 135). As another participant describes the pressure and sense of no end in sight “The responsibility has been, is and will continue to be colossal” (Participant 41).

Many participants discuss how interference and criticism from the public, media and parents of students also had a negative effect on their wellbeing and mental health. Participants describe being criticised frequently from multiple sources. One participant described this sense of interference and criticism as “Very difficult as it is the outside influences like media and scare mongering that cause parents to push and then in turn increase stress in students and teachers” (Participant 98). In addition to criticisms, participants reported being blamed for things that were out of their control. One participant said “Stop blaming us! We didn’t create a pandemic” (Participant 64).

3.3.2. Teacher retention

In many comments, provided by participants, the desire to leave the profession was expressed. Participants discussed seeking early retirement or a change of career because of their experiences of working during the pandemic and the toll it has taken on them physically, emotionally and mentally. One participant stated “The most positive thing is that every day I work, I am one day closer to retirement” (Participant 18). While another said “Plan to take early retirement because of this experience” (Participant 32). Another participant warned “There won’t be many left after this pandemic” (Participant 109).

3.3.3. Reactions and solutions

In addition to how working during the pandemic has affected participants’ wellbeing many openly expressed a desire for more wellbeing initiatives within their profession and more support in relation to mental health. Dominant in participants’ comments was seeking supports relating to mental health and wellbeing. When asked what can your organisation do better to support staff, one participant stated “Making teachers wellbeing a topic for conversation would be a starting point as it is non-existent at the moment” (Participant 38). Another said “Might be nice to actually care about the wellbeing of teachers. We got sent stuff on how to take care of the children and nothing for us” (Participant 152). Other participants stated “Prioritise staff wellbeing” (Participant 7), and “Staff mental health and wellbeing MUST get priority going forward” (Participant 63).

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine COVID-19 related occupational stress in teachers in Ireland through a qualitative study using a thematic analysis approach. This research has identified three themes relating to occupational stress; overburdened, abandoned and consequences.

Participants described a sense of being overburdened while working during COVID-19 contributing to this was a high workload, large class sizes and out of working hours contact. Excessive workload was described to include high volumes of paperwork, new initiatives and the additional work due to the pandemic such as remote learning and cleaning to avoid infection.

These findings are in line with existing research on teachers and COVID-19 within an international context. For example, research by Kim & Ashbury (2020) on the impact of COVID-19 on teachers in England described that teachers’ reported during early stages of online teaching that their senior leadership teams inundated them with paperwork and continuing professional development activities, and that this pressure was hindering their adjustment to online teaching and working remotely. Similarly, a paper by Wohlfart & Colleagues (2021) reported too high of a workload as a factor that affected the acceptance of technology use by teachers in Germany. Teachers felt their workload was too high to train in the use of digital tools. Beamis et al. (2021) describe how Australian teacher’s workload was made even greater with the occurrence of the pandemic; stating how teacher’s role was extended beyond educator to now include hygiene and infection control enforcement and ensuring the wellbeing of students. To this effect, teachers in the present study described feeling they had multiple tasks and roles to juggle and felt the workload was excessive. Large class sizes made enforcing sanitising and hygiene protocols even more difficult.

Participants in this study described a blurred work and personal life divide in which they received emails and messages outside working hours which made it difficult to disconnect from work. Participants’ accounts included being contacted by students, parents and colleagues on Sundays, during breaks or holidays and outside work hours. Research by Calif & Brooks (2020) relayed similar findings describing how the use of technology can have a negative side one of which is being constantly able to get in touch with anyone at any time. They describe the term techno-invasion in which employees can be reached anytime and are constantly connected, blurring the work-personal life divide (Calif & Brooks, 2020). In a qualitative study by Kim & Ashbury (2020), the blurring of personal and work life divide was also identified as emerging from their research. They described some participants’ accounts of being unable to take breaks such as Easter holidays and the work-personal life divide being less present.

A consequence of this is conflicts between one’s work and home life. Spill-over theory describes how this intrusion from work to home life can occur despite the boundaries that exist between work and family;
behaviours and emotions from one domain can spill over to another causing conflict (Westaby et al., 2016). Work-family conflict can be time-based, strain-based and behaviour-based (Greenhaus et al., 1989).

Time based conflict described how the time pressures from one role make it difficult to contribute to the other role. Strain-based conflict describes how strain symptoms, such as fatigue, from one role intrude and interfere with the other role. Behaviour based conflict is when behaviours of one role are incompatible with behaviours required in another role (Greenhaus et al., 1989). All the above conflicts can blur the work-home life divide and cause additional stress to those working from home. The real impact of spill-over theory was evident in participant responses. Descriptions from participants of the pressure resulting from more and more demands together with the dramatic increase in out of hours contact that occurred with principals, colleagues, pupils and parents which prevented teachers from disconnecting provided a stark illustration of the spill over relating to time based conflict. Reports of frustration, exhaustion and burnout further highlight the deleterious impact of spill-over in the context of strain-based conflict.

Moving online was identified throughout participants’ responses as a significantly negative factor associated with working during the pandemic. Participants described how they were offered no guidance in relation to online teaching and the move required more preparation time while also learning new skills relating to technology. It cannot be overstated the potential stress associated with trying to learn new skills surrounding technology during an already stressful and ever-changing time such as a pandemic. Brod (1984) coined the term ‘technostress’ which describes one’s inability to cope with technology leading to distress. Research identified techno-stressors for teachers to include unreliable technology and not having enough time (Califf & Brooks, 2020). If technology is required in order for a professional to do their job, as was the case during online teaching, but the professional does not have the skills, ability or practical means to use technology then, conflict and stress will occur. Such ‘technostress’ was evident in this study. Person-Environment Fit Theory describes such a scenario in which stress occurs as a result of a lack of connection between characteristics of a person (abilities) and the environment (demands) (Edwards & Cooper, 1990). This mismatch between the person’s abilities and the demands of their environment results in strain or stress.

In a study by Califf & Brooks (2020), it reports literacy facilitation is significantly and negatively associated with techno-stressors such as techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, techno-invasion and techno-overload. Literacy facilitation is described as organisations encouraging employees to share technology knowledge and skills to overcome a problem, which encourages collaboration and people feeling open to asking for help with technology issues. It is also reported literacy facilitation is significantly and negatively associated with burnout (Califf & Brooks, 2020). Encouraging literacy facilitation could aid teachers with online teaching and help reduce stress and burnout moving forward.

In the present study teachers described feeling unsupported, fearful of infection, and stressed due to the ineffectiveness and issues surrounding online teaching. Participants also described feeling they were not prioritised and furthermore were not communicated with throughout the pandemic. Teachers reported feeling uninformed and information that was presented was done so in an inappropriate and unhelpful manner. Emerging research on teachers working during COVID-19 attested to this sense of a lack of communication. Research by Kilcullen and Ashbury (2020) identified a theme of uncertainty among participants which described how participants felt they didn’t receive clarity or appropriate guidance. They also described how they wished they had been consulted regarding decision making, schools and guidance for schools. This was echoed within this current study when participants expressed a desire for better communication from the Department of Education and management and a need for collaboration with teachers on COVID-19 matters affecting schools. Teachers also reported feeling the media was provided with information relating to schools before teachers were.

Participants in this current study felt they were the target for media and public criticism and baseless blaming. Participants described how they were criticised throughout the pandemic from several sources and received no support in the face of these criticisms. Past research has shown criticism when not presented in a constructive manner can have several negative effects. In a study by Baron (1988) it showed a group who received constructive criticism reported being more likely to demonstrate inflexible resistance and avoidance (leaving the room) towards the subject reporting the criticism. Furthermore, subjects who received destructive criticism reported feeling significantly angrier and more tense than the constructive criticism group. Negative criticism particularly in a novice situation where an alternative action is not known does not result in beneficial behaviours or actions and can leave the subjects of such criticism angry, tense and more likely to use avoidance behaviour in the future. Accompanying reported criticisms was a lack of acknowledgement for the work teachers were doing during the pandemic. Acknowledgement can act as a protective factor in the face of trauma or difficult situations. In research by Jones et al. (2006), social acknowledgment had a significant and negative relationship to hyperarousal symptoms. Additionally, the more participants experienced disapproval the more intense their experience of hyperarousal became (2006). Indicating acknowledgement of teachers’ difficulties during the pandemic may have acted as a protective factor to some extent against distress. Consequently, the disapproval and critique experience may have been a contributing factor to stress and burnout symptoms.

Participants in this present study felt schools were being depicted as safe workplaces with minimal risk of infection to which they reported was not the case. Teachers’ accounts included having to work in a classroom with large class sizes, unvaccinated due to the age-based vaccination system, with students not wearing face masks, and even with reports of students being close contacts while still attending school. These teachers reported the risk of infection was far higher than what was being portrayed in the media and government reports. Living with this constant fear of infection can be detrimental to an individual’s health and wellbeing. Literature suggests fear of COVID-19 infection was significantly positively correlated with loneliness and was negatively correlated with mental wellbeing (Kayis et al., 2021). Furthermore, reports by participants of false depictions of schools as safe workplaces describes a lack of trust between teachers and those in senior or management roles. A lack of trust in educational professions can have many negative effects including a lack of school and student improvements, decline in teacher morale and self-worth and importantly, in the context of the pandemic, trust is crucial to the success of any change (Bottery, 2004). Consequently, implementing a change to teaching format such as moving online could not have been successful when built on a foundation of mistrust.

Participants in this study reported numerous emotional, physical and psychological effects such as exhaustion, feeling burnt out, loneliness, stress, the desire to leave the profession and reported the desire for more wellbeing initiatives. These reports attest to the negative impact working during the pandemic has had on teachers’ wellbeing and mental health. Exhaustion can be characterised by emotional and physical fatigue resulting from having too many demands and not enough resources (Sokal et al., 2020). In the Maslach Burnout Inventory higher exhaustion levels indicate higher burnout levels (Maslach et al., 1997) and prolonged exhaustion could indicate towards burnout. In an Irish study examining COVID-19 related occupational stress in teachers (Minihan et al., 2021) 82% of teachers reported moderate or higher levels of personal burnout and 79% work-related burnout, furthermore 67% stated their mental health deteriorated during COVID-19. Evidencing teachers working during COVID-19 were experiencing many negative effects both physically and mentally.

Participants described a desire to leave the profession as a result of the physical, emotional and mental toll of working during the pandemic.
This augurs poorly for the teaching profession and the education of the nation’s youth. Participants described a desire for early retirement and leaving the teaching profession due to the pandemic and working conditions surrounding it. Research indicates teachers who reported manifestations of stress (behavioural or physiological symptoms) were more likely to leave the profession (Ryan et al., 2017). It was also reported the school climate was a significant predictor of staff turnover (Ryan et al., 2017). These findings were pre-pandemic and it is reasonable to predict that teachers stress would have increased over the pandemic and teaching climate would have worsened due to remote teaching, therefore one can hypothesis teachers desire to leave the profession will have intensified also, as is described in our current study. Teacher turnover can have multiple negative consequences. In schools where teacher turnover is high it creates instability in the school and therefore reduces the chances of reform (McLaurin et al., 2009). Teacher turnover is costly as it takes time and resources to continuously recruit new teachers (McLaurin et al., 2009). It can also negatively affect how students learn causing disruptions to students when their teacher regularly changes. One potential contributing factor in high teacher turnover and desire to leave the profession is a lack of support felt by teachers. McLaurin and colleagues describe teachers are not being provided with a support system within the school that is needed to set a solid foundation for teachers (2009). They also report teachers should not have to work in isolated conditions. Due to the pandemic teachers were working in isolation when working from home contributing to feeling less support and more alone.

Participants in this current study reported a desire for more wellbeing supports. Teachers reported they were not provided with wellbeing supports or guidance during a time that was most stressful for them. Research around mental health and wellbeing in schools primarily investigates promoting wellbeing in students, there is scarce research for teachers’ wellbeing and the promotion of good mental health. The professional development service for teachers (PDST) has provided various online wellbeing packages to help teachers with mindfulness, wellbeing and mental health. These online resources contain a wellbeing workbook supporting developing and maintaining wellbeing, a video based mental health programme from the HSE promoting self-care, resilience and mindfulness, and a wellbeing in the workplace poster among others. However, many of the resources appear to focus on physical wellbeing such as drinking water and standing or moving regularly instead of managing stress, isolation and poor mental health. They also seem to centre more around mindfulness than preventing burnout and psychological distress.

Based on participants’ accounts as a whole there is a sense the teaching profession was unprepared for the pandemic and did not have any prior training or crisis related knowledge to call on during this time. This, however, is not specific to the teaching population. Research by O’Brien and Colleagues (2021) describes how medical students in Ireland were given no prior pandemic training or disaster medical training and as such struggled to fully fulfil the roles they may have encountered during the pandemic. Similarly, in research by Patel & Dahl-Grove (2018) 70% of medical students felt unprepared for an emergency, however after participating in an online disaster preparedness elective only 11% felt unprepared. Professionals who are deemed essential workers, such as teachers, and who are required to attend work throughout the pandemic and during lockdowns should be offered some disaster or emergency training pertaining to areas of their profession. This would result in more prepared and confident professionals.

Future research should focus on qualitative methods such as focus groups and interviews, asking teachers what would aid their mental health and wellbeing. Research should investigate what supports teachers themselves would find practical, in keeping with their needs and effective in promoting good mental health and wellbeing. This research also suggests it may be beneficial to engage in talks around courses relating to working during a crisis to provide professionals with tools for such an event again in the future.

5. Limitations

There are a number of limitations relating to this current research. Due to the anonymous nature of the research, it was not possible to determine a response rate relating to the number of participants from each recruitment stream: INTO, ILSA and School Invitations. Furthermore, this research study strived to be as representative of the Irish teaching population as possible, recruiting from both primary and post primary schools however in attempts to ensure anonymity, response were not linked to gender, school or age. It is unknown how many participants were from each school level and as such the representation of the sample is unknown. In addition, the studies population is small in comparison to the teaching population in Ireland. However, this research uses a qualitative approach which provides valuable insight into Irish teachers own opinions and thoughts on stress and burnout, and captures their desires for stress reduction in the future.

6. Conclusion

This study examined COVID-19 related occupational stress in teachers in Ireland using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis. Participants largely described negative reactions to working during the pandemic with prominent feeling of being overburdened and undervalued. High levels of stress, exhaustion, isolation and burnout resulted alongside high turnover intention. As the pandemic continues and along with it work and educational related stressors for teachers, these run the risk of having long-lasting impacts on education and professional wellbeing in Ireland. Ongoing mixed methods studies are warranted to ascertain the extent and nature of stressors, and how best to address them. Future research must identify what teachers feel would meet their mental health and wellbeing needs, be practical for the profession and be effective in reducing stress and burnout, in an attempt to reverse the current decline in teacher wellbeing and desire to leave the profession. The results from this study suggest that reducing teacher workload, ensuring realistic employer expectation and providing respect for teachers along with prioritising teacher wellbeing initiatives.

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Ethical approval

This research study received ethical approval from University College Dublin.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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