

**EXPLORING TEACHER STRESS: IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF
TEACHER STRESS DURING A PANDEMIC**

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**EXPLORING TEACHER STRESS: IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF
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I dedicate my work to my daughter, Anastazyia. You can do anything and be anything- just remember to lead with your heart.

Abstract

The globe has faced extraordinary challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic since March of 2020. Teachers in K-12 education are negotiating new ground in terms of teaching methods, technology, and student and family requirements (including mental health needs), all while adhering to mandatory curriculum and testing and maintaining a sense of balance in their personal lives and health. Teachers are affected on both a professional and personal level by this new configuration of stressors in the workplace, including their relationships and overall health and wellbeing. Despite recommendations to use current resources, few studies have investigated how pandemic stressors have affected teachers' professional and personal health and well-being, as well as student learning. Teachers are responsible for curriculum implementation. This research inquires into the personal experiences of three Alberta certificated teachers in their professional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlights key themes and challenges participants and their students experienced due to systemic failures in providing adequate resources, training and support for education in Alberta during the crisis. Participants share their trials, victories and perspectives regarding their environment, schools and divisions navigated the complexities of teaching during pandemic conditions.

Keywords: COVID-19, Teacher Stress, Communication, Responsibility, Mental Health

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, the world has experienced unprecedented challenges. In the field of education, teachers find themselves negotiating new methods of instruction, technology use, and student and family needs (including mental health needs), all while still being expected to hold fast to curricular mandates and maintain balance in their personal lives. These new pressures in the profession affect teachers on both professional and personal levels, including in their relationships and overall wellbeing.

My own experience of teaching during the pandemic mirrored those of my teacher colleagues. Balancing decreased funding supports for newcomer students growing class sizes and composition; new expectations for lesson delivery that kept me awake well into the night; planning multi-leveled (no English experience lessons up to beyond grade level challenge activities) lessons – all of this additional work, compounded with responding to late night email requests from parents, administrators, and students, left me no room to navigate the stresses experienced by my own children and family. My health took a sharp decline, and I endured months of cancer testing and the fear of entering a hospital or worse. How could I leave my family at a time like this? What would become of my children if I were to die? I had no time, no energy and no one listening amidst the fury and chaos enveloping my professional life. How many other educators were suffering on both ends, unable to put their all into either area of their lives?

Despite encouragement from site administrators, school divisions and government leaders to maximize the use of existing supports, little research has examined how pandemic stressors have impacted the professional and personal health and well-being of teachers as well as student learning. Teachers are responsible for the implementation of curricula, instruction, monitoring of academic growth in online, in person and blended platforms, as well as the comprehensive wellbeing of the student in attendance, engagement, participation and mental health. The pressure and stress resulting from the shift of a teacher's role during the COVID-19 pandemic is a topic largely out of the current scope of priority for school divisions.

Teachers are vulnerable to feeling stressed at work and to bear ill effects in their physical health, mental health and personal lives (Karner & Honing, 2021). As classroom demands continue to transform, with higher instances of developmental challenges, diverse needs, and impacts of the pandemic, teachers find themselves responsible for addressing the individual needs of the student within these increasingly challenging environments (p. 11). New understandings show that without addressing the perceptions, needs and stress of the educator, classroom climates, school culture and student learning suffer.

This research aims to facilitate an open discussion around teacher stress under pandemic conditions. What, I ask, impacts have pandemic-related stressors had on teachers in the workplace and in their personal lives during the COVID-19 pandemic? The increasing demands and higher expectations of what teachers are to do within the

classroom, the stress of the job and how teachers cope has become a greater challenge. During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators have experienced new implementation expectations, teaching methods (on-line, in-person, blended) as well as addressing the wellbeing of students and their families, without any additional support for their classrooms or their own mental health (and the impact of the pandemic). New professional requirements such as online teaching, modifications to the scope and sequence of curricular outcomes as well as increased demand for supporting the mental and physical health of their students has created a new stress in the profession. I share collected teacher narratives, personal accounts and stories of their teaching experiences and stress' working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Context

This research was born of my personal experiences and challenges as a teacher in a public school during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, I found myself questioning how to approach the mandated curriculum while adequately attending to complex needs of myself, my family, my students and their families in the 2020-2021 school year. Faced with a growing gap between student and staff needs and available resources to mitigate the discrepancy of viable supports vs the varying educational needs of students, I began to question whether the experience was solely mine, and what other educators around the province were experiencing during this time. Anecdotally, I observed a shift in perception of the role of educators and the system of education in general from all angles: the public, media and most importantly, students and educators

themselves. I recognized a growing emphasis on addressing the mental health of our students and families, which greatly impacted the scope of my work.

I very quickly realized that each student, teacher and school community member was coming to our schools with a story, one that is not always visible but has a profound individual and collective impact on each of us. I observed colleagues break down in a seemingly familiar environment, students erupt in behaviour far removed from their usual forms of engagement and parents lash out at staff. The more frequently I observed these situations, the more I wondered what fueled each event, and more so, how each participant was impacted by another.

Further into my graduate studies, I worked with the writings of Sean Lessard (2015) and the notion of the intersectionality of commonplaces in teaching and learning. In his work, Lessard references to Schwab's commonplaces of teacher, learner, subject matter and milieu, highlighting the unexpected intersectionality of curricular expectation, pandemic effects on families and students as well as the human plight of educators at a crossroads that I was living and observing (p. 3). Were other teachers, students, families and school communities experiencing something similar? I wondered if the commonplaces existing in our schools had been collectively analyzed and if so, what was the result?

Digging further, I understood that this profound intersectionality was impacting society as a whole and manifesting predominantly in school settings. A growing

disconnect between school communities and the schools themselves due to the nature of the pandemic precipitated my interest in a neglected area—the lives of teachers and their families. Similarly, a burgeoning disconnection between educators and their schools has suggested that teacher stress and burnout has been largely overlooked. Breakdown of communication between government, health services in Alberta and the school boards has put great onus on staff to put forth more effort, time and energy to growing demands outside of the traditional scope of education with fewer resources. The Edmonton Journal (2022) reports that more than 37% of teachers surveyed this school year are leaving the province or profession, partly because of the increase in workload such as contract tracing- previously handled by Alberta Health Services, now the responsibility of teachers and school staff (Johnson, 2022).

These and other personal circumstances pushed me into a corner. Should I address my own mental health struggles and physical health issues, or should I impart my energy and safety to those in my school building? To attend to both was not, for me, possible during this time. Further, challenges with a new government and media perspectives on the role of educators during the pandemic left me with feelings of inadequacy and guilt no matter the route chosen.

Amid the pandemic, educators found themselves in contention with the provincial government over issues such as curriculum redesign, professional conduct and equitable and accessible education for LGBTQ students and staff. At the time, the compounding challenges imposed on educators in these categories were overshadowed by new

pandemic expectations, restrictions and responsibilities. Teachers were tasked with too many hats to wear, shrouded underneath the guard of, *what is best for students*.

Unfortunately, little notice was paid to the wellness of teachers at this time, and what impact declining teacher wellness and capacity would have on Alberta students.

The challenges, changes, and divergence of perspectives on the role of educators and the education system led me to ask- what impacts have pandemic-related stressors had on teachers in the workplace and in their personal lives during the COVID-19 pandemic? How much of these challenges have spilled over into student learning, school culture and the mental health and wellbeing of educators? In opening this discussion, I hope to illuminate the cracks that are widening in our education system, and to facilitate further discussion on the personal and professional implications of unaddressed challenges faced by educators today.

Research Aims and Objectives

What impacts have pandemic-related stressors had on teachers in the workplace and in their personal lives during the COVID-19 pandemic? As this essential question suggests, the purpose of this research project is to identify and describe the impact of pandemic-related stress on teachers in Alberta. Similarly, it endeavors to explore the coping strategies deployed by teachers to deal with pandemic-related stress. This project describes forms of teacher stress, how this stress impacted personal lives and professional practice as well as teacher coping, and feelings around stress experiences during the

COVID-19 pandemic.

The goal of this research is to shed light on existing challenges and stress on teachers in the education system in Alberta. Such research can build a foundation for future investigation and development of support interventions to address teacher stress. This foundation is essential to empowering educators and positively impacting teacher coping behaviours. This work may also play a role in shifting perspectives on teacher responsibilities and stress or burnout in the education system. Further, it aims to provide a base for future research that undertakes teacher stress with the notion that teachers are experiencing increased stress and burnout that negatively impacts school culture as well as community engagement and student growth and development.

In addition, this research questions the impacts of teacher stress on overall teacher health and that of their immediate families. Glunschhoff et. al (2016) consider work-related stress as a risk factor for decreased mental and physical well-being of an individual - further questioning how the COVID-19 pandemic has burdened the healthcare system in reactively treating teachers and their families (p. 1). By presenting narrative data from Alberta teachers through a wide lens of experience in the school system, this work aspires to humanize the stress and experiences of teachers during a period when educator roles and socially constructed responsibilities are in questionable flux, both from the viewpoint of the public and the government.

This work aspired to find educators that were experiencing a role shift during

pandemic times. The pandemic has thrown all pieces of social structure into disequilibrium- everything from healthcare, education, social interactions and for some, the ability to build and maintain relationships with others and with oneself. My personal experiences as a teacher during the pandemic influenced methodology and query in this work. Stevenson & Harper's (2008) research suggests that without addressing the perceptions, needs and stress of the educator, classroom climates and student learning suffers (p. 176). It seemed apparent to me, from my own experiences and observations, that nobody was hearing this.

This work has evolved into an experience common to many, but here it is told through the stories of teachers during the pandemic, to highlight the deepest cracks that lay swept under the rug in our education system. Perhaps we may see teachers as they are and as they feel- human, silenced and removed from any human connection that so wholly sustains us in our work.

Related Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has far reaching impacts on all aspects of social life, specifically, in education. In March of 2020, nearly all countries around the world closed schools. Teachers, administrators, students and families responded, under federal and Alberta provincial mandates, by launching various forms of online instruction- something many had not ventured to address before. Huber and Helm (2020) note different levels within education systems were required to adjust previous practice and adopt new

knowledge bases while simultaneously generating new understandings to apply to the evolving context (p. 238). Teachers and school staff attempted to address curricular requirements along with implementing crisis management and health procedures. In my experience, inadequate government support both financially and in perception of educators and education as a competent institution, lead educators to increased levels of stress, disengagement, alienation and burnout. Heinemann & Heinemann (2017) assert that exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy are root dimensions of burnout- three areas that directly affect both lived and mandated curriculum delivery and influence on student learning & sustaining positive school communities (p. 3). The compounding needs of students and families was placed upon the shoulders of educators with little foresight of the large scale, negative implications this burden would have- professionally and personally. This trickle-down effect has now impacted the classroom and those who interact within it.

One new area of challenge in education during the pandemic was navigating online learning platforms, digital resources, participation, competence and equitable access to technology. Rasmitadila et. al. (2020) discuss perceptions of primary school teachers of online learning during the pandemic. They posit that the online learning environment is a collaborative effort between teachers, parents and the school at large, but note that teacher and student readiness for technology, and slow-moving government actions create disparate access to learning success (p. 90). Though teaching and learning expectations remained consistent if not heightened during the crisis, problems such as

access to the internet, the cost of internet packages and poor technology exacerbate social inequities (p. 92). Expectations for teachers as well as parents and students require participants to use new applications to generate optimal levels of learning and instruction (p. 103). However, because of limited access to teachers during scheduled online class structures, parents often found themselves 'giving answers' rather than supporting independent learning; considerations for instructional time, additional support to students as well as disciplinary action for missed classes or assessments negatively impacts student learning and student-teacher relationships. From the initial challenge are born several others- parent role, student responsibility as well as a plethora of other professional difficulties that continue to linger in blended and face to face learning environments.

Several school systems around the world were better prepared and equipped to address the pandemic shift to online learning. Aytac (2021) presents experiences of teachers in Turkey, where programming and protocol for virtual instruction was already established. In his findings, Aytac discusses shortcomings of this system, namely, inexperienced teachers with effective use online tools, resources and methods (p. 405). Constant support is required to navigate online instruction as well as qualified process management such as applications and methodology. Further, Aytac postures that the idea of constant support for each individual student in online and in person instruction is nearly impossible; the ratio of student to teacher is not one on one (p. 405). Similarly, few educators are masters in online process management or competent in application

methodology. In the initial six months of the pandemic and online learning, Google engaged with educators in developing applications, widgets and extensions as the platform was underdeveloped for relevant educational purposes at the time. Again, teachers are asked to take on more, with less.

Similarly, students require academic, technological and psycho-social support while navigating life and learning, more so during a pandemic; teachers are expected to provide these supports while adhering to programming and curricular protocols (Aytac, p. 414). Interrupted in person learning created anxiety especially for students who were preparing for exams or entry to post-secondary institutions. The obligatory shift of learning and teaching environments required teachers to be in constant communication with parents and students, even as motivation decreased, and parental support became obviously insufficient to meet the needs of students (p. 412). Teachers then became responsible for supporting students academically and emotionally. Institutions requested that teachers continuously followed up on the psychological status of students while guiding parents in the process, adding additional responsibility to teachers to mitigate the effects of virtual learning (p. 413). Who was checking in on the psychological wellbeing of educators? Unfortunately, communication centered around achievement, exam preparation and providing additional support not only to students but also, their families.

Aytac (2021) suggests that the greatest challenge for parents, teachers and students was student engagement, motivation and skill development (p. 414). When students were notified that topics covered in distance learning would not be included in

exams, teachers noted a marked decline in student motivation and engagement with online classes, synchronous and asynchronous (p. 414). Huber and Helm (2020) echo that students from low socio-economic backgrounds fell further behind in self-regulatory skill development due to, “worrying levels of learning at home during the school lockdown” (p. 249). The compounding of roles - social worker, psychologist, motivator and educator did not alleviate the multiple hats already required of educators. Expectations and stakes were heightened, with supports and check-ins for staff reduced amid the chaos and constant state of flux.

Huber and Helm (2020) suggest that training and support for teachers was inconsistent in the shift to online learning; students and families struggled to meet the expectations of virtual classes and inconsistent discipline and assessment practices (p. 252). The pandemic exposed a weakness within education systems in the social justice and equity aims for marginalized at-risk student populations. Further, review of teacher experience in psycho-social coping and stress has limited research, and further exacerbates the challenges in addressing the duality of expectation and capability among school divisions, staff and students alike (p. 261).

The rise of exacerbated and newly formed barriers in education under the pandemic caused new and seasoned teachers to reflect on their own abilities and efficacy in the role. Cyclically, lower self-efficacy among teachers created an additional barrier in the use of technology to facilitate virtual instruction (Dolighan & Owen, 2021). Dolighan and Owen (2021) highlight barriers in online teaching during the pandemic include lack

of time to prepare for digitization of resources, lack of digital resources available, rigid schedules with isolation, and a backward shift to teacher-centered approaches to technology use and instruction (p. 97). Further, teachers noted a shift in the qualities and characteristics of learning and instructional experiences of students and teachers while online; feelings of inadequacy in implementing required skills create anxiety among students and their teachers. Teaching in the virtual environment requires an immediate pivot in online classroom management, the use of instructional online platforms as well as designing a newfound learning environment for students. What's more, teachers find themselves navigating unfamiliar waters in attempting to, above all else, motivate and engage their students online while fostering a positive social environment (p. 98).

These challenges faced by educators gradually lowered individual and collective self-efficacy in education. Bandura et al. (1999) define self-efficacy as a goal-oriented belief in one's level of competence in context (as cited in Dolighan & Owen, 2021). Levels of self-efficacy are directly correlated with a willingness to push beyond comfort to achieve a goal in the face of uncertainty and adversity. The COVID pandemic challenged teacher self-efficacy and in turn has affected behavior, academic performance and student engagement over the last two years. Dolighan et al (2021) suggest that teachers with a strong sense of self and confidence in their capabilities often engage in more planning, organization and differentiation for their students; a willingness to experiment with new technology, engage in professional development and attempt new methods of instruction to meet student need is influenced by supported teacher resilience

(p. 100). During the pandemic, teacher self-efficacy within the online classroom waned, though government and divisional expectations often did not. Though professional development sessions were made available to teachers, often these were after school or weekends, adding to the notion of, ‘one more thing’ to teacher plates. What is not addressed is teacher mental health, levels of stress, and resilience/coping skills that would enable them to engage in extracurricular professional development activities.

Schaefer et al. (2020) suggest that many teachers were ill prepared to teach online. Being thrust into remote teaching without ideal conditions impacted the depth of, ‘well-planned, quality instruction for students’ (p. 2). Feelings of inadequacy, coupled with lowered self-efficacy in new aspects of their professional role set teachers up to fail. While some districts around the world shifted to a back-to-basics approach to curricular instruction, many teachers and their students were required to continue comprehensive classes in all subject areas during online learning. This focus on academic growth rather than maintaining ties between students and school affected student self-efficacy in the ability to navigate online learning. The authors also state that social interactions in the middle grades are necessary in the formation of knowledge and deep understanding (Schaefer et al., 2020).

Students thrive in environments where their voices, choices and abilities are privileged and student-centered (Schaefer et al., p. 3). To engage learners virtually, teachers and students required the employment of several methods and strategies- some of which were not always readily accessible during online learning. The authors identify

self-regulation as the most important contributor to achievement, mental health and social success for students (p. 3). Students who possess high levels of competence in self-regulation and self-management showed some measure of success in online learning settings. However, it is noted that in order to examine the effectiveness of pandemic pedagogy can be an insurmountable task- given that economic stresses, concerns about health and well-being and social instability all play roles in the discussion (p. 4).

Research strategies and methods

To understand the stresses, concerns and experiences of Alberta teachers, I designed specific questions to inquire into the various aspects of Alberta teacher pandemic experiences in comparison to findings presented in related literature. Existing literature addressed some areas of teacher experiences during the pandemic but focused more on pandemic impacts on students and education systems.

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, in Alberta, Canada. Participants ranged in age as well as teaching experience, years of service and school board employer. Three participants from various locations around the province were interviewed via Google Meet to cast a wide net of experiences and perspectives of the impact on teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Set questions were asked of all participants, with opportunity to dig deeper into each context. Data collected represents a small yet varied sample of experiences and perceptions of Alberta teachers on the role of stress, impact on professional practice as well as personal lives.

This research uses qualitative narrative inquiry through one-on-one semi-structured interviews to provide participants an opportunity to identify issues affecting them, and to share their experiences teaching in Alberta. This qualitative study aims to develop a personalized understanding of teacher's perspectives about stress and how it is impacting them.

Personal reactions to stress are subjective, therefore qualitative narrative inquiry methods served as the methodology for this work. This process enabled a deeper understanding of stress during the pandemic on personal and professional levels. Probing interview questions regarding experiences of school environment and workplace stress, impacts both professionally and personally of stress as well suggested strategies to address stress were chosen, permitting personalized responses from participants. The reasoning for choosing a qualitative narrative inquiry design for this research is the desire to gain first-hand understanding of teacher stress that has been metastasized during the pandemic. Similarly, personal accounts of lived experience impact professional practice. Lessard (2015) contends that by working within the three-dimensional inquiry space of temporality, sociality and place, others can see themselves within one's story (p. 5). Narrative inquiry allows for synthesizing enhanced apperception of a given query or phenomenon; this format is valuable in allowing for true investigation of theory in lived experience and situation. Due to the delicate nature of the topic, participants were assured confidentiality to facilitate feelings of safety and garner deeper responses to questions presented.

This research used open-ended interviews to permit exploration and deeper inquiry into teacher stress. Personal interviews permit first-hand recollection of lived experience, including conversations that permit meaningful expression rooted in personal truth. These conversations emphasize real-time teacher stress experiences and impacts on personal and professional experiences. Using Otter.ai transcribing, I thematically analyzed and reviewed all aspects of the interview and participant responses. Otter.ai transcribed the interviews verbatim into a legible document and stored as a document for analysis.

Using base questions, the aim of interviews was to identify the emanating theme of teacher stress and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers. Upon initial collection, participants reviewed their responses for accuracy prior to analysis. All participants engaged in follow up discussions to dive further into their initial responses through live google meets. Each participant was able to read interview transcripts to substantiate their answers.

Content of participant responses was analyzed through the Otter.ai transcriptions and researcher data inquiry. Further, narrative analysis provided a deeper understanding of the connection and meaning of common terms and themes emerging from the data. Information collected and analyzed yielded a common thread among stresses and experiences of participants, despite varied locations, divisions, assignments, professional experience, gender and personal lives.

Population and Sampling

Participants are teachers in Alberta who have been teaching for five or more years and have taught either online or in-person during the Covid-19 pandemic school years. The range of experience among participant teachers was important to provide opportunity for data to underline similarities and differences in teacher variables. Participants from my personal school district were excluded from the sample to remove any potential bias in responses and analysis of data collected. Teachers responded to a social media advertisement posted on several teacher pages and groups of which the researcher was a member. Interested participants meeting the criteria listed were invited to email their indication of interest in the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Further, a preamble general survey was distributed to gather general information about participants and their willingness to engage in the research. Teachers varied from elementary to senior high school and were from both rural and urban Alberta schools. The participants were composed of both male and female teachers with a wide array of experiences in diverse school settings.

The Shape of the Data

The nature of the data highlighted that each participant experience was unique, and was affected by participant personal lives, beliefs about education and their roles as

well as their assignments during the pandemic. Among several emerging themes, I recognized that teacher self-efficacy in all areas of their lives played an important role in how they perceived their experiences during the pandemic.

Participants noted that the largest stressor encountered in their role during the pandemic was communication between divisions, government, school administration, teachers and parents. My first participant stated:

That's a big question. I would guess a sense of uncertainty and not knowing what's next. The other huge stressor was an uncertainty of how hard I was supposed to still be pushing the students to learn and work. I feel like I got really contradictory messages from my Admin and Alberta Ed (Interview 1, Participant 1).

In response to shifting abruptly to new teaching platforms, participant 2 echoed the challenge in communicating:

They gave us a week, and then we went live online, and that's how we were just gonna run with it. I'm well along in my career, and it was a big ask to just all of a sudden expect me to do this. There was no professional development along the way to achieve that. They said lean on your colleagues, they can help you, they know what the Google Classroom and stuff is so go find one. Like, seriously, really, that's what you expect of us is just, we get to wing it? (Interview 1, Participant 2).

Communication between parents and teachers during online learning as well as

attempting to adequately support students and their parents posed a challenge for participant 3:

Well I think it's a whirlwind. I think the thing is, my population of students have special needs. And so, when we went online March of 2020, I had one out of my nine students on during that time. I posted to Google Classroom, and I'd have like handouts and everything but all the parents I talked to were like 'schooling is the last thing I can put on my plate, like she won't sit' - so I found it very very stressful trying to put stuff on that would engage the students (Interview 1, Participant 3).

Through the data, several keywords emerged: stress, uncertainty, participation, school culture, share and information. Drawing on commonality among key terms, a general thematic overview was evident among the distinct lived experiences of participants. Data collected highlighted existing challenges and stresses faced by teachers in Alberta that were metastasized during the Covid-19 pandemic. These challenges or causes of teacher stress became the themes of each narrative, with further implications and difficulties discussed in context of teaching under pandemic conditions. The following themes were identified: (a) communication, (b) school culture, (c) responsibility, (d) mental health and (e) teacher expectation. The stress that participants experienced fell within one or more of the themes presented.

Outcomes/Findings

Teacher stress was identified as originating in both external perception of the profession and organizational components such as division and school communication, leading to school culture and engagement in education. These factors were identified as being influential on the profession prior to the pandemic; through interviews, participants provided evidence from their lived experience that the Covid-19 pandemic enhanced these issues. All participants stated that their stress is augmented by the increased demands and expectations related to the role of teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants expressed a lack of direction and rapidly changing expectations without warning or explanation. This led participants to feel exhausted, anxious and ineffective in their roles during the pandemic, resulting in challenges with mental and emotional wellness and coping abilities both professionally and personally. Teacher participants shared how the lack of communication between government and divisions, schools and teachers as well as with parents created feelings of frustration and inadequacy; inefficiencies in resource allocation, direction and role adjustments caused participants to feel ineffective in their roles, despite years of experience and in one instance, a positive relationship with administrators and parents.

The data suggest that participant perceptions of their professional roles shifted through the pandemic as their mental health and personal lives were increasingly impacted by professional challenges faced. All participants felt that there was an increase in professional pressure and stress at work regularly. This included a lack of adequate

resources, support or timely communication compounded the challenge of addressing these pressures. Stress was further exacerbated by a shift in parental and public perceptions of schools and teachers, increased workload, as well as a shift to supporting families and students while attempting to navigate new teaching strategies and technologies.

Participant 3 felt that the available supports to teach her students with exceptionalities were subpar at best, causing further challenge for parents and teachers alike, “I found it more stressful to try and do stuff online for the nonverbal- those with autism or complex communication. It was really hard to try and engage them for even a 20-minute time period. I think it was just the stress of trying to plan and make it so that it's engaging and exciting, something that the parents didn't necessarily need to be by” (Participant 3, Interview). Aytac (2021) highlights how technological challenges for teachers and parents impacts teacher, parent and student motivation to participate in online learning (p. 416). When students, parents and teachers remain in a state of uncertainty coupled with inadequate preparation and professional development, engagement declines, as shared by Participant 3.

Other participants shared that a lack of communication among government, divisions, schools, teachers and parents was a root source of stress during the pandemic. Considering student participation and performance, one participant stated that inadequate and varying expectations of teachers while online increased stress. Participant 2, with more than 20 years' experience teaching shared: “When we were online, I had no

boundaries in terms of when my school would be turned off because both kids and parents would communicate at all times of the day with their submissions or questions about the projects and whatnot.” Participant 1 shared that along with lack of communication, uncertainty in one’s health and safety in school had negative consequences on culture and relationships in the school:

There were times when numbers would rise, and we'd know that changes would be coming...We wouldn't know what the changes were and what the purview was. I definitely wish we were aware. There was a short temper in my classes- it was kind of inevitable that I wasn't quite as patient as I normally would be. And especially if they were really pushing me for answers that I couldn't give that would sort of exacerbate the situation (Participant 1, Interview).

Schaefer et al. (2020) reiterate the widespread impact of inadequate preparation of teachers with online instruction and constantly changing scenarios; lack of teacher confidence and competence directly impacts student self-regulation and learning (p. 2).

Key Learnings

Extended periods of stress impact the teaching environment along with the learning environment. Factors influencing teacher stress, in some cases, existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; growing gaps in communication and division in expectations of teacher roles further impact teacher stress and coping mechanisms. Increased stress influenced teachers’ daily work as well as personal lives negatively. The effect of added

stress challenged teacher-student relationships, parental responsibilities and positive interactions among stakeholders in the school community. The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated neglected areas of teaching and learning, particularly teacher stress and teacher mental health.

Important to note is that participant experiences varied due to external factors such as personal lives, lived experiences, history as well as current teaching and learning environments and conditions. Regardless of these variables, participants shared that increased stress in a variety of areas professionally and personally has impacted their day-to-day professional practice as well as overall health and wellness. This cyclical relationship suggests that governments, divisions and schools did not consider how changes and mandates on educational expectations would impact teacher stress, and further, how this stress would affect student learning.

Educators and learners come to school with a range of lived experiences, influencing the important teacher-student relationship that is key to higher levels of student learning. Without attending to the lives and experiences of teachers, divisions neglect to utilize the skills teachers bring forward in times of crisis and need in the classroom, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As many have heard on flights, leaders are to put their own oxygen mask on prior to assisting vulnerable or younger passengers; the COVID-19 pandemic has pointed a spotlight on an overlooked yet vitally important area of care that must be tended to, to ensure continued growth and success for students and the education system. Teachers must feel and be supported professionally and personally,

as human beings, in order to effectively carry out the roles and responsibilities put before them. School system stress during the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting teacher efficacy, school culture and teacher mental and physical health. One of the many challenges teachers currently face is the lack of communication and support both in the workplace and in their personal lives.

What's Next?

Teacher stress has widespread implications on teaching, learning and the future of education. With growing challenges added by the COVID-19 pandemic, each teacher is impacted in a variety of ways, further challenging expectations and responsibilities in schools. Further, neglected teacher mental health and stress, coupled with school difficulties form a cycle of decreased teacher efficacy and potential negative impacts on the stability and growth of education. Finding resolutions to minimize teacher stress should be of the utmost importance for the betterment of teacher wellness.

Every stakeholder comes to school with their own experiences and ways of knowing the curriculum through their interpretation of the world. As such, teacher-student relationships and supports that facilitate their development require recognition of the needs and challenges of educators. How teachers feel about their responsibilities and their own abilities to adequately function-both professionally and personally has direct implications for implementation in school culture of division policy; to overlook the mental health and stress of teachers as merely a byproduct of the profession can have dire

consequences on those entering the profession, and those who are served. Further research is needed to identify how divisions and school sites can better identify and adequately address teacher stress. Without a willingness to engage teachers in meaningful discussion on their stress and needs as not only educators but as human beings that work with the most vulnerable of our populations, apathy, decreased motivation and burnout will surely taint the progressive institutions that have for so long facilitated growth, learning and wonder amongst their students.

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Appendix A: Preamble Survey Questionnaire

These questions are about you, your education and the time you have spent in teaching.

In responding to the questions, please mark the appropriate box.

1. What is your gender?

Female 1

Male 2

Prefer not to say 3

2. How old are you?

Under 25 1

25-29 2

30-39 3

40-49 4

50-59 5

60+ 6

3. What is your employment status as a teacher?

Part-time employment is where the contracted hours of work represent less than 90 per cent of the normal or statutory number of hours of work for a full-time employee over a complete school year.

Please consider your employment status for all of your teaching jobs combined.

Full-time 1

Part-time (50-90% of full-time hours) 2

Part-time (less than 50% of full-time hours)3

4. Do you work as a teacher at multiple school sites?

Yes 1

No 2

6. What is your employment status as a teacher at this school?

Permanent employment (an on-going contract with no fixed end-point before the age of retirement) 1

Fixed term contract for a period of more than 1 school-year 2

Fixed-term contract for a period of 1 school-year or less 3

7. What is the highest level of formal education that you have completed?

Bachelor Degree 1

Masters Degree 2

PhD3

Other 4 (please specify)

8. How long have you been working as a teacher?

This is my first year 1

1-2 years 2

3-5 years 3

6-10 years 4

11-15 years 5

16-20 years 6

More than 20 years 7

9. In the last year, how would you describe your teaching experience (2020-2021 school year)?

Positive 1

Negative 2

No change from previous years

Appendix B: Interview Question Guide

- 1) What do you perceive as the biggest stress(es) you encountered at work during the pandemic? *(March 2020-current)
- 2) Do you feel that these stresses impacted your teaching practice?
 - a. How?
- 3) Share some examples of when stress (negative or positive) impacted you at work?
 - a. Outside of work?
- 4) What values/actions do you think would positively impact your ability to cope well with stress at work?
 - a. What negative actions impede your ability to cope well with stress at work?
- 5) How much does school culture impact teacher stress?

Appendix C: Further Topics to be Explored

- i) Potential questions posed may include these and others:
 - 1) How does stress under pandemic conditions affect teachers in Alberta schools?
 - 2) How do teachers in Alberta schools cope with stress under pandemic conditions?
 - 3) What do Alberta teachers perceive as the biggest stressor(s) encountered in the workplace under pandemic conditions?
 - 4) How has workplace stress under pandemic conditions impacted Alberta teachers' personal lives?
 - a) Impact on relationships/marriage

b) Impact on mental health

c) Impact on self-care

5) Other questions may be asked as issues arise.

Appendix D: Consent Letter

LETTER OF CONSENT

August, 2021

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to participate in a research study on teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, I am interested in what stress teachers have experienced, both professionally and personally, during the pandemic.

This research will require about 1-2 hours of your time. During this time, you will be interviewed about your experiences during the pandemic. The interviews will be conducted wherever you prefer, via telephone, google meet or in person (with safety measures), and will be recorded.

There are minimal risks or discomforts anticipated with this research. Specifically, social discomfort or psychological stress are possible. The person conducting this research will supply you with the names, contact information and websites of counseling and/or mental health services, if you wish this information. Should you wish to participate in the interview in person, safety measures such as conducting the interview outdoors, physical distancing, hand sanitization and mandatory mask wearing throughout the interview will be in effect.

By participating in this research, you may also benefit other teachers by helping people to better understand the experiences in education under pandemic conditions. Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and identity. While the interviews will be recorded, the recordings will be destroyed once they have been analyzed and a final report drafted. The typed interviews will NOT contain any mention of your name, and any identifying information from the interview will be removed. The typed interviews will also be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's private residence, and only the researcher will have access to the interviews. All information will be destroyed five years after publication of the final paper.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may opt out of answering any questions during the interview. You may withdraw from the study at any time before, during or immediately after the research, for any reason. Notice of withdrawal must occur prior to the anonymization, aggregation and publishing of the final report. If you do withdraw, all information from you will be removed from the research and destroyed.

The results from this study will be presented to Concordia University of Edmonton as the final research project for the Master of Education in Educational Leadership program. At no time, however, will your name be used or any identifying information revealed. If you wish to receive a copy of the results from this study, you may contact the researcher at the email listed below.

If you require any information about this study, or would like to speak to the researcher, please email Deana Truemner at dtruemne@student.concordia.ab.ca at Concordia University of Edmonton. If you have any other questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact the research supervisor, Dr. Lorin Yochim at lorin.yochim@concordia.ab.ca at Concordia University of Edmonton.

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Concordia University of Edmonton Research Ethics Board.

I have read the above information regarding this research study on the experience of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and consent to participate in this study.

_____ (Printed Name)

_____ (Signature)

_____ (Date)

Appendix E: Debriefing Form

Teacher Stress during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thank you for participating in this research study. The purpose of this research project is to identify and describe the impact of new stressors on teachers in the workplace and in their personal lives (relationships, parenting) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study will explore the effects of pandemic stress and the coping strategies deployed to deal with it. The aim of the study is to enhance understanding of how teachers experience pandemic-related stressors and to develop insight into how they deal with stress.

During the course of this research, you may experience levels of social or psychological stress. As a teacher in Alberta, you have access to psychological counseling and mental health support through the Alberta School Employee Benefit Program, the Family and Employee Assistance Program and Homewood Health. This information can be accessed by visiting:

<https://www.asebp.ca/sites/default/files/forms/Balancing%20the%20Give%20and%20Take%20of%20Teaching.pdf> or <https://www.asebp.ca/my-benefits/employee-wellness>.

Counselors and mental health support is available here, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

A copy of the initial individual interview transcript will be provided to you for your review; opportunity for clarification or correction will be available at that time. A final report of the research study will be available for you. You will be notified once the final report is complete.

Please refrain from discussing the research while the study is being conducted to avoid bias or undue influence on your potential responses. Participant responses should be authentic and of your own experiences.

Contact information:

Researcher: Deana Truemner, dtruemne@student.concordia.ab.ca

Supervisor: Lorin Yochim, lorin.yochim@concordia.ab.ca

This study has been granted approval according to the recommended principles of Canadian Ethics Guidelines, and Concordia University of Edmonton policies.