Impact of COVID-19 on Educators' Roles and Morale

by

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted almost all aspects of society including the United States School Systems. As we get further out from the onset of the pandemic and restrictions ease, we are beginning to see that there will be some lasting and irreversible implications in schools across the country. This research implies that teachers were ill-prepared for remote teaching and a large-scale, long–lasting school disruption. Teachers attempted to keep a sense of normalcy but that led to increases in teacher frustration and in morale. Teachers and school staff continue to be stretched thin and increased pressures from experiences such as the pandemic can hinder teachers' efficacy and progress. Some positive innovations were brought about by the urgent nature of changes in educational systems, but the toll taken on teachers leaves a detrimental impact on educator morale that was not as easily fixed when mask mandates were lifted. The literature revealed that teachers added many new roles to their plan books and daily duties. They were asked to innovate and instantaneously create new instructional norms, learn new digital platforms, and maintain their own mental and physical health. In addition, teachers were asked to respond to new school environments and relaxed expectations for student engagement. Throughout this time some teachers felt powerless and left out of the decision-making equations as decisions were made by administration and health departments. Many teachers became burdened, overworked, and questioned their efficacy. Whether or not the metamorphosis can bring about innovation and advancement that outweighs the affliction continues to be explored and determined. What we do know is that educator efficacy is critical to the success of the operation of schools.

Keywords: educator, COVID-19, efficacy, stress, job description

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, schools were forever changed, and educators and students experienced an unprecedented change in their roles and morale. This shift continues to influence and affect educators today. Educators shape the lives of future generations every day and are a critical component of society as a whole. The cause of this conversion was the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down many schools and classrooms across the United States. Despite the closures, restrictions, and mandates it was widely accepted that learning must continue as many students experienced schooling from the confines of their homes, and teachers were quickly coerced into digital modalities of instruction. Teachers had to learn new online platforms to host digital classrooms and present standards remotely at a rapid rate. How have educators' roles and expectations changed as a result? Where are teachers' mindsets now? How can educators continue to rebound and rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic?

It is imperative that we understand what occurred in the lives of educators and students during the COVID-19 pandemic so that we can be better prepared for future pandemics and disruptions to the traditional modality of schools. Currently, there is very limited research on how educators have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. The narrow research that does exist is based on short-term studies that have looked at teacher efficacy and school stability (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). Additional research suggested that teacher morale suffered and teacher job descriptions experienced changes (Abas; 2021; Herman et al., 2021; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). The long-term and lasting effects remain to be seen and understood. This study aimed to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on educator roles and their morale several years after the pandemic onset.

This research was quite personal as I, the researcher, have navigated the uncharted territory of pandemic teaching in the technological age of today's schooling. During this period, I worked remotely and in person, zoomed with students in multiple locations at the same time, recorded infinite lessons, and made numerous visits to students' homes in the community who were quarantined and/or ill. I experienced the need to motivate and engage young elementary students to complete their digital work and tune into online class sessions. I innovated and created new digital tasks, lessons, and assignments while paying close attention to the changing social and emotional needs of my students. I experienced the personal and professional stressors and hurdles caused by the changes in my job description. My story is only one of the many experienced by educators. The plight and story of teachers must be shared and documented during this time as well as the stories of those working in healthcare throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statement of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic changed many of the realities and expectations of the schooling experiences in the United States. Across the country school districts made rapid transformations to keep learning moving forward for students and meet the changing expectations and mandates from various sources. At the forefront of the disruption were educational practitioners whose school year was upended and remained in a realm of consistent modifications for some time. This led to a significant impact on educators' job descriptions and morale (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). Self-efficacy is an integral element of school achievement and staff morale (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). The researcher of this study investigated the improvements and setbacks that resulted from the upheaval and alterations in the educators' job description and the impact on morale. The effects were not all gloomy, and there were positive

consequences of the impact of COVID-19 including the expeditious learning and implementation of new technology and digital platforms for teachers and students (Abas, 2021; Ark, 2021).

As one understands and relates to educators' encounters, the theories of mindset and vulnerability can shed light on morale and the reorientation of educators' job descriptions. Carol Dweck's work on mindset can increase the impetus to persevere through the trials associated with the pandemic and lead to increased morale (Dweck, 2013). Leaning into vulnerability can allow one to build self-efficacy and revolutionize the educators' knowledge (Brown, 2018). By researching the experiences of educators, the skills that are needed to positively influence educator morale can be identified. Embracing the amenability for growth in job descriptions can build for the future. There is a present gap in this understanding of the experience of educators throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Attention has been given to those in the medical field but is limited in the field of education. Initial research in a review of the literature pointed to the hardships teachers experienced as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (An et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021; Pressley, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). There is a dearth of research on what occurred once the pandemic continued past the initial school shutdowns in the Spring of 2020, and limited space has been given to direct teacher stories.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed-method, autoethnographic biographical research study was to understand how elementary school teachers described the changes in their job descriptions and their morale during the COVID-19 pandemic. By exploring the changes in job descriptions and elementary teachers' morale as they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, we can understand how to move forward and learn how to better support educators and prepare for future disruptions in the educational experience. Shared experiences of teachers across districts

throughout a midwestern state varied based on the format of schooling that existed including in-person, hybrid, and remote formats of instruction and learning. Understanding teachers' experiences can bring camaraderie and a sense of community to educators. In addition, the changes to the stagnant role of educators before the pandemic can be reviewed and adjusted for a more positive and healthier self-efficacy lens as we move toward future academic endeavors.

Methodology

Design, Participants, and Instrumentation

In this mixed method, autoethnographic biographical research study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with elementary school teachers in a Midwest state. This consisted of eight elementary school teachers who worked in various formats of remote, hybrid, and in-person with COVID-19 mandates. To increase the study's reliability and validity, the researcher asked study participants interview questions related to the study's central research questions and theoretical framework. There was time and space given for interview respondents to flexibly elaborate on their experiences as they chose to in their responses to the research questions. Interviews are a strong element of qualitative research because most interviewees are familiar with a question-and-answer format, and they provide a quick way for researchers to collect data. The population sample of the survey was 35 elementary school teachers who were teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys provide for a wider swath of respondent participation and add a quantity of thoughts to statements related to the research study. All eight interview participants took the survey and then agreed to participate in a follow-up interview to gather more detailed data.

Procedures

Each interviewee was met individually over Zoom or via phone. Each interview took between 60 to 90 minutes. The interview period took place in July and August, 2023. The interviews were conducted one at a time and they were transcribed immediately after the interview.

Limitations and Concerns

This method of research is limited because not all participants may be articulate or descriptive of their unique experiences or they may be uncomfortable sharing. Since three years have passed from the pandemic onset, there will be reliance on teachers' memory of their retelling of experiences. Another limitation of this research is that the transcription of interviews can be time consuming and labor intensive.

Data Analysis

The narrative analysis occurred by looking at the responses to the research questions, identifying similarities or differences, and subsequently looking for themes or trends in the responses among elementary school teachers. The responses were viewed from the lenses of the theoretical framework. The data were analyzed thoroughly and efficiently using the constant comparative method of teacher interviews and survey results. This analysis aimed to accurately retell the experiences of the elementary school teachers in the Midwest who were teaching during the pandemic.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study and were designed to elicit experiences from elementary school teachers who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions were divided into two central questions that align with the theoretical framework.

Central Questions

1. How do elementary school teachers describe changes in their job descriptions during COVID-19?
2. What were the elements of life that impacted morale (personally and professionally) during COVID-19 as described by teachers?

Significance of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic was a historical event in our world and impacted many facets of life globally. This study identified the tribulations and celebrations of teachers in a Midwest state during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative nature of the study shared the direct impact of COVID-19 on teachers' morale and the changes endured in their job descriptions. Through interviewing teachers who worked in different modes (fully remote, in-person, and hybrid) the beneficiaries are able to gain a better understanding of the teachers' specific experiences. By looking specifically at teachers' morale and the changes in their job descriptions there is a window into the teachers' plight. This study was viewed through the lens of theories around vulnerability and mindset which helped identify how teachers handled changes in their profession. By learning about the experiences of others this study will build camaraderie, compassion, and empathy for these educators while also celebrating the achievements and adaptability in education during the pandemic. This research documented the history of this event as it affected teachers. It is important to have a clear understanding of what happened during the historical COVID-19 event so that teachers and schools can be better prepared for future disruptions and challenges in the learning environment.

The beneficiaries of the study are those who are currently working in the field of education, those who may come to work in the field of education in the future, and those who are

studying the history and impact of COVID-19 on various sectors of the population. This mixed-method study provided specific narrative and survey data to share the experiences. Those who are currently in the field of education may be able to relate to the documented experiences. This builds connections between colleagues from a wider scope. Those who plan to work in education will be able to understand the recent experiences of teaching during a pandemic and the rapid changes to their roles and morale. This study also shared the changes to the profession as a direct result of the pandemic. Those who may look to this study for a historical vantage point have a window into the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Different professions had different experiences in their roles and places of work. This study serves many beneficiaries and as a historical piece of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Role of the Researcher

As with all research, there are limitations and biases within every study. In a mixed-method study, the researcher plays a crucial role in the data collection. The researcher must contact participants, conduct interviews, and analyze the data. This comes with limitations such as human error, interpretation of meaning, and obtaining sufficient data. The researcher must work through the data collection process and through the analysis to accurately and efficiently retell the experiences of teachers who taught during the pandemic. The researcher attempted to briefly build a relationship with the participants so that they felt comfortable sharing their experiences in an interview.

In this study, there were limitations with the eight interview participants and 35 survey respondents because they represented a small sampling of teachers who experienced different modalities of teaching during the pandemic. This study may or may not be representative of other geographical areas. The participants who were interviewed had challenges and limitations.

There were potential limitations to participant responses, such as if the participants were adequately able to recall and articulate the information. It is not uncommon for an individual to block out experiences that include trauma, pain, and/or struggle (Hendershott & Hendershott, 2020). The researcher relied on the participants for accurate information.

Researcher Assumptions

The researcher assumed that teachers would tell the truth about their experiences and provide detailed or specific examples of their experience teaching during the pandemic. It was assumed that many of the teachers may soften or decrease the severity of their experiences as teachers have exited much of the pandemic teaching experience and returned to a more traditional teaching experience. It was also true that one may feel inclined to put a positive spin so as not to jeopardize their teaching career. The researcher assumed that there is the potential for some bias because the researcher is a teacher who was also teaching during the pandemic. This may lead to the potential impact of the researcher connecting or emphasizing elements that correlate with their personal experience. The researcher worked to keep all information accurate and honest focusing on the participants' responses.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms are defined for clarity and to create a shared understanding as the words pertain to this research study.

Educator Efficacy – the ability of a teacher to complete the job of teaching students the standards and fulfilling required responsibilities.

Fixed Mindset - possesses the idea that intelligence is finite, set at birth, and that little can be done to change it (Dweck, 2013).

Growth Mindset - is the idea that intelligence can be developed and evolve through experiences and work (Dweck, 2013)

Job Description – The responsibilities that one is required to complete or carry out in their role.

Morale – the mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual about the tasks at hand (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Narrative – a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Qualitative Interviews – a data collection strategy to gather key information (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006)

Teacher (educator may be used interchangeably for teacher) – a person responsible for instructing/teaching students in a classroom (virtual or in-person) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Vulnerability – is the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (Brown, 2018)

Organization of the Dissertation

The organization of the dissertation is included to provide a preview of the information that is contained in each chapter of the dissertation.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1 included the introduction, problem statement, purpose statement, background information, the significance of the study, research questions, and the definition of terms.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2 included the related literature review of research and information that is pertinent to this study related to COVID-19, teacher morale, and teacher job descriptions.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 shared the methods that were employed by the study and described in detail the research design, sample selection, the selection of participants for interviews, procedures, how the data were analyzed, and the limitations of the study.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 expressed the results of the data collected. This included information from the teachers who were interviewed.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5 discussed the summary of the findings, conclusions, applications of findings, and recommendations for further studies.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The changes in teacher job descriptions caused by the onslaught of COVID-19 had a significant impact on educator roles and morale. The end of the 2019-2020 school year changed the landscape of education. At the epicenter of these changes were school staff and students. In this paper, the term staff was used when discussing anyone who may interact with students (this included teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians, school nurses, paraprofessionals, clerical staff, and administrators) daily in the school setting. Whether or not the metamorphosis of staff experiences can bring about innovation and advancement that outweighs the affliction of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be explored and determined. What we do know is that educator efficacy is critical to the success of the operation (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). Educator efficacy and morale are closely linked to school stability and student success in the United States (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). As teacher morale sinks, a wave of repercussions can influence student learning, test scores, and teacher retention. Educators are also enduring physical and mental health hurdles for themselves and their students due to the coronavirus all while society and media outlets weigh in with loud opinions on how schools should be operating (Ark, 2021; Herman et al., 2021). As a result of the coronavirus, educators are facing changes in their job description, a vastly different school environment, and new instructional norms (Ark 2021; Heider, 2021; Herman et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2020; Will, 2021). The research suggested that the consequences of prolonged morale deterioration would be detrimental to the field of education if we were unable to understand and overcome the widespread issues.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories are addressed related to mindset and vulnerability, which are integral parts of moving forward in morale building and the future of education. Appropriate mindset and healthy levels of vulnerability lead to educator efficacy.

Theory 1

The first theory comes from Carol Dweck's work on mindset and connects to how we rebuild morale based on the lasting impact of COVID-19. If teachers are going to rebound and move toward positive change they must digest and understand what happened so that they can reflect and move forward. Carol Dweck's work (2013) focused on the entity or fixed mindset versus an incremental or growth mindset. An entity or fixed mindset possesses the idea that intelligence is finite, set at birth, and that little can be done to change it (Dweck, 2013). An incremental or growth mindset is the idea that intelligence can be developed and evolve through experiences and work (Dweck, 2013). This aligns with teacher morale because if an educator believes that a circumstance is fixed and cannot be changed, they are less likely to grow through traumatic experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The same can also be said about an educator's job description. If an educator is stuck in a prescribed way of teaching and believes that it is the only way to do their job, they may be less likely to grow through a trial such as the pandemic. Based on the literature and research we can see that there were many ways in which an educator needed to grow and modify their teaching to meet the needs of the COVID-19 pandemic. If we can take steps to build and rewire brains to have a growth or incremental mindset, we can glean the positive outcomes from COVID-19 and use them moving forward. For example, there was a huge increase in technological knowledge and electronic platform usage by students and teachers as a direct result of remote schooling during the pandemic. This is an

indicator of an incremental or growth mindset as all parties learned something. Educators needed to transform the in-person learning experience into one that could be accomplished online. Those with a mindset that desires to grow and learn are more likely to choose an idea or set a goal that stretches them, and risks hardship or failure as opposed to staying safe and maintaining the status quo (Dweck, 2013). There were a lot of risks involved in teaching during a pandemic and it was on display for others to see the trial-and-error process in many homes across the country while students learned remotely or were in quarantine.

One of the hurdles for many people during the state lockdowns and school closures was their mindset. Dweck (2013) argued that people tend to play it safe to avoid failure or embarrassment when they are pressed into new situations. This can lead to stagnant or stifled growth in a school or organization. In the case of the pandemic, this meant that teachers could lose confidence and face staggering levels of self-efficacy if they did not possess a growth mindset and believe that they could change over time. This loss of confidence can turn to defeat and cause morale to diminish. However, when a staff member can ascertain a favorable or affirmative outcome from the pandemic, this builds a teacher's confidence and provides an opportunity for morale, mindset, and outlook to have a slight improvement.

Theory 2

Another theory that aligns with this topic is the theory of vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic showed every family, school, and business that this was something that no one had prepared for or experienced. There was no pandemic drill or protocol in place. This brought about a period of vulnerability and unknown expectations about the future. Educators were uncomfortable as they transformed their lessons into online platforms that were now on display in every home with school-aged children who were learning remotely. There was unbelievable

pressure on many fronts for everyone. Brené Brown's (2018) research focused on shame and vulnerability. Brown (2018) embraced and taught the theory of courage, empathy, and vulnerability in the workplace and in life. Brown (2018) taught about rumbling with vulnerability, living into values, braving trust, and learning to rise from conflict. When these skill sets are absent, there is a fear of failure. Educators were faced with fears of failure of not doing the right thing in remote learning, students not achieving mastery of required standards, and academic and behavioral regression. Brown's (2018) work showed educators that we must be comfortable being uncomfortable and leaning into vulnerability. Educators must stand up when they have been knocked down and start again. This is where growth and learning can occur. Teachers can harvest empathy and courage from Brown's (2018) work on vulnerability to better prepare them for future trials that we know will come. Understanding vulnerability can allow educators to make wise decisions that bolster confidence and encourage growth.

Mindset, openness to vulnerability, morale status, and changes in job descriptions impacted how educators functioned during the COVID-19 pandemic. A growth mindset allowed teachers to stretch and expand upon their previous levels of self-efficacy as they embraced new ways of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. When teachers grew in their knowledge or abilities and found success, they had the potential to increase their level of morale. Having a firm foundation allowed teachers to take vulnerable steps forward when working to meet the needs and changing demands of jobs during the pandemic. Dweck and Brown's work is evident in the research and in the responses of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Review of Research

Changes in Job Descriptions for Educators

The pandemic brought many changes to the role of educators at home, at school, and within the community spanning from needing new knowledge of technology platforms to keeping up to date on the ever-changing health protocols (An et al., 2021; Ark, 2021). School staff was thrust into a new realm of learning in March 2020 (Kennedy, 2020). The initial widely held perception was that this would be a temporary disruption in the status quo, but two years later educators were still enduring the impact of the virus. Changes included rapidly changing health mandates, new instructional norms, altered technology components in the curriculum, and diverse student and family needs (An et al., 2021; Hirsch, 2022; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021; Pressley, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). Each of these categories required spontaneous growth and flipped the script on the previous roles' educators played daily.

Rapidly Changing Mandates

Governors, local health departments, and school boards made many policy changes in a short amount of time that were placed on the desks of educators each week as school districts navigated the uncharted territory of a pandemic. No school, organization, or business was prepared for the pandemic and the ripple of changes. Each decision brought a plethora of opinions and disagreements within communities. In 2020, each weekday residents across this state awaited the briefings of the governor and health director, which included the closure of schools on March 12, 2020 (Kennedy, 2020). From the state and local levels, decisions were made to keep students and staff safe (Abas, 2021; Kennedy, 2020). The literature stated that maintaining as much continuity as possible was the goal of many educators as they embarked upon remote learning (Abas, 2021; Ark, 2021; Hirsch, 2022; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). Abas

(2021) went on to report that many schools made a quick transition to remote learning. At first, it was thought that this change would be temporary to slow the spread or flatten the curve of cases of COVID-19 (Kennedy, 2020). However, this quickly became a long-term adjustment. Each mandate led to many opportunity costs. When schools closed their physical doors, educators wondered who would fill the deficits in students' lives (Aguilera et al., 2021; An et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2020). These same authors went on to discuss questions such as how students would be cared for when some guardians are required to work and others lost their income, how would physical needs be met, and the problem of assigning responsibility for these urgent and unforeseen problems. In some communities, teachers were forced to the front line of these decisions and helped families navigate these complex issues. Kennedy (2020) went on to discuss the quick pivot to remote learning that left many students, teachers, and families in shock. Chamberlain et al. (2020) found that when educators developed strong relationships with families, it was a major benefit to all parties in remote learning.

As schools started the process of reopening during the fall of 2020, many health departments altered their policy recommendations. Additionally, many school districts continued remote learning for the first few months of the 2020-2021 school year (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). New mandates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2022) included additional planning to maintain six feet of space between students, the wearing of facial masks, and seating charts for each part of the day due to contact tracing. School staff found themselves with yardsticks and tape measures as they attempted to spread workspaces far enough away from peers (Aguilera et al., 2021). However, keeping students distanced is an enormous undertaking, especially for young students (An et al., 2021). Teachers were now asked to enforce the proper wearing of facial masks. The nickname mask police could be added to the job description of each

teacher with this mandate. This was a divisive political issue for some families which spilled over into the classroom, and many teachers were caught in the crossfire (Aguilera et al., 2021). Pressley et al. (2021) surveyed teachers from across the United States in public and private schools in 16 states during the first week of October 2020. The authors found in the survey that teachers were experiencing different environments, routines, and modalities of instruction. Teachers found themselves giving numerous reminders to students to keep their masks over their noses and under their chins (Pressley, 2021). Departmentalized classrooms saw enhanced cleaning regimens, requiring the application of disinfectant spray on the surfaces of student workspaces to limit the spread of the virus (Ark, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). This new custodial task was added to the already busy daily routines in teacher classrooms. This subtracted precious instructional time each day for departmentalized classrooms that served different groups of students (Ark, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021).

Instructional Norms

The long-standing effective routines and norms of a typical instructional year, which had been improved year after year, were no longer possible while maintaining social distancing (Abas, 2021; An et al., 2021). Like riding a scrambler ride at a local carnival or fair, teachers were in the cars as they shifted from side to side, spun around, and changed speeds. Teachers were asked to carry on with the curriculum and grade level standards as though nothing had changed. However, many of the tools in the teacher toolbox had been taken away. All of the hands-on manipulatives and constructivist approaches were taken away. The platform from which teachers taught was now digital (Ark, 2021). Teachers needed to quickly build engaging lessons for online delivery. The tried-and-true lessons of the past now need modifications to be digital (An et al., 2021). The shift to digital work was practically instantaneous. Teachers were

offered little to no training on digital platforms due to the timing of the switch to remote learning (An et al., 2021; Ark, 2021). This quick modality switch led to increased stress for teachers. These instructional norms created time-consuming tasks for educators as they learned the best ways to transform instruction on to a screen (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). Educators needed to utilize digital tools for instruction and engagement. Depending on the age of the child this also included teaching students how to use technology tools and/or involving families in the process.

Additional changes in norms included the need for re-teaching entire units and concepts to students who were quarantined or ill. In many cases, students could be out for weeks due to a family member testing positive, the related quarantine, and/or the student receiving a positive test result as well. This meant that students would miss entire instructional units or foundational skills. This became convoluted to in-person instruction, as classrooms became a revolving door of absences and quarantines related to COVID-19. Within a classroom, students were all on very different schedules based on exposures, quarantines, and illnesses. The levels of illness varied, and some students were able to keep up with parts of their work and learn from home (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). However, it created a very complicated system to track as students had different return dates and varying levels of participation and willingness to self-teach. Based on the age level of the students this could be a challenging endeavor. Since quarantines happened at the drop of a hat, students were often left without the necessary supplies to continue learning from home. This could result in teachers doing door drops of materials and other necessities throughout the communities in which they worked. These deliveries joined the long list of activities that would take place outside of contractual time (Aguilera et al., 2021).

Shaw et al. (2021) administered a 10-question survey using the Likert scale to public school teachers, to glean their thoughts related to the impact of COVID-19. They found that

there was a significant financial impact on public schools and individual teachers as teachers shelled out their own money for cleaning supplies (when they could be obtained) and digital materials. Shaw et al. (2021) went on to share that 67% of the surveyed teachers believed that remote students were not receiving the same quality of education as they would if they were in the classroom. This disparity perpetuated gaps in student learning and became more challenging to overcome as time went on. This discontinuity was exacerbated by extraneous challenges families endured at home such as loss of income and stability due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students in specific disciplines and younger students also struggled immensely with online instruction (An et al., 2021). Preschool and elementary teachers faced developmental obstacles with the commencement of remote learning. Elementary students were unable to complete their instruction in the same way digitally as in person (Ark, 2021). They needed additional breaks and hands-on materials. Many students also needed family support to navigate their tasks and assignments online (Abas, 2021). This created additional layers of stress as teachers knew that what they were asking students to do was not developmentally appropriate (Zaretsky, 2021). Students who were in unique disciplines, such as fine arts and hands-on courses, suffered as they were unable to collaborate, get prompt feedback, and use the tools alongside each other (An et al., 2021). Being unable to have the appropriate instructional tools drastically reduced the teachers' ability to provide students with effective learning opportunities (Ark, 2021). For example, a student in a choral or instrumental class is less inclined to be able to receive appropriate feedback and instruction because they are unable to come together for practices and performances.

One of the largest instructional differences was found in the format of instruction. Teachers found themselves in remote, hybrid, and fully in-person learning (Ark, 2021). Some

schools offered remote learning to vulnerable students or for families who felt most comfortable keeping children at home during the rage of the pandemic or before the families were fully vaccinated (Ark, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). Some teachers taught fully in person the whole time with the health mandates and protocol in place (An et al., 2021; Ark, 202). Additional teachers who taught fully remotely or online were able to focus their efforts and tailor instruction to an online audience (Ark, 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2020). These teachers became adept and skilled in the digital delivery of content and standards (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Other teachers, particularly those who worked with middle to high school students, found themselves teaching both in-person and online at the same time (An et al., 2021; Ark, 2021). This blended format divided attention between virtual students and in-person students in the classroom (An et al., 2021). At times this caused online students to receive less attention (Ark, 2021). Additionally, teachers found themselves on a hybrid and flipped classroom schedule or other varying formats. All these instructional formats caused many teachers to stretch themselves into uncharted territory in an already stressful environment (An et al., 2021; Ark, 2021). Which student should a teacher tend to first became the question and how to equitably meet the needs of all students regardless of their locale.

Technology

Due to the mandates and closures of schools, educators were forced to pivot and transform the in-person schooling experiences to an online format. School districts leaned heavily on web-based platforms (Ark, 2021). These new modalities became the source of connection, instruction, and assessment of learning. Teachers needed to learn how to utilize these new platforms in a short amount of time and most cases on their own (Ark, 2021). Some of these platforms included Google Classroom, Zoom, PearDeck, Microsoft Teams, and Flip Grid (Ark,

2021). Some school districts recognized the need for professional development for staff and students to use these platforms but lacked the financial resources and time to dedicate to this endeavor (Ark, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021). Instead, teachers were left saddled with this burden on their own. Many platforms created quick how-to guides to assist but it still required significant amounts of time to transition in-class activities, discussions, and assignments to a digital platform (Ark, 2021). Much of this was done outside of contractual time for teachers, further abetting the job description that teachers signed up for (Ark, 2021).

Student Needs and Family Expectations

Student needs soared at the start of the pandemic as stability and predictability were removed from the equation. Students across the country were often left to fend for themselves during much of the remote learning school day or asked to help care for younger siblings. Working parents had to tend to their jobs as well. This led to more student autonomy and responsibility. In addition to this responsibility, students in many districts around the nation faced other shortages beyond technology inequity (An et al., 2021; Harris, 2021). Harris (2021) expressed that students who were living in poverty experienced great hardships with food, resources, and school materials. UNICEF (n.d.) went on to share that children and families were some of the most vulnerable when it came to the financial impact of COVID-19 (*COVID-19 impacts on child poverty*). This required teachers to help fill the void that working parents and parents who lost their jobs were unable to fill. Teachers and school staff members would drop off supplies and food to students who didn't have the means to access necessities to support and continue learning experiences. Students' basic needs must be met for students to be able to learn and participate in school (Bridgman et al., 2019). The teachers who invested in their families and developed rapport became a resource for those in need of support (Abas, 2021; Glazier & Harris,

2021). Heider (2021) expressed that we must identify and understand that the impact of traumatic situations on individuals is different and the key to this understanding is to seek empathy. Teachers were asked to empathize with their students and their families. Each one had unique physical, mental, emotional, and social needs (Chamberlain et al., 2020; Hirsch et al., 2022). These needs were exacerbated by the pandemic and brought to class each day.

Since this perpetuated an unequal playing field with differing levels of familial support at home, school districts relinquished and relaxed their expectations. In many cases, students just had to sign in or do one thing on a digital platform to be counted as present for the school day (Ark, 2021). One of the biggest complaints from teachers was the lack of engagement from students (An et al., 2021). It became very challenging to hold students accountable for learning (Heider, 2021; Will, 2021). Schools were unable or chose not to enforce assignment completion (Will, 2021). Teachers could post assignments, upload videos, and host live sessions, but students were not obligated to participate (Heider, 2021; Herman et al., 2021). This created vain teacher efforts.

Families also had increased expectations for teachers during the coronavirus shutdown. Guardians believed that it was still the school's responsibility to facilitate the learning process for the students (Hirsch et al., 2021; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). However, teachers' hands were tied when they were unable to engage with a child who did not participate, behavior issues arose, or a child left their camera off (Herman et al., 2021; Will, 2021). The need for engagement with peers and school staff increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (An et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2021). Students learn copious amounts from their peers about expectations and acceptable behaviors (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). While online during remote learning, students' ability to learn from each other was diminished (Herman et al., 2021). This led to an increase in negative

behaviors and many social and emotional needs going unmet (Hirsch et al., 2022). Students craved interaction with peers and teachers were limited in how they could provide that while still maintaining teacher oversight of conversations. These student needs were forced into a different realm than the pre-pandemic circumstances.

School Environment

The school environment had many dramatic and abrupt changes over the course of the pandemic. There were constant changes in the day-to-day setting due to exposure and quarantines for students and staff members related to COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), the amount of time a person was required to miss or quarantine from school was modified over time as the pandemic progressed. The physical environment and professional environment experienced changes as the pandemic wore on. These changes had varying levels of impact on students, teachers, and communities.

Physical School Environment

COVID-19 protocols encouraged social distancing and masking at schools (An et al., 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2020; Hirsch et al., 2022). Many schools closed workrooms and staff lunchrooms. This added barriers and further isolated educators and school staff who were already feeling the burdens of isolation (Heider, 2021). Teacher morale took a hit with the increased isolation (Will, 2021). Some educators worked from home during the pandemic which also singled out their experiences. In the school building, many teachers were told to eat alone in the four walls of their classrooms with their doors closed. Teachers needed to make every effort to stay well to keep the ship afloat. This left staff unable to confide and share spontaneously on a regular basis.

Although physical isolation increased with the pandemic, it also brought about and encouraged planned collaboration among teachers to meet the demands of remote learning (Heider, 2021). Many districts saw teachers sharing the digital lessons they created and trading subjects to lighten the load created by new digital platforms (Ark, 2021). This created a camaraderie among educators who were faced with similar tribulations and celebrations (Ark, 2021; Will, 2021). It also led to enhanced lessons as teachers devoted their time to fewer lessons and traded with colleagues (Ark, 2021; Pressley, 2021). This allowed teachers to divide and conquer standards and units (Ark, 2021).

Professionalism

Another change in the school environment was caused by disagreements between teachers' unions and school boards. There was an abundance of questions about mask requirements and remote learning situations (Hirsch et al., 2022; Will, 2021). These decisions which changed the school environment, and the role of the teachers were largely decided upon without input from the teachers' perspective (Will, 2021). For example, some teachers felt that masking all day was challenging for teachers who had little mask breaks, while other teachers welcomed masks for all (Will, 2021). Teacher unions across the country had varying levels of collaboration with the local school boards (Hirsch et al., 2022). Larger state and national unions also expressed concerns for teachers' mental and physical health (Heider, 2021).

A distinct revolution in the school environment that also related to a teacher's daily job description dealt with planning periods or preps (Ark, 2021). Teachers were being asked to teach classes during their planning periods or combine classes for double class size (Bryner, 2021). This was due to the lack of substitute teachers available. The supply shortage was due to a lack of people who felt comfortable in the schools because of COVID-19 (Bryner, 2021). In some

school districts without strong unions, teachers felt as though they were taken advantage of. Many were forced to routinely give up their break to work, grade, and plan to provide coverage for other classrooms. Even support staff and administration had to provide substitute coverage (Bryner, 2021). Not having adequate staffing provided another layer of increased burden for teachers and lowered morale (Will, 2021).

Teachers' Mental and Physical Health and Morale

As we consider the impact of COVID-19 on the role and morale of teachers, we would be remiss if we did not look at their mental and physical health. The pandemic took a toll on all people groups and professions. Teachers routinely faced demands in the workplace that were exacerbated by the pandemic. Some of the characteristics the research cited for achieving success in the pandemic involved grit and adaptability (Aguilera et al., 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2020). Teachers who were easily malleable to change pre-pandemic were better able to adapt during the pandemic (Abas, 2021; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). The research said that teachers who were able to successfully navigate the changing roles and job descriptions were able to maintain a work and home-life balance (An et al., 2021; Pressley et al., 2021). An et al. (2021) went on to share that this balance included setting limits and scheduling time for self-care. Heider's (2021) research shared that teachers and students need to feel a sense of belonging for their mental and physical health. The coronavirus hindered this need which would normally be evident in the physical classroom. Community and a sense of belonging were much more challenging to replicate via a screen (Heider, 2021; Will, 2021).

Mental Health

Stress and anxiety were major components of mental health concerns that were affected during the pandemic and often cited in the research (Herman et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021;

Pressley et al., 2021; Will, 2021). When teachers felt supported by their administration and felt practices were fair and equitable, they were more inclined to report favorable stress and anxiety levels (Abas, 2021; Herman et al., 2021). Herman (2021) also discussed that appropriate student discipline and clear expectations assisted in lower levels of stress and anxiety for teachers. Pressley et al. (2021) found in an empirical study of 329 elementary teachers from across the United States that virtual teachers during the pandemic showed the most increased anxiety.

After stress and anxiety, efficacy appeared in the research as an immense factor in mental health (Pressley, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021; Will, 2021). Efficacy, or the feeling of being effective, is a huge component of teacher morale, especially during the pandemic (Will, 2021). When teachers felt as though they were able to do their jobs, they were more inclined to express feelings of positivity, satisfaction, and happiness (Will, 2021). Teachers' attitudes during the pandemic were closely aligned with efficacy (Herman et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021). The research indicated that efficacy was not based on years of experience according to Pressley (2021). Pressley (2021) conducted a mixed-method exploratory survey of 329 teachers across the United States. In those surveys, Pressley (2021) concluded that teacher efficacy was important to avoid burnout; teachers, represented on all levels of experience, were susceptible to seeing dips in efficacy rates in the classroom during the pandemic. Pressley (2021) also found that efficacy scores were down from pre-pandemic numbers, which led to the belief that levels were down as a whole as a result of the pandemic. Confidence and self-esteem were in danger as teachers realized that much of what they knew was in jeopardy and that they must quickly pivot to continue the learning cycle (Will, 2021). Will (2021) also suggested tips for supporting teachers and morale including increased planning time, mental health support, and time for colleague interaction.

Teacher Morale

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic teacher morale had been on the decline. This can take the form of fallout and negative consequences from secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout for educators (Hendershott & Hendershott, 2020). Hendershott and Hendershott (2020) explained that compassion fatigue is the idea of the exhaustion that one experiences after looking after traumatized individuals over an extended period. One universal experience during the pandemic was compassion fatigue where educators (and healthcare workers) were experiencing physical and mental withdrawal from students, families, and school districts. Teachers were working incredibly hard to minimize education disruptions while trying to create a sense of normalcy in a very abnormal time in our world. Instead of face-to-face interactions, there were online discussions and video conferencing sessions. In the spring of 2020, there was no end in sight and in fact, the relief did not come for some time. School staff continued to press ahead with ever-changing health guidance and decrees.

Physical Health

As educators and school staff worked within a new unofficial job description, physical health came to the forefront. Teachers cited that their physical health had deteriorated as the coronavirus situation had maintained (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). Between attempts to keep up the status quo during the pandemic, many teachers felt overextended, worn down, and tired (An et al., 2021). Teachers often cited the new parts of their job description as the impetus for their extreme exhaustion (An et al., 2021). While carrying the title of teacher, new tasks and expectations were added to their workload without much thought to their impact (An et al., 2021). The research stated that teachers attempted to minimize their struggles for their students

(An et al., 2021; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021). Teachers wanted to be a stronghold and safe place for students to lean on and therefore internalized their struggles (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021).

In addition to the demands of the professional roles of teachers they also have responsibilities at home. This includes teachers who were helping their children keep up with remote learning while also working to educate their students and support their students' families (Abas, 2021). Teachers shared that they incurred long hours because they would spend their evenings with increased correspondence with students' families which delayed taking care of their health and responsibilities in the home. Teachers also feared getting the virus and bringing it home to vulnerable family members (Shaw et al., 2021; Will, 2021). This weighed on teachers' minds (Will, 2021). If a teacher or their family member contracted COVID-19, they had to have a plan for substitute lessons and be ready to address their family obligations (Shaw et al., 2021). Depending on each teacher's situation, an extended absence could mean reduced pay if they did not have enough sick time to withstand a lengthy absence (Bryner, 2021). To negate some of the negative impacts of COVID-19, Bryner (2021) argued that aggressive salary, strong benefits, and support could contribute to retention and a morale boost. Abas (2021) expressed the need for teachers to support each other to maintain health and safety.

Society and Media

During the initial stages of the pandemic, school staff members were honored and praised as heroes who took the challenges of remote learning head-on and attempted to normalize the ending of the 2019-2020 school year that was anything but normal (Heider, 2021). However, as the pandemic continued, there was a shift in the opinions of the community. School staff members were under siege by the fall when some community members accused teachers of being

lazy or unwilling to do their jobs (Pressley et al., 2021). The scrutiny added to their mental health struggles (An et al., 2021; Will, 2021).

Most recent news seemed to be based on the rise and fall of daily COVID-19 reports (Heider, 2021). Community pressure to keep schools open rose to an all-time high as society entered into the fall of 2020. Families were struggling to assist their children with education at home while also maintaining their employment (Heider, 2021). There was a sense of children being home too long after the summer break. There was also concern about the lack of support services and supervision for at-risk students (Abas, 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022). Schools provided check-in and stable routines for students with emotional and behavioral needs (Hirsch et al., 2022). Educators and school staff were seen as a hindrance to the reopening of the economy, and parents and guardians were eager to return the reins of teaching. As the community became more vocal, the morale of teachers continued to plummet (Will, 2021). Will (2021) went on to share that teachers were exasperated by what they had been investing and the levels of criticism continued to increase. With the increase and ease of access to social media, thoughts and messages spread rapidly. Some opinions celebrated and praised teachers and schools for keeping students safe, while others condemned those in charge and advocated for parent choice (Abas, 2021). Left in the middle were the teachers who interacted with students daily but had little say in the decisions that impacted their day-to-day lives (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021).

Moving Forward

Hendershott and Hendershott (2020) provided meaningful and practical advice for personal strategies for self-care in their book, *Supporting the Wounded Educator: A Trauma-Sensitive Approach to Self-Care*. Although this book was published slightly before the pandemic, it rings true to what school staff members need now as we look toward building morale,

retention, and health as we rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic. Steps to focus on in self-care include journaling, choosing words wisely (positive self-talk), knowing one's triggers, unplugging, learning when to say yes and no, being intentional about kindness towards others, avoiding comparisons and competition, laughing, knowing when to say when, going to medical appointments, and taking care of oneself (eating, sleeping, and moving) (Hendershott & Hendershott, 2020). It is through these habits that one can then rejuvenate and prepare themselves to give back to students and walk into another day in the classroom and school. These are the things not taught in preservice educators' programs at universities across the country. However, they are needed by every educator who sets forth in a classroom. Ongoing conversations about what is needed to replenish and boost morale and health are critical to the field of education during a pandemic and beyond. There is hope that school staff can rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic and set themselves up to be in a better place for the future.

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature and research indicated that teacher morale has suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The job descriptions of teachers have drastically changed since the besetment of the coronavirus. Will school districts be able to retain teachers and staff in their schools? Will collegiate teacher education programs maintain attendance? How will students and learning be impacted? Is the damage that has been done by COVID-19 irreversible or can it be surmounted? What steps need to take place to encourage and support educators? How can we be better prepared to adapt to future pandemics? Each of these questions opens the door to many additional questions. There is hope! The overarching theme is adjustment and modification. Teachers who were able to pivot and adapt to the changing systems had a more positive outlook

on the long-term impact of COVID-19 (Abas; 2021; Herman et al., 2021; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021).

We must also look at the rapid innovations that can be carried into future endeavors to improve the educational system (Abas, 2021; Ark, 2021). For example, as teachers increased their use and knowledge of technology, there was a huge level of growth in the digital platforms of learning and electronic communication for students of all ages (An et al., 2021; Ark, 2021). We must also look at the new role of teachers and identify what should stay and what should be removed from the newly adapted unofficial job description. Focusing on positive attributes can help teachers reflect on the experiences of the pandemic instead of only the negative morale reducing side effects (Herman et al., 2021; Will, 2021). Addressing teacher efficacy, preparing for future educational disruptions, and celebrating success can go a long way toward building teacher morale. Encouraging a growth or incremental mindset can lead to motivation to improve and keep going in the face of adversity or potential hardships (Dweck, 2013). Leaning into vulnerability can allow one to increase courage, self-efficacy, and innovation (Brown, 2018). We need to build skill sets related to theories of mindset and embrace vulnerability to impact educator morale and changes in their job descriptions.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to understand how elementary school teachers' job descriptions changed and the elements of life that impacted their morale during the COVID-19 pandemic, so that we can be better prepared for future pandemics and disruptions to the traditional modality of schools. According to the literature in Chapter 2, there were major disruptions in the conventional and long-established routines of school structure during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). There is a dearth of research related to the impact of COVID-19 beyond short-term studies that have reviewed teacher efficacy and school stability (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). To fill in the missing information from the literature, questions must be asked. To accomplish this, the following questions are pertinent to this research.

1. How do elementary school teachers in the Midwest describe changes in their job descriptions during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What were the elements of life that impacted morale (personally and professionally) during the COVID-19 pandemic as described by teachers?

These questions are significant because a review of the literature showed a void in the educator's voice. During the pandemic, many educators were working with the ever-changing mandates and adjusting to changes both personally and professionally, and their voices became absent as many figured out a survival mode strategy (Ark, 2021). To understand what occurred the research must be carried out and the research questions asked and documented. In addition, this research study added the perspective of teachers three years after the onset of the COVID-19

pandemic. Although COVID-19 has not been eliminated, this three-year time period allowed many of the initial barriers and hurdles to become commonplace or be overcome. From a health and safety standpoint, more has been learned about COVID-19 vaccinations and safety measures, and the quarantine time has been reduced from the initial onset. The literature indicated that society has learned to live with COVID-19 in a manner like other illnesses and diseases. The question remains how we can better understand teachers' described changes in their job description and how they describe their morale during the COVID-19 pandemic to prepare for future disruptions.

Research Method

This is a mixed method, autoethnographic biographical research study. The mixed-methods approach included both quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data to answer the stated research questions. This approach looked at commonalities and trends in the survey data and then delved deeper into the interviewees' thoughts to gain a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences. Quantitative data on its own can be limited to only what is provided in the survey questions, but interviewees' responses can provide further expansion and insight. Ethnography is a type of research that is both process- and product-oriented and is often associated with anthropologists making observations in their field of research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell stated:

> The factor that unites all forms of ethnography is its focus on human society and culture. Although culture has been variously defined, it essentially refers to the beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people. (p. 29)

In this study, the people are elementary school teachers in a Midwest state and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on their beliefs, values, and attitudes. This study aimed to understand how the

global pandemic impacted teachers' job descriptions and morale. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, "To understand the culture of a group, one must spend time with the group being studied" (p. 29). Due to the nature of my personal job description during the COVID-19 pandemic, I had firsthand exposure to the culture of teachers who were experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. This was defined more specifically in the position of the researcher section in this chapter.

This study employed a mixed-method explanatory sequential design to look at the phenomenon. An explanatory sequential design occurs when quantitative surveys are distributed first and then a collection of qualitative data are collected through interviews that bolster findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants / Sample

This study utilized non-probabilistic, purposeful, two-tier sampling. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). Purposeful sampling was necessary as the researcher worked to understand teacher perspectives. The type of purposeful sampling was network sampling based on the identification of key participants in different school settings (rural, suburban, and public). After the participants completed the survey, a two-tier sampling event took place to determine which participants would be willing to participate in an interview for further data collection. Wolcott (2016), an ethnographic methodologist, stated, "The approach incorporates an elicitation technique designed to probe for culture by discovering specific categories and terms through which people in that scene categorize their world" (p. 35). Once categories and terms are identified in the surveys, then the researcher can investigate and more effectively articulate the meanings related to the culture and pandemic event.

Location/Geographic Setting

This mixed-methods study took place in the Midwest. The participants were all elementary school teachers. Survey data were obtained from rural, suburban, and urban school teachers since different types of school settings experienced different decisions, successes, and challenges throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant Characteristics/Criteria

All participating teachers have experience and have been teaching for at least two years before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2019-2020 school year, meaning the teacher started their teaching career in the fall of 2017 or before. This was important as novice teachers experience unique challenges unrelated to disruptions such as a pandemic which was not addressed in this body of research. All teachers have experience teaching in the Midwest and taught during the pandemic. Teachers were given an electronic survey (quantitative) and then virtual interviews were conducted with some of the participants (qualitative).

Sample Size

Survey data were collected from a total of 35 teachers from either rural, suburban, or urban school districts. According to the sequential design of the study, interviews were conducted with eight teachers from either rural, suburban, or urban school districts. The sample size was fulfilled when saturation or redundancy in responses was reached. Saturation or redundancy occurs when the responses to interviews are replicated and there is a deficit of new insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection

Data were collected, survey results analyzed, and transcripts of the collected interviews were coded and assigned to categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were kept secure and confidential during and after the research.

Position of the Researcher

My role was as an internal researcher in this mixed methods, autoethnographic biographical research study. I was an insider because I witnessed one version or story of being an elementary school teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. My experience was limited to one person's understanding. I worked in a large, suburban, public school district where I have taught fifth grade for the past eight years. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic closed the school district on Friday, March 13, 2020. When the schools closed, I was seven months pregnant with my first child and had been preparing for a substitute teacher who would take over the last couple weeks of school while I was on maternity leave. At the time of the school closure in my district, we were called into an emergency meeting with less than two days' notice of closure. We were told to make sure students took their personal belongings home on Friday. At that time, we were under the impression that this would be an extended spring break and that we would all return to school and the status quo when the virus was under control. However, this could not have been further from the truth. We had no understanding of what lay ahead in terms of mandates and new learning that would be required to continue our school year remotely online. I had no inclination that when I told my students goodbye on that fateful day, I would not see them in person for the rest of the school year. As the days turned into weeks and we learned that we would not be going back to school in person, I reported to my school and helped to pack up the

students' remaining personal belongings from their lockers and desks. Students were each given Chromebooks and WIFI hotspots if needed for at-home instruction and schooling across the district.

In those early weeks after the school closure, I held remote Zoom sessions daily with my students for instruction and social-emotional time. Young students had many questions about what was going on in the world and were often bummed that various activities or sports they enjoyed were all canceled. Many of the students did not understand the global reach of the pandemic. As a teacher, I had to tread very lightly while providing stability and encouragement because each family had given their child varying levels of information to not cause fear of the virus. I organized and prepared materials and items for weekly supply pick-ups as much of the work in an elementary classroom is hands-on and not done via a screen. Many elementary students struggled to engage or complete work solely online and with little repercussions for noncompliance. The overarching message from administrators and parents seemed to be to engage students in new learning and meet their social and emotional needs until the end of the year.

On a personal note, my son was born in the early hours of Sunday, May 10, 2020. Knowing that substitutes were in short supply and unsure how I would even turn over a virtual Google Classroom to a substitute for maternity leave, I continued remote teaching until the end of the year. My team of colleagues was supportive, and I couldn't think of leaving my students for the remaining three weeks with a stranger during a volatile time in our world with so much unknown. A few hours after giving birth, while I was in the hospital, I preloaded assignments, announcements, and work into my Google Classroom so that students would wake up to work on Monday morning. My doctor gave me a medical release note to continue working as long as I

worked solely from home. I canceled my Zoom sessions for three days with students but responded to messages, emails, and questions from the hospital. I returned to my daily Zoom sessions on Thursday, May 14, 2020, and continued to meet with students every school day until the end of May. My Zoom sessions did become a little shorter, but my husband and I managed to make them work each day at the assigned times. I introduced my son to my students via the laptop camera and then my husband took him, and I got back to work teaching. The students looked forward to seeing their friends on Zoom and many enjoyed the consistency of the routine digital classroom community time. We would often play games and complete challenges together as a class. None of this would have been possible without the support of my family and colleagues during this time. That finished the upheaval of the 2019-2020 school year.

As summer loomed, there was constant discussion about what health mandates would be in place and if schools would open for the fall term. The summer was filled with virtual professional development sessions related to digital learning platforms that may be implemented. As August approached, I made up my mind to take my maternity leave and stay home with my son to start the year if the instructional part of school was being held in person. However, it was deemed that the school year would start remotely. I decided that I could teach another class of students if it was remote, and I could work from home. My district had also decided to departmentalize by subject to allow for devotion to a single subject and improved digital lessons. I was assigned to teach three classes of fifth-grade mathematics. This period was a whirlwind as I set up three digital classrooms, reached out to families of students, created digital assignments and instruction, and tried to find ways to motivate, connect, and build relationships with fifth graders online. From a professional standpoint, this continued from the first day of school in August until mid-October. Personally, I was balancing a newborn schedule at home (often on my

own while my husband worked), holding a morning meeting, and three institutional Zoom sessions with three different classes, and then grading and responding to questions in the evening. In October, my district offered the opportunity to families for students to remain in remote learning or to return in person to school. I remained working as a remote teacher working with students over Zoom until the end of the school year.

I found that my personal and professional life blurred immensely during this time. I would get up extra early so that I could spend time with my newborn before he went down for his morning nap which allowed me to get through my morning meeting and two of my three Zoom sessions. Then I would take a long lunch and planning period with my son. Then when he took his afternoon nap, I would return for my last instructional Zoom session of the day and hold office hours. I was on an extremely stressful, tight schedule every day and routines were imperative. I soon realized there were no set work hours because some students didn't attend the live lessons and would work later in the evenings when parents were home to help. This led to impromptu evening Zoom sessions and emails at all hours of the night and on the weekends. School and my work as a teacher were a constant presence in my home. Elementary students had varying levels of independence online and in their schoolwork. A version of this would continue the entire 2020-2021 school year as I continued to teach remote students even after in-person schooling had opened. During periods of the year, I would go to school in person and lay out schoolwork for students and Zoom into an in-person classroom via a webcam to provide instruction while a substitute managed behaviors and materials. I would watch the students in my in-person classroom and call on them just as if I were present with them. However, I was teaching from an at-home setup in my dining room. This was done to keep a licensed teacher in front of students for instruction while there was a substitute shortage. At other times I would

deliver materials and supplies to students' homes in a door drop as they were quarantined. I learned brand new digital platforms for monitoring and engaging with elementary students. I redesigned my instruction to be digital in nature and recorded many videos that students could pause and replay as many times as necessary when learning a new mathematics concept. This became the new normal as a teacher, I just did what needed to be done to meet the needs. I truly did not think much about what was occurring because there was always so much to be done.

As an internal researcher with a close association with the phenomenon being studied, there were potential limitations and biases in the research which are outlined in the validity/ limitations section of Chapter 3. There was also a strong understanding of the cultural experiences of teachers in this state during the COVID-19 pandemic because I was one of them. I experienced fully remote teaching, hybrid teaching, and in-person teaching from 2020 to 2022 as the COVID-19 pandemic played out. I had colleagues who experienced the same and different formats. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated as an ethnographic researcher, "It is not enough to only describe the cultural practices; the researcher also depicts his or her understanding of the cultural meaning of the phenomenon" (p. 30). I can understand the phenomenon based on my experiences in the classroom throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. I was cognizant of these biases and used these biases to provide an ethnographic approach to the nuances in the experiences. In my reporting, I used my schema to understand the experiences of others giving attention to their words and findings.

Data Collection / Instruments

After approval of the Internal Review Board (IRB), the data were collected using a triangulated data collection strategy of survey data and teacher interviews. By combining these data collection methods, the researcher obtained detailed data. Triangulation is a strategy for

improving the internal validity of a research study by checking multiple data points and methods of qualitative data against other methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This practice of triangulation utilized multiple interviews and survey data to look for similarities and differences to strengthen the validity of responses. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted over several weeks. For example, semi-structured interview responses were cross-referenced with survey data to give context to the initial research categories and assist in identifying and building out emergent themes. The questions that were asked in the interview came from the research categories that emerged from the literature review data in Chapter 2. These categories include Changes in Job Descriptions for Educators, School Environment, Teacher's Mental and Physical Health, and Morale. Each of these categories includes subsections.

Another form of triangulation occurred through the process of sampling. This research study employed a non-probabilistic, purposeful, two-tier sampling technique. Interviewees were selected by the previously stated participant criteria. The purposeful sampling utilized a network sampling technique based on the identification of key participants in different school settings (rural, suburban, and urban districts) to obtain different perspectives. These participants all took part in the completion of the survey, and then a two-tier sampling event took place to determine which participants were willing to participate in an interview for further data collection. By aligning literature review categories, sampling strategies, and the data being gathered in the surveys and interviews, the researcher improved the study's credibility and focused on the initial research questions.

Initial Research Questions

1. How do elementary school teachers in the Midwest describe changes in their job descriptions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. What were the elements of life that impacted morale (personally and professionally) during the COVID-19 pandemic as described by teachers?

Survey Protocols / Questions

Each survey participant was asked to agree to an informed consent letter for the survey. Digital surveys were administered to teachers who met the previously stated participant criteria (see Appendix A for demographic survey). The survey questions emerged from the themes of the literature review (see Appendix B). The questions asked for a rating response to the participant's level of agreement to different statements: (1) Not at all, (2) Minimally, (3) Somewhat, (4) Significantly, (5) Fully.

Each interview participant was asked to sign an informed consent letter for the recorded interview. Each participant was interviewed one time for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher used the interviews to collect data through teachers' personal narratives. The interviewee was given the interview questions before the interview in most cases when scheduling allowed (see Appendix C). The researcher recorded and took notes about what each interviewee was saying during the interview. Extra clarifying questions were asked to better understand situations or glean more details. The same questions were asked of each interviewee to ensure the potential for repeatability across topics and interviews. These questions came directly from the constructs that emerged in the literature review. After the questioning, each interviewee was told that the interview had ended and thanked for their time. The recorded interview was transcribed, and any potential identifiers or names were removed. The researcher secured all recordings and notes in a safe location to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in place of each interviewee's name. The assurance of anonymity was key throughout the process of data collection.

Data Analysis

The analytic technique that was used was the constant comparative data method to analyze the data. This method was appropriate because it can be used to study any kind of qualitative information including observations, interviews, and documents (Glaser, 1965). This research study employed both interviews and survey data. This also allowed for the data to be analyzed as it was collected. This process was simultaneous and active. Glaser (1965) stated, "The constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically" (p. 437). Glaser (1965) went on to state, "In contrast to analytic induction, the constant comparative method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (not provisionally testing) many properties and hypotheses about a general phenomenon" (p. 438). The survey data were collected first and then analyzed. The data were analyzed through both predefined or deductive and emergent or inductive themes.

After the surveys, each interview was analyzed individually before moving on to the next one, allowing for one set of data to be compared for similarities and differences with a previous set of data or interviews to comply with the constant comparative method. As the data were being collected, it was coded and placed into the initial research categories for the cohesive and logical organization of information. Coded data focuses on patterns or similarities resulting from interview interactions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data were grouped into three initial research categories of changes in job descriptions for educators, the school environment, and teachers' mental and physical health and morale. These categories also have subsections, including rapidly changing mandates, instructional norms, technology, student needs, family expectations, physical environment, professionalism, mental health, teacher morale, physical

health, society, and media. As the data were analyzed, rereading the transcripts, relistening to audio, and reexamining notes were critical steps to ensure the data were fully combed through and thoroughly analyzed. It is important to note that the method of analysis was flexible so that additional findings or themes could emerge from the data which built upon the initial research categories through the survey and interview collection procedures.

Survey Data

Survey respondents self-reported answers corresponding to the research categories. Respondents were asked about their level of agreement to different statements: (1) Not at all, (2) Minimally, (3) Somewhat, (4) Significantly, and (5) Fully. Additional introductory survey questions assessed district demographics (such as urban, rural, and suburban), teacher experience level, school size, and format of COVID-19 schooling to evaluate any correlations related to morale and job description changes. The survey data were then coded and analyzed using IBM SPSS statistical software. General statistics including the mean, median, mode, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were computed and evaluated for each question to provide basic information to be triangulated with interview data. Results and implications for future research are discussed in subsequent chapters.

Interview Data

Interview data were analyzed by examining audio recordings, written transcripts, and notes from each interview. The researcher sought to find the presence or absence of the categories in the responses to questions. The interviews were analyzed in order using the constant comparative method as the conclusion of the conducted interview. This constant comparative method looked for similarities and differences in responses. This information was

coded, grouped, and organized into the predetermined categories or themes that emerged from the literature review.

Validity / Limitations

To establish validity and credibility a non-probabilistic, purposeful, two-tier sampling technique and method of triangulation was utilized. These steps increase the validity. The design of this research study lent itself to potentially be replicated in other settings or states which increases the external validity of the study.

Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The board is responsible for reviewing and approving research with human subjects. This board reviewed the research to ensure ethical standards were being met in all aspects of the research. This research project involved human subjects and included their personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences. There were potential negative consequences as the interview questions could bring about negative memories of experiences, both professional and personal, that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Alternatively, the interviews could bring about a time of reflection and potential closure to unsettling experiences of teaching during the pandemic. This research required participants to give up time from family, work, and other commitments to participate in the interview.

Safeguards were put in place to ensure consent, confidentiality, and ethical actions occurred throughout each step of the research and with all research participants. Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research and asked for their signed consent using the consent form which included the data security protocol. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research process at any time without fear of penalty or

prejudice. The participants' names, positions, and responses were coded. For example, Interview participant A is an elementary teacher at a suburban school and Interview participant D is an elementary teacher at an urban public school. These codes indicated the type of school (rural, urban, or suburban) which was necessary to compare different experiences based on the school setting. This was the extent of identifying information that was included to protect the confidentiality of participants. In other words, the names of participants and the names of schools were removed from the transcription and notes. The collected data were kept confidential and secured with access being given to the research author only. The secured data will be destroyed within six months of the completion of the study.

Summary

This study examined how elementary school teachers in the Midwest described the changes in their job descriptions during COVID-19 and identified the elements of life that impacted morale (personally and professionally) during COVID-19. These data were collected and thoroughly analyzed using the constant comparative method. The benefits of this study included the documentation of the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic nearly three years from the onset. The results of this research can then assist in awareness and preparation for future disruptions to the school structures and protocols.

While there are strengths to this research study, there are also limitations to the study. These limitations to the methodology are due to the sample size and the location of this research. This research is limited to elementary school teachers and may or may not be representative of the opinions and experiences of teachers at other levels, settings, and states. The online interviews and online surveys may not be representative of all subgroups.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter is a presentation of the findings of the mixed method, autoethnographic biographical research study. The mixed-methods approach includes both quantitative survey data and qualitative interviews to answer the research questions stated below.

Research Question 1: How do elementary school teachers in the Midwest describe changes in their job descriptions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: What were the elements of life that impacted morale (personally and professionally) during the COVID-19 pandemic as described by teachers?

To understand the research questions, the following data collection processes were employed as shown in Figure 1. All participants who accepted the informed consent form and met the study criteria completed a demographic survey indicating their years of teaching experience, their school type based on location (urban, suburban, and rural), and their school size. Following the demographic survey, participants were given a research survey using Likert scale questions based on the research questions to assess their thoughts. After the research survey, a select few participants were chosen to complete a virtual interview from each school setting (urban, suburban, and rural schools). The interviews further explored and garnered more information related to participants' experiences while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1

Data Collection Process

Thirty-five demographic and research surveys were collected and analyzed, and eight interviews were conducted and analyzed using the constant comparative method. In other words, each survey and interview were analyzed as the data were collected and immediately following the interview to look for similarities, differences, and themes across the data. The collective findings are shared in the descriptive findings below.

This chapter includes a presentation of the analyzed data culminating in the findings of the study. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the collected data supports the findings and emergent themes. The findings are interpreted, and conclusions are stated in Chapter 5. The initial categories presented in this research remained constant and further expanded upon from their original form. Through analysis and coding of the data, as described in the methodology of Chapter 3, this research produced the following categorical findings:

- ***Shift in Teaching Expectations Associated with Job Descriptions***
- ***The Daily Grind Related to COVID-19 Protocols and Mandates***
- ***The Strain on Physical and Mental Health and Depleted Morale***
- ***Decreased Trust In and Blame of Teachers***
- ***Changes in School Environments/Settings***

These categorical findings are often interrelated as will be more fully demonstrated in the summary of findings later in the chapter. In some ways, the events of one finding led to a causal relationship with another finding.

Descriptive Findings

The aim of this research study was to explore the lived experiences of Midwest elementary school teachers while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection included surveys from 35 teachers and interviews with eight teachers who teach in urban, suburban, and rural school districts. The data were analyzed using a constant comparative method meaning each interview and survey data were analyzed as it was received. This chapter is divided into survey results, interview profiles, and categorical findings.

Survey Results

Demographics of Survey Participants

Thirty-five demographic and research surveys were completed online using the Qualtrics platform. Three-fourths of the survey participants were from suburban school districts even though there were equal amounts of surveys sent to urban and rural school district principals. The least number of surveys were returned from rural school district teachers. Most survey participants taught in schools with 201-800 elementary school students. The smallest number of survey participants taught in schools with less than 200 students. Over half of the completed surveys were from teachers who have taught for more than 21 years. The survey demographics can be seen in Charts 1-3 below.

Chart 1

School Setting of Survey Participants

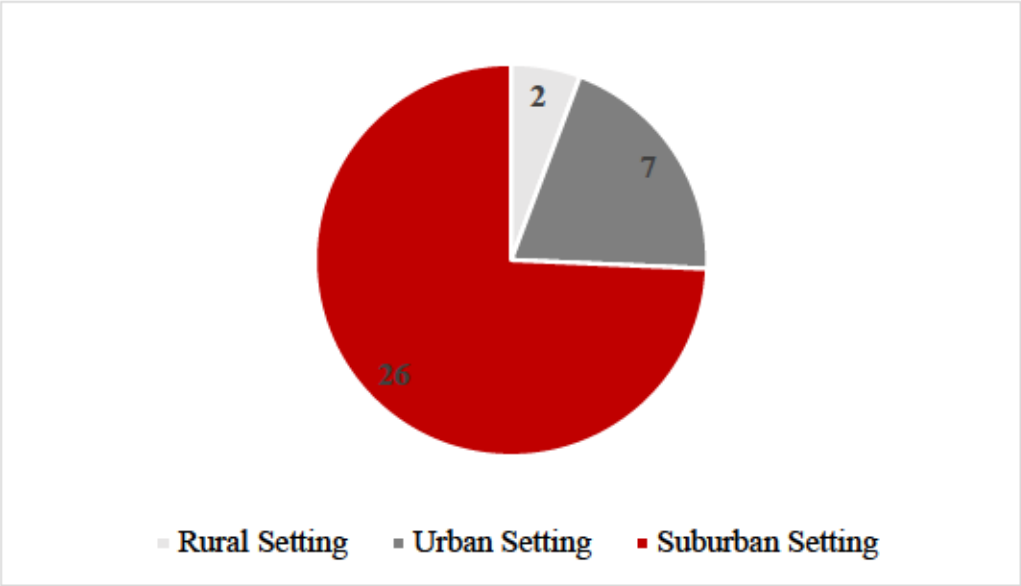


Chart 2

School Building Size of Size of Survey Participants

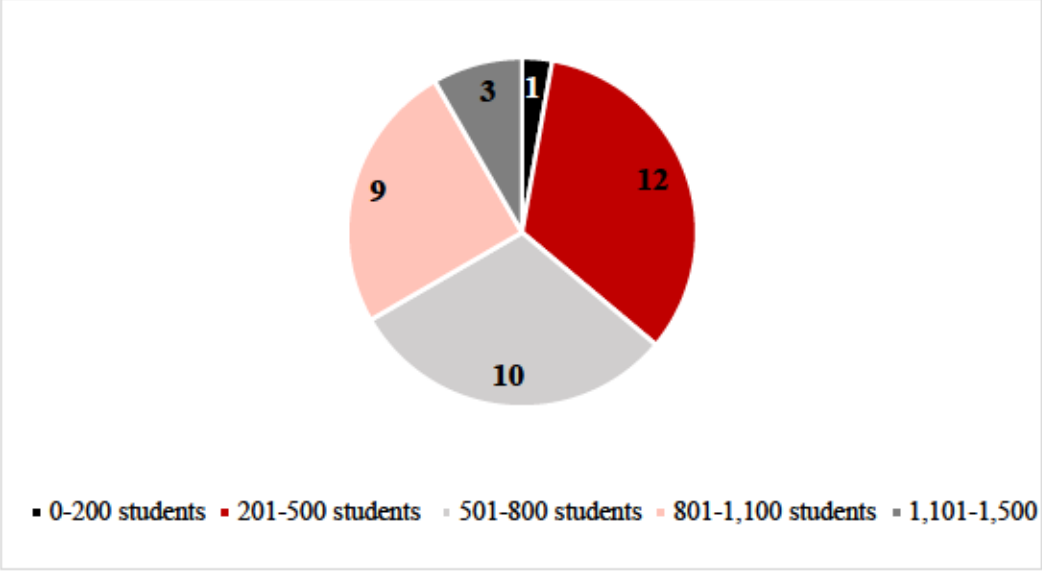
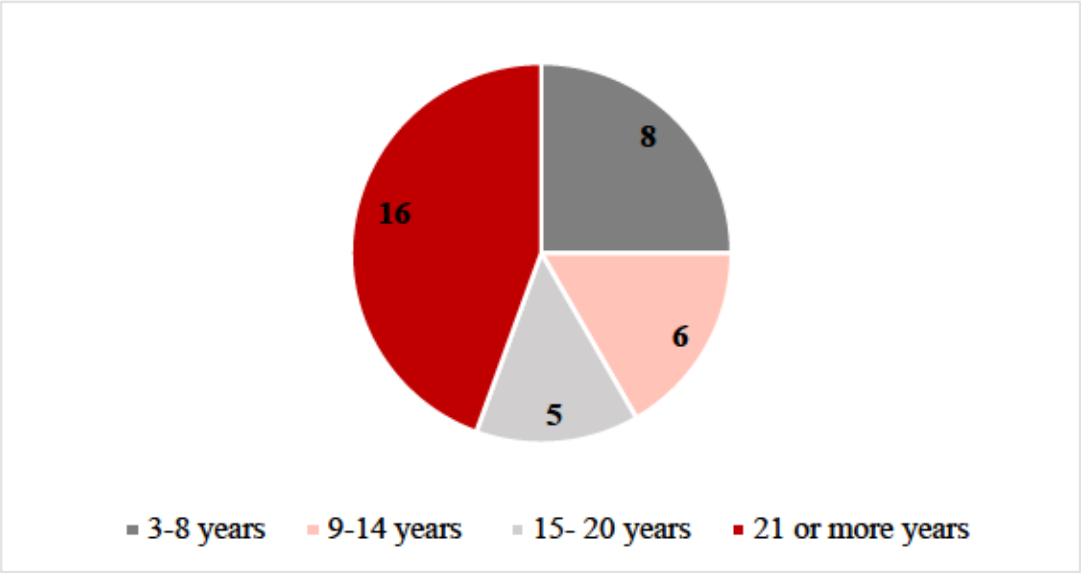


Chart 3

Years of Teaching Experience of Survey Participants



Survey Findings

The research questions of the survey were broken down into three categories with corresponding Likert scales. Survey participants answered on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 representing not experiencing the statement at all to 5 indicating the statement was fully experienced. The research questions for the study formed the three research categories for the survey. These survey categories were changes in job descriptions for educators, school environment, and teachers' physical and mental health and morale. Tables 1, 2, and 3 show the results with connected analysis.

Table 1

Changes in Job Descriptions Likert Scale Given to Survey Participants

Questions	1 Not at all	2 Minimally	3 Somewhat	4 Significantly	5 Fully
I experienced changing mandates related to health protocols and procedures from local boards of health and/or school administration because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	2.86%	11.43%	34.29%	51.43%

I experienced the need to change the way I provided instruction or lessons to students because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	0.00%	2.86%	31.43%	65.71%
I experienced changes in the ways I communicated with students because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	0.00%	14.29%	25.71%	60.00%
I was prepared for the technological requirements when schools shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	5.71%	22.86%	45.71%	17.14%	8.57%
I could continue teaching at the same level and pace during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to before the pandemic.	28.57%	42.86%	17.14%	11.43%	0.00%
I regularly used digital learning platforms (ie. Google Classroom, Seesaw, PearDeck, Edulastic, BrainPop, EdModo, ClassMax, etc.) to deliver instructions or assignments BEFORE the onset of the pandemic. This was part of my regular practice or pedagogy.	11.43%	40.00%	20.00%	17.14%	11.43%
I tried a NEW digital learning platform to deliver instruction or assignments (ie. Google Classroom, Seesaw, PearDeck, Edulastic, BrainPop, EdModo, ClassMax, etc.) because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	2.86%	8.57%	25.71%	62.86%
I recorded myself providing instruction for students who were learning from home or quarantined because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	5.71%	2.86%	14.29%	20.00%	57.14%
I was compensated (with time, resources, and/or money) for the changes required of me to continue instructing students.	54.29%	22.86%	17.14%	2.86%	2.86%
My students needed me more during the COVID-19 pandemic than in previous years.	0.00%	2.86%	22.86%	34.29%	40.00%
Students had a decreased interaction with their peers during the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	2.86%	2.86%	37.14%	57.14%
Families were supportive of me and my efforts as a teacher when the schools shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	11.43%	40.00%	31.43%	17.14%
Families expressed frustration to me with helping their child(ren) with school assignments and learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.	2.86%	2.86%	42.86%	37.14%	14.29%

In the survey questions related to the changes in job descriptions (Table 1), teachers indicated that their jobs changed significantly or fully as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their responses testified that roughly 51% or half of the surveyed teachers only used online platforms minimally or not at all prior to the onset of the pandemic. Nearly 77% of survey teachers recorded themselves providing instruction online or in digital platforms which indicated a significant shift in their job description. Ninety-four percent of surveyed teachers stated that students had a significant or fully decreased interaction with peers due to the shutdown of COVID-19. Approximately, 74% of surveyed teachers indicated that they were needed more by students during the pandemic than in previous years.

Table 2

School Environment Likert Scale Given to Survey Participants

Questions	1 Not at all	2 Minimally	3 Somewhat	4 Significantly	5 Fully
I experienced changes to my physical teaching environment or classroom because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	0.00%	2.86%	28.57%	68.57%
I experienced changes in my relationships with colleagues because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	5.71%	5.71%	31.43%	34.29%	22.86%
I felt that more was required of my professional role as a teacher because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	2.86%	8.57%	28.57%	60.00%

In the survey section related to changes in the school environment or setting (Table 2), teachers claim that there were significant changes. Roughly, 96% of surveyed teachers indicated they experienced physical changes to their teaching environment. Over half of the surveyed participants claimed to experience changes significantly or fully in relationships with colleagues

because of the pandemic. Approximately 78% of surveyed teachers said that they felt more was required of them as a direct result of the pandemic.

Table 3

School Environment Likert Scale Given to Survey Participants

Questions	1 Not at all	2 Minimally	3 Somewhat	4 Significantly	5 Fully
I experienced changes in my mental health because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	2.86%	14.29%	28.57%	34.29%	20.00%
I experienced changes in my physical health because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	17.14%	17.14%	37.14%	20.00%	8.57%
My morale suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	8.57%	11.43%	28.57%	40.00%	11.43%
I felt supported by my administration during the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	2.94%	52.94%	26.47%	17.65%
I felt supported by my community during the COVID-19 pandemic.	0.00%	17.14%	51.43%	20.00%	11.43%
I experienced increased levels of stress at work because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	2.86%	5.71%	11.43%	42.86%	37.14%
I experience increased levels of stress at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic.	2.94%	20.59%	32.35%	20.59%	23.53%

In the final survey category related to health and morale (Table 3), teachers expressed their thoughts related to teaching and working with students during the pandemic. Over half of the surveyed teachers indicated that they significantly or fully experienced changes to their mental health as a direct impact of COVID-19. Approximately, 79% of surveyed teachers cited increased levels of stress in their jobs at work while 43% touted increased levels of stress at home because of the pandemic. Over half of the surveyed participants said that teacher morale suffered. Around 43% of teachers indicated that they felt significantly or fully supported by the administration and only about 31% of teachers felt significantly or fully supported by their community.

After the surveys, participants from each category of school descriptions (rural, suburban, and urban) were invited to participate in virtual interviews to share their stories and provide more background of their experiences and thoughts related to teaching in a Midwest elementary school during the pandemic. This opportunity was given to help bolster the findings of the survey and get a more in-depth analysis of the data.

Interview Results

Interview Participant Demographics

Suburban schoolteachers responded the most to the survey requests and were most willing to participate in a follow-up interview. As survey respondents agreed to an interview, I looked to diversify interview participants by looking at their years of experience. Teachers with more teaching experience, typically the 21years or more category were most likely to agree to participate in an interview. Teachers with 9-20 years of experience were the least likely to agree to a follow-up interview after the survey. Most participants worked in an elementary building with a student population of 201-500. The survey demographics can also be viewed in Charts 4-6 below.

Chart 4

School Setting of Interview Participants

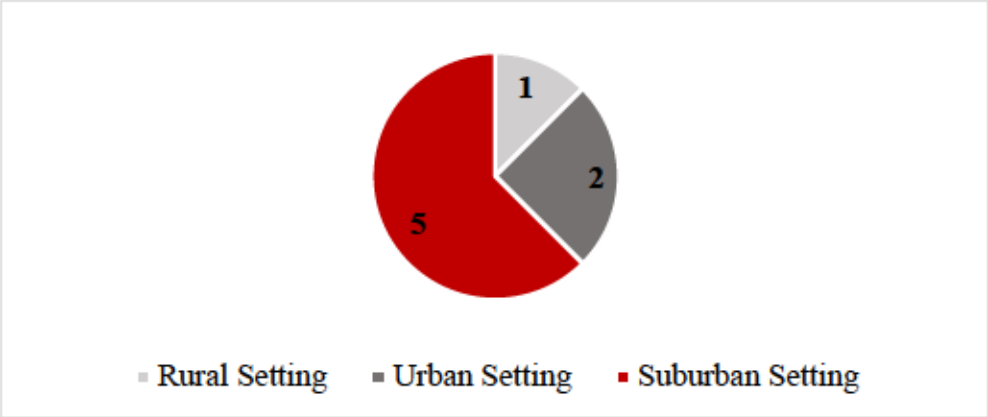


Chart 5

School Building Size of Interview Participants

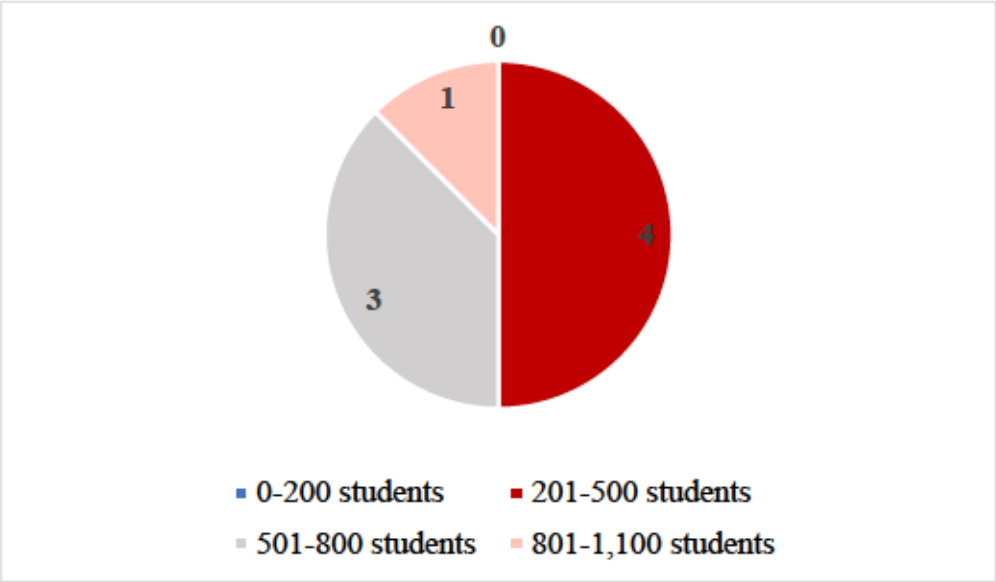
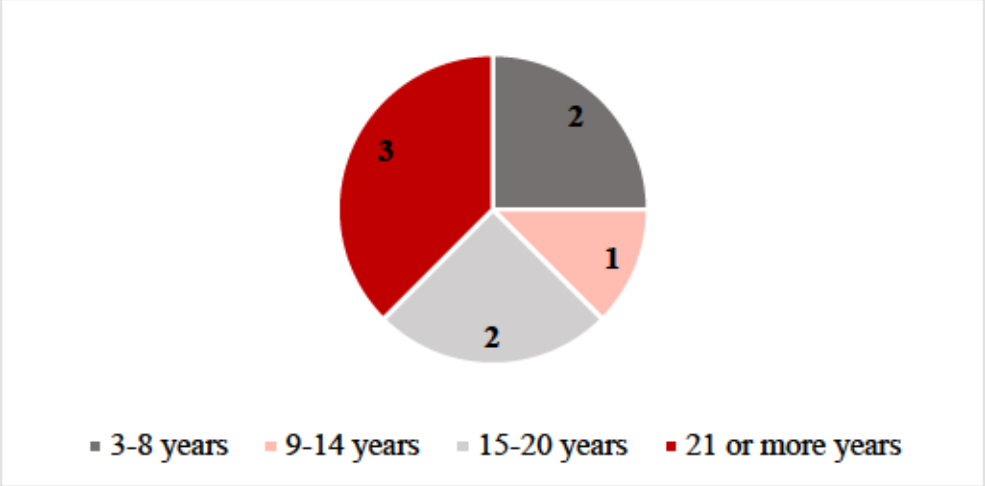


Chart 6

Years of Teaching Experience for Interview Participants



Interview Participant Profiles – Meet the Teachers

Profile 1 (Suburban Teacher)

Interview Participant A is a male teacher in a suburban elementary school. He has been working for the last 27 years in public education. His district closed with a state school closure

set in place by the governor and health director. His district remained online through the end of the 2019-2020 school year and through the start of the next school year. The district returned in person, and he taught students both face-to-face in the classroom and online simultaneously. His interview emphasized the expectations placed on teachers from the district.

Profile 2 (Suburban Teacher)

Interview Participant B is a female teacher in a suburban elementary school with 29 years in public education. Her district also closed with the school closures set in place by the governor and health director, and she had a remote send-off of students to the next grade level after teaching for more than one academic quarter online. She started the 2020-2021 school year online by meeting students for the first time over a screen. After several months of remote learning, she started teaching online and in-person at the same time. She expressed the struggles of juggling this and students who were quarantined.

Profile 3 (Suburban Teacher)

Interview Participant C is a female teacher in a suburban elementary school district with eight years of experience in public school teaching. Her district closed in March of 2020 with the state school closures but reopened for in-person learning for the start in the Fall of the 2020-2021 school year. During her time teaching from home, she taught with her two biological toddlers which she claimed created a chaotic environment, but she valued the extra time with her family. Her district remained in-person for the entire school year. Some of this was due to the lack of funding and students not having access to electronic devices or the Internet at home. Students who could not log on to Zoom calls because they did not have Internet or a device would essentially be given a subservient paper packet as a six-year-old for learning instead of engaging with a teacher. The district decided their only option was in-person learning when they reopened

in the Fall. Interview Participant C stated that she was immunocompromised but was still required to complete her job in person. She expressed that the strain on her physical and mental health caused her to seek out other job opportunities. She remained in education but changed grade levels the following year moving from teaching a younger primary grade to an older elementary-level student. This change allowed her to reset her mindset and continue doing the career she loved. She also stated that the stress and pressures she experienced while teaching during COVID-19 led her to seek professional therapy.

Profile 4 (Urban Teacher)

Interview Participant D is a female teacher in a large urban elementary school district. Interview Participant D worked in a middle school setting for 14 years before making a transition during the fall of 2020 to fifth grade and then to an extension teacher position. Her experience posed a dissonance as she stated the pandemic saved her teaching career. Find more about her story in the interview dissonance section of the chapter.

Profile 5 (Urban Teacher)

Interview Participant E is a female teacher in an urban elementary school district with 17 years of experience. She experienced a transition from one urban school district to another urban school district in the fall of 2020. She shared her interview experiences and transition to working with teachers whom she had never met in person. She works as a mild to moderate intervention specialist but feels as though her current intervention role is moderate to intense considering the pandemic. She described the pandemic as an academic landslide and felt that there were large chunks of time where the district was completely out of compliance when it came to legalities related to IEPs (individualized education plans) for students with special needs or accommodations that were not feasible during the pandemic.

Profile 6 (Rural Teacher)

Interview Participant F is a 23-year veteran teacher from a rural school district who stated she was thrown for a loop when her school was shut down on Friday, March 13, 2020. Her perspectives shared about turning the school into paper packets because they did not have equitable access to technology. She wanted to return to in-person schooling with restrictions and had children in the district as well. She believed that it was acceptable to have a remote and in-person option at the same time so that each family could make a decision that met their needs. However, her district remained remote for nearly a year before returning to in-person instruction. Over the Summer of 2020, her district took the time to figure out a form of remote learning that they would go on to utilize for the next seven months.

Profile 7 (Suburban Teacher)

Interview Participant G was a veteran teacher of 32 years in a very large suburban school district. In her situation, teachers thought they were embarking upon an extended spring break at the school closure in March 2020. She said they were in a period of conferences at school closure so many of the students did not have their belongings or school materials. The Monday after schools closed, she said that she was allowed a one-hour time slot to reenter her building and classroom to gather materials to teach from home. However, she expressed that much was unknown in terms of what they would be doing and for how long. After remaining remote for the end of the 2019-2020 school year, she returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2020. Her district permitted two weeks to prepare for all the new mandates and protocols associated with COVID-19 restrictions.

Profile 8 (Suburban Teacher)

Interview Participant H is a suburban teacher working with upper elementary students who went remote during the initial school closure in March of 2020 and then remained at home for the entire next school year due to a medical procedure that was going to require her to be off work. Since she had a planned medical procedure, she volunteered to teach from home due to the lack of substitute coverage for when she was off work. She said she was able to teach from home but had limited mobility to move around the school building after the procedure. For the most part, interview Participant H enjoyed temporarily working from home and her district provided her with extra monitors and tools to work remotely. She stated that to this day she is still seeing what she called "Covid effects" due to masks and students not learning to decode words. She went on to state that there has been a regression in skills and that she is teaching virtually a grade below because of the learning loss.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Several findings have emerged from the analysis of the data from the Midwest elementary school teachers who participated in this research study on the impact of COVID-19 on Education. In this section of Chapter 4, I will discuss the research study's findings and how it connects to specific theoretical frameworks and the available literature. After analyzing all the data, I was able to hone in on five findings listed in Table 4 and described in further detail following the table.

Table 4

Categories of Findings

Findings	Operationalization	Example(s)
Finding 1: Shift in Teaching Expectations Associated with Job Descriptions	Teachers must now teach students remotely and in person at the same time. They must learn online learning platforms to engage and instruct students.	Long days of new learning for teachers that was not compensated nor was appropriate professional development provided
Finding 2: The Daily Grind Related to COVID-19 Protocols and Mandates	New mandates from the state level and local health departments add responsibilities to classroom teachers.	Contact tracing, social distancing, cleaning measures, students eating in classroom, masking
Finding 3: The Strain on Physical and Mental Health and Depleted Morale	Teachers must maintain and increase student engagement under challenging circumstances both at school/work and home.	Increased work demands, worries about health and contracting COVID-19, lack of psychological safety
Finding 4: Decreased Trust In and Blame of Teachers	Administration explicitly and implicitly stated expectations about safety and perceptions related to COVID-19.	Inability to work from home, social media accounts were watched by administration
Finding 5: Changes in School Environments/Settings	Teachers were required to change their physical classroom space and ways of teaching to meet mandates and increase safety.	Social distancing (6 feet), students eating in the classroom, remote teaching

Finding One: Shift in Expectations of Teachers Related to Their Job Descriptions

This finding was evident in how teachers shared specific examples related to shifts in pedagogy during the onset and continuation of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. These varied in formats of delivery of instruction, assignments, and materials. Additional changes in expectations placed on teachers related to communication. Interviewee A stated that the initial expectation of the administration was that teachers needed to have a daily presence with students online and be there to support emotional needs; grades and assessment could take a backseat while engaging in remote learning and school closures. However, by the time Fall of 2020 Interviewee A stated that there was more of an emphasis on returning to normal even though the

world and remote learning were far from back to normal academic routines. In reference to the changes in expectations during the school closures and remote learning, Interview Participant A said:

> ...I found myself working some very full days and some very long days. And the other about having all of my school stuff and everything right there in my basement was, was very much that on the one hand, many remote workers might say, "Oh, that's lovely." Like, I have some convenience, and I don't have to make the commute. On the other hand, I also felt like I never left work. Because it was always right there in my basement, and I might need to do something.

Interview Participant B echoed a similar response to Interview Participant A about working all hours of the day to meet various students' needs while working remotely. She mentioned the amount of uncompensated time she spent making recordings and videos for students who did not or could not attend live lessons.

Additional changes in expectations included the delivery of instruction to online platforms. For many teachers, this modality of instruction and teaching was brand new. Interview Participant B shared that she felt one of the hardest parts of her job change was related to transferring her instruction to online learning platforms that she had never used before virtually overnight. This was a learning curve for many teachers at the elementary level who were previously more accustomed to hands-on learning away from screens. Participant C stated that it was nearly impossible for her to teach reading skills such as phonics when students could not see her mouth through the mask she wore while in-person learning occurred. Participant C stated that during the initial school closure, many of her young students did not have access to devices or the internet, and therefore, she did not have face-to-face contact and would send home paper

packets of independent work as required by her district, but they could not replace in-person instruction for young students. When Participant C returned to in-person learning with first graders in the Fall of 2020 she shared:

> We were in person with masks, with dividers up on student desks. We could only do small groups for like seven minutes at a time or something. I mean, we were expected to sanitize in between. I made my own makeshift (barrier) because my district didn't provide anything. . . made a makeshift barrier to put in between the students at my table and myself, just to provide that extra layer because I was so nervous. I'm immunocompromised. I have some health concerns in that regard, but it's not enough to maybe stay home all the time if that makes sense. But it was just scary. It's not like you don't want to do your job, but how do you do your job?

Participant C had two small children at home as well as two older children to think about as she worked. These new routines of sanitation and trying to figure out how to still provide academically and developmentally appropriate instruction weighed on her as she had to keep everyone's health and safety at the forefront. Feeling nervous was something many interview participants mentioned. Participant C added that her new job description also included the attempts to keep masks on first graders' faces amid outrageous behaviors. This included explaining to students that they could not lick or chew on their masks which became toys and distractions to learning. She said that over time she did play catch-up in learning how to implement additional technology into her teaching repertoire. She and her students also benefited from some of the free trials of curriculum that companies offered such as *Reading A to Z* which was previously not affordable for her district.

Participant D stated that they used Schoology when they first went remote and then switched to a new math and a new reading curriculum for self-contained classrooms in her urban district. All the learning for the implementation of the new curriculum was done remotely for teachers and students. She went on to say that the district was constantly giving them new apps or websites to try claiming "it was endless." However, Participant D claimed it was impossible to enforce expectations with students who would not turn their cameras on but would be logged into a Zoom meeting. She stated that she had no way of making students comply or turn their cameras on and then keep them on. Participant D stated that her administration wanted her to call the parents of students who did not have their cameras on during the middle of the Zoom session. However, she found this challenging because she was expected to call parents of students with their cameras off at the same time she was to instruct students who were present. She said she finally had to ignore those with their cameras off instead of abandoning the ones who were present for their Zoomed lessons. At the end of the session, interview Participant D shared that it was evident that students did not complete their work and that the ripple effects of that would be present for quite some time.

Interview Participant F, a rural teacher, shared that her job endured drastic changes as the last three months of the 2020 school year turned instruction into paper packets, similar to blizzard bags for when inclement weather closed schools, that parents picked up and students worked on from home. She expressed that the emphasis was not on school and that everyone was in shock and going through the motions. After realizing the packets were not going to work and they were not meeting instructional needs, her district allowed teachers to come together to try and figure out a plan to combat technology deficits and find effective ways to teach. She moved to focus on how to engage students with remote learning in the fall. This included using tools

such as TikTok, Screencastify, and Google Classroom. She claimed that she would record videos using Screencastify to teach a concept but was unsure if students watched the instruction. Additionally, she tried to keep things fresh by wearing silly glasses and other antics to garner attention from the students and engage them in learning online. She shared that when students returned to in-person learning it was like they were starting over. Participant F shared:

> When we came back face to face, it was almost like starting over again on so many levels, and we still talk about it. There was just so much lost in that time frame, kids having that structure and having that routine. So, coming back was more than just, oh let's open up this book, or let's hit this. There is so much more to it than going back to the actual content. It was teaching kids that it's okay to socialize, and teaching kids that there may be new rules. As far as the water fountain, it was almost like starting over for going from teaching so many years to, okay, this is it.

She shared that she felt the best way to carry out her new role as a COVID-19 teacher was to keep everything as simple as possible. This included communication, digital platform usage, and instructional tools to not further complicate or increase stress for students or teachers. Instead of teaching in isolation as many teachers normally do during the pandemic, she shared that teachers would take turns recording different videos for different days and then share them with the teacher team. The remote aspect of her job became an exercise in collaboration. This created downtime during her workday in the building without students there and allowed for longer lunches and bathroom breaks. However, after some time had passed the novelty wore off and Participant F just wanted students back in the building.

Participant G discussed how her job changed as a suburban teacher who scrambled to gather the necessary materials to do her job from home. She said that she grabbed her document

camera, computer, Chromebook, and curriculum supplies to prepare to teach from her home. Her district gave them a week to figure out how to teach online. However, due to the sudden school closure, students did not have their materials which made more work for the teacher who then had to upload copies of everything for students to use. Her district would not even allow small groups or individual students back in the building to retrieve their belongings after the school closures. She felt that the parents were very supportive and helpful to students as a whole, but that teachers were required to put in a lot of prep time with parents so that students could be successful. She noted that in her community they often faced internet connection issues as whole neighborhoods would be without internet on certain days due to over-usage. Participant G also stated that the digital and remote expectations of teachers in the spring left some colleagues who were less savvy in tears as they tried to navigate new instructional norms. She said that this led to teachers virtually teaching other teachers how to prepare for teaching students online which made for busy evenings in preparation for the following morning. Interview participant G shared that the changes in her job description impacted her family too by sharing:

> There were some nights my husband was like, well, my youngest son at the time was a freshman in college, so we had to move him home in the middle of all this too. So, he was trying to take classes as well, online. And I remember a couple of days in a row, literally, my husband and my son, and it was like 7:00 at night, and they're like, are we having dinner today? What's going on? You're still working? And I was like, I know I'm still working with a kid. I'm sorry. I'm still working with the student. I'm really sorry. But this is somebody who hasn't been to class for four days, and now they finally are here, and the parent has reached out, and this is the only time because they only have one computer in their house, and mom and dad are both done using the computer.

Teachers who had children at home steered through additional challenges as they maintained family expectations fulfilling parental roles and their teacher roles.

Teachers found themselves in whole new learning curves when it came to the expectations and changes in their job descriptions. These changes shifted during the pandemic as grace, or a pass was often granted from March to May of 2020. As Participant C shared some students completely missed out on learning because they did not have the resources to provide Internet and devices for all students. Participant G said that they were at the mercy of parents to check their emails and aid young elementary students on top of their own jobs and family responsibilities. However, more stringent requirements and expectations were put in place for students and teachers in the Fall of 2020 after a season of summer planning and the recognition that learning could not be put on hold. Participant G stated that pandemic teaching was a period of trial and error. Although the specific expectations of teachers remained a moving target the interview participants were not shy to mention the added stressors of the changes in a relatively steady job description prior to the onset of the pandemic. These stressors were exacerbated by the daily grind of new protocols and mandates explained in finding 2.

Finding Two: The Daily Grind Related to COVID-19 Protocols and Mandates

Constantly changing protocols and mandates led to incessant changes to routines and expectations for Midwest elementary teachers. These expectations impacted finding 1 of the research study because there was a shift in the job descriptions and expectations of teachers as a direct result of COVID-19. Suddenly, teachers had additional responsibilities that included contacting students when an exposure occurred and a student was ill, social distancing, cleaning and disinfecting measures, and mask-wearing to name a few. Participant B expressed that she felt like the "mask police" as she was constantly reminding elementary students to keep their masks

over their noses and mouths. This was a hard task as elementary students struggled to do so all day. Participant C stated that she did not have time to teach what she needed to, let alone keep up with disinfecting every surface throughout the day and disinfect any resources or manipulatives that were used by students before another student could use them. Participant C also noted that the health mandates were not possible in her small, old-school building because she had 19 to 20 first graders who were supposed to be three feet apart because that was all that was possible as opposed to the recommended six-foot mandates. She said it was nearly impossible to keep six-year-olds from touching or interacting with each other as the mandates called for.

Participant D shared that her district kept sending mandates for remote learning but that the curriculum and resources they had were not developed for online instruction. She claimed that she and her colleagues would tell district administration that it did not work, but they were told to try anyway; so they would go back to trying something with low thresholds of academic success. When she and her students returned to in-person instruction in February of 2021, she said the focus was on all the things students could not do. For example, in her class of 28 students, the students could not be less than six floor tiles apart, could not stand in lines next to friends, could not get water out of the drinking fountains, and could not use the restroom when others were in the bathroom. She did state the COVID-19 mandates kept students quieter because there was less small talk and whispering when students are socially distanced and six feet from their peers during instruction and independent work time. One of the tasks that Participant D mentioned in reference to mandates was constantly asking students to put masks over their noses, stop licking their masks, and remind them to stop chewing on their masks. The added mask elements created more corrective directives throughout the school day.

Interview Participant E stated that there was a huge neglect of students with IEPs because they were unable to support their accommodations with health mandates or remote learning. She felt as though the gaps continued to grow larger over time. She also stated that the typical lack of parent support widened with the pandemic. In her district, they did not complete ETRs (Evaluation Team Reports) for over a year which made it hard to distinguish between COVID-19 and academic deficits.

Participant G echoed other interviewees who stated that the COVID-19 protocols were hard to enforce because they were not consistently feasible with young children. An example that was provided was the six feet mandate because students are not robots who do exactly as they are told. These mandates led to a toll on teachers both physically and mentally as well as morale depletion which can be further explained in finding 3.

Finding Three: The Strain on Physical and Mental Health and Depleted Morale

This finding was ever present in the physical reactions and the anguish teachers expressed in word choice as they shared their experiences via interviews. Health in society was at the forefront of many during the mandates and as communities made decisions on how to move forward. Media outlets weighed in and opinions were scattered across the board as to what should be done. Interview participants were implementors of decisions but were often left out of the discussions. They were required to do as they were told and in addition deal with the fallout that physically and mentally wore on.

Interview Participant C stated that the strain and stressors from the 2020-2021 in-person schoolyear led her to seek professional therapy to share her thoughts. She said that she enjoyed the lockdown part of her teaching experience for safety and for feeling like she only had to go out for necessities but could be with her family more as they were isolated. Participant C shared

that she did end up getting COVID-19 even though she was vaccinated and extra cautious because of being immunocompromised. She said she lost significant weight and the challenge for her was that she was required to go back to work after 10 days because she tested negative, but she was physically depleted and not ready for the daunting task of being with students in an extra tumultuous and stressful season of education. The lack of substitute teachers increased this stress. She claimed, "It was chaos, to sum it up."

Interview Participant D stated that the students would get frustrated when digital materials did not work properly which had a domino effect on her and other students. She stated that "it was just a mess . . . and there was always something" in reference to morale. She felt that she received a needed mental break from the classroom and that she had time and energy to be more physically active during remote learning. She said that she lost weight while teaching from home and gained weight when she returned to school. Participant D stated that morale was low because teachers are social creatures and people were separated. She expressed that in her personal life, she would Zoom with family and have window conversations using a phone or special marker to write messages to her grandson on the window of his house.

Participant F shared that with any major event that there is always division. In her building and district, she experienced the divisiveness of different opinions on health and safety for staff and students. She shared that in her small rural community where she was also a parent, she made it known to her superintendent that she wanted students to be in school face-to-face. She said the strong opinions on both sides made for some tense environments where discussions turned into debates at work in the school setting. She said that it was not that she did not feel supported by her district, but she had a different opinion on how things should be handled. From a community perspective, Participant F touted that the community also had varying opinions but

that teachers tried to block it out and push through. As a parent and teacher, she mentioned the additional stressors such as having to hire a high school student to be at her house where the high school student and her two children were all doing their learning simultaneously from home because she and her husband were both teachers and had to report to their school building each day. In conclusion of her responses, Participant F stated that she was just relieved and glad the COVID-19 pandemic had finally passed over.

Participant G shared that elementary teacher morale was low saying:

> It was just so hard. You didn't have that camaraderie that you have when you go to work every day. You walk in on a normal day, and you walk into school, and you say hi to everybody or, hey, how's your day going? Or how was your night last night? Or your weekend? Or whatever, and you didn't really have that. So that was kind of the first part of the stuff that we noticed is that you didn't really have that. But we would do Google Meet as a team. But instead of it being, hey, how's your life? How's the kids, how's this? It became, oh, my gosh, how do you do this? I can't do this. What are you guys going to do about this? It became more of how do we put out the fires kind of conversation. Instead of, I'll say, just your jovial daily life sharing stuff with colleagues and friends, it became all we were doing was trying to figure out how to survive until were done teaching online. And what did that look like? And how do we do this? And what's the next thing that we have to send out to parents? Or what do we need the kids to do, and how do we get the kids to do this and how do we do this? And it was a constant, trying to figure out the next piece because you didn't know what the next piece was going to entail kind of a thing. And I know teachers were going to quit if they had to go online in the fall. I know for sure that if we would have been forced to stay remote, they were going to

quit. Because they just couldn't take the stress of the computers and all that, and they just weren't going to do it again. So, I know we had some like that, and I'll be honest, I know there's been some residual from that.

This strain on morale and the idea of putting out fires was present in multiple interviews. Priorities changed which led to survival and preparation for the next school session. This was a challenging task that pushed teachers mentally and physically as stated by interviewees. Participant G felt that more novice teachers who were at the beginning of their careers really struggled because they never received the comradery or support that was necessary because everyone was overwhelmed. She went on to cite a case where a colleague left the profession after teaching her first year online and then spending two more years in person trying to recover but never grasping her footing in the field of education due to a rocky career start. The hardest part for her was the fact that after three months of remote learning, she was told that everyone would just pass or fail which turned into everyone passing because you could not fail anyone. This led to a significant amount of wasted time trying to track down assignments for letter grades, manage remote interventions, and assess learning while in a remote environment.

The strain on physical and mental health and morale was monumental on teachers during the pandemic. Interview Participants C and E were strongly considering what else they could do with their education degrees during the pandemic due to the overwhelming stress. Interview Participant D moved districts for relief during the pandemic.

Finding Four: Decreased Trust In and Blame of Teachers

Teachers noted a decreased sense of trust and even felt blamed that they were doing something wrong if they contracted COVID-19. This created an unsafe psychological space for teachers as they navigated life and teaching in person. For example, Participant C stated that she

witnessed other teachers become looked down upon if a teacher became ill. She felt this form of gossip occurred with both upper administration and at the building levels claiming that a teacher was not being safe or was being selfish if they became ill. She said this increased stress and tension among teachers because there was fear that even if you were wearing your mask and using cleaning protocols you could get sick, and others would blame you or they would struggle to find staffing. This increased guilt and pressure on teachers because they would cause more work for colleagues if they were to get sick. Interview Participant C said this went on for some time and was exacerbated by social media posts or pressure to get the vaccine. Interview Participant C noted that there was significant misguided finger-pointing or mistrust under pressure and tense circumstances. She also shared how stress was placed on her when she was forced to contact trace students who had school exposures and then make up lessons and work for those students who were subjected to the virus or tested positive. She also stated that administrators "never truly care what we think." She claimed that additional mistrust and blame of teachers came when vaccines came out and teachers had varying opinions about getting vaccines which caused "a lot of unnecessary ruffling of feathers." She said that in her district there was a large production of the superintendent being the first to get the "jab" or vaccine for COVID-19 in front of the staff at a vaccine clinic.

Interview Participant A noted that mistrust in his district was highlighted when teachers were required to complete remote learning from the school building; in other words, he was required to Zoom or hold virtual classes from his in-person classroom instead of doing the same thing at home while students were learning from their homes. He believed that there was mistrust from the administration and that it seemed to come from a place of desire that there would not be empty parking lots at school during the day and that teachers would truly be working if they

were in the classroom versus at home. Additionally, this created hardships for teachers who had young children at home because they now had to come to school with their teaching parents for their learning instead of being able to be home like other children in the neighborhood. It's important to note that many in many professions and fields employees were allowed to work from home during the pandemic to reduce the risk of coronavirus spread.

Interview Participant D said that she felt the administration did not believe teachers or thought that teachers were making excuses when she would share her struggles with the curriculum that was not fit for remote instruction. She said she and her colleagues were not trying to get out of work but could not authentically replicate hands-on experiences for elementary students while remote.

Participant F stated that she and her colleagues still believed that they were experiencing the residual effects of COVID-19 three years after the onset. Participant C and Participant F both stated that the administration shared that they could not continue to use the pandemic as an excuse for deficits. However, Participant C believes that ". . . it's the harsh reality that the effects of it are going to be felt for quite some time on academic, on an emotional, personal, and social level." Participant F alluded to similar sentiments as Participant C when it came to feeling overwhelmed and trying to maintain balance. Participant F stated that she did not fault the district for shortcomings because she believes no one could have predicted the events that took place in the educational system during the pandemic. One of the challenging parts from a physical perspective was the fact that she was a mom and a teacher in the district. She shared how she was still responsible for reporting to school from Fall of 2020 to February of 2021 even though the students were learning from home the whole time.

Participant F shared that she felt as though the district had the same routine expectations for teachers as experienced before the pandemic but gave students more grace. When teachers experience a lack of trust or differing standards this can lead to morale depletion and added strain of physical and mental wellbeing. This was first shown in survey results and further explained in the interviewee's responses.

Finding Five: Changes in School Environments/Settings

Elementary schools became a different environment due to the changes that were made to preserve as much of the school routines and keep them intact while also creating a safe setting for learning. For example, Interview Participant C described steps such as measuring between desks to try and accommodate as much social distancing in a small room. Interview Participant C noted that she would often go to her car to eat so that she could get fresh air and take off her mask because they eliminated the teachers' lounge due to space in her building and the teachers were asked to eat in the library on a stage. She also stated that students were given extra recess breaks and were also asked to eat in their classrooms instead of the cafeteria. Over the past two years, Participant C noted that there are some students who really missed out, and six of her third-grade students this past year were not identified for support because they were trying to decipher what the root of deficits were and if it was COVID-19-related or not.

Interview Participant D, a teacher at an urban elementary school, said that she missed the social part and developing relationships with students. This sentiment was echoed by all interview participants as replication of the social community was more difficult to authentically achieve in the online platforms. Interview Participant D shared that it was one of her best years in terms of communication with other staff members because she could choose who she wanted to talk to and who she did not want to talk to. For example, she would turn her microphone off if

she did not want to talk or chose to turn the sound off if another teacher was venting and she did not want to listen to it. She said communication level with some students was split with some being more challenging and other students who talked more because they were in the comfort of their own homes. Another thing was that she felt that there was less rushing around during remote learning and that she could touch base with parents and administrators who popped into Zoom sessions more easily.

Interview Participant F, an urban intervention specialist, stated that she witnessed lots of trauma unfolding in the lives of students with emotional disturbances when traditional supports were taken away because of the pandemic which changed their educational environment. She said she "never worked harder" than during pandemic instruction. In humor, she said that she had more bathroom breaks than ever before as it is typically a struggle to get classroom coverage to be excused from elementary students. She talked about motivating students by mailing prizes and rewards to students with her own money. She said she was willing to do whatever it took to motivate and engage with students during the trials of education and the pandemic.

Interview Participant F stated that she and her colleagues were close and that helped tremendously with the transition to remote planning in a new instructional environment. She believed that nothing could replace the face-to-face instructional setting. Participant F stated the district spent a lot of money on barriers that were not effective in containing a virus but did help with comfort levels. She said there was no training on instructional technology for teachers and the attitude was "figure it out" because there was no time to plan or prepare for in-depth professional development. One of the most striking changes to the school environment was the shift in mental health for students. Participants E and F stated that students were not mentally prepared to make it through a school day or have the stamina to persevere through a school day

without some form of breakdown after being remote and returning to in-person learning. This was a marked change and caused Participant F much concern because she said it impacted the whole environment and caused other students to feed into the tone. She expressed that many students were needing to be excused from the classroom setting more than ever before. She even wondered if some of the lack of stamina, distractibility, confusion, and mental health concerns were due to increased time on computers and the internet during remote learning.

Participant G shared that teachers experienced new settings as she entered a student's "homelife" through their computer screen. She expressed how shocked she was when students were unable to produce notebook paper or pencils and various other materials that were necessary for school online. She said at one point her relatively affluent suburban district even held a drive-through food drive because the need was so high due to parents being out of work. She said counselors would take food to drop off at students' homes. Participant G stated that she saw a "new angle" that she had not experienced through the computer screen as she received a window looking into a child's home life and additional needs that are not always visible at school. Participant G said that while teaching online students would fall asleep on screen or she would have to tell all the students to get off Google Meet because of something inappropriate happening in a student's home. Then she would post a new link after 10 minutes and they would resume class. Participant H said that she often witnessed the television loudly playing the in background when students were in "remote class". Participant G said that students with perfectionistic tendencies really struggled because they could not get the reassurance they needed to keep going. In her district students did not have access to their materials or belongings because they were still at school when the school closures occurred. Eventually, at the end of the

year, Participant G said that teachers were called in by the classroom to gather student belongings to be sent home with parents for the summer.

Changes in the school environment or setting were present in the surveyed results and in the interviews. The school setting did not matter because changes abound as mandates and protocols were in place to keep schooling going and attempt to move learning forward.

Triangulation

The five findings have been triangulated below in Table 5 to show where the findings appeared in the research. Each of the five meaningful findings were present in the survey and in the interviews. There was no definable difference in terms of school settings (rural, suburban, and urban districts) related to the major findings. There were small differences from district to district based on access to funding and technology or the decisions that individual school districts made.

Table 5

Triangulation Table

Findings	School Setting	Present in Survey	Present in Interview
Finding 1: Shift in Teaching Expectations Associated with Job Descriptions	Suburban, Urban, Rural	X	X
Finding 2: The Daily Grind Related to COVID-19 protocols and Mandates	Suburban, Urban, Rural	X	X
Finding 3: The Strain on Physical and Mental Health and Depleted Morale	Suburban, Urban, Rural	X	X
Finding 4: Decreased Trust In and Blame of Teachers	Suburban, Urban, Rural	X	X
Finding 5: Changes in School Environments/Settings	Suburban, Urban, Rural	X	X

Interview Dissonance

It's important to note that Interview Participant D shared many similarities to other participants with one striking difference. As a veteran teacher in an urban district who changed her teaching role to a new grade level, she stated that the COVID-19 experience, "probably saved my teaching career." She went on to state, "I was at a point where I was terribly burned out." Interview Participant D said that her class during the 2019-2020 schoolyear was challenging, to say the least, and it was the pandemic that brought her relief. This took the form of relaxed expectations from the administration and the opportunity to teach from home. She went on to thoughtfully share that the pandemic and the reduced workload in the Spring of 2020 allowed her the time and space to reflect. She shared:

> I was holding on by a thread mentally to get through the year. And when it broke and we first got the three weeks down, it was like, okay. It was like, I'm taking a mental break. I need this. And then when we didn't go back the rest of that school year and we were online, it was a godsend for me. It was just an absolute godsend! It really let me take a deep breath, really let me give some time to really think did I want to stay in this profession. This is what I wanted to do, all those things. It gave me a real break. And then when we went back and I went into fifth grade, I had reevaluated, and I felt much better about going back. . . . So that gave me a lot of time to really evaluate where I was. So, the pandemic saved me, as far as I was concerned. It gave me a lot of time and I needed to have that time.

Interview Participant D switched grade levels and taught remotely from March 2020 to the end of February 2021. Her experiences related to the mounting pressures placed on teachers prior to the pandemic and challenging students with a lack of support was crushing. However,

the pandemic allowed for a reset. It allowed her freedom to breathe and reassess her goals as a teacher. Her teaching experience during the pandemic was not immune to the pressures and stressors of remote teaching. She too shared in the struggles of figuring out Zoom and working with a group of deaf students and an ASL interpreter online. She expressed how much she learned and stated that she "started to enjoy teaching again." She stated that she missed the relationship pieces with students because the point of connection was very different than in years past. Interview Participant D stated that she had "personal positives and professional negatives" during remote teaching. This experience was contrary to all of the other interview participants who shared mainly their frustration and increased stress levels due to teaching during the COVID-19 experience.

Summary of Chapter

These findings indicate that there were significant changes in teachers' job descriptions and a decrease in teacher morale. The data that were present in the survey was supported and strengthened by interview responses that clarified and gave specific examples. Interview Participant G said that teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was the hardest thing that she had done in her 32-year career, and she never wanted to do it again in her lifetime; but if she had it to do again, she could probably do it better. The interview participants were able to share a narrative of what it was like to be an elementary teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers faced a shift in their job description due to the daily grind of COVID-19 mandates and changes in the school setting or environment. This led to a strain on teachers' mental and physical health and in some cases a mistrust of the administration due to their lack of support. These experiences impacted teachers, students, families, and communities. It is important to

understand and document the lived experiences of Midwest elementary school teachers so that we can be better prepared for future disruptions to the educational system.

CHAPTER V

DISSERTATION RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed methods, autoethnographic biographical research study was to understand how Midwest elementary school teachers describe the changes in their job descriptions and their morale during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the nature of this research and in many ways, the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic throughout this research period, a dearth of research existed in the realm of teacher's experiences during the pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had not experienced a major disruption to the educational system of this magnitude in their lifetimes. The existing research and literature proved a lack of information specifically related to the experiences of teachers in the field. Therefore, this research study worked to build the foundation of findings of Midwest elementary school teachers' lived experiences including how they described changes in their job descriptions and their morale during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summary of Study

This study worked to address the void of the teacher's voice in the documentation of Midwest elementary education after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study revealed that teachers' job descriptions changed significantly, and there was a continued morale deterioration based on contributing factors from the pandemic as cited by teachers. These examined data shared the lived experiences of Midwest elementary school teachers as they described changes in their job descriptions and morale (personally and professionally) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provided a window of insight into the roles, struggles, and triumphs of teachers as they navigated uncharted territory. Data were collected from 35 surveys

and interviews of eight elementary school teachers in the Midwest. The survey and interview questions were drawn from the research questions in order to garner specific details and identify themes across differing types of school districts (rural, suburban, and urban). In exploring the findings related to changes in job descriptions and elementary teachers' morale from this study, one can understand what occurred or was experienced and how to move beyond and learn how to assist educators as well as prepare for future disruptions to the educational system. This includes taking new learning that came out of necessity and identifying what positive contributions to the field of education can be carried forward from the onset of the pandemic.

This chapter begins by sharing a summary of meaningful findings from the research study. These findings are organized by each research question. Next, the discussion section provides a synthesis of the findings and examines their significance in the larger context. The following section includes the significance of the study. The subsequent section evaluates future research considerations and includes a final conclusion.

Summary of Findings

The summary of findings section provides an overview of the meaningful findings for each of the two research questions and considers possible causes for the results. In addition to the findings, the demographics of the participants are included to show teachers' experiences based on differing school board decisions and local health department recommendations.

As a summary of tables presented in Chapter 4 that share the demographics of participants in a non-probabilistic, purposeful, two-tier sampling, there were 35 completed surveys and then eight follow-up interviews were conducted. The survey was sent to principals at nine suburban schools, nine urban schools, and nine rural schools for a total of 27 buildings based on Midwest Department of Education contact information. A total of only eight of those

principals receiving the survey responded that they would forward the survey to their staff. Since teachers did not have to identify their specific school district it is unknown if more than eight principals forwarded the survey request or not. The only identifying information that was asked of the teacher response was the type of Midwest school district (rural, suburban, and urban) they were employed by. This in turn meant that there was less control over the survey respondents and the research was on the willingness of those who agreed to participate and took the time to complete the Likert scale survey. It should also be noted that based on the timing of the majority of research surveys and virtual interviews took place between the end of July and early August when Midwest elementary teachers were preparing for a new school year, attending professional development sessions, and setting up their classrooms on personal time for a new school year. This timing may have impacted the data based on which teachers were checking their school emails on summer break. The survey may have reached fewer teachers which had the potential to change the sample due to timing than if the survey was sent during the active portion of the school year. Seventy-five percent of the survey respondents indicated they taught in a suburban school. Forty-four percent of the respondents had been teaching for over 21 years. Roughly, 36% of the teachers taught in a Midwest elementary school building with a population of more than 800 students. Survey participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. In summation, the sample was Midwest elementary school teachers who taught at least two years before the onset of the pandemic. This requirement was put in place to mitigate new teacher nuances in the data. All of these teachers in the sample experienced a statewide school shutdown. However, different districts responded in varying ways to the recommendations for keeping individuals based on local health departments and school boards.

The local-level decisions altered the experiences, and ultimately the data, of teachers from beyond the end of the school year and into the 2020-2021 school year.

Research Question 1 (RQ 1)

How do elementary school teachers in the Midwest describe changes in their job descriptions during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research question one resulted in three meaningful findings including a shift in teaching expectations associated with job description, a daily grind related to COVID-19 protocols and mandates, and changes in the school environment and setting. These findings are all interrelated because the changes in a teacher's job description impacted their daily grind or routine and the school environment or setting. A change in one experience led to an impact on another finding. These findings were present in both the survey results and the interview data.

Meaningful Finding One: Shift in Teaching Expectations Associated With Job Descriptions

Analysis of the data showed that teachers experienced significant shifts in the expectations placed upon them related to their job descriptions. Teachers became digital teachers and moderators for students as they navigated schooling at home online for at least two and a half months, and some teachers shared that they taught remotely for roughly a year as students continued online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a shift from traditional methods of teaching to moderating online discussions, teaching lessons over a screen, planning for digital assignments, interacting online, providing digital feedback and assessments of learning, and recording instructional videos, to name just a few of the changes in expectations. Interview Participant B, a 29-year veteran teacher, described the shift in teaching expectations as being, "Thrown into the deep end and then learning how to swim." Over 97% of teachers indicated in the survey that they either significantly or fully need to change the way they

provided instruction or lessons to students because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These shifts in expectations impacted the daily routines of Midwest elementary teachers.

Meaningful Finding Two: The Daily Grind Related to COVID-19 Protocols and Mandates

The data clearly suggest that there was a new daily grind or routine enforced that added to teachers' job descriptions solely based on COVID-19 protocols and mandates. Teachers cleaning students' desks and manipulatives, books sitting in quarantine bins for days between students to avoid the spread of germs, teachers eating with students in their classrooms, and contact tracing processes became new duties that quickly rose to the forefront of teacher tasks each day as teachers were expected to maintain health department and district protocols and mandates. Teachers donned a new hat, serving as the "mask" police who enforced the proper wearing of face masks and related hygiene. Teachers shared how daunting these tasks were at the elementary level as students were unaware or unable to keep socially distant and maintain mask-wearing. These daily tasks became the foundation of the exhausting daily grind. Several teachers expressed that this was not what they had signed up for when they embarked on their teaching journeys. Many felt that these changes in their job descriptions and expectations were too much to be managed alone without the proper resources, encouragement, and support from the administration. This period for teachers was hallmarked by the looming feelings of how long this would go on and being overwhelmed with the daily grind. Interview Participant G shared her feelings on the daily grind while remote teaching:

> You know, teaching online, I'll be honest, this is my thirty-second-year teaching, and it was the hardest thing I have ever done, absolutely the hardest thing I have ever had to do. And I'm a pretty tech-savvy kind of person so I know other people (teachers) in my hallway who are not tech-savvy . . . they would call me crying, please help. Then I was

> trying to teach them (teachers) at night how to do stuff so that they could do it the next day with their students. So, it was hard on everybody, that's for sure.

Meaningful Finding Five: Changes in School Environments/Settings (also present in RQ 2)

Finding 5 is evident in both research questions 1 and 2 as it highlights the changes in the school environment or setting specifically related to the teachers' job description for research question 1 and the changes in the school environment that impacted morale for research question 2. Traditional schooling behind four classroom walls turned into virtual classrooms on a screen, paper packets, and digital assignments according to interview participants. These new instructional norms were time-consuming, and teachers were not compensated for their extra time. Many teachers expressed that they taught themselves how to use digital tools. Interview Participant H described the remote setting:

> We really were expected to the best of our ability to provide the same level of instruction and assessment online as they got in person. And so those summative assessments I was tracking with my colleagues and doing those online. What I found was so difficult online was the formative assessment that sort of you walk around the room and look over kids' shoulders to see what they understand and craft your teaching towards that. That just was absent in an online setting.

Interview participants also noted that it was challenging to know what students were doing independently and what parents were doing for them in remote settings. In other words, it was challenging to accurately assess student learning authentically. Other interview participants expressed issues with the remote setting and getting student participation such as turning on a camera in a Zoom or online setting. When teachers returned to in-person learning, they shared that the setting had drastically changed and that they were unable to conduct class in a normal

manner. This was due to the lack of interactions and collaborative work that could take place. Teachers shared that, to minimize physical interactions, students ate in their classrooms, adhered to staggered bathroom access schedules, and followed unique recess options. Teachers expressed that the isolation was challenging for staff and students.

The findings from research question 1 affirm that teachers experienced significant changes in their job descriptions. This included the expectations placed on teachers, which led to new daily routines and the changes in the setting in which teachers worked. These findings suggest that teacher livelihoods were drastically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the literature, educator efficacy and their livelihoods are critical to the success of schools (Pressley, 2021; Will, 2021). If teachers are isolated, they may not feel as though they are able to carry out their role. The data showed that norms and expectations for teachers were vastly different as they navigated remote instruction, digital platforms, and new health mandates that altered their daily tasks. These modality differences were also present in the review of literature (Ark 2021; Heider, 2021; Herman et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2020; Will, 2021). The findings were similar across school settings (rural, suburban, and urban) and building sizes. According to interviewees, different districts made different decisions in the findings based on access to funding such as developing paper packets to send home and returning to in-person learning in the fall of 2020 versus more affluent districts which were able to supply every student with Chromebooks and hot spots if needed and remain in a remote learning format. This affected the specifics of each finding. The amount of support staff that was able to assist teachers varied from district to district which impacted the level of support that teachers received.

Research Question 2 (RQ 2)

What were the elements of life that impacted morale (personally and professionally) during the COVID-19 pandemic as described by teachers?

Research question 2 also resulted in three meaningful findings that described the impact on teacher morale during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings included a strain on the physical and mental health and depleted morale, a decreased level of trust and blame of teachers for situations, and changes in the physical setting or environment (also noted in RQ 1). These findings were mentioned across school setting types (rural, suburban, and urban) and within different-sized school buildings. During semi-structured interviews, these findings tended to bring about more emotional responses as teachers described their experiences. Interviewees pinpointed specific experiences that led to morale deterioration both personally and professionally because of their experiences of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meaningful Finding Three: The Strain on Physical and Mental Health and Depleted Morale

Based on the survey and interview data, the majority of teachers experienced physical and mental health strain and morale depletion. Some teachers indicated that their jobs had new components that demanded more working hours to plan and prepare for students and remote lessons. Teachers who started teaching in person under the strictest health and safety mandates, before vaccines were available, indicated that there were concerns over getting COVID-19 at school and infecting their families due to their increased exposure in school settings. Interview Participant C shared her fears about being immunocompromised and teaching elementary students in person while also having two small children at home. She feared that she would get sick or bring it home to her children. Teachers shared that stress increased and morale decreased

among staff members. This was due to changing job expectations, COVID-19 mandates, health concerns, and worldwide stressors and fears. Interview Participant A shared:

> I think at first there was a period of shock that spring, and I think we were looking more outward at what was going on outside of our school. . . .That second year, we realized how heavily it impacted us. . . . I would probably say at first, I think morale took a dip just in the sense of how fast we were trying to work and make online learning happen. So, I think there was just that overwhelming feeling with how much you're investing in new instructional strategies and preparing materials and making them available online and communicating in new ways that you hadn't before. So, I think we were a little bit worn down by that. But then it seemed almost as if once things seemed like they were heading back towards normal, whatever we might define that as. I think you saw very quickly administration started to have conversations about how we close gaps. And I think that's when I personally had more of a frustration with school and a letdown about where we were going because again, I'll use that phrase again, I think it was a little bit of a rush back to normal. I don't think that it was a full accounting of the wholeness of the situation. . . . So to me, it was a very big deficit mindset. And so, in a roundabout way, it degrades your instruction, it degrades your experience.

Interview Participant A went on to share that there were initially some missed conversations about how the pandemic impacted students' mental health. The stress and strain on health were also exacerbated by the lack of trust in teachers which was identified as finding 4.

Meaningful Finding Four: Decreased Trust in and Blame of Teachers

As the pandemic lingered and stress and opinions were at an all-time high, the data showed that teachers experienced finger-pointing and mistrust when outbreaks occurred in a

school setting. Mistrust and blame came from both families in the community and administration. In the interviews, teachers also indicated that they were often left out of the decision-making arena and administrators would make decisions without consulting teachers. Some teachers felt that they would be held responsible if they had an outbreak in their class even if they were trying to manage all of the health and safety protocols. A few teachers stated that the administration was watching their interactions with colleagues to be sure they met mandates and watching vaccination statuses, which put pressure on teachers. Just over 94 percent of participants expressed that they had students' families that they were either somewhat, significantly, or fully frustrated with teachers regarding assignments and learning at home. Interview participants made note that they would get emails about how parents were unable to help or that it was not their job to teach their child at home because parents had to do their work. This left many elementary teachers feeling defeated because they were told they had to keep learning moving forward but there was only so much that could be done by teachers across a screen. Interview respondents cited upset parents, but that anger was misdirected because teachers were not making the decisions or mandates related to schools. Interview Participant C had this to share about mistrust from the administration:

> And you just hear through the grapevine of how the superintendent is so upset with them (for contracting COVID-19), and it's been a year and a half, man, people have to live their lives again. It was never me, but some of my coworkers, they would go to a concert or something, and then it was just a lot of misguided anger at people, at teachers really. And it's just like my gosh, we do so much, please give us a break. It never seemed like our input was ever valued, I mean it never is. They never really truly care what we think. It was just something else. It was terrible!

When there is a lack of trust or blame such as what was noted by teachers in the interviews, then it can lead to changes in the school environment or setting from a morale perspective as well such as in finding 5.

Meaningful Finding Five: Changes in School Environments/Settings (also present in RQ 1)

This finding was evident in the data as teachers expressed that the isolation of the school environment was challenging for staff and students. Teachers indicated that they were required to meet virtually even if their colleague was next door or across the hallway. This included wearing masks in the building and eating lunch alone to prevent the spread of germs. This isolation directly impacted morale with teachers citing that they felt alone. Interview Participant G said that her district was incredibly strict about teachers co-mingling and that they had an hour time slot to come into the school while masked and get teaching materials but that only one teacher was allowed in each grade level hallway at a time. Other participants noted similar guidelines, while one participant noted that in her district teachers enjoyed exercise sessions in between teaching remote sessions because there was more time to interact throughout the day than on traditional school days without the presence of students. Changes in the environment and setting varied by each interviewed teacher and school district.

The findings from research question 2 ratify that the surveyed and interviewed teachers described a deterioration of morale based on the COVID-19 pandemic teaching conditions. Teachers conveyed physical and mental stress which impacted their morale and health. Teachers were asked to alter their tasks and roles overnight but also carry out instructional standards in the most authentic way possible over a screen. Many interviewees cited increased and long hours attempting to connect with elementary students in remote settings. This caused disruptions and hardships to teachers' personal and family life. In addition, as the pandemic waned teachers

recognized a palpable level of mistrust and blame if they were to contract COVID-19 or if there was a traceable spread of illness within their classroom. The findings suggest that the pressure and scrutiny were high to maintain health and safety protocols with elementary students while keeping all students on track with instructional norms. This led to school settings and environments where teachers felt isolated from their colleagues and felt pressured to perform. The literature echoed these experiences as media outlets evaluated and weighed in on how schools should be operating (Ark, 2021; Herman et al., 2021).

Conclusion of the Findings

Research question 1 focused on the concrete and tangible changes in teachers' job descriptions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The categorical findings that addressed research question 1 were:

- Shifts in teaching expectations associated with job descriptions
- Changes in school environments/settings
- The daily grind related to implementing COVID-19 protocols and mandates (also connected with research question 2)

The COVID-19 pandemic created a shift in teaching expectations associated with teachers' job descriptions, which led to changes in the school environments or settings, which then translated into a unique daily grind in implementing specific COVID-19 protocols and mandates. The findings for research question 1 were highlighted in both the survey data and in the detailed descriptions provided in interviews with Midwest elementary school teachers.

Research question 2 focused on the bigger picture and included the elements of life that impacted morale from personal and professional standpoints as described by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The categorical findings from research question 2 were:

- Physical and mental health strain that depleted morale
- Decreased trust in and blame of teachers
- The daily grind related to implementing COVID-19 protocols and mandates (also connected with research question 1)

It was no surprise that there were major disruptions to Midwest elementary school teachers' job descriptions and morale. This research shared specific findings and told the stories of individual experiences in different settings (rural, suburban, and urban districts). Interview participants were reflective and at times emotional as they described the stressors and the situations they endured.

The important takeaways from this research are the stories that teachers told of experiencing significant disruptions to their daily lives and that through it all they were expected to maintain a sense of normalcy and continue to move children through learning experiences and opportunities, even as they maintained instructional standards through different modalities (i.e., fully remote learning). The critical piece was that there was much unknown about best practices and teachers and schools had little to no resources, training, or supports in place to carry out changing expectations. This led to less-than-ideal circumstances for staff and students. Similar to the medical field and other professions, many individuals figured out how to persevere through the COVID-19 pandemic; teachers moved learning forward in their unique ways. Several interview participants highlighted that if they were to experience another school shutdown or disruption, they would be better prepared based on the trial-by-fire experiences that occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this mixed methods, autoethnographic biographical research study was to understand the perspective of teachers as they described changes to their job description and morale after teaching during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking at the presented data from this study's research, comparing it to the available literature and theories of vulnerability and mindset highlighted five meaningful findings listed above and further explained in Chapter 4. Each of the research questions' findings has been examined and analyzed in the summary of findings section. The discussion section looks at the bigger picture of the findings and the impact of the experiences of teachers based on their job description changes and morale descriptions and how existing theory applies to the context of this research.

The survey and interview questions were written in direct calibration with the research questions. The survey data were in alignment with the interviewees' responses and provided additional clarity and examples of experienced situations. The overall sentiments shared by Midwest elementary school teachers had many similarities across the data. There were slight discrepancies in the interview data based on each teacher's experiences within their personal lives or specific school districts. For example, some school districts returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2020, while some school districts remained in a remote teaching format. Another discrepancy that stood out from the rest was a teacher, Interview Participant D, who highlighted that the pandemic created breathing room and space for her to rest, reflect, and become reenergized with the break from routine and her struggling class. Interview Participant D's experience begs the question as to whether other teachers shared her sentiments related to increased opportunities to reflect or seek refuge. Did other teachers feel relief from years of mental fatigue and teacher burnout as a direct result of the pandemic? Did the pandemic provide

a shakeup strong enough to reenergize other teachers in the same way as Interview Participant D? What did we learn from the pandemic and are we better prepared for future disruptions?

The patterns and themes that are relevant in this study were the ideas that teachers faced a shift in their job descriptions directly connected to the daily grind of COVID-19 mandates, changes to the instructional settings, and varying expectations of instruction and learning. This then led to an increased strain on teachers' mental and physical health and even mistrust of upper-level administration or leadership. These experiences were largely cited as new and often negative. Despite the negative experiences of teachers, there were positive attributes to the changes that came from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as an increased impetus towards technology integration in learning in the primary grade levels and a boost in students' capabilities and navigation of remote learning. Many elementary teachers and students were asked to move to fully online or digital modalities which was a forced learning opportunity for all. Understanding how teachers experienced these changes is important as we reflect on the pandemic teaching experience, teacher efficacy, and teachers' mindsets moving forward.

Looking through the theoretical lenses of Carol Dweck's (2013) work on mindset and Brené Brown's (2018) work on vulnerability and shame, one can understand the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. By utilizing these researchers' standpoints, one can view the strengths and weaknesses of teachers as they manage mindset challenges and the utmost need to be vulnerable to carry out their daily teacher tasks during pandemic instruction and maintain a level of optimal morale. Using theory as the building block of research allows the researcher to rest on the laurels of experience but then move forward with a lens of understanding in a new context, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Carol Dweck's (2013) work focused on the idea of fixed and growth mindsets. The overall findings of this research showed that teachers had to use a growth mindset to find new ways of teaching remotely and cope with the constantly changing mandates. Teachers were unable to carry out their previous ways of traditional teaching to engage students online and had to provide fully digital or paper packets of assignments. This was a significant shift in pedagogy for elementary teachers who are accustomed to hands-on learning, scaffolded lessons, and engaging in small groups of students. This shift directly influenced morale. A teacher's perceived morale over time must also be viewed in terms of mindset. Teachers who were able to embrace changes and connect with others instead of isolating themselves at home also found support when levels of morale dropped. Dweck (2013) advocated that an incremental or growth mindset produces evolution through experiences, thus allowing intelligence to develop over time. During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had to evolve their pedagogies with changing mandates and new circumstances. This process of growth was continuous and ongoing and by viewing the COVID-19 experience as a time of innovation, we can glean positive outcomes and learn from a less-than-desirable saga. In other words, the mindset of elementary teachers directly impacted their morale. Those teachers who could view the experience as a time of opportunity in the midst of challenges were able to access a growth mindset.

Brené Brown's work dives deeper into the states of a mindset. Brown's (2018) work reminds individuals to have courage and empathy while being vulnerable. Interview participants shared the vulnerable steps they took during the COVID-19 pandemic as they embarked on building digital lessons, daily entering the homes of families via a screen, and teaching remotely for months. This vulnerability produced mental strain and morale deterioration for interview respondents who did not agree with the mandates and administration or felt that they were not

being supported. Some interviewees were vulnerable in sharing that they felt they did not have a seat at the decision-making table. Interview respondents took a vulnerable leap with the researcher as they reflected on their experiences and shared their stories that were full of visible emotion as they spoke about recollections both positive and negative.

In addition to literature related to the theoretical lenses, the findings from this research fit within and build upon the literature that is presently available related to COVID-19. The literature review in Chapter 2 expressed that teachers faced hardships and morale suffered as a result of pandemic teaching (Ark 2021; Heider, 2021; Herman et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2022; Kennedy, 2020; Will, 2021). The findings of this research (surveys and interviews) indicated that there were changes to teaching expectations, changes to school environments, a new daily grind for school staff, decreased mental and physical health, and a decreased level of trust among teachers. This research then provided the details and insights of specific teachers' stories. It's important to provide qualitative documentation of the events to capture the firsthand experiences of teachers. Since this research is based on the onset of the pandemic and the direct results, it is important to understand that current literature does not give much space to the teacher's experiences in direct recollection. This research revealed that teachers wear a lot of hats every day. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the number of tasks or hats in those roles without compensation or alleviation from other responsibilities. For example, teachers added custodial and nursing duties to their daily tasks while also maintaining instruction. This research revealed that teachers felt that they had little input and there was a need for transparency and open communication between all parties. This included increased dialogue related to support and implementation of decisions with administrators. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded teachers

and all of us of our need to be flexible. This research also allows for expansion into future research and understanding.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The implications from the research are that teachers experienced significant changes to their job descriptions, and there was a decrease in morale. This research implies that teachers were ill-prepared for remote teaching and a large-scale, long–lasting school disruption. Many young students and teachers did not have digital skill sets. That being said many teachers were able to make enormous strides into pivoting and being vulnerable as they transferred their instruction to online platforms. This led to an increase in the advancement of computer-based skills for students and teachers. Young students were now submitting digital assignments and engaging online some for the very first time. This research implied that teachers felt that they didn't have a voice, and the findings emphasized a lack of trust that the administration had everyone's best interests in mind. This research implied that teachers attempted to keep a sense of normalcy but that led to increases in teacher frustration and in morale. This research implies that teachers and school staff continue to be stretched thin and that increased pressures from experiences such as the pandemic can really hinder teachers' efficacy and progress.

The findings of the research were often interwoven or even interdependent. For example, additional tasks such as COVID-19 cleaning regiments led to morale depletion as teachers felt their plates were already full before extras were piled on. Interviewees suggested that they were required to keep as much normalcy in school routine as possible for the sake of students, but they were left out of the district-level decisions or given little support for doing so. Teachers were the face of the school and learning during the pandemic and they were often on a small screen in the homes of students and families. This level of exposure, pressure, and acute awareness of

shortcomings in teacher efficacy under the circumstances led to depleted morale and increased stress. Teachers felt as though they could not do all that was being asked in a manner that was beneficial, safe, and fair for all parties. The research indicated that teachers were put into compromising situations where they had to weigh pros and cons of decisions like never before. For example, during a 15-minute reading lesson, a teacher who was in person with students could focus on implementing proper face mask usage (with reminders and redirections) and social distancing for all 24 second graders at the same time, or they could focus on trying to provide the highest quality instruction with COVID-19 minimized interaction and while wearing a facial covering. In a typical, pre-COVID-19 experience, a teacher would have focused on the reading lesson and only disruptive behaviors to the lesson. Teachers were under scrutiny and pressure to keep students safe so instead of working on standards and best teaching practices, they were now focused on health and safety.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research, this study presented several limitations and cannot be generalized across teachers at all school levels and settings or experiences across the nation. Although similarities may likely exist with teachers in other regions and potentially at other grade/age levels of teaching, additional research is necessary to understand the lived experiences of those outside of this study's sample. This study's sample was based on Midwest elementary school teachers with at least two years of teaching experience prior to the onset of the pandemic. This research surveyed 35 teachers who met the qualifications and then from there eight teachers went through a semi-structured interview process to gather additional details of their experiences.

In addition to the mentioned limitations, threats to validity existed as the researcher also experienced disrupted teaching during the pandemic. However, this also allowed for

understanding and connections between the participants and researcher, which had the potential to increase communication and willingness to share without judgment. Bias exists in qualitative research. To work to protect against this, the researcher used member checking with interview participants to check for clarity and accuracy in statements. The researcher used a constant comparative analysis to analyze the data as it was gathered. The data were coded in predefined or deductive and emergent or inductive themes.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research study could be used to further understand the lived experiences of teachers who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic. The limitations of this study could be further explored to identify additional insights into this period in history and to gather accurate and representative experiences of teachers. For example, comparative research could be carried out to look at how teachers at other grade/age levels experienced the pandemic, such as those in middle or junior high school, high school, and collegiate settings. For example, the age of students may have impacted the levels of student independence in remote learning and the ease or types of instructional strategies that were employed by teachers. It could be said that older students who were already completing assignments online would have had more access and expertise with technology than primary/elementary-level students. Were the protocols and mandates easier to manage based on students' ages? What was the academic engagement process for high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic? By looking at the perspectives of teachers representing different age levels of students, a comparative discussion could result.

This particular study had a relatively small footprint of Midwest elementary school teachers and their experiences. Looking at a larger population of teachers has the potential to increase generalizability and gather deeper insights. Looking at schools in different states could

produce some varied data based on unique guidelines within the states and unique school shutdown circumstances or localized Department of Health mandates. Expanding the population and/or changing the location of the population could build this body of research into a more expansive compilation of conclusions.

In addition, another possibility is to utilize comparative study or longitudinal study methods that include student achievement data, pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic onset. Does the school setting or location matter (i.e., urban, suburban, or rural) in a pandemic? It would be interesting to see if teachers feel that COVID-19 is still impacting students several years after the onset. This could also include new teachers who were students themselves or preservice teachers during the pandemic. Additionally, looking at teacher turnover rates after COVID-19 could provide some insight into morale and possibly produce a study about teachers who left the field of education or a teaching career after their pandemic teaching experience.

Another way to further this research is to change the timing of the study. The timing of this study is important to note as educators typically have busy seasons during the calendar year. The data collection period for this research study was late summer to early fall 2023 which happens to fall into a very busy season for educators as they prepare for a new school year and set up their classroom. This research study produced a population of veteran teachers with years of experience that could have impacted the attitudes and experiences and fewer new teachers who responded to survey requests. This begs the question as to whether the timing of the research mattered and if it could have produced more participants or different participants if it was conducted in a season (not summer) where there is less burden on teachers who are already working outside of contract time to prepare for a new school year.

One could replicate this study to address limitations or expand the questioning to prove, build, or disprove the data from this research study in future studies. It is important to note though that as the research gets further from the onset of the event, the responses could be diluted or less accurate due to reduced or faded memory.

Conclusion

This mixed method, autoethnographic biographical research study worked to build the foundation of findings of Midwest elementary school teachers' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research study provided survey data and interview data related to Midwest teachers who taught in schools of different sizes in rural, suburban, and urban districts. The study provided insights into how teachers described, managed, and coped with changes to their job descriptions and the varying elements of life that impacted morale during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study aimed to answer the research questions of how elementary teachers described changes to their job descriptions and what elements of life impacted their morale.

This research serves as a documentation of teachers' lived experiences and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in the Midwest. We are provided with a window into the added tasks and mindsets of teachers during this period that impacted all sectors of our society. We have learned the need for teachers to be heard and understood so that improvements can be made to educational systems. By understanding what happened in schools including the successes of having a growth mindset and willingness to be vulnerable we can work to prepare and address weaknesses in schools. We can also celebrate the growth that was made such as increased technology access in many districts (including increased devices), rapid improvements to digital platforms, increased digital tools for engagements, and an increased aptitude for digital

learning for students and teachers. When we reflect, make modifications, and celebrate the growth we have the potential to increase and improve outcomes and efficacy. This includes setting future goals for inevitable disruptions to the educational system.

This research serves as a documentation of teachers' lived experiences and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in the Midwest. We are provided with a window into the added tasks and mindsets of teachers during this period that impacted all sectors of our society. We have learned the need for teachers to be heard and understood so that improvements can be made to educational systems. By understanding what happened in schools including the successes of having a growth mindset and willingness to be vulnerable we can work to prepare and address weaknesses in schools. We can also celebrate the growth that was made such as increased technology access in many districts (including increased devices), rapid improvements to digital platforms, increased digital tools for engagements, and an increased aptitude for digital learning for students and teachers. When we reflect, make modifications, and celebrate the growth we have the potential to increase and improve outcomes and efficacy. This includes setting future goals for inevitable disruptions to the educational system.

The findings of this study add value to the developing research on school disruption that has the potential to lead to preparations for future educational disruptions. There must be a reflective element to the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers expressed drastic changes to their described job descriptions and morale as a direct result of the COVID-19 mandates and experiences. These changes impacted their livelihood as they worked to support students with little time and resources. In a historical time, when teacher morale is low, one must understand teachers' experiences if they are to work to support and improve the educational system. Teachers need to be heard and understood so that action can take place to

better prepare and support the educational setting for teachers, students, families, and communities. Supporting teachers' efficacy and putting scaffolding into place helps to address the inconveniences and disruptions to school systems and the societal whole. It is imperative that we work to address the weaknesses in our school systems when it comes to the tasks assigned to teachers, set realistic expectations, and promote the mental health of the vital members of schools. Tangible steps include asking teachers who are now working in a new environment based on the pandemic fallout about their needs. In addition, administrators and school boards must create, set, and protect clear boundaries for the time and duties of school staff. The communal expectation that teachers are responsible and at the beck and call of every need from everyone wears on their mental health and morale instead of uplifting and supporting the passionate teachers. School communities must use and build on the skills that have been learned through pandemic teaching such as increased digital learning opportunities. Administration and teachers should not be so quick to return to the status quo but rather reflect, acknowledge, and utilize the growth and needed changes to move forward.

Final Thoughts

Let's lead the way with proactive communication from school administration that creates a culture of respect necessary to energize and recharge teachers and students. There is a need to energize teachers with time, space, and learning opportunities to grow. Expand the boundaries of what teachers can do instead of solely expanding the expectations at the teachers' expense. For example, teachers need their districts to set the working boundaries to certain hours for communication and for time. Everyone wants their piece of the pie and teachers find themselves split between students, the district, family, and community expectations. School staff is spread thin across mounting responsibilities. When teachers are constantly being depleted with the

demands of their job descriptions, morale and mental health will be negatively impacted. Teachers' buckets need to be refilled to compensate for the depletion of time and talents that are poured into students and instruction. We need to encourage teachers throughout the year so that they are not gasping to get to the finish line at the end of each school year. A school year is a marathon and not a sprint which means intentional pacing and proper refueling is an integral part of the process for teachers as they embark on a nine-month journey with a new set of students each and every school year. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that we can be vulnerable and have a growth mindset as we learn and grow in our roles as teachers of elementary students.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Survey Demographics

1. Please indicate your years of experience teaching in a classroom at the pandemic onset:
    - 3-8 years of experience (population requires at least 2 years of teaching experience before pandemic onset)
    - 9-14 years of experience
    - 15-20 years of experience
    - 21+ years of experience
2. Please indicate the best word to describe the location of your district of employment.
    - Urban setting
    - Suburban setting
    - Rural setting
3. What is your school building's approximate population of students?
    - Less than 200 students
    - 201-500 students
    - 501-800 students
    - 801-1,100 students
    - 1,101-1,500 students
    - 1,501-2,000 students
    - More than 2,001 students

4. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced (check all that apply)
    - Fully Remote or Online Teaching
    - Hybrid Teaching (both in-person and online) at the same time
    - Fully in-person teaching (once schools reopened)

APPENDIX B

SURVEY QUESTIONS

The questions asked for a rating response to the participant's level of agreement to different statements: (1) Not at all, (2) Minimally, (3) Somewhat, (4) Significantly, (5) Fully

Research Category 1: Changes in Job Descriptions for Educators

Subsections: Rapidly Changing Mandates, Instructional Norms, Technology, Student Needs, and Family Expectations

1. I experienced changing mandates related to health protocols and procedures from local boards of health and/or school administration because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. I experienced the need to change the way I provided instruction or lessons to students because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. I experienced changes in the ways I communicated with students because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. I was prepared for the technological requirements when schools shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. I could continue teaching at the same level and pace during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to before the pandemic.
6. I regularly used digital learning platforms (ie. Google Classroom, Seesaw, PearDeck, Edulastic, BrainPop, EdModo, ClassMax, etc.) to deliver instructions or assignments BEFORE the onset of the pandemic. This was part of my regular practice or pedagogy.

7. I tried a NEW digital learning platform to deliver instruction or assignments (ie. Google Classroom, Seesaw, PearDeck, Edulastic, BrainPop, EdModo, ClassMax, etc.) because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
8. I recorded myself providing instruction for students who were learning from home or quarantined because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
9. I was compensated (with time, resources, and/or money) for the changes required of me to continue instructing students.
10. My students needed me more during the COVID-19 Pandemic than in previous years.
11. Students had a decreased interaction with their peers during the COVID-19 pandemic.
12. Families were supportive of me and my efforts as a teacher when the schools shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
13. Families expressed frustration to me with helping their child(ren) with school assignments and learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Category 2: School Environment

Subsections: Physical Environment, and Professionalism

1. I experienced changes to my physical teaching environment or classroom because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. I experienced changes in my relationships with colleagues because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. I felt that more was required of my professional role as a teacher because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Category 3: Teacher's Mental and Physical Health and Morale

Subsections: Mental Health, Teacher Morale, Physical Health, Society and Media

1. I experienced changes in my mental health because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. I experienced changes in my physical health because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. My morale suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. I felt supported by my *administration* during the COVID-19 pandemic.
5. I felt supported by my *community* during the COVID-19 pandemic.
6. I experienced increased levels of stress at *work* because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
7. I experience increased levels of stress at *home* because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Category 1: Changes in Job Descriptions for Educators

Subsections: Rapidly Changing Mandates, Instructional Norms, Technology, Student Needs, and Family Expectations

1. I am interested in your experience related to teaching during the onset and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic. How would you describe your experience as a teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Tell me about your experience with changing mandates and instructional norms. What teacher supports were put in place by the district?
3. Technology became a huge classroom component with the pandemic's onset. What was your technology experience and preparations/professional development before the pandemic? How did those expectations change?

Research Category 2: School Environment

Subsections: Physical Environment, and Professionalism

1. There were a lot of differences in the physical teaching/school environment after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. How did your day-to-day routines change?
2. Face-to-face communication seemed to move to more digital communication tools or masked and socially distanced conversations. What were the communications and interactions among administration, colleagues, and students and their families during school shutdowns?

Research Category 3: Teacher's Mental and Physical Health and Morale

Subsections: Mental Health, Teacher Morale, Physical Health, Society and Media

1. Describe the mental and physical health of yourself and/or that of those around you during the pandemic. What stressors or expectations were present? How were these different (if so) from previous experiences?
2. The COVID-19 pandemic led to many changes for individuals both personally and professionally on a global stage. How would you describe the morale of teachers in your building and/or district?
3. Describe how your reactions to pandemic changes were typical, atypical, easier, or more challenging to adjust to your colleagues who faced similar changes. How were you able to relate to or support colleagues?

APPENDIX D

IRB PERMISSION LETTER

Jun 5, 2023 1:59:16 PM EDT

Rodney Rock
Teacher Ed and Leadership St

Re: Exempt - Initial - 2023-260 Impact of COVID-19 on Educators' Roles and Morale

Dear Dr. Rodney Rock:

Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board has rendered the decision below for Impact of COVID-19 on Educators' Roles and Morale

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

Any changes in your research activity should be promptly reported to the Institutional Review Board and may not be initiated without IRB approval except where necessary to eliminate hazard to human subjects. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects should also be promptly
reported to the IRB.

The IRB would like to extend its best wishes to you in the conduct of this study.

Sincerely,
Youngstown State University Human Subjects Review Board