

THE NORTHERN TERRITORY TEACHERS' OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING SURVEY: 2019 DATA SUMMARY¹



¹ This document is a summary of key points from the Northern Territory Teachers' Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey: 2019 Data report produced by the Australian Catholic University on behalf of the Northern Territory Department of Education. This summary document has been compiled by the Northern Territory Department of Education as a companion to the [Education NT Teacher Wellbeing Strategy 2019-22](#).

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching can be both rewarding and challenging. There is evidence that teachers report mental ill-health rates almost double the average of other workforces (Phillips & Sen, 2011). As a result, the Northern Territory Department of Education (the department) has invested in research to assess and improve the wellbeing of its teachers. The department contracted the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and lead researcher, Professor Philip Riley, to conduct this research on its behalf. The scope of this research was ambitious. To date, the ACU research team are not aware of a project of this type occurring previously anywhere in the world. They believe this to be the first project to survey an entire teaching workforce, while providing personalised wellbeing feedback to individual participants.

The aims of the research were as follows:

- a) assess current wellbeing of Northern Territory (NT) teaching staff;
- b) identify predictors of mental and physical health;
- c) receive feedback from teachers about what keeps them engaged in teaching in the Northern Territory; and
- d) provide recommendations on how the NT Department of Education can improve the wellbeing of teachers in the future.

The ACU research team utilised a variety of proven instruments to answer these questions: Assessment of Quality of Life; Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire-II; and Self-Determination Theory, to list a few. NT government school-based teachers (N=2,496) were invited to participate in the anonymous online survey, with a participation rate of 35% during March-April of 2019. Participants remained anonymous so as to provide candid and confidential feedback about their current experiences teaching in the NT. Results were aggregated into demographic groups to ensure teachers' results remained anonymous and unidentifiable.

BACKGROUND AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY TEACHING CONTEXT

This study measured wellbeing across an entire school-based teaching workforce and provided individualised participant feedback. Government school teachers in the Northern Territory (NT) teach approximately 34,000 children. These children come from 152 government schools across an area of 1.35 million square kilometres. Seventy-one percent of schools are in remote and very remote areas. Forty-four percent of the NT's total student population attend these schools. Some 44% of students in the NT speak a language other than English at home.

The scope and rigour of this project highlight the NT Department of Education's commitment to:

- a) nurturing teacher wellbeing; and
- b) understanding the unique rewards and challenges of teaching in the 21st century.

PROJECT AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research project was to conduct a study of all government school-based NT teachers' occupational health, safety and wellbeing. The research compares differing school types, teaching experience and geolocation across the Territory. The research team reported the differential rewards and challenges of teaching in various NT contexts and provided recommendations for systemic improvement to teachers' lives.

The specific research questions guiding the survey were:

- Can recognisable occupational health, safety, and wellbeing subgroups of teachers be identified? These groups may be inferred from a number of criteria including: Location (Outer Regional, Remote, Very Remote); School Type (Primary, Secondary, Special, Combined); Person Factors (Gender, Age, Social Support); Role Factors (Hours worked, years in education, number and type of teachers, students and parents, resources, professional support).
- Do(es) any group(s) thrive in the role?
- Do(es) any group(s) only just survive in the role?
- Do(es) any group(s) show signs of adverse health, safety and wellbeing outcomes.
- Do(es) any factor(s) affect these group(s), and in what ways?
- Are changes to educational policy or policy implementation suggested by the results?

NT DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 2019 SURVEY

The mixed-methods study captured three types of quantitative information drawn from existing robust and widely used instruments, plus a qualitative component.

First, comprehensive school demographic items drawn from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS; Williams, et al., 2007), Program for International Student Assessment (PISA; Thomson, De Bortoli, Buckley., 2013, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority MySchool Website [ACARA], 2018) and International Confederation of Principals surveys were used to capture differences in occupational health and safety (OH&S) associated with the diversity of school settings and types.

Second, personal demographic and historical information was captured. Third, teachers' quality of life and psychosocial coping were investigated, by employing two widely used measures, the Assessment of Quality of Life (risk score) – 8D (AQoL-8D; Richardson, et al., 2009; Richardson, Lezzi, Khan, & Maxwell, 2014), and The Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire-II (COPSOQ-II; Pejtersen, Kristensen, Borg, & Bjorner (2010). et al., 2010, also see Dicke, Marsh, Riley, Parker, Guo, & Horwood, 2018).

The research team also measured teachers' passion (presence, absence and type: harmonious vs obsessive) (Trepanier, Fernet, Austin, Forest, & Vallerand, 2014; Vallerand, 2015). The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS: Watson, Clark, and Tellegen, 1988), and the short

form of the Basic Psychological Needs at Work Scale (BPNWS: Chen et al, 2015; Deci & Ryan, 2004; Van den Broeck, Ferris, Chang, & Rosen, 2016) were also measured along with Job Crafting (Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012). The combination of items from these instruments allows opportunities for comprehensive analysis of variation in both OH&S and wellbeing as a function of school type, geolocational differences, years of experience, and the personal attributes (gender and age) of the teachers themselves.

In addition, the survey asked three open-ended questions:

- 1) Why did you choose teaching as a profession?
- 2) What keeps you teaching?
- 3) What keeps you in the Northern Territory?

Teachers with experience in a remote or very remote school were also able to comment on their experiences.

PARTICIPANT CARE

Each survey participant who completed the survey received a comprehensive, individual report from his/her own survey responses via an interactive, password protected website dedicated to the project. In the Explanatory Statements of the report, participants were advised to seek individual support, such as counselling, if they experienced distress following the survey. Survey results returned to participants included contact details of local support agencies, both inside and outside of the department and the NT.

NT TEACHERS IN 2019: A DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

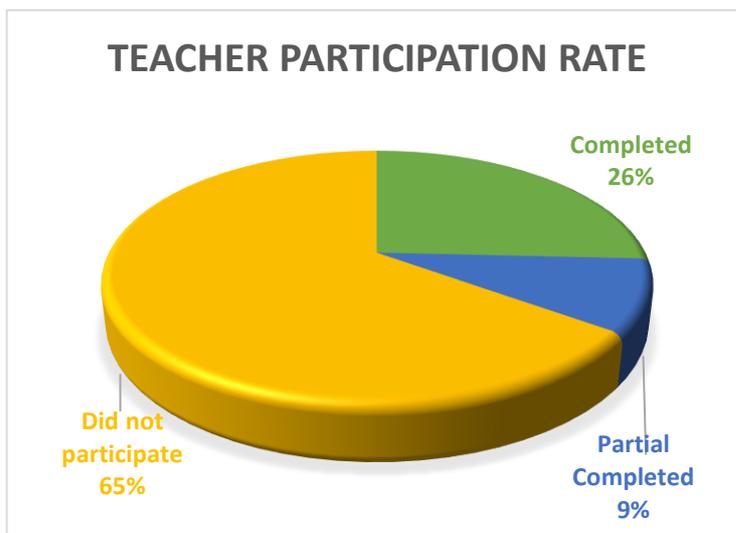


FIGURE 6.1: NT SURVEY PARTICIPATION DISTRIBUTION

2,496 NT government school-based teachers were invited to participate in the NT Teachers' Occupational Health and Wellbeing Survey (the survey). In total 38.8% (968) of teachers registered to participate in the survey; with a completion rate of 26% (643); and partial completion rate of 9% (232). The participation is consistent with the first-year response rate of previously conducted *Principal Health and Wellbeing* surveys.

Of the teachers who participated in the survey (partial completed and completed), the gender profile of the survey is 78% female, 17% male and 5% prefer not to disclose. Further, 3.2% of teachers surveyed identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. The combined average age of participants is roughly 44.5 years; 46.2 years for male teachers; 44.1 years for female teachers and 45 years for those preferred not to disclose their gender. On average, participants had 14.1 years of teaching experience; 13.8 years for male teachers; 14.1 years for female teachers; and 15.3 years for those preferred not to disclose their gender.

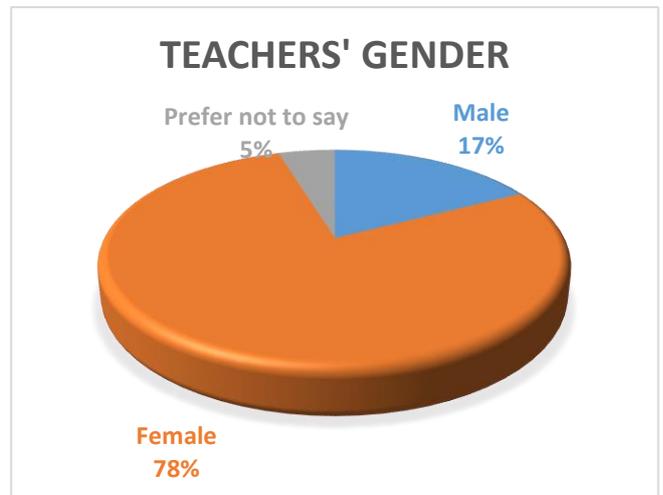
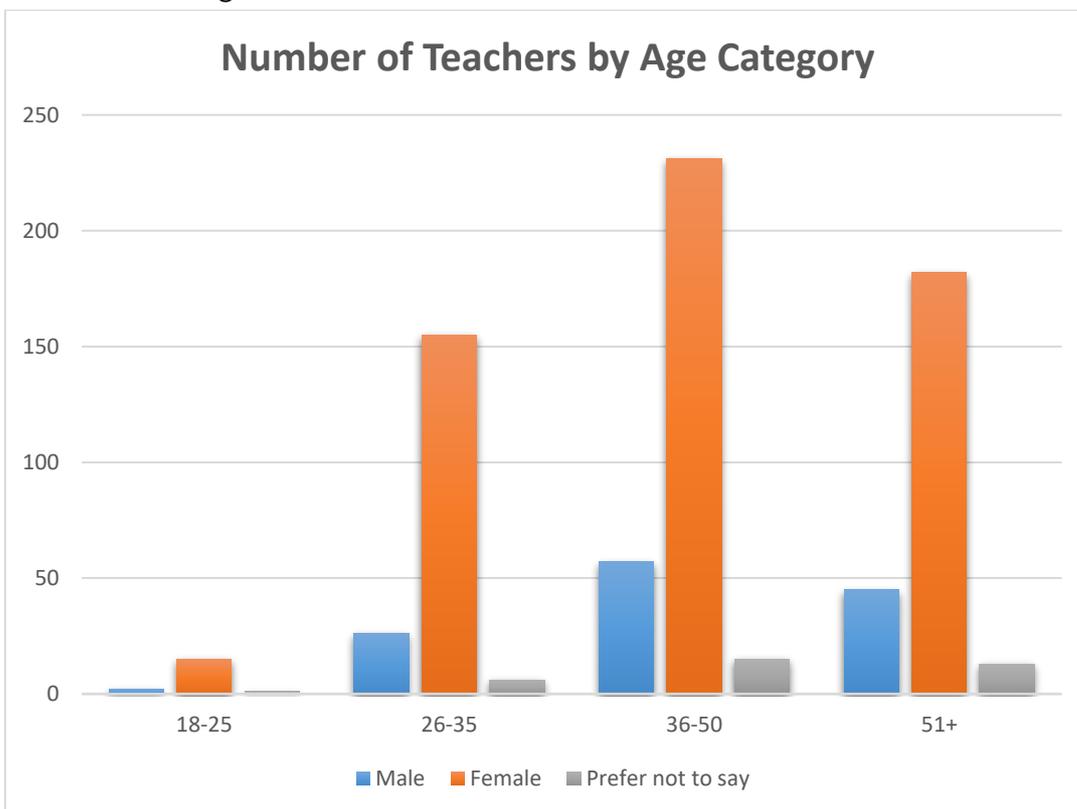


FIGURE 6.2: PARTICIPANT GENDER DISTRIBUTION



Gender Distribution: Males 17%; Females 78%; Prefer not to say 5%

FIGURE 6.3: TEACHERS DISTRIBUTION BY AGE

Of the teachers who participated in the survey, the school distribution 17.4% worked in Combined (P-12); 47.4% worked in Primary; 22.9% in Secondary; 6.1% in Special; and 6.2% did not identify school type. The majority of the teachers who participated in the survey (83.6%) are classroom teachers, 15% are senior teachers and a small percentage (1.4%) are on leave. The on-leave teachers contributed to the overall summaries for teachers, however, due to the small sample size, were not reported on as a sub-group.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS²

- The data in the Northern Territory Teachers' Occupational Health and Wellbeing: 2019 Data report³ demonstrates that NT teachers experience job demands* similar to school principals around Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland.
- Teachers reported working long hours each week but also reported high levels of commitment* and meaning* ascribed to their work compared to the general population.
- It appears that this high level of commitment may make NT teachers more vulnerable to the stresses of high job demands. High demands are linked to increased feelings of burnout*, cognitive stress*, sleeping troubles*, depressive symptoms*, and teacher attrition (Gallant & Riley, 2014; 2017; Pfeffer, 2018).
- Providing supportive relationships that facilitate social connectedness and professional development is likely to be a powerful tool in improving wellbeing and teacher attrition.
- NT teachers are dedicated to their students and communities.
- Two-thirds of participants intend to stay in the educational sector within the Northern Territory in the next five years reflecting the dedication of this workforce.
- Two-thirds of teachers report that more than 20% of their workload is administrative rather than teaching.
- NT Teachers with less than one years' experience are enthusiastic despite reportedly higher demands than more experienced counterparts. Most early career teachers reported that they felt satisfied with their support during their first year of service; however, this support appears to diminish over time.
- Very remote teachers reported the highest job satisfaction* and the highest levels of social capital in their workplaces – suggesting that a socially connected workplace is vital to job satisfaction.
- Special school teachers report greater levels of commitment, job satisfaction and social capital compared to other teachers. Paradoxically, Special school teacher general health* and wellbeing is poorer than other school types. This is consistent with previous research with Special school principals (Riley, 2019).
- NT teaching staff report very high rates of exposure to offensive behaviour*. Violence is almost entirely perpetrated by students; however, principals report a higher rate of violent behaviour from parents.

² Specialised terms will be indicated by the * symbol where they appear the first time in the document with definitions provided in the glossary of terms.

³ The full report is currently under consideration and review and is therefore not publically available at this time.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Recommendations from this study aim to address the most urgent findings from the survey, while drawing on data from previous literature. The research team also make these recommendations with the existing strengths of NT teachers in mind (e.g., high levels of commitment). Importantly, high levels of commitment from this dedicated workforce can increase vulnerability to vicarious stress and trauma (Bowlby, 1994).

How do we ensure that teachers can remain committed and passionate about their roles while maintaining positive wellbeing? The research team hypothesise that teacher attrition rates and stress could be improved if all teachers perceive two fundamental needs being supported: 1) to feel safe at work; 2) to feel connected to the profession. To achieve this it is suggested that the department focus on four recommendations below:

- ***Prolonged Support for Early-Career Teachers:*** Where possible, provide support for teachers in the first five years of service. All teachers need these strong professional relationships, but this two to five year group appears to be most vulnerable to these occupational issues.
- ***Professional Supervisory Support for All Teachers:*** The provision of professional supervision (by appropriately skilled individuals), which is mandated for other professions that work in front line services (e.g., psychologists, social workers) could improve wellbeing for teachers.
- ***Anti-Violence Campaign:*** A coordinated anti-violence campaign is needed to acknowledge teachers' current concerns and actively work to reduce current violent behaviours. The department could lead discussions with other agencies to coordinate a national whole of government and community approach to stopping this violence. Student violence, which could be related to emotional dysregulation and impulse control, may need a very different set of interventions that could be guided by psychological approaches to assisting children with difficult behaviours (e.g., trauma-informed care).
- ***Reduce Non-teaching and Learning Workload:*** Strategies are needed to reduce the amount of administrative work performed by teachers. It is recommended that this issue be the subject of consultation with teachers themselves as they will be best placed to identify tasks, systems, technologies and processes where the burden of time could be reduced, allowing teachers to focus on teaching and learning.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The level of commitment to others that is needed to be an educator comes with a unique set of vulnerabilities. For example a strong moral purpose is a prerequisite for moral stress when one is unable to carry out the tasks one feels morally obliged to perform. NT teachers, like their principal colleagues report moral stress as their greatest challenge. They also report the power of the relationships they are able to form and maintain as a very significant resource to deal with the demands. These two findings, while not surprising offer a significant opportunity to improve the lives of teachers in the NT. Using the power of positive relationships to help alleviate the difficulties of teaching in all its unique forms in the NT will be very likely to have a powerful impact on the lives of the teachers and significantly impact the negative impact that high levels of teacher attrition (particularly in the 2-5 years' experience group).

DEPARTMENT RESPONSE

The department has responded to this research by developing the [Education NT teacher Wellbeing Strategy 2019-22](#). Our aim is to target the recommendations of the report at the primary and secondary intervention levels. Primary interventions work to stop or reduce the stressors that contribute to the decreased occupational health and wellbeing of employees, while secondary interventions grow the wellbeing capability of individuals. Together they make a powerful combination.

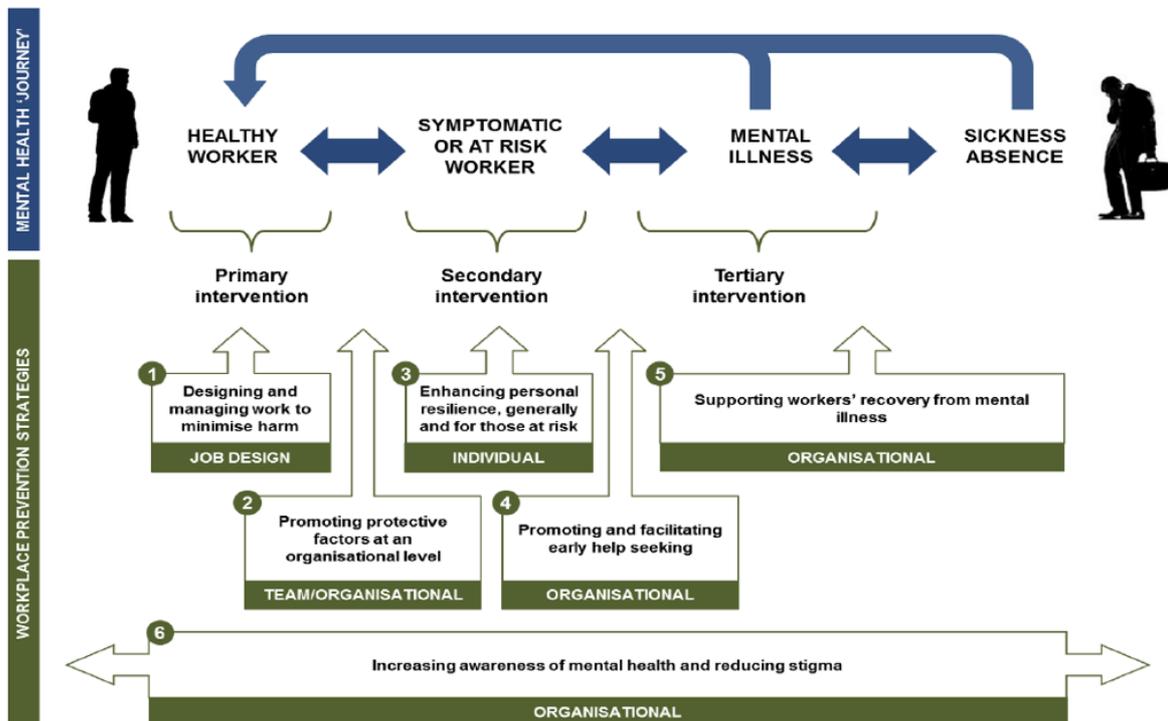


FIGURE 3. GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCEPTS⁴

⁴ Harvey, S. B., Joyce, S., Tan, L., Johnson, A., Nguyen, H., Modini, M., & Groth, M. (2014). *Developing a mentally healthy workplace: A review of the literature*. National Mental Health Commission and the Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Burnout: The degree of physical and mental fatigue of an employee.

Cognitive Stress: Cognitive indicators of sustained stress experienced by a worker.

Commitment to the Workplace: The degree to which a worker feels committed to their organisation.

Demands at Work

- **Quantitative Demands** deal with how much one has to achieve in one's work. They can be assessed as an incongruity between the number of tasks and the time available to perform the tasks in a satisfactory manner.
- **Work Pace** deals with the speed at which tasks have to be performed. It is a measure of the intensity of work.
- **Cognitive Demands** deal with demands involving the cognitive abilities of the worker. This is the only subscale of Demands where higher scores are better.
- **Emotional Demands** occur when the worker has to deal with or is confronted with other people's feelings at work. Other people comprise both people not employed at the work place (e.g., parents and students) and people employed at the work place (e.g., colleagues, superiors or subordinates).
- **Demands for Hiding Emotions** occur when a teacher has to conceal her or his own feelings at work from other people. Other people comprise both people not employed at the work place (e.g., parents and students) and people employed at the work place (e.g., colleagues, superiors, or subordinates). The scale shows the amount of time individuals spend in surface acting (pretending an emotion that is not felt) or down-regulating (hiding) felt emotions.

Geolocation: The geographic location of teachers participating in this study. Location was classified in three categories as defined by ACARA. Outer regional (i.e., Darwin), remote (i.e., Katherine, Alice Springs), and very remote (schools in areas of extremely low population).

General Health: is the person's assessment of her or his own general health.

Job Satisfaction: Experience of satisfaction across various aspects of work.

Meaning of Work: Encompasses both the meaning of work aims and tasks (e.g., contribution to the overall product of an organisation).

Offensive Behaviours: Includes Unpleasant Teasing, Conflicts and Quarrels, Gossip and Slander, Bullying, Sexual Harassment, Threats of Violence, and Physical Violence.

Sleeping troubles: Not having sufficient length of sleep, determined by factors such as sleeping in, waking up, interruptions, and of quality of sleep.

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