

# Canadian Teachers' Emotional Experiences during COVID-19: A Narrative Inquiry

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## Abstract

This narrative inquiry study delves into the emotional experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, using restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) as a primary data analytic approach. Drawing on terror management theory, theories of emotional coping, broaden-and-build theory, and theories of emotion regulation, this study explores teachers' emotional responses to challenges brought on by the pandemic. We interviewed three elementary school teachers in Alberta, Canada. The resultant three restoried narratives reveal a spectrum of emotions, from uncertainty and anxiety to curiosity and empathy, as teachers grappled with shifting job demands, social disconnection, and feelings of inadequacy. The discussion highlights the importance of understanding teachers' emotions in the context of broader theoretical frameworks by providing multiple theoretical avenues for understanding the emotions in the narratives. Implications of the study underscore the need for administrators to listen to teachers' stories and for researchers to explore narrative inquiry as a therapeutic process.

*Keywords:* narrative inquiry, emotions, teachers, COVID-19, restorying

## Résumé

Cette étude d'enquête narrative se penche sur les expériences émotionnelles des enseignants pendant la pandémie de COVID-19, en utilisant la reconstruction de sens à partir de témoignages (*re-storying*) (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) comme approche primaire d'analyse des données. S'appuyant sur la théorie de la gestion de la peur, les théories de l'adaptation émotionnelle, la théorie de la croissance et du développement durable, et les théories de la régulation des émotions, cette étude explore les réponses émotionnelles des enseignants aux défis engendrés par la pandémie. Nous avons interviewé trois enseignants du primaire en Alberta, au Canada. Les trois récits réinterprétés qui en résultent révèlent un spectre d'émotions allant de l'incertitude et de l'anxiété à la curiosité et à l'empathie, alors que les enseignants sont aux prises avec des exigences professionnelles changeantes, une déconnexion sociale et des sentiments de disparité. La discussion souligne l'importance de comprendre les émotions des enseignants dans le contexte de cadres théoriques plus larges en fournissant de multiples pistes théoriques pour comprendre les émotions véhiculées dans les récits. Les implications de l'étude soulignent la nécessité pour les responsables de l'administration d'écouter les témoignages des enseignants et, pour les chercheurs, d'explorer l'enquête narrative en tant que processus thérapeutique.

*Mots-clés* : enquête narrative, émotions, enseignants, COVID-19, reconstruction de sens, témoignages

## Introduction

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic brought an onslaught of personal and professional emotions for teachers (Pellerone, 2021; Sokal et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). Because of the individual and personal nature of emotions, the present study sought to narrate teachers' emotional experiences during the pandemic through narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

## **Changes to Teaching during COVID-19**

The teaching profession fundamentally changed during the pandemic. In particular, the job became more demanding (Bascia, 2022; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Wells & Daniels, 2024). With new job demands such as teaching in an online format and monitoring student physical and mental health (Bascia, 2022), the work of teaching expanded well beyond curriculum delivery. For example, elementary teachers found themselves dedicating time to explaining daily lesson implementation to parents, shifting away from the prior focus on classroom instruction (Yazici & Yüksel, 2022). As a result of these transformations to the profession, research has highlighted a notable increase in job demands and its connection with teachers' emotions during the pandemic. For example, Pressley and colleagues (2021) found that teachers who taught online during the pandemic were more anxious than teachers who did not teach virtually. Two other studies found an increase in teachers' emotional exhaustion symptoms during COVID-19 (Pellerone, 2021; Sokal et al., 2020). According to a reflexive thematic analysis by Kim and Asbury (2020), UK teachers' experiences during the initial lockdown fit into six themes: uncertainty, finding a way, worry for the vulnerable, the importance of relationships, teacher identity, and reflections. Although Kim and Asbury (2020) were not intentionally studying emotions, the identification of emotions throughout their results underscores the importance of teachers' emotions during the early months of the pandemic and creates space to further understand teachers' emotions as the pandemic unfolded.

## **Theoretical Frameworks: The Lenses of the Study**

### **Teachers' Emotions**

Emotions, along with feelings and mood, can be considered under the umbrella term of "affect" (Feldman-Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009). In this study, we will be using these terms interchangeably, as did our participants. However, it is important to recognize that affect is more than simply how people feel, and that it involves a variety of cognitive and motivational elements. Moreover, affect is inherently rooted in context—both situational context as well as the context of an individual's life experiences leading up to the situation (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). This means that teachers' emotions during the pandemic existed in the moment but were shaped by contexts, cognitions, and motivations prior to and outside of the pandemic itself.

***Antecedents and consequences of emotion.*** In understanding where emotions come from, what they feel like, and their consequences, we draw together various multi-componential definitions (Frenzel et al., 2021; Russell & Feldman-Barrett, 1999) as a foundation from which to approach teachers' narratives on emotions. Our understanding of emotion combines internal cognitive and affective factors, external situational and environmental factors, and contextual historical and cultural factors to produce a primary and secondary cognitive appraisal about the situation, which are personal judgements about a person-environment interaction (Greenberg et al., 1992; Kemper, 1987; Lazarus, 2001; Schutz et al., 2006; Ratner, 2007). One factor that might have impacted teachers' cognitive appraisals during the pandemic is a construct derived from terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1992): mortality salience, or the awareness that everyone will inevitably face mortality. Mortality salience was logically high during the pandemic as the general public was reminded of death constantly through public health announcements and restrictions, theoretically impacting emotions through cognitive appraisals. Although media was omnipresent, the resultant appraisal is dependent on the individual's goals, personal experiences, and the context of the situation. These variables lead to the potential for different emotional responses among teachers who face the same scenario (Sutton, 2007).

Emotions have implications for important outcomes, including motivation, emotion regulation, and coping. Emotion can incite or suspend action (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Wundt, 1897/1998), which reflect motivational components of emotion as Weiner (1986) describes through attribution theory. In keeping with this motivation perspective, Fredrickson (2001) proposes through broaden-and-build theory that the purpose of positive emotions is to facilitate adaptive approach behaviours such as engagement in a task and goal-oriented actions (Watson et al., 1999). Uniquely, positive emotions have the ability to "broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources" (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 3). For example, a teacher might feel a sense of joy when their students show enthusiasm during a hands-on learning activity. This positive emotion might lead the teacher to feel more open to trying new hands-on activities with their students or incorporating collaborative pedagogy into their lesson. This openness can then lead to the development of skills in facilitating inquiry-based, hands-on learning, and lead to a more engaging classroom environment for students. It becomes a positive feedback loop because these enduring resources go on to produce positive emotions in the teacher again (Fredrickson, 2001). Similarly, mortality salience as explained through

terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1992) incites people to take actions that have positive benefits for the self (e.g., Dechesne et al., 2000). As an additional perspective, Lazarus (1991) describes action tendencies that follow emotions, particularly negative emotions, as opposed to Fredrickson's (2001) ideas of broadening through positive emotion. For example, someone who is feeling angry may frown, clench their fists, or yell. Action tendencies could take this anger one step further by motivating the angry person to attack or retaliate against the situation (Lazarus, 1991). For teachers, regulating these action tendencies is vital (Sutton, 2007); an angry teacher might calmly ask a student to be quiet when their action tendency is to yell at the student. Aside from regulating emotions, coping is one body of literature that we can turn to as a way to explain actions that follow emotions. Teachers can cope with their negative emotions through problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The purpose of coping is to reduce the magnitude of a negative emotion or promote a positive emotion. Therefore, teachers can display emotions that are incongruent with their actual emotions if unwritten emotional display rules require it (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 2013). An example of this might be a teacher who feels frustrated after dealing with a particularly challenging day but still smiles and speaks in a calm, encouraging tone when interacting with their students. Despite feeling a negative emotion, they can consciously display positive emotions.

An additional emotion regulation perspective comes from terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1992). In keeping with Fredrickson's (2001) perspective on psychological resources as contributors to positive emotions, Greenberg and colleagues (1992) explain that psychological resources such as self-esteem can serve to buffer negative emotions. Specifically, self-esteem serves to reduce feelings of anxiety.

To illustrate antecedents of emotions, emotions themselves, and consequences of emotions during the pandemic, consider an example of a teacher dealing with the issue of students not attending their online synchronous class. The teacher's primary cognitive appraisal might be about their teaching. Maybe they think they haven't translated their lessons into an online format clearly enough, or maybe they worry that their directions on how to sign into the online classroom were unclear. After this appraisal, the teacher feels like they are not doing a good job of reaching their students, so they might feel inadequate, prompting the emotion of disappointment. The teacher might try to cope with their disappointment through problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), where they try to come up with an extra-engaging lesson or better align their classes with their assignments.

If this coping strategy is unsuccessful, the teacher's secondary appraisal might make them feel frustrated at their failed attempts to engage students. This emotion might prompt them to use emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), such as using an emotion regulation strategy (Sutton, 2007) to reduce their negative emotions. Although the reality of teaching being an emotional profession holds true outside of the pandemic (Frenzel et al., 2021; Schutz et al., 2006), likely, it became even more salient in the context of the pandemic when the contextual factors that influence emotion through cognitive appraisals shifted, potentially creating a new narrative about emotions in teaching.

## **The Current Study**

A gap in the current literature exists regarding the firsthand accounts of teachers' emotions amidst the pandemic, highlighting the significance of employing a narrative approach to authentically capture their distinct experiences and ensure the voices of teachers do not get lost in teacher-focused research. In light of the previous research done on teachers' emotions and the contextual influence of the pandemic on their experiences, the purpose of this study was to narrate individual teachers' emotional experiences during the pandemic. To do this, we used a narrative inquiry design, which included two analytic processes to bring meaning to the narratives.

## **Method**

### **Narrative Inquiry**

The individual aspect of narrative inquiry (Riessman, 1993) offers advantages for studying teachers' emotions during the pandemic. Telling and retelling emotion-laden stories is a way to find meaning in them, at a time where many peoples' thoughts and emotions felt chaotic and unpredictable. This is true for teachers, who had the additional task of making sense of a narrative related to an occupation that was constantly changing, and the emotions that came along with it.

Narrative inquiry emphasizes that stories are more than simple retellings of events. They represent interactions between the storyteller, their experiences, and their context, with the researchers also playing a role in how the narrative is understood. Nar-

ratives themselves are ubiquitous in our world and they lack a strict definition in natural settings, but narrative inquiry in research requires careful attention to how stories are framed and analyzed. In this study, we drew on Parks (2023) and Ruthrof (2017) to shape our approach to narrative inquiry, particularly the approach to analysis. Analyzing narratives involves exploring stories to uncover deeper meanings, themes, and patterns that reveal insights about individuals' experiences (Riessman, 2008). In narrative research, analysis often takes one of two primary forms: focusing on categorizing narratives to identify common themes and structures, or working with the stories themselves as complete units (Parks, 2023). In this study, we chose an approach aligned with our goal of retaining the integrity of the stories told by participants. Rather than breaking stories down into isolated categories, we present them as cohesive, meaningful units, bringing participants' experiences to life. This form of analysis is called "restorying," where narratives are reconstructed to emphasize the narrative arc, insights, and the depth of participants' perspectives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Ruthrof (2017) further enriched our understanding of analysis in narrative inquiry by presenting the idea of multiple layers of abstraction that exist within a narrative. The first layer is the surface-level presented world. The second layer of abstraction is the meaning that can be made from these surface-level storytellings; this layer is connected to societal contexts and is collective in nature. The final layer is the meaning that is then made from the second layer of abstraction; this is done when the individual reader or listener makes their own interpretations of the narrative and the initial layer of abstraction. In other words, Ruthrof acknowledges that even as teachers tell their stories, we as the researchers and you as the reader create our own interpretations.

Given these variations on purpose, structure, and interpretation of narrative inquiry, it is unsurprising that the analysis of narrative and final output can also vary widely. According to Blumenfeld-Jones (1995), every story is a restory from the moment it is first told. A human has an infinite number of experiences to draw from, and they choose just one from which to invent a self to craft a story (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). In retelling a story, the storyteller inherently expresses and represses elements of the original story. The more that this happens, the further the product moves from what you might call the "objective" reality of that experience to the interpretive, constructed space that a retold story exists in. Narrative inquiry does not try to represent an objective truth because meaning cannot be made while living through an experience (Mattingly, 1991). Therefore,

narrative inquiry is concerned with the meaning-making that occurs upon reflection of the lived experience. Clandinin and Connelly (1991) explain this idea by clarifying that telling stories and crafting a retold version of the story is a type of personal growth that the participant and the researcher experience together. With the premise in mind that retelling a story is the essence of developing knowledge claims in narrative inquiry, restorying is a method of legitimation in narrative inquiry.

## Positionality

We practised reflexivity as part of this research, meaning that we took account of our biases, personalities, and experiences and the effects that these might have on our research (Holland, 1999). Specifically, the insider perspective of the first author and the research expertise of the second author came together to contribute to the project, making it unique in ways that would not be possible without these dynamics. Specifically, the first author is White, a woman, and has lived in Alberta for her whole life. She was an elementary teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. She approached this research with the understanding that as a teacher she supported government-sanctioned pandemic responses, and as a researcher she adhered to subjectivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology in the identification of the research question and selection of methodology. The second author is White, a woman, and a university professor who researches emotion from a pragmatic worldview in which methodologies serve the research question. She had three children in elementary school at the time of the pandemic and she approached the participants' stories with openness to their experiences separate from hers as a parent.

## Participants

*Sample size in narrative inquiry.* Narrative inquiry does not have a single rule for deciding on a specific number of participants (Vasileiou et al., 2018), but narrative inquiry generally uses purposive sampling techniques in which the goal is to gain a deep understanding of each individual participant's data (Palinkas, 2014). Because the focus is on rich, detailed analysis of each participant's data, narrative inquiry uses particularly small sample sizes. Some narrative studies focus on a single individual (Moen, 2006). However, Vygotsky (1978) explained that researchers expand their knowledge beyond an isolated case by interviewing more participants. In education research, narrative inquiries

tend to utilize sample sizes between one and 24 participants (Guetterman, 2015). In this study, we began our research with three participants and were willing to add more participants if we felt that it would benefit the study in any way. However, once the three participants' data was analyzed, we did not feel that adding more participants was justified, so we maintained our sample size of three.

***The participants in the present study.*** Three elementary school teachers in Alberta, Canada participated in this research. As elementary school teachers from the same province, they shared experiences such as teaching young children, teaching one group of students, and being generalists. Health and education are provincially regulated, so pandemic health restrictions and educational policy regarding the pandemic were common across the province. These shared experiences helped structure this research in a way that would not be possible if we involved teachers from different levels of compulsory schooling or from different provinces. Table 1 lists detailed participant demographic information.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Grade Taught	School Type	Location
John	30s	Man	6	Private	Urban
Betty	60s	Woman	2	Public	Rural
Samantha	30s	Woman	1	Public	Urban

*Note:* Pseudonyms have been given to the research participants for anonymity purposes.

## Procedures

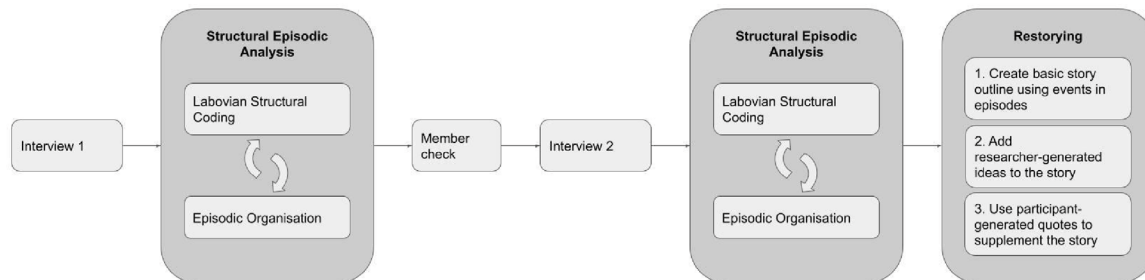
We obtained ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta (Pro00120876) prior to beginning this research. We recruited the participants through professional connections. Once participants indicated to a mutual contact of ours that they were interested in participating in this research, we sent them detailed information about the study and a consent form. The participants orally indicated their consent to participate in this research. We collected demographic information through an online survey and

we conducted two individual interviews with each participant. The first interviews were held between October and December of 2022. The second interviews were held between January and March of 2023. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. In keeping with narrative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the first interview was intentionally open-ended, containing only the prompt “Please tell me the story of your emotions during COVID-19, all the events and experiences that were important to you. Start where you would like. Please take as much time as you need and I’ll just listen.” The protocol for the second semi-structured interview emerged based on our preliminary structural episodic analysis and a member check. This structural episodic analysis was based on a coding system developed by Labov (1972) in which temporal and thematic considerations are used to identify distinct episodes. For more information on structural episodic analysis, please see S1.0 in the Supplementary Materials for this article. An example of the protocol for one of the second interviews is in Appendix A. We conducted these interviews over Zoom. We recorded and transcribed each interview verbatim. We transcribed the first interview of each participant by hand and the second interviews using Otter.AI transcription software (Version 2.18.2; Otter.AI, 2023). Participants received a \$20 Amazon gift card as remuneration.

### **Rationale for Data Analysis**

We used structural episodic analysis (Labov, 1972) as a preliminary analysis and restoring as a main analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991) to analyze the participants’ stories. The data analysis process is outlined in Figure 1. It is important to recognize in advance that together, these two types of analyses legitimize the study by juxtaposing one another, ensuring transparency throughout our analysis process, and providing products for different audiences. The preliminary structural episodic analysis remains as close as possible to the participants’ perspectives and description of the events and emotions in their story (see S1.0 in Supplementary Materials for description and S2.0 for example). The restoring process strikes a balance between the participants’ voice and our own interpretation of their events and emotions to enhance the meaning-making process of the narrative.

**Figure 1**  
*Data Analysis Process*



**Restorying: Connelly and Clandinin.** In the present study, we employed restorying as the primary analytic approach. Restoried narratives strike a balance between the participants' voices and the researcher's interpretation of their events and emotions to enhance the meaning of the narrative.

The results of the present study contain a single retelling for each participant's story. The first objective of this process was to highlight the voices and perspectives of the participants in a narrative that draws from elements of ourselves as the researchers and our own perceptions of the participants' stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). We were careful to strike a balance between remaining close to the linguistic styles of each participant and our own interpretations of the events and emotions that the participants shared. Therefore, the restoried narratives contain elements of both *description*, which are the participants' words and ideas, and *interpretation*, which are our own words and ideas. A second objective of the restorying process was to nudge the reader toward adding their own level of interpretation to the text by considering the experiences in the narrative as relative to their own potentially similar or dissimilar experiences (Ruthrof, 2017). Our overall goal was to highlight that interpretation comes from both the context and the person; it cannot be separated from either (Eisner, 1991).

## Rigour in the Study

We addressed trustworthiness (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) in this study by employing strategies at several stages of data collection and analysis. First, we consistently documented

the biases that we brought to our interpretations of the data and conduct of the study. Second, we used clarifying questions during the interviews such as “When you say that, is this what you mean?” to ensure that we were accurately understanding the ideas that the participants were sharing. Third, we developed member checks (see Appendix A for a sample) to ensure continuity between our preliminary analyses, the participants’ perspective, and the second interview protocol. Each member check included shortened parts of the narrative from the initial interview transcript. We also included an open-ended question under each narrative to allow the participant space to briefly clarify their account of various parts of the narrative and to open the conversation further between ourselves and the participant, facilitating the shift to the second interview. Finally, the first and second author met weekly to consult one another on the analysis process. The first author undertook the analysis and the second author served as an outside perspective on the analysis process to help ground the research.

## **Results**

The results of this narrative inquiry are presented as restoried narratives, which are summarized in this section. Figures 5, 6, and 7 are truncated versions of the complete restoried narratives, which can be found in S3.0 in the Supplementary Materials of this article. Due to space limitations, we truncated the restoried narratives in a way that retained as much description of the emotional phenomena found within the narratives as possible. These emotional phenomena exist both as denotative words in the narrative, such as a participant saying “I felt angry,” and through connotative elements that were implied through the tone, pace, and theme. These elements, while not explicitly about emotion, are implicitly emotional and contribute to the story. The narratives are intended to be read as distinct stories. We invite you to read them as if you were reading any story, keeping in mind elements of plot, character, and emotion. These stories exist independently of one another; please appreciate the previous story in its entirety before moving on to the next one. We encourage you to also read the complete narratives in the Supplementary Materials as they represent the full story of each teacher’s emotions. Figure 2 is John’s narrative, Figure 3 is Betty’s narrative, and Figure 4 is Samantha’s narrative. Below, Table 2 contains a breakdown of which affective states were present in each narrative.

**Table 2***Summary of Affective States in the Full Narratives by Participant*

Affective States	John	Betty	Samantha
Anger		x	
Anxiety	x	x	x
Confidence	x	x	
Conflict		x	x
Curiosity	x	x	
Disappointment	x	x	x
Empathy	x	x	x
Fear		x	
Frustration	x	x	x
Guilt		x	x
Hope	x		x
Hopelessness	x	x	x
Inadequacy	x	x	x
Interpersonal Connection	x	x	x
Isolation	x	x	x
Joy	x	x	x
Loss	x	x	x
Relief	x		
Resentment		x	
Shock	x	x	x
Uncertainty	x	x	x

**Figure 2***John's Truncated Narrative***John's Early-Pandemic Engagement**

John was a Grade 6 teacher when the rumblings about a coronavirus began with a “sense of uncertainty.” With each press release from the government came a wave of shock for John. Just when he was wrapping his head around new restrictions and procedures, a news report would leave him feeling lost. The school closure was especially shocking for John. He felt surprised initially, but it wasn't long before curiosities bubbled up and optimism took over. Maybe it's not such a bad thing to teach online. He could come up with some fun new ideas about how to teach remotely. It was a new challenge to take on. John began with a sense of idealism; kids like technology and they adapt quickly. It'll be a few weeks or a month of something new and exciting.

However, in April, John realized students would likely remain online for the rest of the school year. “The shock wore off, and the monotony began.” John was frustrated; the engaging tools that worked in the early days had dwindled in success. John was having a hard time getting his class engaged. Students stopped responding. They'd blame it on their internet, but John felt them slipping away. It had become “factory learning.” Every day seemed the same. John would deliver his lesson, ask if there were questions, and then everyone would sign off.

Although John was struggling with his students, his relationships with his colleagues flourished. John met Andy, one of the Grade 4 teachers. They spent their breaks playing foosball. By the end of the pandemic, a friendship had been born. John sometimes wished he could work from home instead of commuting to an empty classroom, but the time he spent with Andy made it worth the drive. John reflected that without the pandemic, he wouldn't have gotten to know Andy. John's feeling of belonging also extended to other colleagues with a “sense of coming together. I guess whenever there's some sort of a crisis or something bad that happens, you feel like you're part of a team. You have a common goal.”

June arrived. It felt anticlimactic: “I posted my last lesson online, the last assignment. I had them send messages to each other and create this video collage. I guess it's summer now.” John felt hopeful about the upcoming in-person school year. He expected that the school board would have made a plan for student engagement. Unfortunately, it felt like “more of the same” in September. Technology ran the classroom. Students attended in person and online periodically. John “found that more difficult than just being online.” Although his students were physically present for part of the year, it was almost like they weren't there. They had recess alone in their quadrant of the field. It was unnatural. No one could see each other because they wore masks. John understood the restrictions and supported keeping people safe. However, he felt sorry for them. He was supposed to give students a positive experience, but he wasn't doing that. John took on guilt:

I just remember feeling sorry for them. A lot of my own emotions are kind of tied up in my perception of what their emotions were. A lot of the negativity that I had was almost taking their potential negativity and bringing it to my own experience.

He couldn't control the factors that caused this experience for his students. He was helpless.

**Figure 3***Betty's Truncated Narrative***Betty: Resentment, Guilt, and a Whole Lot of Worry**

Betty was 60 years old and immunocompromised when she taught Grade 2 during COVID-19. Before the school closure, students were getting sick. Betty started wearing a mask at school. One day, Betty called home for a sick student, but the student's parent did not answer. The student had to remain in school. Betty was furious: "That was the first time I actually broke down and I cried. I was so angry." When the child's mother arrived, Betty was ready to confront her about sending her sick child to school. However, the mother was crying after receiving bad medical news. Betty's anger dissolved into guilt, which slowly became resentment. She resented the parents that sent their sick kids. She started to resent the kids too, which broke her heart.

Illness in the classroom worsened, and ICUs became crowded. No visitors could see the sickest patients. Betty was terrified that she would end up on a ventilator and die alone. She "kept praying and praying" that schools would move online before she contracted the virus. When schools closed, Betty was shocked, even though she had hoped for it. She felt relief after the initial shock wore off: "Thank God, I'm not going to die yet."

Betty feared that she would fail her students because of poor technology skills. She was thrown into a "real learning curve." She started to build new skills in Google Classroom. Betty also ran synchronous Zoom classes. She found humour in these meetings: "We had [laughs] this one family showing the cat into the camera. All the kids are going, 'Oh, my God, look at the cat.' The dad is swearing in the back. It was a zoo. It was so funny." Unfortunately, this feeling wore off as Betty realized her classroom management strategies were futile. In person, she had no problems controlling her class. Online, issues arose like students sneaking mics on and making silly sounds. She felt defeated; her lessons were lost to her lacking skills. Betty's engagement strategies also didn't work online. Betty had an innate ability to gauge student engagement in person: "I find if the kids are watching and they're interested, it just really kind of fires you up. Those lessons are just right on the money." Betty tried to do novel activities, such as a scavenger hunt or taking photos of shapes. Betty felt defeated because she would put time and effort into engagement only to have a miniscule group of students participate.

Toward the end of the first year of COVID-19, Betty had the opportunity to say goodbye to her students: "We had a table [in front of us]. The kids would walk up to you. We'd say 'we're gonna miss you so much, but I really can't hug you goodbye.' That was a killer day."

The following school year, vaccines came out and Betty felt like her school had taken precautions to curb the virus: "We had people wiping doorknobs. We felt safer. We felt like we had a little bit of defence. We started to get shots." Betty had more control over her health.

A lot about Betty's job has returned to what it looked like before the pandemic. Parents still send their sick children to school. Betty finds it "kind of frustrating that people slip back into the old groove" in that respect, but she appreciates that COVID-19 worries have moved to the "backburner" so she can enjoy seeing her students. COVID-19 was no longer in the forefront:

You realize how many things that you weren't able to do or you stopped doing. You were so worried that they're gonna get sick or you're gonna get sick. A lot of that, you push it back in your memory. Sometimes you never really deal with it.

**Figure 4***Samantha's Truncated Narrative***Samantha: Balancing Restrictions with Good Teaching**

Samantha was a Grade 1 teacher during the pandemic. When her school closed down, Samantha had to work through grief, loss, and disappointment. Samantha loved the sense of purpose that being with her students gave her. She needed to adapt that purpose without physical students. Some parts of finding that fulfilment came easily. For example, her students had been studying a read-aloud book when schools shut down. She made a video of herself reading the remainder. "Ta-da!" Adapting in these ways was positive for Samantha. Some aspects were more difficult. With four of her own children, she found it hard to balance work and home life. Her class needed teaching, but her own children needed her to be there for them. Samantha's "whole world shrunk down to the family unit." She relished that time she spent with her own children and she wasn't entirely isolated; she cultivated her relationships with friends over text and spoke with her neighbours over the fence.

Samantha felt unprepared to teach online. Luckily, Samantha and five of her colleagues all taught the same lessons during the pandemic: "Everybody kind of chipped in. We'd be like, 'look, we're done!'" Samantha and her colleagues had each other's backs. However, Samantha felt that her students' learning declined. She felt inadequate being unable to engage some families. Samantha tried to maintain relationships by "mail[ing] a packet of seeds to each of the kids." She also used a website where students can record themselves reading assigned books. The students would "go record a book. They wouldn't actually even read the book. They would just leave you a message. 'Hi, miss you, say hi to the principal for me.'"

The second year of the pandemic brought more inadequacy for Samantha despite school returning to in-person learning for parts of it. She felt she couldn't share negative emotions: "You have to mask it." Samantha knew that her classroom was not the most conducive to learning. The health restrictions meant that her carpet, an integral shared space in her classroom, was removed. Samantha "resorted to doing read-alouds over YouTube," which made her feel lazy. Her class should be "sitting on the carpet and having a rich literacy experience together." The pandemic made her appreciate collaborative learning: "I'm going to do extra centre time when the kids can play together. I see the value more."

Masking requirements were hard. Samantha's students were learning about letter sounds and mouth formation: "You're trying to teach them about the difference between TH and F. 'TH, you have to stick out your tongue. Look at how I'm doing this.' They couldn't see that." Some teachers in Samantha's school didn't follow the restrictions as closely. Samantha's class was set up in rows as required. A different class had their desks set up in a horseshoe. Samantha knew that this teacher had the same struggles with the restrictions that she felt. This rule-bending "didn't strengthen school culture." Masking mandates were contentious among parents. One day, Samantha offered a student a mask break: "Go to your desk. Take a breather. When you feel comfortable, come right on back." Their parent emailed Samantha's principal, feeling their child had been "segregated," although that was not the intention.

Eventually, the overwhelming restrictions led Samantha to "give these kids hugs, if that's what they need. These are six-year-olds. They don't get it. They don't need to." Samantha experienced tension between being a "good teacher," and how she had to teach at that time.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to delve into the emotional journey of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing their experiences through narrative inquiry and situating their stories within broader theoretical frameworks. Through their narratives, participants offer firsthand accounts of the emotions they experienced amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic. By examining these emotions through the lenses of terror management theory (Greenberg et al., 1992), theories of emotional coping (Berkman et al., 2000; Cramer, 1998; Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), and emotion regulation (Grandey, 2000; Sutton & Harper, 2009), the results shed insight into the internal processes that influenced teachers' emotional responses during the pandemic. These narratives provide a platform for teachers to articulate their emotional experiences authentically, highlighting the impact of the pandemic on their well-being and professional lives.

### Emotions in Light of Terror Management Theory

Terror management theory offers a compelling framework to understand teachers' emotions during the pandemic. As participants grappled with ambiguity and existential dread resulting from the pandemic, feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and inadequacy emerged. According to terror management theory, death is a certainty in life, but an awareness of death induces uncertainty (Van den Bos, 2001). For instance, John described a pervasive sense of "not-knowing" as his school transitioned to online learning, reflecting the heightened uncertainty that characterized the early pandemic. Uncertainty existed alongside anxiety. For example, Betty felt anxious because there was a chance she could end up on a ventilator and possibly die alone if she became ill. Such anxieties were exacerbated by mortality salience (Greenberg et al., 1992) as teachers confronted the reality of their vulnerability to the virus. Betty's extreme anxiety fits empirically; Santamaría et al. (2021) reported that chronically ill teachers were more depressed, anxious, and stressed during COVID-19 than their healthy counterparts.

Additionally, feelings of inadequacy resulted from challenges of adapting to new teaching modalities and navigating constantly shifting pandemic restrictions. Samantha, for example, expressed a feeling of disconnect between being a strong teacher and the way pandemic restrictions were forcing her to teach. She felt that she was an ineffective

teacher as a result. Van den Bos (2001) explained that mortality salience leads to lower self-esteem related to competencies. Samantha felt hopeless in becoming a more effective teacher during the pandemic due to attributing the drop in her effectiveness to sources outside of herself, namely the pandemic restrictions.

Terror management theory also offers a perspective on fairness, which is relevant to both Samantha's and John's narratives. Samantha described hugging her students despite physical distancing restrictions. The theory posits that mortality-salient conditions spark stronger affective responses to unfair events than non-mortality-salient conditions (Van den Bos, 2004). Samantha felt that it was unfair that she was going to great lengths to adhere to changing pandemic restrictions, whereas some of her colleagues did not follow them. Samantha's decision to defy restrictions and hug her students despite the risks epitomizes the tension between individual agency and societal compliance during the pandemic. This is an example that follows the pattern of disobedience of policy after an unfair experience as Lind and Van den Bos (2002) suggested. Empathy also prevailed during the pandemic. As a second example, John showed true other-oriented empathy (Batson, 1990) by feeling vicarious emotions with his students. John's feelings of empathy stemmed from a perception of unfairness; he felt that the children did not deserve to have their school experiences taken away from them. Overall, terror management theory illuminates the interaction between existential concerns, societal norms, and emotional experiences, providing one lens through which to view teachers' responses to the pandemic.

### **Coping with Emotions and Coping through Emotions**

As teachers were met with negative emotions during the pandemic, they used various coping strategies to help themselves handle these emotions. The participants coped with anger, resentment, frustration, and social disconnection in a way that ultimately revealed resilience in the face of adversity.

One prevalent emotion was anger, stemming from feelings of powerlessness in the face of unprecedented challenges. For Betty, anger was often in line with perceptions of safety. She was angry at parents for sending sick children to school. Betty's anger lessened when vaccines became available and she felt safer. Anger is a defence mechanism that functions to control anxiety (Cramer, 1991), but it is also a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to trauma (Cramer, 1998; Fenech & Thomson, 2015). In keeping

with both Moore's (2018) ideas about known elements of the future eliciting anxiety and Cramer's ideas about defence mechanisms and anxiety (1991), perhaps Betty felt that it was a known element of the future that if her students came to school with COVID-19, then she would get sick too and ultimately die from the virus. She coped with this anxiety through anger and resentment. Betty resented the parents of her students for sending their children to school sick, but redirected her resentment (Vaillant, 1992) toward her Grade 2 students, who were unwittingly caught in the crossfire.

Frustration, an emotion caused by low control appraisals (Lazarus, 1999; Pekrun, 2006), was commonplace during the pandemic. For example, John grappled with dwindling student engagement amidst the transition to online learning. His primary appraisal was that he needed a strong technological base to engage them. His attempts at improving his technological skills to enhance student engagement reflect problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, the persistence of the problem led to a secondary appraisal of ineffectiveness, prompting John to adopt emotion-focused coping strategies, such as positive reappraisal, to mitigate negative emotions (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). John now views the frustrating process of losing student engagement as a process of growth as a teacher, which is the positive reappraisal. Samantha and Betty also describe frustration with technology, rules, parents, co-workers, and even students.

Social disconnection was a struggle for the participants. For example, all three felt disconnected from their students. Betty told a story about being able to see her students one last time at the end of the school year, but the teachers stood with a table in between them and the students, which was a stark reminder of the disconnect that existed. Samantha described feeling like her students drifted away when she no longer physically saw them each day. These feelings of disconnect were lessened through building social connections or creatively maintaining existing connections for both Samantha and Betty (Berkman et al., 2000). Prior research confirms that connections with people outside of the household protected from feelings of isolation during the pandemic (Okabe-Miyamoto & Lyubomirsky, 2021). For example, John found connection with a colleague during the pandemic, at a time when he was missing his students. He gained a friendship that he otherwise would not have. This example illustrates social support, a coping mechanism against loneliness and negative mental health outcomes when faced with a disaster (American Psychological Association, 2020; Ruzek et al., 2007; Wade et al., 2014).

## **Broadening-and-Building through Positive Emotions**

During the pandemic, the participants experienced moments of growth and self-expansion facilitated by positive emotions, reflecting the principles of broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). In particular, curiosity emerged in these stories and clearly aligned with the theory. Curiosity emerged as a driving force, motivating the participants to explore novel teaching approaches and technological tools amidst the transition to online learning. For example, John's enthusiasm for embracing technological challenges exemplifies the transformative power of curiosity. He was curious about the technological possibilities that he could make use of, and this curiosity motivated him to overcome the challenge. While not explicitly addressed in broaden-and-build theory, curiosity serves as a catalyst for self-directed learning and personal growth; it plausibly fits into broaden-and-build theory because it has the same purpose as the positive affective state of interest, which promotes exploration and self-expansion (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

## **Regulating Emotions**

Within the context of the classroom, teachers often find themselves managing their emotions in accordance with societal expectations and professional norms. Samantha's account of masking her emotions in front of students and parents resonates with a prevalent phenomenon observed in educational settings, known as surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) or suppression (Sutton & Harper, 2009). This phenomenon, rooted in emotional labour, reflects the unspoken requirement for educators to conceal negative emotions to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 2013)—in this case, even during a pandemic.

Similarly, John's experience of uncertainty in the early days of the pandemic also suggests that he was regulating other emotions. Uncertainty is theoretically connected to feelings of fear (Moore, 2018), but John did not describe fear directly. This is possibly because of teachers' unwritten display rules that cause one to inhibit their expression of negative emotions in the classroom (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 2013). Although previous studies on teachers' suppression of fear are limited, insights from Oplatka (2017) and Niesche and Haase (2012) demonstrate that school principals suppress fear. Therefore, it is possible that John either chose to hide this emotion or he regulated the emotion of fear and believed that he only felt uncertainty. Overall, the participants alluded to regulating

their emotions without naming it as such. Applying this lens of emotion regulation to the narratives is a way to make implicit meaning more explicit.

## **Implications**

First, there are important implications for administrators that can be derived from this study and its results. We recommend that school principals and administrators take the time to listen to teachers' stories about the pandemic. Teacher mental health predicts burnout, and principals can play a role in reducing burnout post-pandemic (Pressley et al., 2022). Stories provide rich insight into experiences and they are accessible in a way that is different from quantitative research or formal reports from school boards. Administrators can make an active choice to encourage storytelling by asking their staff to share stories and by sharing stories of their own. The results of this study paint an emotional picture of teaching during the pandemic that teachers are still processing. Teaching was hard during the pandemic and even though classrooms are beginning to return to normal, the stories of pandemic education live on within the teachers.

Second, researchers should explore narrative inquiry as a suitable methodology for studying topics that are highly personally relevant. This study highlights the importance of studying emotion through using a methodology that allows for the contextual nuances of individuals' experiences to come to light. Narrative inquiry, especially with a restorying approach to analysis, allows for a detailed account of contextual experiences that bring into being the emotional experiences that the participants describe. Without this ecological context, the emotions described would carry less gravity. Publishing narrative inquiry studies can be difficult as many readers expect a thematic analysis to come out of qualitative research. However, the purpose of narrative inquiry is to preserve the individual experiences, and in this case, describe how those experiences contribute to emotion. Emotions, if only felt by one participant, would be lost in a thematic analysis. Thus, narrative inquiry provided a perspective in this study that other qualitative methodologies would be unable to capture. In addition, researchers might want to consider how narrative inquiry could involve therapeutic processing by participants. The participants in this study all opened discussions with the lead researcher about how sharing their stories made them feel validated. Thinking about their own emotional experiences helped them to make sense of them. Betty even described her participation in this research as letting a load off her chest.

While the idea of narrative inquiry being therapeutic to participants is not new (Clandinin & Caine, 2013), the present research did not specifically intend to have this effect. Participants' admissions about the therapeutic effects of narrative inquiry underscore its potential to validate emotions and help people make sense of their own experiences.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The present study should be considered in light of three limitations that provide direction for future research. First, data was collected during the 2022–2023 academic year—more than two years since the onset of the pandemic. Asking participants to recall and retell experiences from so long ago has drawbacks because of the inevitable shifts in memory that occur over time

(Dudai & Morris, 2013). However, allowing time to pass in this fashion ensures that we did not collect knee-jerk reactions; rather, thoughtful reflections on the event and emotions. Future research could examine both narratives collected during an event and retrospective narratives to obtain a more complete picture of the experiences being researched. Second, the study design did not include any form of fact-checking to ensure that what participants reported aligned with the health and educational policies in place at any given time. However, since the narratives that they shared were well-developed and plausible, this limitation did not reduce the interpretability of the data. Future research using narrative inquiry could incorporate more forms of data beyond participant interviews, such as diaries, photo logs, or interviews with other sources who could speak to the participants' stories. Third, this research was limited to the province of Alberta. This is a limitation in that the political, medical, and educational contexts exist only within that province. Readers from outside the province might find less relatable content in these narratives for that reason. However, because education and health are provincially regulated, this context created a similar experience upon which the stories were based.

### **Conclusion**

The present study restored three teachers' narratives of their emotional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of narrative methodology in this research allowed the researchers to tell the story of teachers' emotions during the pandemic. Unlike

existing quantitative research that examines emotions or emotion-adjacent constructs without diving into the richness of teachers' emotions (e.g., Pellerone, 2021; Pressley et al., 2021; Sokal et al., 2020; White, 2022; Yazici & Yüksel, 2022), the use of narrative inquiry revealed moments of optimism and curiosity amongst complicated experiences of loss and hopelessness. In other words, this research served to provide teachers with a voice and a platform to share their emotional experiences of the pandemic. The stories are discussed within the broader field of psychology showing how teachers' emotions during the pandemic are deeply personal, psychological, and meaningful to them as individuals, professionals, and citizens.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample Second Interview Protocol for Betty**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to narrate the emotional experiences of teachers during COVID-19. It is your own story and your own understanding of these experiences that we wish to capture. Do you have any questions about the interview process before we begin? We would like to remind you that you can choose to end the interview at any time. Do you consent to do this interview?

We are here today to discuss in further detail some of the emotions and events that emerged from your first interview. My hope is to gain a deeper understanding of your experiences related to emotion.

#### **Interview Questions**

- What were some of the hospital “horror stories” that you were hearing before the school closure?
- Anger: When did you feel it? When did you not feel it? What did it look like to you?
- You mentioned that you felt like you were on an island for the first week after the school closure. Can you elaborate on that?
- What emotions do you feel during this school year as we are exiting the COVID-19 crisis?

#### **Probing Questions**

Ask deepening/clarifying questions to encourage elaboration on events described and to keep the conversation going, such as:

- Can you tell me more about this event?
- What else did that event make you feel?
- Why do you think that this event had that effect on you?
- What stood out to you during that time?
- What do you mean when you say that?

## **Closing**

Are there any other stories about your emotions during the pandemic that you would like to share? Is it alright if we end the interview here? Thank you for participating in this research. You gave me a lot of insightful information. Do you have any questions about the research or interview process?