

September 2021

THE TEACHERS' SERIES

A report on the “silent pandemic”

A joint exploratory study on the mental health of teachers in Singapore by Singapore Counselling Services & ACC Institute of Human Services.



ACC | INSTITUTE OF
Human Services

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1. FOREWORD

This survey was birthed from the team's observation that while there is a common understanding that the burnout levels of teachers are high, there was little to no data gathered from the ground on what teachers struggle with specifically.

As such, this study focuses on exploring key sentiments and specific areas of needs which are impacting teachers' mental health. In so doing, we hope to give relevant stakeholders some preliminary data to work within their continuing efforts to care for the teachers who have been working tirelessly for their students.

At the same time, we recognise that the improvement of mental wellbeing takes a collective effort—parents, students, and general members of the public each also have their parts to play in helping to ease the load of teachers.

To the teachers who have been consistently doing your best in building our next generation, we would also like to express our heartfelt gratitude for continuing to show up for our children and youths day after day, despite the pressures you face.

We recognise that everyone is doing the best we can with what we have. With the high levels of mental health needs all around us, we might not be able to plug every gap — but we start somewhere, and we start with ourselves.

John Shepherd Lim
Chief Wellbeing Officer
30 September 2021



2. Executive Summary



81.1%
of teachers reported that their mental health was affected



62.5%
of teachers reported that their physical health was affected

92.2%
of teachers work even when they are unwell



81.4%
of teachers reported positive interaction with students as a satisfying aspect of their job



MAIN WORKPLACE ISSUES FACED:

1

78.6%
Lack of Work-Life Balance

2

78.0%
Excessive Workload

3

52.8%
Students' Behaviour

78.6% of teachers work outside of their contracted hours, leading to a severe compromise of teachers' personal time. Excessive workload (78%) and students' behaviour (52.8%) rank second and third respectively as common issues that teachers experience at work.

10.8%

turn to their supervisors as a source of support for workplace stress



TOP 3 FORMS OF WORK-RELATED CHANGES

8.2%

turn to health-care professionals as sources of support for workplace stress



78.0%
Reduced Workload



63.4%
Higher Income



61.3%
Respected Leaves

These factors, often interlinked, contribute towards mental health symptoms that teachers are at risk of, and need to be urgently addressed.

3. INTRODUCTION

This report is the final piece of The Teachers' Series 2021, an initiative by the Singapore Counselling Centre that aims to raise awareness on the mental health and wellbeing of teachers in Singapore. The report highlights the pressures of being a teacher in the midst of the COVID-19 global crisis, including the need to respond quickly to changing Safe Management Measures (SMM), toggle between home-based (HBL) and in-person learning, while having to care for both the learning and emotional needs of students all at the same time.

Despite the challenges faced by our teachers, they have responded with adaptability and flexibility to continue teaching amidst the changes brought about by the pandemic. Their perseverance in being able to adjust so quickly to ensure they retain the heart of learning is highly commendable. However, in the face of constant stress and exhaustion, it is undoubtedly challenging for teachers to deliver their best work.

This study hence seeks to provide a preliminary overview of the experiences of teachers, in terms of specific sentiments and conditions that constitute their mental health needs. The sentiments gathered highlights the urgency of having to look into the mental wellbeing of teachers in order to support them in their efforts to shape our future generations. As one of the pioneering local projects in gathering data on the mental health needs of teachers, interested stakeholders are encouraged to build upon and improve on our research methods or launch more targeted projects that tackle specific needs.

4. METHODOLOGY

COLLECTION PERIOD



3 weeks data collection period from 13 August to 3 September 2021.

SAMPLE SIZE



1325 valid responses from teachers of various education levels.

DATA COLLECTION METHOD



Online survey disseminated via direct email contact lists, snowball sampling, and social media.



The survey questions were adapted from the Teacher Wellbeing Index, an annual UK nationwide survey.¹

Both quantitative & qualitative data were collected from participants.

Qualitative responses were analysed, and thematic issues and subthemes were identified to allow for coding of responses and a more robust discussion.

SAMPLE PROFILE

LEVEL	QUANTITY	PROPORTION
Preschool	389	29.4%
Primary School	380	28.7%
Secondary School	408	30.8%
Junior College	82	6.2%
Special Education	45	3.4%
Others	21	1.6%

Table 1: Participant responses across different education levels

The following five main populations were used in our population-specific analysis: Preschool, Primary School, Secondary School, Junior College and Special Education teachers. Populations with $n < 15$ were excluded e.g. tertiary educators. Identities of participants were kept anonymous.

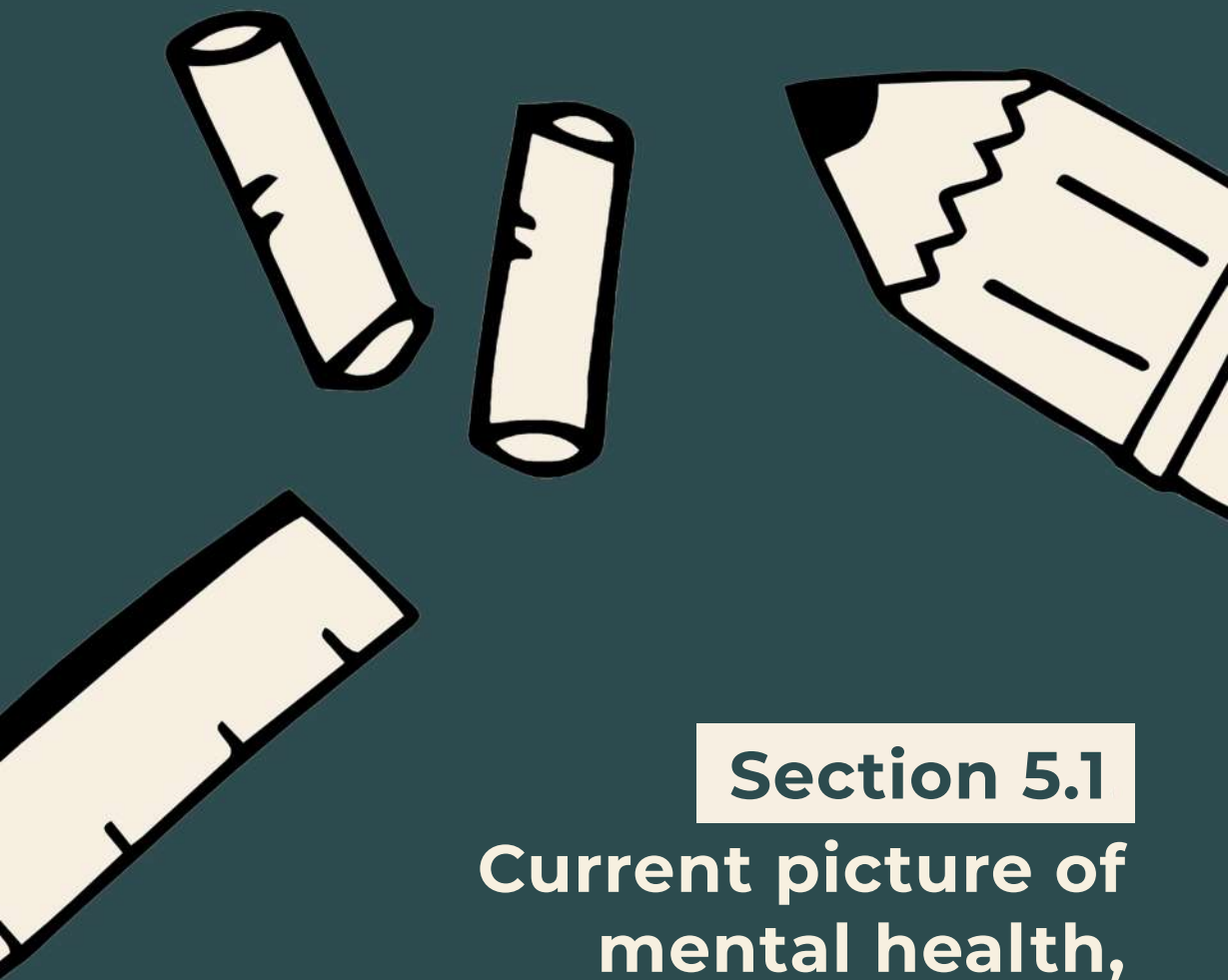
Preschool educators refers to both kindergarten and childhood teachers.² Special needs educators include allied educators.³

¹Education Support. (2020, November). Teacher wellbeing INDEX 2020. 2020. Retrieved September 15, 2021, from <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/about/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/>.

²About Us. ECDA. (n.d.). Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.ecda.gov.sg/pages/aboutus.aspx>.

³Allied Educator (Learning and Behavioural Support). Base. (n.d.). Retrieved October 1, 2021, from <https://www.moe.gov.sg/careers/non-teaching-careers>.

5. Analysis & Discussion



Section 5.1

**Current picture of
mental health,
wellbeing and issues
faced by teachers**

Teachers were asked about how they felt about their jobs. The top 3 emotions reported by them were:



It should be noted that positive emotions were included in some responses as well, although general sentiments point towards largely negative emotionality.

5.1.1 Long working hours are a reality for teachers

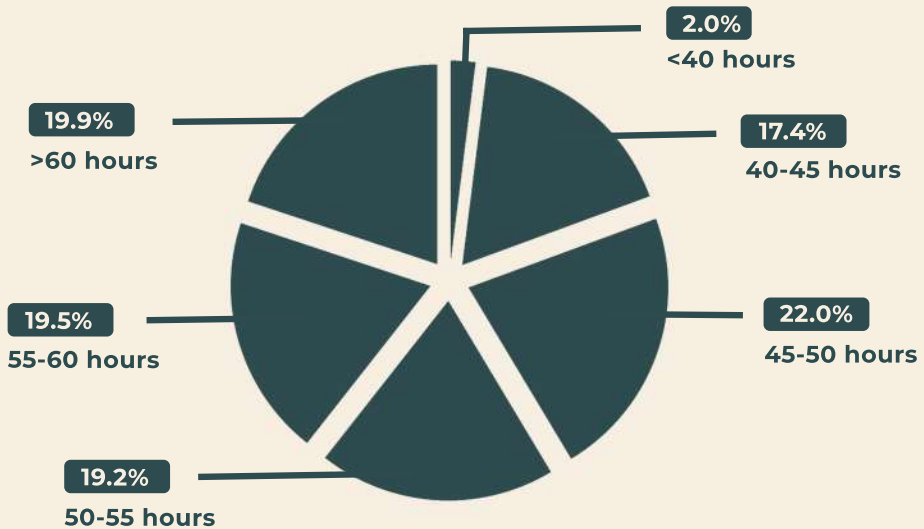


Figure 1: Average weekly working hours of teachers

On average, a quarter of teachers report working more than 60 hours a week, and 79.7% of teachers report working more than 45 hours a week. This is more than the average 44 hours per week of the general working population in Singapore. ⁴

5.1.2 Overview of issues faced by teachers in the workplace

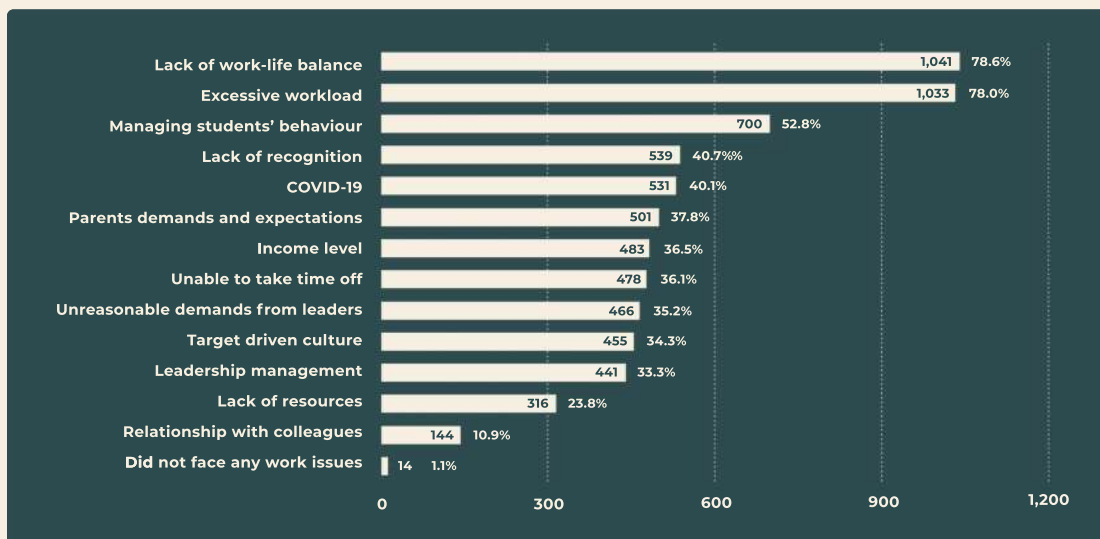


Figure 2: Issues faced by teachers in the workplace

5.1.2.1 Breakdown of issues faced - subthemes

The qualitative data collected, including individual open-ended responses, were analysed to further expand on the issues teachers indicated in the quantitative data (refer to figure 3).

The main thematic issues teachers highlighted were then further expanded and broken down based on salient sub-themes identified through an analysis of the responses. The analysis of qualitative data provided more comprehensive insights into the struggles of teachers, which informed our subsequent discussions.

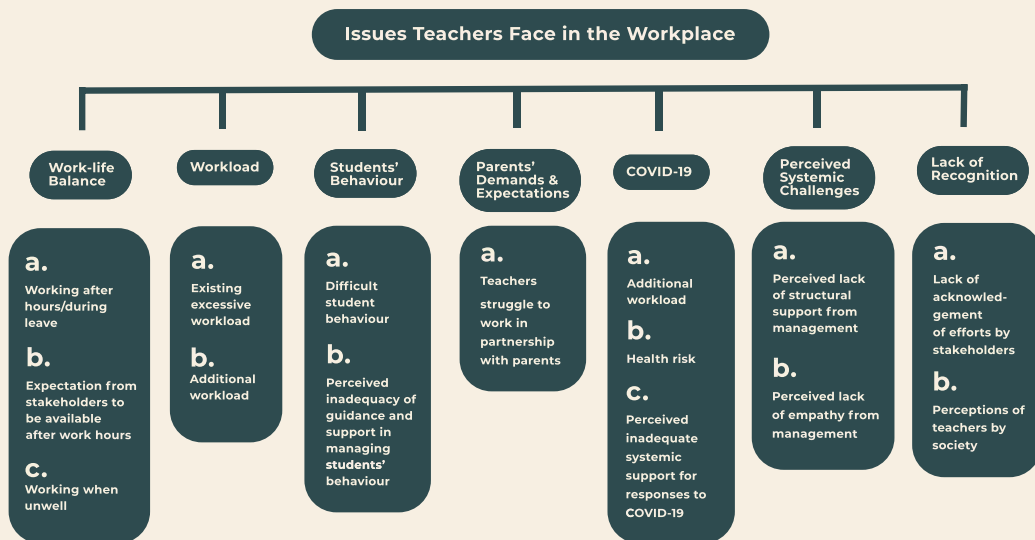


Figure 3: Summary of the main thematic work issues teachers face, and the breakdown of subthemes identified.

5.1.3 78.6% of teachers across all populations struggle with the **lack of work-life balance**

a. Working after hours/ during leave

Teachers across all populations find it hard to establish and maintain boundaries between their professional and personal lives. The struggle to maintain work-life balance was attributed to working or being occupied with work-related thoughts after contracted work hours (i.e., after hours, weekends, leave days, protected time, holidays, etc.).

b. Expectations from stakeholders to be available after work hours

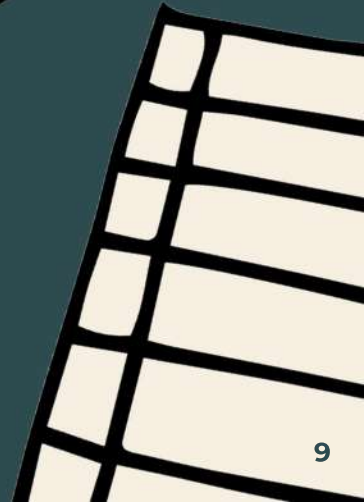
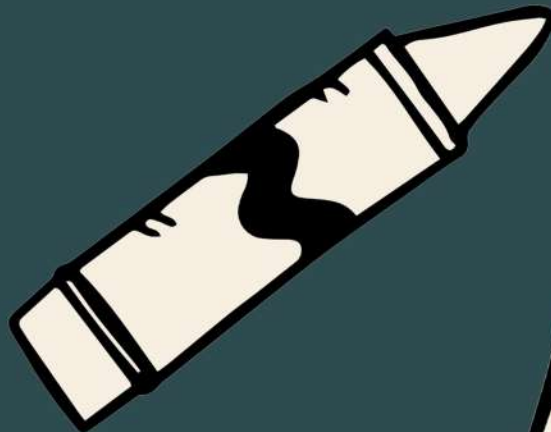
Another issue that negatively affected teachers' work-life balance was the pressure from some students, students' parents, and colleagues to respond quickly on work-related matters even outside of contracted hours. This interferes with their opportunity to switch off and relax.

Of the teachers who voiced their struggles with the expectations from stakeholders to be available after working hours, 38.6% of them were primary school teachers and 38.6% were secondary school teachers.



There's just too much to do, all the time. My mind is constantly completely overwhelmed with thoughts about work, even with proper pacing and time management. Things just seem to crop up unexpectedly almost every day. I'm mentally prepared but it's still exhausting.”

Primary School,
Classroom Teacher



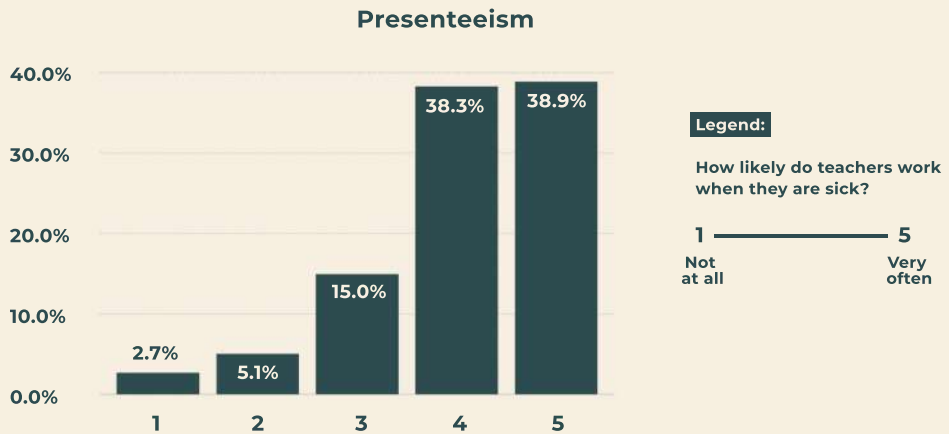


Figure 4: Likelihood of teachers to work while sick

c. Working when unwell

On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the most likely to work while sick, and 1 being the least likely, more than 92.2% of responses indicated that they were very likely to still work even when unwell. This finding suggests the phenomenon of presenteeism — the act of working while being sick or injured, resulting in the loss of productivity.

Many cited reasons such as the need to prepare additional lesson plans for relief classes and the trouble of arranging lessons swaps with a teacher from the same department. Respondents have also mentioned their unwillingness to burden their colleagues who are already stretched themselves.

Apart from that, teachers have indicated concerns that their absence would disrupt students' learning, affect their performance reviews and that a day off work would mean a piling up of their workload.



“Prior to COVID-19, even if I felt slightly unwell, I would go to school because the amount of work needed to put together a relief plan is sometimes more of a headache. There are also other commitments like remedial and duties and I will feel bad that my colleagues have to cover for me.”

- Primary School, Classroom Teacher

“I feel tired all the time because of how much there is to do, which does not allow me to contribute as much as I think I should, which makes me feel inadequate as compared to others/ what I am expected to do.”

- Secondary School, Classroom Teacher

5.1.4 78% of teachers struggle with excessive workload

a. Existing excessive workload

Of the teachers who highlighted their gripe with their workload, 93.4% of them raised that this has been a longstanding problem. Their existing workload can be attributed to the current teacher-student ratios, where teachers often find their resources and efforts being stretched across too many students.

Teachers also often have to wear many different hats as they bear different responsibilities outside of academic teaching. On top of having to manage students' behaviours and liaise with parents, they also have administrative duties, and have to plan for extra-curricular activities and events.

“

"I feel guilty whenever I take a rest because I have a whole pile of work that never ends... I'm overwhelmed because there is just so much to do and only so much I can do - improving myself with courses, trying out new pedagogies and e-pedagogies, connecting with my students, guiding those facing problems/ issues... And so many more. It is never ending..."

- Secondary School,
Classroom Teacher

b. Additional Workload

There have also been many additional responsibilities that contribute to their excessive workloads. Though intended to help and equip teachers, they have voiced that many of the mandatory courses (on topics such as new teaching pedagogies, mental health, ICT [Information Communication Technology], leadership, etc.) can sometimes create additional strain on their already overloaded schedules.

While it should be acknowledged that COVID-19 changes are inescapable and inevitable, measures such as the implementation of SMM practices, shift to Home-Based Learning (HBL), blended learning, eCCAs, and additional classes for students who miss lessons due to quarantine orders, still do place an added toll on teachers' workload.

On a whole, Primary, Secondary and JC teachers were found to be more vocal about the issue of additional workload than Preschool and Special Education teachers.

“

"The frustration stems from the increasing demands of teachers. We are expected to do a lot more on top of teaching, from addressing students' emotional needs to ICT technicians to troubleshoot issues students have with HBL..."

- Primary School,
Classroom Teacher

5.1.5 52.8% of teachers across all populations struggle with managing **students' behaviour**

a. Difficult student behaviour

Managing difficult student behaviour was mentioned by teachers as a stressor in and of itself that takes up a lot of time and energy that would have been better directed towards lesson conduct and clearing their work. The additional time and energy spent dealing with students' behaviour further adds to teachers' mental and emotional stress.

“

“I'm exhausted because the pandemic has an adverse effect on my students' wellbeing and mental health. They are experiencing many more issues that has led to a spike in discipline cases and counselling referrals. It's tiring and heartbreaking to handle cases like this, not to mention its emotional toll on us as teachers.”

- Secondary School,
Class Teacher

“

“Teachers are overloaded with students. The core of our jobs are the students but... students have a different set of needs due to an increasing over-dependence on technology. The way they behave and think are no longer the same as students from previous batches. More support is needed to understand and approach our students for us to best support them.”

- Primary School,
Classroom Teacher

b. Perceived inadequacy of guidance and support in managing students' behaviour

A lack of support from management in handling difficult student behaviour was another key issue. Many teachers felt that existing procedures have been insufficient in dealing with student misbehaviour, with many feeling at a loss of how to manage it. This recurring theme has led teachers to question their own effectiveness.

Among those who cited their struggles with student behaviour, JC teachers were the smallest population.

5.1.6 37.8% of teachers struggle with managing parents' demands and expectations

a. Teachers struggle to work in partnership with parents

While parents themselves are facing stress on their work and home fronts, many teachers shared their struggles with parents who speak harshly and place large time demands to tend to their child alone. Regarding the difficulty of managing parents' expectations and requests, a number of teachers have also voiced out their struggle when parents are quick to accuse, blame, or use disrespectful language when providing feedback to teachers.

Often, while it is understandable for working parents to only have time to respond to teachers after work, teachers have expressed that the need to remain contactable and accessible after work and on weekends is a major factor resulting in the lack of boundaries between work and personal life. Teachers find it difficult to cope when this availability outside of contracted working hours is something expected and taken for granted.

This issue was observed to be a struggle especially among teachers of younger students, with 62% of teachers who voiced this issue coming from Preschool and Primary School teachers.

“

“Parents have become very demanding and even aggressive over the years. Our relationship with parents should be a partnership. But this is seldom advocated for on the ground.”

- Primary School,
Subject Head



5.1.7 40.1% of teachers struggle with the impact of COVID-19

a. Additional workload

The many changes and measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have created significant additional responsibilities on top of their already heavy workload. Many teachers also worry about the disruptions to students' learning and managing students' stress due to the unpredictable work climate. The shift to home-based/ blended learning, eCCAs, etc., required additional curriculum planning. This means that for the same lesson, teachers created two different lesson plans - one for in-person lessons and one for home-based learning

Also, due to quarantine orders or leave of absences, teachers have to schedule and conduct make-up lessons for students who missed classes. This is usually done outside of standard school hours as teachers could only conduct these make-up lessons after their own classes end for the day.

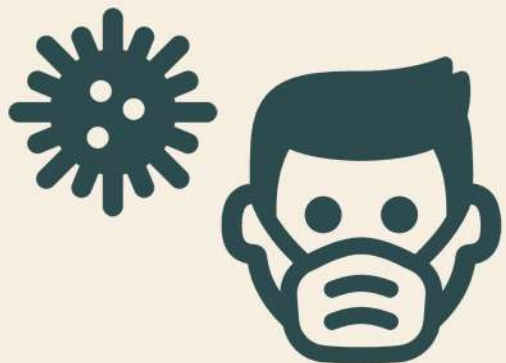
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“The sheer amount of work to be completed despite disruptions to the curriculum is overwhelming. Teachers have to ensure that students on quarantine order, approved absences or self-imposed LOA for reasons related to COVID-19, get the same amount of learning at home as those who are in school. This means teachers will have to come up with our own resources to help them learn effectively, set aside time for online meetings with these children as well as frequent check-in phone calls. All these are done on top of the already demanding workload in school. Nothing, on the other hand, is being taken away.”

- Primary School, Classroom Teacher

b. Health risks

Of the 40.1% of teachers who cited that they struggled with the impact of COVID-19, 19.4% of them expressed that they were worried about the potential health risk of contracting the virus as a result of prolonged interactions between teachers and students.



5.1.7 40.1% of teachers struggle with the impact of COVID-19

c. Perceived inadequate systemic support for responses to COVID-19

Teachers found the implementation of new policies regarding COVID-19 measures challenging on the ground due to a lack of resources. One case in point is the implementation of taking compulsory medical leave should teachers be feeling the least bit unwell. They found this difficult to enforce due to the shortage of teachers to conduct relief lessons or delegate work to.

Teachers would have also appreciated more avenues to voice their concerns so that effective support could have been rendered to facilitate smooth responses to the changing COVID-19 measures.

Some teachers mentioned that their apprehension to voice their concerns stemmed from their fear of how leaders would perceive them if they voiced out their struggles with keeping up with the changes. They were also unsure if the general public would be able to empathise with the struggles they are facing in this pandemic.

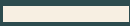
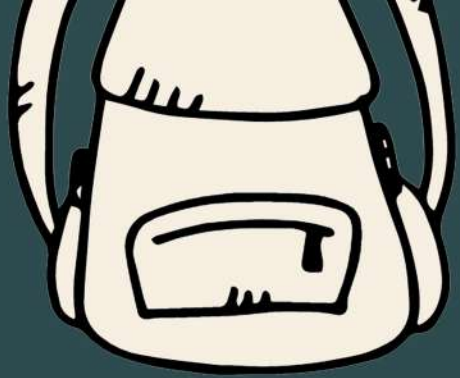
With the uncertainty and disruptions brought about by COVID-19, teachers also struggle to manage both the students' and their own mental health. For example, many feel ill-equipped and overwhelmed by the need to serve the role of a Teacher-Counsellor when they are not prepared for it. This added stress may be counterproductive in their efforts to help their students.

“

“Overwhelmed by the sheer volume of things to do and get on top off - constantly changing online/ offline lessons, thinking about how to reorganise activities for Safe Management Measures (SMM), planning for school events. There are a lot of things we need to adapt to within a very short lead time for many things.

While students do make being a teacher worthwhile, there also exists feelings of inadequacy because there are so many things I wish to do for the students, but do not have enough time or energy to do. It is also hard to deal with the mental health of students as we are not trained professionals.”

- Secondary School,
Classroom Teacher



“There's always so much to be done, and policies seem to be put in place with very little consideration of how things play out on the ground. While there are leaders who understand that we need time to adapt to new situations, the reality is that there is so much pressure to know what to do and to do them well, yet it feels like there just isn't enough support for us to take care of our students... We are expected to keep struggling students afloat, but sometimes it really comes at our expense. I agree it's important to take care of students' individual needs, but we don't have enough resources and manpower to do that.”

- Junior College,
Classroom Teacher

5.1.8 A sizeable portion perceived systemic challenges

Of the 1325 teachers surveyed, a sizeable portion of teachers cited struggles with:



35.2%

Unreasonable demands from leaders



33.3%

Leadership management



23.8%

Lack of resources

a. Perceived lack of structural support from management

When it comes to some aspects of the current system, teachers voiced their struggles in two key areas—the difficult teacher-to-student ratio, as well as their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) which were set at a very high bar.

Regarding the large class sizes, teachers struggled with attending to each student's individual needs and providing students who have special learning needs the attention they needed. At the same time, teachers felt alone in having to deal with the many parents and students whom they are held accountable for. They mentioned feeling unsupported when they felt obligated to meet every demand.

Regarding work performance evaluations, teachers feel that their KPIs are set at an overly high bar, which was difficult to attain. Many also consider their workload to exceed what they find to be justifiable for their income level.

“

“There are too many students with behavioural problems and teachers do not have an avenue to correct errant behaviour, like misbehaviour or defiance. The lack of measures to support teachers in managing such student behaviour often leaves us feeling frustrated.”

Secondary School,
Classroom Teacher

“Most mandatory initiatives were rolled out with the expectations for teachers to perform it effectively in schools. But from experience, there are multiple factors that can affect the effectiveness of a new initiative, such as class sizes and differing student profiles.

Students are also more challenging to deal with, making new initiatives/ policy changes less feasible. School leaders expect students to perform well, but teachers struggle with big class sizes and disciplinary issues at the same time.”

- Secondary School,
Classroom Teacher

5.1.8 A sizeable portion perceived systemic challenges

b. Perceived lack of empathy from management

It has been a very trying period for all during this COVID-19 season—teachers, students, and management teams included, who are all trying to adapt the best they can to the volatile COVID-19 situation.

However, it is also worth noting that of those who reported systemic challenges, 70% of them reported facing issues with the management at work regarding a lack of understanding of their stress. Teachers felt that their organisation’s leadership approach was insufficient in empathising with the struggles of teachers, preventing them from receiving effective support to improve their wellbeing at work.

“

“There is a gap between the higher ups/ policy makers and the ones who are actually on the ground. Student-centricity is important but the teachers who have to execute the different initiatives that are announced indiscriminately are overlooked, without considering the challenges that we may face.”

- Secondary School,
Classroom Teacher

Teachers mentioned that the lack of guidance and clarity in implementation plans, along with the short lead time made it difficult for teachers to respond effectively to changes. For instance, analysis of qualitative feedback revealed that teachers largely struggled with the lack of clear directives, along with the short lead time for those changes.

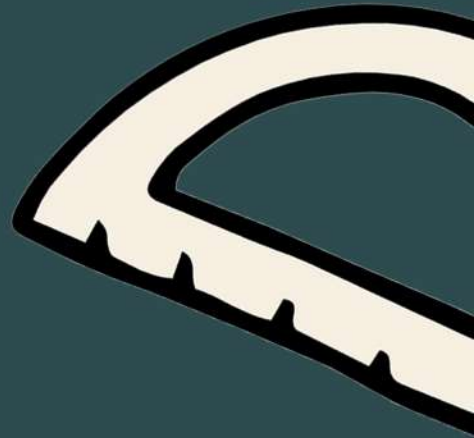
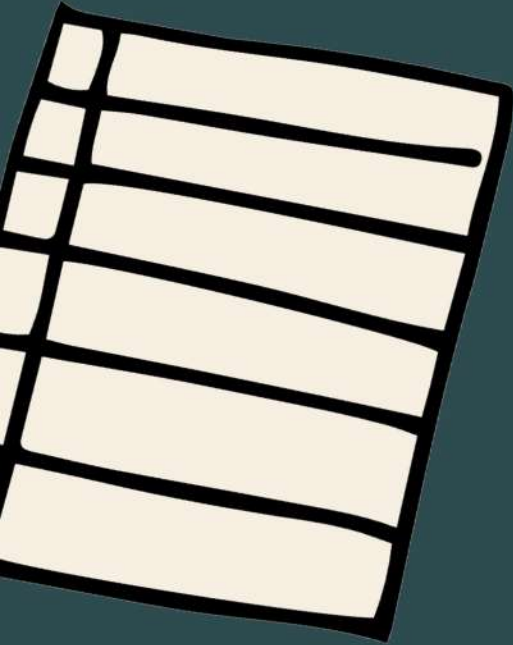
In the midst of the many changes, some teachers also felt that the lack of a platform for their concerns to be heard and for issues to be addressed was another barrier in facilitating efficient change measures. Some have cited the worry that their assessment grades and appraisal will be affected if they were to bring up their concerns.

“

“A lot of extra mental health support seems to place the needs of students above those of teachers... measures targeted to help teachers take the form of extra professional training, rather than actual support that truly lightens the load, or addresses the mental wellbeing of teachers.”

- Junior College,
Classroom Teacher

5. Analysis & Discussion



Section 5.2

**Impacts on teachers'
professional and
personal lives**

81.1% of teachers reported that their mental health was affected and 62.5% reported that their physical health was affected

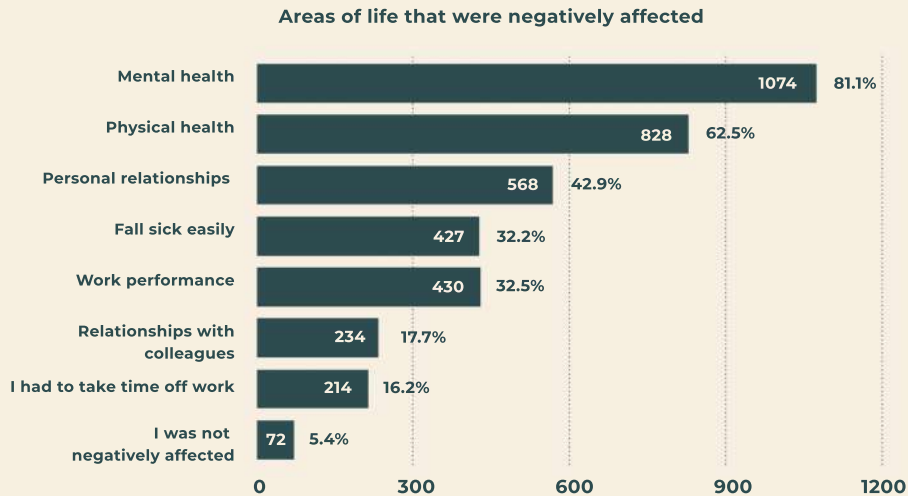


Figure 5: Impacts teachers have experienced as a result of work

Data showed that only 5.4% of teachers indicated that they did not suffer any negative impacts due to work. This statistic is of concern as responses gathered from teachers show many of them facing symptoms of burnout, such as a loss of enthusiasm towards the job, emotional and physical exhaustion, a sense of cynicism, withdrawal and even feelings of guilt.⁵

The importance of responding to symptoms of burnout is widely known; it often leads to a decline in work performance, as well as various forms of withdrawal including absenteeism, and having intentions to leave the job.⁶ Several teachers have expressed these sentiments in their open-ended responses.

The issue of long working hours can also negatively impact personal and professional lives. Although it may be unavoidable for individuals to work longer hours during peak seasons, prolonged long hours place teachers at higher risk of physical conditions such as ischemic heart disease and stroke, as well as poorer mental health.^{7,8}

⁵ Misiolek-Marín, A., Soto-Rubio, A., Misiolek, H., & Gil-Monte, P. R. (2020). Influence of Burnout and Feelings of Guilt on Depression and Health in Anesthesiologists. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(24), 9267. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249267>

⁶ Koutsimani, P., Montgomery, A., & Georganta, K. (2019). The Relationship Between Burnout, Depression, and Anxiety: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00284>

⁷ Pega, F., Náfrádi, B., Momen, N. C., Ujita, Y., Streicher, K. N., Prüss-Ustün, A. M., Descatha, A., Driscoll, T., Fischer, F. M., Godderis, L., Kiiver, H. M., Li, J., Magnusson Hanson, L. L., Rugulies, R., Sørensen, K., & Woodruff, T. J. (2021). Global, regional, and national burdens of ischemic heart disease and stroke attributable to exposure to long working hours for 194 countries, 2000–2016: A systematic analysis from the WHO/ILO Joint Estimates of the Work-related Burden of Disease and Injury. *Environment International*, 154, 106595. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envint.2021.106595>

⁸ Park, S., Kook, H., Seok, H., Lee, J. H., Lim, D., Cho, D. H., & Oh, S. K. (2020). The negative impact of long working hours on mental health in young Korean workers. *PLOS ONE*, 15(4), e0226931. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0226931>

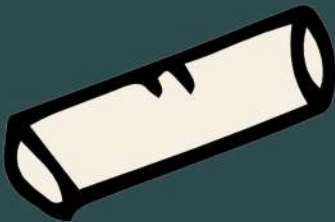
*Disclaimer: Key phrases and sentiments were extracted and edited to form full sentences, without changing the meaning or context of the response



“

...A lot of teachers face burnout due to the high workload, lack of support and resources, poor management and not being appreciated or valued for the work done. This will lead to good teachers leaving the industry, and the remaining ones would have compromised their quality. It's a vicious cycle.”

- Preschool,
Classroom teacher



Overall, 96.8% reported experiencing at least one behavioural, psychological or physical symptom

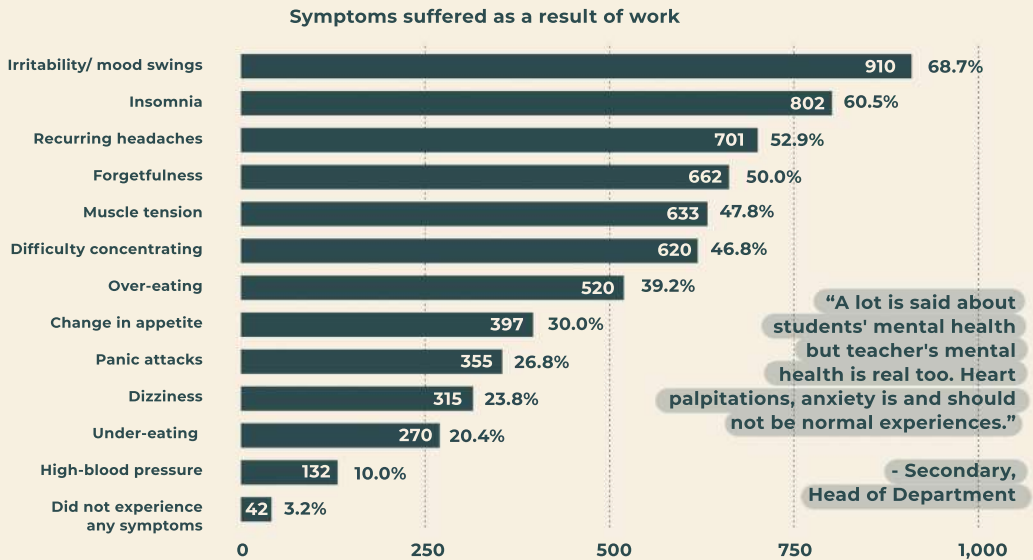


Figure 6: Symptoms experienced by teachers as a result of work

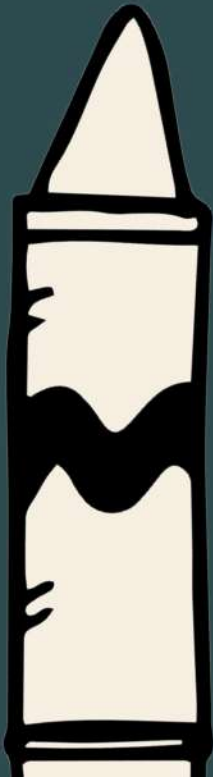
Overall, 96.8% reported experiencing at least one behavioural, psychological or physical symptom.

Irritability, moodswings, insomnia and recurring headaches are amongst the top few cited stress symptoms experienced by teachers on the job. Prolonged symptoms are associated with reduced wellbeing and increased risk of more serious mental health concerns such as generalised anxiety disorder, major depression and posttraumatic stress disorder.⁹

⁹ Ahola, K., Hakkanen, J., Perhoniemi, R., & Mutanen, P. (2014). Relationship between burnout and depressive symptoms: A study using the person-centred approach. *Burnout Research*, 1(1), 29-37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.burn.2014.03.003>

*Disclaimer: key phrases and sentiments were extracted and edited to form full sentences, without changing the meaning or context of the response

5. Analysis & Discussion



Section 5.3

Job satisfaction & support

5.3.1 Areas that bring teachers job satisfaction

96.7% of teachers could identify at least one area of satisfaction in their job

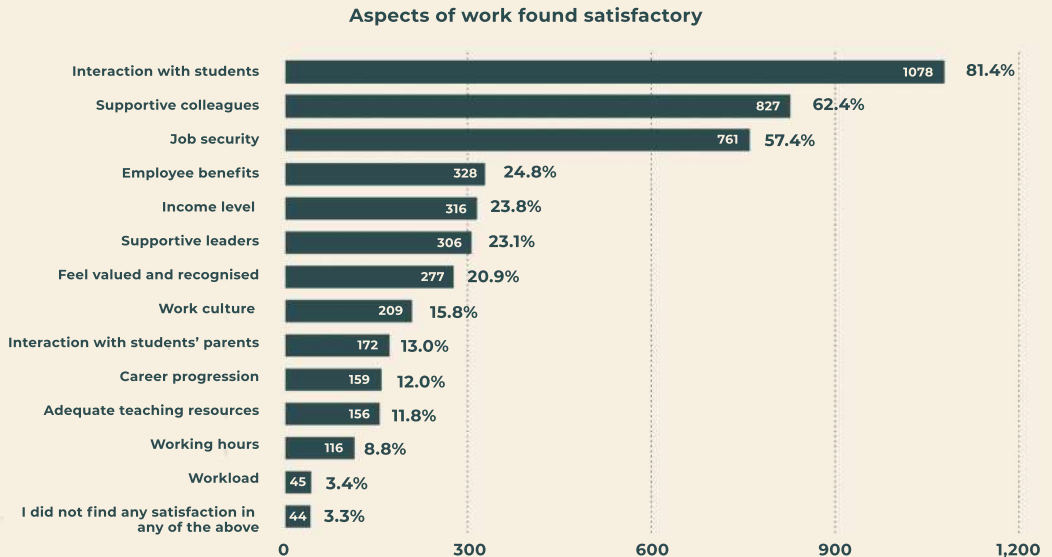


Figure 7: Aspects of work that teachers found satisfactory

While managing students' behaviour was reported as one of the main issues faced by teachers, 81.4% of teachers reported positive interaction with students as a satisfying aspect of their job. Other main areas of satisfaction include having supportive colleagues (62.4%) and job security (57.4%). This goes to show the important role that students play in affecting their teachers' levels of wellbeing on the job.



"When our students appreciate our hard work, after a good lesson, watching students grow in their character, receiving a 'thank you' text from parents, and sharing lighthearted moments with students; these are the rewards I hold precious to me, and where I find comfort thinking about after stressful meetings. This is what I came into teaching for."

- Primary School, Classroom Teacher

5.3.2 Sources of support teachers turn to

Encouragingly, most teachers do have at least one source of support to cope with workplace stress. The large majority turn to their family and friends, colleagues, and their partner/ spouse.

9.7% of teachers stated that they do not speak to anybody about their workplace stresses. This is of concern as social support is a crucial protective factor against both mental and physical conditions.¹⁰

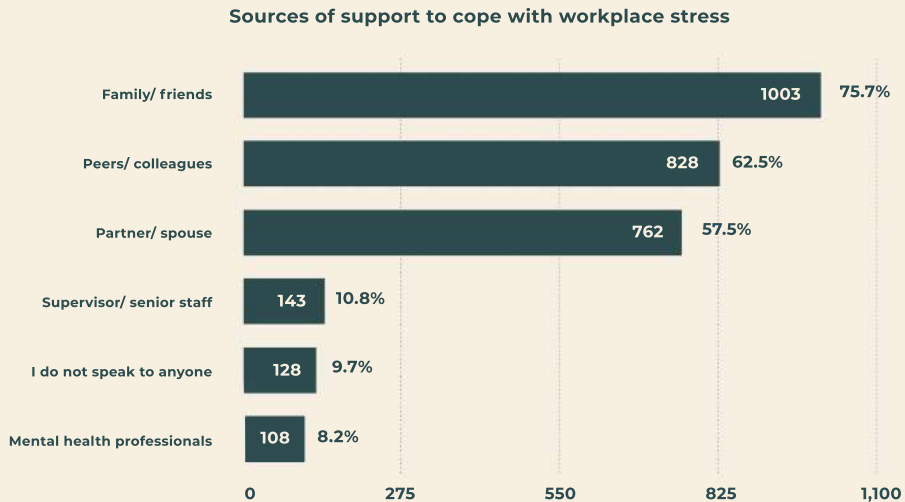


Figure 8: Sources of support teachers turn to in order to cope with workplace stress

It should also be noted that while the majority of teachers have sources of support to cope with workplace stress, it is still evident from our survey that their levels of distress remain high. This could point towards barriers to help-seeking that remain — only 10.8% and 8.2% turn to supervisors and mental health professionals as sources of support respectively.

The reason teachers were not inclined to turn to leadership for help was largely attributed to the fact that they do not feel heard. Some teachers have also expressed fear that speaking up about their struggles may affect their performance ratings and future opportunities, or influence how others view their competence as a teacher. Many may also feel the need to put on a strong front and set aside their own struggles to first manage and support the needs of students.

¹⁰ Ozbay F, Johnson DC, Dimoulas E, Morgan CA, Charney D, Southwick S. Social support and resilience to stress: from neurobiology to clinical practice. *Psychiatry (Edgmont)*. 2007 May;4(1):35-40. PMID: 20806026; PMCID: PMC2921311.

*Disclaimer: key phrases and sentiments were extracted and edited to form full sentences, without changing the meaning or context of the response



Issues and problems on the ground are not recognised. In doing so, we are not being honest about what the real issues are, which prevents us from taking the first step towards a solution. Stakeholders (students/ parents/ middle managers/ school leaders) have substantial influence when it comes to assessing or rating teachers' performances and teachers themselves lack a platform to speak up against any perceived unfair or misrepresented teacher performance evaluation. Teachers' workload and responsibilities are constantly increasing, and students inevitably suffer the consequences of the mismatch between well-intentioned policies and its actual outcomes upon implementation, as well as having teachers who are tired, burned-out and frustrated."

- Junior College,
Classroom Teacher

5.3.3 Forms of support teachers suggest to improve their wellbeing

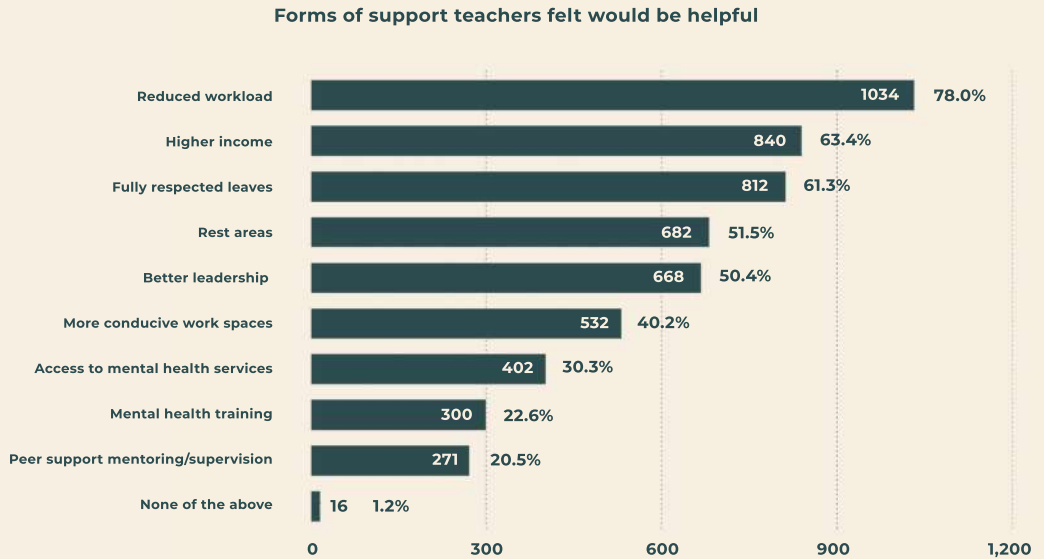


Figure 9: Suggested forms of support that teachers would find helpful

Based on the graph above, the top 3 forms of support teachers want at work are:



78.0%
Reduced
workload



63.4%
Higher
income



61.3%
Fully respected
leaves

HIGH WORKLOAD

On a whole, teachers struggle with a high workload the most. The reduction of workload could greatly improve their wellbeing.

63.4% of teachers felt that an increase in income could help justify the amount of work they do, and offer a form of recognition for their profession and efforts.

“Generally, the workload of teachers is increasing over the years as there are very few caps that teachers do not need to wear, but our remuneration does not justify our workload.”

- Primary School,
Classroom Teacher

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Many teachers have also called for more mental health support in the form of access to mental health services like support groups, counselling, and mental health training courses. This helps to manage their personal mental health and that of students. A number shared that to start this, it would be helpful to begin having workplace conversations on teachers' mental wellbeing.

“Schools should encourage more openness amongst teachers to share/ talk about mental wellness at the workplace, so that it does not become a stigma that teachers feel the need to 'hide it under the carpet'. Having outlets to encourage such conversations will help teachers open up more on their own mental wellness.”

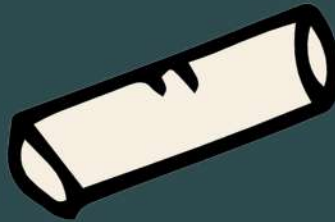
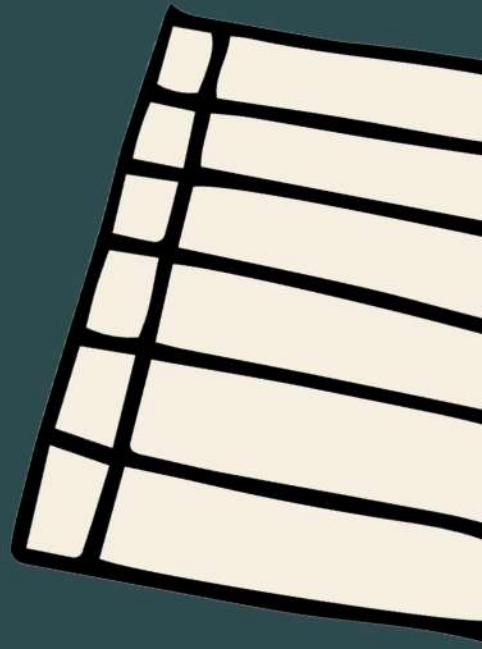
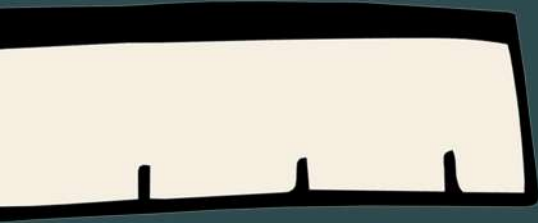
- Primary School,
Classroom Teacher

CONDUCTIVE WORK SPACES

Other useful areas of support are the creation of more conducive work spaces, e.g. dark, quiet rooms for rest or meditation, and more peer support mentoring programmes.

“An area for rest/quick power nap can make a big different as teachers we report very early for work, with full day lessons and meetings that often end late in the evening.”

- Junior College, Subject Head



6



Recommendations

What can various stakeholders do to create a more conducive environment for teachers' wellbeing?

The following were highlighted by teachers as what they think would help create a more conducive environment for their mental and physical wellbeing:

1

Actionable structural changes

Reducing existing class sizes and hiring more teachers to lower the teacher-to-student ratio could be helpful in directly alleviating teachers' struggles with workload, managing students' behaviour and their parents' expectations.

2

Creation of communication channels

Creation of communication channels to listen to and act on the needs and struggles of teachers would help obtain feedback from teachers on the ground regarding policies introduced, while keeping a pulse check on teachers' mental health.

3

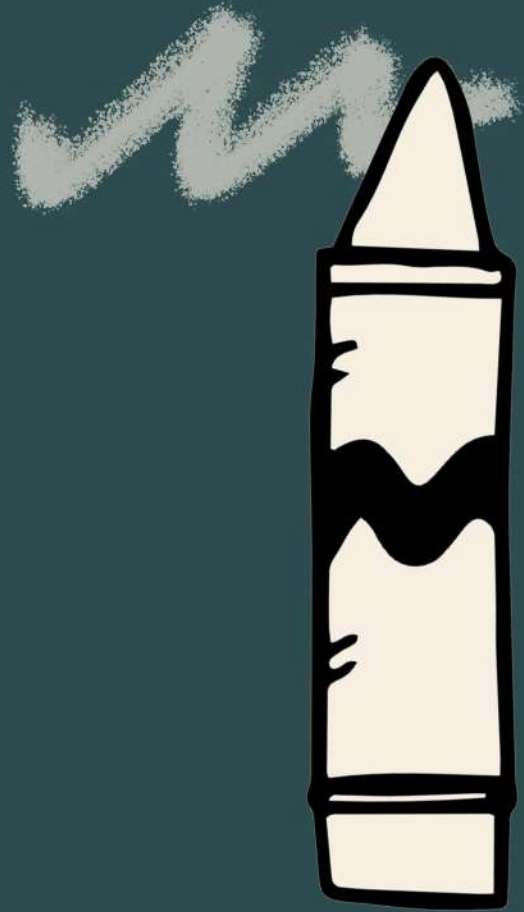
A mindset and behavioural change

Parents should seek to collaborate with teachers towards the common goal of their child's development. Teachers believe that more could be done to change the perspectives of parents towards a teacher's role and encourage them to be understanding, patient and respectful. Students can also do their part in taking ownership of their actions and realising that their behaviour directly influences the mental wellbeing of their teachers.

The fact that the culture of overworking has become normalised is a concern. Healthy boundaries and working habits should be the celebrated norm. With higher levels of wellbeing, teachers can be more emotionally and physically present with students.

7
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Limitations



The limitations of our study



An exploratory approach

It should be noted that our study takes an exploratory approach on the various aspects of teachers' concerns rather than a conclusive, targeted one.

That said, given our substantial sample size, this study does provide relevant stakeholders with a good starting point in having a glimpse of sentiments on the ground, providing them with some practical recommendations worth considering.



Timing

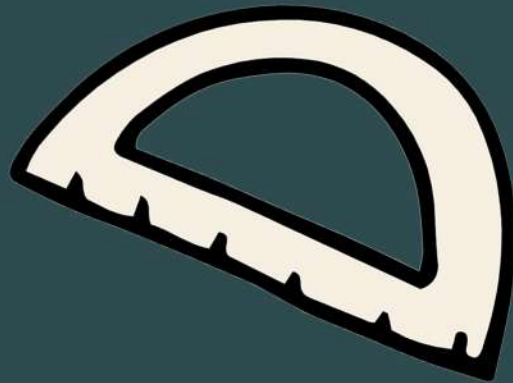
We also acknowledge that wellbeing levels measured in this survey are dependent on when the survey is being launched; it can be expected that teachers' responses are heavily influenced by the pandemic situation. Responses indicated by teachers may hence reflect higher stress levels compared to the pre-pandemic period.

Given that this is the pioneering study concerning teachers' mental health, it is difficult to discern the pre-existing issues teachers had faced and the wellbeing levels of teachers before COVID-19 due to the lack of comparative studies in Singapore.



Anonymity

In the spirit to ensure openness and honesty from our participants, teachers' identities were kept anonymous. This limits the verification process of their response. To ensure that responses were relevant to our study, respondents were instead asked questions about their position and the educational level that they teach.



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