University of North Carolina Asheville
Journal of Undergraduate Research
Asheville, North Carolina
May 2021

Essential and Extinguished: Burnout in Elementary School Teachers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lauren A. Walters
Sociology
The University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Lyndi Hewitt

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on almost everyone, including educators at all levels. College faculty, high school and middle school teachers, and K-5 educators have all experienced significant disruption in their daily work due to social distancing protocols and/or the transition to remote learning, thus exacerbating the typical stressors associated with teaching. While previous research has pointed to causes of teacher burnout, studies investigating the particular impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are just beginning to emerge. This study draws on original survey data to examine how the pandemic and the shift to online schooling have influenced the experiences and burnout of elementary-level teachers. The survey was distributed to an availability sample of public elementary school teachers in the Asheville, North Carolina area in March 2021. Findings based on data from 47 respondents suggest that there are both challenges and silver linings to this work. However, signs of burnout among teachers are notable and concerning.

1. Introduction

Burnout is experienced by teachers as they begin to fall out of their careers due to a variety of factors. These factors might include but are not limited to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a lack of accomplishment. This research will seek to answer the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online schooling has influenced the experiences and burnout of elementary-level teachers. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced educators and students to rethink what school is and how it functions. In March 2020, with any to little warning elementary schools experienced a significant disruption in their daily work due to social distancing protocols and/or the transition to remote learning, thus exacerbating the typical stressors associated with teaching. Teachers across the United States have worked beyond their job requirements to keep their students engaged and educated. However, at what price to them? This research works towards elevating the voices of teachers who have weathered the pandemic. Alongside this, this research will take a more process-oriented approach to teacher burnout by not assigning blame to singular factors. Rather an evaluation of teacher burnout as a complicated and systemic structure will be held. Teacher burnout affects anyone who has journeyed through the educational system. While teachers are the direct recipients of this experience, burnout ultimately trickles down to their student's outcome and the educational system as a whole.[1,2] For this reason, exploration of this topic is vital in the improvement and health of teachers and the educational system. While previous research has pointed to causes of teacher burnout, studies investigating the particular impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are just beginning to emerge. This research works to fill this gap and expand knowledge surrounding teacher experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

The main focus of this review will be around elementary level teachers but will draw from studies which expand into K-12. Current research points to possible explanations to teacher burnout such as excessive emotional labor and poor leadership.[3,4] This approach is limiting as it ignores the complexities of the process that surrounds teacher burnout. Instead, this review will aim to restructure past knowledge in a way that points in the direction of a process-oriented research question, which understands teachers' lived experiences and how burnout occurs on more than one level. Once this understanding of burnout has been established, one can begin to factor in the COVID-19 Pandemic. This review will move through four main sections. Burnout will be discussed and explored in a way that highlights how previous researchers have defined and measured it. Teachers will be examined on an individual level that begins to include variables like gender. Methodology in research that has been used while studying teacher burnout will be examined in a way that encourages the use of process-oriented thinking. Finally, a general discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic will be factored in.

2.1. Defining Burnout

What connects all of this research is the attempt to operationalize and understand teacher burnout. With the exception of a few, most studies use the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), in order to measure burnout. This form of measurement, established in 1996, uses a Likert scale to measure emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment.[5] Research using this measurement normally aims to establish the presence of burnout and then moves into the presentation of possible causes. One example is a study which focused on poor leadership styles resulting in higher levels of burnout.[6] In this study, McKinney-Thompson administered the MBI to 92 elementary teachers (K-2). This was followed by a questionnaire which measured the leadership that was present in the schools. Using quantitative analysis techniques, the conclusion was made that there was a relationship between poor leadership and burnout.[7] What one must ask, is how accurate the MBI is when applied to current research? One study conducted in Hungary, in 2015, points to some improvements which could be made to the model. In the study Szigeti tests eight models which could be applied to the MBI, landing on the conclusion that a bifactor structure remains the most accurate.[8] Similarly a study conducted in 2017 by Hawrot and Konienwski in Poland points to the same conclusion of a bifactor model being the best representation of the Maslach Burnout Inventory- Educators Survey (MBI-ES). This study consisted of 1,206 primary school teachers. The analysis also suggested that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were "more strongly related to the burnout general factor" than personal accomplishment.[9] This bifactor model allows for burnout to be assessed on multiple levels in order to better represent such a large phenomenon. It should be noted that both studies were conducted outside of the United States, where the educational system has a different structure and standards. Despite its continuous implementation in studies, research that tests the validity of the MBI is lacking in the United States. This inventory is over twenty years old and must be adjusted in order to truly represent teacher experiences during such a unique social and political time. A discussion of how the MBI has been adapted to fit this study will be had in the methodology section of this research.

Moving back to the errors that occur during the operationalization of burnout, one must take these possible errors into consideration. In a 2009 study, Chang seeks to understand how emotional labor can produce burnout in teachers. This happens when teachers fall into the habitual pattern of making judgements that foster unpleasant emotions. Here Chang advances with caution, due to a fear of measuring the "feeling" of burnout (which is equated to emotional exhaustion), not actual burnout. This offers an important critique, as many studies are actually reporting the "feeling" of burnout, making emotional exhaustion the main focus over other characteristics.[10]

Burnout has previously been approached in a causal way. Meaning, that research surrounding it tends to point to singular causes which produce teacher burnout. Brasfield's research falls into this category, by linking personal wellness to teacher burnout.[11] This quantitative study uses the MBI and a wellness inventory to link the two together. The results show a significant relationship between burnout and wellness as it was defined in the study. This study continues the narrative that burnout is a problem that falls into the personal realm, rather than one that stems from both the individual and the social structures around them. This is in contrast studies which frame teacher burnout as an institutional weakness, rather than an individual problem.[12]

2.2. Past Methods of Analysis

A commonality found in most research surrounding teacher burnout is the unit of analysis being used. This being an individual unit which looks at teachers individually.[13,14,15] In each of these studies, female identifying teachers make up over half of the subject population. However, gender isn't discussed outside of the methodology. In contrast to this is research conducted by Abbasi in 2019.[16] This study focused on only elementary level female teachers in Pakistan. Abbasi discusses why female teachers might be more stressed, and experience burnout at a more rapid rate. Abbasi concludes that this ties into the role conflict that some of these women are experiencing, along with anxieties about their general positionality as women. While this study takes place in Pakistan, it is still relevant in its gender analysis. It acknowledges the number of women who are found at elementary level teaching positions and considers their unique positionality while conducting research and making conclusions. Few studies reach beyond an individual unit of analysis. However, some studies do manage to begin exploring more group-based analysis.[17,18,19] While the study still tends to focus on making a connection between teacher burnout and student outcomes, they also begin to identify group-based activity alongside this. This takes place in support groups, created by teachers,[20, 21]or just by looking at classrooms as a whole.[22] Herman's study done in 2017 highlights the importance of these groups in preventing teacher burnout. Other research takes a different approach by viewing the effects of the school environment as a whole on teacher burnout.[23] Future research should explore these groups that extend beyond the individual, as they have a noticeable impact. This could go beyond looking at support groups and move into an analysis of the classroom as a whole.

Methodologically, burnout in teachers has been primarily understood through quantitative analysis. This quantitative focus has been critiqued, and qualitative research on teacher burnout does exist. A study conducted in 2004 by Howard used semi-structured interviews, along with purposive sampling to collect data. This study's focus was based around techniques used to resist teacher burnout. Howard found that creating a sense of autonomy, personal achievement and a strong support network were key to resisting a feeling of burnout.[24] By using qualitative interviews, this study was able to reflect the experiences held by teachers today, rather than using an inventory designed to measure the expected signs of burnout. This research also begins to move in the direction of attempting to understand the process surrounding burnout. This is shown in the way that the study seeks to understand the preventative measures teachers can take along the way in order to reduce burnout.

2.3. COVID-19 Pandemic

Research relating the COVID-19 pandemic to teacher burnout is only beginning to emerge. Research conducted in 2020 by Sokal in Canada, looks at ways to prevent teacher burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic.[25] Based on the national survey of 1,330 teachers, the following conclusions were made. One of the most stressful aspects of teaching is concern for vulnerable students. Alongside this, teachers are also seeing inequalities being magnified for their students. This comes in many forms such as access to school resources and food insecurity. The challenge of effectively engaging students through online learning is discussed and the study points to professional collaboration as a helpful tool here. When providing teachers with resources a familiarity can help in the transition to remote learning. Data showed that "teachers who were flooded with websites, learning platforms and other resources often viewed them not as resources, but as demands, leading to more teacher burnout." Finally, results "demonstrated that teachers who perceived high parental support or high administrator support coped better, and interviews verified these trends."[26]

By focusing on burnout, teachers, methodology, and the COVID-19 pandemic one is able to understand the current state of research surrounding teacher burnout. All of the discussed studies, with the exception of Howard's 2004 research, start with a direct research question which guides the collection of data and ultimately its interpretation.[27] However, the process of teacher burnout remains unexplored. Researchers must work backwards, taking a grounded theory approach, in order to understand what is really happening. By pulling from what other researchers have already discovered, a pattern can be found. This research will look beyond the individual. Through the interpretation of this data, there is the possibility of creating interventions geared to alleviate burnout in teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Contemporary Context

In order to fully understand the context and experiences described in this research, a contemporary explanation of the public health guidance given to schools needs to be offered. On March 14, 2020 an executive order was made by North Carolina state governor Cooper. Executive Order No. 117 "closed public school buildings for in-person instruction."[28] Schools then remained closed for in-person learning for the rest of the 2019-2020 school year under Executive orders 120 and 138. Since the end of that school year, the NC Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) "has worked closely with NCDPI and NCSBE to meet the nutritional, educational, and childcare needs of students during school closure, and to plan for safely reopening schools for the 2020-2021 school year."[29] This approach consisted of three plans, Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. While each of these plans are complicated and specific in their practices, this contextual summary will focus only on the mode of instruction as it relates to K-5 teachers.

In order to maintain a chronological understanding of how these plans were enacted this discussion will start with Plan C. In Plan C, all students are taught through virtual instruction. Wednesdays were designed to be asynchronous with a single check-in zoom meeting. This provided teachers with a time to create and record lesson plans. For many schools, this was short lived, and Plan B was soon enacted. In Plan B, students are divided into two groups, group A and group B. Group A attended in-person instruction on Mondays and Tuesdays, while group B attended in-person instruction on Thursdays and Fridays. Students were taught asynchronously on days they were not in person. On Wednesdays, all students were taught asynchronously online. Finally, Plan A meant that all students were taught in-person five days a week. It is important to note that virtual only students were not affected by these changes in plans. At the time that this survey was distributed in March 2021, many schools were beginning to enter Plan A, this is reflected in the data. The timeline of these three plans varies based on county and district. This distinction is important because one really begins to see the adaptability teachers were forced to endure.

4. Methodology

This research was conducted using primary research data in the form of an original survey. The survey was produced online and was self-administered by participants. A survey aligns with this research as it offers respondents complete anonymity and little observer subjectivity. The survey was distributed to kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in the Asheville, North Carolina area in March 2021. The sampling strategy used here can be described as convenience sampling. The researcher utilized existing informal networks to sample the population. The survey was distributed by email to four elementary school teachers who then shared the link with colleagues. The survey was left to circulate for a 12-day period. By going directly to the participants and allowing them to distribute the survey among themselves and their coworkers, the researchers do not have to navigate any gatekeepers of the population. Concerning this research, this was an intentional decision that was meant to give as much power and autonomy to the teachers being surveyed. This allows for trust to be built and encourages an honest response from participants. A total of 47 survey responses were recorded.

The main concept being measured in the survey was burnout. To operationalize burnout, the researchers used measurements developed in the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) but did not use the actual inventory. The MBI correlates burnout with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (or lack thereof). The MBI has received some critiques in the past for the effectiveness of its structure and operationalizations. For this reason, the researchers chose to operationalize emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment themselves to best fit the research. These concepts were then turned into a series of questions that utilized a forced Likert scale to elicit responses. Using concepts developed in the MBI allows for data to then also be compared to other research that might have used a similar methodology. This allows for the experiences of teachers in the Asheville, North Carolina area to be evaluated alongside other research.

In addition to this exploration of burnout, the survey also measured concepts such as general well-being. These questions were mixed into the forced Likert scale as an attempt to create a more inclusive narrative of teachers' experiences. Information was also collected regarding personal experience and circumstances. Questions included the level of experience one has with teaching online, the mode of schooling currency being offered at one's school, grade level(s) one has taught during COVID-19, years of teaching one has taught at the K-5 level, and personal caregiving responsibilities one has that fall outside of school. Data surrounding this information affects the experience a teacher has had; this information is vital in order to come to any conclusions. For example, someone with more familiarity with online teaching might be experiencing a lower level of burnout as a result. Researchers are also able to see how

much external support that teacher is receiving, another noted cause of burnout. Finally, questions were included that inquired about one's plans for teaching in the future and any suggestions for those in leadership roles (principles, curriculum coaches, county administration, etc.). This section allowed the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own experiences and offer a perspective to those in leadership roles that could end up being heard and acted on. Basic demographic information was also collected as a way to allow its consideration in relation to the bigger picture.

The unit of analysis used in this study was individuals, as the purpose of the study is to assess the impact of COVID-19 on K-5 teachers and teacher burnout. Data was then pooled to reflect the experiences of this population in a fuller sense. The survey elicited the information that was specific to the individual and their own lived experience. Burnout itself is a process that occurs on an individual level in many teachers' lives, making this unit of analysis the most accurate in recording its relationship with the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was completely anonymous and does not address any sensitive topics. Participants were reminded of their voluntary participation. As a result, this research remains ethical and well-intended.

While surveys offer a way to collect rich and specific data there are some limitations that should be discussed. Surveys follow an inflexible design that doesn't allow for participants to operationalize complex ideas like burnout for themselves. If one wanted to more accurately reflect teachers' experiences with burnout more qualitative data collection such as interviews could be useful. On a similar note, the use of convenience sampling could leave out members of a population whose perspective would have been valuable in gaining a well-rounded narrative.

5. Results and Discussion

This survey collected a total of 47 responses from those teaching in public schools in the Asheville, North Carolina area. All respondents of this survey identified as white, with 2.1% identifying with a Hispanic ethnicity. Similarly, 97.9% of respondents identified as a woman (cisgender or transgender.) The other 2.1% identified as a man (cisgender or transgender.) This lack of diversity within the sample should be noted and provides room for expansion. In terms of teaching experience, 53.2% reported having taught at the k-5 level for over 10 years, 31.9% reported 5-10 years, 12.8% reported 3-5 years, and only 2.1% reported 1-2 years of K-5 experience. Respondents were relatively evenly distributed among k-5 grade levels. When asked about the current mode of schooling being offered at their school, 55.3% reported some form of hybrid instruction, 36.2% reported in-person instruction and only 8.5% reported being fully online.

Participants were surveyed on more personal circumstances in order to create a more encapsulating narrative of their experiences. Out the 47 surveyed, 32 respondents (68.1% of the total sample) reported having one or more caregiving responsibilities outside of teaching. Out of the 32 with these responsibilities, 50% reported having Elementary School (k-5) aged children who they provide care for, 28.1% reported infants, toddlers or preschool aged children who they provide care for, 28.1% reported middle or high school aged children who they provide care for, 21.9% reported giving ongoing caring for elders at least once a week, and 9.4% reported providing ongoing care for a disabled or ill family member. Of these respondents, 32.43% had more than one caregiving role outside of teaching. This information begins to illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected teachers on both a professional and personal level. Alongside this, 48.9% of the total sample reported not having a space at home to work without disruption. When asked how COVID-19 and the transition to online schooling has affected their plans to continue teaching, 21.3% reported their plans changing in a negative way. This is in contrast to the 2.1% who reported their plans changing in a positive way. The remaining 76.6% had no change in plans or were unsure at the time. Just by looking at the personal circumstances of teachers at this time, one is able to see patterns emerging related to a lack of resources and exhaustion.

Table 1. Responses to statements related to emotional exhaustion

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
"Teaching often leaves me feeling emotionally overextended"	2.13%	4.26%	29.79%	63.83%
"I feel like my general happiness and psychological well-being has declined since transitioning online"	2.13%	17.02%	48.94%	31.91%

Results shown in Table 1 center around emotional exhaustion, the first of three concepts used to operationalize burnout. An overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that teaching often left them feeling emotionally overextended. Similarly, the majority of respondents reported that their general happiness and psychological well-being has declined since transitioning online. This decline in general well-being stems from a multitude of places, however one notable source could be personal accomplishment.

Table 2. Responses to statements related to personal accomplishment

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
"I feel a sense of accomplishment due to teaching"	2.13%	21.28%	55.32%	21.28%
"My work feels significant"	4.35%	19.57%	41.30%	34.78%

Personal accomplishment was the second concept used to operationalize burnout. As shown in Table 2, the majority of respondents reported feeling both a sense of accomplishment due to teaching and a feeling of significance to their work. However, one still is able to see feelings of personal accomplishment lacking in about a fourth of respondents. These feelings could be a reflection of the struggle some of these teachers are reporting in regard to building connections with students online. Similarly, many teachers discussed feeling unappreciated by the public. The struggle to maintain a personal connection to one's work is also heightened by these factors.

Table 3. Responses to statements related to depersonalization

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
"Since March 2020 I have maintained a personal connection to my work, and the recipients of my instruction"	2.13%	10.64%	72.34%	14.89%
"I don't really care what happens to some students"	85.11%	12.77%	2.13%	0%

The third concept used to operationalize burnout was depersonalization. Based on the data shown in Table 3, many respondents are not reporting feelings of depersonalization. As shown, 87.23% of teachers agree that they have maintained a personal connection to their work, and the recipients of their instruction. Similarly, 97.87% of respondents reported caring about what happens to every student. This continued connection to their work is noteworthy and suggests that depersonalization is not a key source of burnout for these teachers. As a result, one must turn to other sources of stress such as access to resources.

Table 4. Responses to statements related to resources

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
"Prior to March 2020 I consistently was provided with all of the materials I needed for instruction"	4.26%	21.28%	55.32%	19.15%
"Since March 2020 I have consistently been provided with all of the materials I need for instruction"	23.4%	29.79%	42.55%	4.26%
Percentage Change	**+19.14%**	**+8.48%**	**-12.77%**	**-15.59%**

Results shown in Table 4 establish that teachers feel like they have less consistently been provided with all of the materials they need for instruction since March of 2020. Struggles surrounding access to resources needed for instruction were further amplified in the qualitative data collected in this research. Beyond the resources needed by teachers, there was also a shared concern about the varied level of resources available to students, especially when being taught remotely. Respondents showed concern for amplified inequalities among students. One educator reported "I work with a high poverty population that struggled to access services they needed to be successful. They had minimal support at home, bandwidth issues, and extreme absences. This caused for a huge gap in instruction and learning loss for our most at risk population. Many needed small group or in person instruction to access the curriculum successfully." This disparity among students thus impacts teachers on both an emotional and professional level. Beyond the resources allocated to them, teachers were heavily impacted by the changes in mode of schooling, and the expectation of them to simply adapt without any precedent to follow.

Table 5. Mode of Schooling

Mode of Schooling:
"It was impossible to get ready for the in person students, grade all of the work from the virtual students that day, check in with my virtual students, AND leave when my contracted hours are over at 3:30. Additionally, my county did "asynchronous Wednesdays" in which students were virtual. In the Fall, I was spending around 5 hours each Wednesday filming lessons for my virtual students for the following week. In the Spring, our county made it so that, in addition to prep time on Wednesdays, we had to meet with students for a minimum of 2 hour each Wednesday. Hybrid was exhausting and I hated almost every minute of it."
"The greatest challenge has been navigating how to safely transition back to in-person. There is NO POSSIBLE way to remain socially distant while teaching kindergarten."
"Everything has had to be remade, recorded, adapted in some way. There was no curriculum to pull from or use. We created literally everything for every subject."
"County admins need to give us more time to plan. They have piled on duties and responsibilities while we are trying to run two classrooms: one at home doing work virtually, and one at school. Our planning day on Wednesday was filled with meetings and required two hours of tutoring. Now that we have returned Plan A, the virtual teachers have lost their Wednesday asynchronous day, which is sorely needed."
"Recognize that the physical classroom CAN NOT be replicated in a Zoom meeting and therefore expectations must change. Instructional pacing for the in person classroom can not be met in virtual school."

When teachers were asked about the challenges currently being faced, many participants expressed how the changes in mode of schooling were difficult and unprecedented. Table 5 shows this echoed concern. Having to manage and adapt to so many different scenarios is challenging. This back and forth is a source of stress for many teachers as they try and keep both themselves, and their students afloat. These feelings are accompanied by external pressure to reach certain learning standards from previous years. Many participants stressed the importance of being provided with time to create lesson material, much of which had to be created along the way to fit changing circumstances. The classrooms these teachers are working in are not equipped to allow for proper social distancing and other COVID-19 precautions. This violated many teachers' feelings of safety for both themselves and their students. This became a source of stress for many. A further complication arises in regard to teachers not being prioritized for vaccination against COVID-19 before schools reopened for in person instruction. These uncertain circumstances are consistently taxing for teachers and lead many to the emotional exhaustion shown in Table 1. However, exhaustion comes in many facets.

Table 6. Exhaustion

Exhaustion:
"I also found expectations on teachers to be super unrealistic. It felt (and still feels) like things change every week and more is added to our plates. Now, all of my students are in the classroom. I am expected to socially distance 18 five year old's, not let them share materials, make sure they are wearing their mask properly, disinfect after them all day long, AND teach them to the standards that we typically hold at this point in the year."
"We are also nervous that the county/state will look at all we were able to do under extreme stress and decide that they can put more on our plates. They are constantly doing that - adding more and more each year with little to no extra funding and pay. But, they know that we do what we do because we love our students."

"It has been overly burdensome mentally/physically. We were asked to do a tremendous amount of extra without adequate training, which exacerbated our stress/fears in general due to the pandemic. All of that extra work/stress with no extra pay, then being forced to teach face to face before being fully vaccinated, has made many teachers bitter and frustrated and to consider leaving the profession."

"My stress level has increased exponentially, triggering illness that has affected my overall life. The constant change and unachievable expectations set by administration and county administrators has been an incredible burden."

As shown in Table 5, the stress and expectations being placed on teachers has affected them both emotionally and physically. Emotional exhaustion is a concept used to operationalize burnout throughout this study. This vocalization of emotional exhaustion paired with the results found in Table 1, support the idea that these teachers are currently experiencing burnout or at risk of burnout. The source of this stress and emotional exhaustion seems to vary, however, a common source is an increased workload and unachievable expectations. These expectations include holding students to standards created for previous years and expecting teachers to enforce proper social distancing in classrooms. This practice is especially difficult for those who work with younger students. Many teachers are being forced to reinvent curriculum that fits these restrictions. While some material might be suited to this adaptation, more hands-on methods are not, limiting some student's absorption of material. Not only is this exhaustion mentally taxing, but it also has an effect on the physical health of teachers. For many this translates into physical exhaustion. In either case, health is negatively affected. These expectations would ideally be paired with high levels of external support and appreciation, which was not reflected in responses.

Table 7. Appreciation

Appreciation:

"The worst part was hearing comments from the public saying things like 'why are they getting paid for not doing anything?' or 'I'm the one teaching my kid at home, so I should be getting their salary.' I feel as if the general public has no idea what went into planning and presenting online lessons."

"The outside community has been so mean toward teachers. Saying we're lazy and don't want to work. Saying we're not doing anything. It really makes you feel down. We're in an abnormal year yet we're still expected to follow all of the normal expectations."

"Honestly, the way that schools across the state and country have dealt with education during these pandemic times has made me completely lose faith in the public school system altogether. The people making the decisions have vilified districts and teachers just trying to do our best. They've held us accountable for circumstances completely out of our control."

"I feel administration often blames teachers when unavoidable or unexpected problems arise, however while they are quick to point fingers of blame, admins did not offer support or solutions, even after repeated requests."

A shared response when asked about current challenges was the feeling of a lack of appreciation from the public and administration. This lack of support resulted in many teachers feeling underappreciated and blamed for circumstances out of their control, as shown in Table 7. These feelings of unappreciation are especially notable when paired with the high levels of exhaustion displayed in Tables 1 and 6. This puts teachers at a high risk of experiencing burnout. Many felt that teachers were being used as scapegoats, even though circumstances were almost always out of their hands. This vilification heightens the stress already being experienced by these professionals and creates fear for future circumstances such as job security and the future of the profession as a whole. While teachers were expected to carry out set standards, they were not the ones behind many of the decisions being made.

Table. 8 Decision Making

Decision Making:
"It is a huge misconception that the 'higher ups' have based their decision making off of teacher input. That is a lie. I have been sent exactly one survey this entire school year in August. Otherwise, no one else on my team has been referred to. In order to support your teachers, you HAVE to get their input on decisions that directly affect our lives, our safety, the safety of our families, and the safety of our students. It is also a huge misconception that a teacher can just be a virtual teacher if they don't feel comfortable coming in."
"*The main downside has just been the exhaustion and feeling like decisions are constantly being made that directly affect me, but I am given no voice to express how I feel about them"*
"It has made me realize how little our voice matters when it comes to decisions that directly impact us and those we work with and how the voices of people who have no experience or understanding of the job or logistics are highly valued and listened to. It has led to a crushing feeling of helplessness for me and my coworkers"
"It would be amazing if [administration] actually sought our opinion on matters. A survey or two was sent out for staff to complete, but I and many of my coworkers feel like any answers or input that did not directly positively correlate to the board's opinion were dismissed and not considered. We sent invitations to board members to come into our school to see what it was really like to teach during the pandemic and all of it's restrictions. One member came to our school, but only visited two classrooms. (Both were upper grades - no visits were made to kindergarten, first grade, or EC classrooms who face a different set of challenges due to the age and maturity of students.)"

Participants emphasized their feelings of voicelessness when it comes to decisions being made by administration. Table 8 summarizes some of these responses. These results suggest that teachers feel that the decisions being made by administration are not based on the current realities of teachers. Participants voiced concerns that their input has not been taken into account, despite the fact that they are the ones with the needed experience to make such decisions. This disconnect undoubtedly leads to increased stress, and feelings of underappreciation. Beyond what it is unfolding on an administrative level, one must look to see how teachers are managing to connect to students.

Table 9. Connection with Students

Connection with Students:
"Greatest challenge was not being able to be in the classroom to see the learning growth of each child and keep that classroom family connections"
"It has been harder to develop relationships with my students. It is also harder to recognize and help students struggling both academically and with their home life"
"I feel that my relationships with my students is not as personable as it has been in the past. I have really had a hard time with the constant rotation of students as well, our county is still allowing students to switch from remote to in person and I feel that I lose and gain students weekly."
"I feel lost sometimes with how to reach some students now that we are not physically in the classroom."
"It's hurt my confidence as an educator who feels secure in my teaching style. I felt like I couldn't reach my students on an emotional or academic level."

Another shared challenge was establishing and maintaining connections to students when not doing in-person instruction. As shown in Table 9, many teachers felt that online instruction created a disconnect between themselves and their students. Participants made it clear that their connection to their students is important to them. This is further supported by the low levels of depersonalization shown in Table 2. This connection expands beyond academic success. Teachers discussed the importance of creating a personal connection to their students, providing support that suits that students needs beyond the curriculum. Remembering that many teachers feared the heightened inequalities being experienced by students as a result of the pandemic. The hindrance of these connections due to online instruction and inconsistent circumstances caused many to doubt their effectiveness as teachers. The care each teacher has for their students in reflected throughout this research. For many, it is the reason they continue to battle these challenging circumstances. Despite the uphill battle participants reported, many were able to find a silver lining within the experiences being held.

Table 10. Silver Linings

Silver Linings:
"I am a technology wizard now (something I NEVER thought I would say about myself) and I have learned how to think out of the box more on how to engage my students."
"Plan A has been exhausting as well...a room filled with little ones who only want to hug and play with their friends, but we are supposed to constantly remind them to stay 3 feet apart.Plan A has also been amazing, though! I finally have all of my kinders together! I get to see them 5 DAYS A WEEK! ALL OF THEM! They are finally making lots of growth. They are happy and able to socialize. They are finally getting a taste of what school should be. I love seeing them each morning. I love their smiling eyes and the fact that they tell me each and every day how much they love coming to school."
"On the positive side has helped me to connect more with some families and I have seen some students excel at virtual learning and grow to be more responsible for their own work/learning. I feel that my computer skills have definitely grown in this past year."
"The silver lining has been finding creative ways to interact with students, and our kids themselves have greatly valued what we do often far more than their parents or society."

Table 10 illustrates some of the silver linings associated with teachers' work, the most common being an increased understanding and confidence in using technology. Some participants mentioned how they have seen certain students excel through virtual learning. For some the forced adaptability has also led to new opportunities to develop curriculum and problem solve. Participants also voiced appreciation for the support they received from within their school from colleagues and students. While some good can be found, it is also important to hear the requests and suggests made by teachers at this time of uncertainty.

Table 11. Recommendations

Recommendations:
"Really cut back on everything that is nonessential."
"Literally just tell us that we're doing a good job handling the things we're doing well. Like just be sincere in acknowledging what we're doing. All of that classroom management stuff for kids? Pick one thing to work on and two things to compliment? Give specific compliments that actually mean something? Those tricks work for adults too."

"Spend time in our buildings not with principals but with teachers, counselors and social workers. Spend time shadowing us, show us with actions that you will support us and do better not with words but actions."

"We need less meetings/professional development. We already have zero time to go to the bathroom throughout the day, barely time to eat lunch, have a break to prepare for lessons, and we're constantly in meetings during our 'planning' time and after school."

"Allow teachers time to work within our grade level to sort out obstacles that have arisen. Do not take away our asynchronous Wednesdays, which were the only time we had to work together as a team. That was our day for planning, support and making virtual slides."

In terms of recommendations, the idea that less is more rings true. Table 11 displays some of these suggestions. Participants emphasized the removal of anything currently nonessential to their job. This would allow more time to put together lesson materials and collaborate with one another. Again, many of these participants report having to recreate curriculum all together, which is extremely time consuming. Table 6 further supports this as one is able to see the increased workload being experienced by teachers. Participants also discussed the importance of feeling appreciated and receiving support from both the public and administration.

These results as a whole display an inconsistency of circumstances for teachers who have been forced to adapt and maintain standards created during a time when a global pandemic was unforeseen. Throughout the pandemic teachers have had to reimagine their job on top of dealing with the personal effects of COVID-19 and nonwork related responsibilities. For many this was paired with reduced access to resources. In return teachers are at a heightened risk of burnout, with limited external support.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to online schooling has influenced the experiences and burnout of elementary-level teachers. These teachers are displaying high levels of emotional exhaustion, and stress. However, this is paired with the majority of teachers maintaining a sense of personal accomplishment and low levels of depersonalization. As a result, one must turn away from this operationalization of burnout, as offered by the MBI. Instead, other factors brought on by the pandemic should be taken into consideration. Burnout can be correlated with a lack of resources, changes in mode of schooling, exhaustion, a lack of appreciation, a feeling of voicelessness in decision making and struggles to connect with students. In reaction to these circumstances, teachers encourage the removal of all things nonessential to their job. Within this there is a desire for collaboration and support.

As research begins to emerge surrounding the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the discussion of burnout is unavoidable. An early connection between these concepts allows for action to be taken. Based on these findings, and the recommendations made by participants, more support is needed. This comes in the form of resources, understanding, appreciation, and lightning workloads wherever possible. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators are experiencing amplified sources of burnout. It is important to understand that burnout in this sense is a shared experience that stems from larger social structures beyond the individual. With this understanding, one must turn to these structures and question their approach in caring for educators during the pandemic. A further exploration is needed to fully understand this relationship and its implications.

7. References

Abbasi, Nusrat N., Muhammad Javed, Azhar Mahmood, and Akhtar Ali. "A Study of Occupational Stress among Female Teachers at Elementary School Level." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 39, no. 1 (2019): 229–37. http://pjss.bzu.edu.pk/website/journal/article/5ed0181780c68/page.

Brasfield, Michelle Welch, Chloe Lancaster, and Y. Jade Xu. "Wellness as a Mitigating Factor for Teacher

Burnout." *Journal of Education* 199, no. 3 (2019): 166–78. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022057419864525?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider.

Campos, Hallie. "Teacher Burnout as a Predictor of Teacher Motivational Orientation." Dissertation, Capella University, 2015. https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/1655359819/2C9C12E9857F4AF4PQ/8?accountid=8388.

Chang, Mei-lin. "An Appraisal Perspective of Teacher Burnout: Examining the Emotional Work of Teachers." *Educational Psychology Review* 21, no. 3 (2009): 193-218. http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/docview/234259848?accountid=8388.

Hawrot, Anna, and Maciej Koniewski. "Factor Structure of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Educators Survey in a Polish-Speaking Sample." *Journal of Career Assessment* 26, no. 3 (2018): 515–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072717714545.

Herman, Keith C., Jal'et Hickmon-Rosa, and Wendy M. Reinke. "Empirically Derived Profiles of Teacher Stress, Burnout, Self-Efficacy, and Coping and Associated Student Outcomes." *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 20, no. 2 (2018): 90–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300717732066.

Howard, Sue, and Bruce Johnson. "Resilient Teachers: Resisting Stress and Burnout." *Social Psychology of Education* 7, no. 4 (2004): 399–420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-004-0975-0.

Huk, Oksana, Mark D. Terjesen, and Lina Cherkasova. "Predicting Teacher Burnout as a Function of School Characteristics and Irrational Beliefs." *Psychology in the Schools* 56, no. 5 (2019): 792–808. https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.proxy177.nclive.org/doi/full/10.1002/pits.22233.

McKinney-Thompson, Carla. "Teacher Stress and Burnout and Principals' Leadership Styles: a Relational Study." Dissertation, University of Alabama, 2015. https://search-proquest-com.proxy177.nclive.org/docview/1733230973?pq-origsite=summon.

NC Department of Health and Human Services. *Strong Schools NC Public Health Toolkit (K-12)*, (accessed March 24, 2021). https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/164/open.

Sarros, James C., and Anne M. Sarros. "Social Support and Teacher Burnout." *Journal of Educational Administration* 30, no. 1 (1992): 55. https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/220457883/E3CCC762631A47A3PQ/18?accountid=8388.

Shackleton, Nichola, Chris Bonell, Jamal Farah, Elizabeth Allen, Anne Mathiot, Diana Elbourne, and Russell Viner. "Teacher Burnout and Contextual and Compositional Elements of School Environment." *The Journal of School Health* 89, no. 12 (2019): 977-993. https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.proxy177.nclive.org/doi/abs/10.1111/josh.12839

Sokal, Laura, Jeff Babb, and Lesley Eblie Trudel. "How to Prevent Teacher Burnout during the Coronavirus Pandemic." *The Teacher* 58, no. 7 (2020): 10. http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/wire-feeds/how-prevent-teacher-burnout-during-coronavirus/docview/2414824349/se-2?accountid=8388

Szigeti, Réka, Noémi Balázs, Réka Bikfalvi, and Róbert Urbán. "Burnout and Depressive Symptoms in Teachers: Factor Structure and Construct Validity of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey among Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in Hungary." *Stress and Health* 33, no. 5 (2017): 530–39. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/smi.2737.

Endnotes

1 Keith C. Herman, Jal'et Hickmon-Rosa, and Wendy M. Reinke, "Empirically Derived Profiles of Teacher Stress, Burnout, Self-Efficacy, and Coping and Associated Student Outcomes," *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* 20, no. 2 (2018): 90–100, https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300717732066.

2 Hallie E. Campos, "Teacher Burnout as a Predictor of Teacher Motivational Orientation," Dissertation, Capella University, 2015, https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/1655359819/2C9C12E9857F4AF4PQ/8?accountid=8388.

3 Mei-lin Chang, "An Appraisal Perspective of Teacher Burnout: Examining the Emotional Work of Teachers," *Educational Psychology Review* 21, no. 3 (2009): 193-218, http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/docview/234259848?accountid=8388.

4 Carla McKinney-Thompson, "Teacher Stress and Burnout and Principals' Leadership Styles: a Relational Study," Dissertation, University of Alabama, 2015, https://search-proquest-com.proxy177.nclive.org/docview/1733230973?pq-origsite=summon.

5 Oksana Huk, Mark D. Terjesen, and Lina Cherkasova, "Predicting Teacher Burnout as a Function of School Characteristics and Irrational Beliefs," *Psychology in the Schools* 56, no. 5 (2019): 792–808, https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.proxy177.nclive.org/doi/full/10.1002/pits.22233.

6 See note 4 above.

7 Ibid.

8 Réka Szigeti, Noémi Balázs, Réka Bikfalvi, and Róbert Urbán, "Burnout and Depressive Symptoms in Teachers: Factor Structure and Construct Validity of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey among Elementary and Secondary School Teachers in Hungary," *Stress and Health* 33, no. 5 (2017): 530–39, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/smi.2737.

9 Anna Hawrot, and Maciej Koniewski, "Factor Structure of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Educators Survey in a Polish-Speaking Sample," *Journal of Career Assessment* 26, no. 3 (2018): 515–30, https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072717714545.

10 See note 3 above.

11 Michelle Welch Brasfield, Chloe Lancaster, and Y. Jade Xu, "Wellness as a Mitigating Factor for Teacher Burnout," *Journal of Education* 199, no. 3 (2019): 166–78, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0022057419864525?utm_source=summon&utm_medium=discovery-provider.

12 Sue Howard, and Bruce Johnson, "Resilient Teachers: Resisting Stress and Burnout," *Social Psychology of Education* 7, no. 4 (2004): 399–420, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-004-0975-0.

13 See note 1 above.

14 See note 4 above.

15 See note 11 above.

16 Nusrat Nawaz Abbasi, Muhammad Javed, Azhar Mahmood, and Akhtar Ali, "A Study of Occupational Stress among Female Teachers at Elementary School Level," *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 39, no. 1 (2019): 229–37, http://pjss.bzu.edu.pk/website/journal/article/5ed0181780c68/page.

17 Nichola Shackleton, Chris Bonell, Jamal Farah, Elizabeth Allen, Anne Mathiot, Diana Elbourne, and Russell Viner, "Teacher Burnout and Contextual and Compositional Elements of School Environment," *The Journal of School Health* 89, no. 12 (2019): 977-993, https://onlinelibrary-wiley com.proxy177.nclive.org/doi/abs/10.1111/josh.12839.

18 See note 2 above.

19 See note 1 above.

20 Ibid.

21 James C. Sarros, and Anne M. Sarros, "Social Support and Teacher Burnout," *Journal of Educational Administration* 30, no. 1 (1992): 55, https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/220457883/E3CCC762631A47A3PQ/18?accountid=8388.

22 See note 2 above.

23 See note 17 above

24 See note 12 above.

25 Laura Sokal, Jeff Babb, and Lesley Eblie Trudel, "How to Prevent Teacher Burnout during the Coronavirus Pandemic," *The Teacher* 58, no. 7 (2020): 10, http://0-search.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/wire-feeds/how-prevent-teacher-burnout-during-coronavirus/docview/2414824349/se-2?accountid=8388

26 Ibid.

27 See note 12 above.

28 NC Department of Health and Human Services, *Strong Schools NC Public Health Toolkit (K-12)*, (accessed March 24, 2021), https://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/media/164/open.

29 Ibid.