

Peer Support and Teacher Self-Efficacy: A Case Study of the Transition to Emergency  
Remote Teaching During COVID-19

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## **Abstract**

Understanding how teachers used peer-to-peer support to navigate challenging teaching situations lies at the heart of this research. The purpose of this research was to better understand how engaging in peer support between teachers shapes teacher self-efficacy. This project used a case study methodology to examine the experiences of a small sample of elementary school teachers in Alberta, Canada who engaged in peer support as they transitioned to emergency remote teaching in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers who were engaging in peer support discussed experiencing increased self-efficacy through relationships with colleagues that were built on trust, regular communication, and open collegiality. This research project enabled a more in-depth account of professional relationships during emergency remote teaching and discussed strategies for teachers facing similar teaching circumstances in the future.

*Keywords:* peer support, trust, collaboration, teacher self-efficacy, COVID-19, emergency remote teaching

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my loving partner, Melanie. She carried many responsibilities over this graduate program journey for me. Without her patience and love, I would not have made it to the finish line.

## Acknowledgements

I want to give special recognition to my sons, Lukas and Tobias, for their patience with me. We will need to make up for the lost time between us over this program.

Special thanks to my cohort members that encouraged me, engaged my thinking and provided friendship along this journey. My peers that have supported me throughout my career that have carried me to this point have been invaluable. They implanted the desire in me to deepen my understanding of these experiences through study. I want to dedicate my deepened knowledge of peer support to my past and future student teachers entering our profession.

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Recognition is due to the divine strength that I draw on for support in my life and my aspirations, "I can do all things, through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). My late grandfather, Gordon Dickau, was also influential in creating me to be a reflective person through his relationship and the time he dedicated to teaching me with unwavering love.

- My sincerest thank you.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	i
Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Researcher Context and Motivation.....	1
Introduction to the Study .....	2
Research Aims and Objectives .....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Working Definition of Peer Support .....	6
Experiencing Peer Support.....	8
Let Peers Prevail- The Significance of Peer Support.....	8
The Centrality of Trust.....	9
Peer Support & Self-efficacy .....	10
Research Strategies and Methods .....	11
Recruitment .....	12
Sample Selection .....	12
Interview and Consent.....	13
Participants .....	13
Coding .....	13
Shape of the Data .....	14
Participant Profiles .....	14
Experiencing Peer Support.....	17
Waxing and Waning Needs.....	18
The Element of Trust.....	18
Impacts of Peer Support .....	20
Peer Support & Self-Efficacy: A Vital Connection for Teachers .....	21
Research Outcomes.....	22
Key Learnings.....	24

What's Next .....	26
Conclusion .....	26
Researcher Contact Information .....	28
References .....	29
Appendix 1: Interview Guide.....	33
Appendix 2: Information Letter for Participants .....	35
Appendix 3: Consent Form for Participants .....	39

## Researcher Context and Motivation

“It isn’t what you do, but how you do it” (Success Magazine, N.D.).

Coach John Wooden’s words capture what I have learned through both my formal and informal learning. It was my first day of school, and I was proud of my finger painting that I made in Kindergarten. This was a time where I was joyful in familiar surroundings and shy about what was unfamiliar. I fondly reflect on the innocence and safety of that time in my life.

I have loved to learn new things throughout my life. I am fortunate to be able to remember my teacher’s welcoming face, the layout of my Kindergarten classroom, and even how I felt that day. I was worried and anxious about being the first “big kid” (I was the oldest in my peer group and in my family), but I knew that I needed to start school. I had a new trail to blaze, and it would take courage. As the day progressed and the tears subsided from the fear of the new learning environment, I found reassurance from my teachers, my mother, and my friends that I had met before at pre-school. I was cautious about entering the new learning experiences waiting at the doorway, holding tightly at my mom’s side. Reflecting on that first day elicited a connection to Dewey’s (1938) thoughts on how *situation* and *experience* enable us to imagine the teacher as an integral part of the learning context and culture for students. As I grew in trust of my new teacher and the environment, I felt drawn to the energy and play going on just beyond the cloak-area. I was soon overwhelmed by curiosity in the security of the new bond with my teacher and energy in the classroom. I was quickly hooked on the learning experience by a joyful situation and the new challenges that I would encounter that afternoon.

I remembered how my Grandpa would often say to me after being tucked in before bed, and after we prayed together, “You’re smarter than the average bear”. Those reassuring words and prayers carried me through my first day of school. Little did I know that I would be learning

in formal education for another nineteen seasons of my life, and that my grandfather's words would still ring in my ears today like they did the first time I heard them. I relate my experiences to when Donald (2009) stated, "Elders who have repeatedly reminded me that teaching is a responsibility and act of kindness viewed as a movement toward connectivity and relationality. Through the reciprocal process of teaching and learning, we move closer together" (p. 19). I see how the relationship between my grandfather and myself influenced my attitude toward learning and teaching. After that first day, I felt proud that I had finished a painting, watched my mom and her friend trail the bus ride home from school, and then how I arrived home from the bus stop on my own with my raincoat on and a great sense of accomplishment.

I was coached to succeed from a young age to be open, persevere, be curious, and work through challenging situations. As Mayer (2013) noted, "One of the most important foundational beliefs of the coaching relationship is trust" (p. 33). I trusted I was ready to learn, and I had some success at it. My ability to develop supportive relationships has allowed me to transfer my childhood experiences to my understanding of the teaching profession. As an inexperienced teacher that was gathering new teaching skills, I related adapting to remote teaching in 2020 (resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic) to be the same. I experienced the supportive peer-to-peer relationships that arose out of the initial phase of emergency remote teaching. This experience led me to inquire how other professional educators experienced the same unstable time in their teaching careers. What were the impacts of peer support on teacher self-efficacy during the initial transition to emergency remote teaching?

### **Introduction to the Study**

Teaching is about developing the learning spirit in people (Battiste, 2013). The natural curiosity of a learner to build new knowledge is what pedagogy aspires to achieve. Many



educators have experienced the focused, engaged, and constructive learning environment in our classrooms (some days with more success than others). These are learning times that are not forced by mandate, but rather, the learning culture fosters them. Donald (2009) argued that "teaching is a responsibility and act of kindness viewed as a movement toward connectivity and relationality. Through the reciprocal process of teaching and learning, we move closer together" (p. 19). This is foundational knowledge to peer-to-peer supportive relationships. As the findings of this research project suggest, bringing experiences and relationships to your professional practice of pedagogy drives collaboration. The experiences of teachers during the transition to emergency remote teaching because of COVID-19 (Government of Alberta, N.D.) drove this research project. Through semi-structured interviews, three teachers shared their stories of collaboration and peer support.

Dewey's (1938) notions of 'situation' and 'experience' have enabled us to imagine the teacher situated within context, culture and temporality. This notion guided my understanding of supportive collaboration between teaching professionals. Experiences have formed me and they have continued to mold me. The descriptions of temporality, both past and future, in Dewey's notion of continuity are the filter through which I have reflected on my plans for my future. I am always waiting to learn something more challenging, to challenge how much I can understand (Dewey, 1938). I await the ability to learn through more genuine experience. Learning about my story of emergency remote teaching and the stories of my fellow teachers has taught me that "learning to think with stories, provides me as a human being to reach beyond myself, and to see more than 'other'" (Chung, 2009, p. 103). My learning seeks to dive deeper into the understanding of lived experiences (Dewey, 1938). I wanted to better understand my own and other teachers' experiences with peer support as we transitioned to emergency remote learning.

Peer support includes peer coaching and mentoring and it seeks to build on an established element of trust that requires a focus on the growth of all parties involved in the exchange of knowledge (Mayer, 2013). All teachers experience professional situations where collaboration becomes a vital element in the growth of teaching capacity and personal wellbeing. Self-efficacy lies at the heart of peer support; it is an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Teachers become leaders for each other through collaboration. As Fullan and Quinn (2016) described, "leaders who possess a growth mindset build capacity in others and help them achieve more than they expect of themselves" (p. 49). This insight highlights that "quality teaching occurs best when teachers work together with other teachers in the common interest of helping all students succeed in diverse and complex learning environments" (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 2). The final ingredient that becomes the deciding factor of a successful peer support experience is investing valuable time in it (Shilder, 2009). Time was the final ingredient to help frame this research project.

This research project engaged elementary teachers in conversations about peer support access during the initial transition to emergency remote teaching in spring 2020. Emergency remote teaching was when a sudden shift from in-person teaching switched to online delivery of student learning. Interviews were semi-structured, online interviews. The qualitative data generated provided insight into the personal experiences of respondents related to peer support experiences. The data gathered linked to the literature related teacher coaching, mentorship and professional improvement practices. This research project provided insight into the experiences of teachers during the transition to emergency remote teaching.

## **Research Aims and Objectives**

Teachers are reflective practitioners of their profession. Connelly, Clandinin and He (1997) described reflective teachers as those concerned “not only with what it is they wish to happen in learning but also with teachers’ knowledge and the professional knowledge landscapes in which [they] work” (p. 674). Through professional relationships, teachers can use peer-to-peer support in times of need to maintain a sense of well-being. Teacher collaboration can lead to resilience in demanding teaching situations (Mayer, 2013). Teachers often seek out approaches to improve the learning experiences of their students and their efficacy as teachers (Ross, 1992). Through my conversations with teachers who engaged in peer support while transitioning to remote teaching, my aim was to capture their reflections on their experiences. These findings led to an understanding of the power a community of teachers has in the teaching profession.

Understanding how teachers used peer-to-peer support to navigate challenging teaching situations lies at the heart of my research. Creating a more in-depth account of professional relationships during emergency remote teaching has helped develop strategies for teachers facing uncertain emergency remote teaching circumstances.

The purpose of this research is to better understand how peer support between teachers shaped their ability to deliver instruction to students through teacher self-efficacy. I explore the experiences of a small sample of elementary school teachers in Alberta who engaged in peer support during the transition to emergency remote teaching during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. I wanted to know the roles that peer support played during this transition. This investigation allowed me to understand their experiences during this period further and how they felt it impacted their teaching and the significance of trust in peer support. This research will contribute to understanding the critical characteristics of peer support for teachers that enabled

them to feel successful.

Using a case study methodology, I explored the experiences of a small sample of elementary school teachers in Alberta who engaged in peer support as they transitioned to emergency remote teaching in the initial months of the Covid-19 pandemic. This research project examined the following: (a) the ways in which teachers engaged in peer support during the transition; (b) participants' perceptions of the impacts that peer support had on their teaching; and (c) the significance of trust levels between teachers in accessing support from their peers. By exploring the experiences and perceptions of teachers who accessed peer support in this case, I hoped to better understand how peer support contributes to teacher self-efficacy.

### **Literature Review**

The literature reviewed in relation to this study employed synonymous terms to describe the concept of *peer support*, including both *mentoring* and *coaching*. The first section of the literature review defines the working definition of peer support in the context of this research. Subsequent sections present research on how teachers experience peer support, its significance to their practice, the necessity of trust to the process, and the impacts of peer support on teacher self-efficacy.

### **Working Definition of Peer Support**

In the field of education, peer support is closely related to two terms, coaching and mentorship, that seem to be used interchangeably. Skytt and Ruban (2015) defined mentoring as "the complex developmental, non-evaluative process that mentors use to support and guide their protégé through the necessary transitions that are part of learning how to be effective educators and career-long learners" (p. 20). These authors also define coaching as "a voluntary, mutual inquiry...by more experienced teachers focussed on enhancing teaching practices and student

learning through the use of best instructional practices" (p. 22). They create a comparison of the often interchangeable terms to highlight that the initiation of practice is where the difference lies, mentorship being the more formal of the two situations. Mentorship has a slightly more vertical power structure based on experience, whereas coaching is a more horizontal power structure based on interchange of expertise. Notably, both definitions identify that there is a reciprocal line of communication and absence of evaluation in the process. Similar goals for supporting a teacher are found in peer supportive situations. The impacts of effective peer support include improving students' achievement, enhancing classroom instruction, and driving instructional leadership (Ross, 1992; Shilder, 2009). Understanding these characteristics of peer support is rooted in literature related to coaching.

As a reflection of the nature of peer support, mentorship and coaching both share goals to support the growth of teaching efficacy. I prefer mutual interaction and horizontal power structure of coaching as identified by Skytt and Ruban (2015). Allaho and Nieuwwerburg (2017) describe that "in coaching, the support takes the form of facilitation while in mentoring, the support involves direct guidance" (p. 7). Both coaching and mentoring are aspects of peer support; the key difference between them is the formality of the relationship. Peer support includes peer coaching and mentoring and it seeks to build on an established element of trust that requires a focus on the growth of all parties involved in the exchange of knowledge (Mayer, 2013). All teachers experience professional situations where collaboration becomes a vital element in the growth of teaching capacity and personal wellbeing. Self-efficacy lies at the heart of peer support; it is an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). This highlights that "quality teaching occurs best when teachers work together with other teachers in the common

interest of helping all students succeed in diverse and complex learning environments" (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 2) The final ingredient that becomes the deciding factor of a successful peer support experience is investing valuable time in it (Shilder, 2009).

### **Experiencing Peer Support**

The literature examined here described teachers' experiences with peer support. Engaging in peer support positively impacted teacher self-efficacy because "coaching is a powerful school improvement intervention that allows educators to make desired changes in their knowledge, skills, and practices" (Killion et. al. as cited in Mayer, 2013, p. 13). Developing healthy relationships throughout the school facilitates learning and allows for a horizontal sharing of knowledge among teaching professionals (Skytt & Ruban, 2015). As Psencik (2015) stated, "Good coaches remain constant symbols of strength and endurance through life's vicissitudes. People who understand their values and what is important to them are able to nurture relationships" (p. 53). Teachers supported each other through the extrinsic teaching challenges they faced (such as internet connectivity, device access, and lack of physical proximity) and by drawing on the inner strength they found from professional relationships with each other. A crucial driver to strengthen and engage teachers was through relationships. Building peer support with colleagues based on trust, regular communication, and professional development experiences was critical (Shilder, 2009).

### **Let Peers Prevail- The Significance of Peer Support**

Discovering how teachers learned to thrive and not just survive is at the root of my project. Shilder (2009) made significant correlations between time spent coaching and impact on student achievement. Her research took a quantitative approach for over three years. Efficacy was defined as "A teacher's ability to see him/herself as capable of providing instruction within a

content area and for the instruction provided to impact on student achievement provides the underpinning of teacher efficacy" (Shilder, 2009, p. 459).

The ethic of care plays a role in peer support as characteristic of being a professional educator: This level of empathy and self-understanding applied to the other can become the foundation for treating persons as ends and not as means; it can, in large part, provide the inner basis of an outward social order through motivational displacement toward the projects of the cared-for" (Noddings as cited in Frick et al., 2013, p. 213). Noddings (2013) explained how teachers ordered themselves in supportive relationships to care and be cared for.

Especially important to early career teachers, Shilder's (2009) findings indicated that the initial peer coaching and quality of support significantly affected teacher efficacy: "The results of this study and the findings of others imply that more time is not always better. It is the type and quality of interaction that becomes a deciding factor" (p. 459). Understanding this allows us to connect the importance of high-quality, trusting, and sustained peer support. Incorporating evaluation into the relationship may create distrust and withdrawal in the coaching paradigm and destroy the peer relationship's nature (Gardiner, 2012). Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) explained that "feedback and evaluation won't change real classrooms unless teachers build the skills needed to make a change" (p. 71). Time and financial support play pivotal roles in educational coaching (Skytt & Ruban, 2015). As many interpretations of the importance of peer coaching commonly occur, policymakers often see peer coaching as a supplement cost to the education system.

### **The Centrality of Trust**

Simply stated, "One of the most important foundational beliefs of the coaching relationship is trust" (Mayer, 2013, p. 33). Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) and Gardiner (2012) similarly emphasized building trust between peers allows for an effective educational exchange

of ideas. Ross (1992) unpacked how "previous research on coaching offers consistent evidence of positive outcomes" (p. 51). His study added to the "growing evidence that coaching may positively affect student achievement" (ibid, p. 60). Ross' work provided clear evidence that peer support and coaching impact teacher efficacy and wellbeing.

Peer support requires the same ingredients as that of a fruitful coaching experience. As Mayer (2013) stressed: "The necessary ingredients are trust, training, and time. Mix them together, and the result is a collaborative environment that values reflection and teacher ownership of teacher development" (p. 33). Ownership of a teacher's online classroom was vital, and peer support was used to enhance that ownership and development into a more efficacious teacher. Skytt and Ruban (2015) discussed a very similar term to peer support, stating that "coaching is a voluntary, mutual inquiry ... by ... teachers focused on enhancing teaching practices and student learning through the use of best instructional practices" (p. 22). Open collegiality between peers seeks to have "good coaches remain constant, symbols of strength and endurance through vicissitudes. People who understand their values and what is important to them are able to nurture relationships" (Psencik, 2015, p. 53). As Donald (2009) reminded us, teaching is an ethical responsibility in which kindness is essential to developing relational connections. The interconnectedness of teaching and learning moves us closer together. During emergency remote teaching, teachers looked for the familiarity of existing peer networks and asked for the care of others they could trust.

### **Peer Support & Self-efficacy**

Ross (1992) identified how increasing understanding of teacher efficacy through peer support was a critical indicator of positive impact: "There was more student growth in the classes of teachers who reported greater use of the coach and in the classes of teachers who had stronger



beliefs in their personal efficacy" (p. 59). This finding reinforces that peer support is a strategy to improve teaching practice. Exploring teacher efficacy as an indicator led to findings where correlation to personal teaching efficacy and student achievement was established. Additionally, "The investigations found that all teachers, regardless of their level of efficacy, were more effective with increased contact with their coaches" (Ross, 1992, p. 62). This understanding is a crucial principle in the established impact peer support has on a teacher's success.

Gardiner (2012) added to the scholarly understanding of peer support by clearly defining peer support " as short-term transitional support designed to socialize and retain... teachers by providing technical (how-to and where-to) and emotional support" (p. 197), based on the work of Wang and Odell (2002). Gardiner similarly emphasized building trust between the coach and teacher to allow for educational coaching to take place (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). Leadership providing a non-evaluative, conducive support system (coaches) and time to support that transformation is important. Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997) emphasized, "As everyone knows, the rhythms experienced by a new teacher entering the profession...are vastly different from the rhythms experienced by a teacher reaching the end of her teaching career" (p. 671); yet peer support is natural to teachers at all stages of their teaching experience.

### **Research Strategies and Methods**

I framed my research project using the question, how does engaging in peer support impact teacher self-efficacy? Three sub-questions defined the interview with each participant: How did teachers engage in peer support during the transition to emergency remote teaching? How did engaging in peer support impact participants' perceptions of their teaching? What roles did trust play in seeking out and engaging in peer support?

I used a convenience sampling method (Bryman, 2016) to identify research candidates

based on the following criteria for participant selection: primary school teaching experience and classroom teaching experience. These participants were from my personal professional network of teachers but outside of my school in order to avoid any potential conflicts of interest or confidentiality concerns. I accessed my personal professional network of teachers based on over fifteen years of teaching experience in Edmonton and area schools to recruit my participants. The participants were between the ages approximately 25 and 60 and there was no preference for gender or years of experience. I selected three participants who met my criteria from teachers who indicated interest in participating.

### **Recruitment**

Convenience sampling was used to identify a group of participants. Target participants were current elementary school teachers who accessed peer support during the transition to emergency remote teaching. I used my Concordia University of Edmonton student email account to send out an initial invitation. I accessed a large group of teachers who were personal contacts to recruit participants. I distributed the Information Letters for Participants (see Appendix 2) to members of my personal professional network who responded to my email. I did not recruit teachers from my current school.

### **Sample Selection**

I distributed the Consent Form for Participants (see Appendix 3) to the interested members of my personal professional network that did not work at my school. Potential participants who expressed interest in participating in the study were sent a consent form to review and were invited to ask any questions they had before they decided whether or not to participate.

## **Interview and Consent**

Once the participants were selected, a mutually agreed-upon time for the online interview was identified. I used a semi-structured interview based on the Interview Guide (see Appendix 1). To mitigate any COVID-19 transmission risk, I chose to complete my interviews online using Google Meet. If the participant agreed, and if I was required to gain more in-depth details and information, additional interviews were scheduled. Participants were asked to complete the Consent Form for Participants and return it digitally. I used the transcript function in Google Meet to provide automatic transcripts of the interviews upon completion. The meeting transcripts were then reviewed, then corrected for accuracy of transcription where needed by the researcher and coded for common themes.

## **Participants**

For this study, three primary-level teachers who taught full-time through emergency remote teaching were recruited. They all taught in the greater Edmonton area. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure the privacy of the participants (Parsons, Hewson, Adrian & Day, 2013). The participants had varying teaching experience: Ewan with three years, Ryan with twelve years and Diana with thirty-four years. A single interview with each participant was conducted using an online meeting application and took place over one week between January 26 and February 2, 2021. Interviews ranged from 25 to 40 minutes in length.

## **Coding**

After completing participant interviews, a coding process was initiated (Creswell, 2019). The initial step involved classifying responses based on meaning in the data. Interview responses were sorted into fourteen subcategories based on interview questions, and then the data was reduced to six themes. Each participant had their responses compiled, and then a common

document was created using the six finalized categories. The categories included the following themes:

- 1) demographic and qualifying questions regarding peer support
- 2) responding and sending peer support
- 3) engagement in peer to peer support over time
- 4) the role of trust in peer-to-peer support
- 5) impacts of peer-to-peer support of teaching self-efficacy
- 6) additional summary content to highlight

Based on these six categories, the collated findings were used as a basis to provide key findings for this research.

### **Shape of the Data**

The data are presented under six headings in this section. The first section provides profiles of the participants in their own words and the context in which they engaged in peer support. Subsequent sections present their experiences with peer support; the shifting levels of support required in the transition to emergency remote teaching; the importance of trust to the effectiveness of peer relationships; and the impacts of peer support on teachers and their self-efficacy.

### **Participant Profiles**

All the participants were engaged in peer-to-peer support during the transition to emergency remote teaching. As part of a school staff group, each of them quickly transitioned from in-person instruction to an online teaching platform over a few days. Each participant was calibrating to the rapidly changing teaching environment, simultaneously with many of their colleagues. They were motivated by cooperation, empathy, preservation of wellbeing, and even

fear of the unknown COVID-19 reality. They were creating knowledge as a group through collaboration, and this was commonly seen as an approach to disperse skills to all teaching staff members. That led to teachers migrating to each other in peer-to-peer support groups, which was evident by the experiences represented by my participants.

“Ewan” was a newcomer to the teaching career with roughly three years of teaching experience. Ewan had a strong comfort level with teaching from her training, but at the same time, she had fewer practical teaching experiences to draw on. “Ryan” had developed a proven track record as a classroom teacher with twelve years of experience. He was able to confidently navigate the classroom and the challenges that he encountered when teaching. “Diana” had thirty-four years of teaching experience, which meant she was a very knowledgeable and experienced teaching practitioner. She drew on many previous experiences to adapt to the needs of her teaching assignment.

Ewan had an inherent desire to improve her skills and collaborate with other teaching colleagues. Ewan shared,

I was working very closely with my grade partner when we were in school, and when schools closed, we decided that the most efficient thing to do would be to teach our kids the same way. Working very closely together at that point, it seemed natural to work on something together. It got a little overwhelming, but it was nice to know that the support was there. (Ewan)

Ewan’s summary that peer support was important was a result of a feeling of being supported to meet challenges collectively.

Ryan had become a leader in various areas at his school and, crucially, he developed a diverse skill set using teaching technologies. Ryan shared,

I didn't seek out to connect with my staff, but sometimes being the tech lead, the staff would come to me. I would then connect to [peers] at the central office. I consider them my peers for troubleshooting or tech issues. I know them on a first-name basis, so it wasn't just a formal email that they were unsure who sent it. (Ryan)

This example illustrated the leadership that a mid-career teacher can be called upon by staff because they can possess a mix of experience and relevant skills. An area that changed throughout Diana's career was the integration of technology into classroom teaching:

I just felt very comfortable with what I was doing [before emergency remote teaching]. It was a really steep learning curve. I think I'm just kind of in that latter part of [my teaching career]. I just never totally caught on to the technology thing because it wasn't part of my [teaching style]. (Diana)

She elaborated further about the initial struggles of emergency remote teaching, Diana shared, "My biggest hurdle about going online was [that] I didn't have the skills at the time. It was hugely frustrating. It was very, very stressful" (Diana). This stress resulted from the following experience that Diana shared with me:

Because I needed the help... I'm going from knowing how to teach it, you know, standing in front of kids and moving around the classroom, delivering a lesson, having that interaction with, one-on-one or a large group of kids and myself. To all of a sudden, they're at home. I'm in front of my screen, and it was just a different world for me. (Diana)

This description must have been a familiar feeling for many teachers managing the shift from in-person to online teaching.

## Experiencing Peer Support

The exchange of ideas, information and practical support was fundamental to peer-to-peer support. These peer groups were characteristically small for Ewan and Diana and then extended for Ryan. Ewan and Diana received and mainly lent their support to a teaching partner or close friend. Ewan contributed,

I don't know that anybody specifically asked me for support. As I said, it was a natural progression for my teaching partner and me to work closely. Had anybody asked me for support, I would have jumped in with two feet. (Ewan)

In contrast, Ryan was readily involved in peer support among staff members and professional contacts. Ryan stated:

I feel like my answers are going to be a little different on this end. I essentially was the peer support. In the transition to online learning, teachers often came to me and said, 'well, how would you do that?' (Ryan)

He explained that he would reach out to consultants at the central office:

The consultants offered monthly Google meets [before emergency remote teaching]. They had newsletters that they distributed. [During emergency remote teaching] we were encouraged to contribute again to a Q&A [resource], and when they did have the answers, they would update it. So in that way, those were my peers [at the central office]. It was helpful that I was able to gather some information that way and then redistribute it. (Ryan)

Each participant had varying experiences with peer support because they each had different expectations for their peer interactions. When they needed help with the skill development, they

were net recipients, and when they felt confident in their skills, there were contributors to peer support.

### **Waxing and Waning Needs**

The intensity of interaction between peers was very high initially because of the abrupt transition to emergency remote teaching. While support was frequent and intense in the beginning, it waned as teachers gained confidence in their abilities. Ryan shared:

I would say that during that time, it was a daily occurrence that staff would know that they would have an opportunity to connect with me. If they had an issue with something that came up or wondered how to do something, they had that opportunity daily. (Ryan) Diana similarly stated, "Oh gosh, at first, I think we had done the first week of teaching, and that first weekend it was probably the most. I would say one to two hours, on a Saturday and or a Sunday also" (Diana). The importance of uniting with a peer was evident from these two responses.

The amount of peer-to-peer support waned as time progressed, and predictability and familiarity with online teaching practices increased. Ryan responded, "[Communication] probably did drop off a little bit near the end. Both of us were getting a little bit more comfortable with things. We kept our weekly meetings on Fridays until the very end of school" (Ryan). Diana supported this change by stating, "Once I figured out better how to work all this technology with the support I needed, it really dropped off. I felt I figured out how to do this" (Diana). While initial needs for peer support were high, they waned as participants' comfort levels rose as a result of that early, intense help.

### **The Element of Trust**

Trust in peer-to-peer support was examined with each participant. Ewan shared, "[Trust]



has a big role. I think that especially for me being sort of new. It was hard for me to admit certain things ... or admit that I was overwhelmed" (Ewan). She continued to explain,

I felt that by being able to talk about what I was afraid of when it came to my teaching... I wouldn't have been able to get help in those areas. I don't think I would have recognized that I wasn't the only [one in the situation]. (Ewan)

Trust was an essential factor in shoring up her self-efficacy in emergency remote teaching.

Contrasting Ewan's reflections to more experienced teachers, Ryan stated, "I didn't question anything or have any worries...We're a small staff, and I was able to have a rapport with everybody, and we worked so closely together as a small team" (Ryan). Diana, the most experienced teacher shared:

I knew I had colleagues that I could rely on to help me with my work ... I was able to trust the people I was working with. I was able to verbalize those fears, then get help and also some validation. Everybody [should] feel like that. (Diana)

These two teachers shared the confidence in their professional relationships, which each one fostered through their sense of confidence as a result of years of teaching experience.

Evidence of the importance trust played in peer-to-peer support flowed through responses. For example, Ewan stressed,

I don't think I would have been able to receive the support that I needed if I hadn't trusted my [teaching] partner and other people that I worked with... I received [support] because I trusted them enough to tell them what I needed. (Ewan)

Diana similarly shared:

Just having good connections with my colleagues, knowing that I could ask them for help, they were very willing to help me. If anybody ever asked me for help, although it

hardly ever happened at that point. I was very willing to help. (Diana)

Facilitating the organic nature of communication was made possible through the trust permeated through the established relationships that each teacher had created for their situations.

### **Impacts of Peer Support**

The impact of peer-to-peer support was reinforced through the emotions that Ewan expressed in this set of reflections:

It would have been a nightmare if I had had to transition to remote learning without any support from my colleagues...I would have gotten through it, but I feel it would have been barely. My students would have suffered for it. I worked hard to try and deliver the best education I could at that time. I think we did as well as we could. We did as well as possible. Without someone else to work with, it would have been more than overwhelming. I would have been overwhelmed. (Ewan)

The importance of peer-to-peer support to a new teacher in the emergency remote teaching situation was palpable.

When Ryan shared his experience, it was from a different perspective, from calm confidence in the knowledge and skills he had gathered:

I was lucky that I did have a good background [with technology] when we went online. I had a really good idea of how I wanted to set it up and how I wanted to do it. I think if I didn't have that background, I would have started smaller. (Ryan)

Diana shared,

I couldn't have done it. I could not have done this. Maybe through the help desk? That might have been my only other option. I think [my peer] gave me the confidence to manage the technology ... by walking me through. That was most useful because I had to

know how to do that. (Diana)

A peer's importance to act as a compass to navigate the emergency remote teaching experience led to a renewed confidence for the more experienced teachers.

Ewan summarized the importance of peer-to-peer support by explaining:

Planning lessons with another teacher was invaluable. I was new to teaching as it was. I don't even feel like I had mastered teaching if it's something you can ever master... I thought, how are we going to do this? I don't want the rest of this year to be a write-off. Knowing that it wasn't my inexperience as a teacher making this feel so overwhelmed was really helpful. That made me feel like I was in the same boat as other teachers.

(Ewan)

Understanding that teachers were in this situation together was a common thread through each of the participants' experiences; supporting other teachers created strength.

### **Peer Support & Self-Efficacy: A Vital Connection for Teachers**

The positive self-efficacy teachers expressed from their peer support experiences was truly evident in their self-reflections. Each participant finished their interview when they provided a final reflection or emphasis that they shared.

The final response that Ewan provided was a powerful reflection on her experience:

I think that peer support is vital to a teacher's efficacy, both in the classroom and 100% when you have to transition to emergency remote learning. I would have been nowhere without peer support... You can't talk to your admin in the same way you can talk to your teaching partner. You don't want to admit [your fears] to your admin. So being able to have someone who is actually in the same boat as you, trying to do the exact same thing as you, trying to do it as best as possible is invaluable. (Ewan)

Ryan reflected on his impressions regarding student learning:

guess you could maybe say my skepticism at first didn't come to fruition at the end, which was an outcome different than I had expected. I was actually quite surprised that not only were we able to get done but also how much the kids took it up. (Ryan)

Diana paused and, in elegant clarity and reflection, responded, "They were my lifeline. Those two teachers were my lifeline. I just couldn't have done this without their help" (Diana). This response speaks to the significance of peer support in the success of teachers in challenging teaching situations.

The participants' perspectives demonstrated how the reliance on peer support was initially intense with a reduction of peer support throughout emergency remote teaching. Defining the importance of trust in peer support was identified as a vital component of all participants. Highlighting the impacts of peer support on the participants' experience over emergency remote teaching linked literature to the findings. A crucial connection for teachers is with their peers, and the results demonstrate a resulting strengthening of self-efficacy.

### **Research Outcomes**

Peer support during emergency remote teaching proved vital to building a sense of efficacy among participants. The remote teaching experiences were fraught with anxiety and fear. This research proved an enlightening view on the experiences of the participants and the greater teaching community.

These findings indicate that peer support positively shaped teacher efficacy for participants. Mayer (2013) and Ross (1992) emphasize how peer support through coaching improved teachers' effectiveness in many aspects of their professional growth. Diana's belief that her peers were her lifeline and that she could not have made it without their support

demonstrated the importance of peer support to success during the transition to remote teaching. Without supportive peers, the outcomes of the emergency transition would likely have been very different.

Peer support depends on the participants caring for their teaching colleagues. Noddings (1984) explained how the ethic of care motivates interactions in peer support (as cited in Frick et al., 2013). Care for others is an underlying ethos for many teachers, including the participants of my research project. The ethic of care cements the effectiveness of peer support, as was found among the participants.

A common theme throughout the emergency remote teaching experience was using technology to teach students. The discovery of how to overcome the technology hurdle for teachers relates to the research of Gardiner (2012), Skytt and Ruban (2015), and Bambrich-Santoyo (2012). Their research reinforced the importance of skill development through peer support and teachers' professional development through collaborative practice. Notably, Ryan found himself in a leadership role for peer support at his school due to having two complementary characteristics, teaching experience and high technological efficacy. Ewan and Diana had strengths in one of the complementary characteristics: Ewan gained experience, and Diana developed technical skills. Ewan had fewer teaching experiences and a greater understanding of how to use technology and Diana expressed the opposite characteristics in her interview. As a result, the importance of peer support was critical, as it allowed these teachers to be more efficacious during the transition to emergency remote teaching. This was consistent with the findings of Shilder (2009), and of Connelly, Clandinin, and He (1997), who asserted that, as teachers needed required skills, peer support could impact their efficacy. Peer support made the difference between experiencing success and continuing to struggle.

A final and central characteristic of peer support that positively shaped a sense of teacher efficacy throughout emergency remote teaching was the element of trust in professional peer relationships. Trust allowed for disclosure among peers, pedagogical risk-taking, and a foundation to build further efficacy for teachers, as highlighted by Shilder (2009), Gardiner (2012) and Psencik (2015). Each participant shared how trust was fundamental not only to initiating peer connections but also to the ongoing impacts of the relationships on teacher efficacy.

### **Key Learnings**

While the transition to emergency remote teaching was a uniquely challenging experience for most teachers, it provided a learning opportunity for those who engaged in peer support. Peer support positively impacted teacher self-efficacy through relationships with colleagues built on trust, regular communication, and open collegiality. During the emergency remote teaching transition, teachers involved in peer support worked mainly with colleagues closely connected with their teaching role. It was noteworthy that teachers also reached beyond their immediate teaching partners to enlarge their support network. Engaging in peer support positively impacted participants' perceptions of their teaching, especially as the emergency remote teaching period progressed. Trust between peers played a vital role when seeking out and engaging in peer support.

Teachers in my research project and those who I work alongside drew together (at a distance) in the uncertainty experienced by the emergency remote teaching of the early COVID-19 pandemic. Even though a sudden physical distance was required, technology facilitated initial reconnection in the form of a phone call, online meeting, or physically-distanced interaction. Teachers developed resilience and found direction for themselves through relationships with

their closest peers. Teachers could draw on a spirit of collaboration to create peer-to-peer support networks that allowed for their adaptation to the new realities of the learning situation. Existing relationships between staff members and fellow teachers became vital to their teaching practice. The adage, "one arrow is easily broken, a bundle is not" summates this research project's reoccurring theme of peer-to-peer support.

Communication was key between teachers regarding their challenges and fears. They empathized with one another and combined knowledge with experiences to improve their self-efficacy. There was a necessity of having the right mix of teaching experience and technical skills. For this study, a newer teacher and an experienced teacher had the exact opposite support needs. The newer teacher desired experience, and the experienced teacher wanted technical skills. Interestingly, the established mid-career teacher was a confident mix of skill and therefore drawn into a leadership type of peer-to-peer support role among many teachers, often acting as an intermediary for transmitting expertise.

Trust became a crucial ingredient in effective peer-to-peer support. Considering trust as the final element in the recipe for successfully navigating the emergency remote teaching world was an important finding. The ability to have transparent and unevaluated reflection proved the potential of peer-to-peer support. Without trust, the peer relationship would not have been strong enough to support the initial stressors in the first weeks of the emergency remote teaching period. Notably, the frequency of peer-to-peer interactions decreased as the teacher became more efficacious. As self-efficacy increased, so did independence as a teacher.

As participants reinforced their experiences to complete their interviews, the importance of peer-to-peer support was evident. As Diana reflected, the importance of her peers were compared to them being a lifeline. Each participant was able to express the requirement for peer-

to-peer support to facilitate their success or that of others. Even though there was skepticism of what would result for emergency remote teaching initially, this quelling of apprehension often occurred by increasing self-efficacy through peer-to-peer support.

### **What's Next**

This in-depth account of professional relationships during emergency remote teaching may help teachers develop strategies for facing similar circumstances in the future.

Understanding that relationships are key to creating a supportive professional working environment is necessary. Trust is established in strong relationships, and this is accomplished by providing opportunities to connect with staff members. We see that the interaction between staff before emergency remote teaching was essential to teachers' success once they worked under the stressors of emergency remote teaching (Mayer, 2013). Supporting teachers' abilities to build professional networks and emphasize social connections play into teachers' resilience and efficacy in demanding situations. Checking to see if teachers all have peer-support is a necessary action that strong leadership in schools should foster (Hargreaves, 2009; Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Looking outside the education field, we can learn from a common practice in corporate culture, which is to participate in team-building events. Further investigating this practice of peer-to-peer support development should be completed to understand its net benefits to teacher efficacy and retention.

### **Conclusion**

Peer support has demonstrated positive effects on teachers' self-efficacy (Mayer, 2013; Ross, 1992). Literature confirms this rather obvious link in addition to the findings produced in the study of my participants. Seeking to understand the key themes in this research project



developed a deeper understanding of how teachers managed and flourished through unprecedented emergency remote experiences.

Understanding the personal connections that teachers build with their peers was linked to caring, sharing and trust, as found in Shilder (2009), Gardiner (2012) and Psencik (2015). Educational leaders must understand that providing opportunities to work with a peer is more than a task-oriented assignment. Instead, peers supporting each other is a crucial ingredient in a teacher's success through a difficult circumstance. The case study of emergency remote teaching is the basis for this project, but it should extend into other teaching experience aspects. Further research should investigate a variety of challenging situations that teachers encounter throughout their careers—examples of challenging conditions such as collegial conflict, challenges in personal wellbeing, trauma, and teaching assignment strains are viable areas for consideration. Using a similar methodology as found in this research project would shed light on an increasingly complex profession.

Understanding that teacher self-efficacy improves through peer support and the evidence from this study underscored how vital peer support is. The ethics of care cements the effectiveness of a sustained sense of confidence when teachers encounter stressors, which is foundational to the teaching profession. Peer support made the difference between experiencing success and struggling in the face of challenges. As Coach Wooden might say, peer support is not what we do with our colleagues but rather how we work with them.

**Researcher Contact Information**

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### **Appendix 1: Interview Guide**

The researcher may ask the following questions but participants may decline to answer any of the questions if they so choose; this will be relayed to participants before and during the interview process.

1. Participant name?
2. Teaching experience?
3. Background (background the participant wishes to share)
4. a) Did you access peer support during emergency remote teaching?  
b) Did you seek out peer support during your transition to emergency remote teaching?  
c) Did you receive peer support during your transition to emergency remote teaching?  
d) How did you respond to requests for support during your transition to emergency remote teaching?
5. a) Did you act as a support to another peer?  
b) How often did you engage in peer support?  
c) What aspects of peer support were most valuable to improving instruction (why)?
6. a) As a peer, what role did trust play in you seeking out peer-to-peer support?  
b) What role did trust play in receiving peer-to-peer support?  
c) What role did trust play in responding to requests for peer-to-peer support?
7. a) How would you describe your teaching practice following peer to peer coaching?  
b) If you did not have peer to peer coaching in your transition to emergency remote teaching, how would you have managed the situation?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences

with peer support?

9. What would you like your pseudonym to be for the purposes of this study?



## **Appendix 2: Information Letter for Participants**

### **Research Title:**

The impacts of peer support on teacher self-efficacy: a case study during the initial transition to emergency remote teaching.

### **Research Investigator:**

Adam Dickau

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Greetings,

My name is Adam Dickau, and I am a teacher from the Edmonton area. I am conducting a small research study examining the impacts of peer support on teacher self-efficacy.

This study is my final research project towards the fulfilment of my Master of

Education in Educational Leadership from Concordia University of Edmonton. Did you access peer support during transition to Emergency Remote Teaching? If so, would you consider participating in a short interview to discuss your experiences?

**What is this research study?**

The purpose of this research is to better understand how peer support between teachers impacted their ability to deliver instruction to students. I plan to explore the experiences of a small sample of elementary school teachers in Alberta who engaged in peer support during the transition to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the Covid-19 pandemic. I want to know the roles that peer support played during this transition. Learning how teachers engaged in peer support during the ERT period opens my topic. This investigation allows me to understand their experiences during this period further and how they felt it impacted their teaching and the significance of trust in peer support. This research will contribute to understanding the critical characteristics of peer support for teachers that enabled their success.

**What is the nature of this Inquiry?**

Understanding how teachers used peer-to-peer support to navigate challenging teaching situations lies at the heart of my research. Creating a more in-depth account of professional relationships during emergency remote teaching will help develop strategies for teachers facing uncertain teaching circumstances.

**How do I participate?**

Participation in this research is voluntary and will involve at least one recorded conversation lasting approximately 45 minutes. This interview will be conducted online using Google Meet outside of the school setting and instructional hours to help

ensure COVID-19 protocols are easily kept. The interview will focus on your experiences using peer-to-peer support during emergency remote teaching.

A second interview will only be requested if more time would benefit the research process. There is no requirement for you to conduct a second interview if you prefer not to. You may withdraw from this study for any reason at any time during the interview or at any point in the two weeks following the interview. If you choose to discontinue your participation, all data pertaining to you will be destroyed. After the two-week period, data cannot be withdrawn. With your consent, our conversation will be recorded and digitally transcribed for the purpose of data analysis.

### **Further Questions and Follow-Up**

You are welcome to question the researcher, Adam Dickau, during the interview. If you have additional questions once the interview is completed, you are encouraged to contact the researcher using the contact information given below.

### **What about my privacy?**

Your anonymity and confidentiality will be protected at all times. If you are interested in learning more about the study or choose to participate, it will be strictly confidential and not be shared with others, only the researcher (Adam Dickau), supervisor (Dr. Christine Martineau) and Co-Supervisor (Dr. Lorin Yochim). Any personal or professional details which may potentially identify you will be altered, with concurrence between you and the researcher. You will not be referred to by name in any future presentations or publications. You will be able to suggest your pseudonym to be used in place of your real name. The name of your school division or school will not be identified in the final paper. All data will be stored on a password-protected

Google drive, and it will be permanently deleted once the research project is completed.

A final copy of the paper will be available for you upon your request.

Other potential uses for this project include publication and use in presentations. This plan has been reviewed by the *Concordia University of Edmonton Research Ethics Board Guidelines for Research with Human Participants* and is found to adhere to ethical guidelines.

If you are able to participate or have any questions that require any further

information, please don't hesitate to contact Adam Dickau

([adickau@student.concordia.ab.ca](mailto:adickau@student.concordia.ab.ca)) or Dr. Christine Martineau

([christine.martineau@concordia.ab.ca](mailto:christine.martineau@concordia.ab.ca)).

I look forward to hearing your stories and experiences.

Sincerely,

Adam Dickau

### Appendix 3: Consent Form for Participants

Project Title: The impacts of peer support on teacher self-efficacy: a case study during the initial transition to emergency remote teaching.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name; please print clearly), have thoroughly read the information letter and understand the presented conditions and expectations.

I understand that I am free to decline to answer any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without an explanation. I can withdraw by either emailing the researcher, Adam Dickau (adickau@student.concordia.ab.ca) or Dr. Christine Martineau (christine.martineau@concordia.ab.ca). I understand that my responses and information will be kept anonymous. I acknowledge that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered by the researcher. I give my consent to participate in the study: The impacts of peer support on teacher self-efficacy: A case study during the initial transition to emergency remote teaching.

Name of teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Please keep the Information Letter for your records.**

Check If:

1. (a) You are interested in information about the study results as a whole and/or  
(b) If you would be willing to be contacted again in the future for a possible follow-up interview.

Check those that apply:

\_\_\_\_\_ I would like information about the study results.

\_\_\_\_\_ I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview.