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Research Article

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Teaching through Turmoil: Special Education Teachers' Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Conducting a study on COVID-19 is essential to understand its impacts on student and teacher wellbeing, identify effective strategies for remote learning, and develop support systems to enhance resilience and mental health in inclusive school settings. While recent educational studies on COVID-19 are increasing, the research to date has tended to focus on children with special needs rather than special education teachers, particularly in the Canadian context. To narrow this gap, the current study explored eleven special education teachers' mental health during school closures due to COVID-19 in a province of Canada. The study highlights significant concerns among teachers regarding the safety of students with special needs, particularly those from high-risk home environments, during school closures. The study suggests a bidirectional relationship between teacher and student wellbeing, where each influences the other's mental health. Social distancing and home quarantine measures, while effective in controlling the spread of COVID-19, led to increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression among teachers. The dual demands of teaching and parenting from home caused significant emotional distress. The findings underscore the need for enhanced monitoring and support for high-risk families, professional development programs for teachers, and strategies to mitigate the negative effects of social isolation, thereby promoting better mental health and resilience among educators.

Keywords: COVID-19, inclusion, mental health, special education teachers, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

In North America, it is believed that all students representing a wide spectrum of diversity such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social class, should receive equitable learning opportunities, including children with and without special needs. In particular, inclusive education is defined as "a process of responding to individual differences within the structures and processes that are available to all learners" (Florian, 2008, p. 202). However, people worldwide have endured the severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past several years. This global health crisis was vast in scale, affecting every individual on the planet, with children being among the most vulnerable. Schools across the country were closed in mid-March 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, forcing teachers to quickly adapt to online teaching. It is acknowledged that students with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups among the student populations (Ontario Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility, 2020). It means that more than 200,000 Canadian students under the age of 15 with varied degrees of intensive needs (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011) and 6.93 million students with disabilities in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Young & Donovan, 2020) have suffered from the school disruptions which have led to noticeable concerns for special education teachers' mental health (Gadermann et al., 2023).

Teacher Mental Health

Mental health has drawn educators' close attention as it directly affects varied aspects of the teaching profession and student outcomes, including teaching effectiveness, classroom management, student academic achievements, engagement, social-emotional development and well-being, and professional growth (e.g., Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Dreer, 2023; Fatahi & Warner-Griffin, 2024; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Nwoko et al., 2023). It is suggested that teachers with higher levels of well-being are more likely to have better job satisfaction and retention, and reduce teacher burnout, job stress, and attrition rates (e.g., Brandenburg

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et al., 2024; Corrente et al., 2022; Katsarou et al., 2023; Nwoko et al., 2023). For example, an early, well-cited report from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) indicates that 30% to 50% of teachers are likely to leave the profession within their first five years, even if they entered with adequate teacher training. The Queensland College of Teachers estimates that approximately 8% to 50% of teacher attrition is due to high workloads and lack of perceived support, noting that there's a lack of national data about the number of teachers who have left the profession (Queensland College of Teachers, 2013). A recent study on Australian teachers who had worked at across different career levels but left their positions between 2016 and 2022 (n = 256) revealed that 2.3% of these participants left in their first year, 7.9% left after teaching for up to three years, and 18.1% left their positions after teaching for seven to ten years (Brandenburg et al., 2024). These studies corroborate the critical issues surrounding teacher wellness and mental health, especially for special education teachers (Fox et al., 2020; Sawatske et al., 2024).

The challenges to teacher mental health and well-being were exacerbated throughout different waves of COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Kotowski et al., 2022; Parkes et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022). According to the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2020), 43.8% of teachers expressed concerns about their pandemic-related mental health and/or well-being among more than 15,000 respondents in June 2020 (n = 6,588), while the percentage increased to 68.6% of a total of 13,770 participants in October, 2020 (n = 9,612). These findings are consistent with recent studies, such as Alves et al. (2020), Hilger et al. (2021), and Sigursteinsdottir and Rafnsdottir (2022). A recent study on 1,276 teachers in British Columbia (BC), Canada (Gadermann et al., 2023), revealed that there was a positive relationship between job-related positive affect and perceptions of school support, whereas turnover intentions were negatively related to perceptions of school support. Teachers perceived that they received the greatest support from their colleagues, followed by school administrators, with the least support coming from the Ministry of Education and Child Care. Additionally, the number of COVID-19 pandemic-related personal stressors, such as being separated from family and friends (90%) and the fear of transmitting COVID-19 to another person if they contracted the virus (86.4%), significantly predicted participating teachers' psychological stress and quality of life. While recent educational studies on COVID-19 are increasing, the research to date has tended to focus on children with special needs rather than special education teachers, particularly in the Canadian context. For example, although 71 BC special education teachers were surveyed in Gadermann et al. (2023), the data from these respondents were not reported separately from those with different school roles. To narrow this research gap, this paper explored special education teachers' mental health during COVID-19 pandemic in the province of Canada.

METHODS

We recruited elementary and secondary special education teachers from the prairie province after receiving ethics clearance from the University of Saskatchewan. A total of 11 one-on-one confidential teacher interviews were conducted using semi-structured questions through an online meeting platform between January and March of 2021 (see Table 1). Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour and 20 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The textual data we gathered offered detailed and authentic insights into teachers' experiences, challenges, and concerns (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Tracy, 2010). Specifically, we adhered to the phrases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Rennie (2012).

RESULTS

Mental Health Impact of High-risk Students

Although three participating teachers felt that they had fairly good psychological wellbeing or were "being very resilient and resourceful, doing the best that I can" (Liliana) while teaching online during COVID-19, eleven interviewees reported that they worried about their students with special needs, especially families at risk. For example, Kimberly shared the following:

"[t]here was some families who I would say are our high-risk families that I'm concerned about home… We didn't hear from them no matter how much we tried. It's a small town, so I would even drive by their house just to make sure everything looked okay… those were kids I was worried about…I did call social services a few times and just said, "I'm worried about so-and-so, I haven't seen them for a while. I just want to check-in.".

Another teacher, Grace, also worried about her students whose home environments were not safe or supportive. This inability to help these students outside of school greatly affected the teacher, leaving her feeling helpless or distressed. She commented that "we had a lot of our staff, and myself included who really were worried about some of our students, because home is not a spot where we would like them to be all the time…knowing you can't do anything about that,…we were at a loss, we couldn't give anything to these students".

Emotional Effects of Student Mobility and Welfare

Two teachers shared how their mental health was affected by their students when school buildings were closed. Abigail noted, "I called social services probably

almost on a monthly basis regularly prior to COVID. Since COVID I haven't called social services once". She continued, "when you talk about mental health that affects my mental health too because I'm more concerned about these students that have these up and down lives". Additionally, Abigail, who taught at a federal school teacher, shared that "[m]y psychological wellbeing had been hugely affected. I have many students who actually changed schools because they need the consistency of school…when I find out I've got a kid who's moving to another school [a provincial school] I'm in tears…I've failed somebody". She also expressed frustration over loosing students after working hard to make positive changes to the school by stating, "that's where it hits me is when we're losing these students, we've worked really hard to build up a respectable school. We're making lots of positive changes. … then to be shut down for such a long time it's like taking a step backwards…. I feel like we've wasted a lot of time. It is very draining on you…It's like going to be rebuilding the school community, and the momentum".

This clearly shows that it took an emotional toll on the teacher who struggled with student relocation and the consequences of school closures. In contrast, a teacher had uplifting moments by witnessing student happiness through online classes. Charlotte commented, "when I could see them through the Google Meets…, it felt better…their joy was my joy…when I got to see them happy then I felt better".

Teacher Mental Health Amidst Social Distancing

Six teachers indicated that their mental health was significantly impacted by the limited social interactions they had with family, friends, students, and colleagues during the school closures. Isabel said that "this last shut down has been way harder on me. I miss my friends". Another teacher, Diana, stated "I have a very supportive family who I spoke to on a regular basis. But it was very challenging…Not being able to interact with my family and with friends, it's taxing". Grace also noted, "we are a team and people rely on the support of their other colleagues…being home in isolation, you really felt like you were going through this on your own. I mean Zoom meetings only give you so much". Kaylee shared, "it was very hard not to have those connections and even staff connections, student connections, my families are very important to me…it was all just taken away and you're stuck at home so you had nothing".

Balancing Work and Life Challenges

The interviews also revealed the struggles teachers faced in managing their professional and personal lives, especially during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Abigail commented, "[i]f something happens at the school then I'm bringing that home to them [my children] and it can affect their livelihoods". Another teacher, Catalina, indicated that she has been diagnosed with a social communication disorder. Another teacher, Kaylee, reported that she faced enormous stress due to a lack of digital competency and her struggle with understanding her role during an unprecedented time. She said: "[a] feeling

Table 1 Participating Teacher Characteristics and Backgrounds (School Year 2021–2021)

Pseudonym	Years taught	Grade level taught	Highest level of education	School type	No. of Students in School	No. students with special needs each teacher served
Diana	2	Pre-K & Elementary	Master's	Urban	301–600	40–50
Kaylee	13	Pre-K & Elementary	Bachelor's	Rural or remote	1–300	12
Kimberly	10	Pre-K & Elementary	Bachelor's	Rural or remote	301–600	10
Scarlett	10	Pre-K & Elementary	Bachelor's	Rural or remote	1–300	12
Grace	9	Secondary	Master's	Urban	301–600	10-20
Abigail	7	Pre-K & Elementary & Secondary	Master's	Rural or remote	1–300	35
Catalina	9	Secondary	Master's	Urban	601–900 s	16
Liliana	26	Elementary & Secondary	Bachelor's	Urban	301 –600	23
Charlotte	16	Secondary	Master's	Urban	> 1200	24 + 6 online
Isabelle	9.5	Elementary & Secondary	Master's	Urban	1–300	10
Natalie	15	Pre-K & Elementary & Secondary	Master's	Rural or remote	301–600	15

of being lost… so much struggle in knowing what my job was and what my role was. And how to figure it out. And never ever did I think that that would happen…I'm not a technology person and that was immense stress. I know we have two personal days that we can use. I know just kind of in a couple weeks in I took one…I was too stressed, too overwhelmed…it's so hard because you - you're so used to working with the students. You're so used to what your role is. And it all got taken away…It was very devastating for me cause I love my job. It's always what I wanted to be was a teacher".

Abigail expressed frustration over losing students after working hard to build a respectable school and make positive changes. The prolonged shutdown feels like a setback, wasting time and draining their energy. She felt they will have to rebuild the school community and regain momentum from scratch.

Scarlett described the intense stress she experienced with the demands of being a teacher, a parent, and managing household tasks simultaneously. The constant switching between roles was taxing, making her feel like she had to be "everything to everyone". She commented:

[T]he stress through, from March to June, was intense… I have a lot of stress relieving strategies that I use independently. I have a really supportive family so I was in a really nice position. But it was quite stressful with all of the demands…I was everything to everybody. The teacher to my kids, the mom to my kids. I'd go from being online supporting a student through their own mental health crisis or something like that and then I'd have to switch my brain and make lunch for my kids… I'm trying to get my son down for a nap and then I've got another Zoom meeting … it was - it was taxing on me, just like always being - trying to be everything to everyone, you know?

However, Scarlett also noted, "[i]t was a crazy…I was quite excited to go back to school in the fall. But I am finding that this school year is a lot more stressful than I had anticipated".

Discussion

The current study found that a majority of participating teachers expressed serious concerns about the safety of their students with special needs, especially those from high-risk home environments. The findings confirm that there was an increased risk of adverse child experiences at home, such as child abuse, neglect, and family violence, during the school closures. Recent studies have discussed how varied risk factors contributed to higher risks of child maltreatment, including parental stress and job loss, economic instability, social isolation, and reduced access to educational and social support systems (Humphreys et al., 2020; Lawson et al., 2020; Pereda & Díaz-Faes, 2020; Ritz et al., 2020). Carter et al. (2020) also highlight the decline in reporting on child abuse due to reduced contact with mandated reporters, such as teachers and physicians. It is recommended that there is a heightened need to increase monitoring and support for high-risk families, and to create a family safety plan that outlines steps to take if family violence occurs. It is also crucial to ensure access to emergency contacts, resources such as hotlines, shelters, and counseling services, as well as conduct check-ins to prevent undetected cases of abuse (Humphreys et al., 2020; Ritz et al., 2020; SAFE, 2020).

Although previous studies have found that teacher distress, stress, or burnout was associated with poorer student mental health, wellbeing, and performance (De Rubeis et al., 2024; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Tikkanen et al., 2021), the results of the present study suggest a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student wellbeing. Teachers reported that their psychological wellbeing was influenced by their students, such as when students changed schools. That is, one of the key findings is that there is a bidirectional relationship where teachers' mental health and wellbeing can be transmitted to students, and conversely, students' mental health and wellbeing can also impact their teachers.

Social distancing was one of the most common and effective measures to minimize the spread of the coronavirus diseases worldwide (Rubin et al., 2020); however, the prolonged period of social distancing and home quarantine may also result in loneliness, anxiety, depression, and even delirium or psychosis (World Health Organization, 2020). This phenomenon also applied to teachers. For example, Talidong and Toquero (2020) reported that school lockdowns and social distancing increased the level of anxiety of teachers. In another study by Montanari et al. (2021), a group of experienced Portugal and Italian teachers felt they had a hard time engaging their primary school students with disabilities remotely. Tremendous efforts have been put into mitigating the negative effects of social distancing and isolation, promoting better mental health and well-being during challenging times. For instance, thirteen University of Texas institutions have implemented varied strategies to help meet the challenges faced by individuals, including using technology to stay connected with family and friends (e.g., video calls, social media interactions, virtual gatherings), creating a daily schedule that includes time for work, exercise, and hobbies, engaging in physical activities (e.g., home workouts), accessing mental health services if needed, as well as practicing mindfulness, meditation, and relaxation techniques (The University of Texas System, n.d.).

Some teachers felt overwhelmed by the simultaneous demands of teaching, parenting, and managing household chores. The frequent role-switching was exhausting, leaving them feeling as though they needed to be "everything to everyone". The sudden change from

their usual teaching environment was devastating. The experience blurred the lines between their professional and personal identities, causing significant emotional distress. These findings echo the results of Marshall et al. (2020) who surveyed preK-12 American teachers, including those in special education, during the initial school closures. Besides adapting to remote teaching, many teachers also faced the challenge of caring for their own children who needed parental support while learning from home. Marshall et al. (2020) and the present study highlight the struggle and role overload of many working parents who continued their jobs from home while also supporting their children, who would typically receive support from their teachers. These issues were especially pronounced in rural areas, where not all children had access to necessary electronic devices and reliable internet.

Conclusion

Research has shown that teachers' mental health directly affects their performance and, consequently, student outcomes. The pandemic has had lasting impacts on mental health. Thus, findings from this study can lead to the development of targeted professional development programs that support teachers in both in-person and online working environments. This research can contribute to building resilience among teachers by identifying sources of mental health issues and welfare mechanisms, ensuring a proactive and effective educational environment.

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Nil

Conflict of Interest

None

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