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Regular Article

“I couldn’t do what I needed to do for my own family”: Teacher-parents during COVID-19 lockdowns

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ABSTRACT

This article draws data from a wider research project that focused on New Zealand and Australian schools’ experiences of delivering education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, we share the stories of 21 classroom teachers as they navigated teaching during the pandemic. We include a subset of teachers who were also parents of school-aged children and explore how they managed their dual role. The findings highlight the toll that teaching during this time took on teachers, personally and professionally, especially, those who were simultaneously balancing work and family demands. We use work-family border theory to explain the role conflict experienced by teachers, and teacher-parents, in particular.

1. Introduction

> I couldn’t help my children with their schoolwork … I was working on the computer in our kitchen [while minding] the baby. I had my own kids walk up to the baby gate, go, “Oh, mum’s teaching” and walk away with their schoolbooks in hand … [Teacher 3, Australia]

When governments around the world put their countries into COVID-19 lockdowns and instructed schools to deliver education remotely, little thought was given to the possible consequences for teachers, especially teachers who were also parents of school-aged children. Our impetus for this article came as we were drawn to the stark consequences while independently analysing data from our own country datasets, as part of a wider study relating to schools’ experiences of COVID-19. Tales of physical and emotional exhaustion sat alongside teachers’ anger and frustration at the lack of support or recognition for what they were being expected to do. We found little else had been written about this dual role so discussed the possibility of more closely examining our data for insights into the role of teachers who were also parents during lockdown learning. We revisited our teacher interview transcripts and recoded them for instances of overlap between their roles as teachers *and* parents. By beginning with teachers’ experiences, more generally, before moving to that of teacher-parents,[1] we found we had enough data for a compelling story. In this article, we first briefly outline the COVID-19 educational responses in our respective research settings. Next, we report on our literature search that covered teachers more generally as well as teacher-parents. We follow our literature review with a summary of the complementary studies we each undertook. We share our findings under the following headings: immediate responses; pedagogical adaptations; teacher-parents; and on-going concerns. We discuss the findings using Clark’s (2000) work-family border theory and conclude with consideration for the significant roles teachers will play in future crises and how they can be better supported by education policy makers, administrators and school leaders.

2. Research contexts

Education, like so many aspects of our lives, has been entirely upended since early 2020 and the onset of COVID-19. Snap lockdowns have forced schools to close with very little notice, shifting to remote or online learning. As case numbers rose and fell in different countries, regions and cities, a cycle of snap lockdowns, cautious re-openings, and further lockdowns created a mood of generalised uncertainty for students, teachers and parents. School communities grappled with managing an entirely unprecedented environment inside and outside the school grounds. This article draws on two datasets from a larger study conducted in New Zealand and Australia between late 2020 and early 2022. We now provide a brief context for the COVID responses in the two research settings.

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[1] We use the term teacher-parents as a condensed way to describe teachers who were also parents of school-aged children at this time.

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2.1. New Zealand

In March 2020, the New Zealand government's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic was to create a four-tiered alert system: Level 1 – prepare; Level 2 – reduce; Level 3 – restrict; and Level 4 – eliminate. After presenting the alert level system, the government promptly put the country into a full Level 4 lockdown (Cameron, 2020). The school holidays were brought forward to give the Ministry of Education and schools time to move to on-line learning or provide remote learning services for those families without appropriate devices or reliable internet (Education Review Office, 2020). In the two years following the first country-wide lockdown, the focus changed to only locking down high-risk regions, most notably, Auckland. Regions moved between full school closures (at Level 4), partial closures (at Level 3) and staggered re-openings (at Levels 1 & 2). At the time of writing in, all national restrictions and mandates are lifted, except for health settings and aged care.

Twenty-two participants from 15 schools in New Zealand responded to requests to participate in a set of school case studies that would capture the unique experiences of principals, teachers and parents in varied geographical, socio-economic, cultural and COVID-affected communities. For this article, with the focus on teachers who might also have been parents, 14 teachers' transcripts were selected, revisited and re-analysed, and later supplemented by quotes from 3 principals' transcripts.

2.2. Australia

The COVID-19 response in Australia also aimed at elimination but was characterised by tensions between federal and state governments (Crome, 2022, pp. 1–16). Prior to the pandemic, state governments had high levels of autonomy over state policies and decisions and resented the interference of the federal government. While the prime minister promoted keeping schools open, some states and territories preferred remote learning. The tensions led to varying educational responses between the states and territories (Biddle, Edwards, Gray, & Sollis, 2020). The Australian case study school used in this article was a faith-based school located in a small rural town in the state of New South Wales. In late March 2020, in response to public health directives from the state government and the education authority, the school was sent into lockdown. The school was forced to shift to 'connected learning', with little notice. Initial concerns amongst staff and parents related to uncertainty about the lockdown's length, and about access to the internet and devices amongst many families. These, and other, factors combined to have significant impact upon the school community. Thirteen members of the school's community contributed to the case study but only the 7 teacher transcripts have been revisited and re-analysed for this article, with several additional quotes from the principal.

3. Literature review

To keep our review manageable, we limited our search to research literature that focused on empirical studies of schools' experiences of delivering education during the current pandemic. Using combinations of search terms such as COVID-19, pandemic, lockdowns, education, schools, teachers, parents, teacher-parents, online learning, home schooling, remote delivery and home learning, we downloaded articles, chapters and reports from over 20 countries. While studies from the US and UK dominated, the breadth of countries provided a wide array of schooling experiences. While countries' COVID-19 severity levels and education systems varied, we were struck by the similarities, rather than the differences, of teachers' collective global contribution to the pandemic response.

We scanned each article for relevance to our focus on teachers who were also parents during the pandemic lockdowns. Only a single article (Güvercin, Kesici, & Akbaşlı, 2021) was specifically about teacher-parents, so we conducted a close reading of more general articles that might reveal insights into the dual role. From the final 32 articles we synthesised the literature into two themes: teachers as frontline workers and teachers who were also parents.

3.1. Teachers as frontline workers

Closing schools as a protective measure was common across countries' responses to the Covid pandemic (Drane, Vernon, & O'Shea, 2020; Education Review Office [ERO], 2020; 2021; Greater Christchurch Schools Network [GCSN], 2020; Hood, 2020; Kim, Oxley, & Asbury, 2022). It often happened at short notice with schools given little time to prepare physical curriculum packs for their students or to switch to virtual educational platforms (Education Review Office, 2021; Hood, 2020, Kim et al., 2022; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020; Sharma, Laletas, May, & Grove, 2022). While not wishing to downplay the pressure that this requirement put on principals and their school leadership teams, our focus in this article is on teachers as frontline workers (Beames, Christensen, & Werner-Seidler, 2021; Pressley, Ha, & Learn, 2021), that is, those who were charged with teaching on a daily basis. Studies of teachers early in the pandemic reveal high levels of uncertainty, anxiety and frustration (Allen, Jerrim, & Sims, 2020; Beames et al., 2021; Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Education Review Office, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Mutch & Peung, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). In later studies, some of these intense emotions appeared to level out as schools and parents reduced expectations and teachers settled into a delivery rhythm (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Sharma et al., 2022) but exhaustion increased, and mental health and physical wellbeing decreased (Beames et al., 2021; Education Review Office, 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Letzel, Pozas, & Schneider, 2020; Mutch & Peung, 2021; Pellerone, 2021).

Teachers experienced high levels of concern, personally and professionally (Letzel et al., 2020; Mutch & Peung, 2021) but their most pressing concern was for their students, especially for those in the most vulnerable families and communities (An et al., 2021; Drane et al., 2020; Education Review Office, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim, Dundas, & Asbury, 2021; Mutch & Peung, 2021; Phillips et al., 2021). Many teachers felt that the pandemic would only exacerbate the inequalities that already existed in society (Hood, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Letzel et al., 2020; Mutch, 2021; Riwai-Couch et al., 2020). Where possible, prior to full lockdowns, schools delivered basic supplies – devices, learning materials, food and other necessities to families most at risk (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Mutch & Peung, 2021). Teachers worried about their students' home environments, whether they could access learning, how much their parents could support them, and how they might cope with a different routine and set of circumstances (Aytaç, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Mutch & Peung, 2021).

Professional concerns included the challenge of moving from face-to-face to online modes (Duraku & Hoxha, 2020; GSCN, 2020; Leech, Gullett, Howland Cummings, & Haug, 2020; Kruszewska et al., 2022; Phillips et al., 2021). A US study found that 92.4 percent of teachers had never taught online before (Marshall, Shannon, & Love, 2020). Teachers also found instructions or expectations from governments, education authorities or school leaders confusing and overwhelming (Crome, 2022, pp. 1–16; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022). As well as the intensity of learning about new pedagogies and platforms, teachers faced limited preparation time, a lack of suitable resources, increased workload, guilt about the quality of their teaching, and the loss of their former teacher identity (Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Flack, Walker, Bickerstaff, & Margetts, 2020; Hood, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Leech et al., 2020; Letzel et al., 2020; Mutch and Peung, 2021; Van Bergen & Daniel, 2022; Weißenfels, Klopp, & Perels, 2022; Marshall et al., 2020). Many teachers missed the face-to-face interactions of teaching, the buzz of a busy classroom, and their individual students (Leech et al., 2020; Letzel et al., 2020; Truzoli, Pirola, & Conte, 2021; Van Bergen & Daniel, 2020). Their feelings of competence, usefulness and optimism tended to decline (Allen et al., 2020; Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Mutch & Peung, 2021;).

Personal concerns included contracting COVID themselves or vulnerable family members becoming ill, financial insecurity, and coping with family or community bereavements (Allen et al., 2020; Hatzichristou, Georgakakou-Koutsonikou, Lianos, Lampropoulou, & Yfanti, 2021; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Mutch & Peung, 2021; Truzoli et al., 2021). Overall, teachers felt their physical and emotional wellbeing were strongly impacted (Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; ERO, 2020, 2021; Gadermann et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). Teaching intruded into their home lives, prevented a healthy work-life balance and, in severe cases, led to burnout (Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Gadermann et al., 2021; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Mutch & Peung, 2021).

Some studies broke down the levels of stress by gender, relationship status, location or school type. However, these studies depended on many contextual factors that render the results somewhat contradictory. A Portuguese study (Alves, Lopes, & Precioso, 2020) found older male teachers faced more difficulties in the online teaching environment, whereas an Australian study found that older, fulltime, longer-term teachers had the highest self-efficacy (Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022). Other studies found that younger teachers (Education Review Office, 2021) were more stressed, as were female teachers, but female teachers had better coping strategies (Allen et al., 2020; Education Review Office, 2021; Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020). Yet, a Slovenian study did not find gender differences were a strong predictor of teacher stress (Košir et al., 2021). Further studies found that single teachers suffered from social isolation (Education Review Office, 2021); German secondary grammar school teachers were more stressed than their counterparts (Klapproth et al., 2020); UK private school teachers had longer lasting stress than other school teachers (Allen et al., 2020); and there was no difference in US teacher burnout based on ethnicity, location, years of teaching or instruction type (Pressley, 2021).

Factors that helped teachers cope were support from their leadership teams and their colleagues, resources that enabled them to teach well online, improving their online skills, and relationships that sustained them through the difficult times (Beltman, Hascher, & Mansfield, 2022; Duraku & Hoxha, 2020; Education Review Office, 2021; Román et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022; Torres, Teixeira, Pais, Menezes, & Ferreira, 2021). On reflection, some teachers reported renewed energy and focus (Allen et al., 2020) and improved confidence with online pedagogies and platforms (Sharma et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2021; Truzoli et al., 2021). Many teachers said that their relationships with students' parents became more reciprocal and authentic (Hood, 2020; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Torres et al., 2021) with 72 percent of teachers in a Norwegian study reporting improved relationships with school parents (Bubb & Jones, 2020).

3.2. *Teachers who were also parents*

Many of the studies we reviewed gathered quantitative data through on-line surveys. We were only able to find one survey that directly asked about teachers as parents (Torres et al., 2021). The study, set in Portugal, asked if teachers had children or other dependents at home. Thirty-two percent of teachers had one child or dependent at home; 27 percent had two or more.

A further twelve qualitative or mixed method studies provided some relevant insights, where respondents mentioned their dual roles as teachers and parents during this time. One qualitative Turkish study (Güvercin et al., 2021) focused on the "double-sided" role of teacher-parents, highlighting that, for home learning to be successful, teachers needed the support of parents and parents needed the support of teachers. Two other studies found that having younger children at home increased stress and anxiety (Allen et al., 2020; Košir et al., 2020, pp. 1–5) and Aytaç (2021) reported that teachers worried about the lack of support they were able to give their own children.

Most of the studies only dealt obliquely with the concept of teachers as parents, using terms such as 'blurred roles', 'work-life balance' or 'life at home' (An et al., 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Van Bergen & Daniel, 2022). However, within these studies were powerful quotes from respondents that gave insights into the complexity of managing work and family commitments. One teacher said, "I work from 9 a.m. until 1 a.m. the next morning with short breaks between to do the things a working mother has to do …". The teacher then listed all the teaching-related tasks she was expected to do before adding, "… then, I have a 5th grader and 7th grader of my own, three pets and my spouse working from home" (cited in An et al., 2021, p. 2602). In another article, a respondent highlighted the conflict she felt between her teacher role and her parent role: "… the teacher in me is going, 'they need to do the work… ' and the Mum in me is going, 'they're getting completely stressed out. We need to go for a walk and jump in puddles for a bit'" (cited in Kim & Asbury, 2020, p. 1072). Another teacher expressed the toll that being a teacher-parent was taking, "I have three children of my own (ages 16, 14, 5) [who] all are learning from home. The two oldest are able to complete schoolwork without my assistance, but … my 5-year-old needs me to sit with him (cited in Marshall et al., 2020, p. 49). Finally, this quote highlights the guilt a teacher felt when she saw the toll it was taking on her children, "I could see my children suffered mental health challenges because of the long school closures. Our home began to feel like a bubbling volcano, with constant eruptions from both of them, including me" (cited in Harvankova, Cunningham, & Striepe, 2021, p.2).

The limited literature available on teacher-parents suggests that the role of teaching from home during lockdown was stressful enough without the added complication of teachers supporting their own children's learning. Although our research did not have teacher-parents as an initial specific focus, we feel we can add further insights to this topic through the close analysis of our teacher participants' transcripts.

4. Methodology

The data shared in this article come from two complementary qualitative studies under the umbrella of a wider study approved by the University of Auckland.[2] The purpose of the wider study was to build a series of case studies of schools' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study began in New Zealand in late 2020 and was led by Author 1 who recruited participants from 15 different schools in different geographic, socio-economic and school settings. An Australian-based researcher (Author 2) used the same research protocol to conduct a single case study in her location in 2021 to complement the New Zealand-based study.

The wider study was undertaken in the qualitative paradigm informed by a social constructivist perspective (Burr, 2015), in which the emphasis is on how participants construct and make sense of the topic, in our case, schools' experiences of COVID-19, including teaching during and after lockdowns. In line with qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), we were not seeking to make generalisable claims but rather draw on participant's stories to illustrate schools' lived experiences as they navigated this unprecedented time. For the wider study, our data gathering methods focused on enabling our participants to share their stories, individually, or in small groups, in response to open-ended questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews were conversational in tone and ranged between 30 and 60 min. They were audio-recorded and transcribed before being and thematically analysed (Saldaña, 2021) to code items of interest, categorise and label similar codes, and iteratively reduce the number of codes to produce robust themes that reflected the unique experiences of our case study schools.

Given that COVID-19 was a traumatic time for many, and especially for the Australian case study participants, who were still recovering from summer bushfires and flooding, treating our participants with sensitivity and care (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009) was uppermost in our minds. As well as the usual ethical considerations of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, we reassured our participants that they could withdraw from the study or stop the recording at any time, and we had support people or material available in case the interviews caused further distress.

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[2] Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, on 6 October 2020, Protocol number UAHPEC3078.

For the purposes of this article, we revisited the combined country data sets and selected 30 participant transcripts that focused on *the impact of the pandemic on teachers' home-based teaching during COVID lockdowns* (see Table 1).

We reviewed the raw transcripts and selected quotes that met our new criteria of focusing specifically on teaching during COVID-19 lockdowns. Our intention was to produce an *instrumental* case study (Stake, 1995), in which we were combining data from different participants to build a rich description of the phenomenon of interest, rather than comparing individual, school or country experiences. To this end, we used *focused coding* (Saldaña, 2021) looking specifically at what teachers did during this time, how they felt, what they learned from the experience, and how they were managing family expectations as well as their teaching.

Qualitative research, by its very nature, with its focus on small sample sizes in specific contexts, cannot be considered valid and reliable in the manner in which these terms are used in quantitative research, however, it should still be conducted with rigour. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest instead credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability as measures of trustworthiness. We aimed for credibility and transferability by undertaking deep, sensitive and authentic engagement with our participants, gathering rich, descriptive and emotive stories of their experiences and transcribing these accurately. We ensured our findings were dependable and confirmable by following scholarly qualitative research conventions and substantiating our findings in relation to current literature and the use of a creditable explanatory theory.

5. Findings

We begin our findings section by sharing the immediate responses of teachers and their schools to the pandemic before outlining the pedagogical adaptations they made to cope with their online or remote teaching. We then focus on the experiences of teachers who were also parents, followed by teachers' on-going concerns.

5.1. Immediate responses

Fear and anxiety were common immediate responses. One Australian teacher said, "… some people were, like, there would be teachers dead, there'll be parents dead, and the school might not exist anymore" [T1, AU].[3] A New Zealand principal similarly explained:

> We had some kids who were really worried that their parents were going to die. Because they were watching the news all the time … it became the story … so, we had significant concern and anxiety that was happening in the community …. [P3, NZ].

Table 1
Breakdown of New Zealand and Australian participants.

	Principals	Administrators	Teachers	Parents
New Zealand	3		14	
Australia	1	1	7	4

Despite the early panic, teachers became more pragmatic:

> I guess you can't really prepare for a crisis like that, because they tend to take on a life of their own. All the preparation in the world sometimes cannot provide for all the twists and turns … and you've got to be flexible … adapt your experience to deal with what's in front of you …. [T4, NZ]

At this stage, schools realised that they couldn't wait for education authorities to provide what they needed; they would need to mobilise themselves. They began assessing their readiness to provide online learning or an alternative form of remote learning. A teacher at the Australian case study school said:

> We did a survey of all the kids and worked out who really needed help. So, we had packages made up from Kinder to Year 10 for those who needed it. We made sure that if the Internet crashed, that kids knew what they could do. [T3, AU]

Also in New Zealand, schools needed to be proactive:

> We gave out a huge number of devices to our students. There are a lot of families that don't have the ability to be able to provide for these students … most agencies were just sort of caught on the hop and so a lot of families didn't get their devices until well into the pandemic. [T2, NZ]

Where schools felt that students might not be able to access devices or the Internet, they arranged packages of curriculum activities and learning materials, such as paper and pens, to be delivered:

> Our team had packages for our children at their level for the work that they were able to do. That was a big challenge, to get those sent out to individual children, to the extent that we were stopping off on the way home and posting them in letterboxes. [T9, NZ]

Schools were also aware that, not only might some families not have learning materials, but they might not even have the basic necessities:

> Before we went into full lockdown, Level 4 lockdown, we actually got as much food together as we possibly could and got that out to families, however we could really, and we did that throughout the lockdown as much as we could. [P3, NZ].

In New Zealand, learning was home-based for the first six weeks but, in New South Wales, schools were expected to have a skeleton staff to supervise the children of essential workers. The Australian school principal opened her school up more widely:

> For most schools, children of emergency workers were to come to school. We included whoever needed to be at school, because there were four families where I was pretty confident there was domestic violence or mental health issues and those children needed to be with us. [P1, AU]

5.2. Pedagogical adaptations

The next focus was for teachers to prepare for on-line learning. Schools and individual teachers were in various states of readiness. Some felt more ready for the challenge:

> I'm quite comfortable using computers and things like that. There were some programmes that I hadn't used before, that took me a while to get used to. I've never made a YouTube video before, so that side of things was new learning. [T1, NZ].

Other teachers were less confident. One teacher said, "My role changed in that I had to become a learner – a panicking learner" [T9, NZ]. Another said, "Oh my god, what am I supposed to do? It was a new school. Their learning strategies were different" [T4, NZ]. Others grudgingly went along with the requirement because they had no choice:

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[3] Participants are coded T for teacher or P for principal and a numeral, then AU for Australia or NZ for New Zealand.

> Yes, I do use Google Classroom and a variety of on-line resources but I prefer face-to-face. I do not like online teaching. I'll say that right here and now …. But this is what I have to do. So, you've just got to soldier on as best you can. [T2, NZ].

Most teachers reported that they initially over-estimated how much work children could get through at home. An Australian teacher said, "What I was originally setting was 10 times more than students were managing to start with" [T7, AU]. A New Zealand teacher also commented, "We created a bit of stress for the parents with our expectations … they were thinking that we expected them to support and help their children, whereas many parents didn't even understand what we were sending through" [T9, NZ]. After a while, teachers relaxed their expectations and encouraged parents to think about the curriculum more broadly:

> It wasn't until I called up the parents and they shared their fears and concerns and I explained, "You can turn on the TV and put on a nature programme, that's science. Go into the garden, that's science and maths. And if they do the stuff we sent out, that's fine, but it isn't meant to stress you out." [T9, NZ]

A New Zealand principal encouraged parents to see this as an important time to spend with their children:

> So, the message that I sent out to them was that children won't remember the reading or writing they do over this time, but they will remember the way they feel … this was a time for them just to connect with their children and to enjoy being with their children. [P2, NZ]

Some schools had more structured days with a timetable for lessons on Google Classroom or Zoom but that did not mean that all students engaged equally, as this New Zealand teacher explains:

> Some of my students have very structured days with their parents who make sure they get out of their pyjamas. So that's when it was quite successful. Others we didn't see for weeks. So, the students that were engaged, learned how to use different digital tools – things that they would never get to do during class [and] they produced the same amount in a short amount of time at home without any distractions. [T10, NZ)

In both New Zealand and Australia, teachers in charge of school timetables organised online learning timetables so that devices could be shared around families with multiple children:

> I worked out a way of doing a timetable that would work for Kinder through to Year 10, because I was pretty conscious that we have kids who'd have to share laptops. So, I wanted it so the whole family could have online access. [T4, AU].

Schools adapted their programmes to meet the circumstances of their families and communities, which meant there was wide variation. One teacher describes her approach:

> Just having clear expectations. And not overloading them with too much information. We had a daily check-in. You had to be online for roll call and say *haere mai* [hello] to each other. Then showing children how to do each activity, modelling it explicitly so they could complete their tasks. [T3, NZ]

Schools expected teachers to maintain regular contact with their students, either through formal on-line lessons, phone calls or virtual drop-in sessions. One Australian teacher explains:

> I started having sessions where I was online live if the kids wanted to drop in … I called it my open-door classroom and they could pop in and ask questions. And the kids used that quite well, particularly the higher grades. [T3, AU].

The Australian school learning support teacher has an anecdote about phoning a student at an allotted time to find she was travelling in a car:

> She was on her way to Thredbo with her dad, in the car, halfway up the mountain. I said, "I can call you back." He goes, "No, no, she's so desperate to talk to you. I'll stop the car." So, it was half an hour with that child over the phone while I read to her and she read to me. [T5, AU]

These expectations greatly increased teachers' workload and the time that they were on call. One teacher remarked, "What wasn't great was I was working up 'til midnight, [T9, NZ]. Another explained:

> For me, for my intermediate class [ages 11–12 years], I was pretty much online from 9 a.m. to 2 [a.m.] each night. And that was just grabbing a sandwich in case someone came back online. If you were not there and available, they would give up … because you didn't know what their home situation was going to be like. [T8, NZ]

Teachers talked of this time as being exhausting, stressful and demanding, not just of their time but of their emotional energy, as expressed by this deputy principal:

> The online situation was challenging for teachers to try remain in contact with the children and do the best by them. And they spent hours doing it. With the younger children, heaps and heaps of individual messages and interactions and trying to assess their work and the rest. For the teachers of older children, having three online meetings a day. So, it was definitely far more intense than being in the classroom. [T8, NZ].

Eventually, online teaching became routine. One Australian teacher began to enjoy her online teaching: "Once we were in a flow, it was less tricky than having kids at school. We didn't have the behaviour and all the other things that we deal with in the classroom [T7, AU]. Similarly, a New Zealand teacher said:

> It levelled out and created its own routine. Initially, there was quite a radical increase in workload because you were doing your best to prepare resources for the digital platform. And then it moved into a pattern and that pattern didn't change. [T2, NZ]

5.3. *Teachers who were also parents*

> I think the bit that doesn't get spoken about is that the majority of educators out there also have their own families that they are having to deal with – supporting their own children, dealing with the partner who could have lost a job. So, while they were out there doing what they had to for their communities, at the same time, they had their own personal issues …. [P3, NZ]

The above quote exemplifies how teachers who also had children or other dependents at home felt ignored or unappreciated by the government, media and wider public. This theme sparked a heated discussion amongst several of the Australian teachers. They were discussing being rostered to work from home some days and attend school on other days to supervise essential workers' children:

> T3, AU: And the other thing I find really difficult to deal with, was the confusion over essential workers' children. We had children here, whose parents were stay-at-home mums. Well, our staff who are vulnerable need to be working from home; our staff who have their own children need to be working from home.
>
> T1, AU: I remember a bit of criticism in certain media, criticising the how much work the kids were actually doing and [saying] the teachers are just having a holiday …

> T3, AU: Scott Morrison [prime minister] basically saying teachers are a waste of time, we need to get their butts back to school – and he says that publicly. Like, that's the head of the country who thinks … teachers are letting us down and they just need to get back to the classroom …

> T3, AU: And I mean, the resentment that I felt as a member of staff and a mum … but I was expected to do it for other people's family because that's my job. And, it was actually said to me, "That's your job and you're paid to do it."

Teachers used words like anxiety, guilt and frustration about having to navigate their dual roles as parent and teacher. A New Zealand teacher had to rely on her visiting parents who were stranded in New Zealand when the borders closed:

> Yeah, it was tough. It was tough because I have a toddler. When she is in front of me, I can't open my laptop. So, when I had online classes, they used to engage her in some activity. If they weren't here, I don't know how I would have dealt with it. [T4, NZ].

An Australian teacher was not so fortunate and had to decide between taking her children with her or leaving them at home:

> I had to leave my children at home. I had no choice. Either bring them to school which seemed more dangerous or just get my older children to look after my younger one, which was hard because they had their own issues … like mental health, and their schoolwork to do, which was stressing them out, plus looking after my littlest, who was three and bit then. [T1, AU].

Teachers also had to navigate between their children and their children's teachers. One Australian teacher felt the expectations put on her own children were too high:

> It was, like, "Get this done, and now I need this done, and this done." They were in Grade 9 and 10 and they were working to 10 o'clock at night. They were in tears trying to do all the work before the next day and it was just way too much. [T1, AU].

Concern for her children at home meant another Australian teacher took matters into her own hands:

> But I kept saying to my own kids: if you can't do it, don't worry about it … And there were a couple of days where I had to email the teacher and say, "We're not doing school today". But I have the confidence, educationally, to do that, that 95 percent of parents wouldn't have. [T3, AU]

The line between school and family time became increasingly blurred. One New Zealand teacher gives an example:

> So, in a normal world, on my weekends, that's the time I spend with my family, with the people I care about. But during the pandemic, students were emailing me work on a Sunday evening, and so you just answer them on a Sunday evening, because that's just the kind of world you're in at the moment. [T2, NZ]

When New Zealand moved to Level 3 and schools opened for children of essential workers, some teachers were asked to return to school. This teacher shares her anxiety:

> So, when we were going back to school, Level 3, I think it was, that we partially opened for essential students only … I went there, met the students, and when I came home, it was like: "Okay, I'm going sanitise myself 100 percent and then shower, change my clothes, wash my clothes and everything, before I see my baby." [T4, NZ].

Teachers working from home had to make choices about how much time they could give to their own children. One teacher said:

> The thing I talked about yesterday, feeling guilty that I couldn't help my children with their schoolwork … I'm 110 percent focused on the students I'm teaching today. That wasn't the case when I was teaching from home and my own kids were next door." [T3, AU].

Another teacher tried to help her own children but found it challenging to find time:

> I found that they [her children] were different with managing their learning from home. Finding out that they don't understand stuff and how they respond, and it was quite a challenge. And then how to focus and attend to each child, you know, as an individual, and trying to do that in the space of a day. [T7, AU]

5.4. On-going concerns

Preparing lessons and resources, teaching online, communicating with students, and managing their own home lives were not the only anxieties teachers had. They worried about students and their families. A frequent concern was about student engagement and wellbeing. Sometimes their concerns were about students losing motivation:

> Kids weren't always engaging online and they weren't getting out of bed … We wanted them to do the thumbs up symbol when they had read the stuff they had to read online. They weren't doing that … Parents were getting stressed because they couldn't do their own work and were having to motivate their kids. [T4, AU]

> Similarly, a New Zealand teacher expressed her frustration:

> I think the biggest challenge was the frustration because it was hard. It was a lot of work … making sure it was challenging and interesting and kind of fun to engage with … to find that they haven't even opened it up to see if they could or would enjoy doing it. [T14, NZ].

> Sometimes, it was hard to make contact with every student:

> Some children I heard from every day, I saw on Zoom, I saw in our class online learning but then for others, it wasn't the case. There were those children who were on my mind. Are they ok? Are their families ok? And that caused a lot of anxiety for me. [T13, NZ]

Student's home situations often prevented them from engaging. It might be lack of a device or Internet, lack of a suitable space or more serious issues, such as homelessness, food insecurity, or domestic violence. As one teacher said: "It was different for the students who had difficulties at home or whose parents had lost jobs and they were struggling for food. They didn't bother about learning because learning was the last thing" [T3, NZ]. Another teacher said, "I had one girl whose house was so filled with people she had nowhere to do her online meetings or her work and she was doing her Google Meets in the car" [T5, NZ].

Teachers' anxiety for their students extended to students' families, as well: "So, yes, teaching and learning was there … but actually the focus was on keeping our families feeling safe and connected to the school and like someone had their backs" [T12, NZ]. Another teacher describes working hard to keep in touch with her families:

> We're a rural community out here. And, so, a lot of parents did lose their jobs, unfortunately. I heard on the grapevine that a lot of students were out there working in order to bring money back for their families. You couldn't blame them for that. You know, that's just practicality. And I spent a lot of my time phoning the parents and just saying, "Hey, how's it going? This is just a this is just a temperature check to see how you're going with the family …." [T2, NZ]

Teachers' wellbeing was declining and they worried about how much longer they could keep working at this pace. In New South Wales, schools slowly transitioned from partial opening to full opening. One teacher explains:

> I guess as time went on and the crisis got a little bit less, things weren't spreading as rapidly and more kids started coming back to

> school, that was probably the hardest part, managing supervision at school and then having to do online stuff on top of that. [T7, AU].

In New Zealand during 2020 and 2021, areas with new outbreaks went in and out of lockdowns. Initially, returning to school was an anxious moment for teachers and students: “When they first came back, they were quiet and withdrawn, I think they were frightened. The classroom wasn’t the style they were used to. You had to have social distancing” [T9, NZ]. When schools were sent back into lockdown, teachers reported that students settled in more easily:

> When we went into lockdown round two, we kind of just picked up where we left off. And started the same as how we finished lockdown one. Which was really good because parents and children knew, kind of, what to expect. [T1, NZ]

By the end of 2020, teachers were exhausted. One principal said, “Teachers, they’re tired now. We’re all tired. Teachers are generally tired at this time of the year but this time there’s not enough left in their tanks” [P1, NZ].

In 2021, students’ mental health issues became more apparent: “It’s not until this year that I’ve gone, ‘Oh, it has affected some kids’” [T6, NZ]; “Everyone’s struggled through COVID, really. And I think the kids struggled a lot more than what we think they did” [T5, AU]. Schools spent more time helping their students process their anxieties:

> So, we actually dropped all digital devices for two weeks after every lockdown, so no devices at all. And it was all about relationship building. And every single time we came back from lockdown was just purely about relationships [T8, NZ].

At the end of 2020 and into 2021, teachers were exhausted. One teacher said, “And I’ve never worked so hard and by the time I got back [to the classroom], I felt I hadn’t had a break.” [T9, NZ]. Another teacher concluded: “It was tough. It was tough. It just about broke me” [T4, NZ]. Yet, when asked to reflect on what the COVID experience had taught them, while teachers still had memories of the frustration and anxiety, they were willing to find positives in the experience. They tended to focus on the human elements: relationships, connections, collegiality and collaboration. One teacher said: “I mean relationships are everything – relationships and connections.” [P3, NZ]. Another teacher said: “Collegiality, having regular contact with colleagues took away my feeling of isolation.” [T9, NZ] and a principal noted: “The connection between family and school, we thought it was pretty strong but its stronger now. [P5, NZ].

6. Work-family border theory

Until we had re-examined the data with the focus on teachers’ experiences of teaching during lockdowns, we had no clear picture of what might emerge. Thus, rather than beginning with a theory or conceptual framework that we might test, it was only after organising our findings that we were able to seek out a relevant explanatory theory – in this case Clark’s (2000) work-family border theory. As the literature review and our findings show, teachers working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those who were expected to assist with their own children’s learning, were having difficulty separating the two domains of work and family. Work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) is a way of examining these two key domains of working people’s lives, and the nature of the border or ‘lines of demarcation’ between them.[4] This theory helps explore how people create, support, mediate, and cross the borders between these domains, with the aim of ultimately recognising how to improve work-family balance. We chose this theory to not only provide explanations of what teachers *did* but also provide recommendations for future events.

There are four critical elements in work-family border theory: domains; borders; border-crossers; and border-keepers. First, work–family border theory focuses on the two domains of work and family that have different values, practices, habits, behaviours and cultures (Clark, 2000). The work domain generally provides financial stability and can create feelings of worth or achievement. In contrast, family life can provide more intimate connections and a sense of personal or collective identity.

Borders are the second critical element. A role within a specific domain can be separated by *temporal*, *physical* and *psychological* borders. Temporal borders refer to how a day or week might be divided into work hours or family time. Physical borders are the places in which the two domains are mostly enacted, such as in homes and offices. Individuals draw on physical and temporal borders to create psychological borders, which are rules created by individuals that dictate when certain behaviours and emotions are considered appropriate for one domain but not the other (Clark (2000).

Borders can vary in permeability and flexibility. They can stretch or shrink depending on the pressures of one domain or the other. If a person is free to work from anywhere (physical) and any time (temporal) and is allowed to think (psychological) about work at home and home at work, then the border between work and home would be considered highly flexible (Clark, 2000). Permeability is the extent to which an individual could be physically positioned in one domain but psychologically engaged in another. Flexibility and permeability can simplify the flow between the two domains but can also blur their boundaries.

The third critical element is the idea of being a border-crosser. It explains the relationship between a person (border-crosser) and the two domains (work and family), across which they try to maintain a balance (Clark, 2000). Each working day, a border-crosser is a member of both domains and crosses from one to the other, sometimes multiple times. Individuals have different degrees of authority or autonomy within a domain and that affects their ability to control the borders between them.

The notion of border-keepers is the fourth element. Border-keepers refer to other domain members who have authority or influence over deciding the rules for the domain and its border, such as work supervisors or spouses. Border-keepers can determine the domain borders and put specific demands on the border-crosser, such as task expectations or time restrictions. We now turn to discussing the experiences of the teachers and teacher-parents in our study using the work-family border theory framework.

7. Discussion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers felt a sense of dislocation and unreality. Using work-family border theory (Clark, 2000), we aim to provide some clarity as to how this sense of an ‘alternate universe’ (Kim et al., 2022) came about and what we can learn from the experiences of two sets of teachers in New Zealand and Australia.

7.1. Domains

The pandemic and consequent requirements to work from home took away teachers’ ability to clearly delineate work and family boundaries. When the kitchen table became their workspace, their work and family personas became blurred. If the teachers also had children at home needing their attention, then they were pulled in conflicting directions. The pressures of two simultaneous sets of demands meant that one domain would need to be prioritised over the other. It was most often the work domain that took precedence in these unfamiliar and uncertain circumstances and the family domain that languished. This choice made teachers anxious, frustrated, sad and guilty (see also, Allen et al., 2020;

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[4] As with all theoretical models, work-family border theory simplifies the complexity and varied nature of the concepts of ‘work’ and ‘family’ but we felt, on balance, that it provided a useful perspective for understanding what had happened and how it might be remedied.

Beames et al., 2021; Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Pressley et al., 2021). They felt that they were not good parents. Teachers invested much time, energy and emotion in their work domain. They were disappointed and resentful when their efforts were not recognised or appreciated by some principals, parents or politicians (Crome, 2022, pp. 1–16; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022).

7.2. Borders

The physical demarcation that existed between school and home prior to the pandemic ceased to exist in lockdowns, as did the transition time between the two domains. Home became work and work became home. As well as the physical space blurring the two domains, teacher-parents had blurred role divisions. Having to share and negotiate the same physical space, and in some cases, devices, added to their anxiety and stress. However, in an interesting twist, one Australian teacher supervising a very young child, set her workspace set up behind a baby gate. Whether intentionally or not, her school-aged children saw this as both a physical and psychological barrier that prevented them from entering her work domain to ask for help.

The blurring of the work-family borders continued even when restrictions lessened in both countries. As schools partially opened for children of essential workers, the borders remained fuzzy. Teachers split their time between work-at-school and work-at-home. For teacher-parents, the role demarcation became even more diluted if they needed to take their children to school with them.

Temporal borders were stretched beyond recognition as workload and other demands transformed the notion of a ‘school day’ – for both teachers and their students. As one teacher said, “With on-line learning there were no boundaries” [T6, AU] and this was the case for many of our participants. They reported working until late at night and on weekends. With the work domain in dominance, the many additional tasks required of teachers at this time permeated the home domain. Eventually, the long hours required to meet external expectations and their lack of control over their home situations began to take their toll. Teachers became tired and dispirited (Allen et al., 2020; Mutch and Peung, 2021; Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Sokol et al., 2020). Their physical and mental health declined (Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Gadermann et al., 2021; Maitland and Glazzard, 2022). Teacher-parents also saw that it impacted on their own children’s mental health – another factor that increased their anxiety (Harvankova, Cunningham, & Striepe, 2021).

With little control over physical and temporal boundaries, it became impossible to maintain psychological boundaries between the expectations and tasks related to work and the needs and activities related to home. When much of the teaching was conducted online, school was no longer a physical place. School became an amorphous concept with blurred psychological boundaries. It filled teachers’ days and minds. Added to that, they constantly worried about their students’ home situations, about their engagement and motivation, and how they were coping with their learning (An et al., 2021; Drane et al., 2020; Education Review Office, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Mutch & Peung, 2021). Teachers devised different ways to be available to their students – scheduled calls, drop-in sessions, an open-door approach, or sitting waiting at the computer so as not to miss a student who might need them. They extended this widening psychological boundary to worrying about students’ families – and extended their job expectations and temporal boundaries to regularly check in on families, even continuing to deliver food and other basic supplies. It became increasingly hard to keep their roles contained and manageable.

7.3. Border-keepers

From national and state governments, through regional health and education authorities to local communities and parents, border-keepers set expectations and exerted pressure that teachers often found oppressive. Teachers felt that their role was not understood, nor their efforts properly appreciated. The Prime Minister of Australia’s comments, for example, highlighted a lack of understanding of teachers’ work (Crome, 2022, pp. 1–16). While some parents were disgruntled (see also, Brom et al., 2020; Ewing & Cooper, 2021; Gadermann et al., 2021), teachers reported that, over time, the relationships with parents improved – a finding that is supported in the literature (Bubb & Jones, 2020; Carpenter & Dunn, 2020; Education Review Office, 2021; Soltero-Gonzalez & Gillanders, 2021). Not surprising, we would add, because of the time and effort teachers in our study put in to checking on and caring for students’ families. Parents also came to see for themselves how much work goes into teaching when they were suddenly thrust into the role of “proxy educators” (Carpenter & Dunn, 2020; Davis et al., 2021).

Principals and school leadership teams received mixed reviews. One New Zealand teacher said, “We’re really lucky, we have a really great principal. And she’s, like, just go back to our values and our school strategic goals … as foundations for learning.” At a different school, a teacher felt affronted when her school leadership team asked why her students weren’t achieving:

> And what we got from management was, “Oh that child is so far behind.” And I thought, “Did you not know what has happened?” That seemed to be forgotten by management … I would have gladly worked with them [children], if they had turned up, *gladly*! [T8, NZ]

7.4. Border-crossers

COVID-19 changed radically changed teachers’ lives and threw their routines out of balance. They were forced to cross back and forth between their work and family domains frequently and often at short notice. Their inability to exert control over domains, borders or border-keepers’ demands led to feelings of guilt, frustration, disillusionment and helplessness. These heightened emotions often persisted over a long period of time or peaked at times of procedural change, such as a new lockdown or return to school (Pressley et al., 2021). The education and wider psychological literature reports that teachers suffered anxiety, depression, stress, poor sleep habits, exhaustion, post-traumatic stress symptoms and burnout (Allen et al., 2020; Alves et al., 2020; Beames et al., 2021; Billett, Turner, & Li, 2022; Education Review Office, 2021; Gadermann et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Pellerone, 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021; Truzoli et al., 2021; Weißenfels et al., 2022).

7.5. Border-minders

Yet, through all the stress and frustration, teachers in our study still took positives away from the experience. They reported building stronger relationships with their students’ families, enhanced collegiality and collaboration within their teaching teams, and a focus on care and wellbeing for their students. These findings also resonate with the wider literature (see, Bubb & Jones, 2020; Education Review Office, 2021; Beltman et al., 2022; Gadermann et al., 2021; Hood, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Román et al., 2021; Soltero-Gonzalez & Gillanders, 2021; Torres et al., 2021). Recent research on secondary teachers’ work life-balance (Sharma, 2022) notes that teachers gain emotional and practical support from within their home domains – their spouses/partners, parents, children and wider family members, and within their work domains from close colleagues, teaching teams and leadership teams. Work-family border theory appears to be lacking a category, which we will term “border-minders” – those members of either the work or family domain that play a role in supporting the border-crossers to navigate their work-family borders more mindfully, and to negotiate ways of managing border-keepers’ expectations. As supportive factors appeared as a theme in our findings and the wider literature (Beltman et al., 2022; Duraku & Hoxha, 2020; Education Review Office, 2021; Román et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2021), this is an area worthy of further study in the field of work-family balance.

8. Conclusion

The impetus for this article came from our interest in a subset of teachers who were also parents during COVID-19. We examined data from a wider study of schools during the pandemic to see if we could bring to light the experiences of teacher-parents. What the literature review and our analysis found was that while most teachers across the globe found that 2020–2021 was challenging and difficult, causing stress and anxiety, there were teachers who had the added difficulty of also caring for or supervising dependents. In our study, these dependents were mainly children engaged in home learning. What the literature and statistics also show, is that because many teachers are women (70% in New Zealand and Australia)[5] and most childcare and household responsibilities still fall on women (Beames et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2021) that female teachers were those most impacted by these extra duties. In future crises that lead to mandated home learning, it is important that more consideration is given to this group by governments, education authorities and school leadership teams.

Our adapted version of work-family border-theory shines a light on the complexity of teachers' work during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for our teacher-parents, and provides a pathway for examining how teachers themselves, and those around them, can come to make sense of their situation. Recognising the two domains of work and family, delineating the physical, temporal and psychological borders, gaining practical and emotional support from border-minders, and negotiating with border-keepers, can enable border-crossers to bring a semblance of order back to their lives and rekindle the passion they once had for their profession. Given the toll that this time took on teachers, personally and professionally – and teacher-parents in particular – it is important that what has been learned from these unprecedented times is not forgotten but used to influence frameworks, policies and resources for future events. Our teachers deserve no less.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carol Mutch: 70%, overall study design, ethical protocol, data gathering, analysis and interpretation for New Zealand case studies; major contribution to article writing and theoretical discussion. **Hannah McKnight:** 30% – design and implementation of Australian case study; contribution to literature review, contribution to article writing, contribution to analysis and discussion.

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