

Who Is a Teacher?

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Abstract

Primary school teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are increasingly taking on relational responsibilities that involve supporting students' emotional and mental wellbeing. The role of the teacher now stretches beyond facilitating academic achievement to encompass wider pastoral and wellbeing support. This study examines how teachers conceptualise their professional identity as their work expands to include supporting children with compelling significant emotional and mental health needs. International and national evidence shows that teachers are working within a rapidly shifting landscape. Recent studies indicate that nearly half of primary teachers identify mental health and wellbeing as priority areas for professional learning, showing a growing expectation on teachers to respond to students' social and emotional needs alongside curriculum demands. Workload and wellbeing data further that teachers associate long hours, stress, and emotional labour with such complex expectations, especially those connected to student wellbeing. Limited attention has been given to how teachers make sense of these expanded demands. This research seeks to examine how primary school teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand understand themselves as professionals when responding to young learners' emotional and mental health needs. This study explores teachers' meaning-making processes and the ways they articulate, negotiate, and position their evolving professional identity. By centring teachers' own interpretations, the researcher offers insight into what it means to be a teacher in contemporary schools. Central to this inquiry are questions about how teachers define their role, navigate tensions, and construct professional identities within an educational environment characterised by increasing emotional responsibilities.

Keywords: teacher identity, teaching, mental health, hauora, learning

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to open a space for critical questioning by beginning to untangle the assumptions about what teaching is, what it demands, and how teachers come to understand themselves within these shifting emotional landscapes. Rather than offering definitive answers, this article invites reflection on how teachers navigate the boundaries of their role, how emotional labour becomes woven into professional identity, and what it means to teach in contexts where care, wellbeing, and relational responsiveness are increasingly central (Barrie, 2024). In doing so, it encourages readers to consider not only what teachers do, but who teachers are becoming in contemporary schooling. Therefore, the researcher asks the teachers, Who is a teacher from the teacher's point of view?

Primary school teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are increasingly expected to support students' emotional and mental wellbeing alongside their academic learning, reflecting a profound shift in the nature of teachers' work (Bonne, 2023; O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020). Teaching has traditionally been viewed as academically focused and largely rational in orientation, whereas contemporary 21st-century classrooms demand far greater engagement with relational, pastoral, and emotional dimensions of practice. International scholarship similarly shows that teachers' work has expanded beyond instructional tasks to incorporate emotional and wellbeing related responsibilities, often without adequate preparation or systemic support (Day, 2018; Noddings, 2012). In the New Zealand context, teachers' roles more recently has involved more complex pastoral and emotional labour beyond curriculum delivery, frequently under conditions of limited preparation and system-level guidance (Sinnema et al., 2021). This intensification aligns with evidence showing that teachers are positioned as frontline responders to children's distress, navigating responsibilities that extend into counselling-adjacent and relational domains (O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020; Sinnema et al., 2021).

The New Zealand National Survey of Primary Schools shows that there is about forty eight percent of primary teachers who chose student wellbeing and mental health as a priority area for professional learning (Bonne, 2023). Thus illustrating a growing expectation that teachers simultaneously respond to students' social and emotional needs alongside curriculum demands (Bonne, 2023). Teachers also report long hours, heightened stress, and substantial emotional labour associated with these responsibilities, particularly when supporting children experiencing instability or intense emotional and mental health challenges (O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020; Sinnema et al., 2021). Teachers subconsciously feel morally and professionally responsible to respond to distress frequently, but report insufficient training, guidance, and confidence (Caruana, 2022; McDowall, 2021).

Existing research tends to examine discrete experiences such as bereavement (Caruana, 2022), parental separation (McLean, 2015), or trauma-informed practice (Barrie, 2023, 2024), however rarely considers severe emotional and mental wellbeing needs as a coherent category of emotional experience that teachers encounter on a day-to-day basis in schools and classrooms. Even less is known about how teachers conceptualise their professional identity as their work expands into these emotionally charged domains (McDowall, 2021; O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020).

Within the context of primary school and classrooms, some important questions for contemporary educational scholarship that the researcher raises are: *How do teachers understand their role when children experience severe emotional distress or disruption? What*

boundaries, responsibilities, and identity positions do teachers draw upon when responding to such experiences? And how do these conceptualisations intersect with the broader intensification of teachers' work within the context of education in a classroom setting?

These questions matter to the researcher of this article as severe emotional needs and wellbeing challenges are not exceptional events in children's lives. New Zealand data show that large numbers of primary-aged children experience bereavement, parental separation, migration-related disruption, promote care transitions, or loss of safety due to family violence (Fauth et al., 2019; McLean, 2015; Ministry of Justice, 2022; Oranga Tamariki, 2023). Children's emotional needs arising from trauma, grief, loss and instability manifest within the classroom, and teachers are responding often alone, often uncertain, and often without recognition (McDowall, 2021; O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020). Teachers' responses to such complex needs are shaped not only by minimal exposure to appropriate training and school systems, but also by their own professional identities, moral commitments, and cultural frameworks (Alisic et al., 2012).

In examining the emotional labour and demands involved supporting students with telling emotional and mental health needs, this article opens a dialogic space for questioning, inviting teachers and readers alike to reflect on how the meaning of "being a teacher" is understood, lived, and continually re-interpreted. The emotional dimensions of teachers' work remain conceptually under theorised in Aotearoa New Zealand. Hence emotional and wellbeing-related support expose the tensions teachers navigate between care and curriculum, relational presence and professional boundaries, cultural obligations and institutional constraints. Attending to how teachers conceptualise these responsibilities offers a powerful window into what it means to be a teacher in contemporary primary schools.

The Expanding Role of Primary Teachers

Over the past two decades, the role of primary teachers has broadened, internationally and within Aotearoa New Zealand. Historically positioned as curriculum deliverers, teachers are now expected to engage in relational, pastoral, and wellbeing oriented work as part of their everyday practice (Day, 2018; Noddings, 2012). This shift is reinforced by policy changes that emphasise inclusion, wellbeing, and relational practice, effectively extending teachers' responsibilities into domains traditionally associated with social work or counselling (Sinnema et al., 2021). For example, the newly published *Aotearoa New Zealand Teaching Standards* (Teaching Council, 2024) expand the expectations placed on teachers by explicitly recognising trauma as one of the diverse learner needs teachers must understand and respond to. Standard 3, Focus Area 3.2 requires teachers to "demonstrate understanding of the diverse needs of learners – including those associated with neurodivergence, disabilities, and trauma – and of the learning strategies that can support them," (Teaching Council, 2024, Standard 3.2) signalling a formalised expectation that trauma related needs are part of everyday pedagogical practice. This inclusion extends teachers' responsibilities beyond academic instruction into domains that involve relational, emotional, and wellbeing-oriented work, echoing wider research showing that teachers are increasingly positioned as frontline responders to complex emotional needs (O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020; Sinnema et al., 2021). Such a shift raises important questions about how teachers understand and negotiate their professional identity when expectations increasingly encompass emotional, relational, and therapeutic forms of labour. If trauma responsiveness is now embedded within the official standards that define *what it means to be a teacher*, what implications does this have for how teachers see themselves,

how they interpret their responsibilities, and how the boundaries of teaching are being re-drawn in contemporary schooling?

International literature similarly documents the intensification of teachers' work. Studies describe teachers as "first responders" to children's emotional distress, often absorbing responsibilities that exceed their formal training or role descriptions (Brunzell et al., 2016; Southall, 2023). These expanded expectations contribute to increased workload, emotional strain, and a sense of professional ambiguity as teachers navigate competing demands (Craig, 2012; Hargreaves, 2000).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, this intensification is particularly pronounced. O'Connor and Macdonald (2020) argue that teachers' work has become "increasingly complex," with rising pastoral demands and heightened public scrutiny. Teachers report long hours, stress, and emotional labour associated with supporting students experiencing instability, distress, or weighty mental health challenges. Hence teachers frequently feel morally and professionally responsible to respond to distress but... report insufficient training, guidance, and confidence (McDowall, 2021; O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020).

Emotional Labour and Teacher Identity

The expansion of teachers' wellbeing responsibilities has brought emotional labour to the forefront of educational scholarship. Emotional labour refers to the work of managing one's own emotions and often those of others in professional contexts (Hochschild, 2012). For teachers, this includes providing calm, relational support to distressed students, regulating classroom climate, and maintaining emotional composure despite personal strain (Noddings, 2012).

Research shows that emotional labour is deeply intertwined with teachers' professional identity. Teachers often draw on moral commitments, relational values, and personal beliefs about care when responding to students' emotional needs (McDowall, 2021). However, emotional labour is not formally recognised in most role descriptions or policy frameworks. This may create tensions between what teachers feel responsible for and what the system acknowledges or supports. Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand spotlight this gap, indicating that teachers frequently provide emotional support "by default" because no other professionals are consistently available (Barrie, 2024; The Education Hub, 2022). This invisibility contributes to role ambiguity, emotional exhaustion, and identity strain.

Responding to Students' Emotional and Mental Health Needs

Students' emotional and mental health needs are increasingly visible in primary classrooms. New Zealand data indicate that large numbers of children experience disruptions such as parental separation, family violence, migration-related instability, foster care transitions, and bereavement (Fauth et al., 2019; McLean, 2015; Ministry of Justice, 2022; Oranga Tamariki, 2023). These experiences often manifest as emotional dysregulation, behavioural changes, or difficulties with learning and concentration in classrooms and schools (Education Review Office, 2022).

Teachers are typically the adults who spend the most time with children during these periods of instability, positioning them as key figures in children's emotional worlds. However, research consistently shows that teachers feel underprepared to respond to complex emotional

needs, particularly when these needs fall outside traditional pedagogical boundaries (Caruana, 2022; McDowall, 2021). Teachers often rely on intuition, personal experience, or relational instincts rather than formal training, which can lead to uncertainty and emotional strain.

Despite the prevalence of emotional and mental health needs in classrooms, scholarship has not fully examined how teachers conceptualise their role in this space. Existing studies tend to focus on specific experiences such as bereavement, parental separation, or trauma-related behaviours rather than the broader category of severe emotional and mental health needs that teachers encounter daily. This leaves a conceptual gap in understanding how teachers make sense of their responsibilities and how these interpretations shape their professional identity.

The New Zealand Context

Recent New Zealand research provides compelling evidence that the role of primary school teachers has expanded in ways that directly intensify their emotional labour and pastoral responsibilities (Dunn, 2022). A large-scale qualitative study by O'Connor and Macdonald (2020) found that primary teachers increasingly act as “first responders” to children’s emotional distress, often providing support for issues such as family breakdown, bereavement, and instability, tasks that fall well outside traditional academic instruction. Their study elucidates that teachers feel a growing expectation to manage complex wellbeing needs without adequate training or systemic support, contributing to what they describe as “emotional overload” in the profession. Similarly, Sinnema et al. (2021) report that policy shifts in Aotearoa New Zealand have placed heightened emphasis on wellbeing, inclusion, and relational practice, effectively broadening teachers’ roles into domains previously associated with social work or counselling.

Research also consistently shows that the role of primary school educators has expanded far beyond traditional academic instruction (New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2024). Historically, teachers were positioned primarily as deliverers of curriculum content, but contemporary scholarship describes their work as multidimensional, relational, and increasingly complex. New Zealand’s national surveys of primary schools emphasise that teachers now routinely engage in pastoral care, social-emotional support, cultural responsiveness, and community engagement alongside teaching (NZCER, 2024). This aligns with international literature describing teaching as “beset with different challenges and dilemmas” due to rising expectations, accountability pressures, and the need to respond to diverse learner needs (Ball, 2003; Craig, 2012; Hargreaves, 2000, as summarised in Teachers and Teaching, 2019).

The Aotearoa New Zealand context adds further complexity to teachers’ wellbeing related responsibilities. Policy frameworks emphasise holistic development, inclusion, and relational practice, aligning with Māori worldviews (whanaungatanga) that foreground collective wellbeing and the interconnectedness of emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of learning (Sinnema et al., 2021). Teachers therefore navigate not only institutional expectations but also cultural obligations, including commitments to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand) and culturally responsive practice (O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020).

At the same time, systemic supports for wellbeing work remain inconsistent. Schools vary widely in access to counsellors, social workers, and specialist services, leaving teachers managing complex emotional needs with limited guidance. This mismatch between

expectations and support structures intensifies the emotional labour of teaching and contributes to role ambiguity (Barrie, 2024; The Education Hub, 2022).

These findings reinforce that teachers' work is not only changing but becoming more emotionally demanding, making the study of how teachers experience and respond to children's grief and loss both timely and necessary. With such strong evidence that the role of teachers is changing rapidly, particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand. Recent analyses describe a "changing policy scape" in which teachers face intensified public scrutiny, shifting curriculum demands, and increased emotional labour (Cook et al., 2025). Teachers report working in "increasingly complex and diverse settings," requiring new professional learning and adaptive expertise (Livingston, 2017, as cited in Core Education's Ten Trends). These changes include:

- Greater responsibility for student wellbeing, including responding to grief, trauma, mental health issues and family instability.
- More pastoral and relational work, often without additional time or training Alisic et al. (2012).
- Increased collaboration in innovative learning environments, where multiple teachers share responsibility for larger groups of students.
- Heightened expectations for cultural competence, including obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Barrie, 2024).
- Growing administrative and accountability pressures, reducing time for relational work (Bonne, 2023).

Such shifts are directly relevant to the researcher's study because they show that teachers are increasingly expected to support children through emotionally complex experiences such as grief and loss despite limited preparation, resources, or systemic recognition of this part of their role.

Conclusion

This preliminary framing of the researcher's thinking illustrates a profession in motion, where primary teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are continually renegotiating what it means to be a teacher amid expanding emotional and mental wellbeing expectations (Biesta, 2022; O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020; Sinnema et al., 2021). As teachers describe the ways they respond to students' complex needs, their accounts reveal an identity landscape shaped by competing demands, personal values, institutional pressures, and shifting societal expectations. These early insights suggest that teachers are actively constructing meaning around their widening roles, often navigating tensions between curriculum responsibilities and relational care. This raises important implications for how teachers understand and position their professional role, as they negotiate shifting expectations and expanding emotional responsibilities in their daily practice (O'Connor & Macdonald, 2020).

Emerging patterns in this ongoing study also resonate with Biesta's (2022) critique of the therapeutic turn in education, which cautions against schooling becoming increasingly oriented toward psychological support at the expense of its broader educational purposes. Teachers' narratives in this research highlights how this shift is experienced at the classroom level, where emotional labour becomes intertwined with professional identity in ways that are both meaningful and challenging (Levkovich & Elyoseph, 2021). Their reflections raise important questions about how far the boundaries of teaching can stretch, and what forms of recognition,

preparation, and structural support are needed as wellbeing work becomes embedded in everyday practice.

Rather than offering definitive conclusions, this study opens space for continued inquiry into how teachers understand and sustain their work within this expansive landscape. It invites further examination of how educational systems might respond to the realities of contemporary classrooms, where emotional responsibilities are no longer peripheral but central to teachers' professional lives. In doing so, the research contributes to an ongoing conversation about the future of teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand, one that acknowledges the complexity of teachers' relational labour and the shifting contours of their professional identity.

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