

***Teachers Mental Health: A Post-Graduate Course of Study Designed to Build Robust Teachers Mental Health Through Knowledge, Collegial Support, and Reflective Practice***

Debra J. Phillips, Australian Catholic University, Australia

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**Abstract**

There is a significant gap in post-graduate teacher education about strengthening teachers' mental health. This paper outlines the theorising, the understandings and the processes in creating an Education post-graduate, specialisation course of study on teachers' mental health. In particular, I draw attention to the relational nature of teaching and to the overlooked spiritual dimension of teaching with its links for a socially just future. Further, it proposes that the tandem of reflection about and reflective practice writing are beneficial tools for teachers. Reflecting, writing, and conjecturing possible strategies to understand the complexity of their role is an opportunity for teachers to develop different perspectives that encourage and foster professional relationships which can strengthen their mental health and teaching practice.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Autoethnography, Future, Spirituality, Writing, Teacher Mental Health

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## **Introduction: Teachers' Mental Health**

Prior to 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic, both nationally and internationally, student mental health in schools was recognised as an escalating health, social, and educational issue that required a comprehensive response (Aldridge and McChesney, 2018; Weisbrot and Ryst, 2020). In parallel, though with less attention, has been the steady rise of teachers' mental ill-health (McLean et al., 2017). Before Australia's population entered the Covid-19 1 restrictions, the limited research on teachers' mental health identified some common underlying school-based factors that increased teachers' mental ill-health. (Hudders et al., 2018; McCallum et al., 2017).

The scholarly evidence indicates that there are significant gaps in a government and societal response to teachers' mental health which can be remediated by decreasing teacher workload, establishing whole-school collegial practices, raising the profile of teachers in the community, ensuring teachers are supported in professional development and addressing teachers' mental health in undergraduate degrees.

As teachers and educators in schools tackle the challenges of competing priorities of academic excellence, social-cultural equity and access to ever-changing digital technologies, teaching staff have taken on the mental health care and well-being responsibility as part of the duty of care for their students (Bouderou, 2019). The link between teacher well-being and student academic, social and psychological outcomes is noted (Fernandez-Betanaro et al., 2021). The link between teachers and educators as individual people, stress and working environments is also noted (Ramberg et al., 2020).

## **A Response From The Tertiary Sector**

In the last decade, universities have offered graduate courses and undergraduate degree units that enable teachers and educators to identify and help manage student wellbeing, but there is little available for teachers and educators themselves. Independent sites that inform general public about the breadth of mental ill-health issues have considerable value, but do not contain the rigour nor breadth that teachers and educators require to build a comprehensive understanding of their specific circumstances. Nor do the sites prepare them for a future in which unusual circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic challenges every-day, ordinary life. Examples from Australia include Beyond Blue and Lifeline. There is now a growing emergence of websites for teachers about teachers' mental health such as Reach Out ([Teacher mental health | Information and support | ReachOut Schools](#)). Their intention is to create an immediate solution for teachers who experience low-level mental ill-health rather than attempting to work towards whole-of-school, infrastructural, work-environment or policy changes. Their concern is for the personal rather than the political.

In the UK, the site *TeachCom*, offers a list of sites that can assist teachers but does not provide specific comprehensive information itself for teachers. ([50 Resources to Support the Mental Health of Teachers and School Staff](#)). Additionally, *Education Support*, [Improving mental health awareness at school \(educationsupport.org.uk\)](#), a UK charity for teachers is motivated to address the personal and the political by advocating changes to create a psychologically safe workplace. Though this service does not address the routines and societal expectations that create conditions for teachers' mental ill-health.

One disadvantage is that the online services that provide quality information for teachers, do so with limited financial support and without endorsement or affiliations from academic institutions or governments. This means that the organisation is unlikely to expand to tackle the critical, work-environment issues that create distress and burnout for teachers. Prior to 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic teachers and educators have shouldered and continue to shoulder the burden of teaching large groups of students either face-to-face, via digital technologies or a hybrid; as well as having to manage their own domestic situation (Hadar et al., 2020). The cumulative effect of stressful circumstances reduces the sense of well-being, coping mechanisms and self-regulation (Zhou and Yao, 2020).

Currently, there appears to be no mental health for teachers and educators in Education post-graduate courses offered by an Australian university which is designed solely for teachers and educators with a focus on their wellbeing and that of their colleagues. Many universities offer courses in generic mental health and units about and for student well-being.

In some Australian states inclusive of Victoria and NSW, during 2020 students and teachers faced several episodes of lengthy lockdown. Indeed, numerous articles indicate that student mental health deteriorated during 2020 (Sicouri et al., 2021). Anecdotal evidence came in through ACU's partnership school systems and schools from teachers, school executives and principals who were experiencing more intense, more frequent and more sustained episodes of mental ill-health. By the latter part of 2020 there was sufficient accounts of the lived experience plus numerous studies to suggest there was a significant issue that, from a social justice perspective, had to be addressed. We understood that there were strategies that could have been and still can be done to support teachers through government and community initiatives – but that is not our remit.

However, as the largest provider of teacher education in both undergraduate and post-graduate courses we were positioned to respond – as an academic institution. We were positioned to provide an opportunity for teachers and education professionals to understand and manage how the increasing diversity of roles and responsibilities impacts their own and that of their colleagues' mental health, as well as the complexities of mental health issues that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic (Klapparth et al., 2020). Although the course, in the first unit of study, offers a focus on self-awareness and self-management, the course, because it is framed by social justice principles, when offered in relationship to the immediate and broader community, especially the education community, the acquired knowledge and understanding becomes a vehicle that offers the pursuit of knowledge to highlight human dignity whilst directed towards the common good. These three values reflect the ACU's mission.

### **Methodology: Reflective Practice**

The four units have been designed to reflect the scholarly literature on teachers' circumstances, professional training and practice, and of the specific environmental factors that erode teachers' mental health. Further the units are designed with various activities that can be used for whole-school professional development. Additionally, this course includes two emerging trends in qualitative research. The first is an exploration of the connection between mental health and spirituality; and the second is highlight autoethnography as a qualitative methodology to explore aspects of the lived experience (Milner et al., 2019). They both sit within reflective practice – firstly as reflection and secondly as practice. The course recognises, uses and supports teachers and educators in their own teaching practice use a mix

of a social and cognitive constructivist approach to learning, and thus, the course has a constructivist frame. This approach acknowledges teachers and educators as adult learners will bring to their studies, their knowledge, skills, experiences and learning patterning.

It is designed to build on, and maximise teachers' and educators' known pedagogical understanding and practice as well as providing new knowledge and opportunities to develop and build collegial practises (Beteille et al., 2020).

### **Aims and Learning Outcomes**

The aim of the Graduate Certificate's four units is to ensure that education professionals have engaged in an appropriately sequenced and structured program of learning and development to progressively build, identify, and respond pro-actively to specific challenges in their school life, to become confident decision makers for themselves, to assist colleagues, to guide school and systems policy, especially to bolster teacher/parent and school/community relationships. This latter aspect is significant. To galvanise community support to enhance the work conditions for teachers, the parent body are needed as political support and action to bolster the teachers' demands. Parents have a desire to have the best education possible for their child and when having acknowledged that teachers' mental health has a strong correlation with their child's academic and psychological achievement will be better positioned to argue in favour for changes to a teachers' work environment. But this will take time as teachers seek to remove negative community attitudes about teachers, they must also build support with productive parent partnerships.

The course offers an integration of the understanding and practice of knowledge, values and skills surrounding teachers' and educators' mental health that can be applied in a personal and work context; and which incorporates a values system based on serving the common good. Moreover, the sequence of units has a focus on the analysis of current, relevant data about teacher and educators' mental health and the education sector to promote independent thinking and inquiry to encourage further critical analysis of themselves in relation to their work environment.

The course aims to build on teachers' and educators' previous knowledge and pedagogy, so they are confident to integrate new content and skills into their understanding of the breadth of mental health self-care and well-being. This is achieved through proposing units that are interdisciplinary and make optimum use of available technologies to advance their classroom and education practice in the context of regard for human dignity and for social justice. The interdisciplinary nature of the course enables teachers of primary and/or secondary and/or tertiary sector, as well as participants from outside schools, to bring their knowledge, understandings and experiences to discussions and collaborative activities. By its very nature, the course promotes collegiality and community so that all can flourish and re-asserts the need for collaborative parent partnerships.

### **Online Delivery**

To keep pace with changing market demand and recognising that a growing proportion of students are seeking more flexible on-line opportunities; and as a response to more effective digital accessibility, ACU offers the Graduate Certificate in Mental Health for Teachers and Educators as an asynchronous platform whilst maintaining a facilitator presence. This dual decision meets the demand to increase accessibility for teachers who may face barriers to on-

campus learning due to work or family commitments, disability, or geographic location, and secondly allows ongoing student/ tutor interactions through conference call platforms.

### **A Chance To Use Reflective Practice**

The scholarly literature indicates the therapeutic benefits and utility, as well as the academic benefits of using an academically reflective approach to lived experience to link theory and practice. Further, teachers' reflective anecdotal evidence must be increased and used to dismantle the practices that render teachers vulnerable to mental ill-health. As reflective practice can become critical self-scrutiny, it opens the way for individual teachers to examine circumstances and contexts that can lead to new understandings about themselves, their subjectivity, and their sense of knowing the world.

Further, reflective practice within the frame of autoethnography allows students to conjecture their future teaching role in a post-Covid-19, dystopian or utopian world. Of significance is that they can imagine and articulate a world in which their work is directed towards the realisation of a socially just world – and it is this factor that is highlighted in the students' discussion posts and assessments. A socially-just world is neither a fantasy, nor an impossibility, and in many cases, is their justifying reason for becoming a teacher. The students' belief that a socially just world, idealised through imaginative reflection is possible and mirrors Anna Stetesenko's (2014) and, Gee and Bernard's (2020) suggestion that reflecting, imagining, and stating an imagined future is a condition for social justice.

To increase critical analytical skills required for good research and writing, the four units emphasise the use of the reflective practice writing model proposed by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2010). Not only does this model of "What?, So What?, Now What?" build capacity to articulate lived experience in response to scholarly material and researched studies, its practise develops subjective positioning in which arguments can be grounded, advocacy through negotiation and a recognition of power plays, the process becomes a scaffold for working with colleagues, school executives and parents to advance changes in the work environment to strengthen teachers' mental health (Harris, 2008).

Further, critical reflective practice writing is a useful tool for post-graduate students who consider their teaching role as a vocation and who have a strong spirituality as reflection calls for deep thinking about the reverberating consequences of actions. For people who regard themselves as spiritual without a religious affiliation, spirituality is best expressed as a connection to others. This perspective was used to emphasise, underpin and expand the relational aspect of professional collegiality that is a targeted feature of each of the course's four units. The reflective writing activities a space to engage with the spiritual dimension because narrating a good future is not just about the self, it is about relationships with others as articulated by Jonathan Lear in his text, *Radical Hope*. (Lear, 2008). Reflective practice is instrumental in conjecturing and brainstorming a frame to develop collaborative social and political activism between teachers and parents to improve teaching conditions.

For teachers, reflective practice that draws on self-understanding in relation to theory is a crucial professional activity because it can strengthen professional collegiality when used for collaborative questioning about what is teaching, the purpose of teaching; and how different research methods generate different data about teaching (Blakely, 2020; Keck, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

As the teacher shortage continues to remain problematic for Australia and the U.K., and for the profession internationally, the ACU Graduate Certificate in Mental Health for Teachers and Educators is addressing one critical area of why teachers leave the profession. The content of the course is designed to provide knowledge, understanding and skills for practising teachers who are intent on using academically rigorous post-graduate study to extend their knowledge, and to acquire a qualification useful for the work-place. For ACU as a tertiary institution, the course is being adapted to become a suite of micro-credentials to provide schools with bite-size, academic material which can be delivered as professional development as well as developing whole-school workshops for education conferences.

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**Contact email:** [Debra.Phillips@acu.edu.au](mailto:Debra.Phillips@acu.edu.au)