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Dynamic perspectives on education during the COVID-19 pandemic and implications for teacher well-being

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ABSTRACT

Twenty teachers took part in bi-weekly interviews over the course of the 2020–2021 school year and again one year later during the COVID-19 pandemic. Comparative findings on teachers' experiences indicated varied circumstances and a wide array of perspectives on coping during this protracted and stressful time. While some teachers demonstrated flourishing and resilience, the majority experienced a tipping point toward burnout. A small group languished, relating indicators of burnout and post-traumatic stress. Given the dynamic findings, a continuum of awareness is suggested that might assist teachers and administrators in critically assessing the range and dimensions of coping exhibited during the pandemic or subsequent stressful periods of time. With information of this nature available, we propose that school organizations could be better informed to provide supports and resources and improve worklife balance and well-being of teachers.

1. Introduction

Popular media have sounded an alarm through ongoing reports of teacher burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic, and both policy initiatives (Holmes et al., 2020) and our own scholarly work at various points in the pandemic have provided substantial evidence of this claim in Canadian teachers (Babb et al., 2022a; Eblie Trudel et al., 2022b; Sokal & Eblie Trudel, 2022c; Sokal et al., 2022d; Eblie Trudel et al., 2021a, 2021b; Sokal et al., 2021c, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). It is within this context that we carried out a qualitative study which involved interviewing twenty Canadian teachers on a bi-weekly basis through the third and fourth waves of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 to summer 2021), returning to interview the same teachers one year later in spring 2022. First, we wanted to engage in an in-depth exploration of perspectives involving their experiences within the education sector during the pandemic, with specific attention to stress and burnout. More importantly, we wanted to understand how they were managing with the protracted, changing and enduring pressures of teaching through successive waves of COVID-19. By incorporating a longitudinal design through ongoing interviews, we were able to move beyond snapshots of teachers' lives and capture their rich, detailed, and dynamic experiences over the course of two years.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Understanding prevalence and theorizing about teacher stress and burnout

Kyriacou (2001) defined teacher stress as involving unpleasant or negative emotions ranging from tension, frustration, anger or depression, as a result of some aspect of the teaching role. The nature of possible variables and concerns relating to teacher stress has been examined in previous studies that focused on classroom and school environments, as well as on instructional factors (Ryan et al., 2017; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008). At an individual level, teachers have traditionally reported feeling overworked due to new curriculum implementation, challenging student behaviours, technological changes, daily role requirements, as well as relationships and communication with education stakeholders – colleagues, administrators, parents and community members (Bottiani et al., 2019; Ferguson et al., 2012; Shillingford-Butler et al., 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Fitchett et al. (2018), along with Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, and van Veen (2018), noted that teaching was deemed to be a stressful profession prior to the pandemic, with close to fifty percent of teachers leaving their jobs in the first five years and nearly ten percent fully exiting the profession due to perceived challenges within their roles.

It is well documented that high levels of teacher stress can reduce the

quality of instruction and affect teacher well-being (Bakker et al., 2014; Clunies-Ross et al., 2008; Harmsen et al., 2018; Maulana et al., 2015). Not only can attrition be the outcome, but sustained periods of stress can result in teacher burnout. On that account the first theoretical model considered in this study originated with Maslach and her colleagues (1996). They described burnout as a process featuring three specific components that can occur in a variety of sequences. Individuals can experience both physical and emotional exhaustion, withdrawals from their work (cynicism) or from those with whom they work (depersonalization). In the case of teachers, depersonalization can occur not only with colleagues but with students. Individuals can also feel a loss of accomplishment or inefficacy in terms of their professional competence. Recent research of Santoro (2018) expanded the scope of teacher dissatisfaction to include demoralization. Santoro identified that teachers who experienced demoralization might express veracious discontent with their professional responsibilities when their teaching roles are undermined by changes that make the moral rewards of teaching unattainable. Santoro reported that demoralization was also experienced by teachers prior to the pandemic.

2.2. Approaches for balance and self-regulation

Kyriacou (2001) reported that other stress models have referred to pressures and demands, in particular the ability for teachers to cope with stress through the provision of select individual (internal) and external resources. More recent research on burnout involved the idea of balance as a support for role resilience and imbalance as a contribution to job strain. Hence the second theoretical model considered in this study was the Job Demands (JD-R) model by Bakker and Demerouti (2007). They found that it was judicious for organizations to assist in maintaining balance for employees by assuring access to resources to offset demands. With support from employers, individuals would be more likely to maintain personal resilience while at the same time meeting organizational goals. Likewise, individuals might choose to use personal resources in an effort to offset increased pressures brought about by excessive job demands (Lupsa et al., 2019). The importance here involves the trend away from conceptualizing stress and burnout as an individual construct, and a shift towards multi-actor responsibilities for maintaining resilience.

A key understanding in maintaining resilience in demanding circumstances surrounds the idea that teachers have agency to engage in self-regulation strategies to optimize their outcomes. Hence, a third theoretical model to reflect on in this study emerged from the research of Bakker and De Vries (2021). They described how school organizations could assist teachers in making the necessary adjustments to thoughts, tasks, and relationships to create more meaningful and less stressful experiences at work. Within this approach they suggested job coaching, facilitating role changes, providing mentorship prospects, or arranging specific professional learning opportunities to assist with re-engagement in day-to-day work. For teachers experiencing role strain, Bakker and De Vries (2021) further proposed strategies to facilitate job recovery or detachment which would allow teachers to replenish resources that had been depleted due to role stress. This would involve encouragement to disconnect from technology at the end of the workday, reduce multi-tasking, and where possible, emphasize non-work-related activities during leisure time.

2.3. Protracted stressful experiences

The need for balance was especially salient during the early months of the pandemic when teachers were required to pivot from in-person to virtual instruction (Pressley et al., 2021). Marshall et al., 2020 found that stress was magnified initially due to challenges with technology, difficulties in communication with students and families, and teachers' difficulties with separating their work and personal lives. In a study on experiences of teachers from British Columbia, Canada, in the year

following, Gadermann and colleagues noted strong declines in teachers' mental health, less occasions to connect with students, their own families and colleagues, increased workloads, and concerns about implementing the required safety measures (mask monitoring and social distancing). Conversely, these teachers felt that support from school districts, unions, communities, and the government was associated with factors such as better general health, improved quality of life, and reduced mental distress. A People for Education Report from Ontario, Canada, released in the later waves of COVID-19, emphasized that the pandemic exacerbated school staffing shortages, revealed insufficiencies in mental health supports (for both students and staff), magnified student inequities, and exposed ineffective government communication with schools and districts (Hodgson et al., 2022). The latter report identified the need for an extensive provincial plan to offset the demands incurred by the education sector during the two years of the pandemic.

In a study of 1930 Canadian teachers during initial and subsequent waves of the pandemic, our research team found that teachers continued to encounter education conditions in varied ways (Babb et al., 2022a). The challenge was to find a statistical technique that would help us to illustrate the different manners in which teachers were coping during this time. An analysis of the sub-set of teachers from Manitoba, Canada, in 2021 (Sokal et al., 2021c) showed that latent profile analysis (LPA) was an effective strategy to determine the number of categories of teacher burnout risk. Successive studies of Romanian teachers during the pandemic (Răducu & Stănculescu,2022a, 2022b) demonstrated the utility of this approach with other teaching forces' data. Accordingly, when we applied LPA to the larger Canadian data set, we found that Canadian teachers fit five distinct profiles of pandemic education experiences (Babb et al., 2022a). Notably, two of the teacher groups that we coined 'engaged' and 'involved' were navigating the pandemic well, whereas a group that we called 'over-extended' was on the tipping point for exhaustion and depersonalization. Two other teacher groups which we described as 'detached' and 'inefficacious' were significantly withdrawn from their students, and the inefficacious category in particular felt the lowest accomplishment of all teachers in our sample. It is essential to mention that despite a portion of teachers in our study who indicated they were doing well, the majority of participants across Canada were not. In the province of Manitoba, the data revealed an even greater number of teachers in the 'detached' and 'inefficacious' groups when compared with Canadian colleagues. This phenomenon could be attributed to a provincial government in Manitoba that persisted in advancing an education reform agenda despite the challenges voiced by teachers during the pandemic, pushing them beyond the tipping point of the 'over-extended' group and further toward burnout.

2.4. Purpose of the study

The topic of teacher stress is an enduring and deep-rooted challenge which continues to be exacerbated by the ongoing demands of teaching and was intensified by the pandemic (Gadermann et al., 2021; Sokal et al., 2020a). Based on concerns raised in our earlier research (Babb et al., 2022a), the purpose of the present study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of Manitoba teachers (some of the most challenged in Canada in terms of coping) amidst the prolonged and intense pressures of the pandemic. We held that it was not only essential to hear about the demands faced by teachers and determine the nature of barriers or resources that could contribute to burnout or resilience, but also to explore the trajectory of teacher perspectives relating to these concepts over time. Equipped with this knowledge, we believed that researchers or policy makers and educational leaders in school organizations could more adequately provide the necessary resources and supports to improve the well-being of teachers during periods of stress.

2.4.1. Research questions

Through the collection and analysis of longitudinal interview data from teachers in a Manitoba school division, we proposed to address the

following key questions:

1. What were the perspectives of Manitoba teachers on the challenges involved with education during the pandemic at time one (T1 - November 2020 until June 2021) and at time two (T2 -May to June 2022)?
2. How did the teacher perspectives change over time?
3. What were the implications for teacher coping, given their protracted experience of stress?

3. Methods

3.1. Study design

This study is part of a larger, mixed methods project which followed a sequential explanatory research design (Creswell, 2013). To begin with in September 2020, a primarily quantitative online survey was completed by teachers in a Manitoba school division and served as the project's first data set. The data of 147 teachers who were currently instructing students in the school division were included in the analysis. Additionally, qualitative data were collected through the inclusion of two questions at the end of the online survey. The question responses generated a set of themes which informed the qualitative data analysis. The focus of the current study is on the qualitative data derived from bi-weekly ten-minute interviews with 21 teachers that occurred during the 2020–21 school year. While the pandemic continued through the 2022 school year, an ensuing focus of this study centered on a single, lengthier (1 hour), successive interview with participants which offered a comparison of perspectives by the same teachers, one year later. This study received ethics approval for both sets of interviews from the research team's University Human Ethics Board (HE14993).

3.2. Participants

As the teachers from the school division were already available and taking part in an initial quantitative survey, convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for the qualitative portions of the study. First, the division was approached to send out the request for participation in the interview process. Shortly thereafter, 45 teachers volunteered to fill 21 spots. Teachers were selected for interview participation based on a diversity of grade levels and subject areas taught and by the nature of positions represented by volunteers (i.e., classroom-based, multi-age, learning support or alternative education positions). Specifically, teacher participants included seven early years, four middle years, seven senior years, and one each in multi-age, alternative education and learning support roles. One senior years teacher participant was promoted to the role of administrator and therefore left the study after the first year. The first set of interviews began with the selected teachers in November 2020 and continued every second week until June 2021. Next, the same group of teachers were contacted for a follow-up interview in May-June 2022. The interview at the latter time was indicated as a one-hour conversation and established to help understand the experiences of the participant teachers since the previous year.

3.3. Measures

The ten-minute interviews each involved contextual check-ins (i.e., How had things been? What had gone well? What had been challenging? Was there anything else to share?). There was a unique question asked in each of the interviews pertaining to one of the following topics: back-to-school processes, student and teacher coping, provision of equitable learning opportunities, directives and communications, energy levels, challenging aspects, efficacy, unexpected positive changes, social interaction and connections, professional learning, toxic positivity, decision making and administrative support. The interviews which

occurred one year later had a similar number and nature of questions but were a one-time reflection on and observation of changes that had occurred since June 2021. Both sets of interview data were audio recorded and transcribed by research assistants.

3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis for this study occurred in three separate phases. First, participant responses from the end of the quantitative survey were inductively analyzed by research team members to determine patterns of experiences (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). This data-driven inductive approach (Boyatzis, 1998) set the stage for the identification of seminal themes relating to the challenges of teaching during the pandemic: Physical health and well-being, pandemic safety protocols, student needs, demands and resources, support from administrators, and support of colleagues. Next, the qualitative T1 interview data were coded manually in a SharePoint spreadsheet, according to the identified themes (Nevedal et al., 2018). Each week, we engaged in synchronic analysis based on consistent coding and negotiated any differences in the interpretation of key ideas in order to consolidate direction going forward. At T2, data were organized according to the consistent thematic coding framework, and a longitudinal qualitative research approach (LQR) was applied to understand how the experiences of teachers changed over time (Saldaña, 2003). Specifically, given the temporal nature of the research, we considered whether there were particular trends identified in teachers' perspectives given the frequency, intensity, and quantity of responses.

4. Results

An important aspect of the teachers' experiences were the changing contexts of teaching in Manitoba during this time. At T1, data were captured during the second and third waves of the pandemic, prior to the availability of vaccinations for teachers. At T2, teachers responded to interview questions after the fourth pandemic wave and outbreak of the Omicron variant, yet well after vaccinations (and in some cases boosters) had been administered. The analysis of the interview responses allowed our research team to address the key questions in our study, specifically to understand the perspectives of teachers at different points of the pandemic, then to consider how those perspectives changed and assess the implications of coping over time. Results indicate changing teacher responses over time and are presented within the thematic coding framework of physical health and well-being, pandemic safety protocols, student needs, demands and resources, support from administrators, and support of colleagues.

4.1. Physical health and well-being

Responses on the topic of well-being at T1— during the height of the pandemic— were notably demarked according to both physical health characteristics and well-being. The rising numbers of COVID-19 cases in school communities and required pivots to and from in-person and remote learning took a comprehensive toll on teachers. One early years teacher reflected on their physical health: "I don't think I've ever been this tired teaching in my life, but I feel absolutely physically fatigued. I don't like missing time from school. I prefer being there, (but) I just need to listen to my body, because it speaks to me before my head does." A high school teacher reacted to the persistent feeling of being overwhelmed, fearful, and concerned for their own physical and mental health. "Last week felt like the brakes broke on a bicycle while going down a hill, and it has been shaping up to be more of the same. You see 300–400 (COVID) cases and think you want to go (to) remote (learning) for the safety of you and your students, but the government wants (schools) to be first to open and last to close. You get to the point where you are hoping for 500 cases so that we can finally go remote. What kind of bizarre thinking is that?" Concurrently they shared how confounded they were by the government's education reform bill which seemed ill-

timed and lacked recognition of the entire context at hand. A high school teacher added "I think at the beginning (of the pandemic) people were really optimistic, and now I feel like they have nothing left." An early years teacher recounted that despite the fatigue, cynicism and depersonalization, "We are on the Titanic, and we are the band that is playing while the ship sinks, and we have to play very well and keep going as if nothing is happening while everything is sinking around us. I think that is the general feeling of all teachers right now."

In fall 2020, teachers and students returned to schools and classrooms. The progression of COVID-19 variants, however, unfolded with changes to government public health orders over the course of the T2 school year directing school divisions for ongoing pivots to remote learning in various regions of the province and with specific age groups (older middle years and high school only). Both physical and mental well-being remained top of mind, but they were evidenced in a more acquiescent manner. An early years teacher admitted, "I felt the orders changed so often that a frustration level (of response) was, 'I don't have time for this. I'm gonna show up every day, do my best, try and take care of my health and the students' health to the best of my knowledge, and someone can let me know if I'm doing it wrong.'" Another early years teacher observed the inherent acceptance of pandemic implications to physical health. "COVID is a lot more prominent in schools this year. Everyone got COVID from each other, and it spread quickly. We had huge waves pass through our school. Absences went up because everyone was sick all the time." The same teacher observed that funds previously allocated to support substitute teachers in classrooms and schools no longer appeared to be available. They related, "It's very prominent to fail to fill substitute jobs – five or six jobs in a small school like mine on a daily basis. The lack of resources is much more pronounced than last year." Nonetheless, an early years teacher discussed the relief felt by the return to a more typical life during T2 and the positive impact on their mental well-being. "I've always been pretty good at keeping a balance, but it's improved, because there's more for me to do outside of work - restaurants are open and we're allowed to have people over for social gatherings." A high school teacher noticed far more open discussions where mental health and well-being were concerned. "I think the pandemic has helped me acknowledge my own personal needs more, and that is something I can help support others in doing – to be able to share my personal stories, which I wouldn't have done before in order to help someone else address their own personal needs." Although there remained a level of concern about the stigma around addressing the challenges of mental well-being, a high school teacher suggested that self-care might be quite practical in nature, "support around knowing that we can't always be on and sometimes we need a break – administrators understanding that halfway through a day when things aren't going well for a teacher, they're kind, understanding and know it's happening."

4.2. Pandemic safety protocols

Teachers expressed frustration with having to enforce pandemic protocols at T1. An early years teacher contended that government directives (on sanitizing and distancing) were out of touch with reality. "They are business people. It is top down. They have never stepped foot in a classroom. They have no idea of what most schools look like – small classrooms and ventilation that is bad." An early years teacher described the struggle of frequent reminders about safety with their students. "It is constant every single day. I probably say things 50–60 times minimum. Whether it is 'pull your mask up' or 'where is your mask?' or 'if you want to work together make sure you are at one end (of the table) and your friend is at the other.'" A high school teacher noted the weariness of staff with enforcing protocol expectations. "Nothing's been simple. You have to think of social-distancing, sanitizing, wiping this, wiping that, and trying to plan everything." They continued by voicing concerns about the students' apathy with protocols over time. "This is a ticking time bomb, and it's only going to be a matter of time before the numbers are

going to show, people are going to get sick, and someone's going to die because of the indifference."

A year later teachers were continuing to struggle with pandemic protocol enforcement. Early in T2, the protocols were quite restrictive, however over the course of the year expectations changed with the progression of the variants. One middle years teacher was conflicted by the continuous pivots and what appeared to them as ongoing inconsistency. "It was a roller coaster as far as restrictions, cases and what the outcomes of vaccinations would look like. It was hard for me, because we're all getting vaccinated and things should be more normal, and then they are not. It feels off, and you don't know what to think." An early years teacher described their demoralization with the drawn-out process. "As this goes on, it becomes more of a drain on my willingness to do anything. I am worn out, I don't want to hear about it. I want kids to take their masks down when they talk to me, because I can't hear them." As the year progressed, government mandates receded, and school processes began to look more like they did pre-pandemic. One teacher reflected, "Now we're allowed to mix classes a bit. We can sit together again. None of my kids wear masks anymore – I still do. The kids were talking about getting our carpet back, because they took our carpets away during the Omicron scare. I'm starting to think about ways to get back to my pre-COVID teaching and what that looks like and remembering what it was." An early years teacher summarized with the following perspective: "With COVID being slowly disbanded, it's been really confusing in the sense that we had very clear instructions last year and in comparison to this year, it's been a slow weeding of the restrictions. It's been very interesting to say the least. There has been a lot of confusion, anxiousness, and change."

4.3. Student needs

Teachers described student needs during T1 as challenging, with difficulty in meeting academic and social emotional challenges as well as maintaining equitable learning opportunities for all. An early years teacher noticed student anxiety going up when the province moved to the code orange (restricted) COVID response system for schools. "I have to debrief with the students a lot, because their parents are saying things, or they're catching snippets of the news and then they're coming to school wondering what that means – so I'm using instructional time to help them cope. You have to hold that space for them and hold those emotions, and that's just an added stress that we haven't signed up for." With reported high student anxiety levels, case counts increasing (students sick and isolating) and in-person classes held every second day due to physical distancing restrictions, overall school attendance decreased. Physical distancing protocols were also restricting opportunities for classroom play, and one early years teacher was more aware of the "isolation, loneliness and that sense of having to constantly build community in different kinds of ways." Despite using the smaller class sizes as opportunities to provide necessary instructional supports, a middle years teacher commented, "A lot of students are just not coming to school. Kids are getting left behind, and I think any teacher in good conscience doesn't like to see that." A middle years teacher shared the importance of keeping students positive and engaged through jokes, trivia games, and classroom celebrations. "We are still trying to work together and most of the students in my room don't want to go to remote learning – they don't like remote learning. They prefer to be in the room, seeing their friends and being taught things in person." Another middle years teacher commented, "I do have kids come and sit by my desk (for additional help), but I have to try to keep a distance from them (and) the mask inhibits them from understanding me. Not being able to work one on one is the biggest piece that has led to less equitable outcomes." With the onset of subsequent waves, ongoing pivots from remote to in-person learning continued through the winter and spring terms. A senior years teacher related the journey of assisting a student remotely to access a digital textbook. "I'm trying to help her via webcam, and she doesn't have a camera, and I'm trying to voiceover, and tell her how to do it. We

finally figured it out today at the end of remote learning - It's ridiculous!" Another senior years teacher grumbled, "It's very difficult to try and maintain a flow with a course and keep students on the same page. Staff are all struggling with getting kids (ones that are missing, students not engaging) to get caught up. There's an overwhelming pressure for remote learning that it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure the students are doing what they're supposed to be doing at home. We can set up a schedule, give the assignments where they have to log on at certain times, but if they're not doing that, it is completely out of our control." Furthermore, teachers noted difficulties with student assessment during this period of time. "We had to do our evaluations without exams, and the biggest challenge was what to do with the students who had either checked out, were participating (with limited contact) online, or weren't going to get the credit - but then you think with all the circumstances this year – how am I going to fault kids for not being present? There was a lot of juggling and trying to determine if the students had achieved the credit. This happens every year, but this year it was amplified."

Teachers at T2 noted that there was a lot of initial enthusiasm as students returned to schools and settled into familiar routines, however students were observed to be less independent, less engaged, and less willing to work through typical academic tasks. A middle years teacher discerned that students were also "having a really hard time concentrating and didn't quite get the concept of deadlines." Although additional pandemic related funds no longer flowed from the government and other supports were eroded over time, the school division did retain additional teachers to assist in learning support in classrooms. An early years teacher observed, "Instead of having four learning supports (teachers) at our school, this year we have a 5th. It's only for one year, but that 5th person is focusing on the early years. We have been able to do the equity and catch-up piece in terms of just being there for kids who are struggling or kids who need an extra hand to move them along." In addition to academic deficits, early years students were perceived as being emotionally less mature. "They haven't developed the same kind of social skill set that they typically have when coming into grade 3." A middle years teacher asserted that students seemed to have an extreme addiction to personal technological devices and were unable to stop gaming or messaging with friends. A high school teacher shared a similar perspective from students in their grade nine English class. "Ninety percent (of the students) said that they were overwhelmed and addicted and wished that there was more control on their media consumption." A middle years teacher acknowledged challenges with technology that compromised the mental health and well-being of their students. "I think kids are socializing a bit more and have opportunities to connect with each other (but) the amount of kids in my school who throw out terms like anxiety and depression without those being clinically diagnosed is really interesting. They are always online, and it builds up these really strong communities that have this certain rhetoric, and it's not the most healthy. A lot of my job is separating the fact and fiction for them." Another high school teacher concurred, indicating that students are fueled by online narratives which spills into classrooms. "What is really showing up is that they're angry – about colonization, patriarchal systems, consumerism, and ableism. They're fired up, and angry that they don't feel supported by most of the adults in their life. It's not anyone's fault. We just don't have the tools, and they don't have the listening skills to be able to tackle this problem together. They're really 'woke', and they aren't scared to enter spaces and have tough conversations. When we're together, it's unpacking, having discussions, giving them space to air all of these thoughts."

4.4. Demands and resources

External demands at T1 were in some cases initiated by teachers, however many of the stressful situations experienced were a result of the interface between schools and families during this time. Additionally, navigating work and home life balance was noted as a challenge. In the

first instance, several teachers in the study indicated intentions to pursue additional post-secondary credentials, and one of the teachers was instructing an online evening course for a local university. A high school teacher elaborated, "I'm starting my masters (degree) and for me it seems like it's the perfect time, especially with this big overhaul of education expected (referencing anticipated government reform). I'm looking forward to being a part of a program where I can delve into those types of issues in a bit more detail and just going back to school is exciting but also stressful to navigate." On the other hand, an early years teacher described the pressure of shouldering the burdens of students' parents during the school year. "When we had to teach from home last year, parents had my phone number so (now) I frequently get phone calls of parents that are very stressed, and I have to talk them down." Another early years teacher mentioned the multiple and repeated requests for (class-related) information. "Parents of young children are going through chaotic times. So, the least I can do is help them in whatever way I can as a teacher. If they need a bit more clarification, even if it's 6:30 at night, I'm okay with touching base with them, because I think we're all in this together and if we use those words, then we are." That said, a high school teacher shared the challenges of balancing the roles of parent and teacher during a pandemic. "My child was sick last week, which meant that I was away for two days when we were doing family meetings. I am now in the process of trying to rearrange them, albeit without any time to really complete those meetings. Not going to work doesn't mean the work goes away, it just adds to the pile." An early years teacher further described the struggle with balance. "It's the expectation that you should be doing everything, and you should be doing more. We come home at the end of the day, we still have families and other obligations. It's not good how this is set up and it's no surprise that teachers are burning out. A lot of teachers will leave the profession."

At T2 teachers reflected on aspects of their experiences that were helpful resources for them when teaching during the pandemic. In terms of professional development (PD) as a mechanism of support, one teacher contended, "Teachers are so burnt out from just teaching during the pandemic that they weren't open to engaging in the dialog, because they were just so done, exhausted and overwhelmed with what we were all going through – especially last year they weren't really able to engage in it." A high school teacher suggested that perhaps a more balanced approach would be helpful with the PD focus. "Sometimes I feel at my school our PD is on social activism all the time and less on curriculum or how we are offering our courses, how we are changing. It's focused on other things which are all very valuable, it just sometimes feels unbalanced." In terms of a PD focus, a middle years teacher suggested more opportunities to engage in professional dialog with colleagues. A senior years teacher summarized, "This year it was so nice to be in person and genuinely talk to people and be able to work with them in a shared space." Several middle and senior years teachers noted the importance of other key resources that they would deem helpful for the classroom. "We're finding as teachers we are needing more digital support. We need computers, cameras, and printers, if kids are going digital and learning from home. We need more resources if that's the way we are going to be moving." Another middle years teacher remarked on how additional educational assistant coverage would be helpful. "They say it's not one on one support, but if you look in the classroom, it really is. When that support is missing, it's really felt." Teachers were selective when it came to suggestions to support mental health and well-being. A high school teacher recalled, "We recently got a mental health week where we got doughnuts and cinnamon buns, and music played in the morning. I think that for us, mental health is more like how can we get you guys active, could we give you time or space within the school perhaps to workout, or could there be for those teachers who enjoy quiet, a space for people to read? I think there should be focus on more support like that." A middle years teacher countered, "Kitschy wellness days don't really help anyone anyway. I think people are wanting to feel more acknowledged for how hard it is to teach during the pandemic. I want to critically

engage into why the government is treating the schools so terribly, but everyone else is not in that frame of mind. They are just trying to get through." Most of the teachers in the study found the Educators' Assistance Program (EAP) sponsored by the local union to be helpful, however recent changes in service provision and online delivery caused some concern. A high school teacher noted, "I know that they've recently changed our EAP plan. I'm not sure of the details yet, but it sounds like we're moving to something where you don't get to choose your own counsellors (in-person). I went to counselling (through EAP) over these past few years and found that it was really helpful, but it sounds like we don't have that freedom anymore." With funding garnered from initial parts of this research study, there was also a website developed by the Canadian Mental Health Association CMHA (2023), offering links to a variety of programming and supports for staff in the education sector. Initial impressions were optimistic. A middle years teacher indicated, "I've used the website quite a bit and shared it with my students in terms of mental health and how to cope with stress. A high school teacher shared, "We took time out of a staff meeting, and we actually connected virtually with one of the people that represents that support. They answered some of our questions, and I'm really thankful for that."

4.5. Support from administrators

Teachers expressed gratitude for the support provided to them by their principals and vice-principals during T1, but also recognized the challenges of the administrative role during the initial waves of the pandemic. A middle years teacher shared their admiration for the range of issues that were being addressed. "My principal spent eight hours last Sunday dealing with cases that came up in our school. Just having to decide who to send to remote learning and wearing the hat of the public health worker and administrator would be very challenging. I'm thankful I don't have that role right now." Another middle years teacher noted the multiple roles and expectations of administrators. "They are contact tracing, talking to parents, teachers, students, and superintendents. They are leaders yet at the same time, they often don't have much more (information) than we do. The most challenging part is that they don't have a lot of answers. They're getting an influx of messages and having to deal with frustrated families and staff who don't feel safe and need answers but simply can't get any." Another early years teacher supplemented, "Right now they probably have all the added stress of teacher absences, EA absences, and the lack of substitutes. I know every morning they are often scrambling and trying to cover different jobs that haven't been filled." Despite the onslaught of challenges arising from the pandemic, an early years teacher described their administrator as actively supportive, ready and available. "If I'm having a problem with a student they step in and help me. I would say that they are role models, somebody that you look to for guidance, someone to give you advice."

Teachers expressed continued appreciation, but were reasonable about the expectations of sustained support of administrators at T2. A high school teacher indicated, "I think it was tough just generally, because information was changing so rapidly, and any kind of update or announcement we were given was as clear as our admin were able to make it. At the same time, there were always going to be so many follow-up questions and a lot of times they just didn't have answers." An early years teacher acknowledged the ongoing, overwhelming amounts of information that were being shared with schools and recognized the efforts of administrators to discern and clarify the essential elements through the ongoing waves of the pandemic. "She (the principal) won't give us more than we need. She is very willing to say that if you need more, here is where you go, here is what you are going to do, and the choices you have. Things have been extremely clear." The same teacher was grateful for periodic recognition and support from the superintendent. "I just always remember statements written to us. They don't come often, (but) they are greatly appreciated – positive words of wisdom and just a solid thank you for what you have done – that is enough for me."

Administrators were also valued for support that they could provide including classroom coverage when teachers were away due to illness. A senior years teacher noticed, however, that over time there was less follow-up once a teacher returned to school. "I'm not seeing the administration call afterwards or check in on them. When teachers are present, it would be nice for an administrator to come in and say, 'I'm here to be with you and to help in any way.' That would count as extra support that would be appreciated at this time." Nonetheless another senior years teacher preferred the autonomy given to them by administrators. "I like that I don't have someone checking over my shoulder all the time. I'm treated like a professional – I'm going to do my job and be left to do my job."

4.6. Support of colleagues

In addition to administration, teachers identified the support from their colleagues as essential during T1. A high school teacher noted, "Even when things are extremely stressful or feel like we cannot tackle them, we are a team and everyone seems to work together to find a solution." The high school teacher conceded however, that "everyone is viewing this pandemic through a different lens and perception." Another high school teacher described the challenges of distancing and physical isolation for staff. "It is different, because we are not together as a staff anymore - our staff meetings are all over Zoom. We don't get to see colleagues. The staff rooms aren't as full as they used to be and teachers are staying (alone) in their classrooms over breaks." A middle years teacher summarized their perception for both students and teachers, "the majority of us learn best when we're actually in-person and have opportunities to create and interact with other people." A high school teacher reinforced the importance of a professional learning community during this time. "People are talking about teaching, it's challenges, and what works and doesn't work. The situation we are in now, you can throw technology at it, but you also have to throw some philosophy at it as well. People are focusing on their craft and delivering quality teaching. It is almost a renaissance of knowledge coming from having to re-think your job." A middle years teacher reflected on the aspects of teaching that were collectively embraced by colleagues during the pandemic. "It's been really great to see our students blossoming despite everything that's been going on and (how they) still manage to find safe adults in the building that they love and trust and have really strong connections with their peers even though they've never seen the lower half of their faces (due to masks). I think all those things are wonderful and sometimes it takes a collective kind of negative experience to make us remember how important community is." Staff members were becoming impatient asking, "What does the future hold for all of us and how much longer do we have to do this for?" The middle years teacher continued, "I wish I could say to them, here's what I know, but I don't want to give them false hope. I don't know the future, but people are getting to that point where they held it together for so long that they are just ready for hope."

Teachers maintained the importance of support from colleagues at T2 but also found that the social dynamics shifted over time. A senior years teacher described the context at their school. "We all felt like we were going through the same things. We had each other's backs. We've had to cover each other's classes whether you were a teacher, guidance (counsellor), learning support or admin. I would say there was extreme support through co-workers – I feel like there's been a closeness that has developed due to the pandemic." A middle years teacher described similar support from colleagues - the group of co-workers who could help them keep things in perspective. "We remind each other that we are rebuilding, not to take anything to heart too much. We share what we are going through and we laugh and vent. Most of what's helped me get past the few years is just talking to my grade level colleagues and sharing what we are doing and what is working and giving each other advice where we can." On the other hand, an early years teacher countered that tensions developed due to COVID restrictions. "It is still hit and miss.

We're sometimes allowed to be together, and sometimes we're not." A middle years teacher described a staff retreat that resulted in having to exclude unvaccinated teachers due to hotel regulations where the event was being held. "It was a very smart thing to bring people back together, but it was also very noticeable in something like this that there was the divide. Things had started to shift where they were bringing us together for PD in the same room, but it created more barriers." The teacher elaborated further about the challenges in developing rapport with new teachers. "We barely even know them, because we never saw their face without a mask, or we didn't interact with them except on a Teams meeting, (which was) the norm for the time during COVID."

5. Discussion

Given the findings on the experiences of teachers during the pandemic at both T1 and T2, we endeavored to determine how perspectives changed over time. It became evident through the myriad of responses at T1 and T2, that teachers' experiences varied widely depending on the conditions (demands) encountered at various points in the study and on the internal and external resources and supports that teachers accessed. The following dynamic perspectives of teachers were indicated in this study according to the original set of themes that were inductively identified for purposes of analysis:

- Although teachers were persistently concerned about the *physical health and well-being* of their students and themselves throughout the study, they experienced a burnout cascade similar to that described in the literature, including components of fatigue, cynicism and depersonalization. However, most teachers were able to concurrently maintain efficacy and accomplishment in the classroom over time, for the sake of their students.
- The additional duties involved in the application of *pandemic safety protocols* (social distancing, sanitizing, and masking) caused notable frustration on the part of teachers. As restrictions were later lifted, responses from teachers varied from ongoing concern about health and safety to relief that they were more able to balance their own needs and, in some cases, offer better support to colleagues, students, and families.
- *Student needs* were initially described as challenging due to the frequent and unpredictable pivots to remote learning. Over time some teachers reported gaps in both academic and social emotional learning, whereas others voiced concerns that their students were overwhelmed with social media consumption, use of technology (devices), and engagement with dominant (sometimes nefarious) online narratives.
- Teachers in the study recalled the challenges of balancing the *demands* of teaching with home life, early on in the pandemic. Later in the timeline they focused on supportive *resources* such as learning through additional university study and professional development sessions in their schools. That said, some noted preferences for greater dialog with colleagues on teaching strategies (during the pandemic) in addition to professional learning related to social activism. Several teachers emphasized the importance of practical rather than performative strategies to support the mental health and well-being of their students and themselves.
- In general, there was admiration felt by teachers for their school administrators over the course of the study, especially when school principals initially undertook contact tracing on behalf of the health authorities. Although some teachers felt continued gratitude for *support from administrators*, others felt that their expectations had become jaded as the pandemic wore on, due to the administrators' operational styles.
- Teachers in the study indicated the importance of *support of colleagues* and the value of team and community during times of challenge. Teachers also acknowledged that it was important to be aware of how they, themselves, were experiencing the pandemic. As one

participant described, teachers were experiencing the pandemic in different ways - some were thriving and engaging in novel aspects of teaching and technology, while others were experiencing trauma and tensions, as well as grieving the loss of pre-pandemic practices.

6. Conclusions

Holmes et al. (2020) contended that understanding teacher stress would be essential to better support the education community in the future. Hence, the focus of this research was to query the implications of teachers' coping given the protracted duration of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Pre-pandemic, Kyriacou (2001) noted that teacher stress was frequently dictated by individuals' temperament, circumstances, coping ability, strengths, and challenges. Likewise, our research team corroborated similar findings in the peri-pandemic setting, indicating a range of five distinct teacher responses to coping (Sokal et al., 2021c; Babb et al., 2022a). Given the additional qualitative data in the present study, we confirmed anecdotally that teachers continued to experience a comparable array of responses. Whereas some teachers expressed resilience and were able to critically reflect on the challenges of teaching during the pandemic, others were notably vulnerable or indifferent as a result of their individual contexts and experiences. While the former appeared to flourish and experience resilience, the latter seemed to languish and identify with components of burnout noted earlier in the literature. The majority of teachers in the study, however, expressed viewpoints that were more acquiescent or at a tipping point between flourishing and languishing. Consequently, although teachers might not be able to master the environments in which particular circumstances occur, they could be assisted to understand their reactions along this dimension of responses, in order to better cope with life experiences (Helzer & Jayawickreme, 2015). Additionally, with improved knowledge and awareness of coping styles along a continuum from flourishing to languishing, researchers, educational leaders and policy makers in school organizations would be more adequately informed and better able to prepare supports and resources to ensure worklife balance and well-being for teachers. Given the dynamic perspectives offered herein, a framework to manifest this type of consideration might be value-added for the well-being of teachers both peri- and post-pandemic.

Limitations and future directions

We acknowledge the limitations of this study in order to allow for appropriate interpretation of the results. Despite the rich information provided through the foregoing teacher interviews, the small sample size typically negates the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless this study was preceded by a larger seminal work (Sokal et al., 2021c; Babb et al., 2022a) and hence the qualitative data set provides an in-depth view which served to validate existing quantitative findings. This research also confirms the importance of being aware of teachers' coping responses in challenging contexts and the concurrent possibilities of organizational resources and supports that could be provided as a result of this knowledge. That said, additional research is in order to assess the interplay of individual and organizational characteristics relating to teacher balance and adaptive regulation (Westphal et al., 2017). Furthermore, supplementary study would assist in identifying specific recommendations based on individuals' coping response patterns and the nature or types of organizational adaptations possible (Chang, 2009).

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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