Research Bank

Professional Doctorate Thesis

Lived Experiences of Teacher Stress

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Title

Lived Experiences of Teacher Stress

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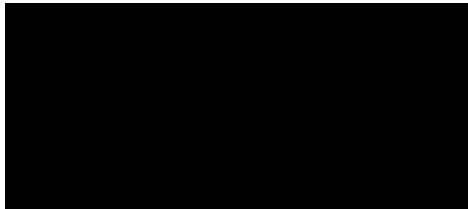
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I certify that:

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ii. *No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.*

iii. *All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics/Safety Committees (where required).*

SIGNED:

BRENDAN REED

DATE: 8/11/2023

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ABSTRACT

The current teacher shortage gripping education sectors the world over has been decades in the making. Teachers' workloads have increased incrementally over the years, almost by stealth, to the point where the profession is now distinctly unappealing and a hotbed of stress and confusion. Formerly enthusiastic and dedicated educators are seeking pathways out of the classroom at the exact moment in their careers when they should be operating at the peak of the powers - drawing on their years of experience to develop and deliver enriching and expertly crafted lessons for their students. Researchers and professionals have long expressed concerns over the high levels of stress experienced by teachers. It is distinctly possible that classroom teacher stress has profoundly deleterious effects on experienced classroom teacher retention, and the overall quality of teaching. Recommendations have been made for further qualitative research in order to hear from the teachers themselves and benefit from their perspectives on teacher stress. Employing a phenomenological framework, the aim of this study was to investigate and present the lived experiences of a group of Australian teachers who have worked for years as classroom teachers in a variety of schools and at various levels. *Lived experiences* are distinguished by the phenomenologist concerning themselves with how individuals experience a phenomenon, and the meaning they connect to it. Semi-structured one-to-one discussions, group dialogical discussions, and individual biographical narratives were used to generate nourishing and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of teacher stress. The analysis of the data from the discussions and biographical narratives illuminated four key concepts which were then punctuated with *essence exemplars*, adding the teachers own words and stories to the texture of the phenomenon. The key concepts were (i) bewilderment; (ii) misalignment; (iii) invasion; and (iv) fractured

teacher identity. A focus theory then emerged connecting the dissonance that exists between how teachers view themselves as professionals, and the various overwhelming job demands embedded in teaching today. This research also draws extensively on the literature connected to teacher stress, of which there is a considerable and growing body of work reflecting the seriousness and pressing nature of this issue. However, very few studies have explored the unique lived experiences of classroom teachers.

Chapter 1

Introduction

An Overview of the Problem Statement

This thesis is a hermeneutic phenomenological study investigating lived experiences of teacher stress in Australia. The phenomenological research methodology is used to capture the professional experiences of the participants, and in doing so, reveal the essence of the phenomenon of stress. The motivation behind this thesis was the researcher's own experience of stress in the classroom, and the current global problem of growing teacher shortages (Caudal, 2022; Wiggan et al., 2021). Having taught for more than twenty years in a range of schools, at both the primary and secondary levels, I observed at close quarters the impact of teacher stress on staff, students, and wider school communities. From my immersed vantage point, I witnessed experienced classroom teachers, many of them highly talented and dedicated educators, question their place within the profession and eventually leave. I was struck by the intensity of the workload for classroom teachers, and the apparent widespread disregard for teacher wellbeing. The various principals, curriculum leaders, and coordinators I worked with seemed to view teachers as inexhaustible resources. At the same time, policy writers and heads of department increased the adminitrative burden on teachers while neglecting to lighten any other part of their workload. From these observations and experiences my interest in researching teacher stress was ignited. It is important to recognise that this is the background to the study and to acknowledge what some might see to be the prejudice (Gadamer, 1976) of the researcher from the outset of the research.

Teacher retention and diminished classroom performance are problems that often surface when exploring issues surrounding teacher stress. McLeskey and Billingsley (2008) emphasised that it is difficult to avoid teachers leaving the profession due to individual circumstances, however they suggest that many teachers are lost to the system due to avoidable issues. In the context of teacher shortages, it worth pursuing accounts from teachers themselves in order to more fully understand their experiences of stress in the classroom, and the conditions which may led them to question their place in the profession.

Study Rationale

This study has particular relevance at this point in time given the focus on teacher recruitment, retention, and the current worldwide teacher shortage (Caudal, 2022; Wiggan et al., 2021). The findings of this study will be of interest to both policy makers and educational leaders, and although the research was conducted within an Australian context, the shared lived experiences of the participants will resonate with key stakeholders in education world-wide.

In 2022 there were 311, 655 full-time equivalent (TFE) teaching staff in Australian schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). There is a higher proportion of male teachers in secondary schools (38.6%) than primary schools (17.9%) compared to a higher proportion of female teachers in primary schools (82.1%) than secondary schools (61.4%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Currently in Australia, As Caudal (2022) describes, teacher shortages exist in every Australian state, with regional and rural areas particularly impacted. Not enough graduates are entering the profession to replace retiring teachers, and the scarcity of relief teachers is placing more pressure on schools and individual teachers (Caudal, 2022). Enrolments into teacher education degrees in

Australia has dropped by 30% (AEU, 2021), and it is predicted by the mid 2020's, in the secondary school sector, there may be a shortfall of over 4000 teachers Australia-wide (Welch, 2022).

A number of researchers have examined the looming crisis in education, pinpointing the circumstances surrounding teacher stress as an area of focus. Richards (2012) believes that student academic success is not achieved in isolation, and that the wellbeing of the teacher is critical. Proper recognition of the importance of the teacher should be reflected, as Van Maele and Van Houtte (2015) stated, in the way those who manage the teaching profession respond to factors that contribute to teacher attrition. Tschannan-Moran and Hoy (2007) discussed the problem of how stress can affect the learning environment and decrease the likelihood of the creation of the optimal classroom climate. Highlighting the gravity of the issue, Vesely et al. (2013) stated that the psychological health of teachers is imperative for the success of students, the education system, and society at large. Alongside the idea of teacher stress, the current study utilises the term, 'teacher identity', which refers to the way educators view and understand themselves (Mockler, 2011). In recent times, teachers' understanding of themselves has been challenged. Changes in areas such as administrative support, classroom management expectations and routines, and the influence of high-stakes standardised testing on the curriculum has resulted in teachers becoming something other than the dynamic educators they originally envisaged themselves to be (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017). This incongruence between teachers' own identity, and how they are expected to deliver programs, can lead to high levels of stress as teachers endeavour to function effectively in the classroom (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017).

Insights from hermeneutic phenomenology have been developed in this study to illustrate the issues surrounding teacher stress. After researching the literature, the researcher discovered that the number of phenomenological studies undertaken to address teacher stress, drawing on the lived experiences of teachers in the process, was few. The present study, it is therefore anticipated, makes an original contribution to qualitative research into teacher stress. The empirical literature on this issue is enhanced when teachers themselves are able to express their own concerns and frustrations by presenting narratives drawn from their lived experiences. The participants averaged 18 years of classroom teaching experience across a variety of settings, including overseas and regional placements. By seeking the stories of those who have spent years in the classroom, dealing with the pressures of teaching, new and useful understandings are more likely to be discovered. After reflecting on the research problem, along with the literature, the following research questions were developed in conceptualising the research:

- What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?

- What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?

- What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?

The insights from the literature on teacher stress point to the value of studies such as the present one that combine theoretical understandings of teacher stress with investigations into the lived experience of teachers in the classroom setting. It is also envisaged that the hermeneutic phenomenological approach adopted in this study will have relevance outside the educational sphere.

The Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach to the research project emerged as the most suitable for the collection and analysis of data. Lancey (1993) believed that one of the advantages of the qualitative approach is that the researchers often "engage in face-to-face interaction over a prolonged period with 'informants' whose opinion they value, thus building trust and credibility for their eventual findings" (p. 26). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007), Phan and Locke (2015), and Klussen, Usher and Bong (2015) all highlight the contributory role that studies of a qualitative nature should play in future research on teacher stress. Klussen et al. (2015) believe that qualitative studies could be used to "better understand the links between collective and individual motivational beliefs in diverse school settings" (p. 485), while Phan and Locke (2015), in their qualitative study investigating Vietnamese EFL teachers' perceptions of sources of self-efficacy, advocate greater use of qualitative methods such as interviews to compare groups. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) believe that, within the context of exploring the effect of vicarious experiences on a teachers, more qualitative studies would be useful.

The study is situated within the scope of the *interpretivist* paradigm. Hammersley (2012) believes that, in methodological terms, interpretivists would argue that we cannot begin to understand why people function in particular ways without working with those immersed in the given environment. The world addressed by positivist science, as distinct from interpretivism, is distant from the world of everyday experiences (Crotty, 1998). As such, this research is housed within the interpretivist paradigm.

Methodology

The researcher concluded that a phenomenological framework is appropriate for the current study. Husserl (1859-1938) developed the phenomenological approach in

order to more effectively present the lived experiences of individuals. In the case of the current study, the phenomenological methodology is combined with a narrative-biographical perspective (Kelchtermans, 2009) in order to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon. Given the aim of this research is to capture how the participants experience stress and reflect upon it, a phenomenological study presents as ideal.

While Husserl (1931) believed any pre-supposition about the subject under focus will impede understanding, hermeneutic research acknowledges the researcher's own experience (Nigar, 2020). Gadamer (1989) differed with Husserl (1931) in that he held that prior understandings are not necessarily an obstacle to be avoided. He instead believed that the task of the researcher is to sort the productive prejudices from the unproductive ones (Gadamer, 1989). This phenomenological study's methodological approach was closely aligned to Gamader's (1989) beliefs and procedural insights.

Lived experiences and essences. The hermeneutic task is to open up the meaning of a text in a playful and dialogical manner (Sharkey, 2001). The aim is to achieve a fusion of horizons, whereby the phenomenon is understood in terms that are common to both researcher and the object of research itself. *Lived experiences*, like *essences*, are phenomenological constructs, and help define the universal structures of the phenomenon in focus (Vagle, 2014), in this case, teacher stress. Lived experiences are distinguished by the phenomenologist concerning themselves with how individuals experience a phenomenon, and any meaning they may connect to it. Essences provide phenomenologists with the opportunity to seek understanding beyond subjective experiences. They attempt to describe the underlying essences of the experience (Sharkey, 2001). In the context of the current research, therefore, the task is to consider the phenomenon of teacher stress in such way as to isolate the essence. Links can then

be made from teacher to teacher, as whatever belongs to the essence of the individual can also belong to another individual (Husserl, 1931). The driving goal of this study into teacher stress is to present the lived experience of a collection of teachers, uncovering the essence of the phenomenon in the process.

Participants. I engaged in purposive selection by assembling a group of experienced teachers. Six teachers were selected. Between three and six participants is ideal for phenomenological studies of this kind (Smith et al., 2009). Selected teachers had a minimum of ten years' classroom teaching experience in a range of settings. At the time of the interviews, some were in positions of leadership or coordination in schools, but all participants had spent years engaged in full-time classroom teaching which has equipped them with the ability to reflect on the demands of the profession today.

Methods. Three methods were employed to gather deep and powerful data for this research into teacher stress. Employing multiple methods was preferred as responding to qualitative research questions using a variety of approaches potentially opens up a range of explanations and increases the likelihood of capturing the complexity of the phenomenon (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

In keeping with the established phenomenological approach of working with several individuals with a shared experience, I conducted semi-structured, one-to-one discussions with the participants at locations convenient to them. The data generated from interviews helped to guide the development of questions for the second research method, the group dialogical conversation. Additionally, participants were asked to write a biographical professional narrative of approximately 500 words.

Working with data. Rich data was generated after the completion of the discussions and biographical narratives, lending the researcher an array of choices. The

hermeneutic conviction is one in which 'coding' does not necessarily provide a clear path to understanding. Reflective insights and observational astuteness are more consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological approach to research (Sharkey, 2001). An analysis of the data from the discussion sessions led to the development of *Essence Exemplars* and *Key Concepts* as the building blocks for theorising the findings of this phenomenological study. Each of these is briefly introduced below.

Key Concepts

Key Concept 1: Bewilderment. The sense of bewilderment experienced by participants is integral to teachers becoming overwhelmed by an education system presenting them with excessive workloads. Fink (2003) believes that mid-career teachers seem to be the most vulnerable to stress. A lack of clear support networks only heightens the feelings of bewilderment.

Key Concept 2: Misalignment. Teachers experience misalignment when their own educational philosophies and deeply held beliefs are out of step with those of school leadership. For example, Alshorfat (2011) declared that loss of teacher control appeared to be the overriding cause of anxiety for teachers faced with mandated educational reform. The ensuing misalignment between teachers' values and those of management can result in stress.

Key Concept 3: Invasion. Teachers have had to increasingly manage the invasion of key work obligations into their outside personal lives. Incrementally, external contributors to stress have managed to find their way into teachers' consciousness. De Nobile (2016) noted that the lack of clear boundaries separating key professional duties and teachers' personal wellbeing has been the underlying essence of feelings of invasion.

Key Concept 4: Fractured Teacher Identity. This study reveals the fracturing of a positive teacher identity for participants due to an undermining of their personal and professional self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The discussions with teachers also expose a misguided tendency to overwork, and a bubbling competitiveness among staff.

Theoretically, the study asserts that teachers are experiencing contestations between their professional beliefs and those contrary values forced upon them by those in leadership positions. The resulting cognitive and emotional dissonance experienced by teachers results in stress.

Overview of the Thesis

Following this introductory chapter, a review of the literature is presented. This begins with an examination of key issues connected to teacher stress, and the initial conceptualisation of the study. Central topics such as teacher stress, teacher retention, and reducing teacher workload are analysed and clarified. Theoretical frameworks are also presented from across the literature with a view to revealing a range of applicable theories that are currently argued in the literature focussing on teacher stress. The empirical findings reported in the literature review are then analysed in order to generate research questions that will likely address current gaps in the research literature.

Chapter Three presents the methodological framing of the study. The research design underpinning the study is outlined, as is the research paradigm in which the design is embedded. The epistemological foundations of the research, as well as the theoretical perspective that shapes the methodology, provide a link to chapter four.

The Methods Chapter outlines how the particular data collection methods adopted for this study are aligned to the methodological approach outlined previously. The

chapter describes in detail the data collection methods used and how such data is analysed in order to generate the findings that will address the research questions.

Chapter Five introduces the participants in the study and their stories. The context of the research is revealed, including an overview of the participants and the various settings. A presentation of teachers' lived experiences follows, showcasing the six participants and their journey in education, in particular the profession of teaching.

The Data Analysis chapter offers background to the determination and presentation of the key concepts and accompanying essences exemplars. The phenomenological concepts represent the participants' experiences and were selected through a process that was iterative, but also in the realm of the researcher's own interpretation and thoughts.

Chapter Seven moves towards theorising the findings and outlining how this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge in the field of teacher stress. The focus theory emerging from the data is presented and rationalised.

The conclusions and recommendations chapter will draw the research to a close by further articulating new and significant findings. The key implications of the study are re-addressed, before the findings are juxtaposed with the research questions and the contemporary challenge of understanding teacher stress. The third section of the final chapter outlines recommendations for future study in areas closely connected to teacher stress, and reflects on the limitations of the research.

Conclusion

In this introductory chapter, I presented an overview of my research study. The intention of the study was to gather and present the stories of teachers in such a manner

as to approach the phenomenon of teacher stress in a new and revealing way. Throughout the research it was beneficial to, at times, reflect on why teachers move into the profession in the first place. The pull to creatively educate young people in a supportive, collegial environment was strong among the participants, along with the belief that they each had something of value to offer. The participants' high levels of motivation and strong sense of identity during those moments in time when they had ownership over their professional duties was clear, and in many cases, inspiring. What this study reveals is the gradual loss of a positive teacher identity, and the emergence of work conditions that undermine the previous high level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Drawing on the essence of the data it can be argued that teacher identity becomes repositioned in misalignment with the expectations of contemporary school management. This has had a clearly identifiable impact on teacher stress levels, and by extension, a negative influence on teacher performance and the delivery of the curriculum. In other words, school managers and policy makers run the risk of contributing to diminished student performance when they are not acutely mindful of the dangers of teacher stress and loss of teacher identity. It is recommended that school leaders need to consider alternate styles of leadership and management where a positive sense of teacher identity is nourished, whereby teachers avoid the pitfalls that come with working in contexts that are characterised by cognitive and emotional dissonance. It is argued that the experiences shared in this study should inspire further investigations that examines more broadly the findings of this research.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the empirical literature that underpins the key focus of the study, teacher stress. The profession of teaching is currently recognised as a "stressful occupation, characterised by numerous and varied challenges: administrative burdens, long hours, classroom management difficulties, and lack of autonomy, to name but a few" (McCarthy, 2019, p. 8). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding teacher stress, and to more fully appreciate the breadth of the literature on what is a central educational issue, a comprehensive review of the literature was completed prior to conceptualising the study. As will be explained later, there was a degree of intellectual contestation about this process in light of the methodological constructs of this study.

This chapter unfolds in four sections namely:

Section 1: Key review of major concepts, where peer reviewed, empirical articles were sought and critiqued from recognised international and national journals as a way of conceptualising the study in the first instance. The definition of stress, teachers and stress, teacher retention, reducing teacher stress are analysed and clarified for the purposes of this research;

Section 2: Theoretical frameworks, where various frameworks are presented from across the literature with a view to revealing and analysing the range of theories that may be applicable to the present study.

Section 3: Synthesis of the literature, where the more relevant findings are analysed in order to ascertain the benefits a phenomenological approach might bring to the problem. Taking heed of suggestions from previous researchers on teacher stress, suggestions for future studies contained within the literature are also located.

Section 4: Application of research literature to the present study, where significant findings on the theme of teacher stress, its impact, and sources emerged and were identified as highly relevant. Presented also in this section is a phenomenological conceptual model and a chapter summary.

In shaping this chapter as both a phenomenological study and a higher education thesis, a key contestation emerged regarding procedural matters associated with a literature review. There exists a line of thought that reviews may not always be as beneficial to phenomenological studies as compared to qualitative research employing other methodologies. Fry et al. (2017) refer to the possibility of phenomenologists exposing themselves to contamination by way of the knowledge gleamed from previous research. However, the current literature review has played a pivotal role in the development of the research topic, not only by making clear the pressing need to study the phenomenon of teacher stress, but also in highlighting the researcher's inherent interests in the topic. Furthermore, such literature reviews help to delineate the phenomenon itself, and prove useful in revealing the nuances of the phenomenon under study (Fry et al., 2017). Despite the risk that the immersion of the researcher into a deep analysis of the conceptual framing of the study risks skewing the essences of the findings, the traditional thesis structure was embraced in the interest of rigour and examination requirements. The following section outlines the rationale for doing so.

The aim of the current study is to report the lived experiences of selected teachers who have worked through different forms of stress in their professional lives. By discussing key aspects of the intensification of teachers' work, concepts will be explored around those practices in their work teachers might identify as 'acceptable', and consonant with their professional identity, and other professional demands which may lead to stressful conditions and have a negative impact of the act of teaching.

The importance of the teacher in education remains high. Teachers, through their work, continue to act as the facilitating funnel through which knowledge passes onto students, and although other factors play a part - such as the characteristics of the student demographics - the robustness of the teaching force remains the key ingredient to student success (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Rickards, Hattie, & Reid, 2020). Given their importance, the welfare of teachers should be high on the list of priorities for school leaders and policy makers. By hearing directly from teachers themselves, it will become clear through the research findings how some have responded to stress throughout their years in the classroom, and how they have managed to stay in the profession.

Section One: Key Review Concepts

This literature review began with the researcher conducting an advanced search on the ProQuest education database. Peer-reviewed, empirical articles were sought from recognised international journals, as well as some with an Australian context. Similar searches were conducted on the ERIC and A+ Education data bases. Most articles were sourced through ProQuest, and from these further articles were located after noting references. A literature map with a hierarchical design to group articles under themes was finally created.

For the current study it was decided to offer a conceptual literature review. Not only does a focus on key concepts enable researchers to explore the current state of knowledge regarding a phenomenon, it helps to clarify terms and ensures that "the phenomenological researcher is fully aware of the shared meaning and understanding of the words used within his or her area of research" (Fry et al., 2017)

The definition of stress. In the interests of clarity, this study was conceptualised as a result of a deep review of the literature in order to find an established and acceptable definition of the word *stress.* This review is outlined forthwith.

Fink (2003) observed that researchers and scientists from various disciplines have conceptualised the phenomenon of stress, which has resulted in multiple definitions of across the fields of study. Each discipline seems to view stress through a different conceptual lens (Fink, 2003). Stress has been described broadly as "the human body's non-specific physiological response to any demand" (Selye, 1956, p. 423). For sociologists, a level of disequilibrium becomes identifiable through stressful events, which disturbs the social structure within which people live (Fink, 2003). Peterson and Wilson (2002) noted that the word has increasingly acquired negative connotations - implying excessive demands or pressure, a perceived threat, and that it is sometimes challenging to distinguish stress from its causes and effects (Peterson & Wilson, 2002). Peterson and Wilson (2002) further noted that in more recent times, stress has come to signify the subjection of a person to force, by overwork, which leads to strain.

A different perspective was presented by Selye (1974) who articulated that people at times require an element of stress to be present to encourage them to grow. However, excessive amounts of pressure can often lead to feelings of oppression. Complicating matters is the understanding that not everyone reacts uniformly to the same demands or

stressors: what some perceive as stimulus, others may find stressful (Wilson, 2002).

Lazarus (1976) suggested that stress occurs when a person is faced with demands which

exceed their available adjustive resources. The idea of exceeding available resources was

specifically developed and applied to teachers by Klassen and Chiu (2011) in their

examination of the occupational commitment and quitting intention among pre-service

and practicing Canadian teachers. They stated that when teachers perceive that

professional demands exceed their capacities for coping, they become "vulnerable to job

dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and burnout" (Klassen & Chiu, 2011, p. 120).

Of particular note is Kyriacou's (2011) definition of stress. He believed stress is

present in teachers' working lives when they experience "unpleasant negative emotions

resulting from aspects of their work as teachers, triggered by a perception of threat in

dealing with the demands made upon them" (Kyriacou, 2011, p. 161). Additionally,

Kyriacou (2011) proposed that teacher stress can be triggered by threatening situations

that leave teachers fearing they may not be able to deal with job demands, and that this

reality may bring negative consequences upon them. This definition, infused with

emotive elements, has been incorporated into the work of a number of researchers (De

Nobile & McCormick, 2010; Reilly et al., 2014; Papastylianou et al., 2009; Wilson,

2002; Dunham, 2002) and has also been adopted for this current study.

On examination of the literature in this domain the terms stress and burnout are at

times used interchangeably. However, teacher stress can by contrasted with teacher

'burnout', a condition wherein teachers display a lack of interest and enthusiasm for

work, develop a sense of detachment, and begin to express a cynical attitude towards new

initiatives or colleagues (Kyriacou, 2011). In their study investigating issues connected to

teacher burnout in Greek state primary schools, Papastylianou et al. (2009) make a clear

distinction between depression and stress. Whereas individuals who suffer from depression will experience a lack of energy not only at work but in their free time, teachers who suffer from professional stress will experience an energy decrease "mainly in the workplace, although they can still be cheerful and productive in other areas of their lives" (p. 299). Therefore, when discussing teacher stress, an acknowledgment needs to be made that those individuals experiencing feelings of helplessness, as well as the accompanying energy loss, are themselves not necessarily depressed, and that their professional condition is a result of the demands placed on upon them in the workplace.

Teacher Stress

Some stressors associated with teaching are difficult to avoid or may be accepted as part of the job. However, there is evidence in the literature that there are a large number of unacceptable stressors placed on teachers, with possible wide-reaching consequences. Sonnentag et al. (2010) believe that "job stressors make psychological detachment from work less likely which will in turn be related to emotional exhaustion and a high need for recovery" (p. 364). In reviewing the literature on teacher burnout and teachers' emotions, Chang (2009) categorises studies on teacher stress into three groups, highlighting the sources identified. These include individual factors, organisational factors, and transactional factors. With regards to individual factors, Chang (2009) argues that exhaustion and depersonalisation interfere strongly with teacher effectiveness and sense of achievement, indicating that idealistic teachers may be vulnerable to stress as they "are dedicated to their work and end up doing too much in support of their ideal" (p. 200). Those teachers who were able to avoid taking student behaviours personally had a higher sense of personal accomplishment.

Since teacher character traits must be dealt with at an individual level, it is significant to investigate what are considered to be organisational factors in connection to teacher stress as school leaders and policy makers may be more responsive to these if required. Chang (2009) includes elements such as class sizes, complicated work demands, low pay, role ambiguity, lack of preparation time, poor school culture, and organisational rigidity as impacting negatively on teachers. Kokkinos (2007) explored the nature of teacher stress in his study on job stressors, personality, and burnout among primary school teachers in Cyprus, however his approach was to look at *person variables* systematically (something he feels research has not considered) rather than look solely into the interaction between individual characteristics and school-based issues (Kokkinos, 2007). Kokkinos (2007) also acknowledges that it is clear that both personality and work stressors work in tandem. Idealistic educators, who have high expectations of themselves and their students, are generally more prone to stress. However, Kokkinos (2007) adds that "the preponderance of environmental factors in the prediction of emotional exhaustion appears rather promising since it is easier to control or to change job-related conditions than personal tendencies" (p. 240).

The focus of this study will be on teachers with at least ten years' experience. The decision to work with experienced teachers, as discussed later in the thesis, was based on their understanding of the difference between stressors that are part of the job of being an educator (such as correction, classroom management, report writing, preparation), and other onerous tasks that could be seen as unnecessary, or that render teachers time poor and divert their attention from their students. However, it is worthwhile acknowledging that beginning teachers are also subject to a range of stressors that may have a strong and lasting impact on their initial teaching experiences and can inform the experiences of

their more senior colleagues. Whilst researching the shaping of novice primary school

teachers' identity in Ireland, O'Sullivan (2015) found that, among participants, a majority

of important incidents from the first year of teaching concern school as "an

organisational entity. Fewer nominated episodes relate to classroom-based activities,

involving the beginning teachers and their allotted pupils" (p. 217). This points to a

situation whereby the organisational structure of schools, and the demands that are placed

on teachers beyond the classroom, have enormous and lasting influence on those new to

the profession. These are the very elements that appear to be the most controllable, as

they happen outside the classroom and should be managed in a way that does not lead to

an overt amount of stress on teachers.

The qualitative inquiry conducted by Li et al. (2024) into workload related stress

amongst Chinese teachers revealed that participants found dealing with parents

particularly stressful. Evidently, there exists a disparity between parental expectations

and the participants' own teaching philosophies (Li et al., 2024). Discussed in the same

study was the eventuality of workload-related stress spilling into family life, transferring

anxiety to family members, and bringing about conflict, "with negative effects on the

quality of relationships with spouses and children" (Li et al., 2024, p. 74). Minihan et al.

(2022) also explored the blurred boundaries between teachers' work and personal life in

their study into post-covid occupational stress in Irish teachers, finding that emails and

messages received outside working hours can make it difficult for teachers to disconnect

from work. Participants described the debilitating impact of being contacted by "students,

parents and colleagues on Sundays, during breaks or holidays and outside work hours"

(Minihan et al., 2022, p. 5).

McCormick and Ayres (2009) highlighted the impact that changes to the New South Wales HSC curriculum, along with teaching methodology, had on experienced teachers in particular. As the scope of the changes became clear to teachers, stress increased, and teacher confidence in their own ability plummeted (McCormick & Ayres, 2009). Teachers burdened with excessive workloads and high expectations can also leave themselves more vulnerable to chronic stress. McLean and Connor (2015), while investigating depression among third-grade teachers in the United States, identify unreasonable parents and pressurised performance evaluations as examples of activities that could ultimately lead to stress and even depression. Khlaif et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study exploring issues connected to the challenges teachers face when trying to master and adopt more advanced technologies in the classroom. They favour the use of the term "technostress" [emphasis added] and report that the strategies employed by participants to reduce stress include "receiving social support, using open educational resources, and attending training on using a new technology" (Khlaif et al., 2023, p. 884).

It is also evident that teacher stress is an international phenomenon, and not limited to western countries. Alshorfat (2001) explored the impact of mandated educational reforms on Jordanian teachers and found that "frustration was expressed with overall time and workload pressures that arise from the sheer amount of work to be completed within a short period of time" (p. 61). Pressure arising from workload stress can have a deleterious effect of the teachers' own perception of their effectiveness - the concept referred to as *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1997). When considering the benefits of researching teachers' self-efficacy, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) proposed that an increased understanding of the "antecedents of self-efficacy beliefs of teachers can expand scholars understanding of this construct as well as assist teacher educators,

principals, and other practitioners in fostering teachers' sense of efficacy" (p. 948). They

explored how various sources of self-efficacy impact American teachers' careers and

refer to Bandura's (1997) belief that once a teacher's self-efficacy has been established,

and their career is underway, a sever jolt is needed to bring about a re-alignment

(Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). How severe the jolt is, and how much faith the

teachers have in the purpose behind the re-alignment, are reflection points that need to be

considered when researching the impact of stress on teachers.

The work completed by Tschannan-Moran and Hoy (2007) compliments McLean

and Connor's (2015) exploration of stress and poor emotional regulation among third

grade teachers potentially displaying depressive symptoms. They discuss the problem of

how stress, along with other negative factors, can affect the learning environment, and

draw the teacher away from creating an optimal classroom climate. Highlighted is the

importance of teachers' mental health and the clear links to student outcomes. The

negative impact stress has on the quality of teacher-student interactions is also discussed

(McLean & Connor, 2015). Experienced teachers can find retraining, or substantial

organisation change stressful, which can impact on student learning (McCormick &

Ayres, 2009).

The importance of the issue of teacher workload, and its links to student

outcomes, is also raised by Richards (2012). In her study on teacher stress and coping

strategies, which includes a survey of over a thousand teachers in the United States

across all levels, Richards noted that stressed teachers who distance themselves from

colleagues and students "accomplish less and feel emotionally empty and depressed.

They no longer believe their efforts make a difference in the lives of their students. They

have given up and feel powerless to change what is causing them distress" (Richards,

2012, p. 307). Richards (2012) believes that concerned educators and policy makers need to find out why almost half (Richards, 2012) of classroom teachers are concerned about their level of efficacy. She states that part of the solution lies in how teachers deal with stressful situations themselves:

> One cannot alter a state's financial realities, decide how many more students will be added to a classroom, or choose whether to participate in mandated district or state testing. The only true power stressed teachers have is their choice of coping strategies as suggested by teachers who are managing to cope and even thrive in these challenging times (Richards, 2012, p. 300).

De Nobile (2016) believes that unacceptable demands placed on teachers at the curriculum, school, and state level needs to be brought into focus. Teachers should not be left to cope with the onerous requirements of dubious tasks that remain unscrutinised and increase in quantity over time. More practical solutions to the problem are put forward by De Nobile (2016) in his examination of organisational communication and its relationship with occupational stress in Western Australian primary schools. He includes ideas such as ensuring that clear guidelines are set regarding appropriate times to send emails, limiting the number of staff meetings, and giving teachers more time to adjust to new demands. Given the context, understanding the lived experience of teachers would appear paramount to more fully grasping the essential elements of teacher stress. Richards (2012) pinpoints the ingrained nature of the problem with great clarity when she states that "student academic achievement is a worthy goal, but it is not achieved in isolation. Teachers' attitudes and performance are critical to that endeavour" (p. 312). It follows therefore, that teachers struggling with job demands, hobbled with a shattered professional identity, are negatively impacting student performance.

Of particular interest is the stage in a teacher's working life when stress seems to have the most impact on them as professionals. Clearly the beginning of a teacher's career is pivotal - a time when those new to education need to reflect upon whether or not they are suited to the profession. However, the two groups that appear most vulnerable to the impact of crippling stress is mid to late career teachers. Fink (2003), in his investigation into top-down reform, found that teachers shuffling towards retirement "mourn nostalgically for the past and tolerate the changed circumstances for teachers with the knowledge that they are leaving soon, and will take the first opportunity to leave" (p. 121). He argues that teachers who move into survival mode because they cannot face adapting to demanding changes and increased procedural requirements, could quite possibly be doing more harm than if they left the system. Nevertheless, Fink (2003) believes that mid-career teachers seem to be the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of stress, particularly in the wake of educational change. "These teachers with between 5 and 20-years' experience must live with the mandated changes for a long time and respond in more diverse ways" (p. 121). This can be exhausting, and daunting. Capturing and understanding the lived experiences of established teachers - professionals who have worked through enforced changes and countless new teaching methodologies - appears to be an interesting and worthwhile way of gaining a fresh understanding of the phenomenon of teacher stress.

Van Maele and Van Houtte (2015) observed that there exists a negative link between teacher stress on the one hand, and staff commitment on the other. After gathering data from 673 teachers across 58 elementary schools in Belgium, they theorised that the occurrence of teacher burnout will work against student achievement

and believe it is therefore "important to learn about those factors which may antecede teacher burnout" (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2015, p. 96).

Teacher Retention

In response to the current issue of poor teacher retention, from both global and national perspectives, and the possible flow-on problems associated with it, Klassen and Chiu (2011) examined occupational commitment and quitting intention among pre-service and practicing teachers. The authors acknowledged that there exists already a large amount of research on teacher motivation, therefore they chose to add to this knowledge by focusing on how job stress and motivation, as well as job satisfaction, are influenced by context and cultural values (Klassen & Chiu, 2011). They found that the distinction between novice and experienced teachers is of vital importance, as youthful exuberance and cynical worldliness often clash in educational settings.

The traditional classroom, with teachers in full control of the prescribed learning - relying on textbooks and the rote learning of facts - has given way to a more student-centred approach. Zajda (2018) explains that in the constructivist classroom, teachers engage in an interactive manner with the students, the students themselves connect with meaning-making activities, the curriculum is negotiated and dynamic, students learn in cooperative groups, mastery learning is self-directed, and assessments are aimed at improving meaningful learning (p. 5). Whilst this might be an ideal and productive way for many students to learn, it may not be the most enjoyable and empowering way for educators to teach. Of critical importance is the way such an approach is introduced into classrooms, and how teachers are managed and supported - particularly experienced educators who may need to re-adjust their philosophical approaches to teaching. Each school community is different, and the staff makeup in schools also varies greatly.

Localised context needs to be considered when introducing change, according to Garcia-Huidobro et al. (2017). They examined change trends as reflected in the first 15 years of the *Journal of Educational Change* and concluded that when transferring change "transplanting external reforms without accounting for context tends to be unsustainable" (Garcia-Huidobro et al., 2017, p. 274). The sustainability of any change is crucially important, as placing undue pressure on teachers to implement changes quickly could lead to increased levels of teacher stress. With regards to constructionist pedagogies in particular, Zajda (2018) believes that significant issues arise when the use of constructivist pedagogies in schools "becomes the preferred method of teaching, which is imposed on all learning" (p. 9). Teacher resentment to enforced changes is also reflected in Alshorfat's (2011) findings. He noted in his study on the impact of mandated educational reform on Jordanian teachers that "loss of teachers' control over their classrooms appeared to be the overriding anxiety factor, coupled with poor pupil motivation and attitude" (p. 62). Similarly, Laybourne et al. (2018) reported in their qualitative study investigating teacher procrastination, emotions, and stress in Germany that many participants felt tasks imposed on them by their principal or the ministry of education often lacked personal meaning for teachers, and as result, would be neglected or completed with reluctance.

Fink (2003) found that many teachers, while stressed in the midst of great organisational change, are prepared to make the best of the situation in order to assist their students. He observed that "physically and emotionally however, they are withdrawing their commitment to the school and to the teaching profession" (Fink, 2003, p. 124). Arnup and Bowels (2016), in their study of the professional resilience of 160 Australian primary and secondary teachers, explored how resilience could act as a

protective factor against teachers leaving the profession and found that overall job satisfaction differentiated those educators who harbour a desire to leave the profession more so than did general resilience. They also argue that "this suggests that job satisfaction may be a more productive target to change for school administrators as job satisfaction of staff can be argued to be more easily influenced by school administrators, compared with resilience which is a more individual factor" (Arnup & Bowels, 2016, p. 239). Rather than concentrate solely on individual teacher resilience, they argue, it is first worthwhile ensuring that the structures and resources around teachers are supportive enough to make the job less demanding and not a profession that is suitable only for people with extremely high levels of resilience.

There can be a range of motivations behind teachers making the decision to leave the education sector. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) discovered, in their study of 760 Norwegian primary to mid-secondary teachers, that when teachers become exhausted, they enter into a professionally depressed mood, or when psychosomatic responses result in a loss of engagement, they will become more motivated to leave the profession. They highlight values and ethical considerations as drivers and believe that when teachers sense a loss of alignment between their own values, and that of the school, motivation falls (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Klassen and Chui (2011), in their research on teachers' occupational commitment and intention to quit, note the lack of studies on the "psychological factors that influence teachers' occupational commitment and intentions to leave the profession at various career stages" (p. 114). A key aspect of their study was the discovery that, against their predictions, experienced educators had lower levels of commitment to the profession than new teachers. They also had higher levels of overall stress (Klassen & Chui, 2011). This difference between the motivation levels of novice

and experienced teachers is worth noting. The vast store of knowledge that experienced, practicing teachers hold make the retention of their services paramount.

The challenge of keeping teachers in the classroom is a problem that continually surfaces when examining stress and burnout in education. Ingersoll (2001) points out in his study on teacher turnover and shortages that high rates of teacher turnover are concerning not only because they may be indicative of "how well schools function, but also because they can be disruptive, in and of themselves, for the quality of school community and performance" (p. 505). Ingersoll (2001), after analysing the data in two surveys conducted by the National Centre for Educational Statistics in the United States, also noted that factors such as low salaries, poor student behaviour, and a lack of teacher involvement in decision-making are also having a huge influence on teacher retention (Ingersoll, 2001). It is therefore imperative that school leaders and policy makers are receptive to research highlighting teacher workplace stress, as it is clear that stress can lead to diminished classroom performance and poor teacher retention. Additionally, acknowledging the lived experiences of stressed and dissatisfied teachers adds to the wider understanding of the phenomenon of teacher stress. Van Maele and Van Houtte (2015) believe that "in order to keep teachers in their job, those who manage the teaching profession should understand which factors contribute to attrition-inducing job attitudes" (p. 94). Part of that understanding must be rooted in an interest in discovering what it is like for teachers to experience stress, and how it interplays with the act of teaching. You and Conley (2015) wrote that if the workplace variables that influence high levels of teacher dissatisfaction can be discovered, "we may have a basis for altering workplace conditions to reduce intentions to leave at different points in teachers' careers." (p. 576). They also discovered, after utilising the *USA Schools and Staffing Survey* (SASS), that

increased administrative demands are an important factor in rising professional uncertainty, particularly for teachers who are approaching the twilight years of their time in the profession (You & Conley, 2015).

The stories and narratives of experienced teachers who have waded through stressful workplaces need to be brought to the attention of those in the position to affect change. Hearing from teachers, understanding their lived experiences, and discovering how they negotiate stress will enhance awareness of the phenomenon of stress. Therefore, further research in this area is needed not only to assist teachers in classrooms and help them remain in the profession, but to ensure academic programs are delivered successfully and that student learning is not impaired.

Reducing Teacher Stress

The empirical literature being reviewed in the early stages of this study led to a further literary investigation into suggested direct actions that could be taken by stakeholders in education to reduce teacher stress. For example, school leaders and administrators may need to be more mindful of the mental health of teachers when developing strategic plans to increase teacher quality (Wong et al., 2017). Sass et al. (2011) felt that "university administrator preparation programs should directly address leadership approaches that are respectful and supportive of teachers" (p. 423). Change can bring chaos into the teaching environment, as Chong and Kong (2012) noted when they called for the development of internal processes to support instructional change in Singapore. Concerning the implementation of new curriculum and teaching methodologies, McCormick and Ayres (2009) suggest that these should be introduced in stages to lessen the impact on teachers. It is also felt that increasing teachers' control of

the teaching environment would be beneficial, particularly with regards to experienced

teachers (Klassen et al., 2010).

Chang (2009) explained in her article on the emotional work of teachers that

many problems within the classroom may be prevented through proactive approaches

specifically designed to enhance coping strategies. She believes teachers should, if

possible, predict problems and seek out looming challenges first, rather than fall into risk

management and respond to challenges only as they emerge. She writes that "teachers

need to foresee the challenges in the classroom, explore alternatives in facing the

challenges, and be persistent in their actions when dealing with the classroom problems"

(p. 211). Running alongside this idea is a belief that teachers would also benefit from

professional development to help them to detach from their emotions when dealing with

students – much in the same way counsellors or clinical psychologists achieve

detachment with their patients. Chang (2009) identified that "the more teachers care

about students, the more likely they are to get angry or frustrated by students" (p. 212).

Chang (2009) further posited that teachers should be trained to deal with the full

emotional impacts of student-teacher relationships. While these approaches may well be

highly effective in helping teachers reduce in-class stressors and enhance their

effectiveness overall, it still leaves teachers exposed to the decisions of upper

management in schools along with senior administrators, many of which bear down

heavily on teachers.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) provided evidence that support the argument that

educational administrators should focus on reducing the workload and time pressure on

teachers. Depressed or exhausted teachers are less efficient and may have reduced energy

to motivate and inspire students. In contrast, teachers who have a high level of wellbeing

"may be more energetic, seek social relations more actively, and therefore perceive the social environment as more supportive" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018, p. 1271). When they are consulted as a matter of routine, any new program's chances of success are increased. Ashorfat (2011) proffers that "when teachers are ignored or when reforms come from above or are not connected to the daily realities of the classroom, and local environment, even the most expensive and well-designed interventions are almost sure to fail" (p. 67).

Often, well-intentioned courses of action can result in teachers feeling alienated and weighed down by a sense of obligation to completely re-align their practices (Ingersoll, 2001). Teachers can be harmed by schools boldly declaring shared goals or policies whilst de-emphasising others; "From the viewpoint of teachers, key questions are these: Whose policies are emphasized by the school? What options and choices are available for those who disagree with the dominant policies, values, and goals?" (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 527). Ingersoll (2001) also believes that it is of vital importance that schools provide opportunities for the protection of academic freedom. Support may come, for example, in the form of tenure or active participation in strong unions. These outlets can provide a mechanism for those wanting to voice opposition within their school environment, which in turn decreases the likelihood of teachers exiting the system (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 527). Blaydes et al. (2024), in their study exploring teacher wellbeing during the covid pandemic, found that one avenue of support for teachers moving forward is to include their voices directly in conversations related to teacher stress management to facilitate wellbeing. Many teachers taking part in the study "expressed frustrations about policies not addressing their main concerns and decisions being made without their input, which often resulted in feelings of frustration and less effective

support" (Blaydes et al., 2024, p. 18). A study examining teachers' deep feelings and emotional reactions when presented with change, or prescribed approaches handed down from above, would shed light on the impact of such organisational shifts.

Wong et al. (2017) found in their study on teaching quality and student engagement in the United States that student learning outcomes are directly and indirectly influenced by teacher stress. After analysing the research, the sources and impact of these stressors seem to be innumerable, and clearly in need of further exploration. The conclusions reached by those who have conducted research on teacher stress, and the various repercussions aligned with it, highlight a clear need to further explore the phenomenon. It is clear the researchers see stressors flowing from a number of areas in schools. In some cases, the effects of stress and high workload may be reduced by the proactive actions of teachers, but often those who spend the majority of their time in classrooms in front of students, have little influence over positively changing their own working conditions. Further research in the form of a phenomenological study focusing on the lived experiences of teachers who are exposed to stress is of crucial importance if deeper insights are to be understood and then addressed. Educational leaders at all levels, and across the globe, should be invested in this issue, for as the empirical evidence demonstrates, teacher wellbeing and retention, student outcomes, and the overall classroom environment may be negatively impacted by the phenomenon of teacher stress.

Section Two: Theoretical Frameworks

An overview of the various theoretical frameworks located during this review contributes to generating a deeper understanding of the theories that underpin earlier

studies on teacher stress. One theoretical framework that has a strong presence in research connected to stress is Albert Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, which is the backbone of studies completed by Klassen et al. (2010), Chong and Kong (2012), and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007). *Self-efficacy* is a central concept of this theory. A teacher's level of self-efficacy represents the extent to which the teacher genuinely believes that they can affect student learning, as opposed to the actual influence they have on learning. Bandura (2007) states that when self-efficacy is measured "individuals are not asked to rate the ability they possess, but rather the strength of their assurance that they can execute given activities under designated situational demands" (p. 646). Certain practices and experiences can enhance teachers' self-efficacy, just as some experiences can undermine and diminish a teacher's level of confidence in their ability. Bandura (1997) identifies four principal sources of self-efficacy, which have varying degrees of influence. A mastery experience involves teachers experiencing success firsthand, vicarious experience occurs when correct modelling is observed, and social persuasion comes in the form of encouragement from others. The fourth source involves teachers' physiological and affective states. Morris et al. (2017), when critically reviewing the emerging literature linked to self-efficacy, noted that the relationship between emerging teachers' years of experience and their level of self-efficacy is unclear. They assert that educators who have confidence in their capabilities are "less susceptible to work-related stresses. However, it is also evident that individuals who feel overwhelmed at work are consequently less likely to believe they can be effective" (Morris et al., 2017, p. 816).

A further theoretical framework that is highly relevant to the current study is Leon Festinger's (1957) *theory of cognitive dissonance*. In it, the social psychologist proposed a new theory centred on the concept of dissonance. Dissonance, in this context,

refers to the negative affective state, experienced by a person in their place of work, in response to cognitive discrepancy (Hinojosa, 2017). Festinger (1957) outlined his belief that:

> 1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance.
>
> 2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance (Festinger, 1957, p. 3)

The theory's broad application, and relevance to teaching, has been acknowledged by numerous researchers (Heaton & Chan Lai Quan, 2023; Hinojosa et al., 2017). Pedder and Opfer (2013) called for further research into "how teachers respond to dissonance between their values and practice" (p. 643). They ask whether a state of dissonance leads teachers to re-examine their practices as they move towards bringing them into close alignment, and whether the condition can ultimately act as a catalyst for change (Pedder & Opfer, 2013).

Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that when an individual holds two contradictory cognitions, they will experience the unpleasant state of dissonance until they are able to resolve the situation (Hinojosa et al., 2017). Cognitions can be defined broadly as any mental representation, including "attitudes, beliefs, or knowledge of one's own behaviour" (Hinojosa, 2017, p. 173). With regards to the act of teaching, dissonance is likely to occur if educators are forced into adopting pedagogical approaches that are problematic for them. Heaton et al. (2023) explained that "if curriculum and content are implicated by power structures, educational experiences change, and these can cause dissonance" (p. 14).

Analogous to cognitive dissonance is the concept of *emotional dissonance.* Pugh et al. (2011) describe this as the discrepancy between felt and expressed emotion. The existence of emotional dissonance can also pose a distinct challenge to an individual's sense of self (Hochschild, 1983). Teaching sits comfortably in the category of professional occupations that require workers to present emotions and displays of enthusiasm that are often at variance with their genuine feelings towards the work. Face-to-face interaction requires greater control of emotional expression from educators as compared to other professionals, as vocal and facial presentation must be regulated constantly (Morris & Feldman, 1996).

The narrative-biographical research undertaken by Kelchtermans (2009) is a further theoretical framework that has had applications within research on teacher stress. Kelchtermans (2009) developed the belief that during the course of their careers, teachers develop a "personal interpretive framework: a set of cognitions, of mental representations that operate as a lens through which teachers look at their job, give meaning to it and act in it" (p. 260). Incorporated in this are two domains inherent in the framework: the teachers' conception of themselves - their *professional self-understanding* - and teachers' personal system of knowledge and beliefs about education, *the subjective education theory* (Kelchtermans, 2009). This theory specifically refers to the beliefs about education that teachers call upon when performing the tasks associated with their job. Subjective education theory encompasses their professional "know-how, the basis on which teachers ground their decisions for action (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 264). *Professional self-understanding* is a term that Kelchtermans (2009) prefers over *teacher identity,* and in a similar manner to Bandura (1997), he identified five principles that make up teachers' professional self-understanding: self-image, self-esteem, job

motivation, task perception and future perspective. These were developed by

Kelchtermans (2009) after analysing teachers' narrative accounts. He has found that

narratives are a powerful way to unravel the complex processes of sense making that

constitute the act of teaching. Kelchtermans (2009) also believes that when teachers share

narratives it is informative not only because researchers learn what and how teachers

think about themselves, but also because teachers can construct that self-understanding in

the interactive act of sharing, at the same time "inviting the 'audience' to acknowledge,

confirm or question and contradict the statement" (Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 260).

Chang (2009), and Van Maele et al. (2015) refer to Maslach Burnout Inventory

(MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). Van Maele et al. (2015) highlight

Maslach's description of burnout as a "psychological syndrome in response to chronic

emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (p. 95). Key burnout dimensions were

developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981), including; emotional exhaustion, cynicism,

and inefficacy. The MBI consists of two dimensions, 'frequency' and 'intensity'. There

are 47 items contained within this two-scale format, which was initially administered 605

people from a variety of health and service occupations including: police, counsellors,

teachers, nurses, social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists (Maslach and Jackson,

1981, p. 101). Further subscales emerged from the data, which included emotional

exhaustion, depersonalisation, and low personal accomplishment. Chang (2009) believes

that Maslach's work has provided an important framework for studying the phenomenon

of stress because of the defining psychological constructs put forward.

Other conceptual frameworks can be located when exploring issues surrounding

teacher stress in schools. McLean and Connor (2015), in their study of depressive

symptoms of third grade teachers, discuss *dynamics systems theories*, while Klassen and

Chiu (2011) incorporated the *workplace commitment framework*, which was developed as a result of research on vocational psychology. Others, such as McCormick and Ayres (2009), in their research into self-efficacy and occupational stress, acknowledge the importance of "schema theory and the self-serving bias which provides a theoretical framework for studying stress in schools" (p. 465).

The adoption of a theoretical framework provides a structure for research, and it clearly behoves the researcher to locate the research within the theoretical landscape that would be most conducive to the topic at hand. Teaching - with its oft hidden away interiors of closed classroom spaces – would benefit from verbal accounts from teachers themselves in order for others to make sense of what is happening in these learning spaces. There appears to be a dearth of this type of research currently in the literature. Teachers' emotional state and mindset as they practise their profession also needs to be conveyed if researchers are to gain an understanding of the challenges and stresses they face. For this reason, the philosophical constructs of phenomenology (Husserl, 1980) emerged as an ideal fit for the current research. The rationale for this decision is outlined forthwith.

Phenomenological Methodology

A review into the literature reveals a vast array of theoretical frameworks and methodologies that have formed the basis of many studies into teacher stress. One under-used approach to researching teacher stress that appears highly suited to capturing the essence of the issue is phenomenology (Ayala, 2008). The defining characteristics of phenomenological studies include characteristics such as; placing an emphasis on the phenomenon to be explored and phrasing it in terms of a single concept or idea, using heterogeneous groups of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon, and

employing data collection procedures that usually involve interviewing the participants

who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The type of problem best

suited to this form of research is one in which "it is important to understand several

individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 80).

Phenomenology is described more broadly by Cohen et al. (2000) as "a theoretical point

of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value" (p. 23).

Genuine conversations should flow between the researcher and the participant – one in

which the two are asking questions of each other, listening to what the other has to say,

and responding (Hyde, 2005). It requires the researcher to look beyond the minutiae of

everyday experiences and begin an examination of their very essence - to get to the

meaning structures of everyday experiences (van Manen, 2016).

Phenomenology is not designed to offer an effective theory with which one might

explain the world, but rather it provides opportunities to gain "plausible insights that

bring us in more direct contact with the world" (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The interpretive

researcher, therefore, must abandon the hope of a universal theory in favour of

multifaceted images of human behaviour within a certain context (Cohen et al., 2000).

The researcher is hoping for the revelation of the phenomenon as it is actually lived,

rather than as it is conceptualised. The goal is to be able to experience the lived

phenomenon in an enriched fashion (van Manen, 2016), contributing new insights and

understanding to the field under review, in this case, the lived experiences of teachers

undergoing stress with their professional lives.

The aim of the current phenomenological study is to reveal findings that will help

shed light on issues connected to teacher stress in a way that is deeply connected to

teachers own lived experiences. This review has identified a gap in the research with

regards to research of this type. Huisman (2009) presented a phenomenological thesis exploring lived experiences of teacher stress as perceived by middle school teachers from a rural Midwestern town in the United States, however, participants were drawn only from the middle school level, and the researcher employed Lazarus' (1990) *transaction theory of stress* as the theoretical framework. Aziz et al. (2019) conducted phenomenological research entitled, *Coping with stress: The lived experiences of English teachers who persist in Malaysian rural school,* which was a phenomenological case study and involved only limited use of the teachers' own words in describing their experiences. Williams (2023) also delivered a case study which instead focused on teachers experiencing stress and burnout in a unique school in Utah. However, there appears to be few phenomenological studies on teachers stress with a strong focus on presenting the participants' lived experiences in their own words.

Section 3: Synthesis of the Literature – Revelations and Future Studies

The sources of teacher stress are varied and layered. They could result from within the complex and diverse contexts of face-to-face classroom teaching, but also from work demands such as administrative duties, collaborative work with colleagues, the counselling of students and parents, excessive preparation, data collection, correction, and report writing (Caudal, 2022; McLean & Connor, 2015; De Nobile, 2016, Van Meale & Van Houtte, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Given the complexity of the phenomenon, it is worthwhile reflecting on the more relevant findings in order to ascertain the benefits a phenomenological approach might bring to the problem. Taking heed of suggestions from previous researchers regarding future research on teacher stress can also confirm an approach to the phenomenon that has been under-utilised.

Iancu et al. (2017) believe there exists several ways to decrease teacher stress. They classified the possible approaches into categories which included techniques such as "cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), mindfulness and relaxation, social-emotional skills, psychoeducation, social support, and professional development" (Iancu et al., 2017, p. 375). Van Maele and Van Houtte (2015) believe that the leadership style of school principals can have an enormous influence over the levels of emotional exhaustion displayed by their staff. Principals who are benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open are more likely to foster a positive workplace environment where the prevalence of emotional exhaustion is reduced (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2015, p. 110). If a change of managerial style from leaders who are able to influence the tone of the workplace can have a tangible impact on those working within it, then it is clearly worthwhile exploring which approaches teachers may respond positively too. Phenomenological discussions revealing the lived experiences and thoughts of experienced teachers appears to be an ideal way to dive into the many issues connected to teacher stress.

A review of the research exposes the many challenges associated with classroom teaching, however it also uncovers surprisingly affirming experiences – some of which may lead to a reassessment of how teachers derive motivation. For example, one participant in Phan and Locke's (2015) study recounted how they felt their own confidence surge when hearing a colleague teach whom they found to be operating at a much lower level than themselves, as opposed to a gaining inspiration from more capable teachers.

> I could hear the teacher's instructions when our classrooms were next to each other… His teaching strategies made me think that I am much better than him (Phan & Locke, 2015, p. 79).

Other findings that encourage prospective researchers to broaden their understanding of teacher stress include the belief that the effectiveness of teachers' collaborative work may well be dependent on the cultural context. Klassen et al. (2010) reached the conclusion that teachers from collectivist societies work better as part of a team in comparison to teachers from more individualist societies, such as the United States. Educators from individualist countries thrown into excessive group work may find it stressful, complicated, and a source of frustration (Klassen et al., 2010).

Suggestions for future studies in the literature. Whist there are inherent stressors in teaching, such as poor student behaviour, assessment, and planning, it is probably that there are a number of controllable factors on the periphery, such as heavy administrative requirements and tense interactions with parents, that are having an impact. Further research is clearly needed in order to fully understand the impact of these job demands. Wong et al. (2017) have called for additional studies to confirm the effects of stress on student outcomes, whilst McLean and Connor (2015) believe that the impact of teachers' depression on the classroom environment needs to be explored further. Reilly et al. (2014) identified perceived stress as the main predictor of job satisfaction, however they believe it is still unclear what the main sources of stress for teachers are. Minihan et al. (2022) believe that future research must identify strategies and ideas that teachers themselves feel would meet their mental health and wellbeing needs. Ideas, they assert, must be practical and effective in reducing stress and burnout if the current decline in teacher wellbeing, along with the downturn in commitment to the profession, is to be addressed (Minihan et al., 2022). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007) conclude their article with a call for further work around sources of self-efficacy.

> More research into important sources of efficacy information
> that would tap the relative weight of vicarious experiences,

> verbal persuasion, mastery experiences, physiological arousal
> and contextual factors would be of great value as we attempt to
> learn how to better train and equip teachers for their complex
> tasks (p. 954).

Kelchtermans (2017) believes that *professional vulnerability* is a given in the teaching profession – an inevitable outcome of the fact that teachers are required to not only have expertise, but also be fully committed to the profession and their students, wherever this takes them. He believes that this structural vulnerability is still not fully understood yet seems to be the key to "understanding a number of complex issues, such as teacher attrition, resistance to change, teacher burnout, and intensification of the teaching job" (Kelchtermans, 2017, p. 17). In a similar way, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2018) list job control or autonomy, and parental conflicts as areas that demand to be included in future research, while Iancu et al. (2017) state that future research should concentrate on the effectiveness of organisational interventions in educational settings.

Of significance is the number of researchers who felt that further qualitative studies are needed. Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2007), Phan and Locke (2015), and Klussen et al. (2015) all highlight the role that studies of a qualitative nature should play in future research. Reflecting on their studies of perceived stress, Reilly et al. (2014) conclude that; "A qualitative approach would allow for the in-depth exploration of the situational factors contributing to perceived stress, which could then be targeted by local educational authorities and school decision-makers" (p. 373). For the reasons outlined, and in response to the highlighted gap in the research, the current phenomenological study focusing on teachers' lived experiences of stress in the workplace appears to be both timely and methodologically sound.

Section 4: Application of Research Literature to Present Study

Conceptual Framework. Conceptual frameworks help move the researcher's thinking into alignment with the data, and enable them to reflect in broader terms, rather than simply dealing with transcribed accounts and quotes (Naeem et al., 2023). The models outlined in the aforementioned sections also add richness to a study, and help the researcher and reader interact with the data in different ways. The conceptual framework that will guide this research was developed as a synthesis of the following five key findings uncovered in this literature review. The importance of placing great store in the welfare of teachers, as emphasised by McLesky and Billingsley (2008), along with the belief that the strength of the teaching force remains the key ingredient to student success, will be central. Vesely et al., (2013) contribute further by stating that the psychological health of teachers is imperative for the success of students, the education system, and society at large. Proper recognition of the importance of the teacher should be reflected, as Van Maele and Van Houtte (2015) state, in the way those who manage the teaching profession respond to issues connected to teacher attrition. Crucially, the importance of this research into teacher stress is underlined by Tschannan-Moran and Hoy (2007) as they discuss the problem of how stress can affect the learning environment and decrease the likelihood of the creation of the optimal classroom climate. The work of Richards (2012) compliments this view as she puts forward that student academic success is not achieved in isolation, and that the wellbeing of the teacher is critical.

A focus of this study, therefore, will be on establishing how teachers experience stress, and then understand and respond to it. Teachers receive and work through stress differently, depending on their level of experience, motivation, and context (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Workload, school policy changes, curriculum demands, behaviour and

parental interference - among other issues present in contemporary education - need to be explored further, and in a way that moves the research towards the very essence of the lived experience of stress for teachers.

Chapter Summary

Illuminated by the findings of this literature review, the full value of the proposed research into various forms of unacceptable stress experienced by classroom teachers can now be seen. It is imperative that educationalists develop a deeper understanding of stress with a view to reducing the number of teachers exploring other avenues of work, away from teaching. Patil (2023) revealed that currently in Australia, "59% of teachers reveal a desire to leave the profession" (Patil, 2023, p. 306). Moreover, many teachers are lost for entirely preventable reasons. It is distinctly possible that current job demands, many of which experienced teachers find unacceptable, have profoundly deleterious effects on teacher retention, and the overall quality of teaching. A study focusing on the phenomenon of teacher stress, which will reveal the lived experience of teachers who have spent at least ten years in the classroom, appears to be both worthwhile and important. In response to the identified problem, and the literature analysed, three research questions have been developed for the current phenomenological study:

- **What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?**

- **What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?**

- **What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?**

This literature review has highlighted the need for further exploratory studies addressing teacher stress and has demonstrated the role that further qualitative and narrative-based research can play. The review also has the potential to inform future research in this area. Chapter 3, Theory and Methodology, describes the theory

underpinning the research, as well as the methodological characteristics of the

phenomenological approach.

Chapter 3

Theory and Methodology Chapter

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the methodological framing of the study. The research design underpinning the study is outlined, as is the research paradigm in which it is embedded, the epistemological foundations, and the theoretical perspective that shapes the methodology.

This phenomenological study aims to encounter the lived experience of stress from the perspective of a small group of teachers. A qualitative study delving into the reality of teacher classroom stress, with a focus on seeking the narratives of those who have spent years dealing with the pressures of teaching, will be of high interest given the challenges facing education systems both in Australia and abroad.

The opening section of this chapter outlines the features of the qualitative paradigm. It does so by addressing the following:

(i)   The Qualitative Paradigm

(ii)   The Epistemological Foundation

(iii)   Theoretical Perspective

Section two presents an overview of the phenomenological research paradigm, and consists of four parts namely:

(i)   Phenomenological Research Paradigm

(ii)   Phenomenological Traditions

(iii)   Lived Experiences and Essences

(iv)   Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Section three concludes the chapter by outlining the following features of the research process including:

(i)   The Research Process

(ii)   The Development of the Research Questions

(iii)   The Role of the Researcher

(iv)   Chapter Summary

Section One

(i)   The Qualitative Paradigm

This study into the lived experience of teacher stress sits within in the qualitative paradigm - a paradigm Freebody (2003) distilled into various aspects. He regards qualitative research as inductive and holistic, sensitive to researcher effects, and distinctly interested in the subject's point of view. The underlying philosophy of this study reflects Freebody's (2003) belief that qualitative studies should describe the taken-for-granted experience of participants, and report all valuable perspectives available, within the confines of the study. A qualitative researcher of this type is humanistic in their orientations, and interested in the inner life of the average person, in this case the teacher exposed to stress. It is important to note, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) did, that qualitative researchers endeavour to have their writing maintain consistency with the collected data. They should not declare their findings and assertions to be true, only "that they are plausible given the data" (p. 27). Qualitative researchers produce an interpretation of reality that helps the broader educational audience understand social circumstances, as well as the human condition (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Freebody (2003) notes that it is important in qualitative research not only to compare and contrast

interpretations, but also to expand and develop unforeseen and surprising findings. This should be done even to the point of exploring findings that are "anomalous to or disconfirming of original hypotheses and impressions" (p. 83). In this manner, deeper insights into the topic under scrutiny may be revealed.

The ontological view of the researcher is relativist. Different ontological positions, such as relativism and realism, reflect contrasting views on what exists and how it exists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Relativist ontology is the belief that reality is relative to the observer and the context in which it is observed. In other words, reality is a finite subjective experience and nothing exists beyond our thoughts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The idea of universal truths or values gives way to negotiated truths, with multiple interpretations of experience bringing multiple realities (Levers, 2013). "The purpose of science from a relativist ontology is to understand the subjective" (Levers, 2013, p. 2). Departing from the more positivistic and behavioural empirical sciences, van Manen (1990) explains that human science does not see theory as standing *before* practice in order to inform it. Rather, the researcher adopts and uses theory in order to enlighten practice. "Practice (or life) always comes first, and theory comes later as a result of reflection" (p. 15). This notion of placing life first, along with the idea of negotiated truths, has led the researcher towards conducting a qualitative phenomenological study into the lived experience of teacher stress, with a focus on describing the nature, the very essence, of that lived experience.

(ii)   Epistemological Foundation

The epistemological view adopted by any researcher is of great and far-reaching significance. It permeates every step of the investigative process, from selection of the

phenomenon that is scrutinised, to the way the ultimate report is composed (Yazan,

2016). The paradigm under which the researcher conducts their study is multi-layered:

> From a philosophical perspective, a paradigm comprises a view
> of the nature of reality (i.e., ontology) – whether it is external or
> internal to the knower; a related view of the type of knowledge
> that can be generated and standards for justifying it (i.e.,
> epistemology); and a disciplined approach to generating that
> knowledge (i.e., methodology) (Taylor & Medina, 2013, p. 2).

The importance of these assumptions cannot be overstated given the influence they

have on the way researchers view the phenomenon at hand, develop questions, and

approach the collection and analysis of data. The researcher is called upon to provide not

only a description of the chosen paradigm and accompanying methodology, but also an

account of the reasoning behind the choice of methodology and methods, and the way in

which these are employed (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). In this case, the lived experiences of stress

as endured by teachers who are currently working in the contemporary teaching

workforce will be the focus of the investigation. The complex layers of knowledge,

attitudes and experience are fraught with assumptions and emotions, therefore the

necessity for understanding a myriad of interpretations is essential to this research study.

Constructivism. Constructivism underlies the epistemological foundation of this

research into teacher stress. For constructivists, understanding is a matter of interpretative

construction on the part of the experiencing subject (Olssen, 1995). This viewpoint

rejects the claim of metaphysical realism which holds the view that "our knowledge is a

knowledge of the world independent of the knowing mind" (Olssen, 1995, p. 83). This

conviction was founded in the belief that something is only true if it corresponds to an

objective reality. Constructivism presents an alternate position, renouncing positivism

and rigid empiricism in favour of interpretive structures of science, and the role that an

active, inquisitive mind plays in uncovering new streams of knowledge. Here, reality is

seen as fluid, socially embedded, and existing within the mind (Grbich, 2013).

Knowledge is subjective, and multiple realities are presumed – and can be experienced

differently by people. Within the research context, the focus is on exploring the way

people interpret and make sense of the world presented to them (Grbich, 2013).

The current study has a firm basis in constructivism, which encompasses the view

that all knowledge, and by extension all meaningful reality, is contingent upon human

practices being constructed out of interaction between human beings and their world,

which is then transmitted within a social context (Crotty, 1998). All humans contribute to

the pool of knowledge of our being by using joint constructions and opening different

lines of interpretations (Nigar, 2020). "The world and all the objects in the world may be

in themselves meaningless, yet they are our partners in the generation of meaning and

need to be taken seriously" (Crotty, 1998, p. 44). Teacher stress resides within this world.

Discussions involving the phenomenon of teacher stress necessitate a level of

interpretation on behalf of the researcher before, during and after engaging with texts.

Meaning is then generated as part of this ongoing process.

(iii)   Theoretical Perspective

Once a research problem is identified, the researcher needs to arrive at the most

appropriate and effective way to commit to the research. The theoretical perspective the

researcher adopts supports and upholds the methodology. Swann and Pratt (2003) give a

broad overview of the options researchers face at this critical stage, pointing out that

most texts on educational research divide prospective research approaches into either the

quantitative or qualitative approach. In turn, these categories are often then associated

with two paradigms - respectively, positivism and interpretivism. Cohen, Manion and

Morrison (2000) characterise positivism by its claim that science provides us with the

clearest possible ideal of knowledge. They explain that positivism is often less successful

in its application to the study of human behaviour where the complexity of human nature

contrasts strikingly with the regularity of the natural world. The world addressed by

positivist science is distant from the world of our everyday experiences, and is detached

further from the essential or lived experiences lying behind our everyday experiences

(Crotty, 1998, p. 28). In contrast, when an interpretive approach to educational research

is adopted, individuals become the starting point, and the goal shifts towards

understanding their interpretations of the world around them (Cohen et al., 2000).

Interpretivism. The proposed research will operate within the scope of the

interpretivist paradigm. The researcher adopted this theoretical mindset from the outset of

the research, and then throughout the process of data collection and analysis.

In methodological terms, interpretivists would argue that we cannot begin to

understand why people or institutions function in particular ways without working with

those immersed in the given environment, and asking them to describe the situation

(Hammersley, 2012). Teaching, in particular, requires verbal accounts from teachers

themselves in order for others to make sense of what is happening in learning spaces. The

teachers' emotional state and mindset as they practise their profession also needs to be

conveyed to researchers if an understanding is to be gained regarding the challenges and

stresses they face. Interpretivism requires the researcher to take on the role of a social

commentator or actor in order to generate differing viewpoints through the research

process. Interpretivist studies typically emphasise meaning, and often employ varying

methods in order to highlight that no single objective reality exists beyond the actors'
explanations and viewpoints, just differing versions of events (Burton & Bartlett, 2009).

Given that the epistemological groundings of the interpretivist approach require
the researcher to attempt to discover a person's unique worldview, the researcher has
concluded that a hermeneutic phenomenological framework is deemed appropriate within
the context of the current study into teacher stress.

Figure 3.1 Theoretical framework of study.

Section Two

(i)   Phenomenological Research Paradigm

Phenomenology is a subsection of qualitative research. Broken down further, the
phenomenological approach to research seeks to "move beyond the individual
occurrences of phenomenon to describe the phenomenon itself" (Sharkey, 2001, p.31).
Phenomenology involves gathering insights, lived experiences, and essences from
subjects as they describe and recollect them. It is ideal for exploring complex issues such
as workplace dynamics, family and parental interplays, and cultural/political attitudes. At

its heart, the approach is designed to understand the uncovered meanings and essences of an experience, and how participants make sense of these (Grbich, 2013, p. 92). This is quite distinct from the goal of quantitative research and the testing of *a priori* hypotheses. Whilst both methodologies have their place in educational research, it was revealed in the literature review chapter that there is a dearth of phenomenology studies focusing on the lived experiences of teachers as they worked through stress. Husserl (1931) thought it of vital importance to consider conscious experiences in the fullness of their context. In this way, the researcher intends to capture the 'essence' of the teaching experience for stressed teachers.

> We shall be concerned to grasp this individual content of the cogitation in its pure singularity, and to describe it in its general features; excluding everything which is not to be found in the cogitation as it is in itself (Husserl, 1931, p. 116).

Husserl developed and refined the phenomenological approach in order to identify and present the lived experiences of individuals more effectively. Pure phenomenology, he explained, was not established to be an empirical science. Its purity comes not just from reflection, and is entirely different from the sort of purity one might encounter in other sciences (Husserl, 1931). Phenomenology, therefore, provides an appropriate theory and methodology in which to explore teacher stress. The methods often adopted in phenomenological research, such as discussions and biographical narratives, provide an avenue to explore and delve deeply into the research questions:

- What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?

- What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?

- What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?

The various traditions of phenomenology are outlined below with the purpose of situating this study within the particular approach that best meets the purpose of this research as outlined above.

(ii)   Phenomenological Traditions

As discussed in Chapter Two, phenomenology is not designed to offer an effective theory with which one might explain the world, but rather it offers plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world of the participants (van Manen, 1990). The interpretive researcher, therefore, must abandon the hope of a universal theory in favour of multifaceted images of human behaviour within a certain context (Cohen, et al., 2000), in this case, the profession of teaching. Given the present study is an attempt to capture how the participants experience stress, deal with it, and reflect upon it, the phenomenological methodology presents as ideal. When listing the defining features of phenomenological studies, Creswell (2013) includes characteristics such as phrasing the phenomenon in terms of a single concept or idea, using heterogeneous groups of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon, and employing data collection procedures that usually involve interviewing experienced participants. Further, Creswell (2013) believes the type of problem best suited to this form of research is one in which "it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (p. 80). The focus is on the shared experiences of teacher stress from the multiple perspectives of the teachers participating in the study.

Phenomenology can be viewed both as a research approach and as a philosophy (Chudnoff, 2015). It provides the philosophical framework for the study in that the participants have subjective experiences of the phenomenon – teacher stress - but also

objective experiences in common with other people (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). Van Manen

(1990) refers to *hermeneutic phenomenology* as a philosophy of the personal which is

pursued "against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the

logos or other, the *whole,* the *communal,* or the social" (p. 7). This understanding, that

the personal may also reveal itself as a shared experience, lies at the heart of this study

into teacher stress.

(iii)   Lived Experiences and Essences

When an interpretive approach to educational research is adopted, individual

teachers become the starting point. The goal shifts towards understanding how teachers

experience the world around them - to relay the participants' lived experiences - and to

reveal the essence of the phenomenon (Cohen, et al., 2000).

The lived experience of teacher stress. Conducting a qualitative,

phenomenological study, with its focus on describing the very nature of the lived

experience of teacher stress, seems highly appropriate for this study, and consistent with

the research questions that have emerged. Going to the source of the issue - the teachers

themselves - and listening empathetically and with deep reflection to their stories,

appeals greatly as a means of capturing and portraying the essence of the phenomenon of

teacher stress. Husserl (1980), explains that phenomenology calls on researchers to

capture the lived-experience or essence of a phenomenon:

> The natural scientific attitude is, according to its essence,
> directed toward the real-causal in the context of actual factual
> existence. One must radically alter this attitude in order to be
> able to obtain any serious description of the statal, as it is a
> lived-process (Husserl, 1980, p. 47).

Lived experiences are distinguished by the phenomenologist concerning themselves with how individuals experience a phenomenon, and the meaning they connect to it. Coppola (2023), in his study into musical egotism, declared that the purpose of phenomenology is to bring into focus the experience of the phenomenon in human consciousness. An objective definition of the phenomenon in focus was not sought by Coppola (2023), but rather an understanding of how its presence, however it may be identified, is felt and embodied. This core ideology shapes the researcher's approach to the study.

Essences. The concept of essences is integral to phenomenological theory and can be described as the universal properties and essential structures of the given phenomenon (Vagle, 2014). Merleau-Ponty (1974) built on these ideas as part of his existential phenomenology, in which he "synthesised existentialism with Husserlian phenomenology" (Priest, 2003, p. 36). Merleau Ponty (1974) believed that in order for a researcher to grasp an essence, first they must consider a concrete experience, such as teacher stress, and then "make it change in our thoughts, trying to imagine it as effectively modified in all respects. That which remains invariable through these changes is the essence of the phenomena" (Merleau-Ponty, 1974, p. 252). Shiying (2009) described the process wherein the essence of a thing emerges. What is revealed initially is the simple individuality of the perception of a thing (Shiying, 2009). This is followed, in the second instance, by the revelation of the universality of the thing. What is finally revealed is the "unity of the universality and the particular (universal thing and particular thing) of things" (Shiying, 2009, p. 146). Solomon (1970) believed that one intuits an essence by considering all possible examples and counter examples. This is challenging if one cannot think of a single example of an instance of that essence, or "distinguish a

case that is not an instance of the essence from one that is" (Solomon, 1970, p. 383). The

distinction between the contingent and the essential properties of a phenomenon is made

possible by a process known as imaginative variation. Breaking this down further, eidetic

variation is the "imaginary addition and subtraction of the properties of an object with the

aim of disclosing its essence" (Priest, 2003, p. 16). Through the analysis of the data

generated in this study, the researcher will consider teacher stress through the lens of

imaginative variation in order to arrive at the essence of this phenomenon. Husserl (1931)

declared that "whatever belongs to the essence of the individual can also belong to

another individual", and that phenomenology aims at "being a descriptive theory of

essences of pure transcendental experiences" (Husserl, 1931, p. 209). The challenge

phenomenologically, is to explore beyond subjective experiences and attempt to describe

underlying essences present in the experience (Sharkey, 2001). This enhances the

sophistication and rigour of the research design. In the context of teacher stress, the task

is to – as the researcher sifts through the data - consider the phenomenon in such a way as

to isolate the essence.

> If we are trying to conceive the essence of a "social process,"
> we will represent to ourselves a social process in which we have
> participated or concerning which we have some historical
> understanding. That which does not vary through all
> conceivable variation will be the essence. (Merleau-Ponty,
> 1974, p. 252)

The location of essences, drawn from the data, will help form a conceptual

understanding and appreciation of teacher stress as experienced by the participants. The

third research question - *What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?* – allows for

the exploration and isolation of the essence of teacher stress.

Departure from Husserl and Bracketing. Husserl (1931) developed

phenomenology as the science of pure consciousness (Moran and Mooney, 2002 p. 129).

It draws on deep, sustained and systematic reflection and excludes external experiences

and objects alien to consciousness. Husserl's (1931) intention was to approach the focal

point of the research, or the phenomenon, with a mind clear of pre-conceived notions,

and to refrain from introducing new motives of judgement. He believed the researcher's

personal thesis should undergo a modification. Husserl (1931) calls us to push it "'out of

action', and 'disconnect' it, 'bracket it'" (p. 109). This bracketing (the suspension of

one's own thoughts on the topic), and epoche (the deliberate suspension of judgement) is

undertaken in order to help facilitate the change in attitude that is necessary for 'the

philosophical reduction' to take place (Burton & Bartlett, 2009). In order to regard things

'in themselves', the researcher is required to deliberately suspend their presuppositions

concerning the phenomenon. According to Gadamer (1976), the goal of

phenomenological reduction is to "disclose the whole wealth of the self-given

phenomena in an unbiased way" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 146). The researcher is hoping for

the revelation of the phenomenon of teacher stress as it is actually lived, rather than as it

is conceptualised. Van Manen (2016) explains that the reduction is not an end in itself.

Rather, it is a means to an end. The goal is to be able to experience the lived phenomenon

in an enriched fashion, and, in this case, report such phenomenon as integral to the

findings of this study.

A state of mind free of bias or judgement must exists for the phenomenological

researcher to fully adhere to Husserl's (1931) reduction approach. Moran and Mooney

(2002) acknowledge that this suspension stands in conflict with our most basic habits of

thinking, yet state that it is precisely for this reason that "fully self-conscious

phenomenological reduction is needed if consciousness is to be systemically investigated in its pure immanence at all" (p. 131). However, others such as Gadamer (1989) and Heidegger (1962) advanced a viewpoint at odds with Husserl. First, Heidegger (1962) stated that our understandings are actually dependent on the reality of historical pre-structures, and he emphasised that interpretation is the crucial element not only of hermeneutic phenomenology, but also of our own existence. Later, Gadamer (1989) held that prior understandings of a given phenomenon are not necessarily wrong, nor to be avoided at all costs. In Gadamer's (1989) view, prejudices do not necessarily lead to erroneous conclusions.

> The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 295)

Gadamer's (1989) views gained considerable traction and contributed to many phenomenologists abandoning Husserlian methods, such as bracketing (van Manen, 1990). Given the researcher's closeness to the issues surrounding teacher stress, the significance of Gadamer's (1989) turn in methodological positioning influenced the analytical thinking of the researcher in this study, although the idea that certain prejudices are not easily discarded was revisited a number of times as the study unfolded.

Regardless of the particular strand of phenomenology that is employed by the researcher, the methodology is not without its challenges. Original insight is normally not the result of meticulously planned methods, procedures or approaches. Instead, "a phenomenology of the happening or emergence of meaning challenges us to find our way back to the beginning" (van Manen, 2016, p. 187). The methods employed in this study provided insights into the lived experience of teachers under stress. However, it was

important to be conscious of the fact that one cannot predict when this insight will be revealed, nor the method that will trigger the response. As part of the current study, the researcher has continued to utilise appropriate and stimulating research methods in the phenomenological tradition in order to generate nourishing and illuminating texts, full of undiscovered meaning. In doing so, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach proved to be fruitful in addressing the particular research questions and in serving the research purpose.

(iv)   Hermeneutics: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

The hermeneutic task in the context of research is to open up the meaning of a text in a way that is best described as "contextual, playful, and dialogical" (p. 24 Sharkey). The goal is to achieve, if possible, a fusion of horizons, whereby the phenomenon is understood in terms that are common to both the researcher and the object of research itself. The hermeneutic researcher endeavours to understand the meanings projected by the people and texts as they become fused (Nigar, 2020, p. 12). Pursuits that can be included under the hermeneutic umbrella can be expanded to include "reflections on the interpretation of meaningful human action more generally in such disciplines as history and philosophy" (Sharkey, 2001, p. 20). The idea that the lived history of our experiences and consciousness are inseparable from the world was developed by Heidegger (1962). In Heidegger's (1962) phenomenology, worldly phenomena do not reside beyond human consciousness, but exist "in the enaction of its intentionality to be aware of and interpret them" (Nigar, 2020, p. 12). While Husserl (1931) believed any pre-supposition about the subject under focus will impede understanding, hermeneutic research takes the researcher's own experience and interpretation into consideration (Nigar, 2020).

Gadamer's (1989) articulation of hermeneutic phenomenology does not involve a set of procedural rules, but rather a certain discipline of attending to things. He saw the hermeneutical experience as descriptive of the human experience of understanding (Dostal, 2002). Adhering to Gadamer's hermeneutical approach requires the researcher to "understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole. This principle stems from ancient rhetoric, and modern hermeneutics has transferred it to the art of understanding" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 291). This understanding was important in shaping the form of this research study.

Gadamer (1989) developed a number of insights which he believed were highly important in the conduct of hermeneutic research. These insights or concepts are useful to those engaging in a phenomenological study in an educational context and actually become the key principles that shape the methodology of enacting this study.

Principle 1: Method – Conversing with the text. A defining feature of philosophical hermeneutics is that it does not rely on one particular method in order to arrive at an understanding of a given text. Instead, truth is derived by entering into conversation with the text. Questioning is given priority; "There is no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what is questionable" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 365). Gadamer (1989) believed that the desire to question, or to know, pre-supposes a knowledge that one does not know. Indeed, a lack of knowledge in a particular area may lead to a particular question or type of question.

While hermeneutic phenomenology is not necessarily method-free, disciplines such as coding may not necessarily be in keeping with the hermeneutic approach. Van Manen (1990) expressed his hesitance to employ frequency counting or coding in order to discover hermeneutic themes. Gadamer (1989) too, valued reflections and insights that are derived not from following strict methodology, but rather through observation and

judgement. The transcripts produced in the current study were not coded, but instead surveyed, scanned, and approached from various angles, over time in sustained ways, in order to arrive at insights and the essence of teacher stress.

Principle 2: Conversation – Pathways to understanding. Through conversation, understanding is reached. Gadamer believed "the situation of two people coming to an understanding in conversation has a genuine application to hermeneutics, which is concerned with *understanding texts"* (Gadamer, 1989, p. 385). With regards to the current study, the methods utilised will require the participants in the discussion not to be at cross purposes. The researcher must ensure the other person is part of the discussion and that the conversation is conducted by "the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 367). Hermeneutic inquiry is sustained by a certain responsiveness to the dialogical focus as it unfolds. The art of questioning means refraining from attempting to discover the weakness in what is said, but rather "bringing out its real strength. It is not the art of arguing (which can make a strong case out of a weak one) but the art of thinking (which can strengthen objections by referring to the subject matter)" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 367). The researcher in the current study was conscious of asking questions in a way that increased the level of understanding, not only of the researcher, but also the participant. Many questions were challenging and probing, but the discussion remained collaborative and playful.

Principle 3: Play – Finding meaning through dialogical encounters. Humans can become lost in, and subject to, the unpredictability of gameplay. As Gadamer (1989) noted, players immersed in a game experience it as a reality that surpasses them. In other words, the game masters its player. Parallels can be drawn with the researcher in the act of interpreting a text. Ideally, a researcher becomes engaged in the encounter with the subjects to such an extent that the dividing line between subject and object becomes

blurred (Sharkey, 2001). Shared meaning is found between interpreter and the texts, in what Gadamer (1989) described as the *middle space* and the metaphor of play points to the common language of that encounter (Sharkey, 2001). The text opens up in a playful and dialogical way as part of the hermeneutic approach to gaining an understanding of the chosen phenomenon.

Gadamer (1989) noted that even in the case of games in which one tries to perform tasks that one has set oneself, such as research tasks, there is a risk that they "will not 'work,' 'succeed,' or 'succeed again,' which is the attraction of the game" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 106). Over the course of the current study, the researcher has maintained a playful attitude towards working with data, surrendering to the lived experiences contained within the narratives, and letting them speak to, and guide, the research.

Principle 4: Understanding as a productive activity. Understanding occurs when horizons are fused – that of the interpreter and the text. The meaning of a text is "co-determined by both the hermeneutic situation of the interpreter and the horizon the text produces" (Sharkey, p. 25). The researcher cannot simply reproduce the original intention of the author in order to show an understanding of the meaning of the text. Understanding is ultimately the culmination of a journey based on interpretation, and is determined by the hermeneutic situations of all stakeholders connected to the text (Sharkey, 2001). The text of the author, or stories shared by participants as part of research, are not without meaning, but meaning is also attributed to it legitimately by the interpreter. Different interpretations and meanings can, of course, continue to be attached to a text long after the author has moved on, and meanings may change as the text moves through different eras.

> The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does
> not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original
> audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always
> co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter
> and hence by the totality of the objective course of history
> (Gadamer, 1989, p. 296).

The researcher's understanding of teacher stress will flow from how the narratives are unpacked, and ultimately, what the researcher brings to the exchange as well.

Principle 5: Prejudice. One fundamental distinction between hermeneutic phenomenology and Husserl's pure phenomenology (1931) is the understanding that the hermeneutic approach does not require the elimination of prior understandings, or prejudice. Indeed, the hermeneutic goal is to test such understandings. Gadamer (1989) argued that prejudices are not necessarily wrong, and can prove to be enlightening. Understandings are always subject to revision if more convincing evidence and interpretations are introduced (Dostal, 2002). "We start off with vague anticipations of the whole, which are, however, revised the more we engage with the text and the subject matter itself" (Dostal, 2002, p.44). One implication of this finding in framing the current study is that the hermeneutic researchers need to be open to new possibilities, and be open to readjustments. As mentioned previously, Gadamer (1989) argued that the hermeneutic task involves sorting the productive prejudices from the unproductive ones – a task that is difficult to accomplish prior to working with the text. Prejudices may well be exposed and jettisoned, but equally, established understandings may be reconfirmed and strengthened through the process. In the context of the current study, the researcher brought to the process a range of educational experiences and views connected to teacher stress. As outlined in the first chapter, twenty years in both primary and secondary schools, across private and state sectors, burdened the researcher with prior understandings that needed to be laid bare and tested. The texts produced as part of the

study will therefore be approached by the researcher with particular pre-understandings and questions. Although wider reading painted a picture of the literature on teacher stress, the development of the research questions, as well as probe questions raised in discussions, were at least in part influenced by the researcher's own views and lived experiences. Gadamer (1989) argued that if we want to do justice to human's finite, historical mode of being, it is necessary to review the concept of prejudice in connection to phenomenological research, and recognise that legitimate prejudices and pre-existing views exist, although an alternate view may be discovered. Prior understandings can be seen as the reference point for acts of interpretation (Sharkey, 2001).

Principle 6: Understanding as fusion of horizons. Real understanding comes in the form of a fusion of horizons. Hermeneutic research is faithful to the horizons of the texts, but also acknowledges the researchers own insight through the act of interpretation (Sharkey, 2001, p. 28). By adopting a hermeneutic approach, one becomes open to the possibility that there are different ways of understandings things, as opposed to holding stubbornly to personal opinions or beliefs. The researcher's own knowledge of the phenomenon may have been all they allowed for previously, but through the hermeneutics, space for other ways of thinking open up which can "accommodate the beliefs of a quite different culture. Our horizon is extended to take in this possibility, which was beyond its limit before" (Dostal, 2002, p. 133). From this extension of horizons, a thesis will be built, and as such, will make a significant contribution to the new knowledge in this field.

Numerous research approaches seek to eliminate the subjective. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks, as Sharkey (2001) describes, to uncover a shared, overlapping space between the research object and the researcher. Important and worthwhile hermeneutic research "engages genuinely (dialogically and playfully) with the research

texts and aims to produce something of value and insight that is common to the researcher and author" (Sharkey, 2001, p. 28). Again, with this purpose in mind, new insights regarding the research questions will be forthcoming.

The study also embraced the subjective nature of qualitative research. The act of stripping verbatim data down to its essential elements and presenting to the reader an interpretation of the phenomenon is an approach supported by the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology (Crowther et al., 2017). This creates a more transparent text and enables the reader to identify the significance of the lived experience under study (van Manen (2016). The intention of the researcher was to work with, and respond to, the data in such a way as to provide texts that give the reader fresh insights into the phenomenon of teacher stress. The researcher has, at times, provided brief contextual background to the broader discussion before presenting the essential elements of the verbatim accounts. Sharkey (2001) reiterates that interpretation is always 'productive' in hermeneutic research, as opposed to reproductive. The aim is for the research process to culminate in a fusion of horizons between the text being interpreted and the interpreter. "The fusion is creative and always holds more than the sum of both parts alone" (Sharkey, 2001, p. 31). Through the hermeneutic approach, the text was opened up, and the phenomenon viewed in a way which draws the reader into the lived experience of teacher stress.
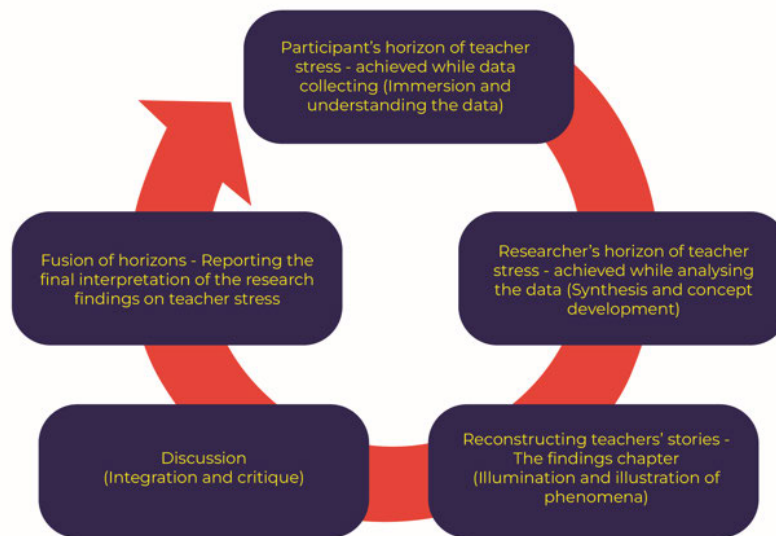
Figure 3.2 The Gadamerian Hermeneutic Cycle: Teacher Stress. (Adapted from Alsaigh and Coyne, 2021.)

Section Three

(i)   The Research Process

It can be recalled that the research methodology is shaped by constructivism which underlies this epistemological foundation of this research into teacher stress. The research will unfold as an interpretive study, with the methods (conversations, biographical professional narratives) serving the methodology – hermeneutic phenomenology.

Figure 3.3 Representation of research process.

(ii)   The Development of Research Questions

Ultimately, the design, analysis, and reporting of qualitative studies is driven by the research purpose and questions (Boudah, 2011). Queries about processes, or the effectiveness of the data analysis, should always lead back to the twin questions - "What is the purpose, and what is the research question?" (Boudah, 2011, p. 227). For this study into teacher stress, the research questions helped to guide the adoption of the methodology, methods, as well as the theoretical basis used for the analysis. The questions were developed and refined as the process moved along, with a clear focus on the lived experience of stress. Van Manen (2016) believes that the development of appropriate phenomenological questions is crucial to ensuring the success of phenomenological research. He warned that if questions lacked "clarity, point, and

power, then analysis will fail for lack of reflective focus" (p. 253). To this end, the researcher has endeavoured to encapsulate the areas of focus that were continually revisited during the development of the literature review. Given teachers themselves have been interviewed, stressful teaching experiences were examined in an attempt to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon.

It is worth acknowledging again that the research questions driving this study also arose from an inherent personal and professional interest in the topic. Twenty years of both primary and secondary teaching have resulted in the researcher forming the discomforting view that the workload on classroom teachers is unacceptably severe. This interest led to wider reading, a review of the literature on the topic, and eventually to an overwhelming desire to enter into a shared exchange with teachers.

Therefore, in response to the identified research problem, and the apparent gaps in teacher stress research as revealed in the literature review, three research questions have been developed.

- **What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?**

- **What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?**

- **What are the essences of the phenomenon or stress?**

These questions are clear, to the point, and will provide scope for much reflective analysis once the data is gathered. Furthermore, the questions are in line with the theoretical framework of the study which augers well for a rigorous approach to educational research.

(iii) The Role of the Researcher

Throughout the current study, the researcher was aware of the need to adhere to the highest ethical standards in gathering, recording, analysing, and reporting this research into teacher stress. In working with the participants, the researcher was honest and open about the intended goals of the study, and how the data will be shared. Participants were shown a high level of empathy and respect, particularly in light of the fact that they are all still active within the profession, and as such were vulnerable to identification issues. In keeping with the principles of ethical research, approved by the university in which the researcher is enrolled as a doctoral student, the teachers were made fully aware of the processes involved in de-identification, and participated in editing the transcriptions of the discussions. The responsibility that comes with conducting a large, doctoral campaign that is wide and scope, and topical, was not lost on the researcher.

Strengths and Risks of Being an Insider Researcher. Qualitative research is a human endeavor at its core, and as such, the researcher's positioning was necessarily partial, subjective and historically located whilst absorbed in discussions, and during the analysis. However, pre-ordained thoughts on topics under discussion were not a hindrance in allowing topics of discussion to meander and branch out on occasions, even if this meant participants raised points that were counter to the researcher's own thinking during the interviews. For example, on numerous occasions the interviewees referred to competitiveness among staff, and high stress levels that were "self-inflicted" (Ollie, Interview 2, p. 4). This was surprising, but ultimately enriching for the study, and it was the researcher's natural inquisitiveness that saw the discussion incorporate further dialogue delving into the essence of teacher motivation – in this case, actions driven by

competitiveness rather than specific direction from management or student academic

concerns.

By selecting hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher became committed to a

methodological paradigm that seeks, as Heidegger (1962) states, to understand the nature

of phenomena by attending to the relation that exists "between things and ourselves"

(Sharkey, 2001, p. 10). At all times, the researcher remained open to the likelihood that

their own personal belief system would be challenged. Indeed, by engaging with the

teachers, opinions and entrenched philosophies were reviewed and reflected upon as new

experiences were relayed.

A benefit of the researcher also remaining an active teacher whilst undertaking

the research is that the participants felt a connection to another educator, the researcher,

who has taught in a variety of settings. The need to explain fully the daily routines and

challenges presented to teachers was not necessary, and conversation flowed easily

between people whose professional lives intersected. It is the researcher's belief that

greater depth was reached because of this professional kinship. However, a closeness to

the phenomenon also brings with it certain dangers that need to be front of mind. Van

Manen (2016), for example, cautions against researchers leading with their own

preconceptions as they approach their phenomenological study. This includes

assumptions connected to the frameworks employed, dominant theories, and the nature of

the questions posed. Van Manen (2016) also believes the researcher needs to be mindful

of their own subjective or private feelings, and to guard against expectations that may

"seduce or tempt one to come to premature, wishful, or one-sided understandings of an

experience that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomenon as it is lived

through" (p. 176). Given the researcher in the current study has experienced classroom

stress, and that the study is in response to an enduring interest in the area of teacher

wellbeing, it is important to ensure that the data generated is not the result of any steerage

towards a preferred accounts or disclosures. Rather, the insights that were generated as a

result of the study, grow out of the complex dialogical conversations that took place

amongst colleagues and participants over the sustained life-cycle of the research.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned precautions, a remaining implication of

being a researcher with a strong connection to the study, may be the possible inclination

of some of the participants to talk about only what they think the researcher might want

to hear. Discussions, particularly those conducted in groups, may become generally

negative about all aspects of teaching, rather than an attempt to get to the essence of the

phenomenon. Regarding the one-to-one discussions, there is also a chance that

overfamiliarity with the subjects may diminish the quality of the data produced. The skill

lies in the interviewer's ability to listen and respond to the information as it is presented

and in adhering to the methodological principles that shaped this study at the outset.

(iv) Chapter Summary

Studies of a qualitative nature should offer a deep exploration of the topic - a

narrative of the lived experience – that will, in turn, enlighten those engaging with the

work at various levels. All stakeholders in education benefit from deep reflection on past

and current experiences. Like history, research can help us learn about the past,

understand the present, and predict the future. However, researchers (particularly

phenomenologists) need to be conscious of the need to temper their determination to

arrive at definitive findings. As Pring (2004) expounds when discussing how definitive

research can ultimately be, it is much better to treat research as provisional findings

which can be viewed as:

> the most thoroughly corroborated position in the light of
> available evidence, open to yet further correction and
> refinement, a part of the 'conversation' which is essential to
> intelligent policy-making and professional judgement (Pring,
> 2004, p. 147).

New research highlighting the lived experience of teachers under stress should be

greeted with interest in the contemporary educational scene the world over. With mental

health concerns taking prominence in a wide range of workplace settings, any chance to

offer quality research insights in the area of teacher stress needs to be seized upon. The

methods adopted in this research will produce high quality, authentic, and transformative

data to enable an engaging and enlightening narrative to emerge.

Although the research is not without its limitations, close adherence to ethical

considerations will ensure that the participants are treated fairly, and that the importance

of the research justifies the small intrusion into teachers' working lives. These provisions

also help to provide a defensible basis upon which to judge whether a particular piece of

qualitative output is worthy of serious attention (Thorne, 2016). The theoretical

components presented earlier in the chapter include the ontological, as well as the

epistemological, aspects of the study. The phenomenon teacher stress is therefore poured

through these theoretical funnels, the end result being a dependable and transferable

piece of research that will make a significant and original contribution to the field of

study.

Chapter 4

Methods

Introduction

The theory and methodology chapter introduced the reader to the current study's research questions and outlined the relevance of the proposed phenomenological approach as well as the ontological and epistemological positions framing the study. Incorporating and adopting elements of Husserl's descriptive phenomenology (1931), as well as Gadamer's (1931) hermeneutic approach to research, a set of data collection approaches was adopted to gather rich and phenomenologically useful data. The purpose of this methods chapter is to describe how and why the particular data collection methods adopted for this study are aligned to the adopted methodological approach, how the data has thus far been gathered, and how such data is analysed in order to generate the findings of the study. Further links will be made between theory, methodology, the chosen methods, and the ways they have been applied. In doing so, the methods chapter pre-empts the next chapter, the data analysis chapter.

The first section of this chapter gives background to the processes involved in preparing for data collection. It is divided into three parts namely:

(i)   Personal Vignette

(ii)   Participant Recruitment

(iii)   Ethical Considerations

Section two outlines the data collection process and is presented in six parts:

(i)   Data Collection Methods

(ii)   Deeper Exploration of the Lived Experience

(iii)   Working with the Data

(iv)   A Conceptual Model

(v)   Authenticity of study

(vi)   Chapter Summary

The methodological and theoretical frameworks outlined previously flow from the initial development of the research questions, and the fundamental purpose of the research. The generation of the data through the adoption of the methods outlined forthwith will serve to address the three central research questions:

- What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?

- What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?

- What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?

It has been argued in the previous chapter that a qualitative approach is most likely to successfully address the above questions as it typically generates "empirical knowledge about human phenomena for which depth and contextual understanding would be useful, and for which measurement is inappropriate or premature" (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, p. 35). The current research is exploratory in nature, and deals mainly with experienced teachers' reported narratives and reflections drawn from years of professional experiences.

Section One

(i)   Personal Vignette

Social science is influenced in complex ways by the researcher's personal biographical journey (Banks, 1998, p. 5). Acknowledging and outlining the subjective

components of the researcher's story does not mean that we "abandon the quest for objectivity. Making the value premises of research explicit can help social scientists become more objective" (Banks, 1998, p. 6) In order to provide a full picture of my own journey in education, it is important to note that for many years I worked as a student coordinator in a large secondary school. Prior to this, I taught mainly in primary schools in both country and urban locations. Below is a personal vignette outlining how I gained an interest in teacher stress, and how this insider knowledge led to, and influences, the current study.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Education (Secondary) in 1996, my first long-term teaching position was in a primary school. I was keen to pursue a career in education as both my parents were teachers. My father worked in teacher education at the tertiary level, and my mother had returned to the classroom regularly throughout her working life. Both of my parents are of Anglo-Saxon, English-speaking, Christian backgrounds, and they have lived mainly in suburbs and towns populated by people with similar profiles. The teaching profession provided them with a comfortable standard of living, intimate knowledge of the education system (benefitting their children academically), and school holidays to spend with the family. This aspect of the job, as well as working with young people, was particularly attractive to me. I was also a strong believer in the value of education and held teachers in very high esteem. I believed that students, whatever the motivational levels and abilities, should have a positive school experience and every chance to reach their potential academically. I understood that teaching could be stressful, having observed two of my siblings embark on their careers in the classroom only to withdraw from the profession, but I was keen to experience the job myself and held the belief that I would thrive in the right setting.

I found working with younger students highly rewarding and enjoyable. As a young male teacher who was very keen on music, art, and sport, I was in high demand, and often one of only two or three males on staff. Indeed, the scarcity of males in the primary setting ingrained in me a sense of importance and value, quite aside from any ability I had as an educator. Additionally, I was a rare commodity in the primary context given I could teach specialist physical education, drama, and music, as well as deliver the junior literacy and maths programs as a classroom teacher. I should have been set for a long career in primary schools. Instead, I left in my mid-thirties.

After ten years, I was mentally drained and emotionally exhausted. I found the demands placed on primary classroom teachers excessive and counterproductive. During my time at the primary level I was able to observe a tangible increase in the amount of work required to successfully prepare and deliver a classroom work program. The core business of teaching remained, but I found it harder to raise the required energy to successfully deliver classes. The excessive workload, and accompanying stress, drew me away from the joy of teaching young students. First among these stressors was the rigid requirement for teachers to deliver lessons following a particular method. We were instructed by the heads of curriculum to begin each morning's literacy hour by engaging in shared reading with the class. Three literacy foci were to be addressed during this shared reading session, and by 9:15am we were to move onto the first of two reading rotations, each lasting twenty minutes. Four or five reading groups were to be formed containing students of like needs, with five activities set up around the room, each aimed at the level of the students. One group sat on the floor for a teacher-led reading group, the rest were scattered inside or outside the room, led by supervising parents. After twenty minutes the students moved to a new activity. The class came together again at the end of two rotations to discuss what they had learned. This same process was repeated for the

second hour of the day, the writing session, and then again for the maths hour after recess, and following that, inquiry studies after lunch. This rigid system was non-negotiable. A teacher could not, without just cause, deviate from this method of delivery. I found it stifling in the extreme. Adding an extra layer of unnerving stress, the parents of the students were a constant presence in the classroom - something many teachers found highly agitating and pointless. Before school, teachers would be trapped in discussions around student reading group placement, or how the maths program could be more effectively delivered. Teachers were directed to use parent helpers in class every day, and most sessions if possible.

The amount of data teachers must track in the primary system is also burdensome. Notes were taken daily for each reading and writing group. Testing was carried out constantly, and thorough analysis of the data drove the planning. The fluidity of the groups meant changes were often met with a raised eyebrow from parents, and tweaks needed to be justified.

Planning sessions done in teachers' groups were laborious and far from efficient. Endless discussions ate into already sparse student-free time for teachers. Meetings were also in plentiful supply, with principals, vice principals, curriculum leaders, and visiting experts all vying for teachers' time, and their chance to introduce a sparkling new initiative. The end result for me was, after ten years, a move away from primary teaching.

Throughout my career I have been struck by how often the phrase, "It's what's best for the students," is used by management whenever a teacher questions the worth of a particular approach, or school program. At one literacy professional development day, staff were directed to audio record students as they read. They were then told to listen to the recordings at home - perhaps whilst doing the dishes - to become familiar with the nuances of the student's reading style. It was also made clear to us that the creator of a

particular teaching methodology wasn't concerned by teacher complaints about the time it took to implement her approach because she was, 'only interested in the learning of the students.' This comment stayed with me. I was struck by the inherent disregard for the increase in teacher stress that accompany enforced teaching methodologies. I also felt that some principals and curriculum heads view teachers as inexhaustible resources. In my case, within a primary context, I had certainly reached the point of exhaustion. It should be noted that this state was reached without having to work through additional challenges such as moving into Australian schools from as non-English speaking background, or having to teach predominately in lower socio-economic areas. I eventually made the move to the secondary level in the hope that I would find some autonomy, and the freedom to teach in a way that worked best for my students, as well as for me.

Unfortunately, at the secondary level it, I found yet more stressed and disillusioned teachers. Many of the more experienced teachers were able to, for the first part of their professional lives, teach in their own way and modify their practises as they moved from class to class, and subject to subject. The sheer volume of students that secondary teachers work with, routinely over one hundred in a day, has meant that unrealistic expectations were set with regards to catering to the students as individuals. Gradually, the word, 'differentiation' has found its way into the secondary lexicon, whereby work must be prepared for students at all levels in all classes. Multi-levelled exams must also be prepared so that students can experience success. Although parents wandering around secondary grounds remains rare, their omnipotent presence is felt through email. The unacceptable, and unworkable levels of stress that I encountered in primary schools have now seeped into the secondary level. I believe staff and students are much the poorer for this.

The above experiences slowly condensed into an internal longing to explore and

lay bare the reality of teaching in the hope that the essence of the experience may be

captured, and in turn, better understood. Rather than simply complain about

circumstances as they stood, the decision was made to conduct some research, and

hopefully, shed new light on the phenomenon.

(ii)   Participant Recruitment

Purposive selection, or non-random (Padula & Miller, 1999) sampling, was used

to assemble a diverse group of experienced teachers to take part in the study. All are

experienced teachers with at least 10 years classroom practice behind them. Some of the

participants have moved out of a full-time teaching role and into management positions,

or other non-classroom positions within the school. The teachers were chosen due to their

high-level communication skills, the time they have spent in the classroom, the range of

positions they have held, and the variety of settings in which they have taught. Such a

diverse group of experienced teachers brings a richness that is invaluable in this type of

research exploring the full range of perspectives of teachers who have many unique as

well as common experiences to share. These teachers were known to the researcher

personally, although some had not been in close contact with the researcher for years, and

many did not know each other. Among them are three former primary school classroom

teachers (two female, one male), and three secondary teachers, (all male). They have all

taught in at least three different schools, and in a variety of sectors (Catholic, state, and

private). One of the female former primary teachers is now teaching in a secondary

school, and all six of the teachers have been, or are currently in, positions of leadership.

The participants have been employed as full-time classroom teachers for at least ten years, and are therefore highly likely to have experienced, or observed, stress over a substantial period of time.

Phenomenological studies often include a description of the individuals taking part in the study. The intention here was to reconstruct the journey of the participating teachers from the start of their career, and to link to the current circumstances in which they find themselves at the time of the research. A profile of the participants, each with a pseudonym, is listed in the table below.

Table 4.1: Teachers participating in study on teacher stress.

Teacher	*Experience/Justification for inclusion*
Siobhan	20 years' experience in all levels of primary teaching - Leadership role in maths and literacy - Taught in South America - Spent time in Catholic and independent schools in both regional and metropolitan schools - Transitioned successfully to secondary teaching - Currently in full-time, non-classroom role in a secondary school
Ollie	15 years' experience in secondary schools - Taught in Asia - Taught in both regional and metropolitan schools - Spent much of his career in government sector schools before moving to Independent system - Very experienced VCE Humanities teacher - Transitioned to student wellbeing management role

Red	• 15 years' experience in primary schools • Leadership position in literacy • Taught in regional and metropolitan schools • Transitioned to senior leadership role in the independent system • Has taught in independent schools
Richie	• 25 years of teaching experience • Taught in a both small primary and large secondary schools • Moved into middle leadership • Currently holds a principal position
Eli	• Over 20 years of teaching experience • Taught overseas for four years • Held leadership position in large secondary school • Experience in state and private sectors
Tom	• Has taught for over 15 years • Taught all year levels at secondary schools • Involved in starting up a new campus of a secondary school • Moved to a middle leadership science coordinator role • Currently teaching full-load in large secondary school

This cohort was selected with a view to exploring the breadth and depth of experience that each will bring to this study, which also enabled the selected teachers to reflect on the position of classroom teacher with some insight. Of particular interest, however, are the experiences that highlight the essence of the phenomenon and reveal what it is like to live through stress generated within a teaching context. The teachers themselves benefitted from meeting other experienced teachers and sharing stories and insights, thus reflecting on the many positives, as well as the negatives, that come with a

career in teaching. Ultimately, it was possible for the researcher to assist the participants to reflect on experiences in education in ways they may not have done so previously, and in doing so, provide some illumination for them as well. The process becomes a joint exercise. Hermeneutic Phenomenology in particular, unfolds in such a way that it leads all those taking part to reflect on personal experiences and professional obligations in order to arrive at what is fundamentally the essential aspect of this experience (Ayala, 2008). The researcher was confident that the benefits to participants were numerous, not least of which was the chance to lend their voice to a contemporary study that aimed to open up an issue with which they are very familiar, and one that has a direct impact on their professional lives. In doing so, the broader community will also benefit from the sharing of each participant's insight into the phenomenon under study.

When finalising the selection process, the researcher needed to be confident in the participant's ability to communicate clearly in a group discussion, share their views openly in a one-to-one setting, and construct with some support a biographical piece of writing reflecting on their careers. Private locations convenient to the interviewees were utilised for the discussions, and a more central location was used for the focus group, away from public view. Those participating in the research project were invited to write their biographical professional narrative without face-to-face contact from the researcher. An email containing a guiding scaffold for the narrative enabled the participants to understand fully what they are required to do.

Initial Contact with Participants. A formal email was distributed to contact each of the participants. The purpose was to introduce the study and explain why the researcher is keen to have them involved.

The email read:

> "Dear (participant),
>
> As part of my Doctor of Education through Australian Catholic
> University, I am about to conduct a study into teacher stress. I am
> hoping you might consider being a participant in this research. Given
> your years of experience in education, and your communication skills,
> I believe that you would be highly suited to partaking in such a study.
> Please read the Participant Information Letter attached, and feel free
> to email me with any questions. Thank you for your time and
> consideration.
>
> Brendan Reed."

(iii)   Ethical Considerations

When considering the ethical aspects of qualitative research, of paramount concern is the maintenance of participants' confidentiality. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000) note that "on the whole, the more sensitive, intimate, or discrediting the information, the greater is the obligation on the researcher's part to make sure that guarantees of confidentiality are carried out in spirit and letter" (p. 62). They suggest that researchers, from the outset, create a checklist of points that must be clear before seeking consent. Key considerations regarding ethics for this study into teacher stress have included the following:

1. Deciding what is meant by terms such as anonymity and confidentiality.

2. Establishing whether participants will receive a copy of the reports and/or interview transcripts (time implications).

3. Making participants fully aware of what is to be done with the information they provide.

4. Outlining the conditions under which the study will be carried out.

5. Having the purpose of the study clearly stated.

The overriding principle of informed consent derives from a "subject's right to freedom and self-determination" (Cohen et al., 2000, p.51). The subject should be under no illusion as to the true purpose of the study, and their role in it. The researcher conducting the current study considered how the anonymity of the individuals will be protected, how the data will be eventually discarded, and who owns the data once it is analysed.

Regarding the confidentiality of participants, and protection of the material generated, the Australian Catholic University's Data Management plan has been utilised to help keep risks to a minimum. The data has been made non-identifiable after the permanent removal of identifiers, ensuring the confidentiality of participants. This extends to the biographical professional narratives, and any documents or samples discussed in the focus groups.

Ethical Clearance. A requirement of the Doctor of Education course is that students submit an application for ethical approval at least six weeks before data collection commences, and after their research proposal has been peer-reviewed. The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (2007) was closely consulted as part of this application. When considering the values and principles outlined within the document, of particular concern to the researcher was the concept of justice and the fair recruitment of participants.

Ethical clearance for the proposed research was received from Australian Catholic University before participants were approached. After gauging interest initially with an email, an information pack was sent to all participants. This outlined the details of the study, and what participants would be required to do. In keeping with ethical guidelines, of utmost importance was ensuring that participants understood that they could withdraw from the study at any point, that their comments would be de-identified, and that they would have the opportunity see the transcript and data analysis before publication. Consent was gained by way of signing the approved consent form. The interviews took place in rooms that were unlikely to intimidate the interviewee or compromise the integrity of the de-identification process.

The level of risk to those participating in this research was assessed as low, and no conflict of interest was in play. When collecting data, qualitative researchers must be mindful of potential power imbalances. This was not a factor in this research as no participants were working under the coordination of the researcher. The burden of time was also low on those taking part and given the aims of the research and its attempts to address a genuine issue in the educational domain, the potential benefits outweigh the risks. The proposed study saw teachers 'opt in' rather than giving implied consent.

Participants received a formal, written invitation, along with reassurances that they could withdraw at any time. All data gathered as part of the research has been de-identified.

Section Two

(i)   Data Collection Methods

At the heart of the phenomenological approach is the illumination of the specific - identifying phenomena as perceived by the participants (Lester, 1999). Arriving at this point requires the gathering of rich information through inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews, discussions, recounts. The onus is on the researcher to then present the participants' perspectives in an open and clear manner.

For the current study into teacher stress, the preferred methods of data collection were; semi-structured one-to-one conversations, a group dialogical discussion, and written biographical narratives. Each method brings with it particular strengths, and provides the study with different angles of approach from which to dive into the experience of stress for participating teachers, as guided by the research questions. Conducting the semi-structured group and one-on-one conversations in particular, is in keeping with the established phenomenological approach of working with several individuals that have a shared experience in common. Charmaz et al. (2005) believe that interviews and discussions provide a picture taken during a moment in time – much like a snapshot. The technique succeeds in gaining a view of research participants' concerns as they present them, rather than as events unfold. Arksey and Knight (1999) explain that when two or more distinct methods are employed to explore the same phenomenon, the rationale is that cumulatively the weaknesses of one research method is offset by the strength of the others (p. 23). It also is apparent that responding to the specific qualitative

research questions using different methods potentially opens up a range of explanations

and responses, ones that might better capture the complexity of the phenomenon (Arksey

& Knight, 1999). In the case of the current study, some triangulation was achieved

through the adoption of three different methods. Whilst it was not the intention of the

researcher to triangulate, it become clear that triangulation added to the richness of the

data. The one-to-one semi-structured conversations allowed the participants to engage in

fluent discussion with the researcher, sharing stories and thoughts in response to prompts.

The data generated here contrasted somewhat with the data collected in the group

dialogical conversation. As part of a group, participants entered into quickfire exchanges,

and discussed with some passion their positions and professional experiences. The energy

generated within the group, often as a result of finding common ground, is evident in the

participants' statements and stories. The topical discussions in this session were not as

reliant on prompting from the researcher. Responses also tended to be sharper and less

contemplative. The third method employed, the biographical professional narrative,

produced deep reflective recounts and more considered responses, free from the influence

of other participants, or the researcher's probing questions.

The multiple research methods produced three distinct data sets. The first set was

generated through semi-structured conversations with individual teachers.

Semi-structured conversations with teachers

The notable advantages of conducting semi-structured conversations as a means

of collecting data include the method's adaptability to different situations and

respondents, the ability of the researcher to identify non-verbal clues, the fact that the

data can be expressed in the respondent's own words, and that it allows the researcher to

explore different lines of inquiry as they emerge throughout the discussion (Burton &

Bartlett, 2009). This method is therefore likely to yield expansive descriptions of lived experiences, which will enable to researcher to approach the research questions with confidence. One-to-one conversations or interviews are also consistent with the aims and processes involved with phenomenological research in that the aim of such interactions is to obtain from individuals a sense of their own account of their working lives (Elliott, 2005). This is made all the more difficult if researchers follow a rigid structure of questions, or alternatively, simply ask the participant to produce a statement outlining the course of the professional life. A balance needs to be struck between providing some guidance, and restricting participant responses.

The structure of the conversations with the teachers in this study allowed the researcher to be responsive and adaptive. Questions were pre-prepared - there was a uniform and consistent approach to all interviews - but on each occasion the researcher also delved deeper into the subject matter and explored stories or comments further in an attempt to uncover the participants lived experience of the phenomenon of stress. This was done in order to unearth the principles of the essence, thereby exploring the experiential realities of the teachers that can be difficult to communicate, but may be fundamental to understanding the working life of each individual (Fuster-Guillen, 2019).

Once a rapport was established, the researcher encouraged the participants to expand on answers, and ask questions of their own. The interviews began with a re-capping of the purpose of the study, and the presentation of the research questions. A series of introductory questions then followed, designed to locate the participant in their professional career, establish fields of interest, and put the participant at ease. The main questions were asked, along with the accompanying probe questions, which facilitated the flow of spontaneous answers and insights. When discussing the advantages of semi-

structured interviews, Arksey and Knight (1999) advocate being open to taking the

discussion down unpredictable pathways so that the interviewer can be more receptive to

new avenues that may open up in the discussion. This proved to be advantageous, as the

method also allowed the participants to reflect on the very nature of stress, how it might

differ from pressure, and the ways in which individual teachers perceive these

phenomena. The conversation should flow back and forth naturally, with listening and

responding a key to success. Amongst other unplanned revelations, the method allowed

participants to articulate the impact stress has had on the quality of their teaching and

assess the resources available to help them cope and carry-on teaching.

> The prerequisite for a genuine conversation is that the dialogue
> partners surrender to the ebb and flow of the conversation as its
> subject matter unfolds. Individuals allow themselves to be
> conducted by the subject matter of the conversation when they
> really consider the weight of the other's opinion. (Sharkey,
> 2001, p. 23)

The challenge presented to the researcher was to have in mind the clear purpose

of the discussion. Van Manen (2016) sees interview scenarios as serving two very

specific purposes. In the first instance, it is employed to gather experiential material that

may serve as a resource for developing a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under

focus. Secondly, the conversational exchange "may be used as a vehicle to develop a

conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience"

(van Manen, 2016, p. 66). The second point van Manen (2016) makes is especially

pertinent. In order for participants to feel confident sharing their story and insights with

the researcher, a certain amount of rapport needed to be established. A guarded

participant will offer little of value. The researcher should be responsive, and actively

engage in the discussion, not directing proceedings bluntly. Bogdan and Biklen (2007)

addressed this point when they proposed that, in order for transcripts to become filled

with nourishing details and examples, researchers must communicate personal interest

and attention to subjects by "being attentive, nodding their heads, and using appropriate

facial expressions to communicate" (p. 104). In these circumstances a more natural

conversation is likely to emerge. Concerning the questions themselves, Bogdan and

Biklen (2007) assert that the larger goal, that of *understanding*, should steer the

interviewer away from technical devices or gimmicks which are aimed simply at

obtaining information. The key is for the interviewer "to avoid as much as possible

questions that can be answered by 'yes' or 'no.' Particulars and details will come from

probing questions that require an exploration" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 105). The

intention is to gain access to the deeper significance of events, "so much so that it seems

ever more difficult to generalise - to see this or that individual as simply an instance of a

generalisation" (Pring, 2004, p. 39). This is particularly pertinent with regards to the

current phenomenological study, where the goal of generalisation gives way to presenting

clear, thought-provoking accounts of the participants' highly personalised lived

experience.

In phenomenological interviews, researchers should skilfully attempt to seek

elaborations and probe further when necessary, drawing out some specific, deeply

descriptive examples and narratives from the participants. Alsaigh and Coyne (2021)

promote the Gadamerian (1989) approach to developing research questions that aim to

attain a deep understanding of the phenomenon. The research questions driving the study,

if correctly formed, open up the whole research process and influence the development of

the questions used in discussions (Alsaigh and Coyne, 2021). In this study, the following

questions were designed as prompting questions with a view to generating responses that

would be of great value during the analytical process. After following the aforementioned
recommendations, the prompt questions developed for the one-to-one discussions were as
follows:

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Driving Discussion Questions

- What have you experienced as a classroom teacher in terms of stress?

- How did you negotiate this stress?

Open-Ended Questions

- What is the phenomenon of stress for you?

- Can you describe some aspects of the role of full-time classroom or
  subject teacher that you find particularly challenging or stressful?

- What does stress look like in an educational setting?

- In what ways do you think stress differs from pressure?

- How do teachers make sense of pressure?

- What is it about you that makes certain situations stressful as opposed to
  pressured?

- How do you respond to stress?

- Can you give an example, or relay a narrative, exemplifying stress?

- What resources are available to you when faced with a stressful
  situation? Are they adequate?

- In what ways were some of your experiences of professional stress
  unacceptable?

- What impact does teacher stress have on pedagogy? Can you give an
  example?

</div>

All questions were open-ended. Most called for a description in order to explain a particular line of thinking. The questions opened up the possibility of exploring the differences between the concepts of stress and pressure, along with teachers' thoughts on what types of stressors were considered acceptable in the context of a school. The opportunity for teachers to reflect on their learnings, and proffer suggestions for change was also present during interviews. Further probe questions, when necessary, followed each question to draw out information, and a consistent overall approach was maintained during all discussions to keep participants aligned to the subject matter. The one-to-one discussions ran for approximately 45 - 60 minutes for each participant, although time was more of an organisational dimension rather than a component of the research methods.

Group Dialogical Conversation

The group dialogical conversations were run using the same experienced teachers who participated in the interviews. These sessions generated the second data set. As mentioned previously, current teachers with at least ten years' experience were seen as ideal for the focus group. In addition to this, teachers who were willing to reflect on issues and incidents that have touched them over the course of their careers and share their experiences with both the researcher and the other selected teachers were preferred. Typically, focus groups run with smaller numbers generate worthwhile discussions (Bloor et al., 2001). This is especially the case if the topic is complex and multi-layered, as it gives each participant time to express their view. Larger groups can be more difficult to moderate, and participants can be more easily overshadowed and frustrated (Bloor et al, 2001).

After noting the general ability of teachers to engage in conversations and unpack educational issues with one another, the value of holding a focus group discussion became clear to the researcher. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) believe group discussions are particularly useful when the topic is general, and the purpose is to stimulate talk from multiple perspectives so as to enable the researcher to become familiar with a broad sweep of views. They explain that "group participants can stimulate each other to articulate their views, or even to realise what their own views are" (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 109). The purpose of the group dialogue was to provide conversational data around the theme of teacher stress – explorations of discussion points and topics whereby participants bounce off each other and respond immediately and less formally to the comments, narratives, and questions of other teachers. The group dialogue also helps to further diversify the data, and provides group generated insights to the topic. Phenomenologically, the different tone inherent in group conversations, where participants respond to each other's stories and experiences instantaneously, provided an extra layer of fertile dialogical data to work with. Gadamer's (1989) belief that there exists always more than one worldview, and that it is incumbent on researchers to acknowledge and respect this, influenced the decision to adopt the group discussion as a data collection method in the current study.

To facilitate the group sessions, the researcher first analysed the one-to-one discussions, and provided the participants with some thematic talking points in the days leading up to the group discussions. In this way, group members had time to contemplate their answers. Once the session was underway, each participant contributed whatever thoughts they had on an educational theme or topic, before the focus group opened up to

a more interactive discussion among the teachers. The general questions the researcher

raised to prompt the group discussion were:

- How do we manage stress successfully?

- How do we know when the level of stress has become

  unacceptable?

- When, and in what ways, can teaching become frustrating?

- Who do we feel comfortable turning to in times of stress?

- How do stressful times feel? How do we react to them?

- What resources do teachers have available to them when they are

  struggling?

- When is classroom teaching not stressful for experienced teachers?

- How does a successful classroom teacher that you know operate?

- What makes someone an unsuccessful teacher? Have you ever felt

  like one, and if so, how did that feel?

As Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) note, a group dialogical session is "not just a

haphazard discussion among people who happen to be available; it is a well-planned

research endeavour that requires the same care and attention associated with any other

type of scientific research" (p. 51). The researcher was conscious of the need to ensure

that the group discussion operated in such a way that it produced rich and worthwhile

data, that all participants felt their contributions were valued, and that the experience had

a positive, affirming effect on those taking part. Participants were provided with

guidelines on how to interact in a clear manner, without participants talking over each

other. The particulars of the audio recording were also outlined before the session

commenced. The group dialogical conversations ran for approximately 90 minutes.

The researcher's clear intention as he explored teacher stress was for the

discussions to yield reflections and narratives that came directly from the participants

own experiences. The method is highly appropriate in the context of a hermeneutical

phenomenological study in that it is a collaborative activity between the researcher and

participants. The group dialogical discussion also acts as a mediating element,

complimenting the other methods employed by addressing critical events and experiences

that may have otherwise been missed in less varied qualitative studies (Nigar, 2020).

Biographical Professional Narrative

The third data set derives from biographical narratives. These were written by the

participants once the one to one and group discussions were concluded. Elliott (2005)

believed that the increased popularity of written narratives, particularly as part of

qualitative studies, stems from the fact that they allow respondents time to provide

accounts of their lives and experiences without being subject to any of the power

imbalances that can exist in the exercise of many research enterprises. Importantly,

written narratives can also provide strong evidence "about the everyday lives of research

subjects and the meanings they attach to their experiences" (Elliott, 2005, p. 17). As part

of the current study, teachers were given parameters to help them focus on events and

circumstances that are relevant to the study, and to describe them in such a way that the

accounts are phenomenologically fertile.

The biographical narratives form part of a phenomenological approach seeking to

get to the very heart of the lived experience of stressed teachers. Van Manen (2016)

refers to this manner of biographical writing as a "lived experience description" (p. 252)

whereby the researcher gains access to the participant's personal experiences through their writing. In a similar way to the discussions, the written biographical narratives proved to be useful in describing some of the experiences that have stayed with the teachers over the years, and have had an impact on their effectiveness in a pedagogical sense, or possibly made them re-evaluate their place in the profession. However, whilst the conversations gave rise to spontaneous reactions and lively discussion, the construction of a biographical narrative enabled the participants to put forward a more considered and deliberate response to the issues. This ensured that the data was personal and authentic, and enabled deep analysis to take place, revealing another layer of lived experience. Participants were offered a loose guiding structure, or scaffold, to assist them with the writing of the narratives. They introduced themselves as professionals, and provided some background as to why teaching became their career choice, when they started, and why they have persisted. Major incidents, turning points, or key themes in the teachers' professional lives were central to the narratives as planned, along with participants' thoughts on the main issues connected to teacher stress currently in Australian education. Anne Phoenix (2008) states that key themes may, indeed, simply be the stories of events, and that in response to a variety of questions "participants may construct themselves as having particular philosophies and habitual ways of dealing with the world that constitute a projection of identity or that signal their preoccupations" (p. 67). These personal philosophies, approaches, and lived experiences - which may remain hidden during the course of a semi-formal discussion - were able to be calmly revealed in a written reflective piece. In response to this, a narrative picture emerged that is perhaps wider in scope, adding an extra element to the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis.

When reflecting on why researchers *need* to collect the data of other people's experience, van Manen (1990) suggested that we do this because "they allow us to become more experienced ourselves" (p. 62). The biographical professional narratives helped the researcher gain further insight into the lived experience of participating teachers, and formed a valuable part of the generated data. The narratives were designed to be around 500 words in length, however participants were free to contribute as much as they were comfortable with.

Engaging with Participants: Inviting the Stories

In order for the questions in the group sessions to reflect the issues and concerns raised in the one-to-one interviews, the process of analysing and collecting data took place almost simultaneously. The timing surrounding the introduction of the various methods was also important. Leaving the professional narrative until the end of the process, for example, enabled participants to reflect on and identify shared experiences which may have emerged during the group dialogical discussions.

Van Manen (1990) believes it is essential to keep in mind what a lived experience looks like. Only once the researcher has developed an understanding of this experience can they go about "obtaining such descriptions of individuals who have the experiences that we wish to study" (van Manen, 1990, p. 65) He puts forward some suggestions for helping participants in a phenomenological study describe a lived experience. These include:

- Avoiding causal explanations, generalisations, or abstract interpretations

- Describing feelings, moods, emotions, etc.

- Focusing on a particular example of the object the experience – one which stands out for its vividness

- Being attentive to how the body felt, how things smelled, how they sounded, etc.

- Endeavouring to avoid beautifying your account with over flowery terminology (van Manen p. 65)

The intention throughout the data collection process was to make the participants aware of the kinds of observations that are of most benefit in a hermeneutical phenomenological study in order to capture something of the experience of their time in teaching, and for the phenomenon to come alive. At the conclusion of both the individual and group discussions, the researcher ran a short debrief session to ensure that the participants felt comfortable with the tone of the questions, their own answers, and their continued place in the study. As part of the debriefing, the researcher said the following:

Thank you very much for taking part in the session. I greatly value your participation, and I hope the experience has been enlightening and worthwhile for you.

- Do you have any questions concerning what happens to the recordings at this point and the process of de-identification?

- Would you like to reconsider any of your answers?

- Did you feel comfortable and safe delivering your answers?

(ii) ***Deeper Explorations of the Lived Experience.***

The analysis of the data is also a unique and integral part of the qualitative process of research. Lichtman (2013) believes researchers should start analysing data early in the process. "You should not wait until all your data are collected before you begin to think about your analysis. There are various procedures that you can choose to follow; whichever you choose, you need to document how you carried out your analysis" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 262). Gadamer's (1989) hermeneutic approach to phenomenological analysis includes his six strategies to explicate meaning and bring the researcher closer to the essence of the phenomenon. This advice was adopted by the researcher resulting in the data analysis unfolding over a 12-month period. Interruptions to the data collection process due to covid 19, whilst incredibly frustrating, enabled the researcher to analyse the data and make adjustments before continuing with the data collection process when restrictions eased.

Phenomenology's strong connection to philosophy gives the approach an immediate aura of reflection and purposeful dissemination. Phenomenological studies endeavor to understand and describe the fundamental nature of the lived experience that individuals who come in contact with a particular phenomenon have. It was the intention of the researcher to ensure that the data was analysed in an inquisitive and theoretical manner. One researcher's interpretation of a transcript may be quite different from the interpretation made by someone else. In the final analysis, the unique aspect of the qualitative approach is that it gives researchers the chance to "put themselves in another person's shoes and to understand the subjective experiences of the participants". (Sutton

& Austin, 2015, p. 226) Thus, the analysis presented in this study is simply one researcher's perspective on the varied experiences shared by each participant. In this sense, the findings cannot be generalized, but rather they serve to invite more profound contemplations on the phenomenon of stress itself.

Phenomenology attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence, and there are various ways to approach this explication. Van Manen (2016) described the *wholistic reading approach* as one where the researcher asks, "How can the eidetic, phenomenological meaning, or main significance of the text as a whole be captured?" (p. 258). This differs from the *selective reading approach* wherein the researcher explores the text several times looking for statements that reveal something about the phenomenon. These statements are highlighted, and the phenomenological meanings captured in longer thematic descriptive paragraphs. van Manen (2016) also describes the *detailed reading approach* which involves looking at every single sentence with the following question in mind: "What may this sentence or sentence cluster be seen to reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?" (p. 258). When considering how the data generated by the current study was be analysed, the intention was to incorporate elements of van Manen's (2016) *detailed reading* approach. However, regarding the hermeneutic approach to phenomenology, as outlined in the previous chapter, Gadamer's six steps to hermeneutic analysis (1989) will guide the researcher through the interaction with the data.

Transcribing the data. Data transcription is a process that requires attention to detail, and forethought. Matters such as how the transcript is set out can have a direct bearing on the ease of analysis. Each transcript was set up with a 2-inch margin either side of the text to enable the researcher to take notes. Leaving an extra space between

questions and comments is worthwhile for similar reasons, and transcribing long pauses and laughter throughout the interview was also useful (Creswell, 2003). In the case of the current study, implementing this strategy moved the document from reading as quite a formal series of questions and answers to a living exchange wherein the participants pondered questions, struggled, and laughed at stories and recollections. Including pauses and laughter also served to highlight the instances when the participant is talking fluently and engaged with the topic, or sharing a story with great enthusiasm.

The transcript was annotated by way of labels to describe segments of text. The notes recorded in the margins of the printed transcript linked important contextual matters, such as attitudes towards leadership, the perceived difference between pressure and stress, relationships with colleagues, reactions to new curriculum initiatives, or the effectiveness and emotional impact of meetings. These annotated labels were then collapsed into a more manageable collection of phenomenological concepts and sub-concepts. Coding, or frequency counting, as a means of identifying themes was something that van Manen (2016) was wary of. The hermeneutic conviction is one in which coding does not necessarily provide a clear path to understanding. Rather, reflective insights and the powers of observation are more prominent in the hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Sharkey, 2001, p. 22). An analysis of the data from the discussion sessions lead to the development of *Essence Exemplars.* In a similar way, the biographical narratives were analysed with an emphasis on reflective insights and thoughtful attentiveness rather than regimented coding.

(iii)   Working with the data

Phenomenological researchers should prepare themselves for the eventuality of having to work with, and manage, large amounts of data. Thorne (2008) observed that

many newer researchers can easily get bogged down in detail, and be overawed by the meticulous process required to successfully analyse data. It is clear that this approach is not a passive activity, as the researcher is required to actively solicit further examples, variations, and contrasts in order to present a full picture (Thorne, 2016). During this study, the researcher had occasion to recall participants and attempt to gain clarification of particular details, or venture down avenues that were bypassed too hastily in the first instance. These fresh discussions were arranged in response to a close reading of the data, and came as a consequence of the researcher having developed a sensitivity to missed opportunities. Digging down deeper into the lived experience of teachers and uncovering essence exemplars became the clear goal of the researcher.

    The development of essence exemplars. The teachers were invited to converse about their experiences regarding strategies they may or may not have employed over the years in order to stay in the profession for as long as they have. This line of reflection in particular produced responses that drew on the teachers lived experiences in the classroom, and generated vivid descriptions of the act of teaching. These experiences led to enlightening developmental concepts which catalogued, for example, how teachers view other educators in times of crisis, and what they see as effective ways of negotiating stress or fatigue. Relationship tensions within school communities, and how these interconnect leadership structures, also surfaced regularly during discussions. Following Bogdan & Biklen's (2007) suggestions, these exchanges were placed under the heading *Essence exemplars*. Within the context of phenomenological theory and research, an essence exemplar would bring with it universal qualities of the phenomenon under investigation. Vagle (2014) believes that which makes up the essential structure of a phenomenon constitutes an essence. To phenomenologists, these are universal truths, not

generated from specific research questions, but are instead descriptors that rise above and

beyond immediate social context. Below is an example of an *essence exemplar.*

> **TOM:** And so when is it unacceptable, the level of stress? I think that when it starts to really impact your family, then I think, 'well that's really unacceptable.' Your job shouldn't really do that to you. Or if it starts to impact your physical wellbeing, and your mental wellbeing. You can't sleep at night with worry. That to me is really unacceptable. I don't think anyone signed up to have their job impact their family life in a negative way, or impact their physical or mental wellbeing (group discussion, 16/6/22).

Development of key concepts. The teachers' reflections gave the researcher an

understanding of how teachers actually experience educational issues. In turn, these

provided a pointer towards the human reality behind research. As a consequence of

building on the language of description, reflecting on themes becomes part of the process

of analysing qualitative data. Themes are simplifications, and can be understood as

indicators capturing the phenomenon one is trying to understanding, describing perhaps

an aspect of lived experience (van Manen, 1990). In the context of a phenomenological

study, researchers are constantly aware of the inevitable need to determine the themes, or

key concepts, along with the experiential structures that make up an experience. A

narrative cannot be presented as a mere concept, and the examination cannot be satisfied

via a process of simple categorization. What is required, given that the hermeneutic

phenomenological approach has been employed here, is for researcher to be satisfied that

the concepts have phenomenological power, which will in turn allow for

phenomenological descriptions (van Manen, 1990).

Driving this process of phenomenological analysis and thematic development are

the research questions. Rather than allow the quest for key concepts to stealthily carry the

researcher away from the questions driving the study, they should regularly pull back to the core questions which provide focus, and help streamline the process. The researcher was ever-mindful of concepts and essences, as the goal of capturing the participants lived experience is at the forefront of the study. The goal was to unearth the qualities that define the phenomenon – or, put another way, make the phenomenon what it essentially is. Below are examples of key concepts and essence exemplars located in this study.

Table 4.2 Examples of key working concepts and essence exemplars

Key Working Concepts	*Essence exemplars*
Bewilderment	*The things that get in the way of actually teaching.* "And the many interactions you have, not just the educational interactions and conversations with students, it's the, 'okay, has Harry got his lunch, has so and so got her slip to go to sport, did I follow up from that incident on the playground. I need to get my yard duty covered…' All of those things, that got in the way of the actual teaching on some days could make the day very stressful. And sometimes you could have smooth sailing without having any of those elements impact your day" (Siobhan, Interview 1, p. 11).

Misalignment	***Teachers are happy to work hard, but leadership is a deal breaker.*** "A lot of it for me was tied to leadership. And that was the issue at my previous school. People, not feeling valued. No flexibility, no understanding about work/life balance. That was the main issue. Teachers want to work hard, teachers are happy to work hard, but lack of support from leadership is the deal breaker" (Siobhan, Interview 1, p. 5).
Invasion	***Just another thing teachers have to do.*** "Email's just another thing for people to do. I always say, I think teachers are emailed like they're in desk jobs. But they're not in desk jobs. They're actually in the classroom [laughs]" (Ollie, Interview 1, p. 4).
Fractured Teacher Identity	***There was the pressure I put on myself. Nobody knew if I was doing a good job or not.*** "Again, now that I think about it, perhaps the stress was coming from myself. And the demands that I put on that role and what my expectations were. I didn't have to do all that extra work, didn't have to re-write a lesson I wasn't happy with. Nobody really knew if I was doing a great job or not. There was pressure that I would put on myself. Many times I'd think, "I don't have to do this," but I couldn't not do it. Maybe that's a bit of OCD" (Siobhan, Interview 2, p. 8).

Using the Data. The way data is used and presented varies across the research paradigms (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). As mentioned previously, coding data verbatim is one approach used by many qualitative research methods. However, hermeneutic phenomenologists work with data in a variety of ways. The methodology calls for an openness to a myriad of approaches which might reveal "multiple meanings within phenomena and draw the reader/listener into new understandings" (Crowther et al, 2017, p. 828). At the conclusion of this study, the lived experience of the phenomenon of teacher stress is revealed by working with the data in a way that surfaces the meaning behind these shared experiences. Using raw data, with accompanying contextual background, the researcher stayed close to the phenomenon in order to present accounts that call upon the reader to "consider and ponder what the experience of the phenomena 'is'" (Crowther et al., 2017, p. 833).

(iv)   A Conceptual Model

The research was designed to ultimately build a conceptual model from the concepts to identify the essences, as well as relationships amongst the essences. Conceptual models help move the researcher's thinking into alignment with the data and underscore a study's contribution to knowledge (Naeem et al., 2023). The development of a conceptual model during the course of this study, enabled the researcher to think in broader terms, rather than simply working with transcribed accounts and quotes. The model also adds richness to a study, and helps researcher and reader interact with the data in different ways. The conceptual model below demonstrates the adopted approach of this phenomenological study
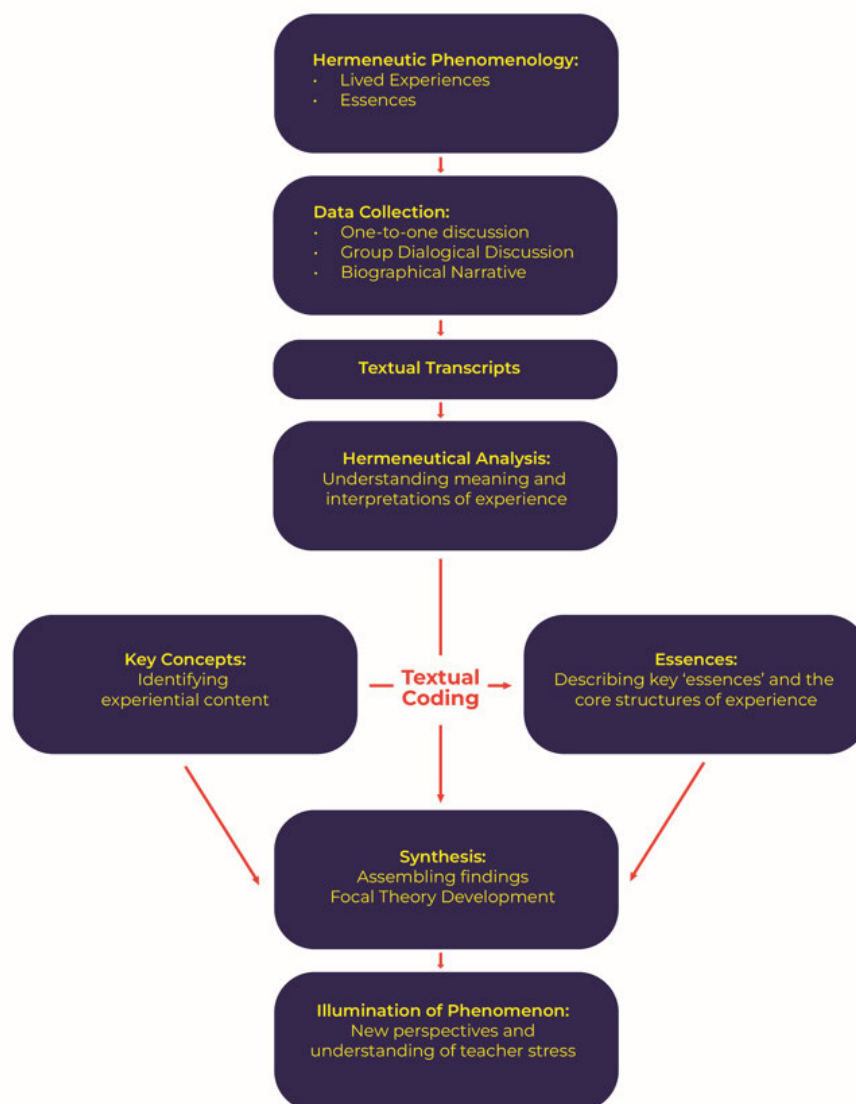
Figure 4.1: Phenomenological Conceptual Model

(v)   **Authenticity of the Study**

Qualitative researchers often focus on areas such as credibility, transferability and dependability when establishing the validity of their studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Credibility indicates the level of confidence the reader should have in the soundness of the data, and the reliability of the interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). The researcher was receptive to the participants' stories and ensured that their perspective was

represented clearly and within the context it was intended. The concept of transferability refers to the likelihood of the findings having a high level of relevance and connectedness to other studies (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). Often this is difficult to achieve in phenomenological studies beyond the essential structures of the phenomenon itself. Transferability was addressed in this study through the dialogical group discussion, in which participants were able to consider and reflect on shared lived experiences, creating a through-line between the two methods. Participants were able to recognise their own experience immediately in others, and build on the shared narrative.

Dependability is an indication of the stability of the findings at the time, and across varying conditions. Whilst this is a desirable quality in connection to many methodologies, it is a difficult one to assign to a study that is underpinned by Gadamer's philosophy as he believes the "researcher's horizon and those of the participants will change; therefore, a final interpretation will not be achievable, and interpretation of data will change over time" (Alsigh and Coyne, 2021).

For the qualitative researcher, unlike those adopting the quantitative approach, there is not the option of controlling variables, and often the research is carried out in natural settings, involving complex phenomenon (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Discerning readers should attempt to arm themselves with an adequate understanding of the research so as to arrive at a judgement about the chances of the study being replicated within its natural context (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). As discussed later in the thesis, reliability and generalizability in qualitative studies play a negligible role in terms of findings. Wiersma and Jurs (2009) note that the qualitative researcher "is not concerned with broad generalization of results. Rather, external validity is more concerned with the comparability of and the translatability of the research" (p. 215). The emphasis is on

comparability, or the "extent to which adequate theoretical constructs and research procedures are used so that other researchers can understand the results" (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009, p. 216). It was crucial during this research into teacher stress to draw from the participants vivid and genuine experiences of the phenomenon, and to ensure that the narratives were insightful and firmly in the realm of the phenomenon.

Limitations: Data Interpretation. The task of identifying the most significant and arresting sections of data becomes critical as the researcher approaches the task of working with the participants' words (Thorne, 2016). Whilst there is a strong subjective component, interpreting the stories and reflections of teachers involves more than simply locating passages in the data that the researcher feels most closely aligns with their own thoughts on the issue (Thorne, 2016). When working with stories concerning teacher stress, especially given the researcher's own connection to the issue, it became important to be wary of self-indulgency - highlighting only phrases that re-enforce long held personal views and opinions. Another kind of interpretive error is "the assumption that, if things occur frequently within a data set, they are necessarily more relevant or important" (Thorne, 2016, p. 156). The discussions in the current study produced a range of re-occurring phrases such as 'the demands of the job' which was used regularly to explain why teachers become stressed. These verbal crutches failed to help paint an interesting phenomenological picture, however, and most were set aside during analysis. The frequency of their appearance had no impact on how these phrases were managed.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) believe that researchers might also benefit from strategies such as the *analysis-in-the-field* mode. Here, the more formal interpretation of the data is left until most of the raw data are in. For the current phenomenological study, the data was analysed as it came in as a means of ensuring that the interview questions,

the pacing of the discussions, and those moments of deeper reflection were more or less

in alignment, which helped the analytical process to move forward.

Remaining open to a range of viewpoints, and avoiding the belief that one

participant's narrative encapsulates everything about a phenomenon, helped the

researcher to develop a balanced appraisal of the data. Freebody (2003) builds on this

view by adding that what is relayed about a phenomenon during research should not be

taken as undeniable reality. He warns against this not because interviewers are

consistently misled, but rather because "phenomena and events do not relate directly,

finally and comprehensively to one fixed account" (Freebody, 2003, p. 167). There

remains a necessity on behalf of both the interviewer and interviewee to discover

common ground, and to coordinate the moral rights and responsibilities of each party to

the process (Freebody, 2003). While exploring issues connected to teacher stress, the

researcher maintained confidence in the interviewees, and was therefore able to work

with a data set that was gathered in good faith.

Managing Participant Distress. Researchers should never become complacent

about the mechanics of their research, and the possible impact such undertakings can

have on those involved. Teachers may be left demoralised, or a school's reputation

tarnished as a consequence of a poorly conducted dissemination (Pring, 2004). There are

"duties of respect to those who are being researched, often people in positions of

vulnerability" (Pring, 2004, p. 146).

Arksey and Knight (1999) list undue intrusion into personal spheres,

embarrassment, distress, nervous strain, a sense of failure or coercion as possible harms

that people might incur during interviews or group discourse. Often it will not be clear

that the participant has had a negative experience. In order to raise the issue, and make it

clear to participants that the researcher was continuously mindful of dangers, however slight, the following was said at the close of each session.

> Please do not hesitate to contact your G.P. if you feel, upon further reflection, uncomfortable about what was shared, or if you feel your mental health might be impacted. Access Psychologists (0420 553009) or Headspace Psychologists (03 5222 6690). Headspace is free. Participants can access eheadspace also at 1800 650 890.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that "ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry. They are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process" (p. 170). Armed with a thorough preparation, and faith in the process and guiding philosophies connected to qualitative research, the researcher has been able to manage these issues effectively.

Upon completion of the collection of data, transcripts were shared in order to ensure that all participants were comfortable with the manner in which their words and thoughts appear. Pring (2004) believes there exists "a constant need to reflect on the values which inform the research and the ways in which those values might be made concrete in the research activity itself" (p. 140). Given the necessity to analyse large amounts of dialogue, ethical principles of engagement have been closely followed. In light of the above considerations, the researcher is confident that the safeguards and procedures put in place have ensured that the data generated is protected, and that the participants continue to enjoy the rights they are afforded.

Maintaining the Data – Storage. Data recording storage is an integral part of any research project. This is particularly the case with phenomenological research such as the current study, where data often came in the form of large electronic files. These held the biographical professional narratives, and audio files from the one-to-one discussions, and the focus group, as was the case with this research. The ongoing adoption of The Australian Catholic University's data management plan ensured that risks were kept to a minimum. The data was stored at sites which include the Australian Catholic University Research bank, and Cloudstor. Cloudsor's storage is located in Australia and is directly connected to the AARNet backbone. It is replicated at a minimum of two geographically distributed storage nodes for high reliability and availability. The ACU Research Bank will continue to be used to store data following the completion of the study. It is a secure and regularly backed up platform.

The researcher has also controlled access to data through digital means, ensuring data is not stored on identifiable and unencrypted formats, or on easily lost items such as USB keys, laptops, or external hard drives. De-identification was an early as part of the data management plan, as was the creation of a de-identification log of all replacements or deletions made. A strong focus on effective data storage and management ensures not only that the research project in question has a high level of integrity attached to it, but also gives peace of mind to participants. This was also an integral component of the ethics clearance process that cleared a path for the research to take place.

(vi)   Chapter Summary

Phenomenologists have at the heart of their studies an interest in working through the filter of conscious human thinking to uncover the essence of life, and what it means to be human (Thorne, 2016). A strong theoretical basis, and flexible methods, will ensure

that researchers can confidently follow the phenomenological approach and develop fresh insights into the object of their studies – in this case, teacher stress. The eventual findings will then be related to the literature, and links made to broader professional concerns and concepts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After being immersed in the lived experiences and reflective descriptions of the participants, the researcher has been able to work successfully with the unearthed stories laid bare before him.

Phenomenological research should be a voyage of discovery for the researcher - an illuminating journey whereby the study is kept afloat through buoyant narratives and evocative recollections. Exploring the lived experience of teachers is an exercise that calls upon the researcher to place faith in the methods selected – in this case one-to-one discussions, group dialogical discussions, and written biographical narratives. From the outset, researchers are exposed to information about phenomena which will require them to forge their own path ahead, and engage in activities that lead them to query, explore, and interpret - stirring in the mind a sense of wonder (Thorne, 2016). This phenomenological study into teacher stress swept the researcher into a world of evocatively described lived experiences, helping to reveal the essence of the phenomenon of teacher stress. An analysis of the teachers' stories and experiences will follow in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Encountering the Stories

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the data collection methods adopted for this study, how the data has been gathered, and the way in which the data will be analysed in order to generate the findings. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the participants in the study and their stories. In doing so, this chapter pre-empts the next chapter – data analysis. The first section gives an overview of the context of the research, and is in three parts:

Section One:

(i)   Data Analysis in Phenomenology

(ii)   Context

(iii)   Review of Methods

Section Two focuses on the narratives of the participants and consists of two parts:

(i)   Definition of Stress

(ii)   Presentation of Teachers' Lived Experiences

(iii)   Chapter Summary

Section One

(i)   Review of Data Analysis in Phenomenology

As emphasised in the literature review chapter, the importance of placing great store in the wellbeing of teachers cannot be over-stated. Vesely, et al. (2013) in particular, highlight the continued importance of the teaching profession, and how teachers remain the key ingredient to student success. Accordingly, this high level of importance should be reflected, as Van Maele (2015) states, in the way decision-makers in various capacities respond to reports of teacher stress and attrition. As researchers listen to, and reflect on, the stories and lived experiences of teachers deep and useful insights can be generated. This phenomenological study aims to encounter the lived experience of stress from the perspective of a small group of teachers, and will focus on seeking enlightening narratives from those who have spent years dealing with the pressures of teaching.

A qualitative approach typically generates empirical knowledge about human phenomena, and is particularly useful when depth and contextual understanding is paramount to the study (Eisner & Peshkin, 1990, p. 35). The current research is exploratory in nature, and deals with experienced teachers' narratives and professional reflections. The narratives that are generated through this study not only authenticate earlier themes and concepts that have become evident throughout the interviews and focus groups, but also offer new insights as the teachers share their narratives and reflect on their past and present experiences of stress.

Effective analysis of data is driven by efficient and accurate collection of data – which in turn flows from a solid methodology and theoretical underpinning (Burton and

Bartlett, 2009). Burton and Bartlett (2009) suggest that "the ease with which the data can be analysed is very much dependent upon how effectively it has been recorded" (p. 93). A running review of the data took place as the discussions were transcribed. The researcher was determined, as this inquiry progressed, to ensure that the data generated by the discussion sessions, as well as the biographical narratives, was analysed in a theoretical and probing manner. As mentioned earlier, it was necessary to return to certain participants in order clarify comments and anecdotes, and to explore topics and themes that were not pursued in the course of the original discussions due to time pressure, or a fixation on a different line of investigation.

Crafting the stories. Hermeneutic phenomenology uses data to "draw attention to the multiple meanings within phenomena and draw the reader/listener into new understandings" (Crowther et al., 2017, p.828). Hermeneutic analysis requires the researcher to sit within the data, and seek out glimpses of the phenomenon. These glimpses can then be presented in the form of stories that, if effectively communicated, share how humans make sense of events and relationships. The hermeneutic phenomenological story can thus become a powerful means of presenting shared pathic responses (van Manen, 2016). Gadamer (1976) believed that researchers are, at the same time, interpreting and taking on the stories as their own. The researcher becomes aware that through the act of analysis, certain aspects of their own story are revealed. In the context of the current study, the researcher was aware of his own experiences of stress, as outlined in the 'Personal Vignette' in the methods chapter, and approached the task of working with the stories through this filter. Gadamer (1975) believed that individual researcher's pre-understanding should be transparent as their backgrounds always

accompany them into inquiries. Indeed, these personal understandings and experiences act as the catalyst to send researchers on the path to their inquiries.

For the current study, useful and revealing stories were identified following the process outlined by Cowther et al. (2017). In keeping with that process, extraneous comments and details that did not give further insight into teacher stress – such as remarks about the weather and parking – were not used. There was a concerted attempt to focus on the data which drove 'story', and which spoke to the experience of what actually happened. Grammar has been polished, and some stories were placed in full context through the use of a brief commentary before the direct quote.

It is worth noting that, although working with data in hermeneutic phenomenology encourages the removal of words that are repeated or over-used, often in these extracts repeated words have been left in the quote used. This has been done deliberately in order to show the participant pondering the question, or straining for the right phrase. Grammar has also been left uncorrected in some places in order to maintain the natural delivery of the narratives. Working with stories in this way aligns with the philosophy underpinning hermeneutic phenomenology. The technique highlights the researcher's points of interest as they interpret and prioritise the data, and attempt to illuminate the phenomenon (Crowther et al, 2017). The stories in this chapter reveal each individual's lived experiences in education in a way that brings forward new understandings of the phenomenon of teacher stress.

(ii)   Context

Participants. With at least 10 years classroom practice behind them, the selected participants were ideally placed to offer thought-provoking professional narratives highlighting their lived experiences. As outlined previously, I worked with three former

primary school classroom teachers and three secondary teachers. They have all taught in at least three different schools, and in a variety of sectors. Although most participants had moved out of full-time teaching roles and into management positions, or other positions within the school, they each retained vivid memories of their full-time classroom experiences. Indeed, some participants were still in the position of having to work a heavy, stress-filled teaching load whilst juggling extra leadership responsibilities.

The sample size of teachers used in this research is consistent with an increasing number of interpretive phenomenological studies (Smith et al., 2009). Between three and six participants is ideal for studies of this kind, given this should "provide sufficient cases for the development of meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants, but not so many that one is in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data generated" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21).

Setting. The one-to-one discussions were held in private meeting rooms in libraries convenient to the participants. The non-threatening and private nature of the surroundings, along with the semi-structured format of the interviews, helped to facilitate the flow of natural conversation. The researcher was satisfied that the participants felt at ease during the discussions, and had spoken freely, honestly, and with a determination to make a valuable contribution to the study. On occasions during the one-to-one discussions, when the recording needed to be paused, it was noted by both the participant and the researcher, that the ensuing casual conversation was of high interest and worth committing to the record. When this occurred, the researcher and participant simply re-traced their steps, started the recording, and followed the conversation through to its conclusion.

During the selection process the researcher was conscious of the fact that the success of the group dialogical discussion would be very much dependent on bringing together the right mix of teachers. As well as fine communicators and story-tellers, it was felt that prospective participants needed to be adept listeners, and receptive to alternative points of view to ensure the success of the group session. Additionally, the researcher had to be certain that the teachers were all in a receptive frame of mind going into the discussion, and that they could cope with being part of a robust conversation, and possibly having their views challenged. Pleasingly, the group discussion was lively, good natured, and open - with a high level of respect and patience on display. All participants reported positively on the experience.

In keeping with the ethical clearance gained for the research, participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any point, that their comments would be de-identified, and that they would have the opportunity see the transcripts before publication. Consent was gained by way of signing the approved consent form.

(iii)   Review of Methods

All six teachers involved in the research took part in a one-to-one discussion with the researcher. The audio recording of each session was then transcribed by the researcher and later presented to the participant. They were reminded that they could remove comments or sections that they were no longer comfortable with. The researcher also worked with the participants to de-identify the transcript. Two of the participants agreed to a return discussion to expand upon some points of interest that were raised during the initial meeting, but not explored sufficiently.

The participants then took part in the group dialogical discussions, which were challenging to organise given the logistics involved in assembling them at a convenient time. All participants were given gift packs, and they grazed on the light refreshments on offer as they talked. The session was audio recorded using a 360-degree microphone, and then transcribed. Each participant was given a copy of the full transcript of the session, and invited to make any changes or deletions. The de-identification process from the one-to-one discussion was then applied to the group dialogical discussion.

The final part of the data collection process required the participants to write a 400–500 word professional biographical account of their time in teaching. Each person was sent an email with a structure to follow in order to assist them with the task. It was anticipated that the two discussion sessions would allow the teachers to crystallize their thoughts on issues surrounding teacher stress, and provide them with a springboard to present a measured summary of their journey through the profession.

Throughout the analysis process, the researcher immersed himself in the data, drawing out the lived experiences of the participants and looking for the stories that touch on the essence of the phenomenon of teacher stress. The research questions acted as a guiding beacon, and the experiences of the participants were received in light of the researcher's own teaching experiences.

Defining stress with the participants. At the start of each discussion session, the participants were presented with Kyriacou's (2011) working definition of 'teacher stress' to ascertain if they felt it was, for them, an accurate summation of what they experience in times of stress. As stated at the start of the literature review, Kyriacou (2011) believed stress is present in teachers' working lives when they experience "unpleasant negative emotions resulting from aspects of their work as teachers, triggered by a perception of

threat in dealing with the demands made upon them" (p. 161). Additionally, Kyriacou (2011) proposed that teacher stress can be triggered by threatening situations that leave them fearing they may not be able to deal with job demands, and that this reality may bring negative consequences upon them. All teachers were comfortable with Kyriacou's words, and understood what was meant by the term 'stress' as it would be used in the discussions.

Part Two

(i)   Presentation of the Participants Lived Experiences

The chapter contains six participant narratives. Outlined are reflections from the teachers on why they entered the profession, why they have persevered with it, and how they have experienced and managed stress. Pseudonyms have been used for the participants and other family member names, and schools and specific locations within Australia have been de-identified. The narratives in this chapter address the study's first two research questions:

1. *What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?*
2. *What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?*

Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, not all questions followed the same order from session to session, and some questions where not asked at all if the interviewer was satisfied that the issue had been covered in previous answers. The interviews collectively covered a wide range of topics and foci, the contents of which differed from session to session. For the purposes of this chapter which introduces the participants and their 'lived experiences', the following broad sub-headings have been

used to organise the accounts: *Why Teaching?, Experiencing Stress,* and *Time to move on?* Each story is presented below, beginning with that of Siobhan.

Story 1: Siobhan's Lived Experiences

I met with Siobhan in the private room of a local library. She had heard about my proposed study some time earlier and showed enthusiasm towards taking part. I was keen to have a discussion with her given the breadth of her educational experiences and because I knew her to be a skilled storyteller, as well as a highly amusing and engaging person. Siobhan also proved to be a stimulating presence in the group dialogical discussion and wrote an honest and highly descriptive biographical account of her teaching journey. She is a respected and charismatic teacher and community member around the regional city where she resides and has a passion for education. Siobhan demands a lot of herself and others in the job, having been in leadership roles for the last few years in both secondary and primary settings. However, she has also had periods of doubt about the profession she loves.

Why teaching? In keeping with all the interviews, I began by asking Siobhan for some background information regarding her decision to become a teacher. Her love of children had initially spawned an interest in becoming a childcare worker. However, an influential friend's ambition to become a primary teacher saw Siobhan follow the same path (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). 25 years later, she is still teaching, having experienced full-time and part-time classroom teaching loads in private, Catholic, and state schools. Siobhan currently finds herself in a large secondary school as the head of information systems.

An element of formality was present in the discussion early, however we were able to relax into a casual exchange as more reflective topics were raised. I asked Siobhan at what stage in her career she was at her peak as a teacher, and if she is still in that zone.

> **SIOBHAN:** I was at my peak definitely when I was teaching prep and grade 1. Teaching those students how to read, I just felt like it wasn't an effort. I really knew what I was doing. I didn't have to consult anyone. I knew what was best for those students. I knew what they needed. I knew where to go. That was glorious, and the data, or the results, showed [it]. That was at the start of my teaching career. I had some really great mentors. …At times I haven't felt it when I've been teaching mathematics. Probably more so when I've been teaching literacy. When I've been working with students and teachers and talking about literacy, and the pedagogy of literacy, that is definitely when I've had it in my pocket (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Experiencing stress. The conversation moved onto the differences between having a full-time classroom role, and working in middle leadership. Siobhan noted that the demands on classroom teachers are different, more intense, and more likely to cause stress (Siobhan, discussion, 22/12/20). I asked Siobhan about her experiences of stress and how she responds to it. It occurred to her that she is not always comfortable with the way she reacts to stressful periods - that she doesn't like the version of herself that surfaces when she is overwhelmed by her workload:

> **SIOBHAN:** I don't respond very well. I get angry. I do a bit of swearing. Private swearing. I behave in a manner that I'm definitely not proud of. And probably all my movements, if you're talking literally, are a lot more physical. I guess I behave in a more fastidious kind of way (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Siobhan spoke of the times when the intensity of class preparation clearly took precedence at home, preventing her from successfully detaching from work. Much of this was pressure she placed on herself, but it also was a product of the environment she was in. Siobhan described how she had moved herself into an over-worked state, and while she enjoyed the sense of satisfaction that a thorough preparation brought with it, she knew she could not function at that elevated level long-term.

> **SIOBHAN:** …from the minute I woke up in the morning I was on my laptop, before I was even at school, and crazy all day at school, and then I'd come home and do the wife/mother thing. Couldn't wait to finish that because then I'd keep working, and I'd keep working maybe three or four times a week up until 10, 11 o'clock. And I actually loved it in terms of my career. I was really getting a lot of success there, but the fall-out was my family. My relationship with my family was suffering and I wasn't happy in that sense. So, I knew something had to give (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Siobhan explained that she really liked to bring work home with her at that point. She doesn't have many other hobbies, so teaching became her life in a sense. Siobhan believed at the time that she could control the stress at home if she wanted to, and she acknowledged that at every school she has worked at there has been a rule stating that you don't have to answer emails after 3:30pm, which she always found reassuring (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). But through it all, she was struggling to cope as she moved into the middle part of her career. Her personal compulsion to over-prepare, along with the demands of classroom teaching, produced an unhealthy work/life balance.

> **SIOBHAN:** If it was colouring-in something, or cutting out ten thousand things, I just always wanted to improve a lesson. But it did get to a point where my work/life balance was out. I just needed a break. And I had a daughter going into Year 12, and I just thought, 'there's no way known I can still be a decent parent, wife, mother - that I'm comfortable with' It just wasn't happening. We had a pretty grim leadership team too (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Time to move on? Of particular interest was the disclosure from Siobhan that she

met with some colleagues outside of school on a regular basis to discuss ways they could

break away from the teaching profession. Although they were at the height of their

teaching powers, she recalled that the four of them would regularly catch up for a coffee,

and that the conversation would inevitably turn to doing something other than teaching.

> **SIOBHAN:** [We were] all very experienced, hard-working
> teachers. Teachers with families… And having morning
> meetings at school, and lunchtime meetings, and afternoon
> meetings - there was no reprieve there. (discussion 1, 22/12/20)

She went on to explain how her colleagues often made it clear that they wanted

out of the profession:

> **SIOBHAN:** We would always [say]… 'You know, we are four
> incredibly hard-working women, and we still love our work,
> we're intelligent women, we all get along well. Surely, we can
> apply this somewhere else in the outside world. Have more
> success, possibly make more money. Have a… not so much a
> better lifestyle, but a better work/life balance' (discussion 2,
> 19/1/21).

I enquired as to whether she could remember exactly what it was that drove this

disenchantment, and whether the four of them shared their feelings openly. Siobhan was

most reflective at this point, and spoke generally about the stresses in her colleagues

working lives.

> **SIOBHAN:** We wanted to get out of the teaching game because
> it's so stressful. I think it comes down to the constant demands
> on your time, and the many hats you have to wear, which
> creates a lot of pressure. They were the conversations we were
> always having, how you can maintain the energy to keep going
> and that you are perhaps under-valued (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Siobhan observed that many of the stressors inherent in her working life within

the primary setting disappeared when she started work at a much larger secondary school.

She left her primary school after she decided she could no longer work under the

principal (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). Immediately, she noticed differences

working in a bigger school environment.

> **SIOBHAN:** I didn't have to deal with first aid, I didn't have to deal with permission slips, I didn't have to deal with all of that administrative stuff, so that really made a big difference to my teaching, and the way I was able to just focus on my teaching (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Siobhan was able to re-invent herself as head of information systems in a large

secondary school. She teaches individual classes here and there, but she no longer

struggles with the demands of a full-time role in the classroom (Siobhan, discussion 1,

22/12/20). Relationships with students are at the centre of all Siobhan does, and she has

never had any real concerns with student management or behaviour throughout her

career.

> **SIOBHAN:** You know when you're a bit older and you've got a bit more knowledge and experience behind you. I'm not afraid to go to leadership. I'm not afraid to challenge, and to get some perspective. Transparency's a big thing for me. But I guess when it really blows out of the water, then I'll go too… because I don't really like to people to know that I'm stressed. I like them to know that 'I've got this.' But really, I'm just a hot mess (group discussion, 16/6/22).

Siobhan loves her job, but she feels working as a teacher can be heartbreaking,

and a source of tremendous frustration - even anger (Siobhan, group discussion, 16/6/22).

She reflected succinctly on her career, and her place in it, towards the end of the

discussions:

SIOBHAN: We all love teaching, and we've said this before – 'Man, if you could just let us teach. Like, just let us teach.' Imagine (group discussion, 16/6/22).

Story 2: Richie's Lived Experiences

Why Teaching?

RICHIE: Well, the desire to be a teacher has always been there. I was inspired by *my* teachers, both primary teachers and secondary teachers. I sort of made that decision when I was about 16 or 17 that I wanted to make teaching my career, for a long time. And so far I've been in education for 27 years now. It's been one hell of a journey. Very rewarding, demanding, challenging, but joyful (discussion, 12/1/22).

So began my conversation with Richie – a confident, proud educator with more than 25 years of teaching and school leadership behind him. We met in a private room in an education facility, and discussed his journey from classroom teaching through to senior management. Richie's professional mindset is not one where he is comfortable letting pertinent educational issues rest. He endeavours to find solutions, and has worked through many of the stressors mentioned by other participants in a positive and determined manner over the course of his career. He has also, however, felt the sting of a stress-filled workplace on occasions, and considered looking for other opportunities beyond teaching. He was at pains to point out that the experience of working in many different educational settings has helped him immeasurably (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22). In particular, a regional placement early in his career helped him develop a calm and positive approach, which he feels he has carried with him over the years.

RICHIE: I've taken that approach my whole career, and into the space of leadership, which I'm in now. ...You become the model, whether you're the teacher or the leader, and the parents see that. So, if that calm approach is there, then that [builds] an

element of trust. And trust builds trust. Whether that's with colleagues, whether that's with parents, or whether that's with students as well. So, I'm a firm believer in modelling a calm, well-measured approach (discussion, 12/1/22).

Richie believes that teachers hit the 'sweet spot', about 8 or 9 years into their careers and begin to perform at the peak of their powers - with the right blend of youthful enthusiasm and experience (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22). During his time as a classroom teacher Richie predominantly taught in the senior end of primary schools and found his niche there. In his leadership role today, he tries to assist young teachers who are transitioning in that space. He recalled with some pride the feeling of confidence he had as a young teacher during this period.

> **RICHIE**: I was comfortable. I knew the content. I was confident in working with the children, and with the team I was working alongside, to move the children on and make the impact that was needed. And I felt confident in my delivery space, and how I brought elements of humour into the delivery of teaching (discussion, 12/1/22).

Time to move on? I asked Richie if he can recall the period when he started to move away from this feeling of being in control and on top of his game. He said this happened when he took a job in a much larger secondary college, that also had upper primary year levels.

> **RICHIE:** I had two years where very difficult curriculum needed to be covered. It wasn't difficult curriculum, but it was in a different context, being both a primary and secondary school setting. That was an interesting space. …And it was a large class. And whenever you've got a large group, 30 students every day, when you're teaching them every subject, that is a real drain and strain on all aspects of your job (discussion, 12/1/22).

Knowing that Richie started teaching in the days before email became prevalent, I asked him if he found the introduction of technology into the classroom helpful, or more of a burden.

> **RICHIE:** …the amount of email that teachers get, as well as leaders, is just mind-blowing. It takes your mind away from your core job, and that's not fair. And I don't know what the answer is to that. There's no answer. You've just got to manage it and deal with it (discussion, 12/1/22).

In his current role, Richie experiences stress in a variety of ways. He believes he can now usually chart a course through stressful periods, however he can still feel overwhelmed by the expectations and demands connected to the profession. He is conscious of his current role as school leader, and helping other teachers to cope with their stress levels is important to him (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22). Working with families is an area that he believes is becoming increasingly difficult to manage in a way that maintains positive relationships.

> **RICHIE:** In my current workplace, there is a lot of entitlement. Parent expectations. Entitlement – what they believe their child deserves. And every child does have that learning entitlement, but there are some issues with parents where they just think that they deserve more, and that can often cause a lot of stress and anxiety for teachers (discussion, 12/1/22).

Experiencing stress. I asked Richie how he experiences stress – how would other people perceive him in those moments when he was endeavouring to work through some of the issues that he had mentioned. This caused a moment of introspection. It was perhaps even uncomfortable to admit that it does show at times.

> **RICHIE:** Yeah, I get a bit short with my answers. I know when I do that. And I don't like that. It's not me. I snack when I shouldn't. And I've tried very hard not to do that of late. I've been told I look more tired, which means I'm not sleeping

properly. That can be a huge burden on teachers and school leaders because you need to be alert. You need to be present every single day and if you haven't had that sleep that's required it's really challenging at times. But managing stress is a partnership too with your family (discussion, 12/1/22).

As with the other participants, I asked Richie to describe what he observes and experiences when he is around a stressed staff. Given that Richie is now in a position to influence the levels of stress in his school, I wondered whether he is more attuned to stress indicators.

> **RICHIE**: [I see] fast moving people. Sometimes you don't see a lot of eye-contact. I'm about to move into a new role, and I want to be very careful and make sure that when I see people multiple times during the day that there is plenty of eye contact given. So that we know that there's an element of, 'Okay, let's do this together.' I get really frustrated when I see people moving around quickly, because kids see that… It's in the way that people speak as well. People tend to talk quickly when they're stressed. And not calmly. And don't always get their full ideas, or the way they're feeling across to people. Whether that's the school leaders, or to their teaching colleagues, or other members of staff. That can create stress easily (discussion, 12/1/22).

In Richie's time in education he has seen staff workloads increase, and expectations rise, which he believes makes the likelihood of teachers experiencing sustained success in the job an unlikely eventuality (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22). Richie believes the entire job description for teachers needs to be made more manageable.

> **RICHIE:** …from a classroom teachers' point of view, there are specifics that are required, and unfortunately some of those get in the way of other aspects of the job. …A lot of pressure has been placed on teachers in recent years with what's required for NCCD (Nationally Consistent Collection of Data) responsibilities. Children that require that extra support with their certain circumstances. That's been a real learning curve for leaders and for teachers alike. Because of the sheer volume of

what's required with, you know, personal learning plans for
instance, and how much effort and time needs to go towards
those. And if classroom teachers have 3 or 4 to deal with, or
one, or 7 or 8. It's really time consuming, and requires really
concerted management (discussion, 12/1/22).

Through all the challenges, Richie has managed to carve out a successful and

satisfying career, but he is aware that other good teachers have not been able to sustain

the intensity required to stay in the profession long term (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22). He

is optimistic about the future, and getting the balance right in favour of making teaching a

desirable profession. Being conscious of the manifestations of stress in his new role of

leader is something that he takes very seriously.

> **RICHIE:** Teaching's a tough gig. It always will be a tough gig,
> and it's completely under-rated by the general population. I've
> been in the game for a while. I've learnt not to let things worry
> me too much. Having said that, you always have things occur
> that give you time to think about things (discussion, 12/1/22).

Story 3: Ollie's Lived Experiences

Ollie was keen to take part in the research project after hearing about it through

connections at his school. He informed me that he reflects deeply on issues surrounding

teacher stress in his role as year house leader in a large secondary school and has

manoeuvred his way through many difficult times in the classroom over the course of his

career. He works closely with his colleagues and is routinely called upon to share coping

strategies and advice to calm heightened teachers. Ollie well remembers the 10 years he

spent full-time in the classroom, working mainly as a senior history teacher in the state

and private sectors, as well as internationally. We met in a private conference room in the

city he works, and spoke for well over an hour. Ollie is skilled at telling a story, speaks

easily and fluently, and has a highly attuned sense of humour and irony.

Why teaching? A prospective teacher's urge to move into education can be

driven be a number of factors. Commonly, a thirst to help others was a prominent reason,

along with childhood memories of inspirational educators, and the family-friendly nature

of the profession. Contrastingly, Ollie's interest in becoming a teacher was driven by

encounters with a number "bad educators" (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21) in his youth, and

the developing belief that he could do better. However, he also knew he wanted to work

with people, and away from jobs that were centred around making money. He had a

genuine sense that he could make a difference to the profession and provide a better

experience for his students than the one he had himself. After graduating, he travelled

around the country and worked in some "really low socio-economic, tough schools"

(Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). He spent time at the primary level upon his return to the city,

and worked in South Africa teaching mathematics and English. Ollie has been working in

the private sector now for 10 years. Not long into the discussion, I asked Ollie when he

was at his best as a teacher.

> **OLLIE:** Probably recently – either Year 12 History, where you
> really get them humming along. Or being a house leader…
> probably doing house leader, where you're actually thinking,
> "Yeah, this matters." Where if you've got a kid whose mental
> health is really rubbish and you're actually thinking, "Well, this
> isn't just a chore that someone set me to do." You genuinely
> feel like the purpose is worthwhile (discussion, 12/4/21).

Ollie discussed the over-all school environment that he feels most comfortable in.

In his opinion, high professionalism must be on display from a collegial point of view,

and the facilities of the school should promote and support quality teaching practice.

OLLIE: So it's a combination of the system working, you're in a good team, and you really know your stuff. And you feel prepared. …And the team's good, so I've got a few resources from them. Whereas, some of the tough schools I've worked in, there were just constant stuff-ups. Like even, just internet dropping out. Or no projector screens that work. So you could never plan any visuals because you could never bank on it working (discussion, 12/4/21).

Experiencing stress. Without much coercion on my part, the conversation soon moved towards teacher stress. Ollie believes that stress is currently a huge issue in schools, and he has experienced its debilitating effects. A major concern of his is when his life away from school is impacted by the happenings in his workplace. He has also noticed a physical response to the experience of being overworked.

OLLIE: For me, it's getting run down, getting headachy, and really tired. Physical response. And maybe a little bit mental and emotional too. You start to feel a bit fed up. Stress for me is being run down, and it starts affecting that home life as well. You get home and feel too knackered to be bothered doing anything. Sometimes I'm patient all day long, and then I get home and take it out on my kids (discussion, 12/4/21).

I wondered how Ollie has managed to stay in such a demanding profession for so many years, and whether he was able to develop a particular approach that isolated him against the ravages of teacher stress. I was keen to discover whether he was able to tap into any specific resources on offer to help him stay the course. Ollie told me that the motivation to stay can be multi-faceted, and that not all teachers hang around for pure educational reasons.

OLLIE: That motivation to stay in the job is, I think, really problematic, because I think it becomes an, 'I can't leave,' kind of motivation. There's no, 'You're an expert teacher now. You get less classes.' It's either management, or going down to [part time work]. So I think the motivation to stay in the gig is quite negative. So for me it's like, 'Do I want to lose my holidays?' I

> still consider myself a positive teacher, but I think that is a real problem, when you've got guys you can't get rid of. Who are just paying off their mortgage. Who were really burnt out years ago, but they're going to somehow hang on (discussion, 12/4/21).

Ollie described a type of self-help approach to surviving teaching – one in which the teacher should not wait for the school to reach out (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). He talked about how he has been willing throughout his career to take time off when necessary, as other resources to support teachers in stressful times are sometimes difficult to locate.

> **OLLIE:** I think one of the problems is the stress of the workload, and the only thing available to teachers is take the day off. Take the old mental health day, and try to work at home and try to knock over those tasks that are maybe adding up. Or maybe not even do that. Just have a mental health day off. That's not a great resource, is it? Because no one's ever going to say in a school, 'Geez, you're looking burnout towards the end of term. You know what, we're going to turn your email off. You're not getting any more email for the rest of the week' (discussion, 12/4/21).

As a senior History and English teacher, the sheer volume of corrections Ollie is required to undertake weighs on his mind. He has tried many different approaches, but much to his exasperation, he has never been able to develop a family-friendly system to calmly negotiate his way through to the end of term, when writing tasks are all due at once. He feels correction is one task he can't organise his way out of, but he accepts that in the senior school context corrections are a necessary stressor.

Time to move on? Ollie's journey has seen him move away from predominantly being a senior classroom teacher, to working more in the student wellbeing space, lessening his face-to-face teaching load. This is a source of sadness for Ollie, as he does

enjoy teaching older students, and relished the challenge that came with guiding students through their final years of study (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). But the intensity and workload eventually wore him down, and he decided to step away from teaching senior year levels. He identified that much of the additional stress that came with teaching was poured on at a school level. He believes he was a well-organised and dedicated classroom teacher who was simply squeezed out of a role he enjoyed, and was very good at.

> **OLLIE:** I think teaching works best when you're thinking about that ten-week unit, 'Okay, I'm starting here, and this is where I want to end.' And you're actually going in there, 'This is the purpose of this lesson.' And I think when you're stressed, and you're under the pump, and you've got too much to do, and too little time, it's more about, 'What can I give them for this lesson? How can I get through this one?' And then you're at risk of getting through to the end of the year and thinking, 'You know, I didn't actually touch on this properly.' I remember teaching Year 11 English, but working really hard in Year 12 history and thinking, 'I think I'm just going to have to summarise their Year 11 English book for them.' We should have been finished the book by then, and I remember suddenly stopping and saying, 'Right, in the end [this is what happens]…' And I know how awful that sounds. I did my best, but I was absolutely pooped (discussion, 12/4/21).

Ollie was a passionate senior history teacher for many years, however he made the tough decision to step away from senior classes. He recalled with some sadness the ever-increasing demands placed on senior teachers during his time.

> **OLLIE:** We went through a phase where we decided we all had to triple mark everything, and double mark everything, and benchmark everything. This might sound arrogant, but I reckon I was a really good Year 12 history teacher. I feel really proud of what I was able to do in the classroom. But that other stuff that came with the job… I now think I'll never go back again to teach Year 12, because of that. Just too much other stuff (discussion, 12/4/21).

We discussed how the challenge for schools, and decision makers at various levels, is to strike the right balance between demanding a high level of commitment and excellence from teachers, and losing them to the profession itself. He believes the key to staying in the profession is to pick your battles, focus your energy, and learn how kids work best (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Excess stress sometimes makes this organisational task difficult, which then sets off a chain-reaction of new managerial challenges.

> **OLLIE:** I think good teachers know the patterns. Kids are a pattern. Schools are a pattern. So sometimes I think with teachers you need to say, 'Well, you knew your reports were due around then. Plan for that.' Because there are so many more administrative jobs than there used to be, I think it requires a real level of organisation. I've been going, 'Nup, those students are going to be rubbish at that time of day, so I'm going to book the library.' So when I'm organised enough to do that, then that makes a big difference. But when I'm not, I'm walking into the pressure environment of a class, in a really small classroom, with a bunch or personalities banging off each other (discussion, 12/4/21).

Ollie is still teaching and will continue to place a strong emphasis on student wellbeing and delivering engaging and stimulating lessons to younger students. He walks into his school each day determined to make a difference, and to help young teachers in his charge find their niche in the profession (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). He believes he is a good teacher who has, almost against the odds, managed to find a way through the stress and survive.

> **OLLIE:** I'm saying this in the context that… I don't think I'm a bad teacher. I think I'm an effective teacher. I don't think I'm the weak link in any of my teams or anything, but I think the reality is – during my career there has been a hell of a lot of, just having to bumble through, for want of a better expression. Kind of 'Fake it 'til you make it' sort of stuff. Just got to get through this (discussion, 12/4/21).

Story 4: Eli's Lived Experiences

Eli is an extremely engaging and personable educator who for over twenty years has taught in schools in Asia, as well as a range of co-educational state schools in Australia. He is currently working in a private school in an urban setting, and says he still feels lucky to be a teacher. We recorded our session in a meeting room at a mutually convenient educational facility. Eli is a considered man, who likes to think clearly through his responses, and usually defaults to a positive, teacher-affirming position rather than a negative one when discussing educational matters. He was keen to share his story and educational philosophy, which is centred on relationship forming, both with colleagues and students.

Why teaching? A combination of circumstances led to Eli enrolling in a Diploma of Education in his early twenties.

> **ELI:** I was fortunate to have a lot of really good teachers in primary school, and particularly high school. It was a combination of having a really good school experiences, and then I did some work experience at a physiotherapist because I was interested in the health sciences. But I thought, 'this isn't the right thing.' Then I did a public speaking course at university, which went really well so I thought, 'Maybe I could marry the two, and do a Dip. Ed. Then I did some teaching rounds and absolutely loved it (discussion, 11/8/22).

After spending his early professional years in education in Australia, Eli then taught in Singapore in a language school. He found this to be a fantastic and extremely rewarding experience as the different pacing of the school calendar suited him (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22). The smaller class sizes also provided a greater opportunity to connect with the students.

> **ELI:** I worked in an international setting where the school was all-girl, there was no discipline policy, your biggest challenge was making sure your students were challenged. That was it. And it was just teaching Nirvana. It was ridiculous how good this was. This was in Singapore. With that, we did a stint that went from August to September, straight, with like a four-day weekend in October. Time allowance was crazy good. So 40 periods a week, you're on for 22. So you had 18 off. Plus, the class sizes - some were 6. I had some at 17. I was there for four years (group discussion, 16/6/22).

Upon returning to Australia, Eli settled into a private school and soon discovered a passion for helping students discover their potential.

> **ELI:** I love connecting with kids and empowering them to see that they're in control of their behaviour and their learning. You're ultimately the facilitator. You want to get them to the point where their saying, 'That's what I want to learn, and this guy can help me get there.' That's what's addictive about it (discussion, 11/8/22).

Eli has observed in his time that although schools can vary a great deal in some regards, for example, "the fees might be different from place to place, and the culture might be slightly different, but at the end of the day, it's the same everywhere" (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22). As the years have passed, Eli has derived great satisfaction from drawing on his years of experience. He reflected on when has felt most effective as a teacher:

> **ELI:** At your best? When you go to your war chest. When it's like: 'I've got this problem. How am I going to tackle this?' And then when you go there and think, 'Yeah. I got this. I think this will work.' And you do it and it works. That's when I feel like I'm at my best (discussion, 11/8/22).

Experiencing Stress. Unsurprisingly, given the focus Eli has placed on creating

connections with his students, and providing opportunities for their academic and social

development, many of his most stressful experiences have come from working through

structural barriers, particularly with regards to the individual needs of students. He spoke

of this challenge in the group discussion.

> **ELI:** My biggest stress has been not being able to cater to the
> wide range of needs that are in my class (general agreement). I
> find that so hard. In my year 9 science class we've got kids who
> can't read, who are at grade 1 or grade 2 level, in a general
> science class, and they're sitting next to a kid who's ready for
> year 11 and 12 chemistry, physics and biology. And I walk into
> those classes and I think, 'Where am I pitching this? How am I
> getting to that kid who's bored and mucking around, that kid
> who's playing up because he's controlling his failure. It's not
> his fault that he's behaving like that. I actually empathize with
> him (group discussion, 16/6/22).

Eli believes that stress can be experienced when teachers "feel like they can't

make a positive change" (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22). He also sees a distinction between

pressure and stress, explaining that "pressure you can cope with. Workload is pressure

because you know that it's going to come, but then it's going to go. Having reports due is

not stress. Because I know I'm going to get them done. It's going to be alright" (Eli,

discussion, 11/8/22). Eli believes that stress in schools today can be caused by a myriad

of things (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22). Aside from his concerns around the huge range of

student abilities in class, Eli has noticed the following:

> **ELI:** There seems to be more and more administrative tasks for
> teachers to complete nowadays. Teachers are more accessible
> and, somewhat, expected to be on call 24/7 via email and a
> range of educational platforms to answer questions.
> [Leadership] haven't been in the classroom for years, and may
> be out of touch in terms of what it is like to deal with the
> million decisions teachers make on a daily basis, and then an
> additional task is added for them to complete. There is lots of

adding of tasks, but very little to no removing of tasks or responsibilities (biographical narrative, 12/10/22).

Time to move on? Of all the participants, Eli seems the most settled in the profession, and has never seriously considered moving on.

> **ELI:** I reckon it's an amazing job. I reckon we're really lucky in terms of working with great young kids. I feel like you do have an influence. I reckon it's a great job. It's getting more complex. There are some parts that you don't like, but in all jobs there are parts you don't like. I've met great people, got to do different things, and was able to work overseas (discussion, 11/8/22).

Eli does, however, understand why some teachers are now opting out of teaching: "I reckon a lot of teachers are leaving because they're fed up with the administrative side of things. And probably because they're not adequately resourced to cater for the needs of the kids in front of them" (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22). He also believes that there are many more teachers who want to try something else, but they decide to stay in teaching out of a sense of obligation. He reported that "sometimes people say 'I'm considering leaving, and I want to leave, but I love my colleagues, and I don't want to walk out on them'" (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22). The successes individual teachers experience with students also continues to spur them on, according to Eli:

> **Eli:** Nothing beats seeing the look of satisfaction, the smile on the students' face when they have been faced with adversity and worked hard to overcome it. That in my opinion is why the majority of teachers persist in the profession despite how complex a job it has become over the years (biographical narrative, 12/10/22).

Eli has firm opinions on the plight of teachers, and was a thought-provoking member of the group discussion. But equally, he has no regrets concerning his choice of profession, and looks forward to many more years in the classroom.

> **ELI:** During my early years, I became addicted to helping students reach their potential, whatever score that may be, and it's the best thing about the job. When you instil belief in a student, have the bar set at a point where it is just out of reach, and that student works hard to get over the bar, there's no better feeling in the world (biographical narrative, 12/10/22).

Story 5: Red's Lived Experiences

My discussion with Red was enormously enlightening and productive. She is an energetic and driven educator, who recently decided to make the move into middle and upper leadership in her primary school, and away from straight classroom teaching. She clearly brought a leader's viewpoint to the discussion, but her memories of spending every day in the classroom are still fresh.

The discussion took place in the meeting room of a local library, convenient to Red. After some technical difficulties, the conversation flowed easily, but was perhaps more formal at times than the other discussions. Part of this is down to Red's professionalism, and her firmly held beliefs that required little reflection to call upon. Red takes pride in her high level of commitment to both the students and staff operating under her leadership. One senses that this strong commitment to pastoral care would be evident to all.

Why Teaching? I asked Red why she chose teaching as a career. She explained that she was inspired by her own teachers, particularly her grade four teacher, and also felt a calling after engaging with the younger siblings of her friends (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). She completed work experience in special education, and looked set to head

down that path. However, some teachers at her secondary school pointed her in a

different direction, suggesting the she was "too smart to do teaching" (Red, discussion,

8/7/21) and that she should try something else. She heeded their advice and initially

enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts. However, after a bout of glandular fever she arrived at the

understanding that she really did love teaching, and enrolled in a straight teaching degree.

She excelled during her teaching rounds, and enjoyed the variety on offer at the primary

level.

> **RED:** Probably to start with, literacy was my stronger point, but as I've gained in experience and I can see the massive gaps in maths, I tend to go towards that now. When I was on rounds in early years, I loved the creativity. You could incorporate other subjects, like science and history, into literacy and maths, and bring books to life through art.
>
> **RESEARCHER:** Do you still have the freedom to do that now?
>
> **RED:** No (Laughs). I think that is something that is missing now a lot. And I think that that's quite sad. You just don't have the time or freedom to bring the joy of learning into the classroom.
>
> **RESEARCHER:** So when you say freedom – what does that mean? Freedom for the teacher to do what they might want to do?
>
> **RED:** Yes. And now we have to have things ticked off. 'What are you doing?' and 'How are you doing that?' If you want to do an activity in the classroom, it's like, 'Well what outcome are you trying to achieve through that?' rather than sometimes for the love of it, and the joy of it (discussion, 8/7/21).

Experiencing stress. I was struck by what a loss it must have been to her school

to have Red out of the classroom, and wondered whether the prospect of a reduced

classroom teaching load was attractive to her for other reasons. I asked her if, even

though she seemed on top of the demands of classroom teaching, stress had played a part

in her decision to move into management. Red revealed that she had, indeed, experienced

stress in the role (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). She went on to describe the deep feeling of

helplessness that came over her when the pressure piled up in the classroom. She

constantly carried with her the sense that there was so much to do, which caused her to

feel out of control.

> **RED:** I think the frustration of - you've planned a lesson, but then just can't get it delivered, because that one's upset. Particularly in the upper primary. You have the girls come in after recess or lunch. They've had an issue with a friend. You've got to spend 10, 15 minutes sorting that out before you can actually even start teaching. So I think there are a lot of other dynamics in the classroom. It's not just coming in and delivering a lesson and expecting everyone to just get on with it. There are all those other relationship things, and interpersonal things that come into play. And you can even see as they come in in the morning. What's happened at home. That's going to influence what their day is going to be like (discussion, 8/7/21).

Red also had an experience where stress came as a direct result of the leadership

approach in her school. An over-bearing principal, she believes, traumatised some staff

members. Red appeared exasperated recounting the incident during the group discussion,

shaking her head in disbelief at the memory of the experience.

> **RED:** That stress came from the principal. She just had those expectations. She'd be in the shared office, so we were all in the shared office, and she'd be in there with us. And when she first started we thought, 'Isn't she wonderful, she's in the office with us.' But we very soon realized that the expectation was that I'd be there at a quarter to eight. I'd rock in a ten to 8, and she'd look at the clock, then she'd look at me.
>
> **OLLIE:** So, keeping a close eye on you.
>
> **RED:** Yep. And then Friday afternoons she'd let you go early at 4:30pm, and you had to ask her for permission to go earlier than 5 o'clock during a week night. She was very authoritarian. Like, staff are still traumatized. They were scared when they heard certain keys jangling, because it was her coming and she was coming into your classroom to look at you and then say, 'I'll see you at recess' (group discussion, 16/6/22).

After spending some time in the private school system, Red returned to the

Catholic sector. She found that some adjustment was required to work successfully in a

team. A reduction in planning time also had an impact on her.

> **RED:** [It] was interesting because primary teaching was two
> and a half hours release a week, in a team situation, and that
> took a little while to get my head around. We did divide and
> conquer a little bit, which was a good thing, but I think if your
> team's not coherent, it causes a lot of stress. If you don't all
> have the same teaching beliefs or purpose, and are constantly
> clashing, I think that that causes a lot of teacher stress.
> …Dynamics play a massive part. And it is hard. Sometimes you
> just need that 40 minutes or half an hour to yourself to prepare
> for your class. In a primary school you just don't get 5 minutes
> to yourself. You're constantly with you kids or with your team
> (discussion, 8/7/21).

Time to move on? Although she saw overbearing administrative tasks as counter-

productive, this is not to say that Red failed to adopt the latest teaching strategies, or

neglected to gather accurate and useful data to inform her teaching (Red, discussion,

8/7/21). She always arrived to her classes fully prepared, and ensured that students could

access the curriculum – adhering to the rigours of differentiation. She also ran constant

one-to-one sessions with the students along with small focus groups. However, she began

to find the routine monotonous, and started thinking about a change.

> **RED**: I suppose I was getting a bit bored in the classroom. And
> I wanted a different challenge. And it was appealing, to start
> with, that I could have a couple of days out of the classroom to
> focus on something else that might be more academically
> stimulating for me. I approached the principal at the time and
> said, 'If there's anything, I'm keen.' That led to a shared
> English leadership position. I found I really enjoyed that, and
> that I was out of the classroom a couple of days. …Then there
> was a change of principal and I'm sure they saw something in
> me, and encouraged me. And then it was [head of] learning, and
> that was a massive passion. So I did that, and then it was like a
> natural progression into the deputy principalship. …The big
> jump for me was going out of the classroom full time
> (discussion, 8/7/21).

To conclude the discussion, I asked Red if she could pinpoint a period in her career where she thought she was operating at a very high level as a teacher. She nominated a time when she returned fresh from maternity leave and felt ready for the rigours of the classroom.

> **RED:** I think when I was still relatively enthusiastic, and you had that drive. Probably when I came back from maternity leave. I'd done some emergency teaching. I had a few years behind me. I had my children. And I was desperate to get back into the classroom, to have my own class at a new school. And I think those few years there were probably my most effective. I was experienced. Parents didn't really worry me anymore. I could get along with colleagues fine. I felt that I had a voice, and what I could contribute to planning, or information I gave about students, was valid and important. And in the classroom, I felt like I knew what I was doing. I could pick kids who had learning difficulties and know what to do with them – or know who to ask if I couldn't figure it out myself. Those kids who were doing really well, I knew how to extend and push them along a little bit. I wasn't intimidated anymore. I just went with it, and trusted my gut. And I knew I was doing okay (discussion, 8/7/21).

The session finished with Red commenting that a school's success, whether secondary or primary, depends on having as many teachers as possible finding themselves in that sweet spot in their careers - where they feel in control, capable, and have the time to commit fully to the profession. She believes it is the job of school leaders to foster an environment where teachers can thrive and have ownership over the very difficult task they are required to perform (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

Story 6: Tom's Lived Experiences

Tom was quite upfront from the outset about not having any intention of being a career-long teacher when he started in the profession 23 years ago. His is a success story

in that he has found enough in teaching to keep him interested and busy (discussion,

23/7/22). What came through in the discussions is the strength of Tom's beliefs, and his

dedication to his students. Tom showed an interest in the research at a time when he was

struggling with the demands of running the science department in his secondary school. I

was heartened to hear of his enthusiasm towards taking part, so I booked a meeting room

in a local library where our discussion eventually took place.

Tom is a strong family man who is universally respected in his local community

and in educational circles. His smiling and giving nature make him easy to talk to, and he

listens intently to the experiences of others. He is also a great defender of teachers, and a

wonderful advocate for young educational leaders. Tom was a calming presence in the

group discussion, telling his story gently and showing a genuine interest in the thoughts

and stories emanating from around the table.

Why teaching? Describing himself as a people person (Tom, discussion,

23/7/22), Tom entered the teaching profession ostensibly because he thought it might

stimulate him academically, and provide him with a chance to partake in a variety of

positive, fun activities such as camps.

> **TOM:** Honing my skills in the classroom, but also, more
> broadly, doing things like camps. I think those sorts of things
> are unique in terms of a workplace. You're getting a huge bit of
> variety, but you're also getting to go away on things that are
> making memories for young people. So that was sort of the
> driving factor, and they're the things that I have found most
> enjoyable about teaching as well (discussion, 23/7/22).

Experiencing stress. Resentment seems to build up when school leadership

doesn't acknowledge how hard Tom, and other teachers like him, are working. This is

where the 'extra little demands' that get placed on teachers can really start to add up and

cause stress (Tom, discussion, 23/7/22). A recent staff meeting seemed to agitate Tom at

the time of our discussion. It came at the end of a particularly busy week.

> **TOM:** The other night we have a staff meeting after school. I had a full day's teaching… and then I [have to] make pot plants for an hour after school. Which is all very well and good - very therapeutic - but time's precious as well. But then I have a follow-up survey to do. I've had the person email me multiple times saying, 'You have to do this survey.' And it's twenty questions, and it's about going into the school's core values, and reading them. It's a Microsoft forms survey which will take another 30 or 40 minutes. And so I don't get that time at school. I have to find that time at home (discussion, 23/7/22).

Tom raised in the group discussion issues concerning directives from

management and the unforeseen impact some initiatives can have. In particular, a recent

email he received from management concerning a uniform blitz aroused furious

agreement among the other participants.

> **TOM:** That's what can stress you out. When you get a directive like 'Okay, we're going to do a uniform blitz. And the way you're going to do it is you're going to send letters home to the parents.' And you're like, 'I'm teaching six periods today. I'm teaching six periods tomorrow. And might get there on Wednesday middle of the day. Oh, shit. There's like seven kids that have worn the wrong shoes. I've got to send letters to each of their parents. And then they're going to contact me back.' (agreement from group). And I'm like, 'I haven't got time to do this' (group discussion, 16/6/22).

The difference between pressure and stress was raised during our one-to-one

discussion. Tom believed that there is a clearly identifiable difference, and that pressure

can sometimes be healthy – keeping teachers on track and helping productivity. "Stress is

when pressure reaches a tipping point" (Tom, discussion, 23/7/22), Tom believes. He has

a physical reaction to the presence of stress.

> **TOM:** I get eczema when I'm stressed …my sleeping goes out the window. They're the physical repercussions of when the pressure goes over the tipping point and I do have those sorts of physical reactions. Eczema, lack of sleep, a bit of anxiety.

> **RESEARCHER:** I talked to one person, separate to these interviews, and she says she just gains weight every term. Eating poorly. Then she'll de-tox over the holidays, keep it together for the first month back of the term, and then it unravels.

> **TOM:** Yeah, I see it myself. I love to exercise. And I find that exercise is a great way to calm me and de-stress. But it goes out the window because, like I was saying before, how do you cope with stress - you work harder. Which then has that flow-on effect of, 'I can't exercise.' So I find throughout the term that my exercise levels go backwards. I would put on a few kilos throughout the term, and then it's sort of like, 'hanging out for the holidays.' You do a two-week burst of exercise. But once again, that's sort of a physical repercussion of maybe the stress and the pressure that you're under (discussion, 23/7/22).

As our discussion neared its conclusion, Tom brought up a heart-wrenching source of stress for him. It concerned the lack of positive feedback back from senior management in his school.

> **TOM:** I talk about working so hard, and being a passionate teacher who wants the very best for their students in terms of their academic performance and pastorally. But in the last four years I have not had a single person in leadership ask me about what I do in my classes or acknowledge what I do in my classes - at all. So I feel like I'm working way harder than I ever have before, yet there is zero interest at all from senior leadership about what I do from day to day. Because I don't have issues behaviourally from students and because I don't have complaints from parents, it is literally just… 'this guy knows what he's doing.' But that doesn't mean that I don't want some sort of interest or acknowledgement of what I do from day to day. And that actually causes me a fair bit of stress because you do feel very isolated and you feel undervalued, and I think those sorts of negative feelings definitely manifest themselves in stress. …And I sometimes go, 'Why am I doing this?' I'm working myself into the ground with zero acknowledgement. I'm not expecting it in a formal sense, but I go 'surely someone wants to show a tiny bit of interest in what I do… considering that we're a school, and education should be our number one

priority.' That doesn't happen. That does result in stress because you start to feel underappreciated (discussion, 23/7/22).

Time to move on? Although Tom has derived a lot of satisfaction from his profession, over the last few years he has found that his thoughts have turned to leaving teaching. There have been opportunities to pursue other jobs and interests, but certain factors have prevented him from doing so - including his daughter attending the school.

> **TOM:** Teaching's worked out okay, but I'm probably at a stage where I've thought, 'I probably should have had a crack at something else.' But I guess also, maybe I've left it too late as well. I would definitely say I've been feeling this way for the last five years. But you know, the grass is always greener on the other side. And it's always easier said than done to say I will move into something else. I'm a realist as well, and sometimes the idea of starting back, doing something else, isn't that appealing (discussion, 23/7/22).

Teaching senior science, Tom is extremely thorough in his preparation. He explained that he believes this is essential as the smooth running of the class depends entirely on how well he can explain and decipher the complex problems for the students. With some nervousness, and humility, Tom revealed that he does not have any behavioural issues in class, or problems with classroom management. He does not feel stressed in the classroom, and has a great relationship with his students in the senior end of his secondary school. The classes run very smoothly (Tom, discussion, 23/7/22). However, encased in a busy school, the workload can overwhelm him.

> **TOM:** I'm in class 24 periods a week. And maybe it's the nature of my load as well. So even after I've done my teaching, it does not stop. Which is fantastic. It's a great learning environment, but it is non-stop. I can have kids, such as this morning, you know, five periods of science and maths straight, and after period 2 – and this happens day after day – after period 2, I've got year 12's. They're working really hard. They're preparing for [an assessment]. They're asking me a

million questions. We run into recess for 12 minutes or so. And I'm thrilled because I'm working hard, but then I have 2 minutes to go to the toilet, to get my stuff and get ready for my next class. And that happens almost every class. So there's no breathing time at all. I'm never having 5 minutes to say, 'Oh, what are we doing next class,' or just strolling around the room. So that's sort of like the phenomenon of stress for me. It's almost like this relentless busy-ness that never eases off. In the class, and then out of the class, it's getting ready for the next class. It's like a never-ending treadmill, almost (discussion, 23/7/22).

Tom feels enormous accountability to his students, and to the parent community in the school. When work – such as preparation or correction – piles up, Tom finds himself faced with the choice of either taking a break or working even harder to get the job done (Tom, discussion, 23/7/22). The frustration was evident in his voice when he reflects on this dilemma.

The night prior to our discussion, Tom had spent two and a half hours preparing for his senior maths class, which was draining, but by the end of it he felt his stress levels had reduced because he was more on top of things. However, he knows that when the workload starts to eat too much into family time, a reappraisal of the situation is needed.

> **TOM:** Sometimes I acknowledge that I am feeling stressed, and that it is impacting on the family. If I take the kids to swimming lessons, and I would normally watch them swim, but if I sit in the car and do work instead, then I'll go, 'this isn't healthy.' And that's to get on top of work to reduce stress. And so that contributes to stress as well - knowing the impact of what you are doing has on your family. So sometimes I think that the expectations are too great. But those expectations, they're always going to be there. …And I know what happens. I've seen it before, where you do get people who say, 'It's too much for me.' It gets worse. It snowballs. You get parents on the phone. They get leadership in their ear saying, 'We're getting these calls from parents.' And I would find that extremely stressful as well. It's the lesser of two evils. So do you just take the hard work, suck it up, put yourself under that sort of pressure, but at least it's the path of least resistance? That's the best way to get through (discussion, 23/7/22).

(ii)   **Chapter Summary**

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with "the shared common understandings of experiences that are illuminated through stories that resonate with us all" (Crowther et al., 2016, p. 834). The intention of this Encountering the Stories chapter was to present the participants' lived experiences of stress in a concise and honest way, drawing on the data collected. The success of this research - its usefulness and value - is dependent upon the participants stories and how they resonate.

> Without narratives, complex communications are nearly impossible. A narrative serves the function of a story, which is the sequential telling of events, and also the function of re-storying, emphasising parts of the story that are important to the narrator (Nigar, 2020, p. 12).

The experiences of the researcher allowed him to act as an insider, gaining the confidence of the participants, which in turn allowed them to open up and share the experiences. Importantly, the intention was to represent the lived experiences of the teachers in a way that did not alter the meaning of the experiences from the participants' point of view. The narratives in this chapter seek to describe an experience rather than enter into a prolonged explanation (Husserl, 1931).

The three guiding sub-headings used in the narratives allow the reader to reflect on;

- why each participant chose teaching as their preferred profession;
- what they have experienced in terms of stress; and
- what drove them to re-considering their place in the profession at certain points in their career.

Each teacher considered in depth their own unique educational journey and the professional choices made along the way. The first two research questions: *What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?,* and *What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?* have been addressed in the course of this chapter: The following chapter, Data Analysis, will address the final research question: *What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?* Key concepts and essence exemplars will also be located to help further explore the phenomenon of teacher stress.

Chapter 6

Data Analysis

Introduction

It is important to bear in mind the nature of phenomenological research when analysing data as different phenomenological approaches can lead to divergent end products (Greatlex-White, 2008). This current research is interpretive, and is therefore informed and influenced by hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The unique aspect of the qualitative approach is that it gives researchers the chance to "put themselves in another person's shoes and to understand the subjective experiences of the participants" (Austin & Sutton, 2015, p. 226). Thus, the data analysis reported in this chapter is just that, one researcher's perspective on the varied experiences shared by each participant. In this sense, much of the data analysis cannot be generalized beyond the context of this study, but rather the researcher has attempted to generate deeper perspectives on the phenomenon of teacher stress for reporting to the wider community.

Phenomenologists have at the heart of their studies an interest in working through the filter of conscious human thinking to uncover the essence of life, and what comprises the human condition (Thorne, 2016). This goal can be reached only through efficient and thoughtful data analysis. Armed with the right theoretical basis, as outlined in Chapter 3, appropriate methods, and useful, workable data, the researcher has followed a phenomenological approach to develop fresh ideas about the phenomenon of teacher

stress, relate these ideas to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and make clear links to broader professional concerns and concepts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The design, analysis, and reporting of qualitative studies such as the one reported here, is driven by the research purpose and questions. Queries about processes or the effectiveness of the data analysis should always lead back to the following - what is the purpose, and what is the research question (Boudah, 2011). The focus of this chapter is the study's third research question: *What are the essences of the phenomenon of teacher stress?*

The first section of this chapter presents the background to the determination and presentation of key concepts and accompanying essences exemplars. It does so by addressing the following:

(i)   Determination of Key Concepts

(ii)   Essence Exemplars

(iii)   Defining and Identifying Stress

Following Section One, the chapter will turn to an analysis of the data and the generation of the building blocks that provide the foundations of the key themes presented in the following Chapter 6. Section Two will consist of two parts namely:

(i)   Presentation Key Concepts; and

(ii)   Chapter Summary

Section One

(i)   Determination of Key Concepts

As a consequence of building on the language of description, reflecting on themes and concepts becomes part of the process of analysing the qualitative data presented as a

result of the data collection that occurred in the earlier part of the study. The phenomenological concepts that are presented forthwith are to be considered intransitive. They are not objects one encounters at certain points as the text is analysed, but rather the "experience of focus, of meaning, of point" (van Manen, 1997, p. 87) as reported through the perspectives of the participants in the study. They are simplifications as they are presented here, and can be understood as indicators that capture the phenomenon under investigation, describing perhaps aspects of the lived experience (van Manen, 1997) that may well be unique to one participant, or common to many. The phenomenological concepts presented in this chapter represent thoughts and experiences that were deemed important, and were selected through a process that was iterative, but also clearly in the realm of the researcher's own interpretation and thoughts.

Combing through the data, as was the case here, researchers immerse themselves in the ideas and thoughts of the participants in order to uncover distinctive ways of thinking, or remarkable behaviors, phrases, or events that might appear with some regularity (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Throughout this study, it was important to keep in mind that one of the goals of phenomenology is to capture the lived experience of the phenomenon of teacher stress in this particular context, time and setting. The narrative that unfolds below cannot be presented as a mere idea, and the examination of data cannot be satisfied via a process of simple categorization. What is required, given that the phenomenological approach has been employed here, is for researcher to be satisfied that the concepts presented as a result of the data analysis have phenomenological power, which will in turn allow for phenomenological descriptions (van Manen, 1997); descriptions that will contribute significantly towards new insights into the field of study.

Interpreting Whilst there necessarily is a strong subjective component to the interpretation of data presented below, there is also a systematic line of reasoning that was followed throughout the process of data analysis. Interpreting the current data set involved more than simply locating passages in the data that the researcher felt most closely aligned with his own thoughts on the issue. Equally, as outlined in the methods chapter, it was important to avoid the assumption that "if things occur frequently within a data set, they are necessarily more relevant or important." (Thorne, 2016, p. 156). For this current phenomenological study on teacher stress, the data was analysed as it came. This was done in order to ensure that the interview questions, the pacing of the discussions, and moments of deeper reflection were in alignment, and that they harmonised to reveal something of the nature of the phenomenon with a view to building new knowledge in this troubled area of teachers' professional lives.

In order to develop phenomenological concepts, utilising the theoretical constructs of the study as a lens, the researcher first identified multiple categories and working sub-headings, with the intention of condensing these later. Influenced by Boudah's (2011) beliefs concerning effective qualitative data analysis, the researcher reflected on the following questions throughout the process.

- which sub-categories belong together?

- why is this the case?

- what is tying them together?

- are the categories similar in some ways, and do they retain some uniqueness?

- how do the specific characteristics of the categories interact?

It was imperative to fit categories together that provided an overview of the phenomenon. In other words, the data analysis was shaped by the proposition that

phenomenological concepts should "create a picture for the reader of what you found in the data you examined" (Boudah, 2011, p. 231). As a phenomenologist, the researcher was called upon to proceed with vivid and original phenomenological descriptions that have the necessary ingredients to be valuable to the researcher and the professional community. In order to firmly grasp these concepts, the researcher was intent on eliciting from the data appropriate phrases and statements that carry the meaning of the concepts (van Manen, 1997) that are presented in their fullness in Chapter 6. This chapter articulates the building of such concepts through data analysis of the type presented here. This process was enhanced by the adoption of a series of *essence exemplars* as a means of touching on the essence of an aspect of the phenomenon. The significance of exemplars in a study of this type is explained below.

(ii)   Essence Exemplars

Remaining open to a range of viewpoints, and avoiding the belief that one participant's narrative encapsulates everything about a phenomenon, helped the researcher to develop a more balanced appraisal of the data rather than assume a generalised summary as the basis of data analysis. This reflects the unique focus of a phenomenological tactic that differs from many other qualitative approaches. Freebody (2003) articulated this view by declaring that what is relayed about a phenomenon during research should not be taken as undeniable reality. He warns against this not because interviewers are consistently misled, but because phenomena do not normally relate exclusively to a single account. This was the challenge of engaging with a diverse community of participants who shared vastly different perspective on teacher stress as they perceived it across their professional lives as classroom educators.

In order to reveal and work with the phenomenological essences contained within the data presented by participants, it was important to re-examine the nature of essences. One might ask how they come to be, and what their characteristics are. Dahlberg (2006) attempted to describe and unpack phenomenological essences, arriving at the conclusion that:

> An essence could be understood as a structure of essential meanings that explicates a phenomenon of interest. The essence or structure is what makes the phenomenon to be that very phenomenon. That is, the essence or structure illuminates these essential characteristics of the phenomenon without which it would not be that phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 12).

This was the conceptual understanding of essences that underpins the data analysis for this study. Solomon (1970) referred to Husserl's (1931) characterisation of essence in terms of "what a thing is" and shared his belief that an essence is a "body of essential predictables" (p. 383). This was the conceptual understanding of essences that underpins the data analysis for this study. Approaching the data with the understanding that essences are not something that researchers add or manufacture while working with participants accounts, the challenge was to locate the essences that are already housed within the data itself. The process of identifying essences throughout the data analysis process reported here was influenced by Gadamer (1989) who called on researchers to interrogate the text in order to illuminate patterns of meaning. The focus was on essences of phenomena that are present in lifeworld descriptions provided by the participants, namely through interviews and written narratives, and included the many nuances of the phenomenon (Dahlberg, 2006). Pondering the relationship between a given phenomenon and its essences, Dahlberg (2006) concluded that:

> Essences are their phenomena; the phenomena *are* their essences…
> An essence is, simply, a phenomenon's style, its way of being, and thus the essence cannot be separated from the phenomenon that it is the essence of. (Dahlberg, 2006. p. 18)

Shiying (2009) noted that, through the process of cognition, researchers recognise the universality of the phenomenon and grasp the essence of it, thereby deepening their cognition of things. Within this conceptual framing the next section of this chapter will present the essences identified through the data analysis. At the conclusion of each sub-section, and intermittently throughout, a collection of statements or brief narratives from the participants that best encapsulate the nature of the key concept is presented. These are not necessarily the summations of the participants views, or expansive generalisations, but rather statements that reveal something of the essence of the phenomenon. In other words, the statements get right to the heart of the issue, and reveal the lived experience of the participant.

In isolating essence exemplars, the researcher favoured statements that were succinct and clear examples of the phenomenon. As the analysis evolved, essence exemplars materialised as either strong declarative statements, or brief narratives that revealed the lived experience of the participants. They were often shared in moments when the participants attempted to share and crystalise relevant thoughts and feelings, either through direct example or re-telling of a story, or by way of considered reflection. As they became increasingly involved in the discussions, the participants would often highlight moments of clear perspective or important examples relating to teacher stress. As Shiying (2009) observed, the process whereby the phenomenon under consideration is "recognised and revealed mentally is simultaneously the process wherein the self-cognition and self-revealing of the essence of this object or thing are done" (Shiying, 2009, p. 146). By presenting essence exemplars at the conclusion of every piece of conceptual analysis within this chapter, aspects of the essential elements of the

phenomenon will be revealed, thus addressing the third research question: *What are the essences of the phenomenon of teacher stress?*

In keeping with the phenomenological approach to research, the intention was to, wherever possible, lead the participants towards rich and reflective conversations, and away from simple listings, or airing of grievances. For example, with regards to the various sources of teacher stress, I was interested in the lived experience of the participants and how the individual stressors may have impacted them as people and professionals. During the analysis the focus fell on concepts that were mentioned independent of one another by numerous participants, along with those perennial topics that sparked recognition and lively debate during the group sessions. Although some discussion points were unique to the primary or secondary level of schooling, most issues seemed to be universal across sectors and familiar to all teachers participating in this study. The researcher remained conscious of the fact that the essence of the phenomenon of teacher stress cannot be revealed by simply labeling the issues circling around education today. Rather, the essence may be illuminated by showing how the participants experienced, and responded to, the various sources.

(iii) **Defining and Identifying Stress**

During the dialogical sessions, I detected a keenness on the part of the participants to very quickly delve into the causes of teacher stress, discuss the impact stress has on their teaching, and to make suggestions regarding how best to deal with the situation. While all these conversation points are within the full scope of the study, I felt it was important to spend some time with each participant discussing the nature of teacher stress. I wanted them to reflect on how they understand and recognise stress in the workplace - what it looks like, sounds like, feels like, and how it is experienced as

distinct from pressure. Starting the sessions in this manner, drawing out the participants understanding of stress itself, enhanced the likelihood of uncovering the essences of the phenomenon.

As mentioned previously, I shared with the participants Kyriacou's (2011) definition of stress, which states that stress is present in teachers' working lives when they experience "unpleasant negative emotions resulting from aspects of their work as teachers, triggered by a perception of threat in dealing with the demands made upon them" (Kyriacou's, 2011, p. 161). This stress can be activated by threatening situations that leave teachers fearing they may not be able to deal with job demands, and that this reality may bring negative consequences upon them. It is a statement that all participants confirmed as an accurate summation of what they have seen and experienced regarding teacher stress. A link was identified between pressure and stress, and whilst a complete absence of any type of pressure in schools would be unreasonable, I was interested in how the participants viewed pressure, and how they had experienced pressure morphing into stress. One participant, Red, believed that pressure, as distinct from stress, can be controlled by teachers – that they can still place tasks in some sort of order and know that they will eventually achieve the outcome (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). She sees stress as an extra layer of pressure, resulting in teachers not being able to see the end in sight, or understand how they will get the task done.

> **RED:** I think stress is like that next level up from pressure. There is so much to do, but you're not sure how you're going to get it done. Where is the time to do that? That feeling of almost being out of control (discussion, 8/7/21).

The semi-structured nature of the dialogical conversations concerning pressure and stress also allowed the focus to move onto unexpected but connected areas, such as

stress flowing as a result of competitiveness between staff, and the nature of self-imposed pressure. Participants discussed these unanticipated aspects of teacher stress with an enthusiasm born from years of observing and experiencing the workplace.

Definition of Management. 'Management' or 'leadership', as referred to by the participants in the study, can be identified as people in positions of authority in a school setting; nominally principals, deputy principals or heads of curriculum. Occasionally the participants referred to policy makers at government or board level, but most often the terms 'management' or 'leadership' were used collectively to describe those people in charge within the school setting. The teachers also see people in management, nearly all of whom were full-time classroom teachers at one point in their careers, as holding positions that enable them to be either instruments of great positivity for teachers in schools, or conversely, conductors of stress and dissatisfaction.

Identifying stress in schools. All participants confirmed that stress can also be manifestly observed in schools – that it has a definite look, feel, even sound. The staffroom was raised consistently as an arena where one is likely to observe signs of a stressed working environment. Ollie understood immediately the crux of questions concerning how a stressed school might present, and offered a number of insights. He has seen, on many occasions, teachers in staffrooms gossiping, complaining, and talking only about their classes or school events (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). He stated that the school environment seems all consuming. On display, Ollie says, is the stereotypical "winging, venting teacher" (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21).

Tom has, by his own admission, been very observant over the years with regards to obvious displays of stress. He believes people increase their pace when they're stressed, and much running around is on display. Intriguingly, Tom has noticed that many

of the interactions between teachers become "short and sharp" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22), and he has picked up on high-level hostility among staff and students at the end of term as people are moving towards exhaustion. His normal advice to younger teachers on staff is "keep your heads down for the last three weeks of term" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). Key signifiers of stress for Tom were a noticeable drop in teacher numbers in the staffroom, and a lack of relaxed collegial socialising. In recent years, he has very rarely been able to get to the staffroom himself, but enjoys socialising there when he is able to because it "does take your mind away from the grind of the job" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). He considers a nice, busy staffroom, with people seizing the opportunity to sit down and chat, as very healthy. "I think when you look at a staffroom and it's empty. Or you just get people whipping in and out to go to the toilet and grab coffee, I actually think that that shows a lot of people being stressed, or just overly busy" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). Teachers eating their lunch in their office at their computers is also a sign, according to Tom, that they feel unable to take a break and re-charge.

Siobhan explained that she can often see the tension in a stressed staffroom reflected in the resting expression on teachers' faces. In these times she has noticed a palpable absence of volunteering to help colleagues out - for example, by covering classes or yard duty (Siobhan, discussion, 22/12/20). Like Tom, Siobhan has noticed that staffrooms in times of stress are almost empty, and that people rush around having short, agitated exchanges (Siobhan, discussion, 22/12/20).

> **SIOBHAN:** When I was in a stressful working environment, when stress was at its peak, [it] made me feel like I wanted to leave, not only that workplace, but that profession. Stress made me irrational, made me fastidious. However, it kept driving me to keep going (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Educators occasionally observe each other in the act of teaching. When this happens, according to Red, it is obvious to the observer if the teacher in view is experiencing stress. Red noted that instead of seeing educators engage with students, she'll instead see them on their computers, taking the chance to get a bit of "admin" done (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). Red believes that in the absence of stress, teachers are "more focused on the kids" (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

With the terms such as 'stress' and 'management' now defined for the purposes of this phenomenological study, the key concepts arising from the analysis will now be elaborated on in Section Two that follows.

Section Two

As outlined above, the key concepts arising from the data analysis of the current study into teacher stress are presented in this section which is divided into two parts namely:

(i)   Key Concepts

(ii)   Chapter Summary

(i)   Key Concepts
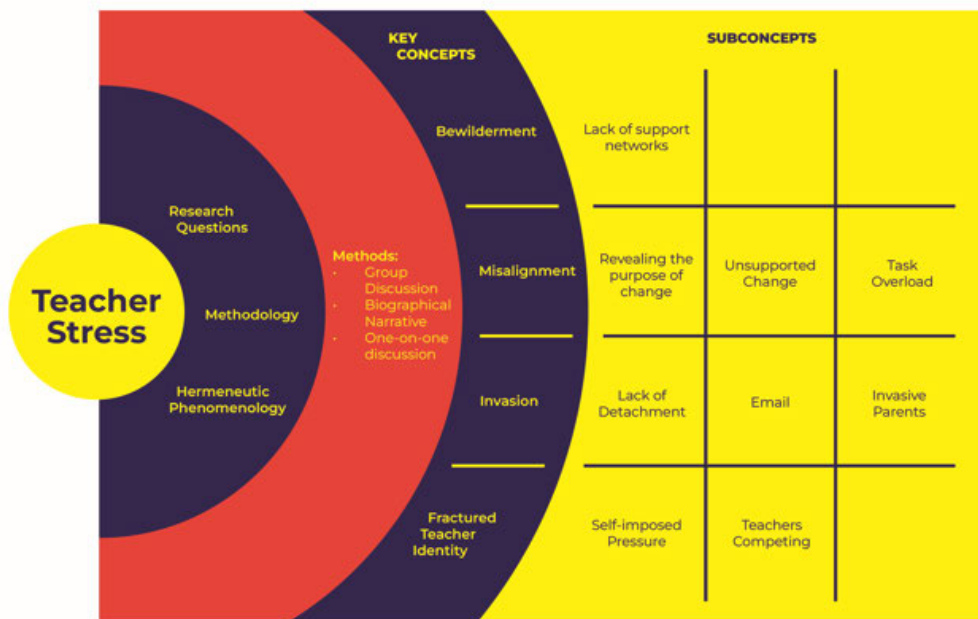
Figure 6.1 Visual representation of analytical process and identification of key concepts

The key concepts have been categorised under distinct headings, however it is worth noting that many of the concepts are entangled and interwoven. For example, a teacher who is struggling to work through issues connected to a demanding parent might be experiencing a state of *misalignment* as a result of a school's 'open door' policy which allows parents to help in classrooms, and wander freely on school grounds before and after school. The teacher may strongly disapprove of the school policy on parent helpers and school drop-offs, causing this misalignment. Simultaneously, it could be argued that the teacher is also experiencing a sense of *intrusion* – in this case, parents regularly entering teachers' workspace which can cause stress. In a similar way, entering into a state of bewilderment can lead to a fracturing of teacher identity, which may on occasions result in poor decision-making under pressure when responding to the demands of management. It has been determined that the data presented under the various

headings does relate predominantly, if not exclusively, to the relevant key concept. In the

final analysis, the key concepts and essences exemplars outlined in this chapter highlight

in an ordered and logical manner, the participants' lived experiences of teacher stress.
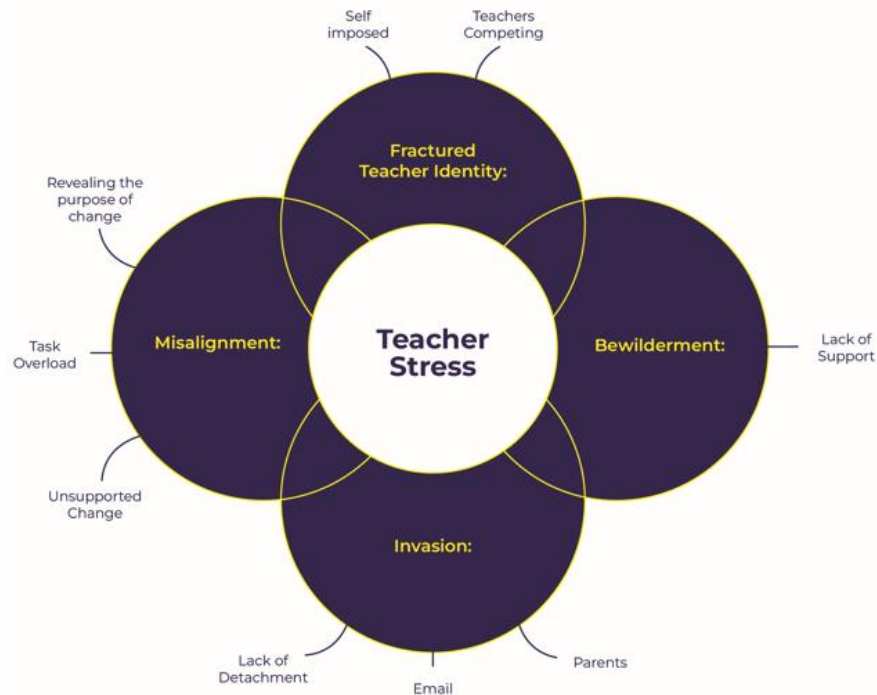
Figure 6.2: Key concepts and sub-concepts

Key Concept 1. Bewilderment

The participants in this study have outlined that the work of teachers has become

far more complex and regulated as demands from parents, policy makers and school

leaders compete with the formal curriculum in the classroom. Additionally, they report a

distinct lack of support networks available to assist them in managing the state of

bewilderment that they often experience as part of their work in the teaching profession.

Ollie explained that prioritising the various tasks competing for teachers'

attention is becoming increasingly difficult. He remarked that "every big idea that comes

in - for example, 'We want to deal with wellbeing. We want to increase engagement. We want to make them 21st century learners' - I think what that means is, whatever their vision is, it has to be implemented by the foot soldiers" (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Now ensconced in leadership, Ollie pointed out that apart from policy makers, principals, and vice principals creating new tasks for teachers, they're also going to have "…the sustainability person sending them something, the cyber safety person is going to send them something (laughter). You know what I mean? When you've got those positions of leadership, they all have to delegate to the guys at the coalface" (Ollie, group discussion, 16/6/22). These acts of delegation, according to Ollie, lead to disconcerting feelings of unease, and inevitably to stress. This is captured in the essence exemplar below:

> **OLLIE:** One theme or pattern over my career is definitely 'gradually growing expectations'. Parent engagement is much higher than in previous generations. Likewise, differentiation, compliance, risk assessments, high email volume, social media challenges, mental health awareness, diagnosis of learning needs are just a few factors that have become more demanding as my career has progressed (biographical narrative, 11/10/22).

The sense of bewilderment experienced by participants such as Ollie, is the end result of teachers becoming overwhelmed by a system that is running at overload. Ollie believes that when a school experiences a tragedy, or multiple members of staff are out sick, or someone is going through a painful separation and may miss a few days of work, absent teachers are left with a sense of needing to return to school quickly to avoid the inevitable pile up of work (Ollie, group discussion, 16/6/22). When this view was shared during the group discussion there was all-round agreement. Ollie concluded that, "Everything is running at such an overloaded rate, and then there's nothing built into the system for these big events" (Ollie, group discussion, 16/6/22). Tom also noted that the new normal for a classroom teacher, incorporating the intensification of work, "provides

enough twists and turns throughout the day to constantly challenge teachers' energy

levels (Tom, group discussion, 16/6/22). He reported that the preparation side of teaching

as a requirement of the job, and part of the satisfaction you can derive from a career in

education. However, when teachers' preparation time is compromised, the discord

creates stress because "you know that if you don't get to the point where you're prepared,

you can't have a good class" (Tom, group discussion, 16/6/22). Tom has, however,

remained committed to the students, and to delivering quality classroom instruction,

however he has found himself pulled away from the act of teaching and into a cobweb of

administrative requirements. He explained how the job now involves much more than

simply "preparing and delivering lessons, giving feedback, and attending a couple of

meetings per week" (Tom, discussion, 23/7/22). Red also outlined the sense of dizzying

bewilderment she now experiences as she attempts to consolidate her role as a

professional educator. She discussed some of the issues present in teaching that have

caused a decline in the level of enjoyment she experiences as a teacher:

> **RED:** I have times when I question why I am still in education.
> The demands [of] parents and their expectations, lack of student
> disciple, administrative demands, the mandatory requirements
> of the profession, the lack of respect from society. I find these
> overtake the joy that I once had in teaching (biographical
> narrative, 11/10/22).

Red went on to claim that over the years she has witnessed the gradual stripping

away of teacher independence, and that she feels the breadth and ambition of the primary

school curriculum has contributed to a feeling of disempowerment and confusion:

> **RED:** I think we're trying to do so much. A lot of the things
> that primary teachers are expected to do, it's like, 'Well what
> are the parents doing?' For example, swimming lessons. When
> kids leave now they are expected to be able to swim 50 metres.
> When we were at school, that was on the parents. When new

important things come in, then maybe other things need to go. I
think primary schools need to focus on reading, writing, basic
maths skills, and a little bit of joy. And little bit of creativity
(discussion, 8/7/21).

Until such action occurs Red is of the view that a sense of bewilderment and

confusion will continue to be present for teachers (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

Bewilderment through lack of clear support networks. All teachers involved in

the research have experienced stress within the educational workspace. They are also, in

varying capacities, still in the profession. The point of focus in the discussions turned to

survival and how the participants have managed their personal stress over the past years.

I asked the teachers who they most likely to turn to at work when they needed

assistance or advice? I was interested in the thought process behind their decision to seek

help, who they trusted, and what the benefits and drawbacks were of asking for

assistance. In other words, what were the staff wellbeing resources the teachers drew

upon in those moments of stress. In preference to more formal avenues of support, the

participants shared that advice from colleagues was of vital importance to them. For

example, Eli explained how he relies only on a small circle of people at work in times of

stress.

ELI: Usually I share with my colleagues in the office. I try to
share my experience, and look for wisdom from my colleagues
within the room. I rarely go to someone higher up. First port of
call is the office (group discussion, 16/6/22).

However, as Siobhan reflected, the initial starting point to seeking support must

come from the teachers themselves. "I don't think that people really step forward and ask

if teachers are okay. Normally teachers get to a breaking point and then possibly maybe

look for some avenues to help them" (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). Usually, Siobhan

revealed, rather than rely on formal support structures within the school, she also seeks out her friends, especially when she needs a "soft place to fall" (Siobhan, group discussion, 16/6/22) because she knows that they're going to give her what she needs, or they'll agree with her. Red agreed, explaining that on a day to day basis, she found it best to turn to her colleagues, saying, "My mates just down the hallway, I can have that relationship with them. I can have that trusted colleague that after school I can go to and just vent – and it's not going to go any further. They'll understand" (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). Knowing when to head to management, and when to keep the issue between colleagues, is a quandary that requires a deft and experienced hand within the context of a school.

It became clear from participants narratives that whilst leaders have the capacity to effect great change in schools, they can also very quickly cause stress and paranoia if teachers remain unsure of how to safely access the support that may be on offer from them. Siobhan spoke of an experience at work when she was stressed and needed support. She decided she couldn't go to management to share her concerns because she feared she would not be listened to. I asked her to share what she felt in such a situation:

> **SIOBHAN:** Frustration. Anger. Disappointment. I felt like I deserved better because I put in everything to my job. And it added more pressure instead of alleviating the pressure. It added more to the load. And that would cause me to go to the staff, and then share my frustration with the staff, which would impact them and the way they deal with things also. Because if you can go to leadership then it's dealt with straight away. You don't need to go staff and spread this poison through the staff. But if you're not heard, you'll keep going until you're heard by someone (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Tom believes his current school has good support structures and resources in place to deal with issues such as behavioural management, but he finds it "very hard to

come up with a clear sight on resources that are going to make me feel less stressed when none of those resources reduce the things that cause me stress" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). Therefore, reducing stress levels is "…a thing that I deal with individually (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). He reports that in his context there is not a pathway to access support "and that is something else that can cause you a bit of stress. I'm really isolated here. It's me and nobody else" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). Despite his many years in education, Tom is still unsure of how to access a reliable support pathway in his workplace.

A lack of stress-relieving resources available to teachers led many of the participants to seek alternate avenues of support. Going to colleagues for a sympathetic ear and advice was perhaps not the preferred option for some of the participants, but it seemed to be the only avenue open to them if the leadership was unapproachable (Red, discussion, 8/7/21; Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). The long-term effectiveness of these intense, collegial conversations is open to question. Indeed, Tom noted a considerable straining in relationships among staff in moments of great stress, possibly due to over-involvement in each-others' affairs (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). In the group discussion, Eli recalled a conversation he had with a university lecturer who explained to him that you need to push through crises when you're a teacher. Eli accepts that this is part of the role, but stress can build up over time:

> **ELI:** I remember my university lecturer telling me, 'the show goes on. Your dog dies, you split up with your girlfriend, bad luck, the show goes on. You're up on stage.' I reckon we're good at that, but later, we probably fall apart a bit. Whether it becomes unacceptable – I don't reckon it does, you just always have to roll on, and cope.

Alarmingly, the degree of agitation that Siobhan reported when attempting to access support was exemplified when she explained that she was also hesitant to go to management because she thought it might be used against her – "I thought I may have been penalised and not given support later on" (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). She has worked in many other schools where she has been very stressed as a result of "poor leadership and their lack of ability to advertise a genuine concern for their staff" (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). The essence of teacher stress as reported by the participants due to lack of support is clearly one of frustration that sustains ongoing anxiety. The essence of this sense of bewilderment is captured below.

Essence Exemplars:

> **RED:** And I think you get a sense of a teacher almost being chaotic. 'I'll do this, and then I'll do this.' There's no sense of smoothness or consistency to what they're doing. They're a little bit ad hoc and all over the place. Particularly in a planning session. You can tell the teachers who are stressed because they don't want to listen to the conversation about the learning or the student. They just want to get the planner done (discussion, 8/7/21).

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> **TOM:** …I think it's a bit unreasonable that you think you're doing well if you get to go to the toilet twice a day, and grab your lunch and eat your lunch at a desk in front of the computer. But I do that a lot. It's not really healthy, I don't think (discussion, 23/6/22).

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

> **SIOBHAN:** The actual physicality of it. From being on all the time. And the many interactions you have, not just the educational interactions and conversations with students, it's the, 'Okay, has Harry got his lunch, has so and so got her slip to go to sport, did I follow up from that incident on the playground. I need to get my yard duty covered…' All of those things that got in the way of the actual teaching on some days could make the day very stressful (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Key Concept 2. Misalignment

The concept of teacher misalignment is further distilled into to three sub-concepts: *misalignment through unsupported change*, *revealing the purpose of the change,* and *task overload*. The sub-concepts highlight issues that arise when a shift occurs in school values or pedagogical approach, which then ultimately clashes with and undermines teachers' educational ideals.

The participants indicated on more than one occasion that they feel that their own teaching philosophies and deeply held beliefs are out of step with school leadership (Richie, discussion, 15/1/22; Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). This misalignment is the source of considerable stress and professional torment, and was most obvious during the discussions when the topic of ownership and achieving mastery over teaching work was introduced. For example, Ollie revealed in the one-to-one discussion that the research on motivation by Daniel Pink (2009) had connected with him profoundly. In Pink's view, three key elements need to be present in order for employees to have a positive experience at work. These elements are: purpose, mastery and autonomy. Ollie has reflected on this over time. It was clear to him that teaching has an undeniable purpose, and that most teachers would draw comfort from the fact that they engage in an activity that is meaningful and worthwhile (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Ollie further reported that it is debatable as to whether mastery and autonomy are tangibly present for teachers today in an educational context:

> **OLLIE:** I was thinking about mastery and I'm thinking, 'when was the last time you had an assessment and every kid was there on the day?' You can't even control those sorts of things. It's just messy (discussion, 12/4/21).

He said that teachers could experience some isolated moments of mastery in class at times, but he doubted it was possible to achieve mastery of the profession overall, and linked this reality to a lack of autonomy that was central to the profession of teaching (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). It is evident that this sense of misalignment between his aspirations as a teacher and the reality of his daily work were at odds with one another. He reports:

> **OLLIE:** Mastery – there's no way of ever mastering the job. It's like being a paramedic. If you're the best paramedic ever, you're not going to reduce the amount of triple zero calls. You're always reacting. And I know teaching's not alone in having these sorts of stresses. But you've got all these competing things vying for your attention, that you can't actually prioritise… you're never going to be able to master that.
>
> …The other one in [Pink's] three that he had was autonomy. I think we're very autonomous in some ways. You can be by yourself, without a teachers' aide or anything like that, and sort of do what you want to do, to a degree. But we're not really. Like, you've got to work to the bells (discussion, 12/4/21).

According to some of the participants, namely Red (discussion, 8/7/21) and Ollie (discussion 12/4/21), the current focus on 'differentiation' - or meeting the individual needs of the students through tailored instruction – has had a marked impact on the effort involved in delivering classes, and in turn, generated a feeling of misalignment between their professional values and current school policy, causing increasing stress levels among teachers. Red noted that it is an incredibly difficult task to cater for the massive range of abilities that are present in any given classroom (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). She explained that the development of personalised learning plans (PLP's) requires considerable organisation and writing on behalf of the classroom teacher. Documentation needs to be revised every fortnight and evidence collected to show goals have been met - "and you don't get any extra time to do that. And the PLP writing is massive" (Red,

discussion, 8/7/21). A sense of misalignment can be located in the words of Tom when describing how he is forced to engage in administrative activities that distract him from his commitment to teaching students. Tom noted towards the end of the group discussion that the increase in workload has not been accompanied by any changes to school structure. He reported that: "If you're talking about the breadth of the job, and the demands of the job, nothing's changed, structurally, to accommodate that." (Tom, group discussion, 16/6/22). There was a belief among the participants that major adjustments need to be made to teachers' job descriptions to acknowledge the changes that have taken place over time regarding the scope of the role. Red in particular, was frustrated by the pull away from areas of the curriculum that have traditionally had a strong focus:

> **RED:** And the curriculum's changed too. They've got to do that, they've got to do this. 'Oh, but hang on, you're not taking anything out?' And now literacy and numeracy are dropping. Oh yeah, well I wonder why. You just don't have time to teach it because you've got to teach all this other stuff (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

Ollie also described how teachers often become disillusioned by the addition of new content and how it's supposed to be delivered. As a consequence, he explained, rather than working hard to deliver explicit teaching and give student feedback, a teacher struggling with the new demands of the job may instead do the bare minimum (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Further depleting Eli's faith in management over the years has been the clear misalignment between his focus as a teacher, and the leaders running his school.

> **ELI:** Sometimes it's funding. School's will spend thousands on a social gathering. That I don't get. But then teachers ask for something that they need, or needs updating, and it's just like – No. (discussion, 11/8/22).

Misalignment through unsupported change.

> **OLLIE:** The common line I hear from teachers is, 'There's always something being added, but nothing is ever taken away' (discussion, 12/4/21).

Complaints about workload are a feature of many professions, and are not limited to teaching. However, within the context of a classroom teacher juggling the constant demands of face-to-face teaching - along with the introduction of new pedagogical techniques, complex technologies, and compliance demands - the spectre of change looms large. It was established during the discussions that a career in education, although rewarding, is also extremely challenging due to the ongoing changes to curriculum, policy and practices. Constant change can prevent teachers from ever having the sense that they have mastered the job - a gnawing feeling that, as Ollie shared, has had a negative impact on his career

> **OLLIE:** There's never a chance to master your job. There's never a chance to say, "You know what – I've got this humming." Because so many factors are out of your control (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21).

Change has had a major bearing on Tom's outlook on teaching also. He believes that the introduction of technology into all areas of education has resulted in teachers working harder throughout the day, and for longer. Covid-enforced remote learning, and the increased reliance on technology that came in its wake, has meant that Tom's preparation time has increased again enormously. "So you're doing worked examples, doing movie clips and all that sort of stuff. That happened during remote learning, but it's flowed on to now" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22).

Siobhan wrote in her narrative report about her expansive career and the subtle changes in the kinds of tasks she has been required to carry out as a teacher. She described how the challenges increased during her career, due to the "various social and emotional demands of students, parents' expectations, and the administrative paperwork outside the classroom" (Siobhan, biographical narrative, 11/9/22). Siobhan experiences profound misalignment when the purpose behind the change remains hidden, or at odds with her professional values (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). Eli acknowledged that teachers never feel like they have completely mastered the job. He explained that "you think you're a good teacher until you're exposed to something you haven't been exposed to before. And then you have to adjust and learn from that" (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22). He added that "teachers like control over situations" (Eli, discussion, 11/8/22).

Revealing the purpose of the change. It seems that a sticking point for teachers as they take on new demands is the question why - why are these procedures, platforms, or school structures being introduced? Participants indicated that teachers are normally happy to work hard and take on new initiatives, but when the purpose behind the change is obscured, or withheld, enthusiasm drops and resentment is likely to appear. Tom reported he has often found himself in the position of obediently striving to implement a new pedagogical technique, while at the same time remaining far from convinced of its value and purpose. He believes that if teachers aren't satisfied that new additions to their role are worthwhile, then "that can cause a little bit of angst because you know that you're the one who's going to have to wear it" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). He offered the example of teachers at his school having to adopt a certain style of teaching which "…differed greatly from what people were used to. And people would often get a little

resentful of that, and stressed out maybe, having to deliver it in a different way" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22).

Change can be ushered in to school communities through special days set aside for professional development. This normally involves a guest expert visiting a school, or alternatively, a collection of teachers heading off to a conference in order to be schooled on a new approach. Richie pointed out that a great deal of time has been invested in "…professional development, system-wide, that hasn't worked. A lot of money's been spent on it, and it lasts for a period of time, and then it's, 'move onto the next one'" (Richie, discussion, 15/1/22). Siobhan also mentioned the stress that accompanies events such as professional development days. She reported constant pressure to stay up to date with the changes in "literacy, the changes in inquiry, the changes in mathematics, mental health, the different programs that we need to be updated with constantly and that are always changing" (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). She concluded that the requirement to stay on top of these changes "prevents teachers from ever feeling settled" (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20), or adept as educators.

Of major concern to the teachers taking part in the study was the impact that constant change, and the ensuing confused reaction to it, has on pedagogy and the delivery of the curriculum. Ollie outlined his concerns that teacher stress can have serious repercussions on the way lessons unfold and that many teachers enter survival mode to get through their day. He reported:

> **OLLIE:** I think it's the dud lesson. I think that's the way you cope with stress, isn't it. You go in and you just say, "I've just got to get through this lesson. I'm too knackered. I'm too stressed." And I think that has a huge impact. Kids aren't getting the same feedback they would normally (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21).

Richie made a link between pressure and time. His contention was that schools operate on the understanding that nothing stands still. Richie explained that "as soon as one task is completed, a new one takes its place and teachers know that something else will come straight after again. There are expectations on teachers, in every setting, regarding what they should be getting through. And it's not realistic" (Richie, discussion, 15/1/22). An exchange between Eli, Ollie and Siobhan during the group discussion exposed the teachers' thoughts on school management exploiting the work ethic of teachers:

> **Ollie:** The system is based on, 'Just keep pushing, and they'll get it done.' It's based on that assumption that you will get it done.
>
> **Eli:** It's exploiting that.
>
> **Siobhan:** Exactly.
>
> **Eli:** Exploiting the good-will factor (group discussion, 16/6/22).

The essence exemplars below give further insight into the misalignment that can exist between management and staff.

Essence Exemplars

> **SIOBHAN:** I guess - why? Why is that being implemented? Is it something because, we don't know how to teach reading, and now this is what we're going to be doing? Or is it because it's the new thing. So, what's the purpose? Understanding what's the purpose behind it (discussion 1, 22/12/20).
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> * * *
>
> **OLLIE:** [Leadership] are the generals coming up with the ideas. But there are so many generals, if you're a teacher at the bottom then there's no chance of mastering that. There are so many things you're supposed to be across (discussion, 12/4/21).

Task overload. During the one-to-one discussion with Ollie, the conversation turned to unnecessary or unacceptable tasks that teachers are required to undertake beyond what could be seen as the core work of teachers. Many of the tasks that now fall to teachers have done so as a result of a form of "responsibilisation" – the process whereby "subjects are rendered individually responsible for a task which previously would have been the responsibility of another – usually a state agency – or would not have been recognised as a task at all" (O'Malley, 2009). For example, Ollie identified obligations in a teachers' role description, such as correcting student work, managing behaviour, writing reports, heading out to yard duty, and participating in meetings as part of the fabric of a life in education. He sees these as acceptable and purposeful tasks, even though at times they can all be arduous and demanding (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). The non-essential and often unacceptable job demands identified by Ollie, he believes, are most often delegated by those in school management or those in government positions. Ollie believes that people in management feel the need to be seen as constantly "doing something" (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). He contributed the following anecdote, which touches on the essence of teacher frustration and misalignment. It is linked to task-overload, and to the ever-increasing amount of little jobs teachers are required to do – tasks that of themselves don't seem to be overly demanding, but tend to clutter teachers' working lives.

> **OLLIE:** I heard some teachers in the quad the other day, senior teachers, talking about how often they'd been surveyed recently. They had to come and talk about their [senior] data, and straight away they get a survey asking, "How did that go?" For that little meeting! And they were just so fed-up and stressed about being constantly surveyed on things (discussion, 12/4/21).

In Ollie's opinion, this sort of interference from management only added to the stress levels of the senior teachers who were already under pressure as the school year drew to a close. He also believes that in many schools there are too many people in middle leadership positions, and that consequently they each have their own visions that need to be implemented (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Ollie's comments indicate that responsibilisation in the form of task-invention is present in schools. He argued that each new task may seem worthwhile and achievable in isolation, but can add to a feeling of misalignment and stress as the core responsibilities of teachers are replaced by tasks that are the priority of others, not the teachers.

> **OLLIE:** You've got a curriculum that can be quite demanding and specific – and that maybe you don't agree with. And you think, "Well hang on a minute. How am I also going to teach these boys spelling and vocabulary? I'm an English teacher and I'm supposed to be doing all these 'whiz bang' things (discussion, 12/4/21).

Tom also raised his concerns over the misalignment that can exist between classroom teachers' expectations and those of management. He stated that over the last few years he has not been part of a single conversation concerning teaching and learning that was initiated by leadership. He explained that "this lack of interest has contributed to feeling isolated with little support, making the stress of the job more difficult to deal with" (Tom, biographical narrative, 29/9/22). Unless you are a classroom teacher with a full teaching load, Tom argues, "you don't realise how much stress new requests from management add, because you know that every single one of them, you can't get done in your normal day" (Tom, biographical narrative, 29/9/22). This reflection was echoed by Eli, who believes that the misalignment is due to management lacking the understanding of what the day-to-day professional lives of teachers entails.

> **ELI:** I've had a theory the last ten or fifteen years, and I've told everyone who is interesting in listening. The principal should do a full-time teaching load for six months. The deputy who is interested in becoming a principal, takes the principal's role for those six months, so the principal is still there. Just so the principal has a solid understanding of what a teacher experiences. Some of them haven't taught for twenty years - a full time load (discussion 1/8/22).

This bifurcation in understanding the complex nature of teachers' work from the perspective of a teacher such as Tom, and his principal, is a source of misalignment regarding teachers' work that is the essence of sustained teacher stress in the contemporary workforce.

The dialogical conversations, as well as the written biographical narratives, revealed that teachers taking part in the research regard the enormous breadth of the role of classroom teacher, and the unacceptability of certain tasks they undertake, as contributing to a growing misalignment between teachers and those who delegate these tasks. In previous decades, many of the tasks of the nature described were beyond a teacher's domain. The participants are aware of this misalignment, as outlined by the essence exemplars below.

Essence Exemplars:

> **TOM:** Because policy makers and leadership at schools often have minimal experience of teaching a full academic load, they show little understanding of the things contributing to teacher stress. Workload and conflict with students, parents, and between staff causes enough stress in itself. Add to this administrative and compliance burdens, and the breadth of what a teacher is required to do becomes unreasonable and heightens stress (biographical narrative, 29/9/22).

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> **OLLIE:** It's also a cultural problem - looking to schools to solve things. How does a politician, or someone with the best interest show that they're doing something, "Well, we'll just get

school to talk about that." And maybe move away from the
parents having accountability (discussion, 12/4/21).

* * *

TOM: Sometimes it almost becomes a survival approach: 'I'm
stressed, I just need to get through the content of the day.' And
you tend to neglect the personal connections that you strive for
in a classroom. Pedagogically you'll still get through the basics,
you'll go into limp mode. You'll get the content covered but all
the peripheral stuff that makes a good teacher – connecting with
the kids, forming relationships - when you are stressed and you
are on edge, that goes out the window (discussion, 23/6/22).

Key Concept 3. Invasion

The analysis of the data revealed that the participants have had to increasingly

manage the invasion of key work obligations and requirements into their lives outside of

school. As part of the process of examining this concept, three sub-concepts are

presented under the headings: *lack of detachment, email,* and *parents.*

Tom noted, when reflecting on increased administrative demands such as staff

surveys, that he doesn't get time to complete such tasks at school: "I have to find that

time at home. I'm already doing preparation and I'm already doing correction. And that

happens all the time" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). Red explained how external

contributors to stress incrementally and insidiously managed to work their way into her

classroom, and her consciousness. She remarked that often she had "a lot of stuff going

through my head, like I've got to get to that staff meeting, or ring that parent, then I

would just leave it. I would fix that at home. I would get on top of that once the kids have

gone" (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

Tom referred to the sheer volume of tasks that classroom teachers are required to undertake in order to fulfil the requirements of the job, and how certain administrative tasks invade his teaching space (Tom, group discussion, 16/6/22). He described how directives such as uniform blitzes can be a huge source of stress when mishandled by school leaders. An instruction from a deputy principal outlining the new focus can immediately make teachers reassess how their day or week will run.

> **TOM:** That's what can stress you out. When you get a directive like 'Okay, we're going to do a uniform blitz. And the way you're going to do it is you're going to send letters home to the parents.' And you're like, 'I'm teaching six periods today. I'm teaching six periods tomorrow. (group discussion, 16/6/22).

Tom reported that he now completes basic teacher tasks, such as corrections, at home as a matter of course:

> **TOM:** I think, because all your time in class is taken up with classroom duties, and then your eight periods a week where your time goes on preparation. I now find I take all of my corrections home, because I don't have time to do any of them at school (discussion, 23/6/22).

Similarly, Red described how her teaching time is invaded by the challenging requirement to 'differentiate' properly and cater for the wide range of abilities teachers find in classes (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). Aside from making the delivery of the lessons more challenging, Red reported that running a class with a wide range of student abilities brings with it a flood of emotional and social demands from parents, and enormous amounts of invasive administrative paperwork:

> **RED:** One of the big stresses now is differentiation. Making sure that all the kids are learning what they need to learn. You also have all the discipline things that pop up. So, 'that person's off task. This person's annoying that person. This one's getting upset because they don't understand the task.' You can never

really have a fluid teaching session. You're constantly putting out little spot fires, making sure the children are engaged (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

Red has observed that rather than focussing on the students, teachers necessarily tend to give all their attention to the administrative tasks imposed on them, both at home and in the classroom (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

A sense of invasion among the participants, or a blurring of professional boundaries, was present in two further ways - namely through a lack of detachment from work at home, and an invasion into the classroom by parents. These two experiences are outlined below.

Lack of detachment. Tom explained during discussions that above all, he prioritises the classroom experience of his students. This requires significant planning, engagement in class, and feedback to students and parents afterwards (Tom, biographical narrative, 29/9/22). Tom explained that the planning of classes on its own "takes up more than the allocated time set aside for teacher release. Every other aspect of the job takes place in the evenings, weekends and holidays: assessment and reporting, communication requirements, and the many admin tasks" (Tom, biographical narrative, 29/9/22). But for Tom, stress emerges when pressure reaches a tipping point and he starts to have an emotional or physical reaction to it.

> **TOM:** And so when is it unacceptable, the level of stress? I think that when it starts to really impact your family, then I think, 'well that's really unacceptable.' Your job shouldn't really do that to you. Or if it starts to impact your physical wellbeing, and your mental wellbeing. You can't sleep at night with worry. That to me is really unacceptable. I don't think anyone signed up to have their job impact their family life in a negative way, or impact their physical or mental wellbeing (group discussion, 16/6/22).

This invasion of work into the home space highlights the all-encompassing nature of the profession today.

Email. Every teacher interviewed was active in the profession before email became virtually omnipotent. They also started their careers without allocated staff laptop computers, which have ensured that teachers continue their work at home and remain contactable by students, colleagues, and parents alike. The integration of technology into the lives of teachers has brought with it an extra layer of complexity. Red believes that "with every new bit of technology, so many things can go wrong" (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). Eli highlighted his strong disliking of students' laptops. He believes that their presence in the classroom pulls the focus away from the teacher, they require close monitoring, and are harmful to many students:

> **ELI:** I hate student laptops. I think they're a massive distraction. We've got kids who are addicted to games, and we're telling them to open their computer and do the work. And they've got access to some games online. We've got students with genuine game addictions. So we're saying to them, here's the heroine, but don't inject it - to an addict (discussion, 11/8/22).

Ollie sees email as hugely problematic. He has observed how emails flood into teachers working lives, pulling them mentally away from their core tasks.

> **OLLIE:** It's a delegation tool rather than a… it's not really a solution, it's more a way of saying "I ticked the box for someone. So we've got an issue. How am I going to deal with it? People are using bad language. I know – I'll send an email out to all the teachers. 'There's a bit of bad language going on. Stamp down on it. Da, da ,da… this is what we're going to do if there's bad language.'" That's great. But then the solution is what the teachers do when they hear the bad language. Not that email. That email's just another thing for people to do (discussion, 12/4/21).

Email is a presence that simply wasn't in teaching 30 years ago, and although technology may have increased the efficiency of research and information sharing, email is a highly invasive tool that the participants have had difficulty managing in their working lives. For example, Eli believes heavy email use has a clear impact on the mindset of teachers.

> **ELI:** Twenty years ago, we left our laptops on our desk overnight. And no parent emailed you. Whereas now you've got 24-hour access when parents can email you. And that one email may chew up 30 minutes. And you might get multiple emails from multiple students and multiple parents. And it's part of your role and part of your job to respond to those. As well as prepare classes and do all the other stuff. And look after yourself to make sure you're ready to go into the classroom and put your best foot forward (discussion, 11/8/22).

Eli also discussed the stress that accompanies emailing parents, and how avoiding email completely is, for him, a better option: "You have to put together that email, and make sure the tone is right. All that sort of stuff. That's so tricky. And you've got to do that right. I'd much rather pick up the phone and call the parent. I'll email them just to say 'I'm free at 3:30pm'" (Eli, discussion, 1/8/22).

Essence Exemplars

> **OLLIE:** I always say, I think teachers are emailed like they're in desk jobs. But they're not in desk jobs. They're actually in the classroom (discussion, 12/4/21).

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> **TOM:** We were spoken to the other day about doing proper [data] reports. I have 150 kids, and then a bunch of those requests drop into your email. And I'm not doing any of those things during the day when I'm teaching or preparing for my classes. Those are the peripheral things that come in sometimes, and they're on evenings, weekends, whatever. And so they add a lot of stress. I think unless you've got a full load, you don't

realise how much stress those sort of requests add, because you
know that every single one of them, you can't get done in your
normal day. It's going to happen outside of worktime
(discussion, 23/6/22).

Parents. While administrative tasks invade teachers' home space, it appears the

parents of students can also invade teachers' work space. Of all the reasons put forward

to explain why many of the teachers taking part in this study have moved away from a

full-time classroom teaching position, dealing with parents was the most prominent. The

teachers within the group reported that parental expectations and the level of scrutiny has

grown. According to Siobhan, schools "seem to be catering more towards the parents

than really looking after the general wellbeing of their staff" (Siobhan, discussion 1,

22/12/20). It seems, at least among the experienced teachers taking part in this study, that

managing students becomes more of a genuine source of stress when it is coupled with

challenging and combative parents. For Siobhan, stress came from trying to make sure

she was doing a good job, not only by the students, but also by the parents (Siobhan,

discussion 1, 22/12/20). She declared during the first discussion that parents are "really

becoming almost like a tiger that's very hard to control" (Siobhan, discussion 1,

22/12/20). Eli noted that often the teacher becomes the first target of parents if their

child's school experience is not to their satisfaction, or an incident as taken place. He

believes "the first thing is, if the kid's not doing well at school, then let's 'go' the teacher.

But for me it's 'Well let's look at what's happening at home first'" (discussion, 11/8/22).

Richie believes teachers can become apprehensive about writing reports if they are too

conscious of whom they are writing for – parents.

> **RITCHIE:** There is definitely an element of anxiety that is
> there for teachers when they are constructing their writing
> because they know who their audience is. And they don't want
> to, or hope that they're not challenged by parents with what

they write. So they may tend to be very cautious with what they write. And therefore, it's not actually what should be reported (discussion, 15/1/22).

Most alarmingly, Red stated that among teachers in her school, "there is often conflict between taking action against behaviours, and fear of what reaction parents may have" (Red, biographical narrative, 11/10/22). This fear of incurring the wrath of parents also extends to the act of grouping students within classrooms for learning activities. According to Red, although students are usually fine working in whatever tiered learning group they're placed in, parents can cause issues (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). She explained in the group discussion that deflated parents of students in lower maths groups often express their frustration at seeing their children forced to solve easier maths problems at school than those they set for them at home.

> **RED:** Then you've got the parents who say, 'He's working in the thousands with me. I'm teaching him BODMAS and algebra at home.' And we're like, 'yeah, that's great, but he's still got to know how to do this.' It's meeting parent expectations, the child's ability, differentiation. And then you've got a kid who's still got a sucking thing around his thumb. I'm not joking.
>
> **ELI:** And the kids know that. They know. The parents are the issue. The kids are fine. It's the parents (group discussion, 16/6/22).

In his biographical narrative, Eli further elaborated on his belief that parents are too often an invasive presence in the school setting, particularly when teachers are trying to challenge individual students.

> **ELI:** I'm of the firm opinion that students should be pushed outside of their comfort zone, in a loving and supporting environment, to achieve success. We must have structures in place that allow for this to happen. This will build resilience and belief, key tools that they will need for future success. Sometimes parents just don't want their kid pushed, which in my opinion, is a real shame (biographical narrative, 12/10/22).

The teachers taking part in this study shared how parents, email, and inconsistent classroom job demands can all constitute invasive elements in the context of contemporary teaching. This invasiveness is a clear source of stress for the participants, as highlighted by the essence exemplars below.

Essence Exemplars:

> **RED:** Timelines are reduced. Time in our holidays/breaks are spent thinking about and planning for school. I find most of my 'personal' time is spent thinking or doing things around my school (biographical narrative, 11/10/22).

<div align="center">* * *</div>

> **RICHIE:** I think there are some parents who think they know just as much as teachers do because they went to school themselves. That's not the case. How many of us get into a plane and ask to see the pilot? You put trust in the pilot because the pilot knows how to fly the plane. Teachers know how to teach, and they should be allowed to do that job with the support of leaders (discussion, 15/1/22).

<div align="center">* * *</div>

> **OLLIE:** We want parents to be in partnership. But if every parent starts communicating with you, it's actually impossible. The job's impossible (discussion, 12/4/21).

Key Concept 4. Fractured Teacher Identity

At a certain point in the formative stages of their careers, the role of teacher became part of the participants' identity. The term, 'teacher identity' can be used to refer to the way that "teachers, both individually and collectively, view and understand themselves as teachers" (Mockler, 2011). It incorporates values that educators uphold and the decisions they make regarding, for example, curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment. Teacher identity is framed by an understanding of themselves "as a product

of their professional identity" (Mockler, 2011). This section outlines how teacher identity

can be fractured as a result of stress. Two sub-concepts are highlighted namely: *self-*

imposed stress, and *teachers competing with one another*.

As the participants matured into their roles, they reported that their level of self-

efficacy - the belief individuals hold in their own ability to perform specific tasks

effectively (Bandura, 1977) - also increased and consolidated. For example, Richie

recalled how his confidence soared after teaching the same year level for a few years:

> **RICHIE:** I had multiple years when I was a year 5/6 teacher, and I found a niche in that space where I was comfortable. I knew the content, I was confident in working with the children, and with the team I was working alongside, to move the children and make the impact that was needed. And I felt confident in my delivery space, and how I brought elements of humour into the delivery of teaching. And the relational aspect that I had with children, and I still hold this now, is a key component to getting children to work with you, alongside you (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22).

Teacher self-efficacy can shape capability to "determine how persons interpret

their thoughts, actions, and emotions in given situations" (Zee & Koomen, 2016). What

this study has revealed most poignantly, and in the teachers' own words, is when teachers

lose focus, and their sense of identity as professionals is fractured, their teaching is

compromised. Red report that:

> **RED:** When teachers are stressed, they are less focused on the act of teaching. They're less focused on the needs of the students in that moment because they're thinking about 20 million other things. Their teaching becomes more chaotic as well (Red, discussion, 8/7/21).

The stories presented as part of this research have revealed that teachers are

increasingly pulled away from what they see as their core purpose, which destabilises,

and at times fractures their sense of professional identity. Red continue to outline how

even experienced teachers are often in the situation where their mind is not on the

students in front of the them, but rather consumed by other tasks.

> **RED:** It's like, 'Well, I'm meant to be teaching, and I'm meant
> to be at my best in the classroom, but in the back of my head
> I've got all this other stuff that I've got to do, and when am I
> going to get that done?' (discussion, 8/7/21).

The teachers explained that they were at their best as teachers when they felt

empowered and had ownership over student learning and classroom management, a

revelation consistent with the work of Jentsch et al., (2022). Valdmann et al., (2020) hold

that the concept of teacher ownership relates to "both the beliefs established by the

teacher and the operationalisation of these beliefs" (p. 660). A sense of ownership also

develops when a new approach is deemed acceptable and workable by teachers, thus

increasing their self-efficacy levels (Valdmann et al. 2020). However, Ollie explained

that when a methodology is enforced school-wide it can have debilitating effect of on

teachers who aren't suited to the prescribed way of teaching.

> **OLLIE:** It can take a bit of the personality out of teaching, and
> it can reduce teaching to something that's not open to all
> different types of personalities, but just a certain type of teacher
> (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21).

The tasks connected to their work that teachers taking part in the study see as

non-essential, or poorly delegated, are the ones that have driven them to despair at

various points in their careers, diminished their sense of ownership, and fractured their

identities as teachers. Siobhan explained that as a young teacher, she gradually learned

how to cope and grew in confidence in the classroom. However, peripheral tasks loomed

large, which she had little control over.

> **SIOBHAN:** There were also the stresses of all the different things that had to be done. Not just in my teaching, but in following up documents, making policy decisions, contacting parents. The copious number of things that had to be done during the day, and then that had to be cleared. (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20)

For experienced teachers such as the participants in this study, the shock of the new can be detrimental to their identity as professionals. Siobhan expressed her belief that when change is introduced, it is important for school leaders to have the needs of teachers front of mind.

> **SIOBHAN:** I think for me it comes from leadership, and what leadership demands of them. Where teachers are in their teaching. Change, I think change causes a lot of stress. Because some teachers don't cope with that, or aren't willing to change (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Pearce and Morrison (2011) believe that when new approaches are presented to staff, teachers are more likely to retain a positive professional identity if they feel confident that the different ways of thinking can be accommodated in practice. This applies both to new teachers, and their more experienced colleagues (Pearce & Morrison, 2011).

Tom offered an example of how strong, empathic management can be a great driver of positivity and motivation. He shared how he worked under a principal who, at every opportunity, would reaffirm what Tom was doing in the classroom. "If he ever had good feedback on you, he'd let you know. He'd make you feel very supported, and that's always good. Having that feeling of support reduces stress" (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22). Tom thrived under the former principal's leadership, and put his hand up for a management position himself during this period as a result of his respect for, and

connection with, senior management. However, Tom, like many of the participants, found himself more commonly in contexts where this support was not present. Richie reported that over the years, whenever he has experienced stress and felt his identity as a teacher slipping, usually "part of that stress has come from leadership and their inability to support staff and look after the wellbeing of their staff, and perhaps be understanding of the pressures that their staff are under" (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22).

Self-imposed pressure. At certain points throughout the discussions, and within the biographical narratives, teachers reflected on the possibility that an element of the stress that undermined their professional identity may have been self-imposed. It was considered likely that the internal drive which lead them to care for their students, and invest in their learning and wellbeing, was also responsible for them over-working and exposing themselves to stress and burnout. This stress is derived not only from the demands imposed by leadership but is a reaction to the environment of the school, and the unreasonable expectations that are allowed to germinate within the teaching group. Siobhan gave an insight into her mindset during a period when she found herself overworking:

> **SIOBHAN:** The stress was coming from myself and the demands that I put on that role and what my expectations were. I felt at the time that I had a boss that put a lot of demands on me, and I really wanted to be able to live up to those expectations (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Siobhan said that when reflecting on her self-imposed periods of stress, she could admit that she didn't have to do the work she was so immersed in, but she "couldn't not do it" (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20), such was the fragile state of her professional identity. Red noted that education seems to be a profession vulnerable to staff putting "extra pressure on themselves because they want the kids to do well" (Red, biographical

narrative, 11/10/22). At the conclusion of her biographical narrative, Siobhan declared

that dedicated educators are usually stressed because that is the very nature of the job.

> **SIOBHAN:** Real educators are stressed, they care, they work
> hard, they go the extra mile, they work in their holidays and on
> a Sunday, they work then they are sick, and they turn up every
> day, because you are either a teacher, or quite simply, you're
> not. And that, is the job! (Siobhan, biographical narrative,
> 11/9/22).

Ollie believes that the instinct to perform extra duties, and work late into the night,

stems from a sense of obligation to students and leaders, and a need to be always looking

for new ways to do things (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). He feels this prevents some

teachers from ever fully settling into their roles, and diminishes their sense of

professional identity.

> **OLLIE:** There's an old saying, I forget who said it, 'Each of us
> is our own general, but we're also the soldier as well.' We can
> be creative people, teachers. Or passionate, or have big ideas.
> The hilarity of that is that we're also the soldier that has to
> implement that idea (discussion, 12/4/21).

Teachers competing with one another. A surprising revelation, raised by

numerous participant's and linked strongly to a state of fractured teacher identity, was the

prevalence of competitiveness among staff within schools. Ollie asserted that this is a

distracting and burgeoning issue that possibly stems from a desire to "be the better

teacher by working harder than everyone else. Or seemingly working harder" (Ollie,

discussion, 12/4/21). He has observed that because so much of what teachers do is away

from other teachers, highly ambitious members of staff, or the ones riddled with

insecurities, need to somehow signal to their colleagues that they are an effective

operator (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Normally, Ollie relayed, this is done through email,

sharing success stories, or through "constant self-promotion in staff meetings" (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21).

Richie also expressed his concern over staff competitiveness, and how this reflects poorly on the school environment. He felt that staff should be secure enough in their work so as to not feel compelled to constantly advertise their worth (Richie, 12/1/22). He cited report writing as a clear example of teachers falling into the trap of writing too much in order to be seen as the person giving the most detailed feedback. He explained that "what can happen is that people start to write more. Often there are people that do that. And I've had to have conversations with people about taking stuff out" (Richie, discussion, 12/1/22). Richie warned that if leaders are not quick to stamp this out, or indeed, if they make excessive report comments the benchmark, resentment and stress can be the end result – along with huge teacher workloads (Richie, discussion, 15/1/22).

Ollie believes that when a school has an unfortunate mix of overly-keen teachers and managers who are not monitoring workloads, then teachers can become their own worst enemies. "Sometimes our ambition can work against us. We want to do fantastic things, or exciting things. Or maybe we're bored so we're looking for something – 'Yeah, this would be great if the kids can do this.' Is it really? Or is it just the new, shiny bright thing that you're looking to implement" (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21).

The stories and essence exemplars presented in this section have revealed that when teachers are pulled away from what they consider to be their core purpose, a destabilization takes place which can fracture their sense of professional identity. Additionally, the participants' stories highlight the presence of competitiveness in their working lives, which has led to further undermining or fracturing of their identities as a

result of this competitiveness. Further essence exemplars expose the reality of the issue

below:

> ***Essence Exemplars:***

>> **RICHIE:** …Teaching shouldn't be a competition between teachers. It's very much a partnership, and should always be that way. Unfortunately, there are a lot of teachers out there who do like to put themselves out there as being better than the next person (discussion, 15/1/22).

>> * * *

>> **OLLIE:** Because so much of what we do is away from other teachers, how do you signal to others that you're an effective teacher? It's through all your emails, and the things you say during staff meetings. Maybe that would be alleviated if we saw each other in the classroom. We would say, "No, actually you're a crap teacher. You send a lot of worksheets around, and you have a lot of great ideas…" or, "You're a ripper, but I've never heard anything from you, but you do an incredible job in the classroom" (discussion, 12/4/21).

(ii)   Chapter Summary

By emphasising how participant narratives and quotes – their lived experiences – bring the literature to life, the essence of the phenomenon of teacher stress has been revealed. The analysis of the data highlights the robustness of the key concepts and essence exemplars located within the data, which is evident by the depth and sharpness of the participants' stories and reflections. These shared experiences help to more fully elucidate the phenomenon of teacher stress in schools today. Furthermore, the data gathered during the course of the current study presents a clear path to new understandings of teacher stress.

In this chapter, the intention was to address the third research question - *what are the essences of the phenomenon of teacher stress?* – by consolidating the data into

succinct conceptual summaries. The researcher, through deep analysis of the teachers'

lived experiences, was able to draw out essence exemplars to help uncover the essence of

the phenomenon of teacher stress, particularly as experienced through bewilderment,

misalignment, invasiveness, and the fracturing of teacher identity. The complexity and

illusiveness of the research problem was revealed through the inter-relating key concepts,

and the entangled starting points of the presentation of the phenomenon. Whilst it is

important to understand the findings from this study should not be generalised, it is clear

that the participants involved have sketched a disarming portrait of modern-day teaching,

highlighting the misalignment between job demands, and the fracturing of teachers' sense

of professional identity. The analysis of the discussions, along with the written narratives,

has identified strong emotions and feelings accompanied by a shared sense of

misalignment as reflected in the data presented in the chapter. Further, evidence of

besieged teachers, such as the participants in this study, captures the essences of

bewilderment, misalignment, invasion, and the fracturing of professional identities that

underpin the teacher stress permeating this community and the broader profession.

Chapter 7 that follows, considers the theoretical impact these findings may have in the

field of teacher stress.

Chapter 7: Building a Substantive Theory of Cognitive and Emotional Dissonance: Discussion and Findings

Introduction

The thesis now moves forward towards theorizing the findings and articulating how this research makes a valuable contribution to knowledge in the field of teacher stress. Encountering the stories, Chapter 5, addressed the first two research questions using the participant narratives and descriptions namely:

- What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?

- What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?

Chapter 6 analysed the data that was identified within the stories and experiences presented in Chapter 5. Four key concepts were identified that captured teachers' perspectives:

1. Bewilderment

2. Misalignment

3. Invasion, and;

4. Fractured identities

These four concepts form the basis of theorising teacher stress from the perspectives of this cohort of teachers.

Here, in this chapter, the focus is on theorising the reported experiences of the teachers and the place of the four key concepts presented in the previous chapter in building a new substantive theory of teacher stress that reflects the feelings of

bewilderment, misalignment, invasion that have led to the fracturing of their identities as teachers in the current context of teaching. It is concluded that incongruence, or dissonance, between the teachers' own identity and how they are valued by the decision makers within their school communities, leads to high levels of stress in the educational workspace (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017).

From the very beginning of this study, the intention was to give voice to a collection of teachers who have worked with and managed stress throughout their professional lives. Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, teachers' experiences and reflections were presented through discussions and written narratives in the hope of bringing the phenomenon of teacher stress to life. While there have been many studies with a strong focus on teacher stress (Chen, et al., 2022; McCarthy, 2019; Prilleltensky et al., 2016; Kyriacou, 2001; Jentsch, et al., 2022) the value of the current study is that it presents the participants' own lived experiences of stress in schools, and in the teachers' own words. The methods employed have generated strong, deeply insightful, and informative statements on the issue, and although the findings cannot be generalised to all teachers, it is hoped that the participants' words, and accompanying fresh theoretical perspective, will resonate strongly with key stake-holders, and create a new avenue to understanding the working lives of teachers. The data exposes an ongoing misalignment experienced by teachers through leadership, compliance with policy mandates, meaningless administration tasks, and reduced quality teaching time that deprioritises the significance of student learning.

Focus Theory Emerging from the Data: Cognitive and Emotional Dissonance

It became clear upon reflecting on the data analysis presented in the previous chapter that it is possible to argue that the bewilderment concerning, and misalignment

between, teacher beliefs and self-identity has led to the fracturing of teacher self-efficacy

over time, and has resulted in a growing sense of cognitive and emotional dissonance that

is permeating teaching today. Festinger (1957), in this theory of cognitive dissonance,

suggested that employees work towards maintaining consonance among multiple

cognitions of beliefs and behaviours. The distinctive aspect of this theory is that

individuals attempt to move away from a state of cognitive dissonance as inconsistent

cognitions lead to unpleasant and conflicted feelings for individuals (Festinger, 1957). In

the case of teachers experiencing misalignment and bewilderment, cognitive harmony

may be achieved by teacher beliefs influencing their practices, or alternately, teacher

practices influencing their beliefs (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017). The lived experiences

presented in this study reveal that teachers often struggle to align their professional self-

identity and self-efficacy with the current requirements of the job. In response to this

cognitive dissonance, teachers experience stress and possibly burnout. Guerra and

Wubbena (2017) offered the following;

> Teachers may express beliefs emphasising [for example,] the
> importance of culturally proficient teaching for diverse student
> populations while their practices in the classroom align with the
> pressure of high-stakes testing environments, making teachers'
> decision-making and judgements ripe with contradictions that
> must be sorted through (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017, p. 47).

Cognitive Dissonance theory rationalises this disconnect between teacher identity

and what is demanded of them in the classroom and after hours. Teacher beliefs and

practices are fundamentally interrelated (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017), therefore teachers

are finding themselves in a position where they are experiencing contestations between

their own professional beliefs and the contrary values forced upon them by leaders and

employers. It is important to note that the participants in this study have received no

training in dealing with this cognitive dissonance, and have been left to wrestle with the strain of teaching while harbouring this conflict. When misalignment occurs for educators, and they feel the effects of dissonance, they naturally seek some form of re-alignment. This can cause teachers stress, and may even force them out of the profession (Martin, 2022).

Festinger (1957) argued that dissonance almost always surfaces "after an attempt has been made, by offering rewards or threatening punishment, to elicit overt behaviour that is at variance with private opinion" (Festinger, 1957, p. 261). He also noted that forced exposure to new information will often result in "misinterpretation and misperception of the new information by the person thus exposed in an effort to avoid a dissonance increase" (Festinger, 1957, p. 265). Workers experiencing a state of dissonance such as the teachers in this study may respond in a variety of ways. Hinojosa et al. (2017) described a four-step process. Initially, workers experience a cognitive discrepancy, and then respond with psychological discomfort (dissonance). Third, individuals become motivated to reduce the dissonance, and finally they engage in discrepancy reduction in an effort to reduce the dissonance that is present in their workplace (Hinojosa et al., 2017). The participants in this study experiencing a state of cognitive or emotional dissonance have shown signs of attempts to reduce dissonance by engaging in discrepancy reduction, which entails "altering cognitions to reduce the cognitive discrepancy" (Hinojosa et al., 2017, p. 173). This is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

This study has demonstrated that the sources of teachers' stress are multifaceted and contextual. However, the participants have all experienced sensations of bewilderment, invasion and misalignment that have ultimately fractured or reconstituted

their identities as responsible and autonomous professional educators. The ongoing

contestations, contradictions and ambiguities that have been reported by teachers as their

professional work is being reshaped away from their aspirational values and ideologies

into highly bureaucratised and regulated forms of work has generated feelings of

cognitive and emotional dissonance as the central core concepts of teacher stress.

Individuals attempt to move away from a state of cognitive dissonance as inconsistent

cognitions lead to unpleasant and conflicted feelings for individuals (Festinger, 1957).

The teachers have identified their conflicted feelings as invasion, bewilderment, and

misalignment; concepts that have resulted in the fracturing of their professional identity.

In this case, teachers have been unable to move away from a state of cognitive

dissonance as Festinger (1957) suggests, ultimately resulting in sustained feelings of

conflict, uneasiness, and demoralisation.

Emotional dissonance. Participants have also reported the essence of emotional

dissonance, which is a "subjective emotional state that represents a mismatch between

genuine emotional expression and organisational requirements of emotional display"

(Cheung & Tang, 2011, p. 50). In the context of this study, emotional dissonance refers

to the conflict between genuinely felt emotions and those that are required to be on

display in the workplace (Middleton, 1989). When the outward expression of emotion is

not genuinely experienced by the worker it is "more keenly and immediately felt, and it

creates greater emotional dissonance" (Morris & Feldman, 1996, p.999). Here, teachers

clearly report the experience of sustained and exhausting emotional dissonance when the

emotional expression required to perform the act of teaching clashes with the inner

feeling that they hold (Morris & Feldman, 1996). It is also clear that the act of teaching,

with its constant and often exhausting social interplay between teachers and students –

and between colleagues – exposes educators to high levels of emotional investment. It has been demonstrated in this study that this type of emotional labour threatens teachers' sense of authentic selfhood in that it requires the teachers to "evoke certain types of emotions while supressing others" (Erickson & Ritter, 2001, p. 148)

Emotional dissonance has been identified in the literature to date as a key element of poor health outcomes for workers, as well as burnout (Dormann & Zapf, 2004). Goussinsky (2011) made links between burnout and decreased performance, and in doing so, called on managers to work towards reducing the impact of emotional dissonance through different forms of intervention, including training to enhance employees' ability to cope with stress. It was found that the need for managers to enhance workers' feelings of control was of vital importance. The importance of teachers maintaining a semblance of control over their job, along with a sense of independence and discretion, also increases the likelihood of them responding effectively when faced with stressful interactions. Teachers confronted with the alternative – little control over how and when job tasks are undertaken as described in this study – might experience psychological issues (Karasek, 1979). Additionally, Grandey (2003) posited that workers such as teachers may try to cope with emotional exhaustion, and attempt to reduce the emotional dissonance experienced, by sharing their negative feelings to colleagues. Some participants in the current research outlined how they responded to emotional exhaustion in a similar this way.

> **SIOBHAN:** [The lack of support from leadership] would cause me to go to the staff, and then share my frustration with the staff, which would impact them and the way they deal with things also. Because if you can go to leadership then it's dealt with straight away. You don't need to go staff and spread this poison through the staff (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Emotional dissonance, the discord between a teacher's feelings towards their work and the emotional strain involved in actually undertaking the tasks, is a condition that relates not merely to psychological wellbeing and job outcomes, but can also affect familial relationships at home (Cheung et al., 2011). There is strong evidence of this discord in the data provided by participants in this study and analysed in the previous chapter. A powerful lived experience highlighted in the current research is the draining exhaustion experienced by the participants in executing their work, and the way this decreased the likelihood of being emotionally present for their families. Ollie expresses this exhaustion most clearly:

> **OLLIE**: Stress for me is being run down, and it starts affecting that home life as well. You get home and feel too knackered to be bothered doing anything. Sometimes I'm patient all day long, and then I get home and take it out on my kids (discussion, 12/4/21).

Of significance is the revelation that the teachers in this study were unable to find a way of overcoming emotional dissonance due to the imposition of constraints on their work. The confluence of cognitive and emotional dissonance experienced by the professional teachers in this study due to educational policy mandates, and the sustained imposition of bureaucratic styles of leadership resulted in new concepts of teacher stress that may reflect high levels of demoralization across the profession and increasing levels of attrition in the domain of experienced classroom teachers in Australia. In this study it has been ascertained that four key concepts foster the cognitive and emotional dissonance that participating teachers have experienced over recent years, namely invasion, bewilderment, misalignment and the fracturing of professional identities. It is argued here that these concepts are core to the phenomenon of dissonance that underpins long-term

teacher stress. This is illustrated below graphically, and is recognized as a contribution to new knowledge in this field of study.
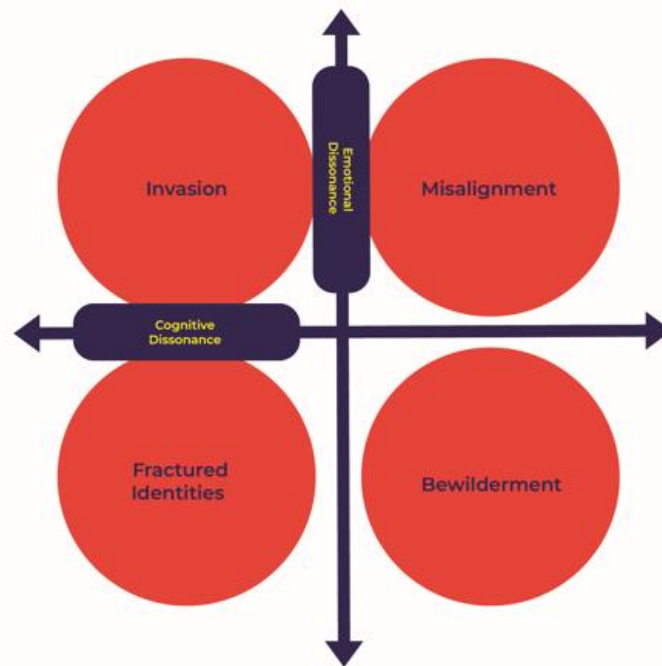
Figure 7.1: Teacher stress resulting from cognitive and emotional dissonance

Context: Imposition of bureaucratic measures on the work of teachers.

Theoretical Connections

It has been revealed during the course of this research that teaching in the classroom was the focus of the participants' working lives in the early years of their professional journey. This is in contrast to the challenges they experience now as part of their daily work, including wading through emails during lessons or trying to gain an understanding of changes to curriculum and policy in countless meetings. It has been reported that any joy or fulfilment to be derived from the job was in part dependent on

the trust shown in teachers as professionals. Over time, the participants relayed that this feeling of fulfilment has been stripped away and replaced by a sense of bewilderment and misalignment. Reflecting on the findings of their study into the complexity of teacher job satisfaction, McGee, et al. (2022) were not surprised by aspects of the job that brought teachers joy – specifically student achievement and the fostering of positive relationships in schools. They were, however, surprised by;

> … the sheer number of challenges shared by these seemingly satisfied teachers and how those challenges connected to the ideas of what's missing from education, what's added on to teachers' jobs, and how these two elements cause imbalance for teachers both personally and professionally. (McGee, et al., 2022, p. 10)

This reported imbalance and dissonance negatively repositions teachers' self-efficacy and their identity as professionals and is consistent with the issues explored in the participant narratives presented in the current study, and expressed through feelings of bewilderment.

Considering the staffing crises currently unfolding in education sectors across Australia and in many other parts of the world (Wiggan, et al., 2021), it is worth noting why the participants moved into the profession in the first place, and when in their journey they found teaching most satisfying and enjoyable. None of the teachers in this study mentioned financial renumeration as a driving factor when they entered education. Similarly, holidays and lengthy pupil-free opportunities, although attractive, were seen as a bonus rather than a strong lure. The pull to educate young people in a collegial environment was strong among the participants, along with the belief that they each had something of value to offer. The attractiveness of the profession seemed to lie in the act of creatively presenting content to a classroom full of students and assisting them with

progressing their learning and socialisation. The participants described how previous

positive experiences with educators provided a model for success in the profession.

During the discussions, when the participants recalled the positive characteristics of

teaching, they have described how they immersed themselves in their role and drew great

satisfaction from catering to their students' needs. Table 8.1 below provides a succinct

overview of those moments of satisfaction.

Table 7.1 Participants thoughts on teaching as a satisfying and enjoyable job

RED: I felt that I had a voice, and what I could contribute to planning, or information I gave about students, was valid and important. And in the classroom, I felt like I knew what I was doing (discussion, 8/7/21).
SIOBHAN: I knew what was best for those students. I knew what they needed. I knew where to go. That was glorious, and the data, or the results, showed [it] (discussion 1, 22/12/20).
TOM: I looked at teaching as something that I could get into that stimulated me a little bit academically, but also provided me with a chance to do lots of different things. So honing my skills in the classroom, but also, more broadly, doing things like camps. I think those sort of things are unique in terms of a workplace… and they're the things that I have found most enjoyable about teaching as well (discussion, 23/7/22).
ELI: I had a principal that was interested in my opinion and was willing to support me in order to help me get the best out of the students. It was a tough environment to teach in, but I always felt supported by my colleagues and leaders. Work was fun, we all worked hard, but had a lot of fun along the way too. Nobody took themselves too seriously. I felt like it was a humble environment where the majority of staff were on the same page.
OLLIE: It's when you've got the time to prepare [and] when you're working in a place where all the systems work. IT support, the timetable works, and you've got all that stuff being of taken care of. And you hit that topic really well, or that book you can teach really

> well. So it's a combination of the system working, you're in a good team, and you really know your stuff. (discussion, 12/4/21)

> **RICHIE**: I was comfortable. I knew the content. I was confident in working with the children, and with the team I was working alongside, to move the children on and make the impact that was needed (discussion, 12/1/22).

This research has revealed how the teachers who have taken part in the study have, at various times, lost sight of their original teaching aspirations. The discord between their own educational philosophies and the complex nature of the job has led to the presence of cognitive and emotional dissonance, housed in a stress-filled existence at work and at home, as they navigate their way through their lives.

Focus theory in relation to the literature and key concepts.

All of the participating teachers were able to identify the manner in which they experienced the phenomenon of stress, the differences between stress and pressure, and how they perceive stress in the workplace.

The first research question in particular; *What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?* was addressed by the participants' descriptions of stress-filled workplaces, as exemplified by Tom's observation:

> People are feeling really under the pump. And they've got a lot to do. I always used to say, 'Keep your heads down, the last three weeks of term', because that's when people get hostile with one another. They do. And they get hostile with the kids. And they get tired, and they tend to blow up a little bit, but you can definitely see it with staff. How does it look, it looks like busy-ness off the charts. No time to sort of sit down and reflect, and unload if you need to, or talk about things other than work. Then it becomes very, very work centric. That's a stressed

environment, when people can't just sit down and have a chat at lunchtime, or at recess (Tom, discussion, 23/6/22).

The evocative, stress-filled scenes described by the participants eventually led the research process into deeper conceptual analysis, and the generation of the four key concepts relating to teacher stress, as it was reported by the teachers in this study. Underpinning the aforementioned dissonances were the key concepts of invasion, bewilderment and misalignment, and the fracturing of teacher identity, captured holistically in the conceptual model below.
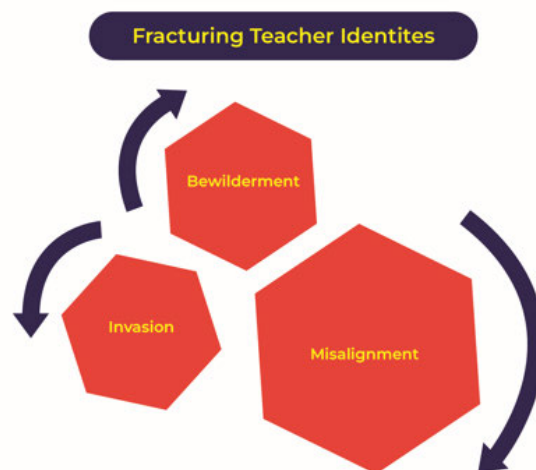
Figure 7.2: Fracturing Professional Identities: Conceptual Model

Key Concept 1: Bewilderment. The teachers' descriptions of how they lived through the experience of negotiating stressors uncovered a degree of consistency between the sources of stress at both the primary and secondary school level. These sources have a multitude of entangled starting points, often away from the 'coalface' of teachers' work in the classroom. They involve universal issues such as working with parents, dealing with change, and managing the broad scope of tasks that teachers are

required to undertake, which can at times lead them to experiencing a profound sense of

bewilderment. The participants described how they feel overwhelmed by the long list of

tasks associated with the job, and how a feeling of hopelessness can set in exacerbating

the sense of bewilderment that permeates work.

Returning to O'Sullivan (2015), it was found that a majority of pivotal incidents

from teachers' first year in the classroom concerned the ability of schools to operate

effectively as an organisation. Fewer episodes related to classroom-based activities and

the management of the pupils. This points to a situation whereby the organisational

structure of schools, and the demands placed on teachers, clearly have enormous and

lasting influence on teacher stress-levels. Red was able to outline how even experienced

teachers often found themselves in the situation where their mind is not focussed on the

students in front of the them, but rather filled with other tasks:

> **RED:** Because it's like, 'Well, I'm meant to be teaching, and
> I'm meant to be at my best in the classroom, but in the back of
> my head I've got all this other stuff that I've got to do, and
> when am I going to get that done?' (discussion, 8/7/21).

This scenario is made all the more frustrating for the participants if they are of the

strong opinion that this destabilisation is unnecessary and avoidable. The participants

also shared how a lack of support when dealing with demanding parents, endless

administrative tasks, poorly behaved students, or the mandatory requirements of

contemporary teaching increasingly resulted in a sense of bewilderment and confusion.

The stories highlighting their despairing sense of futility helped to unveil the essence of

the phenomenon of stress, and thus has clearly addressed the third research question. The

dissonance is not limited to an overwhelmed emotional response, but also gives rise to

sustained tension between teachers strongly held beliefs and ideals, and those of school leaders and policy writers.

Key Concept 2: Misalignment. Drawing on the essences embedded in the data, and the lived experiences of those taking part, it seems that teacher values and philosophies are increasingly in a state of misalignment with those of school management. This has had a clearly identifiable bearing on teacher stress levels, and by extension, has reconstituted teacher work and their preferred delivery of the curriculum. Based on the reports of this small group of participants, it became evident that their school managers have a negative influence on student performance when not acutely mindful of the dangers of teacher stress. School leaders within these particular settings reportedly lacked sensitivity towards teachers as professionals. The participants revealed that leadership of this type covertly increases the sense of misalignment that teachers are experiencing and could ultimately also run the risk of shortening the careers of classroom practitioners, consequently contributing to the high levels of teacher attrition. If staff are continually forced by policy, principals, and testing schedules to be something that goes against their core principles as educators, then inevitably they will experience high levels of cognitive and emotional dissonance. This sense of misalignment was best captured by Siobhan when she reported:

> **SIOBHAN:** A lot of it for me was tied to leadership. And that was the issue at my previous school. People not feeling valued. No flexibility, no understanding about work/life balance. That was the main issue. Teachers want to work hard, teachers are happy to work hard, but leadership is the deal breaker (discussion 2, 2/3/2021).

The teachers spoke at length about stressors that have their genesis beyond the classroom, such as administrative work, special events, emails, and excessive reporting and testing. This captures the essence of misalignment that underpins the cognitive and emotional dissonance reported by teachers. They participants agreed that these stressors need to be managed far more effectively by school leaders in order to avoid or minimise the essence of misalignment that teachers are currently experiencing due to the disjuncture between systems imperatives and self-identity as an autonomous professional teacher. As stated in earlier chapters, the sense of misalignment between leadership expectations and teachers' classroom priorities is real. As Ollie described during his discussion: "Leadership is a big one. If there are too many people in middle leadership, or the leaders that have all got their visions that need to be implemented, then the poor classroom teacher's the one who's stuck in the middle" (Ollie, discussion 12/4/21). Based on the sentiments of the participants stories reported on the previous chapter, it can be argued here that teachers' work is being reconstituted away from their professional and personal aspirations towards systems priorities through the endless bureaucratisation of the profession by external forces. This theorising addresses the third research question concerning the essences of the phenomenon of stress.

Change was identified by the participants as provocative agent of stress. This proposition is captured in the empirical literature such as that of Fink (2003) who argues that mid-career teachers seem to be the most vulnerable to the stress that comes in the wake of educational change. In 2023, some twenty years later, Fink's work (2003) strongly connects with the lived experiences of teachers in this study. Their frustration with the way change is often introduced is in alignment with Fink's belief that mid-career teachers must still "live with the mandated changes for a long time and respond in more diverse ways"

(p. 121). This study demonstrates that teachers are not prepared to respond in more diverse ways, but rather, opt out of the classroom teaching due to the strong sense of misalignment between management demands and their professional responsibilities. Similarly, Bandura (1997) believed that once a teacher's self-efficacy (or belief in their ability as a teacher) has been established, a severe jolt is needed for them to successfully adjust to change. It became evident through this study that if any fresh approach to education is to successfully take root in schools, teachers – particularly experienced ones such as those taking part in this study - must have faith in the purpose behind the change and be supported through it. This notion is supported by Siobhan's comment:

> I guess - why? Why is that (change) being implemented? Is it something because we don't know how to teach reading, and now this is what we're going to be doing, or is it because it's the new thing. So what's the purpose? Understanding the purpose behind it (is imperative) (discussion 1, 22/12/20).

Siobhan, Ollie, Red and Tom also bemoaned the loss of professional control that accompanies enforced changes from management or policy makers (group discussion, 16/6/22). This is in keeping with Zajda's (2018) work, who found that significant issues arise when teaching methodologies are imposed on all learning. Similarly, Alshorfat (2011) declared that loss of teacher control, along with time-pressure to implement changes, appeared to be the overriding cause of anxiety for teachers faced with mandated educational reform. The concept of misalignment generated through this study concurs with their earlier research but has been extended into a new way of theorising the significance of misalignment in generating on going emotional and cognitive dissonance that ultimately leads to teachers' withdrawal from full participation in their profession.

Participants in this study all started their careers at a time when parents and guardians were more supportive of teachers and acknowledged their status as responsible

professionals. Further, email was a garnish rather than the main form of communication throughout schools. Incremental changes over time in these areas seem to have had a profound impact on the careers of teachers taking part in the study, suggesting that the changes have not been managed successfully by those overseeing the participants' professional career journeys. The state of cognitive dissonance that many teachers are currently working under, whereby their core beliefs are at odds with the task requirements of the job, has likely played a part in ushering in the feelings of dissatisfied and frustrated mid-career teachers, such as the participants in this study, who are desperately seeking professional inspiration, or at least a lifeline back to the motivation that steered them towards teaching in the first place.

Key Concept 3: Invasion. The participants focused upon the many invasive elements present in contemporary teaching, and lamented during the discussion the impact these were having on their professional their personal lives. Papastylianou et al. (2009) made a distinction between professional stress, and individualised depression. Many teachers who are struggling through their days at work may still be cheerful and energetic outside of school, however it was also revealed in the current study that the two spaces are often intertwined. Stress in one space can often lead to stress in the other.

Whilst the word 'depression' was rarely used during the discussions, it was interesting to note that the participants identified moments where the workplace seeped into their home lives, and the impact this had on their overall wellbeing. The teachers regarded this invasiveness as highly concerning, irrespective of whether the intrusion came in the form of mental preoccupation, online demands, or physical tasks to be completed at home. The narratives gave the researcher an insight into the essence of

teacher stress by highlighting how regularly the demands of the profession walk into

teachers' 'non-school' life. The anecdotes also addressed the second research question;

What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?

The invasive nature of the teaching profession came to represent the end-point of

stress in the educational setting – the inevitable overflow of tasks spilling from the

workplace into teachers' homes. It was this invasion into the physical or mental home

space that seemed most likely to give the participants pause for thought, and perhaps lead

to a re-appraisal of their professional circumstances. The strong impression was given,

through the sharing of these experiences, that in order to really surge ahead as a teacher,

one must sacrifice significant aspects of home-life. This has created among the

participants a form of cognitive dissonance, creating tension between how the teachers

imagined their lives as successful professional educators to be, and the reality of the lived

experience for teachers. Tom, along with other participants, seemed to outline the

breaking point when he declared:

> **TOM:** And so when is it unacceptable - the level of stress? I
> think that when it starts to really impact your family, then I
> think, well that's really unacceptable (group discussion,
> 16/6/22).

Later, Tom referred to a specific example to draw attention to the enormous

amount of pressure he feels to complete school work in any way available, including

during personal time with his children.

> **TOM:**…I tend to go, 'I have to push on." Then other things
> come in where, you know, it can impact your family, and you
> have guilt rolled into it. Like sitting in the car when the kids are
> doing their swimming lessons, and I'm working (group
> discussion, 16/6/22).

The emotion dissonance inherent in the situation Tom describes highlights the incongruence between the obligation these teachers have to their place of work, and their responsibilities at home. It was evident in the discussions that, at times, the teaching profession can make some teachers feel 'guilt' when not fully attuned to all its invasive needs – a situation that can put immense strain on both the professional and private lives of teachers.

Key Concept 4: Fractured Teacher Identity. A positive teacher identity can arm teachers with the resilience needed to negotiate challenging periods in the classroom, or thrive as an active member of staff and a responsible autonomous professional educator. A high level of self-efficacy, as described by Albert Bundura (1977), refers to a person's set of beliefs and the way in which they determine how well they can execute a plan of action in different circumstances. In the current context, a high level of self-efficacy would indicate that an individual teacher has strong belief in their ability to succeed in various education settings. The participants in this study made it clear that at times in the course of their careers, their self-efficacy has been negatively impacted, and their identity as teachers diluted. The lack of ownership over the management of their classrooms, and the content of the curriculum, has led all the participants at certain points in their career to a state of emotional dissonance, whereby they reported that they felt obliged or forced to outwardly display enthusiasm for an aspect of the job, whilst internally harbouring resentment. Teachers in this study have shared that this long-standing sense of contradiction has led to the demise of their positive identity as professional educators. Tom described how teachers can resent having teaching methodologies forced upon themselves.

> **TOM:** It's like, 'We want you to do this.' We had a program in my school where people were asked to adopt a certain style of teaching, which often differed greatly from what they were used to, and people would often get a little bit resentful of that, and stressed out, maybe, having to deliver it in a different way. But also resentful of it, which can cause stress as well, because you're also saying, 'Well, you're not really respecting the way I want to do things. I'm the one who is present, I'm the one who is front-line, you've got to respect a little bit the way that I want to do things. When that's removed from people, then that can cause stress (Tom, discussion, 16/6/22).

The study has also revealed that once a teacher's confidence is eroded, and their identity fractured, they may over-compensate in other areas to redress the dissonance between their self-image, and the way they feel they may be perceived as professionals. It was reported that self-imposed stress, along with stress rooted in competitiveness, can make detachment from work less likely. Siobhan explained how work invaded her home space:

> **SIOBHAN:** From the minute I woke up in the morning I was on my device, before I was even at school, and crazy all day at school, and then come home and do the wife, mother thing. Couldn't wait to finish that because then I'd keep working, and I'd keep working maybe three or four times a week up until 10, 11 o'clock. And I just, I actually loved it in terms of my career, I was really getting a lot of success there, but the fall-out was my family. My relationship with my family was suffering and I wasn't happy in that sense, so I knew something had to give (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20).

This invasion of work into the home space, as Sonnentag et al. (2010) have argued, results in "emotional exhaustion and a high need for recovery" (p. 364). The teachers in this study outlined how the experience of exhaustion decreased the chances of them remaining highly engaged with their professional work and negatively impacted their relationships with students. For example, Siobhan further reflected on her state of

mind when she was pushing herself to the limit of her resources. She recounted that the struggle to prove herself, and provide a high level of support to her students, created unsustainable levels of stress, resulting in Siobhan seeking a "change in her professional direction" (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). The identification by participants of self-imposed stress correlated with Chang's (2009) thoughts concerning the dangers lurking for teachers who "are dedicated to their work and end up doing too much in support of their ideal" (p. 200). Siobhan outlined her struggles with self-imposed pressure, declaring: "Many times, I'd think, 'I don't have to do this,' but I couldn't not do it. Maybe that's a bit of OCD, I don't know. And nobody knew if I did a great lesson or not. But I knew, and I just couldn't let that go" (discussion 1, 22/12/20). These words capture the emotional dissonance that Siobhan, like many of her colleagues, was experiencing as a direct result of the fracturing of her professional identity over time.

A newly discovered aspect of teacher stress, goes to the third research question; *What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?* The research revealed an overhanging sense among the participants that periods of great stress, frustration, even trauma will always be part of an educator's lot. The discussions as outlined above revealed that the culture in many schools breeds dedication to the students and colleagues, but also a bubbling competitiveness amongst staff which is difficult to manage unless explicitly addressed. The teachers revealed on a number of occasions that the inability of leaders to address increasing teacher workloads and competitiveness may result in teachers becoming overly driven individuals. The participants also reported the important insight that this same strong sense of purpose that enables them to inspire students, and deliver innovative classes, can also result in teachers over-working and exposing themselves to the ravages of stress.

It is worth noting again that the four key concepts often overlap and interact with each other, and emerge from different starting points so there is a fluidity across and within the concepts, rather than a static or fixed portrayal. However, the development of these concepts contributed to the framing of the substantive theory used to explicate the phenomenon of teacher stress in an original way - through the identification of cognitive and emotional dissonance that was central to the participants reported experiences.
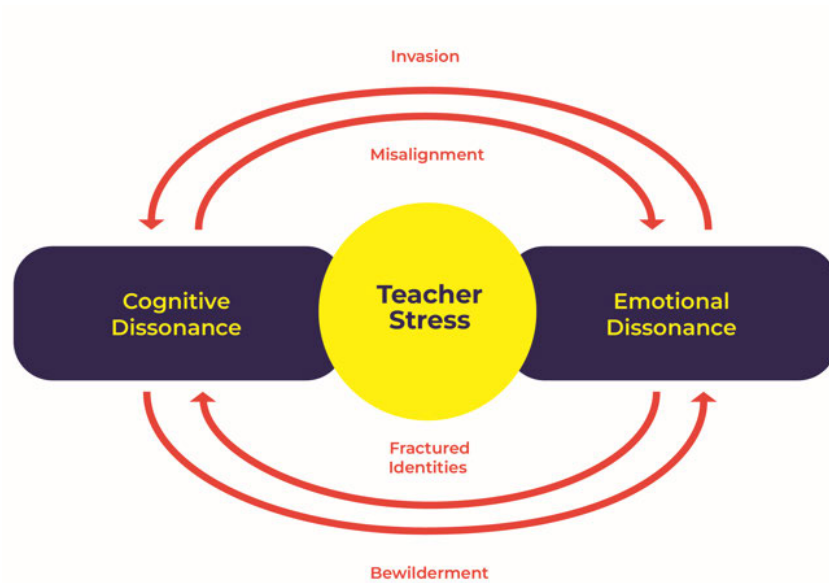
Figure 7.3 Theoretical Model: The interplay between the key concepts and cognitive and emotional dissonance theory

Reducing the dissonance

Workshopping possible solutions to ease the experience of stress on teachers was not a focus of this study as I began gathering data. However, I found that teachers were uncomfortable laying bare their inner beliefs and experiences without offering possible solutions. In light of Festinger's (1957) theory, it is probable that the presentation of a solution is driven by the need to lessen the cognitive and emotional dissonance they are experiencing. If a participant shared an experience highlighting a stressful situation, or

passed comment regarding a demanding requirement, often, consistent with the need to

diminish the state of dissonance, a recommendation or solution would soon follow. The

data indicates that teachers experience stress in various ways due to the presence of

cognitive dissonance. Festinger (1957) revealed that two responses to a state of

dissonance include:

> 1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically
> uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the
> dissonance and achieve consonance.
>
> 2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it,
> the person will actively avoid situations and information which
> would likely increase the dissonance (Festinger, 1957, p.3).

Additionally, as Hinojosa et al. (2017) discussed, individuals may become

motivated to reduce the dissonance present in their working lives by engaging in

discrepancy reduction (Hinojosa et al., 2017). The participants in this study experiencing

a state of cognitive or emotional dissonance have shown clear signs of attempting to

reduce the dissonance by suggesting changes and discussing possible helpful alterations

to the education system operates. The most passionate advances for change, and therefore

dissonance reduction, fell within the scope of three areas. These ideas were drawn from

the teachers' own experiences and observations.

Leadership. The participants were steadfast in their belief that leadership has a

vital role to play in reducing the experience of teacher stress, and that they can be more

proactive in this area. Siobhan felt those in management need to be more available and

approachable. She sees room to improve in terms of "…approaching staff, being there for

staff, being aware of what's going on. Being always available. Understanding the

demands of the job. Definitely leadership can make a big impact there" (Siobhan,

discussion 1, 22/12/20). Ollie also picked up on possible improvements in the way

leadership oversees the full scope of tasks that teachers are required to undertake. He

believes that the best leaders have some idea of what's going on, but he also pondered

whether there needs to be an actual role that specifically oversees the workload of

teachers across domains and curriculum areas, to make sure the workload is manageable

and sustainable. He asked, "How do we actually take stock of what's going to be on

peoples' plates?" (discussion, 12/4/21). He sees a clear need for a greater understanding

of just how far teachers are stretched, and for the development of a role to guard against

this.

> **OLLIE:** I think there's definitely a problem with teachers in
> one team, in one moment, in one day, coming up with a big idea
> – but you need somebody there with an over-arching, 'No, hang
> on a minute'. …And I think timetabling's a huge issue. If I
> could do one thing for teaching, it wouldn't be to give anyone
> more money, it would be to take a couple of kids out of every
> class, and take at least one class away from every teacher. That
> would be amazing (discussion, 12/4/21).

Teachers. Red and Richie both highlighted that teachers themselves can drive

better teamwork, and ease pressure by spreading the workload. With a begrudging sense

of defeat, Ritchie declared that, "planning is a very demanding space for teachers, but if

you haven't planned, you can't teach. So that always causes stress with teachers, whether

you're in a small team, or on your own in a rural setting" (Richie, discussion, 15/1/22).

Red championed a reduction of face to face teaching time, in the primary setting

especially, highlighting multiple benefits including handing teachers blocks of time to

prepare classroom spaces and lessons (away from enforced team-planning situations).

She insisted that teachers need to "divide and conquer" (Red, discussion, 8/7/21) some of

the time set aside for preparation, and perhaps allow less-experienced teachers time to

observe other teachers in action (Red, discussion, 8/7/21). Ollie also believes a reduction

in face-to-face teaching time should be given immediate priority, along with placing a

cap on class sizes (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Eli declared emphatically that teaching a

smaller class "does matter because you establish rapport [with the students]" (Eli,

discussion, 11/8/22). During the group discussion, Eli and Ollie agreed that large classes

also makes catering to all learning styles extremely difficult:

> **OLLIE:** You do feel crap don't you, when you've got a kid you
> haven't pitched to properly.
>
> **ELI:** And you can't. It's impossible. 25 or 28 kids in a class.
> You just can't. (group discussion, 16/6/22)

The discussion around teachers taking charge of their own stress levels when

planning as a group also interested Ollie, and he alluded to the importance of having the

right mix of teachers:

> **OLLIE:** It's not just from the top. If you're in a good team, that
> understands each other and who works properly as a team, that
> helps. So, you might have a graduate there with a few ideas and
> a bit of energy, but you've also got a few older teachers.
> Especially in a bigger school where you sometimes have 6
> people, or 8 people teaching the one subject. The workload
> should be reduced and shared among those people. It should be
> doable. But there seems to be in teaching just a constant need to
> always be creating new work. New stuff. New content. And I
> reckon individual teachers can make a big difference to that. By
> sharing the workload (discussion, 12/4/21).

As Tom noted, the complexities of teaching have increased greatly over the last

couple of decades, whilst many policies and accompanying employment conditions have

not been altered to reflect this (Tom, discussion, 23/7/22).

Parents. The constant presence of parents in schools – whether in person or via

email – was regularly raised during the one-to-one sessions, and was a focal point of the

group discussion. Rather than simply complain about the lack of support and respect

shown by parents, their intrusiveness, or the fact that they are now far more influential

than they were 40 years ago, the participants spent some time enthusiastically sharing

their success stories concerning parental interactions. Tom, Richie, and Siobhan both

advocated for a positive approach, believing that teachers should initiate contact, respond

quickly to emails, and show a willingness to listen.

> **TOM:** There's a huge time commitment with parents, but I
> think it's a good investment, cause as you said, if you can have
> a really good relationship with a parent, and you can get them to
> understand your point of view, then they can be a really
> powerful resource. They really can. So even though I don't like
> turning up this morning, I've got about three emails from
> parents and I have to respond to them all, I'm like, well it takes
> time but I know the value in it. And I also know that if I didn't
> respond to them, then the opposite is going to happen.
>
> **SIOBHAN**: And if you deal with it properly that first time, then
> they won't be on your back (group discussion, 16/6/2022).

Richie added that he has honed his parent management technique over the years

and is now a great advocate of simply listening, and encouraging the parents to talk.

> **RICHIE:** One of the statements that I say straight up when I
> make the call is, 'How can I help you? What would you like to
> tell me?' And then, 'Tell me more.' They're just a couple of
> examples that can get a conversation started with a disgruntled
> family, where they are able to express themselves, their
> thoughts, and be heard. You've got to let them speak.
> Sometimes it can be really challenging to not interrupt, because
> you want to (Richie, discussion, 15/1/22).

This study reveals that making a firm, career-long commitment to teaching

requires the development of effective stress-management techniques in order to lessen

the impact of cognitive and emotional dissonance. Most of the participants would still

consider themselves to be mid-career teachers with much to offer students and colleagues

in future years. They have all negotiated periods of stress by adopting a mix of load-sharing and self-protection techniques. Most notably, the support of colleagues was highly sought, while there appeared to be a palpable lack of trust in management. Based on their lived experiences, the teachers shared their opinions regarding the plight of educators openly, and willingly offered solutions as part of this process. De Nobile's (2016) suggestions, including setting clear boundaries with regards to email use, limiting the number of meetings, and giving teachers more time to adjust to new demands, were in keeping with many of the ideas offered by the teachers. Many of the participants have moved into positions of leadership within their schools and now, as a consequence of this research, they revealed that they have been reconnected to the rigours associated with the job of classroom teacher. They can acknowledge the layers of stress that accompany the role, and understand the real sense of obligation that most dedicated career teachers share. All participants brought active, creative minds to the sessions, and approached the issue of teacher stress with staff - and the students alongside them - at the centre of the issue. Talking through solutions, proposals, and changes of approach – the act of reducing dissonance - became part of the lived experience of teacher stress for the teachers participating in the study. The likely end point of the experience of cognitive and emotional dissonance is teachers leaving the education system. However, the data is also filled with teachers avoiding new requirements, or wrestling with ways to improve the plight of classroom teachers so they can remain in the profession and experience success.

> **RED:** Right now, Teaching is clouded in administration, compliance, and demands from others. Educators need to be heard. They are the experts in this field, and for results to improve and for teachers to stay in this profession, they need to be shown respect and have a say how education should look day to day (discussion, 8/7/21).

Chapter Summary

In developing a focus theory for this research, the researcher reflected on key statements, patterns, and re-occurring issues in an attempt to theorise the lived experience of the participants, and offer a unique perspective on the issue. The experience of teacher stress is one of bewilderment, lack of detachment, and loss of identity, brought on by the presence of cognitive and emotional dissonance. The essence of stress, therefore, is germinated in the dissonance between the positive identity of themselves as professionals, and the unreasonable expectations that are sometimes allowed to fester within the teaching profession leading ultimately to the reshaping or fracturing of identity that harbours emotional frustration and dissonance, as has been continually reported in this study.

As a result of the experiences shared, and the participants instinctive need to reduce the level of dissonance they are experiencing (Festinger, 1957), suggestions were made in an attempt to address some of the educational issue effecting teachers today. Many of these form the basis of the useful recommendations outlined in the concluding chapter. These recommendations should ensure that a positive sense of teacher identity and self-efficacy is nourished, and help teachers avoid the pitfalls that come with working through a state of cognitive and emotional dissonance.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

At the outset of this study, the literary review revealed that although some key findings have been made in the area of teacher stress, relatively few studies have focused on the lived experience of stress for classroom teachers. This study has offered insights into the perspective of one cohort of experienced classroom teachers across a number of settings who have, and continue to, experience stress in their profession lives.

The aim of the research undertaken and reported in this study was to investigate and present the lived experiences of a group of teachers who have worked for more than ten years as classroom teachers in a variety of schools and at various levels. The empirical research to date, as reported in Chapter 3, confirms that multitudes of teachers operate under severe workplace pressure or stress. Whilst there are innumerable ways teachers can arm themselves better to survive the many challenges the profession throws at them, they are often powerless to influence the direction a school takes, regardless of how much experience, knowledge, and insight they might bring to the context. The specific intention, therefore, of this phenomenological study was to highlight teachers' own views regarding stress, how they experience it and then manage it with a view to gaining deeper insights into the essence of stress as it is experienced by this cohort of teachers.

The research question driving this study evolved from an inherent and invested interest in the topic. Twenty years of both primary and secondary teaching have burdened

the researcher with the discomforting sense that the workload forced upon classroom

teachers is unnecessarily severe. This interest led to wider reading on the topic, and

eventually to the identification of a research problem and accompanying questions. The

refinement of these questions became an important initial step towards undertaking

research. The research questions that shaped this study were:

- What are the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress?

- What stories and incidents underpin these lived experiences?

- What are the essences of the phenomenon of stress?

These questions were clear, and provided scope for much reflective analysis of

the data. Following the identification of the gap in the literature and consequently the

detection of the research problem, the most appropriate and effective approach to conduct

the research was discovered. A qualitative approach was adopted in line with Lancey's

(1993) view that effective qualitative researchers often engage in close sharing and

interaction over a period of time with credible participants whose opinions they value,

and whose trust they gain (Lancey, 1993). A phenomenological methodology was

combined with a narrative-biographical (Kelchtermans, 2009) approach, ideal for

disclosing the individual impact of stressors on experienced teachers. The research was

designed to capture the *lived experiences* (Crotty, 1998) of the teachers in their own

words, and was both descriptive and exploratory. The elements of narrative research

present in the study, particularly in the analysis stage, enabled key concepts to be

developed, and narratives of individual experience were presented. The researcher was

confident that the phenomenological approach – incorporating the preferred methods of

one-to-one discussions, biographical narratives, along with group dialogical discussions –

would provide rich data. The epistemological view adopted by the researcher proved to

be of great and far-reaching significance in this study, and as Yazan (2016) noted it permeated every step of the research process, from selection of the phenomenon, to the way the study was composed (Yazan, 2016). The study was situated within the scope of the interpretivist paradigm.

Phenomenology provided the philosophical framework for the study in that the participants have "subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people" (Creswell, 2013, p.78). Van Manen (1990) refers to hermeneutic phenomenology as a philosophy of the personal which is pursued "against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos or other, the whole, the communal, or the social" (p. 7). This understanding that the personal may also reveal itself as a shared experience was at the heart of the study.

Findings

Three methods were employed to gather rich data for this research into teacher stress. Semi-structured one-to-one discussion were held with participants, along with group dialogical conversations. The teachers also constructed biographical narratives. Purposive selection, or non-random (Padula & Miller, 1999) sampling, was used to assemble a group of experienced teachers. As a consequence of their considerable classroom experience, each participant had at their disposal stories, recounts of incidents, and various educational adventures to share. In keeping with the, at times, robust nature of staff meetings and lunchtime discussions, the selected teachers had strong and well-formed opinions of the current state of education, and the processes involved in teaching children. The participants' breadth of experience enabled them to reflect on the position of the classroom teacher with great insight. The accounts of their lived experiences in this

study convey a very serious message; the profession is being eroded by administrative demands and over-bearing management, resulting in teachers re-examining their place in the profession. The phenomenological approach adopted in this study has isolated the truth of the participants' working lives, and has explicated the phenomenon of teacher stress through the development of key concepts and essence exemplars, as identified in Chapter 6. The participants in this study have all experienced the senses of bewilderment, invasion and misalignment that have ultimately fractured or reconstituted their identities as responsible and autonomous professional educators.

The ongoing contestations, contradictions and ambiguities that have been reported by teachers as their professional work is being reshaped away from their aspirational values and ideologies into a highly bureaucratised and regulated forms of work has generated feelings of cognitive and emotional dissonance as the central core concepts of teacher stress. This study has ultimately revealed the fracturing and undermining of a previously positive classroom teacher identity among the participants as a result of this dissonance. In attempting to reduce the dissonance, teachers are forced to either change their individual philosophies and approach to their work, or leave the profession.

The analysis of data contained within this research has addressed the three research questions by revealing (i), the participants' lived experience of the phenomenon of stress; (ii) the stories and incidents that underpin these lived experiences, and (iii) the essences of the phenomenon of stress? An examination of the key concepts and essence exemplars generated as part of this phenomenological study have clear practical benefits for leaders, teachers, and school communities. In bringing the study to a close it is important to set out recommendations for practice, policy, and future research. These are outlined forthwith.

Useful Recommendations

The following useful recommendations for practice, drawn from the participants' lived experiences, may help school leaders, policy makers, and future researchers work towards the goal of reducing emotional and cognitive dissonance among teachers. The study closes with the following recommendations for:

- Practice;

- Policy;

- Future Study.

These are outlined forthwith and out set out in the table below:

Table 8.1: Useful recommendations to help address cognitive and emotional dissonance among teachers.

Key Concepts:	Action
Bewilderment	- *Reduce the administrative burden*
Misalignment	- *Support teachers experiencing change*
Invasion	- *Regulate email use and exposure* - *Set and enforce clear parental boundaries*
Teacher Identity	- *Reaffirm teachers regularly* - *Create a dedicated wellbeing resource for teachers*

Recommendations for practice

Reduce the administrative burden. For the participants in the study, the constant tug-of-war between the act of teaching and the completion of administrative tasks appears to be a strong driver of the discontent that the many teachers are experiencing. Those in management positions in schools need to consider whether or not it is always beneficial to introduce new administrative tasks. It is counterproductive to continually add to the demands placed on teachers under the impression that students will reap the benefits. Participants in this study believe that the education of students, and the act of teaching itself, is negatively impacted when teachers are overworked.

Although poor student behaviour and the perceived lack of respect from society are areas that are difficult for school leaders to positively influence in the short term, most of the administrative demands that are tethered to teachers are well within their purview. This issue can – indeed, must - be addressed immediately. An internal position within schools to oversee teacher loads and job requirements, as suggested by Ollie, (discussion, 12/4/21) will help ensure that teacher loads are manageable, and in alignment with the philosophies of the staff delivering the programs. This would go some way to addressing the multitude of issues connected to over-worked staff.

Support teachers experiencing change. It appears relatively easy for school leaders and policy makers to introduce new initiatives into schools, and tempting for them to view teachers as inexhaustible resources. More challenging is the task of clearly communicating the need for change, monitoring the impact that change has on teacher workload, removing entrenched but unnecessary tasks, and supporting teachers through

the transitionary phase after its introduction as suggested by Siobhan (discussion,

22/12/20).

This study has shown that experienced teachers notice and become disheartened

and bewildered when a teaching approach they have invested heavily in for years is

replaced abruptly with something new. As a consequence, their experience is suddenly

undermined, and years of positive teaching practice counts for little (Siobhan, 22/12/20).

Leaders need to be delicate when instituting change, and mindful of the fact that more

experienced teachers may show some resentment and need time to adjust. Furthermore,

each new initiative should be accompanied by the challenge of finding tasks that can be

removed from teacher's job description, which will help guard against incremental

overload, and ensuing cognitive and emotional dissonance.

Regulate email use and exposure. Leaders need to put in place strong guidelines

around the frequency of school email use, the content that emails carry, and the times

work emails should be sent and read. The issue is more nuanced than may first appear.

Although email is obviously an essential form of communication in large operations,

schools are unique in that teachers have set timetables and classes filled with students

who require teachers' undivided attention. The invasive nature of email creates a sense of

unease among teachers (Tom, discussion, 23/7/22). Clear guidelines should be

established regarding the timeframe teachers are expected to respond to emails, and when

– in the interests of unclogging the system - an email might be better left unsent. It is also

clear that teachers need to be supported, and possibly receive professional development

in working with demanding or aggressive parents who email relentlessly. School leaders

also need to work towards ensuring that the emails teachers are exposed to are

worthwhile and that the overall volume received is manageable (Ollie, 12/4/21). Teachers

need to feel comfortable focusing on their classes during the day, safe in the knowledge that the job will not be made more difficult by the uncontrolled excesses and demands of email.

Set and enforce clear parental boundaries. The influence that parents can exert within the context of a school community was laid bare by the participants in the study. As Red explained (discussion, 8/7/21), within the contemporary school setting parents are manipulating consequences connected to student discipline, expressing outrage at the selection of sporting teams, and challenging the legitimacy of classroom reading groups. Few corners of a school now lie beyond the reach of the parent body. It appears teachers' working lives would be made far more tolerable in relation to interference from parents if leadership becomes active and vigilant in the management of individual parents, along with parent groups. Educators should be left in no doubt that those who employ them will also fiercely protect and defend them against snipping criticism and intimidation, and guard against the intrusion of parents into the workspace (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). Parents need to have boundaries made clear to them so that teachers can be left to deliver programs, create groups, and manage students, confident that communication has been delivered to parents outlining the expectations that the school has of them. School community safety orders are already in place in many regions which enable principals to ban parents from school grounds after serious incidents (Victorian Education and Training Amendment, Protection of School Communities Act, 2021). This response should be triggered sooner rather than later in support of teachers.

Reaffirm teachers regularly. The discussions underlined the mental health dangers that lurk when leadership directs little or no positive feedback teachers' way, as outlined by Tom (discussion, 23/7/22). Stable, confident and well-supported teachers

have little need to endlessly advertise their worth. School leaders can more effectively manage the issue of self-imposed teacher stress by making teachers feel secure in their job and providing them with more regular positive feedback so the individual instinct to compete with one another, or work themselves into an unhealthy state, is curtailed. Managers clearly need to monitor teacher performance closely, but they should also ensure that a culture is not generated in which teachers who successfully manage to distract themselves away from school, and who remain comfortable with the profession, are shamed into working harder. The inherent psychological value in detaching properly from work after hours, over weekends, and during holidays is well researched (Aulen et al, 2022; Sonnentag, 2012; Varol et al, 2021), and should be promoted by leadership in schools.

Create a dedicated wellbeing resource for teachers. In response to the lack of support resources available to struggling teachers, as outlined by participants in this study (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20; Red, discussion, 8/7/21; Tom, discussion, 23/7/22), it seems necessary for schools to consider establishing a position dedicated to overseeing teacher wellbeing and moving away from, for example, merging this role with any number of other responsibilities a busy leader might have to juggle. Teachers should have access to a qualified professional to whom they can turn in times of stress. Approaching principals or assistant principals may usher in feelings of vulnerability for teachers, and a sense that they will be judged harshly for admitting they are struggling to cope (Siobhan, discussion 1, 22/12/20). Teachers need to have a clearly identifiable and accessible support outlet in times when they can sense a previously high level of self-efficacy slipping, and when their professional identity is under strain.

Recommendations for Policy

Leadership training. Teachers are often placed in positions of leadership with little or no training, and with only a rudimentary understanding of how to manage a substantial adult workforce. Set within the context of shifting cultural standards and expectations, the task of successfully leading a school staff is without doubt a challenging one (Zajda, 2021).

Many leaders in schools today have not received adequate or explicit training (Lamberski, 2016, Bruce et al, 2022), and would be ill-equipped to address the recommendations outlined earlier. This study highlights the urgent need for school leaders to receive guidance in listening to and acknowledging teacher concerns, being mindful of the demanding requirements of classroom teachers' roles, and remaining aware of the fact that decisions involving increases to workload - however slight – bring with them the potential to seriously impact teacher stress levels. School leaders need to be aware that opportunities for teacher voice in change management is often limited (Roczniewska et al, 2022), therefore developing an approach which is more inclusive of educators in the process of instituting change may be beneficial for all involved. Leaders should also receive regular professional development with the aim of addressing the disjunct between management expectations of staff, and the stark reality of the classroom.

School structure. As the administrative demands of teachers have increased, the profession may have reached a point where a reduction in face-to-face teaching time becomes a practical necessity. School leaders need to work creatively with timetables in order to find ways to release teachers for periods of time so they can attend to the many administrative requirements of the job (Ollie, discussion, 12/4/21). Alternatively, school

leaders could seek a collaboration with policy writers at a government level in order to ease the administrative burden on teachers – freeing them up mentally and physically, and allowing them to put more energy into creating engaging and dynamic classes for their students. The effect of rushed and poorly delivered lessons is "debilitating and cumulative" (Darling-Hammond, p.332, 2000). Conversely, the effects of quality teaching on educational outcomes are greater than those that arise from other factors, such students' background, class sizes or government spending levels (Darling Hammond, 2000).

Recommendations for Further Research

Aside from discovering a fresh theoretical foundation from which to view teacher stress, this study also underscores aspects of contemporary education that would benefit greatly from further research. Driving issues such as severe parental pressure, email saturation, and the scarcity of wellbeing resources for teachers all warrant further research.

The impact that heavy parental involvement in schools is having on the wellbeing of teachers needs further exploration in the light of teacher shortages. The draining effect of poor interactions with parents and care-givers was a feature of discussions throughout the data collection stage of this research. The almost adversarial natural of parent/teacher meetings, and the continued unnerving presence of parents in schools and as part of social media groups needs to be explored in greater depth.

In a similar way, email saturation in schools has become a distinctive aspect of 21st century education. Further research in this area will assist schools in regulating email use, and enable wider community understanding of the possible perils inherent in email reliance and overuse. By extension, research into the current administrative burden

carried by teachers may help to limit student exposure to the educational pitfalls that come with high staff turnover, and the loss to the system of strong, passionate educators.

Finally, there exists a need to extend this research beyond the Australian mainstream schooling context into other systems of schooling, including alternate education settings and specialist schools. Although participants taking part in this study were sourced from a variety of backgrounds, and had a range of experiences across decades of teaching, there also exists a need to diversify and extend the cultural contexts of teachers who are selected to participate in such studies.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of qualitative research generally were highlighted earlier in the thesis. Discussed was the strong subjective component inherent in qualitative studies which requires researchers to guard against locating quotes and thoughts that align most closely with their own. Given my experiences in dealing with teacher stress, it was important not to steer stories or opinions in directions that support long-held personal thoughts or opinions. As a current teacher, I entered the research process with criticisms of the way in which schools operate, and the lack of support on offer for teachers. I discovered through the process that the phenomenon of teacher stress is more nuanced than I anticipated. For example, the prevalence of self-imposed stress and competitiveness among teachers led me to quickly pursue an unintended line of questioning, and be more open-minded to this multi-layered issue.

The relatively small sample size precludes general conclusions around teacher stress beyond the presented sample. Furthermore, the teachers were all from the same

state in Australia, and although they were working in different educational settings at the time of data collection, they shared a similar demographic and geographic context. Although all participants reported feeling safe and supported through the process, there was, at times, a 'job interview' feel to the discussions. This may have resulted in teachers feeding me the response they thought I wanted to hear, or perhaps the answer that would reflect on them most favourably. Some participants were remarkably open and honest in the one-to-one sessions, and did not hesitate in paintings themselves in a less than flattering light as educators. Others were slightly more guarded, and less likely to share stories that exposed them at their worst. The degree of openness among the participants may have been dependent upon the rapport that I was able to establish with them, and the variation in responses was perhaps reflective of the level of ease they felt with me.

In the group environment, I was comfortable with the playful interaction that took place. It was clear that the participants quickly felt safe in each other's company, and much laughter was generated. The focus group method does open itself up to being dominated by one or two individuals, something that took place for periods of time during the session. There is a possibility also that some participants withheld their points of view in order to avoid clashing with the majority. Conversely, individuals may also have shared views that went along with the majority held position, when in actuality the participant's opinion was not firmly held.

This study is one of few hermeneutic phenomenological studies to present the lived experiences of teacher stress. Regarding the transferability and trustworthiness of the study, as addressed in the theory and methodology chapter, this is an issue more aligned with empirical studies, and should not be the focal point of qualitative studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Conclusion

The lived experiences of teacher stress contained within this thesis have been presented in such a way as to make clear the connections between methodology, data collection, and the phenomenological underpinnings of the research. The context and justification behind selecting six teachers with at least ten years' experience was established early, and a summary of how the researcher would approach hermeneutic phenomenological research and analysis followed. Through the adoption of this approach, the identifiable characteristics and repercussions of teacher stress, as experienced by the participants, has been exposed. By addressing the research questions, four key concepts revealing how teachers experience stress were developed - *teacher misalignment, bewilderment, invasion,* and *detachment* - helping to bring to light the experience of stress from the participants' lived viewpoint. The teacher's thoughts and experiences, in their own words, were then presented as essence exemplars in order to bring about a deep, authentic understanding of the teachers experiences of stress in schools.

A significant finding arriving from this research is that a strong emphasis should immediately be placed on reducing the administrative requirements teachers' job, and for school leaders to actively engage in understanding the lived experiences of full-time classroom teachers, thus reducing the cognitive and emotional dissonance that is currently permeating through the profession. The teachers taking part in this study entered the profession to engage with student learning in a creative and meaningful way, and to direct their energies towards student achievement. Instead, the reality of their working days has exposed them to feelings of demoralisation, frustration, withdrawal,

loss of professional identity and self-esteem, and in some cases, absenteeism and eventual resignation from classroom teaching positions. In the final analysis, it becomes evident that the real victims of teacher stress are students. They are the ones who are exposed to under-prepared lessons delivered by exhausted professionals who are torn between external expectations, and their own concept of how a teacher should be able to ply their trade. Ollie shared his response to stress in the classroom.

> **Ollie:** And I think when you're stressed, and you're under the pump, and you've got too much to do, and too little time, it's more about, 'What can I give them for this lesson? How can I get through this one?' (discussion, 12/4/21).

Not only do growing demands result in teachers experiencing stress, and a destabilisation of their identities as educators, it also makes for an incredibly complex and demanding job. Both Red and Siobhan conveyed the spirit of the study when they offered the following summaries at the end of their respective discussions.

> **RED:** Right now, Teaching is clouded in administration, compliance, and demands from others. Educators need to be heard. They are the experts in this field, and for results to improve and for teachers to stay in this profession, they need to be shown respect and have a say how education should look day to day (discussion, 8/7/21).

> **SIOBHAN:** Man, if you could just let us teach. Like, just let us teach. Imagine (group discussion, 16/6/22).

In these times of acute teacher shortages, school leaders and policy-makers need to reflect on the benefits that careers in education have traditionally brought to those who make the decision to enter the profession. These benefits should include a positive work environment generated by mindful leadership, the company of enthusiastic and magnanimous colleagues, and the inherent joy of helping students succeed and grow.

This phenomenological study's original contribution to teacher stress research lies in the theorising of how teachers experience stress as a result of cognitive and emotional dissonance, and in the examination of the anxiety that follows teachers' attempts to lessen this dissonance in order to make the job more tolerable. It is hoped that the experiences shared in this study may inspire further research examining the various characteristics and features of teacher stress.

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