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# Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

## The Lived Experience of Saskatchewan

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# Table of Contents

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Executive Summary . . . . .	1
Introduction . . . . .	3
Methods . . . . .	5
Study Findings . . . . .	7
Lessons Learned from this Study. . . . .	11
Study Implications . . . . .	12
Conclusion. . . . .	13
Acknowledgements. . . . .	14
References. . . . .	14

# Executive Summary

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In Saskatchewan, living a life during the COVID-19 pandemic has been incredibly challenging for communities and professionals including teachers. Within the education system, the atmosphere cultivated by COVID-19 over the past 18 months needs to serve as a learning point to capture missed opportunities during the pandemic. We also need to strategize to examine the impact of the changes pursued through the past months from the lens of those who have lived implementing these policies and programs. Ultimately, history regarding the occurrence of pandemics is not in favour of mankind and its social systems. Public health experts have demonstrated a possible pandemic every decade. The challenge, therefore, is how governments and other stakeholders, including private sectors, use the lessons from the experience of COVID-19 to equip our systems and structures with the necessary edge to withstand the shocks of pandemics.

Our research on the lived experience of Saskatchewan teachers teaching during a pandemic indicates that there were loopholes in the education plan that aimed to foster continued service delivery amidst an active pandemic. Teachers felt undervalued for the extra workload they had to undertake especially in teaching PPE protocols to their students; supervising cleaning; and teaching from home with their children around them. The online teaching experience was not positive for some teachers because there were no orientation programs put in place at the start of the program, which would enable them to prepare for the huge undertaking. Albeit the recognition of the increased workload and easy fatiguability, teachers' mental health was left unchecked during the pandemic which predisposed some to unhealthy behaviors including the use of drugs and alcohol. We also observed that the pandemic communication strategies were not effective in keeping teachers informed about the rapidly changing circumstances. Some teachers felt information reached them last and they had better access through social media platforms.

Our study demonstrates that the life realities of teachers during the pandemic were negative and there were limited support systems in place. We recommend a post-COVID-19 emergence plan that recognizes the difficult times our society underwent during the past 18 months. The plans need to account for targeted mental health services directed to teachers and a recognition of the extra load they willingly embraced during the pandemic. Furthermore, post-COVID-19 evaluation studies need to account for the differential impact of the pandemic changes among urban versus rural teachers to identify what other extra contextual support systems could have improved the experience of teachers during the pandemic.

The evaluation studies need to also focus on the impact of online learning system on studies along the lines of race, socio-economic status, and neighbourhoods. We hope our study findings will serve to inspire more commissioning of research that will aim to uncover more processes and structures that advantaged or disadvantage teachers during the pandemics. Above all, we hope that our findings can serve as a learning point for stakeholders within the education system to prepare for any similar circumstances to the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Introduction

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In the last two decades, Canada has experienced more than two epi/pandemics including the 2003 SARS and 2008 H1N1 influenza, but the far-reaching social, economic, and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how unprepared our social structures and systems are to deal with pandemics of such magnitude (Choi, 2012; Sundararaman, Muraleedharan, & Ranjan, 2021). At the surge of COVID-19 pandemic, we saw schools close, hospitals reduce number of visits and admissions, companies cut down the number of employees, and social events brought to a standstill. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has been incredibly difficult on communities and professionals, including teachers, all over the world.

In Saskatchewan, the education system was affected in different ways, including an abrupt stop to in-person instruction in March 2020, a rapid shift to online teaching, and integration of PPE protocols as prerequisite for educators and students all over the province. In the fall of 2020, the Government of Saskatchewan released a plan for reopening of schools amidst an active pandemic, even if there were limited data on the required support structures to function effectively in such circumstances. The impact of these interventions at a population level is yet to be known.

The experience of COVID-19 serves as a learning point to capture missed opportunities, examine the impact of structural changes fueled by the pandemic, and the experience of implementing those changes from the perspective of those who have lived these policies and programs. The history and trends of pandemics indicate a possible pandemic every decade (Choi, 2012; Nuzzo, Meyer, Snyder, Ravi, Lapascu, Souleles, Andrada, & Bishai, 2019). In essence it is within the remit of policymakers and leaders to draw on lessons from COVID-19 experience to prepare for future uncertainties. As our province, Saskatchewan, emerges out of the pandemic, we hope that we can build systems, policies, and programs that are guided by data and shall serve to inform initial responses in the event of a pandemic of such magnitude in the future.

Within an education system, there is limited data on the experience of teachers who taught during a pandemic. Effective teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic required a 180 degree turn from our comfort zones and teachers were urged to embrace the unknown, at times teaching completely online. The most challenging aspect of these transformations were that the magnitude of changes imposed on the education system did not match the available resources, or in situations where these resources were adequate, there were issues with its accessibility and timing.

It is important to understand the experience of Saskatchewan teachers during a pandemic if we are to meet their needs and that of the students in the future.

Our interest to understand teachers' experiences with teaching during the pandemic was driven by the fact that we are teachers as well as parents who had to come to terms with the plethora of changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic prevention strategies. We aimed to understand the life realities of teachers during the pandemic and what lessons they had learned along the way when schools were reopened in the middle of an active pandemic that first caused the closure of schools. In this report, we present the findings from this study and expound on our methods. Lessons learned as provided in this report drew on participant narratives evident in close examination with demographics. We also highlight the implication of the study findings for the Saskatchewan teaching community, institutions, and government.

# Methods

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The study utilized qualitative study design to understand the experience of teachers teaching during a pandemic. The study utilized purposive sampling with maximum variation to recruit teachers with diverse experiences and institutions. Between November 2020 through February 2021, a total of 13 interviews in the ratio of 10:3 female and male respectively were conducted. The interviews lasted on average 50 minutes. The teachers interviewed represented seven different school divisions in communities across the province of Saskatchewan with the exception of the Far North but included Saskatchewan Rivers School Division and North East School Division.

Of the total (13) study participants, 46.2 percent were teaching in an urban setting (Saskatoon and Regina), 23.1 percent of the participants taught in semi-urban settings, and 30.7 percent were teaching in rural settings where the school population was less than 200. The total years of experience of the study participants pre-COVID-19 was 100 years. Interviews were conducted on phone and recorded with consent from the study participants. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the conversation with the participants. Below are the sample questions that constituted the basis for in-depth interviews:

1. The Saskatchewan Government released a back-to-school plan on August 4, 2020 and adjusted those plans on August 17, 2020. What aspects of the plan made you feel more comfortable returning to school at the end of August?
2. What specific protocols and safeguards put in place made you feel more comfortable returning to school?
3. What social distancing measures or communication about social distancing measures were more positive and encouraging than others?
4. Was there a specific communication that made you feel confident about returning to school at the end of August?
5. What supports are available to you as a teacher that made you feel more confident about returning to school?
6. Is there a control measure for students that made you feel safe and confident that you would not contract COVID-19 during the back-to-school process?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the COVID-19 response or plans?



All of the study participants had the freedom to talk about each prompting question or to move from there to topics or issues that they wanted to share. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. After transcription was complete, the researchers separated any identifying information such as names and places that could identify the participant from the main transcript. To maintain confidentiality, de-identified transcripts were accorded pseudonyms # accompanied by a counting number (for example, #2). Once this was done, the interview transcripts were coded thematically by two separate researchers using an inductive approach. The themes were selected and agreed upon by both researchers. The study was approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Ethics Committee.

# Study Findings

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Following data analysis, four main themes were identified: Teacher Wellness, Communication, PPE and Protocols, and Technology. This report focuses on the four main themes.

## Teacher Wellness (Workplace Conditions and Demands, Stress, and Coping Mechanisms)

Teacher wellness was discussed in terms of workplace conditions and demands, stress, and coping mechanisms. The teachers felt the period during the pandemic was very busy and demanding of them. "This is the busiest year of my teaching career," (#5). "Everyone feels like I gotta tough this out. It's a big load," (#6). While the demand to step up their performance had increased during the pandemic, many teachers acknowledged the support levels were insufficient. "I think there is a culture of push through and get this done," (#12). Amidst the busy and demanding times, the teachers expressed that the teaching approaches and support structures instituted during the COVID-19 pandemic were not ideal.

It is not ideal teaching this way, especially level 3 precautions in place, it is not good for teachers' mental health. It is stressful on the teachers and stressful on the students. There is a lot more workload teaching this way. (#9)

As indicated in the above excerpt, the increased level of preventive precautions as the pandemic progressed compounded the level of stress experienced not only by the teachers but also students.

The rigorous PPE protocols and multiple rule changes that occurred during the pandemic were viewed to be far from the available resources required to meet their demands, especially at the workplace level. For teachers, this added another layer of strain. As indicated by one of the participants, "We didn't get any supports other than cleaning supplies. We started using the wrong cleaning supplies to start the school year ... I had to buy Lysol wipes for the Chromebooks. The school division didn't have enough wipes," (#8). The institutional support for PPE at workplace level often fell short and teachers had to improvise to maintain safety at workplace environment. The change in rules and imposition of infection control measures did not only cause anxiety among teachers and their students, but also on the parents.

"Parents are anxious and struggling. I have one parent that put their child in class, then online, then in class, then online. I know I am not the only teacher dealing with this," (#7).

There was anxiety across multiple levels of stakeholders, and the teachers' mental health status were often at risk since their efforts had to match the needs of stakeholders who were already anxious at the time.

The anxiety that presented with the unknown of teaching during a pandemic left some teachers vulnerable and they felt they were exposed to the virus. "It is very stressful teaching during a pandemic," (#6). "I contracted the virus at school because I wasn't going anywhere else," (#2). Yet some teachers felt that their efforts were not being recognized. "One of the stressors is not being acknowledged and not being valued," (#5). The teachers described their unrecognized efforts from the perspectives of mounting pressures from institutional leaders who often demanded that they return to school and continue teaching even if they had reported feeling unwell. "There is pressure from my principal at times to return to school even when I have symptoms," (#1). Pressure to teach from administrators left teachers with no option but to comply even if their own health was at stake.

The lack of support system at the time of crisis left some teachers on the verge of giving up with their duties. "I do not know how much more of this I can take because I do not have any support," (#6). This circumstance predisposed teachers to the state of hopelessness as the pandemic progressed. "There is less hope than there was at the beginning of the year," (#12). As indicated by one of the participants, teachers receded to insidious coping mechanisms including the use of drugs during the pandemic. "There is a high level of numbing ... increased marijuana use, alcohol use, and binge eating," (#12). The uncertainties of teaching during a pandemic, lack of social support, and pressure to continue teaching amidst increased workload left the teachers' mental health unchecked, making them probable victims of substance abuse.

## Communication

Teachers discussed communication in terms of its timeliness and the channels pursued through which they receive these communications during a pandemic. Throughout the 2020-21 school year, teachers noted that they have been finding out about the confirmed COVID-19 positive cases within their school through social media. "It's crazy to me that we hear about information that is affecting our school through social media," (#6). The teachers indicated that they feel that they were the last group of people to hear information that affects them and yet they were expected to respond at the pace of others, making them too often feel rushed. "We don't hear about changes until after everyone else, and then we have to change on the fly," (#1). The improper communication channels and timeliness of the information to the teachers/institution cultivated a sense of neglect within the teachers.

"The government has a different agenda because they want people to be able to go to work, we have no choice but to follow the guidelines and stay open, but we don't feel like we are being taken care of," (#1).

As indicated in the above excerpt, the teachers felt the government had a different agenda and didn't care for them in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of vaccine information and public health issues of concern in general that was targeted to meet the teachers' needs left them feeling undervalued.

In the wake of the COVID-19 vaccination rollout plan, the teachers perceived the government communication processes as exclusionary and did not prioritize them. As noted by one of the participants, "I haven't heard anything about teachers getting the vaccine. As a profession, I feel very disrespected," (#5).

## PPE and Protocols

At the time when there was a lot of uncertainty entering the school year, teachers viewed the provision and use of PPE as a safety precaution and felt far safer when PPE measures and safety procedures were in place. "Things that make me feel safe are physical supports such as masks, shields, sprays, etc.," (#2). Some teachers felt that the regulatory imposition on the use of PPE within small groups were beneficial. "The best thing was mandatory masks and mandatory shields for small group instruction," (#1). Whereas some teachers felt safe with use and implementation of PPE protocols, this process came with additional challenges.

Some teachers felt that the stringent measures put in place positioned them as rule keepers rather than as teachers. "We are policing more than teaching," (#4). "Rules and procedures were changing daily as we started back at school," (#11). "Another thing we have to do is, bathrooms, we have to write down when students go. I've never been asked for those lists," (#6). Teachers felt that some of procedures required of them were time wasting, yet the information they gathered through these extra efforts in addition to teaching were not put to proper use. "The lists were never needed of people in the change rooms," (#11). The experience of implementing protocols and rules as required made the teachers feel as though they were no longer being effective in teaching content.

## Technology

Participants discussed technology in terms of their experiences with online teaching and challenges it imposed. The dismissal of school followed by optional supplemental online learning in March of 2020 was seen to have a detrimental impact on the perception of online teaching. This was seen as an accurate representation of what online learning could be because there was no preparation and student attendance were minimal. "In the spring the supplemental learning wasn't taken seriously – it was a very weird time," (#9). The shift from the comfort zones of teaching in person coupled with the lack of preparedness of teachers to embrace the online teaching platform cultivated a negative experience. Teachers reported there was inadequate time to complete their tasks. "I was worried that there wasn't enough time to get everything ready ... to make it a safe environment," (#1).

When teaching went back to in-person, participant response indicated resentment for a possible shift to online learning. "I don't want to go online again!" (#8). As one of the participants indicated, the negative experience with technology relating to online teaching presented with lots of desire for in-person teaching even in the middle of an active pandemic. "There were no cases here, so it didn't seem necessary to wait to start school," (#3).

However, some participants demonstrated a sense of hope for the future in case such a pandemic of the COVID-19 magnitude occurred. "In the next pandemic, our online learning system will be ready," (#7). Online teaching presents multiple challenges including time and the prerequisite skills and knowledge of information communication technologies. The teachers felt unprepared for the shift to online learning but are hoping that such events in the future will get them and their institution more prepared.

# Lessons Learned from this Study

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Throughout the course of the pandemic, the job description of a teacher has changed significantly. The workload has increased due to the teaching of protocols, learning, and online teaching system as well as extra cleaning, yet there was no support mechanism put in place to meet the increased workload. Many teachers felt pressured to work in unsafe conditions, whether it was due to exposure to sick students or pressure to work with symptoms. This made teachers feel vulnerable and at risk of stress and mental health pressures. Our study demonstrates that some teachers tended to opt for unhealthy behaviours to cope with the stress brought about by the changes during the pandemic.

Remote teaching has created substantial challenges for teachers' work and limited the degree to which students can engage in learning. Teachers explained that in addition to the regular stressors of school and living in a pandemic, the added time teaching safety protocols took away from them the time to teach the curricular content. In addition to this, the teachers indicated that the extra work they were doing was not being recognized. Notably, there was an expression of fear that the differential access to technology and learning supports at home may have exacerbated achievement gaps along racial and socio-economic lines. Our study design couldn't allow for a further exploration on this. Future studies need to aim at exploring the impact of the pandemic among students stratified by race, socio-economic, and neighbourhood status.

We observed that mid-career teachers – those most likely to have children at home – have particularly struggled to balance their work responsibilities with their home lives during the pandemic. Urban teachers felt pressure to go to school as there may be a shortage of substitute teachers even if they had symptoms but hoped that no one would recognize their symptoms. In smaller rural schools the teachers felt as though they were the focus. If their children were sick, everyone knew and, even if it was allergies, they had to keep their children home and be extra careful as they quarantine themselves.

The lack of support combined with improper and delayed communication channels from the government to teachers often fuelled anxiety. The teachers felt outraged from the lack of direct communication on matters that affect them and their institutions. Most teachers were ready and willing to return to school and support their students through the pandemic, however, the lack of government support left them feeling demoralized. From the sites where our study participants were situated, we observed that there was an abundance of disposable face masks provided within all of the teachers' classrooms at the beginning of the school year, but these were not replenished during the course of the year, which caused frustration in keeping with the PPE protocol at schools.

# Study Implications

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In the middle of a crisis, a clear and timely communication process is paramount. During the pandemic, we see that communication processes were a challenge and education system stakeholders including teachers felt left out and unprioritized in the response strategy because communication reached them last. Post-COVID-19 emergence, there is need to review an intersectoral and stakeholder communication strategy and processes that were put in place, and their effectiveness. This will enable the government and intersectoral response strategy to identify gaps and strategize to bridge these gaps if we are to meet the increased demands and needs of the diverse stakeholders during an active pandemic.

Resources in terms of funding and equipment need to accompany the rigorous prevention protocols that need to be put in place during a pandemic. These will call for institution of emergency preparedness plans within education sector so that institutions and governments do not get overburdened with increased demand resources across sectors in times of pandemics.

Post-COVID-19 emergence programs need to consider mental health programs for teachers and these support systems need to be activated in times of a pandemic. We could not ascertain if the school institutions had mental health support structures in place to aid teachers' coping with the demanding circumstances. Furthermore, there is need to invest in online teaching platforms and teachers need to be given opportunities to explore these avenues outside the pandemic times.

Post-COVID-19 evaluation studies that focus on the impact of the pandemic on the education system need to pay attention on the disproportionate impact of the pandemic changes on teachers' wellness, paying attention to mid-career teachers, rural teachers, and urban cohorts. These studies need to pay attention to how the changes pursued during the pandemic interacted with the social determinants to differentially position Saskatchewan students' population on the path of achievements.

# Conclusion

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on communities and social well-being. In Saskatchewan, the teachers saw tremendous increase in workload during the pandemic albeit limited support systems to cope in difficult times. The situation was even worsened by shortage of teachers in some urban areas, where teachers felt pressured to teach even if they were feeling unwell. Workload and the pressure to perform made teachers vulnerable to mental health conditions pushing them to unhealthy behaviours. The prolonged time taken to refill PPE supplies caused frustrations in keeping informed and practiced in the rigorous prevention protocols instituted by the government.

Despite the willingness to deliver during the pandemic, the teachers felt there was a breakdown in the pandemic communication channels, making them to feel neglected and undervalued within the pandemic response strategy. Future pandemic communication plans need to account for diverse stakeholders to facilitate the development of shared responsibility towards combatting the crisis. In our study, the teachers felt the government had a different agenda from them and always placed them at the tail end of communications, which made them feel rushed in the proposed responses successfully deliver instruction remotely.



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## Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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