

“I feel like I lost myself”: An Examination of Teachers’
Lived Experiences During The COVID-19 Pandemic

By

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Abstract

The current study aimed to understand teachers' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing six main themes from their interviews and open-response questions. Key findings of teachers' lived experiences included the prevalent feeling of isolation due to a lack of social connection with students and colleagues, the struggle to balance various responsibilities, the increased workload transferring an interactive in-person environment to online learning and adhering to safety protocols. Despite these challenges, some teachers reported benefits such as improved work-life balance and enhanced technology skills. The findings also highlight differences between elementary and secondary school teachers, particularly in implementing safety measures, and how these varied based on years of teaching experience. Elementary school teachers faced unique challenges in maintaining young students' engagement and adherence to safety measures, whereas secondary school teachers experienced challenges related to subject-specific teaching demands. Additionally, teachers have demonstrated resilience and dedication, adapted their roles as advocates, educators, and support systems to ensure educational success throughout the various stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study fills a gap in existing research by specifically examining the distinct challenges and benefits experienced by teachers during this unprecedented period. By providing nuanced insights into teachers' experiences, this research contributes to understanding the broader impacts of the pandemic on educational practices and teacher well-being.

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Introduction

Teachers are advocates, role models, and support systems for the children/students in their classrooms. The COVID-19 pandemic required a shift to online education, fundamentally altering a job that relies heavily on physical interaction and support. Teachers had to manage the additional work of creating adaptive environments that upheld educational success while complying with ever-changing protocols and safety measures. The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant challenge as teachers were faced with a rapidly changing educational context in which impacted their working conditions, introduced shifting work demands (e.g. implementation of safety protocols, oscillations between on-line, face-to-face, and hybrid instructional modalities, etc.), and a great deal of uncertainty as conditions and protocols within the school context and the broader surrounding community were changing rapidly. This research explores what teaching at the elementary and secondary level, in Ontario, was like for teachers by focusing on teachers' accounts of their lived experiences during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Education During COVID-19

Public Education in Ontario, Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic fluctuated across various configurations of teaching instruction. The suspension of face-to-face learning and closures of schools was implemented between March and June 2020 (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021) and the 2020 to 2021 school year had both local and province-wide school closures. Education in Ontario was delivered through three models: remote learning (i.e., teaching online at a distance), blended learning (i.e., students were in-person for part of the week and then learned remotely for the remaining part of the week), and hybrid instruction (i.e., teachers taught students in-person and online simultaneously; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). Between March

2020 and April 2021, schools across Ontario experienced numerous changes in their class instruction with respect to teaching models. From March 2020 to June 2020 all schools were closed, and students were learning remotely (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). The 2020 to 2021 school year began with different phases of reopening, which was led by specific school board responses, up until the winter break (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). After winter break (January 2021), all schools were closed for a week-long period and students returned to virtual learning. Schools returned to partial reopening between the months of January 2021 to April 2021 (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). However, schools closed again during April 2021 until the end of the school year (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). Therefore, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic was an unpredictable time for teachers, students, and the education system.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued into September 2021, schools began to open for in-person learning with additional options for online learning (Hodgson-Bautista et al., 2022). Schools in Ontario continued to stay open until the beginning of January 2022, when students returned to online learning for a two-week period. Following that two-week period, schools began to reopen and offer in-person learning along with other forms of online learning (Hodgson-Bautista et al., 2022). Moving into the 2022 to 2023 school year, students were able to return back to in-person learning instruction. In sum, several novel changes to instruction and the school environment took place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to capture teachers' experiences of and responses to these changes in terms of their mental health and their approach to instruction to view the ways in which teachers adapted to these unforeseen circumstances (Ali, 2020; Clausen et al., 2020; Dalai et al., 2022; Daniel, 2020; Francom et al., 2021; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

Challenges to Teaching during the Pandemic

Teaching during the pandemic presented several challenges to teachers; many of which were centered on the delivery of online instructions (Ali, 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020). Whereas research on teacher experiences during the pandemic is still in its infancy due to the novelty of the pandemic, some research has documented these challenges with empirical findings (Ali, 2020; Clausen et al., 2020; Dalai et al., 2022; Daniel, 2020; Francom et al., 2021; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). Some of the major challenges that teachers experienced during the early stages of the pandemic were a lack of relationships and feelings of community, a lack of connection for students in their home environment, mental unwellness, accessibility issues, the digital divide, and increased workload (Hartshorne et al., 2020). Thus, teaching during the pandemic presented several challenges to teachers, particularly in the delivery of online instruction (Ali, 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020). These challenges encompassed issues such as accessibility barriers, lack of student engagement, disparities in digital access, strain on teacher-student relationships, adjustments to the school environment and support systems, heightened teacher workload, and the steep learning curve of new technologies and course redesign for teacher (Ali, 2020; Clausen et al., 2020; Dalai et al., 2022; Daniel, 2020; Francom et al., 2021; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020).

Accessibility Issues

Teaching and educating children and youth is not something that is done individually, but rather collectively through the support of teachers, classmates, and the school environment (Dorn et al., 2020). Transferring this active in-person environment to an online environment was challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic, (Ali, 2020; Dalai et al., 2022). This change of environment was particularly challenging for students with disabilities, because the online environment was not conducive to providing the additional supports that they typically receive

from teachers and teachers' assistants to ensure their inclusion in the school environment (Bowles et al., 2018). Thus, teachers found it challenging to adapt school material in an online format to support students' with disabilities (Ali, 2020; Dalipi et al., 2022).

For students with motor, hearing, vision, or cognitive impairments, accessing online learning posed significant challenges without appropriate accommodations such as assistive technologies or customized assignments (Zdravkova et al., 2022). Motor-impaired students faced difficulties with tasks like typing and managing technical issues independently which teachers addressed by offering extended time and alternative resources (Zdravkova et al., 2022). Similarly, students with vision impairments encountered obstacles in visual material presentation and online platform accessibility, addressed through text alternatives and pre-recorded audio (Zdravkova et al., 2022). Hearing-impaired students struggled with participation in discussions and comprehension, prompting teachers to provide subtitled audio content and adjustable audio settings (Zdravkova et al., 2022). Students with cognitive impairments needed additional time and structured content to interpret information, supported by teachers through extended deadlines and organized materials (Zdravkova et al., 2022). Therefore, considering the numerous disabilities that may be in one classroom, teachers took on the reasonability of supporting their students during the COVID-19 pandemic by finding ways to adapt class material.

Lack of Engagement

The lack of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students combined with a lack of support in the home environment contributed to challenges around engagement and homework completion for some students (Clausen et al., 2020; Daniel, 2020; Francom et al., 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). This lack of engagement and connection to the virtual classroom not only refers to students who did not receive the needed support from their family and teachers, but also

to students who simply did not have access to the internet or a smart device (Francom et al., 2021; Meyer, 2016; Klein, 2021). In addition to their typical workload, teachers had the added stress of worrying if their students had access to the internet and a device. Few studies highlight that teachers felt as though it was their responsibility to ensure that their students had access to internet connection and a device so that their students could join and complete class material to mitigate potential homework gaps (Francom et al., 2021; Klein, 2021).

The Digital Divide

The digital divide is the difference between students who have access to internet and technology and those who do not. Thus, considering school was solely completed online for periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers took on the responsibility of teaching students with limited to not access to the internet and technology (Francom et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Klein, 2021; Reich et al., 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Additionally, teachers also had to assist parents who had to support their children's learning in an online environment. For many parents, this task was challenging due to their limited knowledge about technology. Thus, teachers had to adapt class material for students who had limited access to internet and technology, as well as students and parents who were unaware how to use forms of technology.

Teacher-Student Relationships, The School Environment, & Teacher Support

The change to an online learning environment was challenging for teachers as a previously in-person and interactive learning environment became a 'faceless' interaction (Cain et al., 2022; Rose 2017; Watermeyer et al., 2020). The literature shows that this 'faceless' interaction presented numerous challenges for teachers such as maintaining relationships with students (Rose, 2017), not being unable to understand the students' needs through social cues

(Cain et al., 2022), and being able to easily assess if students understood the information being taught (Cain et al., 2022). Since there was a lack of student interaction, teachers were placed in a position of ‘me-focused’ (i.e., students not interacting with one another or the lesson), which was particularly exhausting for teachers (Cain et al., 2022; Olivera et al., 2021). It was challenging to have interactive parts in an online learning environment, since online interactive engagement was not as meaningful as in-person interactive learning (Cain et al., 2022). This theme was also expressed in other countries outside of North America as well. For example, in one study of 3,500 teachers from Australia and New Zealand shared their concerns for the transfer to online learning (Flack et al., 2020). In this study, the most common concern expressed by teachers was worry about student social isolation, decreases in student well-being, and limited learning (Flack et al., 2020). Furthermore, teachers shared that they missed the social aspect of in-person teaching, including the relationships with students, friends, and colleagues (Flack et al., 2020). Therefore, the lack of face-to-face interaction was particularly challenging for teachers and negatively affected their well-being.

Teachers also experienced worry for vulnerable students such as students with disabilities, students with English as a second language, and students with low socioeconomic status (Cain et al., 2022). Teachers worried less about students who did not experience any vulnerable factors, as online learning was less of a challenge and they were able to actively engage in online material (Cain et al., 2022). Teachers that participated in Cain et al., (2022) study changed their teaching perspective from the notion of content and assessment, to moving towards caring and compassion for students (Cain et al., 2022). Teachers’ focus on kindness was embedded in their pedagogy while teaching during the pandemic (Cain et al., 2022). Therefore,

teachers may have experienced a heightened worry for these students, which further contributed to teachers' poorer mental health and well-being.

The change to online learning affected teachers' relationships with students (Knorr Cetina, 2007; Norton et al., 2005). This drastic change in teaching may have disrupted the personal connections developed through in-person learning (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020). The added toll on teachers was also shared through their heavy support for students. Specifically, many teachers went out of their way to support students during these unforeseen times. This included being able to meet outside of formal class time to provide individual support, breaking up class material into more manageable segments, providing additional drop-in sessions for students who were struggling or had questions, providing more intense feedback, extending due dates to increase flexibility for students, and checking in on students' well-being more frequently (Cain et al., 2022).

Keeping in contact with others was a supportive factor for teachers' mental health and well-being. Even though teachers' workloads had increased, their relationships with others were of high importance (Kim et al., 2022). A survey from Canadian teachers showed that teachers who received support from their families, administrators, and coworkers had better coping during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sokal & Eblie Trudel, 2020). However, despite the high importance of social support, teachers shared that teaching in their home was very lonely and isolating, which, in turn, negatively impacted their mental health and well-being (Kim et al., 2022).

Not only did some teachers feel that they lacked social support, but they also felt a lack of support from the government. More specifically, quantitative research showcases those teachers felt that their work was not recognized by the government and felt extremely disconnected from society (McDonough & Lemon, 2022). Teachers shared their frustration towards the Premier and

the ways that they handled education in Canada (McDonough & Lemon, 2022). This frustration was attributed to their increased workload, and their profession being degraded to a form of babysitting. Therefore, many teachers felt that they did not receive enough support from the government and that their health and well-being were disregarded (McDonough & Lemon, 2022).

In sum, support for teachers during the challenging time of COVID-19 was limited on various levels. The limited access to social support between colleagues, administrators, students, and parents was harmful to the well-being of teachers (Kim et al., 2022). Additionally, the lack of recognition and poor support from the government further added to the challenges associated with teaching during unforeseen times (McDonough & Lemon, 2022). The lack of government support was evident across multiple aspects of their profession including increased workload, negative attitudes towards the teaching profession, and not being recognized as important workers (McDonough & Lemon, 2022). Therefore, the lack of social support and government support was visible in the literature, but few studies focused on teachers' lived experiences through their own individual voices (Cain et al., 2022; Francom et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022).

Teacher Workload

Occupational workload is a critical component of job satisfaction. For example, an increased workload can contribute to burnout and poorer job satisfaction among workers (Bottiani et al., 2019; Greenglass et al., 2001; Hakanen et al., 2006; Yürür & Sarikaya, 2012). Teachers are not only expected to teach but also to undertake numerous additional tasks, including administrative duties (Kelchtermans, 2005; Lizana & Vega-Fernandez, 2021; Marshall et al., 2024; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). Previous literature showcases the intense work demands of teachers by making a clear distinction between "teacher work" and "teacher

workload" (Apple, 2004; Beck, 2017; OECD, 2019; Creagh et al., 2022). "Teacher workload" refers to the total number of hours teachers work each week (OECD, 2019; Creagh et al., 2022), while "teacher work" encompasses the various tasks and demands associated with the teaching profession (Creagh et al., 2022). As teacher work intensifies, there is also an increase in teacher workload. This intensification includes additional demands, inadequate resources, and insufficient support (Apple, 2004; Creagh et al., 2022). Additionally, non-teaching tasks, such as paperwork, curriculum reformatting, and administrative duties, further contributes to the increased workload and the growing complexity of teacher work (Timms et al., 2007; Manuel et al., 2018). Thus, "teacher work" refers to the activities directly related to teaching, but as demands on teachers grow, this work intensifies, leading to an increased "teacher workload" (Apple, 2004; Beck, 2017; OECD, 2019; Creagh et al., 2022).

Pre-pandemic literature reveals that teachers have long been responsible for various tasks beyond instruction, many of which occur outside school hours, such as organizing extracurricular activities for students (Abdulaziz et al., 2022; Cho & Wang, 2023; Johari et al., 2018; Punia & Kamboj, 2013; Sharifah et al., 2014). Consequently, the extensive workload associated with the teaching profession has led to feelings of exhaustion and burnout among teachers, adversely affecting their work-life balance (Cho & Wang, 2023; Kellaway, 2019; Tapper, 2018; Yang, 2016). This imbalance restricts teachers' time for leisure activities and reduces the quality time they can spend with their families (Abdulaziz et al., 2022; Baker, 2019; Cho & Wang, 2023; Johari et al., 2018; Mogato, 2020; Punia & Kamboj, 2013; Sharifah et al., 2014; Tan, 2019).

Given these difficulties with workload and work life balance reported prior to the pandemic, it is not surprising that teachers also struggled with workload and work-life balance during the pandemic. For example, teachers in Australia described the transfer to online learning

during the COVID-19 pandemic as exhausting, as 67% of teachers reported they had increased their work hours (McDonough & Lemon, 2022). Not only did teachers experience a heightened workload with curriculum, but teachers also experienced many additional hours of parent and student interaction (Lizana & Vega-Fernandez, 2021; Marshall et al., 2024; McDonough & Lemon, 2022). These interactions included discussions with families about mental health, or describing messages from the media (i.e., information presented on the news about COVID-19). In sum, teachers were challenged with the increase in workload specific to adapting course material to an online environment, as well as increased family communication with respect to pandemic-related topics, mental health, and well-being.

The drastic change in the workplace environment was an additional challenge for teachers. With teaching being done in the home environment, many teachers felt like there was no escape from work (Lizana & Vega-Fernandez, 2021; Marshall et al., 2024; McDonough & Lemon, 2022). Therefore, teachers were placed in a position to consistently adapt their course material based on different stages of restrictions. As well, teachers had to consider other elements related to the pandemic with respect to their students' families. For example, teachers were often made aware of the stress that was present in their students' homes (e.g., parental job loss, loss of income, health concerns). Teachers would often try and provide additional supports for their students in these circumstances, which contributed to their workload. Thus, teachers had to balance a variety of new roles, which increased their workload.

The increased workload for teachers placed a toll on them which negatively impacted their mental health and well-being (Kim et al., 2022; Lizana & Vega-Fernandez, 2021). The additional workload was not only specific to online learning, but teachers also experienced difficulties balancing the increased demands they faced when returning to a semi in-person

environment with numerous restrictions such that teachers had to teach in-person as well as online simultaneously (Francom et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). Further teachers had to be aware of and enforce additional safety and cleaning protocols that would change throughout the pandemic to support student and staff safety (Francom et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). A specific quote that expressed teachers' feelings during this time can be seen in Kim et al.'s (2022) work, "I feel like I'm on overload. My brain feels like a browser with 100 tabs open. There is so much to think about all the time" (p. 309). In addition to this quote, Kim et al.'s (2022) findings demonstrated that teachers had trouble keeping up with their workload, which, in turn, left teachers feeling exhausted and undervalued. Thus, the increased workload for teachers was not only specific to teaching in-person as well as online simultaneously and implementing new safety measures (Francom et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022), rather the increase in workload may have also been associated with learning new forms of technology and developing new class material (Ferdig et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2020).

Learning New Technology and Course Redesign

Teaching in an online environment requires different skills than teaching in-person, even though there is some overlap (An, 2021; Davis et al., 2007; Morris, 2002). Using digital video tools such as Zoom or Google Meets, were very useful when shifting to online learning. Digital video tools allowed for communicating in a synchronous class form (Francom et al., 2021; Lowenthal et al., 2020), and fostered human interaction in online class, which helped to address mental well-being and a sense of community (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2021). In addition to digital video tools, other forms of online teaching tools used included screen sharing (Francom et al., 2021; Ranellucci & Bergey, 2020), audio feedback (Fitzpatrick et al., 2020), online storytelling (Caudill & Reilly, 2020), and fun activities such as online escape rooms (Neumann et al., 2020).

Although teachers implemented numerous online recourses, some teachers felt that they lacked confidence, were ill-prepared, and not supported during this transition to online learning (Watermeyer et al., 2020). The quick shift to online learning happened within days or weeks (Ferdig et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020), which did not give teachers much time to prepare for teaching in a new environment. Many teachers had no interest in teaching in an online environment that completely changed their course material, with minimal notice (Watermeyer et al., 2020). Although many teachers experienced challenges with teaching online, some teachers decided to incorporate what they learned about technology during the COVID-19 pandemic into their classroom once the pandemic is over (Francom et al., 2021). Therefore, the quick change to online learning failed to consider the enormous amount of preparation that often goes into designing engaging course material, and the comfort level of teachers in a new online environment.

There were also numerous challenges that arose for teachers who needed to adapt their course material (e.g., lesson plans, assessments), and teaching styles. Some of these challenges included experiencing difficulties with their internet connection, slow transitions between class periods, and technical issues. (Cain et al., 2022; Flack et al., 2020; Francom et al., 2021; Pathirana & Karunaratne, 2023). In one study, teachers shared that they felt a wide range of feelings towards the change to online learning (Cain et al., 2022). In some cases, teachers felt high levels of confusion, especially when tasked with answering student and parent questions that involved uncertainty (e.g., how the semester will proceed). Some teachers also expressed confusion concerning the use of online platforms. Keeping students engaged online for many hours during a day was also challenging for teachers (Cain et al., 2022). For example, some students experienced 'screen fatigue' and when students became disinterested in learning

teachers had to work much harder to engage their students in class material (Cain et al., 2022; Francom et al., 2021; Pathiranage & Karunaratne, 2023). Thus, adapting a once in-person interactive learning environment to an online setting presented numerous challenges for teachers.

Teacher Mental Unwellness

It must be noted that there was vast heterogeneity in teachers' responses to online learning during the pandemic. For instance, some teachers shared that they experienced a positive shift to online learning (McDonough & Lemon, 2022; McKim & Sorensen, 2020), such as a better work-life balance. Specifically, 28.3% of participants in one study shared that they had greater work-life balance due to a shorter commute time and spending more time at home (McDonough & Lemon, 2022). However, on the other side of the spectrum many teachers also experienced significant challenges. Indeed, the change in teaching environment in conjunction with personal responsibility was incredibly hard for some teachers' mental health and well-being (Kraft et al., 2020; Lizana & Vega-Fernandez, 2021; Marshall et al., 2024). Many teachers experienced increased anxiety, stress, and exhaustion from teaching in an online environment (Cain et al., 2022; Casacchia et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2024). As well, teachers experienced poorer sleep patterns, minimal energy, and a limited personal life (Cain et al., 2022; Casacchia et al., 2021). Some teachers also felt uncertainty in their jobs and had difficulty handling the numerous changes that occurred in the educational context throughout the pandemic (Kim et al., 2022). The related public health measures put in place to mitigate the spread of the virus (e.g., self-isolation, physical distancing, stay-at-home orders) were particularly challenging for teachers who had experienced poorer mental health since the onset of the pandemic (Alves et al., 2021; Cain et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2024).

The change from in-person classroom delivery to online learning may have caused teachers to feel vulnerable, disliked, and isolated (Cain et al., 2022). As a whole, teachers described the feelings of being mentally and physically challenged from teaching during unforeseen circumstances (Cain et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2024). Specifically, some teachers reported being frustrated and angry with students, colleagues, and administrators (Cain et al., 2022; Francom et al., 2021). This heightened level of stress was also seen in An et al.'s (2021) work, which found that 60% of teachers found online teaching to be very stressful. Indeed, multiple teachers have reported high levels of anxiety, stress and depression (Alves et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2024). Further, the stress of the pandemic and minimal administrative support appears to be contributing factors to teacher burnout and poorer mental health (Pressley, 2021; Marshall et al., 2024). Therefore, research shows that teachers experienced relatively high levels of stress with respect to teaching in a new online learning environment.

Teachers during the pandemic were not only concerned with their students, but also had responsibilities in the home such as supporting their own children in school, caring for family members, and taking care of their own mental health (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marshall et al., 2024). The added work hours during the pandemic, balance of home environment, and increased exhaustion negatively impacted teachers' mental and physical health, which was a challenge to their well-being (Marshall et al., 2024; McDonough & Lemon, 2022). Additionally, having to deliver lessons and help their own children learn from home was particularly challenging to teachers (McDonough & Lemon, 2022). The separation of home and work life was an important factor in maintaining teachers' well-being (Marshall et al., 2024; McDonough & Lemon, 2022; McKim & Sorensen, 2020). Thus, not only did teachers feel an intense amount of stress, but they also experienced negative emotions that contributed to their distress during the pandemic.

Coping Strategies

Teachers implemented a variety of strategies to handle the additional stress of working in education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kim and Asbury's (2020) work used semi-structured interviews to understand the lived experiences of twenty-four teachers (11 primary and 13 secondary) during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that teachers tended to engage in two types of coping strategies: First, some teachers reported using problem-focused coping strategies, which are strategies that target the source of the stress (Kim & Asbury, 2020). For example, some teachers discussed increasing their skills. This aligns with another study where teachers reported using alternative methods to deliver educational material and provide online resources (Cain et al., 2022). Second, some teachers reported using emotion-focused coping strategies, which are strategies that focus on the emotional aspects of stress (Kim & Asbury, 2020). For example, some teachers reported receiving emotional support from others including friends and other teachers.

Other coping strategies that teachers reported using during the pandemic included taking breaks, engaging in hobbies, connecting with friends and family, and eating a healthy diet (Cain et al., 2022). Teachers also shared that they used exercise, do it yourself projects, meditation, and breaks from social media (Kim et al., 2022) as active coping strategies. 'Finding a way' also became of major theme for many teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 'finding a way' many teachers shared that they had a significant increase in workload, which included them working seven days a week for months (Cain at al., 2022). However, a few teachers expressed that they implemented specific work hours that they were available to students, staff, and families (Cain at al., 2022). The specific use of work hours allowed teachers to be more mindful about their physical and mental health and the problems that arise when being available 24/7

(Cain et al., 2022). The use of work hours was used as a coping strategy to be mindful about boundaries and burnout (Cain et al., 2022). Thus, in sum, teachers appeared to engage in a wide variety of coping strategies to deal with the stressors of the pandemic.

Ending Their Career to Cope

Prior to the pandemic, studies show that teachers felt overworked which led to burnout (Lizana et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2024; Smetackova, et al., 2019). The pandemic increased many teachers' workloads which further resulted in mental unwellness (Alves et al., 2021; Cain et al., 2022; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Marshall et al., 2024). Thus, the heightened stress associated with teaching during the unforeseen times of the COVID-19 pandemic caused many teachers to consider leaving the profession. Teachers expressed that they felt like they were losing students through online learning (Cain et al., 2022; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020), such that students shared that they felt that online classes were too challenging and that they could not learn (Cain et al., 2022). Indeed, many teachers reported that online teaching was ineffective, unsatisfying, acritical, and frustrating (Cain et al., 2022; Flack et al., 2020; Francom et al., 2021; Pathiranage & Karunaratne, 2023). These intense negative feelings were experienced by numerous teachers who resigned, even though they still had a love for educating young people (Cain et al., 2022; Madigan & Kim, 2021a; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020).

In addition to difficulties transitioning to an online learning environment that led teachers to leave their profession, teachers also reported leaving education because of poorer mental health and well-being (Madigan & Kim, 2021a). Madigan and Kim's (2021a) work examined the relationship between the mental health of teachers and job satisfaction and found that teachers all burnout symptoms (i.e., exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishments) were a major factor in their choice to leave the teaching profession. Therefore, significant changes to the

learning environment coupled with the heightened stress and poorer mental health of teachers during the worldwide pandemic left many teachers deciding to end their teaching careers (Cain et al., 2022; Madigan & Kim, 2021a; Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020).

The Current Study

Significant changes to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have negatively impacted teachers' mental health and well-being (Cain et al., 2022; Casacchia et al., 2021). These negative outcomes seemed to transcend multiple aspects of teaching including increased workload (McDonough & Lemon, 2022), minimal social and government support (McDonough & Lemon, 2022; Sokal & Eblie Trudel, 2020), and lack of connection (Clausen et al., 2020; Daniel, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). However, few studies (Cain et al., 2022; Francom et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022) have focussed on understanding teachers' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, as most studies have concentrated on student experiences during the pandemic. By implementing research that highlights teachers' voices and their lived experiences, there is potential to collectively view individual experiences and provide an overall picture of what teaching was like during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the goal of the current study was to put the focus on teachers' voices about their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study specifically addressed the following research questions: (1) How do teachers describe their experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What benefits (if any) did teachers experience while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?; (3) What challenges (if any) did teachers experience while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?; (4) Did any benefits or challenges reported by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic vary as a function of teacher characteristics (e.g., gender, years of experience, elementary and secondary teacher status)?

Methods

The current research is drawn from a larger longitudinal mixed-methods study. The purpose of this larger study was to capture the perspectives of teachers navigating their school environment, mental health, and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the larger study included a focus on teachers' perceptions of students with perfectionism as well as teachers' own experiences with perfectionism. This larger study included online surveys across three timepoints, in which participants answered questions related to personality, social life, burnout, well-being, and experiences and feelings with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, a subset of participants completed an online semi-structured interview across all timepoints, in which they were asked questions with respect to how COVID-19 impacted their teaching experience, perfectionism, and the overall school environment. The subset of participants that completed the online semi-structured interviews were selected using a purposive sampling approach such that participants were approximately balanced with respect to whether they identified or a perfectionist or not. This was due to the additional focus on perfectionism in the larger study.

It is important to note that the current study only focused on teachers' navigation of changing educational contexts during the pandemic and while it did consider teaching characteristics such as level of education (i.e. elementary or secondary) and years of experience, perfectionism and other mental health considerations such as burnout were not within the scope of this research. The current research is solely qualitative drawing upon open response questions and a subset of interview questions from the first time point (July 2021 to November 2021), to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences of teachers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants

The full sample that completed the online surveys included 197 teachers from Ontario, Canada between the ages of 25 and 69 years old (164 female, 33 male) with 91% self-identifying as white. The sample had an average of 14 years of teaching experience, ranging between 2 to 48 years. More specifically, 131 of the teachers in the sample taught elementary school and 66 teachers taught secondary school. Additionally, 85% of teachers taught in person and online during the 2020 to 2021 school year and 15% solely taught online. Additionally, the sub-sample that completed the interviews included 26 teachers between the ages of 25 and 69 years old (22 female, 4 male). There was a total of 17 elementary school teachers, and 9 secondary school teachers. This information reflects the total enrollment of participants in the larger study for time one, however not all of these participants may be in the current study, as it depended on whether or not they answered the specific questions focused on in this research.

Procedure

Study Design

The larger study used a longitudinal mixed-methods design in which all participants completed an online survey at three time points (i.e., baseline (July 2021 to November 2021), approximately 2-month follow-up (September 2021 to January 2022), approximately 4-month follow-up (January 2022 to May 2022) and a subset of participants were interviewed online at each time point. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be teachers who were certified through the Ontario College of Teachers and had taught for at least 2 years in Ontario. Teachers were recruited through a variety of methods, including social media advertisements, participant pools, and passive snowball sampling. Ethical clearance was received from the University Ethics Board.

Consent Procedure.

Once interest in the study was indicated by the participant, the consent form was sent via email. The consent form for this longitudinal mixed-methods research project included both the survey and the interview.

Online Surveys.

Each participant had the opportunity to complete an online survey at each time point. Participants was assigned a unique ID code so their responses could be linked across time points. At each time point, participants were sent their unique ID code and the link to the online survey directly via email. Surveys were conducted using an online survey platform (Qualtrics) across all timepoints. The completion of each survey took approximately 60 – 90 minutes. At each time point, participants received a \$20 (CAN) Amazon gift card via email for compensation. If participants completed half of the online survey, but did not fully complete the full survey, they received a \$10 (CAN) Amazon gift card for that specific time point.

Online interviews.

Interviewees were selected from the pool of participants using purposive sampling approach such that participants were approximately balanced with respect to teaching status (e.g., elementary versus secondary), and perfectionism status (whether they identified as a perfectionist or not). Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an online video platform (Lifesize). The completion of each interview took approximately 90 – 120 minutes. At the start of each interview, the interviewees were informed that each session would be video recorded for the purpose of transcription and that each recording was treated confidentially. Additionally, interviewers also reviewed the consent form with the participant and consent was confirmed prior to beginning the interview. Semi-structured interview guides were created in advance and

interviewers were able to prompt the participants for elaboration and clarification, if necessary. At each time point, participants received a \$25 (CAN) Amazon gift card via email for compensation.

Data Analysis

All interview recordings were machine transcribed, checked by research assistants for accuracy and then the anonymized interview transcripts were entered into NVivo (QSR International Private Limited, 2020). Thematic coding occurred in two separate data sets, the first data set included all the anonymized interview data and the second data set will include all anonymized open response data. I had two separate data sets that I analyzed due to the varying number of participants in each group (e.g., participants who answered the open response questions, and participants who completed interviews).

I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022) work, where I examined my role as a researcher and acknowledged how my own subjectivity and assumptions influenced the research process. Specifically, I recognized and established my position as both an insider and an outsider in this research project. My previous experience as an in-school tutor, emergency supply teacher, and educational assistant provided me with an insider perspective on the school environment. However, since I am not a registered teacher who taught during the height of the pandemic, I also bring an outsider's perspective to the current research.

I used deductive coding that mirrored the steps presented in Braun and Clarke's (2022) work, in which I had pre-set codes that were shaped from my research questions and provided a 'lens' for me to develop themes in the data. More specifically, the codes I used for deductive coding included "advantages" and "challenges." It is important to note that prior to beginning the coding process, I conducted a thorough review of literature on teachers' experiences during the

pandemic. This review provided a foundational understanding of the existing research and helped identify gaps in the literature. Although I could have used the literature to develop different pre-set codes to use during deductive coding, I decided to analyze the data without pre-set codes informed from previous literature to aim to view the data with a clear 'lens.' Additionally, I used inductive coding that also mirrored Braun and Clarke's (2022) work, in which themes and coding were solely driven by the data itself. I brought all my sources together using themes and sub-themes to provide a clear understanding of the lived experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022) work, implementing their six phases of thematic analysis: familiarising myself with the data set, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and completing a final report. Although my approach followed many of these stages, Braun and Clarke put emphasis on having a single coder code all the data however, I worked with Dr. Zinga to work through all the data and reflect on my position as a researcher. In addition, Braun and Clarke do not use codebooks but I used a codebook that was developed through familiarization with the data and a reflexive process. The main distinction is in Braun and Clarke's (2022) tripartite classification of thematic analysis, which includes Reflexive TA, Coding Reliability TA, and Codebook TA. Reflexive TA emphasizes the researcher's role in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes within the data. Coding Reliability TA focuses on a structured approach to coding, highlighting systematic coding to enhance the reliability and credibility of the findings. Lastly, Codebook TA uses a predefined codebook to guide the research process, ensuring reliability and consistency. The approach to thematic analysis I employed falls between Reflexive TA and Codebook TA as identified by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 235).

The Stages

To familiarize myself with the data, Dr. Zinga and I reviewed the interview guide and open-ended response questions, selecting questions where participants were directly asked about their teaching experiences during the pandemic or where they may have shared relevant insights. This process was guided by my research questions. I created a table (see Table 1) aligning each research question with specific interview or open-response questions that addressed them. Additionally, Dr. Zinga and I read over two different elementary school teachers' interview transcripts and two different secondary school teachers' interview transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data. We then met and discussed possible codes that we both noted while reading over the transcripts. During our meeting, Dr. Zinga and I discussed my position as both an insider and outsider, and we created a codebook (*See Appendix C*). I realized how my experiences in the education field contributed to my understanding and creation of codes while familiarizing myself with the data. Additionally, my position as an outsider allowed me to view the interview transcripts from a fresh perspective.

I then moved to code majority of the interview transcripts, and Dr. Zinga coded the rest to ensure we had a complete understanding of the data. Additionally, I coded all the question level codes using the same codebook (*See Appendix C*). After the coding process was completed, I gathered all the data that was collected for each code and created separate documents labelled by code names. I then went through each individual document to group common themes within each code. During this process, I created a separate document that had each code and the themes that were found. This document allowed me to see themes that spanned across multiple different codes. I then created another document that was labelled by theme and included all the information across every code that pertained to that overarching theme. During this time, Dr.

Zinga and I met multiple times to discuss and define potential themes, sub-themes and the titles of each theme. Once each theme had been defined and discussed, I wrote the first draft of my results that was organized by each theme and sub-theme. I completed multiple drafts in which I returned to each individual theme document to ensure that my results accurately showcased participants' experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the writing process, I chose not to report the specific number of participants who shared a common theme or topic within a theme. This decision was made to avoid potential bias that readers or researchers might associate with the reported numbers. For instance, readers might undervalue a finding if it was shared by only a few participants (Maxwell, 2010). Instead, I employed quasi-statistics, where I conducted simple counts and used these to guide my descriptions with terms like "most," "some," and "few." This approach (Becker, 1970; Maxwell, 2010) allowed me to present participants' experiences without introducing the potential bias associated with exact numbers.

Table 1***Research Questions in Relation to Qualitative Data***

Research Question	Interview Question	Open Response
1) How do teachers describe their experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?	C2, C2a, C2b C3 C5 C6, C6a, C6b	25L 25N 25P
2) What benefits (if any) did teachers experience while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?	C2, C2a C6, C6a	25N
3) What challenges (if any) did teachers experience while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?	C2, C2b C3 C5 C6, C6b	25L 25P
4) Did any benefits and challenges reported by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic vary as a function of teacher characteristics?	C2, C2a, C2b C3 C5 C6, C6a, C6b	25L 25N 25P

Note. See Appendix A for interview questions and Appendix B for open response questions.

Data Quality and Reflexivity

In my research, I used a Relativist Constructionist Theoretical perspective, which was situated within the broader framework of Social Constructionism (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This perspective was particularly suited to the nature of my research questions and aligned with my experiences as a researcher. Emphasizing reflexivity throughout the research process, I recognized how my background in the education field influenced my understanding of the study. More specifically, the ways in which my experience as an emergency supply teacher and in-school tutor place me in an insider and outsider position such that I have experience teaching, but my experience varies from the participants in the current study since I am not a full-time teacher and did not teach during the height of the pandemic. Throughout this research, I employed a Relativist Ontology (Braun and Clarke, 2022), acknowledging that there was no single, objective reality shared by all teachers. Instead, I recognized that teachers' experiences, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, were influenced by a variety of factors, leading to diverse realities. This ontological stance was crucial for capturing the varied experiences of teachers and understanding the complexity of their individual realities.

Additionally, I applied Epistemological Relativism (Braun and Clarke, 2022) in my research, which stemmed from my view that knowledge was inherently contextual and subjective. I understood that knowledge was shaped by multiple factors, including personal experiences and social contexts. Consequently, while exploring teachers' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, I did not seek a singular 'truth.' Instead, I aimed to uncover and expand upon the multiple, diverse experiences that teachers had encountered. By integrating Relativist Ontology and Epistemological Relativism within a Relativist Constructionist framework, my research was designed to appreciate and explore the rich, varied realities of

teachers, acknowledging the importance of context, perspective, and reflexivity in the construction of knowledge.

To ensure the quality of my research, my approach to qualitative analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022, p. 277) discussion on qualitative quality criteria, and by employing research quality strategies guided by Anfara et al.'s (2002) work. Specifically, I focused on strategies including transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

To address transferability, I ensured comprehensive and rich descriptions in my analysis (Anfara et al., 2002). I incorporated participants' voices in my results section, using multiple quotes from different participants to capture the collective experience. This approach not only provides depth but also allows readers to see how the findings can be applicable to other contexts, enhancing the transferability of my research.

For dependability, I maintained a detailed record of all coding analyses (Anfara et al., 2002). This included multiple files documenting each stage of my analysis from beginning to end. Additionally, I collaborated with Dr. Dawn Zinga and Dr. Molnar, discussing my analysis process in detail at every step. This thorough documentation and collaborative approach ensured that my research process was consistent and reliable.

Finally, to ensure confirmability, I engaged in reflexivity throughout my research process (Anfara et al., 2002). I reflected on my past experiences and how they influenced my perspective on the data, documenting these reflections throughout the research process. Furthermore, I discussed my positionality and its impact on data interpretation with Dr. Dawn Zinga. This reflexive practice helped to ensure that my findings were grounded in the data and not biased by my personal perspectives.

Results

The results from the current study presented a variety of findings that highlight teachers' lived experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through analysis, six different themes and three sub-themes emerged. The six themes include: change and context; challenges; benefits; strategies; relationship and connection; and support and resources. Within the theme of strategies, two-subthemes surfaced: mindset; health and wellness. Additionally, the analysis process showcased another sub-theme under support and resources, which was support from colleagues. All coding of the data was done without knowledge of individual teaching characteristics, however during the analysis process teaching characteristics were considered. I created a table (*See Appendix D*) that summarizes the analysis for any potential differences based on teaching characteristics among participants. The theme of change and context was the only theme that presented a difference with respect to teaching characteristics (*See Appendix D*).

Change and Context

Participants discussed change in various ways with respect to teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, one area of teaching that changed the most was their school environment. Many of the teachers spoke of how prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, they felt a strong sense of connection and belonging to their school communities and that these connections were strengthened by in-class activities as well as activities and events that brought the whole school community or subsections of the community together. However, this feeling of belonging changed during the pandemic for many participants as teachers reported that the school environment became a more isolating experience for everyone. As one participant shared: "*when I picture teaching during the pandemic, to me it becomes smaller. And your classroom was more of your community... no more school-wide activities...no class trips.*"

Another major change to teaching contexts described by most participants was adapting to required safety measures in their classrooms and across the school environment. These included physical changes such as spacing desks 2 meters apart, or for teachers who used tables, placing tape on the tables to divide students. Participants also had to remove all soft furnishings such as carpets, fabric chairs, blankets, and fabric toys. Additionally, participants were required to design a system to ensure any shared materials were isolated after each use and sanitized to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

While many of the implemented safety measures resulted in physical changes to the classroom, teachers reported the biggest impacts occurred in relation to the change in routines and the additional time many measures required. Many teachers reported significantly increased time between class transitions due to the increased safety measures. Making sure that students were socially distanced throughout transitions, washed their hands when entering the classroom, before snacks and lunch as well as the constant sanitizing (e.g. washing tables and class materials) between transitions were all additions to teachers' usual schedules that took additional time and preparation. Participants described their experience with safety measures as, "*we were forced to separate all kids and no one can face each other, everyone must be distanced as much as possible within the classroom*" and "*my students are in desks and straight rows, they have all their materials in their desk, they can't share. I'm trying to figure out how we can do cooperative learning because they took my carpet away and they took my furniture away.*" Although participants recognized the importance of safety measures as a necessity to protect society and the school community, it created additional demands in their daily routines.

Participants also experienced other changes in their schedules and teaching assignments. Some participants experienced sudden changes to their teaching assignment such that they had to

shift from their scheduled teaching assignment to teach a new grade with only a few days' notice. While some teachers experienced these sudden shifts, the majority of teachers spoke about changes related to required delivery methods due to pandemic conditions. One teacher shared: *"It's difficult for me to teach, to flip my lessons and not knowing if Monday I am at school or am I still online, even though the material covers the same concepts, it's not taught the same way. So that was challenging too. Just always be on the edge and not knowing what's going to happen next."* All of the teachers experienced shifts in teaching delivery methods throughout the pandemic. Most participants associated these changes with an increase in work hours, increase in checking their emails, and no supervision duties. The shifts in delivery methods went back and forth from teaching in-person to online (either from the school or from home) requiring adaptations that often-involved new strategies and approaches in how they taught and designed their courses. Many teachers reported that these shifts were particularly difficult, especially for those teachers who taught multiple grades at once.

Multiple participants shared that they had to change the way their course was designed to be able to teach during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported having to redesign their course to make it accessible to students online, to do this many participants researched online resources and tools to make interactive lessons in an online environment. However, this was particularly challenging for participants who taught hands-on courses such as science. Additionally, participants shared that they had to change their teaching style to align with COVID-19 restrictions. This change included eliminating all in-person collaborative work between students, communicating with students on different topics, being more animated when teaching online, and adapting to the new way they had to teach. This change in teaching style was hard for many participants, one participant described the experience as: *"I just wasn't*

motivated to teach because I wasn't happy with the way that I was teaching, but there was nothing I could do about it.” Overall, participants experienced the change in course design and teaching style required by COVID-19 pandemic conditions, to be very challenging when they had already spent significant time developing their personal teaching styles and approaches and were required to pivot quickly with little support.

The reference to change was not only experienced on a personal level as expressed through participants class environment, routines, scheduling, teaching style, course redesign, but also on a grand scale across the province. Many teachers felt that there needed to be more consistency across school boards with respect to COVID-19 measures. A few teachers shared that they felt that their school board was behind compared to others, other participants felt that the lack of consistency was frustrating and left them not knowing what their next steps were. Teachers shared: *“it was stressful in a different way because of the unknown of everything”* and *“the lack of information, you know, that anxiety was - it was pretty strong not knowing if we were going back like week after week after week.”* These quotes highlighted how participants struggled with the lack of consistency across teaching contexts as well as how the constant changes, speed of change, and level of uncertainty contributed to a challenging environment adding to their levels of stress and anxiety.

Participants also reported experiencing change differently based on their teaching context (*See Appendix D*). More specially, many elementary school teachers shared how their experience was different from secondary school teachers with respect to safety, since majority of elementary school students were unable to receive the COVID-19 vaccine at that time: *“as a kindergarten teacher, I know that my students are not able to be vaccinated right now.”* Secondary school teachers shared a different experience that was not focused on safety, rather the format in which

they were teaching such that participants shared that teaching a hybrid model was more challenging compared to elementary school teachers who taught online or in-person. However, many of the participants who taught in elementary indicated that they also had experience teaching using a hybrid model.

Another area that participants referenced with respect to teaching characteristics was the differences in teaching experience. The majority of teachers with more teaching experience felt that new teachers experienced more challenges compared to experienced teachers since newer teachers were placed online with limited resources and knowledge of curriculum due to their lack of experience. However, participants with less teaching experience did not describe their experience as ‘more challenging’ due to their years of teaching experience. Rather, newer teachers identified the same challenges that teachers with greater teaching experience reported. For example, creating a collaborative environment in an online setting, digitalizing all class content, and keeping students engaged. One difference that was noted for teachers with more teaching experience was their ability to retire, such that several teachers with more teaching experience decided to retire due to all the change to the education system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants described the significant changes in teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly regarding their school environments. Before the pandemic, teachers felt a strong sense of connection and belonging within their school communities, which was fostered by in-class activities and school-wide events. However, this sense of community diminished as the pandemic created more isolating experiences. Teachers adapted to new safety measures, such as spacing desks and removing soft furnishings, which required additional time and effort. Changes in routines, increased sanitation protocols, and altered classroom layouts were common

challenges. Additionally, many teachers experienced abrupt shifts in teaching assignments and delivery methods, switching between in-person and online formats. This led to redesigning courses for online access, which was especially challenging for hands-on subjects. The lack of consistency across school boards and constant changes contributed to increased stress and anxiety among teachers. Differences in experiences were noted between elementary and secondary teachers, with elementary teachers facing more safety concerns due to unvaccinated students and secondary teachers finding hybrid models more challenging. Teachers with varying levels of experience faced similar challenges, although more experienced teachers had the option to retire, which some decided to do. Overall, participants found the rapid and unsupported changes to their teaching styles and course designs particularly difficult.

Challenges

In addition to speaking about change, participants expressed various points of view when sharing the challenges they faced while teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic. One area that participants shared as a heightened challenge was safety with respect to teaching in an in-person learning environment. The COVID-19 precautions requiring that students remained six feet apart from one another was not only logistically challenging in their spaces but also meant that all lessons, assignments, and classroom learning materials had to be individualized as in-person group work and sharing of materials was not possible. Moreover, teachers also had the challenge of ensuring all their students were washing and sanitizing their hands regularly.

Challenges around safety and covid precautions were quite common as were technology challenges. More specifically, this challenge came from having to learn new technology in a quick manner. Numerous participants shared that they had to teach themselves how to use the different forms of technology and were told to: "*figure it out.*" For the few participants that were

able to receive training, the training was done too quickly or by people who were not trained to use the software. The challenge to learn how to use technology was also noted when teachers had to create lessons digitally. In addition to the challenge to learn new forms of technology and transfer all lessons online, participants also shared that they experienced challenges with their network such that many participants went without internet for a day or had to buy data to teach from their home.

Participants reported challenges adapting to the new usage of technology, such that for some participants this led to physical pain from this new form of teaching. One participant shared: *“I was getting back and neck problems from facing the screen and I was having eye problems, my eyes felt like they were burning”* Additionally, teachers shared that they also experienced challenges connecting with their students’ online. Participants felt that there was a lack of engagement from students, many teachers taught solely to screens and did not know if their students were there listening or learning or had just logged in but were otherwise occupied. Thus, the heightened use of technology presented a variety of challenges for participants from the way in which they had to adapt to a completely new teaching environment, with limited connection to students’ and the physical pain that followed.

Another challenge that participants shared was the heightened pressure and expectations from families and students to be always available. A few participants shared that students or parents would email them at night asking for help or with specific questions. The increased expectations of participants were also shown through the multiple tasks that they were expected to do all at once. One participant highlighted this challenge by saying, *“How do I manage online and face to face at the same time. Especially when I know that child A, B, C, D are behavior and then E, F, and G have an IEP. And then now I have to deal with H, I, J, K online Then when*

we deal with that, they're going to be like, oh, we're going to give you more. And, you know, as human beings, at what point do we crack?"

Benefits

While teachers sometimes felt isolated and experienced challenges connecting with their students, they also reported that one of the benefits that arose was the increased connection with others. Conversely, some teachers found it more difficult to make meaningful connections with their student online while other teachers identified enhanced communication associated with on-line interactions with students and their families as a benefit that emerged from pandemic conditions. As one teacher said, *"I've had a lot more communication with parents with the online, which is nice."* Some teachers shared that they were able to take the time to get to know each individual student since often, in-person, they would wait for students to come to them, whereas online they were placed in a position to go to the student. Pandemic conditions were also reported to foster enhanced connections in other areas, as many participants reported that they felt as though they were able to spend more time with their family which in turned allowed them to feel connected to their partners, children, and extended family.

In addition to the heightened connection experienced between participants and their family as well as their individual students, participants shared that they experienced benefits with respect to their work environment. Participants shared that teaching in a virtual environment allowed them to feel safe, since not all students wore masks or adhered to the necessary safety protocols (i.e., social distancing, hand washing). As well, teaching in a virtual environment had many work-related benefits for participants such as no supervision duty, smaller class sizes, not having to clean up after students, flexible schedules, and no commute time. A smaller group of participants also shared that they experienced a lighter workload: *"I found the workload to be*

lighter because I wasn't having to plan for such big blocks of learning." Furthermore, the experience in virtual teaching provided participants with the benefit of improving their technology skills such that participants were able to develop new resources, enjoyed using technology or began to feel comfortable using technology. For one participant in particular, the challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic were something that they really enjoyed since they got to learn a variety of things in new ways.

Strategies

Teachers employed a variety of strategies to navigate the turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, two distinct sub-themes emerged in the analysis of these strategies: mindset and health and wellness. This section examines the spectrum of approaches employed by teachers, from engaging in a positive mindset to prioritizing their health and well-being.

Mindset

One of the sub-themes that emerged within strategies was participants' mindset, more specifically the ways in which participants reframed their mindset and how that contributed to their outlook on life. Numerous participants implemented a positive mindset, which focused on how their attitude towards challenges that arose from teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic helped them grow. To focus on this "growth mindset" participants used forms of positive thinking, such as finding the silver linings, not taking anything for granted and choosing to enjoy a new form of teaching. The use of a positive mindset was also shown in ways in which participants viewed their collective experience, participants highlighted that "*everyone was doing the best they could, given the situation.*" Additionally, the use of a positive mindset was also apparent when participants spoke about their employment, in which participants highlighted that

they were grateful to be employed during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many people lost their jobs.

This mindset, for some teachers, was implemented through a self-focus lens. The implementation of a self-focus mindset varied across participants, some participants implemented this mindset by preparing in advance and being proactive. Other participants used forms of focusing on bettering themselves and taking care of themselves before anything else. For one participant, this self-focus positive mindset involved talking to their counsellor regularly and going on medication. This participant highlighted the implementation of their self-focus mindset with one sentence during their interview: *“I'm not ashamed of it, you know, for a little bit, I went on meds, and you got to do what you've got to do to take care of you first because you're no help to anybody if you're not solid.”*

Health and Wellness

Participants used a variety of health and wellness strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some participants decided to use their time to take up physical activities such as walking, running, dancing and other forms of exercising. A few participants decided to get a dog to aid in their physical activity. Other participants decided to spend their free time watching mindless television shows, gaming, reading, collecting plants and gardening. The use of physical activity and different hobbies was a way in which participants were able to balance between the various challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants described this balance as a “give and take” situation in which they thought of the pandemic as a re-set to what is important and learning about the fine line between work and life: *“it's finding how do you balance what gives to make this work and what gives to make that work.”* This work/life balance allowed participants to spend more time with family, invest more time in themselves, set a

specific time to put away work for the day, and follow schedules for marking and class preparation.

The implementation of work/life balance was not a universal experience for all participants. Some participants had to find their balance by taking time off work to recharge their mental battery. One teacher shared: *“There was a point in March where I had a meltdown. I had to take three days off in order to deal with myself. And then the way that I explained it to the kids was that I sent a picture of a Jenga tower, and I said, when you start taking the Jenga pieces out, what happens? They said, “Well, the tower gets wobbly.” And I said, yeah, my tower was getting wobbly, and I needed some time to put my Jenga pieces back in.”* Other teachers took more than a day or a few days off of teaching to attain that balance, one participant in particular took a leave of absence for five months. Some participants had to get a medical note to work from home, or a medical note for reduced hours to attain that work/life balance. The awareness of the balance between work and life was also shown when participants talked about leaving the teaching field due to the heightened stress of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. For one participant, the additional stress of teaching during those challenging times lead to their retirement.

Relationship and Connection

Many participants spoke about the relationship and connection they had to others during the turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic as a necessity: *“It’s critical for human beings. We need to connect.”* However, this need for connection could be hard to fulfil between participants and their students, colleagues, and students’ families. As discussed earlier a few participants felt that they were connected with their students: *“I really felt a connection with the children”* and saw enhanced connection with students and their families as a benefits that they experienced

many teachers felt that they were unable to connect with their students. Teachers associated connection difficulties with the isolation of online learning: *“I think with being virtual this year, it was a lot harder to connect with all the kids”* and *“I really didn't get to know my students as well as I would have in person.”* Some teachers described this experience as: *“there are kids who I literally never saw”* and *“most of the time the students wouldn't turn on their camera or their mics. So, you were just teaching to a computer screen, which is very disheartening.”*

Teachers tried to mend this lack of connection by building bonds with students and their families: *“before school started, I reached out to all parents. I phoned them. I introduced myself, I talked to them a little bit about what this learning environment would look like”* and *“I would keep a blog about what we did every day so that they could have a conversation with their child over dinner about what they did.”* This focus to connect with students and their families was important to many participants: *“connection and belonging is so important to families and to teachers, that we're here together, and that's, we're going to make it.”*

This need to connect with others was also seen in participants' relationship with colleagues. Many teachers described their relationship with colleagues as a community, a form of helping one another: *“co-workers have been great, we've all been sharing one way or the other as to how to get through problems.”* For many participants, this connection was not limited to teachers from their school, but also involved teachers across the province. Many participants used Facebook to stay connected with other teachers: *“There are a lot of amazing teacher Facebook groups where teachers share ideas, share resources and you can ask a question and get an answer immediately.”* Although participants felt connected to their colleagues and to other teachers, some participants felt a lack of connection to their colleagues. Participants described feeling isolated in various ways: *“we also felt very isolated because when we were teaching*

remotely... it's not the same as being in the next door” and “I wasn't part of a community of teachers anymore because I was at home. I was isolated from my community.”

Supports and Resources

While isolation was identified by some teachers, participants also talked about support and resources in various ways. One-way participants spoke about this experience with respect to particular items they received, these items included Personal Protective Equipment and technical equipment (i.e., microphones, laptops, cameras). Additionally, participants described support as an action such as talking, texting and virtual meetings with friends and family. Although some participants felt supported from their school board, some participants felt that they had completely no support from their school board. While some participants reported feeling supported by their school board, others expressed feeling unsupported. Additionally, certain participants described their experience with support as not enough from their school board: *“I felt like our board didn't really do enough”* and *“I didn't feel like I had a lot of support coming from school.”* One area where participants identified a lack of support in was their mental health: *“A lot of lip service about how much our Board and our administration care about our mental health.”* Additionally, few participants felt unsupported by the lack of recognition of their opinions: *“you don't really feel fully supported when your opinion isn't valued or even asked for.”* Although many participants shared that they felt an overall lack of support, a few participants reported that they felt that they were supported during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While many participants spoke about support in terms of being supported, lack of support and needing more support, other participants spoke about how they had to find their own forms of support. These participants shared that they found their own mental health support by attending therapy, taking mental health days, taking a leave of absence, and one participant was

put on medication by their physician. Participants shared: *“I sought therapy”* and *“I was attending therapy prior to the pandemic but it was particularly helpful during the pandemic.”*

Among those participants who reported finding their own supports, a few had to use their personal funds to access support which included: paying for mental health support, purchasing cellular data to teach from home and purchasing different types of technology to teach.

In addition to sharing what they did to combat the lack of support during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers also spoke about what they wished would have been provided to them as forms of support. Many participants spoke about how they wished more support would have been provided to them with respect to mental health: *“I wish teachers were provided with more mental health days”* and *“I wish it was encouraged for us to take a mental health day.”* Teachers also spoke to other forms of support they wish would have been provided to them including recovery days to work on their increased workload, eliminating student evaluations, smaller class sizes, technology support to answer specific questions quickly, and increased training.

Like support, participants also spoke about resources they wished they had received during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared that they wished they were provided with numerous different resources such as: a list of available online resources, more textbooks, white board markers, and Chromebooks. Participants also shared that they accessed resources that included access to different educational platforms, and numerous resources from colleagues and other teachers across Ontario through social media. However, many participants experienced a variety of challenges with resources such that participants described their experience with resources as limited and scarce. One participant shared that they had to teach new math curriculum with no new resources to support it: *“new math curriculum and not a single new resource to support it.”* The lack of resources available to participants lead some participants to

use their personal funds to purchase resources for their classroom, due to the lack of funding available. Many participants shared that they generally had to purchase any resources needed in their classroom on their own to stay up-to-date: “*No resources provided, I purchased everything myself*” and “*I purchase what I need on my own.*” However, this experience was not universal to all participants, other participants shared how they had access to numerous resources and felt they received great resources.

Support From Colleagues

A subtheme that emerged within support and resources was participants’ experiences with support from colleagues. Few participants shared how they missed the previous in-person relationship they had with their fellow colleagues. However, many participants described their experience with support from their colleagues as a feeling. Some participants described this feeling of support as a form of connection: “*I think a lot of that supports came from just connecting with other virtual teachers.*” Other participants described this feeling as a collaborative effort: “*I felt supported like when I was working with my teaching partner*” and “*reaching out to other colleagues who taught similar things and making a network. I would say, be the most helpful and support.*” Some participants specifically mentioned that they felt supported by their administration: “*My administration is great, she has just been like phenomenal*” and “*I felt supported all the time by my administration.*” Majority of participants shared this feeling through stories, such that many participants talked about how easy it once was to connect with their colleagues and how that changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. To continue this form of support from a once interactive in-person environment to a virtual environment, many participants joined numerous groups on social media to receive and provide support to their colleagues and teachers from across Ontario. Thus, participants described their

experiences with support from colleagues in a variety of contexts. Some participants shared that they missed how they could easily connect with their coworkers when teaching in person, while others shared their experience feeling support from their school administrators. Overall, this finding highlights how important support from colleagues was, especially during the turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

This study was designed to gain insight into the lived experiences of teachers' during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, six themes were clearly showcased in the teachers' rich and detailed expressions of their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each research question will be discussed in detail drawing on the results, themes, and sub-themes that emerged throughout the analysis process. Additionally, I will explore how the current findings support and contribute to existing research on the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the discussion is organized by research question, questions two and three (e.g., 2. What benefits (if any) did teachers experience while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?; 3. What challenges (if any) did teachers experience while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?) are discussed together. This is due to the nature of challenges and benefits that were described by teachers and the ways in which these themes intertwined with teachers at times identifying aspects of their experience as both a challenge and a benefit.

How do teachers describe their experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

A common experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in the current research has been the lack of social connection, which was often discussed as isolating. Notably, many teachers felt a lack of connection to their students, such that teachers were teaching to students who had their microphones and cameras off for the whole class. The lack of social

connection between teachers, and the school community has emerged as a primary finding established in previous literature (Cain et al., 2022; Rose 2017; Watermeyer et al., 2020). This idea of a “faceless” interaction was also noted in Cain et al. (2022), who highlighted how teachers felt alone while teaching their students.

This lack of connection was also discussed in the current study as many teachers described feeling isolated from their community due to the nature of their relationships with colleagues during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, teachers missed the in-person social environment of teaching where they had the ability to establish relationships with colleagues and share resources. This finding aligns with previous literature that reported teachers missed the social aspect of teaching in-person (Cain et al., 2022; Flack et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2020).

Another aspect emphasized by teachers when describing their teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic was balance. Specifically, many teachers expressed feeling pulled in multiple directions, including transitioning all materials online, adapting to new technologies, teaching students how to navigate technology, being accessible to students and parents, and balancing their commitments to their families. This finding is like previous research that highlighted the “imbalance” experienced by teachers during the pandemic. Specifically, Kim and Asbury (2020) found that teachers struggled with balancing the demands of their students with additional responsibilities at home, such as assisting their own children with schooling, caring for family members, and prioritizing their mental health. Furthermore, other studies, such as those by Kraft et al. (2020) and Lizana & Vega-Fernandez (2021), showcased the considerable challenges posed by the shift in teaching environments and the added personal responsibilities, which significantly impacted teachers' well-being. However, research also found that for some teachers the overwhelming nature of managing these multiple tasks simultaneously may have

contributed to the development of a healthy work-life balance (McKim & Sorensen, 2020). For example, McDonough and Lemon (2022) found that teachers experienced a positive shift between work and life which was reflected in their improved work-life balance.

Given the literature prior to the pandemic, which highlights that teachers had to complete multiple tasks both in school and outside of school (Abdulaziz et al., 2022; Cho & Wang, 2023; Johari et al., 2018; Punia & Kamboj, 2013; Sharifah et al., 2014), it is unsurprising that teachers faced challenges with their work-life balance. Some of these tasks included extracurricular activities, yard duty, meetings, and administrative duties, which were done during and after school hours. During the pandemic, teachers' schedules became more variable, and they had fewer obligations (e.g., no commuting, no yard duty, no extracurricular activities). This shift allowed some teachers, who were now working from home and spending more time with their families, to establish boundaries that contributed to a better work-life balance. However, not all participants were able to achieve this balance. Some felt overwhelmed and recognized the need to implement strategies for better work-life balance but were unable to do so.

Teachers also addressed their workload when reflecting on their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many teachers noted an increase in their workload due to the necessity of digitizing all lessons and assignments, being available to meet with students and parents, as well as striving to create engaging online learning experiences. Additionally, when returning to in-person teaching, the implementation of additional safety measures further added to teachers' workloads. This included ensuring that all materials were individualized and maintaining social distancing and safety protocols such as mask-wearing, handwashing, and sanitizing at all times. For some teachers, their workload was increased due to the need to simultaneously teach both in-person and online, which required them to adapt their lessons and

materials for both environments. This finding illustrates that teachers' workloads extend beyond just teaching and preparing lesson materials. Their responsibilities encompass every action they take to support their students. Teachers view their workload as including being available to students and families, maintaining a clean and safe environment, ensuring students follow safety measures, and finding ways to make learning engaging. This finding of increased workload for teachers aligns with findings from previous studies where teachers reported an increase in work hours, additional meetings with students and parents, the necessity to revise all their class materials, and implement a variety of safety and cleaning protocols during the pandemic (McDonough & Lemon, 2022; Ferdig et al., 2020; Francom et al., 2021; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022). Additionally, teachers in the current study discuss how their work has evolved, particularly regarding the addition of numerous tasks that were not required before the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes, including increased responsibilities in supporting students and families, implementing safety measures, and creating an engaging learning experience in an online environment, have resulted in a significant rise in their workload. This observation is consistent with previous literature, which indicates that while "teacher work" traditionally encompasses teaching, the intensification of teaching tasks due to the pandemic has led to a corresponding increase in "teacher workload" (Apple, 2004; Beck, 2017; OECD, 2019; Creagh et al., 2022).

The final aspect that teachers highlighted when describing their experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was the various strategies they implemented to help combat the turbulent times. These strategies encompassed physical activities such as walking, running, and exercising. Additionally, teachers engaged in activities that required minimal mental effort such as watching TV, reading, and playing various games (e.g., board games and video games). The

implementation of physical and/or mindless activities may have contributed to teachers' overall wellness. This finding aligns with Kim et al. (2022), in which teachers identified using many of the same strategies such as: taking breaks, pursuing hobbies, maintaining connections with family and friends, practicing healthy eating habits, engaging in regular exercise, participating in do-it-yourself projects, incorporating meditation, and taking breaks from social media.

What benefits and challenges (if any) did teachers experience while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Given the drastic change in teaching environment, teachers experienced a variety of challenges that affected their teaching experience. The additional implemented safety measures were particularly challenging for teachers to navigate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers described the increased safety measures as challenging due to the multiple measures that were implemented to keep the school environment safe. This included removing soft furnishings from the classroom; increased hand washing; individualizing all class resources; and sanitizing all materials after each use. The use of these safety measures created multiple new tasks for teachers to complete throughout their day, which in turn may limit their time teaching students and preparing for upcoming lessons. Challenges with the implementation of numerous safety measures accord with other research studies of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, which found that teachers had to be aware of and enforce a variety of safety and cleaning protocols to support student and staff safety (Francom et al., 202; Kim et al., 2022).

Further, teachers also shared that they experienced challenges with respect to technology. The transfer to an online teaching environment left teachers needing to recreate all their lessons and class material in a digital format. This was especially challenging for teachers who taught hands-on courses that could not be represented in an online setting (i.e., plumbing, science, shop,

etc.). Teachers not only had to change all their resources to a digital format, but they also had no support on how to use and teach using these new forms of technology. This research finding was also highlighted in a variety of research studies, such that teachers felt a lack of confidence using online teaching platforms, ill-prepared to transfer to an online environment and not supported through the transition to online learning (Francom et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Klein, 2021; Reich et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2020).

Additionally, teachers shared that they had to teach their students' how to use technology without understanding how to use it themselves. This finding aligns to other research projects that highlight that their participants experienced the same situation, such that teachers had to provide technology support for students (Francom et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Klein, 2021; Reich et al., 2020). Finally, teachers also expanded on their challenging experiences with technology by sharing that themselves and numerous students had issues accessing technology devices and internet connection. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic led to different forms of online learning, it was incredibly important for teachers and students to have access to quality digital devices and stable internet connection. Without proper devices and internet connection, teachers had to think of new ways connect to their students or buy themselves a new digital device that supported teaching in an online setting. Teachers who participated in other research studies shared similar experiences, such that teaching reported the challenge of teaching students with limited to no access to technology (Francom et al., 2021; Hamilton et al., 2020; Hartshorne et al., 2020; Klein, 2021; Reich et al., 2020). An overall challenge experienced by teachers, in the current study, was the added expectations placed upon them by students, student families, and administration. For example, teachers shared that they had families and students expecting them to be available to answer questions late at night and

over the weekends. Another challenge teachers experienced was expectation to balance multiple tasks at once such that teachers had to teach students in-person and online simultaneously. The challenges that teachers experienced in the current work was also seen in teachers from the United States such that teachers in America also faced significant difficulties connecting with students, learning new technology and balancing multiple tasks, and shifting from in-person to online learning (Hamilton et al., 2020; Kraft et al., 2020; McKim & Sorensen, 2020; Reich et al., 2020).

Although teachers experienced many challenges, teachers also shared that they experienced a variety of benefits with respect to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic such that some challenges transitioned to benefits. One of the main benefits shared by teachers was the change to their schedules, some teachers experienced no supervision duty and no commute time. The change to virtual teaching was also seen as a benefit for a few teachers such that teachers shared that they felt safe teaching from home and not interacting with students in an in-person environment. These changes to teachers' routines offered participants more time during their day to spend with family, in which participants shared that they felt more connected to their family. This finding is highlighted in other research, which showcased how the change to teachers' schedule allowed teachers to spend more time with their families (Cain et al., 2022). Thus, although teachers experienced a variety of challenges with online learning (e.g., connecting with students, and creating an engaging and collaborative environment), this challenge was also viewed as a benefit given that teachers spent more time with their family.

Additionally, many teachers expressed that teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic helped improve their knowledge of technology, which in turn allowed them to feel more comfortable using technology in the classroom and contributed to the development of new

resources. This finding in this study draws attention to the ways in which technology became a useful skill for teachers, in which many continue to implement during their daily teaching practices. Although many teachers described their experience with technology as a challenge, the challenging adapting to technology may have helped them gain new hands-on skills that they are now able to apply to their current practice. Additionally, benefits of improved technology skills was also noted in Francom et al.'s (2021) work, in which participants shared that they learned how to use new forms of technology and will continue to implement different aspects of technology usage in their classroom after the pandemic. Thus, the varying challenges and benefits experienced by teachers may have contributed to the adaption of new skills.

Did any benefits or challenges reported by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic vary as a function of teacher characteristics (e.g., gender, years of experience, elementary and secondary teacher status)?

The results indicate that the benefits and challenges reported by teachers remained fairly consistent across various teaching characteristics. The current study highlights notable distinctions between elementary and secondary school teachers (*see Appendix D*) with respect to safety, as well as differences based on years of teaching experience. Elementary teachers emphasized that they had to be actively involved to help ensure their students' safety due to the hands-on nature of teaching younger students. This included initiatives such as creating individual material baskets and avoiding activities like circle time. Additionally, elementary teachers shared concerns about feeling unsafe since young children were not able to receive the COVID-19 vaccine at that time. In contrast, secondary school teachers described a different experience, as most of their students were eligible for vaccination. This allowed secondary school teachers to implement safety measures with a less hands-on approach, which may have

contributed to a different dynamic in their teaching environment. One study by Kim et al. (2022) examines the differences between elementary and secondary school teachers concerning job demands and resources. However, their work does not investigate the specific challenges and benefits experienced by these teachers. This gap highlights the novelty of the current research, which specifically explores the distinct challenges and benefits faced by elementary and secondary school teachers.

Additionally, another notable difference emerged with respect to years of experience, such that teachers with more experience tended to describe “newer” teachers as encountering more challenges due to their lack of experience within the teaching environment. For example, more experienced teachers believed that newer teachers faced greater difficulties because they had less practical experience in the classroom and they thought new teachers were unable to apply their learned skills effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, younger teachers reported facing the same challenges as more experienced teachers, indicating that their limited classroom experience did not result in additional difficulties. Thus, younger teachers might not have perceived their experience as an issue; instead, they may have demonstrated adaptability in transitioning to online or hybrid teaching environments. Additionally, experienced teachers might have perceived the experience of younger teachers as challenging based on their individual contexts, which could vary depending on factors such as their school board, mode of teaching (online or in-person), and their school community.

This study aimed to understand teachers' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing six main themes from their detailed interviews and open-response questions. The discussion is structured around specific research questions, integrating themes and sub-themes identified in the analysis. It also connects the findings to existing research on the

pandemic. Key insights of teachers lived experiences included the prevalent feeling of isolation due to a lack of social connection with students and colleagues, the struggle to balance various responsibilities, and the increased workload from digitizing materials and adhering to safety protocols. Despite these challenges, some teachers reported benefits such as improved work-life balance and enhanced technology skills. The findings also highlight differences between elementary and secondary school teachers, particularly in implementing safety measures, and how these varied based on years of teaching experience. This study fills a gap in existing research by specifically examining the distinct challenges and benefits experienced by teachers during this unprecedented period.

Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to the present study that are worth noting. The sample that completed online surveys was predominantly female (164 women; 33 men) and White (91%). Specifically, this sample included mainly elementary school teachers (131 Elementary School teachers; 66 Secondary school teachers). Additionally, the subset of participants that completed interviews from the larger sample included 26 teachers between the ages of 25 and 69 years old (22 female, 4 male) with 91.31% being white, with 17 being elementary school teachers, and 9 secondary school teachers. Given the lack of diversity in the sample, these findings may not be generalizable to all teachers experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future work should focus on recruiting more diverse samples with respect to race, gender identification, and teaching level to explore the ways in which these aspects may have contributed to their experience teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another limitation is geographic area, as there were different regulations across provinces. Consequently, these findings may not be generalizable to all teachers, considering the importance of context (i.e., school board, teaching in-person or

online, grade level). Another limitation in the current study is that only a subset of open-response and interview questions were analyzed. The larger study included multiple questions that did not specifically pertain to the current research. However, there may be areas where participants shared their experience teaching during the COVID-19 that were not in the sections analyzed. Furthermore, the interviews included a small number of participants selected from a larger survey, there is a chance that participants may have overlooked certain aspects and thus not have fully shared their entire experience. The last limitation in the current study is that the results are only from the perspective of teachers. There was no incorporation of viewpoints from school administrators, parents, or students, as this was not the primary focus of the research. However, including these perspectives could have offered a more comprehensive understanding of the collective experience.

Future research in the field of teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic should aim to include teachers from various provinces to capture a collective understanding of this experience across Canada. Additionally, integrating multiple perspectives, including those of school administrators, students, and their parents, would offer a deeper insight into the experience of teaching and learning throughout the turbulent times of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research study offers valuable insights into the support systems that school boards should implement for teachers. Specifically, school boards should focus on adding additional training, facilitated by qualified individuals, during the establishment and implementation of new measures (i.e., new curriculum, new software, etc.). Additionally, school boards should prioritize teachers' well-being and recognize the ways in which it connects to students. By attentively considering and addressing teachers' needs, school boards can create an environment that supports student success. This research study also sheds light on steps for teachers to consider

moving forward. Teachers are encouraged to continue implementing various positive mindset techniques that may enhance their overall well-being. Moreover, fostering and participating in a supportive community of fellow teachers through social media platforms may be beneficial to their well-being. Lastly, it is important for teachers to continue discussing their comprehensive teaching experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and to share how these experiences have shaped their professional development.

Conclusion

The current work aimed to explore and share the lived experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. An overall notion shared by participants was that they experienced numerous negative challenges in multiple areas of teaching and the ways in which a social environment supports classroom learning. The frequent transitions between in-person and online teaching was difficult, since teachers had to quickly adapt to new forms of technology and redesign their lessons. Some participants shared how they lost themselves mentally and physically due to the high demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some teachers were able to grow and learn new skills from this experience, this study highlights the significant hardships that the pandemic created for teachers and the various ways they had to navigate these challenges. Thus, this research highlights the impact of the pandemic on the teaching profession, emphasizing the importance of support systems and adaptability in navigating such unforeseen times.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Opening

G1. Why did you get into teaching?

G2. What was the most recent grade that you were teaching or are currently teaching?

Perfectionism and Education

P1. Have you had students who you would describe as perfectionistic in your classroom? If yes, can you describe what they are like?

P2. Do you think perfectionism in kids has increased since you've been teaching? If so, in what ways?

P3. What do you think the source of perfectionism is among students? (e.g., from the self, parents, others, society)

P4. How do you deal with perfectionistic students? What strategies do you use?

P4a. *If they say they don't have any switch to:* What strategies would you use if you did have perfectionistic students?

P5. How do you deal with perfectionistic parents? What strategies do you use?

P5a. *If they say they don't have any switch to:* What strategies would you use if you did have students with perfectionistic parents?

P6. How important do you feel that grades are?

P6a. How important do you feel that feedback is?

P7. How important do you think grades are to your students?

P7a. What do you find most frustrating about dealing with students and their grades?

P8. How do you think students interpret feedback from teachers?

P9. Do you think students are experiencing more pressures these days?

P10. Where do you think the pressure comes from?

P11. Would you identify yourself as a perfectionist?

P11a. If yes, why would you describe yourself as a perfectionist?

P11b. Would you be the same if your perfectionism got taken away?

P11d. What do you think the opposite of perfectionism is?

P11c. If you could take away your perfectionism, would you choose to? Why or why not?

P11e. *If no:* Do you know any teachers (without naming names) who you would describe as a Perfectionist?

P12. How do you think your own perfectionism impacts how you teach?

P12a. *Or if they aren't perfectionistic:* How do you think a teacher's perfectionism impacts how they teach?

P13. Do you think perfectionism affects all areas of people's lives or some parts more than others? (Domain specificity)

Pandemic and Education

C1. Can you describe what teaching was like for you prior to the pandemic?

C2. Can you please describe what teaching was like during the pandemic?

C2a. What were the best aspects (if any) of teaching during the pandemic?

C2b. What were the biggest challenges of teaching during the pandemic?

C2c. How are you feeling about returning to school in September? Are you worried about anything? Are you excited about anything?

C3. What was your workload like this past year during the pandemic as compared to pre-pandemic conditions?

C4. How do you feel the education/school experience your students had during the pandemic compares to their pre-covid education?

C4a. Do you feel that this past school year prepared students for transitions (e.g., grade 8 to grade 9, grade 12 to post-secondary)?

C5. The pandemic has created additional stress for teachers and students, how have you, and how have the students dealt with the additional stress and changing conditions? Do you think there will be long-term effects? If so, please describe.

C6. Please describe any supports provided to you during the pandemic? What was helpful? What was not helpful? What do you wish would have been provided?

C6a. When did you feel supported?

C6b. When did you not feel supported?

C7. Does a parent have the right to know if teachers are vaccinated?

C7a. How much information should people have access to regarding the vaccination status of others?

C7b. Do you feel that vaccines should or should not be mandated for teachers, students, and other education staff? Why or why not?

C7c. What do you think about the possibility of ‘vaccine passports’ (e.g., having to carry proof of vaccination in order to access certain privileges such as businesses, flights, university dorms, camps, etc.)

C7d. *If it doesn't come up:* How would you feel about being required to carry a vaccine passport?”

C8. If you were in charge of the provincial government and had to decide on COVID restrictions, what would you do differently or the same (e.g., who gets vaccinated when, masking, what should be closed, school closings etc.)

Ending

E1. Is there anything else about teaching that we haven't covered that you think we should know?

E2. What do you find most rewarding about teaching?

Appendix B

Open Response Questions

25) Open ended COVID-19 and Teaching Questions

- K. How do you feel the education/school experience your students are having compares to their pre-covid education? (open-ended)
- L. The pandemic has created additional stress for teachers and students, how have you, and how have the students dealt with the additional stress and changing conditions? Do you think there will be long term effects? If so, please describe (open ended)
- M. What strategies do you use to work with perfectionistic students?
- N. Please describe any supports provided to you during the pandemic? What was helpful? What was not helpful? What do you wish would have been provided? (open-ended)
- O. If you were in charge of the provincial government and had to decide on COVID restrictions, what would you do differently or the same (who gets vaccinated when, masking, what should be closed, school closings etc.)
- P. What has been your experience with having access to resources that you need for teaching this year (e.g., textbooks, novels, chalkboard/whiteboard)? (open-ended)
- Q. What do you find most rewarding about teaching?

Appendix C

Codebook Used to Code all Interviews and Open Response Questions

Codes	Description
Deductive Codes	
<i>Advantages</i>	Any reference to positive things that came from the changes that arose from the pandemic (i.e., more time for one-on-one teaching) or any reference to a positive change or positive view, can also be a reference to having a break from their typical routine
<i>Challenges</i>	Any reference to challenges that arose from the pandemic
Inductive Codes	
<i>Life Skills</i>	Any reference to preparing students for life, can be helping students with independence, preparing students for life outside of school, teaching students skills and lessons that do not follow curriculum
<i>Team Work</i>	Any reference to working alongside someone, having assistance, any reference to a team environment
<i>Disabilities</i>	Any reference to students with disabilities
<i>Relationship and Connection</i>	Any reference to a connection or building a bond/relationships with parents, students, teachers and staff (can be positive or negative)
<i>Above and beyond</i>	Any reference about teachers doing more than expected of them (i.e., sending home weekly letters, coaching, clubs, after school support), anything teachers frame as being above and beyond normal duties
<i>Student Behaviour</i>	Any reference to a change in the behaviour of students (can be good or bad)
<i>Exhaustion</i>	Any reference to being exhausted from teaching, workload, dealing with students and/or parents
<i>Change</i>	Any reference to changes in class environment (i.e., class set up, open space, cubbies, desk spacing, arrows on the floors, stickers for where to stand, removing certain items), Any reference to changes to daily routines, lessons, the way the teacher would conduct their class and curriculum Any changes to change in reporting structure and specific duties
<i>Negative Emotions</i>	Any reference to teachers feeling frustrated or angry with respect to any context, also includes worry [excluding mental health]

<i>Missing and Loss</i>	Any reference to missing aspects of teaching prior to the pandemic, can be loss in opportunities and connection, anything that they frame as a loss
<i>Workload</i>	Any reference to workload (i.e., work hours, time teaching, time with students, time with parents), could be an increase or decrease, can be positive or negative
<i>Safety</i>	Any reference to worry about teachers safety, student safety, staff safety or just safety in general
<i>Stress and Pressure</i>	Any reference to stress/ pressure or feeling stressed/ pressured, can be an increase or decrease and can be observed in others or reference to the self
<i>Support</i>	Any reference to teachers feeling supported or lack of support, can be in reference to available resources (can be positive or negative, does not need to be framed as supportive)
<i>Uncertainty and Change</i>	Any reference to not knowing what's to come, unsure if teaching will be in-person or online or any reference to change, not including change to workload
<i>Doing Their Best</i>	Any reference to teachers doing the best they can during the pandemic
<i>Balance</i>	Any reference to balancing work and life (can be framed in a negative or positive form)
<i>Hobbies</i>	Any reference to teachers trying something new, having more time to do different things, or not having enough time to do their usual hobbies and activities
<i>Mental Health</i>	Any specific reference to teachers own mental health, can include anxiety and depression, might include seeing professional, taking a leave, taking medication (can be framed in a positive or negative form)
<i>Difference Due to Context</i>	Difference of experience that is context specific (i.e., can be subject, grade level, school, quarantine status), may involve comparison to others
<i>Isolation</i>	Any reference to feeling isolated
<i>Expectations</i>	Any reference to expectations of themselves, student expectation, observation of students own expectations for themselves, expectations put on teachers by others (i.e., parents, administration, students)
<i>Frontline Workers</i>	Any specific reference to teachers as frontline workers, can be positive or negative, and presence or absence of being a frontline worker (i.e., lack of consideration for being a frontline worker)
<i>Technology</i>	Any reference to technology (can be framed as positive or negative)
<i>Fun</i>	Any reference to fun inside or outside the classroom

Strategies

Any reference to strategies used to manage themselves, the classroom, or any strategies used (can be positive or negative)

Appendix D

Exploring Teaching Level (Elementary School and Secondary School): Themes and Differences
in Teachers' Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Theme	Number of ES	Number of SS	Total Number	Differences
<i>Benefits and Challenges</i>	69	28	15 ES 9 SS	ES faced challenges with social distancing and technology.
<i>Change and Context</i>	102	34	21 ES 8 SS	ES detailed specific classroom changes and safety measures.
<i>Relationship and Connection</i>	80	41	19 ES 9 SS	None
<i>Strategies</i>	38	22	15 ES 8 SS	None
<i>Support and Resources</i>	285	67	133 ES 32 SS	None

Note.

ES = Elementary School Teachers

SS = Secondary School Teachers