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Challenges Faced by Early Childhood Teachers (K-2) as Schools Emerge from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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by

Julie C. Wright

MS, Walden University, 2005

BS, The College of New Jersey, 1990

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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April 2024

Abstract

Researchers have studied stress and burnout in the field of education for decades. The problem addressed in this study was that early childhood (EC) teachers of kindergarten through second grade in a large, northeastern, suburban public school district have returned to in-person instruction with many challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC teachers and investigate the support they need to remain in the classroom. Jennings and Greenberg's prosocial classroom model was the conceptual framework of the study. Two research questions explored the challenges faced by EC teachers and the support they need to remain in classrooms. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 12 EC teachers with at least 3 years of experience in the research district to participate in semistructured interviews. Participants' responses were analyzed with in vivo and axial coding to search for emerging themes. Key results illustrated participants' struggle to meet the changing needs of students and their families, challenges responding to administrative demands, increased stress levels affecting their overall wellness and satisfaction with teaching, and their need for administrative support and professional development that supports and maintains teachers' personal and professional health. The findings may contribute to positive social change by indicating specific training topics and support EC teachers need to maintain their well-being, encourage healthy teacher-student relationships, and promote positive outcomes for students.

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Dedication

To Kevin. You dream big. You dreamed this dream for me before I realized I wanted it. You have supported me through every part of this journey. You knew I would succeed even when I was unsure. We earned this moment together! I love you!

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my committee members at Walden University. Special thanks to Dr. Donald Yarosz for stepping in as my committee chairperson in the final months of my journey. You helped me find a topic I am passionate about when I first began my coursework. Since becoming my chairperson, you have been eager to help, always available to talk on the phone or join a virtual meeting. I am also extremely grateful to Dr. Amy White for her expert guidance throughout this experience. You are indeed an important asset on this committee. You were never easy on me, but you saw my dedication and pushed me toward reaching my potential. I am thankful for Dr. Mary Howe. You taught me the art of crafting a qualitative research design even when I insisted that I would prefer to conduct a quantitative study. I would also like to recognize Dr. Jeffrey Christo and Dr. Jeffrey Lolli for giving your time, expertise, and friendship to guide me throughout this lonely process. Finally, I would be remiss in not mentioning the wonderful Dr. Beryl Watnick. As both a course professor and my initial committee chairperson, you and I always connected. I felt like you were a teacher, a guide, and a friend. Enjoy your retirement!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt closing of schools worldwide and sent children home. Educators and researchers were immediately concerned with how school closures and distance learning strategies might affect students (Kyerematenge et al., 2022; Oberg et al., 2022). During the formative years of primary education, young children learn the foundational skills that will prepare them for life, work, and active citizenship (UNICEF, n.d.). COVID-19 has impacted on the education community as a whole, yet, it is important to explore the many ways teachers have been affected (Teglasi, 2022). As the United States emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, school leaders will need to understand what challenges early childhood (EC) teachers have faced, consider how those challenges may affect teaching and learning, and address EC teachers' needs by providing meaningful support and professional development. The knowledge gained from this study has the potential for positive social change within the research state and other suburban public schools in the northeastern United States. It may inform the profession by highlighting EC teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face, suggesting themes and topics administrators might focus on when planning for professional development sessions and improving the educational environment for all participants and stakeholders.

This first chapter will introduce background information on the topic of sources of stress and teacher wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The problem and purpose statements will be discussed. Research questions will be presented along with the conceptual framework that may assist in answering those questions. I will describe the

nature of the study with a concise rationale for choosing to conduct qualitative research. I will provide all definitions, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations necessary within the context of the study. Finally, I will describe the significance of this study as it has the potential to contribute to the professional conversation regarding challenges faced by EC teachers post-COVID-19 pandemic and to initiate positive social change by identifying professional development topics that support EC teachers who remain in the classroom.

Background

Almost 40 years ago, researchers recognized a need to examine the reasons teachers report high levels of stress in the workplace. Teaching has long been described as one of the most stressful occupations (Smith et al., 2000). Research over several decades indicates an ongoing concern about stress and burnout among teachers. In a quantitative study intended to investigate suburban teachers' stresses and identify factors that promote teacher burnout, about 30% of teachers surveyed reported some level of burnout, about 69% said they did not feel adequately prepared for the stresses of teaching, and almost 87% felt that the administrative meetings did not help solve their work-related problems (Farber, 1984). In a qualitative study, the teachers interviewed agreed that heavy workload, problems with student discipline, and impractical expectations for standardized testing were stressors that negatively affected their relationships with students and coworkers (Davidson, 2009). Several other factors that contribute to teachers' stress have also been explored such as work-life imbalance (Moeller et al., 2018), increasing class sizes due to high attrition rates (Rancher & Moreland, 2023; Varathan, 2018), and a gap in practice identified as inadequate training

or support to address challenging student behaviors (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Schaack et al., 2021). As an ongoing concern, it is important to note that EC teacher stress levels and burnout rates have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is an abundance of current research on how the pandemic has affected children (Araújo et al.,2021; Bryant et al., 2020; Davis, 2022; Dorn et al., 2020; Kyerematen et al., 2022; Oberg et al., 2022). Some research has addressed the challenges EC teachers (K-2) faced at the onset of the pandemic and through the initial stages of distance and hybrid learning (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Cipriano et al., 2020; Dias et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2021), but it is important to examine the new challenges that developed when students returned for traditional in-person instruction. Although current literature has identified a need for professional development and training that will support EC teachers' social-emotional skills and well-being through these challenging times (Cipriano et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2021; Mankki & Räihä, 2022; Sandilos et al., 2022), a gap in professional practice still remains as such training has not been offered in the research district or in many public school districts in northeastern states before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study is needed to explore the challenges EC teachers face, illustrate the need to assess and address EC teachers' stress levels, and identify a gap in practice regarding what training and support EC teachers need to remain in the classroom. District administrators may use the findings of this study to seek out professional development that can mitigate shortages, reduce burnout and attrition, and ultimately improve students' learning and achievement (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). All stakeholders may

benefit from the findings. As teacher well-being (TWB) improves, attrition and burnout rates may decrease, learning environments will be enhanced, and student achievement will show positive outcomes.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this study was that EC teachers of kindergarten through second grade in a large, northeastern, suburban public school district have returned to in-person instruction with many challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Information was needed about those challenges and how district leaders are addressing the personal wellness and social-emotional needs of EC teachers so they may remain in classrooms and provide high-quality instruction. High stress levels can lead to less effective instruction and behavioral management practices (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). According to recent research, students notice when teachers experience high levels of stress (Herman et al., 2018; Oberle et al., 2022). Teachers working with younger students have shown the highest levels of stress, perhaps due to a heightened sense of responsibility to address students' needs (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021).

This study was conducted in a large, suburban public school district in the Northeast that shall be referred to by the pseudonym Shell Creek School District (SCSD). Local regulations and policies enforced within the SCSD schools indicate a perceived association between teacher wellness and quality of education. According to district policy, effective teachers are expected to monitor and maintain the sound mental, physical, and emotional health necessary to perform the duties and services of their professional assignment. Additionally, all teachers are expected to take the appropriate

measures when personal or health-related issues may interfere with work-related duties. According to the research state's Department of Education, state and local codes indicate a need for professional development that includes at least 20 hours per academic year of learning that incorporates strategies to improve educator effectiveness and student achievement. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2011) also noted a responsibility in the profession to support co-workers by establishing and maintaining positive work settings and relationships that support productive work and meet their professional needs. The current qualitative data collected from SCSD EC teachers (K-2) shows that the problem of post-pandemic challenges and TWB is current, relevant, and significant within this district, which is one of the largest prekindergarten through eighth grade school systems in the research state.

Rising teacher absenteeism rates may be an indicator of changes in stress levels, which contribute to the problem. Teacher absenteeism rates and a shortage of substitute teachers resulting in alternative coverage strategies negatively affect teachers and students (U.S. Department of Education [US DOE], 2022). According to the state department of education's website, SCSD reported rates of teacher attendance as high as 96% prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that teachers were typically absent fewer than 7 days per year. During the 2020-21 school year, SCSD teachers' absenteeism rates rose to an average of 12.6 days. Although local absenteeism rates were not reported for the 2021-22 school year, 72% of U.S. schools reported an increase in teacher absences compared to just 49% the year before (NCES, 2022). The secretary of the local teachers' union reported that members raised concerns about special education and intervention

teachers being used to cover absences. Scheduled in-class support periods were being cancelled, contributing to rising stress levels in classrooms. An SCSD teacher who recently resigned stated that administrators seemed unaware of teacher overload. During a virtual panel discussion of K-12 teachers and administrators from the research state, one guest stated that her school compensates teachers financially for using their planning period to help cover another teacher's absence (Gagis et al., 2022). Members of the panel agreed that this practice is generally uncommon. The local teachers' union president stated that teachers must find a way to communicate their needs for support and professional development to administrators.

Another contribution to the problem is that district administrators typically welcome back teachers and staff with messages of new goals and strategic best practices. After 2 consecutive years of remote and hybrid instruction complicated by social distancing and masking mandates (Cardoza, 2021; Gershenson & Holt, 2022), SCSD teachers were greeted with statistics from high stakes test results and reviews of student performance (SCSD Assistant Superintendent, personal communication, October 18, 2022) along with directives to administer a series of new benchmark tests so that district administrators could track students' progress (SCSD Curriculum Supervisor, personal communication, January 5, 2023). Administrative communications like these may contribute to the problem being studied and have been related to increased feelings of frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty among EC teachers leading to concerns of teacher well-being (TWB) and poor student academic outcomes (Robinson et al., 2022).

There is an abundance of research focused on how students, teachers, schools, and families responded to initial school closings, distance learning, and hybrid programs (Araújo et al.,2021; Bryant et al., 2020; Davis, 2022; Dorn et al., 2020; Kyerematenge et al., 2022; Oberg et al., 2022), yet challenges still remain since COVID-19 restrictions and mandates were relaxed and students returned to traditional in-person classrooms (Eveleigh et al., 2021; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). After a bibliometric analysis of 75 published articles, Gómez-Domínguez et al. (2022) reported a growing interest in teacher stress and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic but were unable to find any studies that explored TWB and/or what support EC teachers may need to persevere through current challenges. Other researchers indicated that it is important to examine what is meant by TWB and identify ways to support it (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). The findings of this study may have local and statewide implications for the professional development policies districts follow.

This study builds on research from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic by collecting EC teachers' current, post-pandemic perceptions of stress related to closing learning gaps, addressing students' behavioral delays, and finding a suitable work-life balance. With notable changes in administrative demands, student behavior, and staff morale, a qualitative study was needed to explore EC teachers' current experiences in the classroom. There is a need to explain what is meant by TWB and identify the tools and strategies to support it (Dietrich, 2021; Hascher & Waber, 2021). A gap in professional development practice exists because although current literature has identified a need for professional development and training that supports EC teachers' social and emotional

skills and well-being through challenging times (Brackett & Cipriano, 2020; Cipriano et al., 2021; Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Curry & Csaszar, 2021; Eveleigh et al., 2021; Fly Five SEL, 2022; Fraser, 2020; Herman et al., 2021; Panorama Education, 2015; Sandilos, 2022; Santoro & Price, 2021), such training has not been offered in the research district or in many public school districts in northeastern states before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative data collected in this study could offer insights regarding what training and interventions may be used to support EC teachers, bolster emotional well-being, and support their efforts to remain effective in the classroom (see Sandilos et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. During the initial months of the pandemic across the United States, rates of significant teacher burnout and turnover doubled from 20% to 40% with the most common sources of stress contributing to a loss in social and emotional wellness (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Cipriano et al., 2021). Existing research has indicated a need to build on earlier data with further exploration and description of teachers' experiences (Brooks DeCosta et al., 2022; Jennings, 2021; Panorama Education, 2015; Santoro & Price, 2021). There is a lack of research that addresses EC teachers' current perceptions of new challenges as students have now returned to traditional in-person instruction (Jones & Ali, 2021). Teachers have been called "first

responders" as they attempted to meet students' increased academic and behavioral needs. Administrators, families, and the greater community have high expectations for teachers to eliminate education inequalities, accelerate student progress, close learning gaps, and assist families in need of guidance and community resources (Vegas & Winthrop, 2022). Though there has been research on stress in the field of education (Gewertz, 2020; Herman et al., 2020; Kwon, 2020; Oberle et al., 2020), as the nation emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for professional development and training that will support EC teachers' social-emotional skills and well-being (Mankki & Räihä, 2022).

A gap in practice remains as it is uncommon for districts to offer training topics that support TWB. Participants in this study described their perceptions of challenges EC teachers have faced related to student behaviors, administrative expectations, and widening learning gaps among others that contributed to their feelings of stress and burnout. With a clearer understanding of EC teachers' perceptions and experiences, teachers and their administrators may begin to address challenges, offer teachers support and interventions, improve emotional and physical well-being, and implement strategies to promote schoolwide improvement (Brooks DeCosta et al., 2022; Henderson, 2022; Jennings, 2021; Santoro & Price, 2021).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the research design of this qualitative study:

Research Question 1: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the personal and professional challenges they faced when returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support needed post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom?

Conceptual Framework (Qualitative)

The prosocial classroom model was the conceptual framework for this study. It highlights the importance of teachers' social and emotional competence (SEC) and well-being in the development and maintenance of supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and the successful implementation of learning programs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The prosocial classroom model defines teachers' SECs as the skills that shape the nature of their relationship with children. The quality of student-teacher relationships and classroom management can directly affect student outcomes (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) recommend adult SEC training and interventions to support teachers' well-being, make them more self-aware, and regulate their own emotions in ways that promote a positive classroom environment (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The logical connections between the framework presented and my study include several key concepts related to the experience and management of stress such as burnout, mindfulness, stress/coping, teacher effectiveness, and classroom management. This aligns with the problem and purpose of the study as the conceptual framework identifies key

terms associated with EC teachers' challenges to balance personal stress with increased professional demands and will be further explained in Chapter 2. The model illustrates a relationship between SECs and teacher burnout as well as suggested interventions to support EC teachers. An in-depth description of the framework is presented in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

A basic qualitative approach is the appropriate method to explore EC teachers' perceptions of the challenges they have faced as schools returned to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic. Individual semistructured interviews guided my research and data collection as I collected data regarding teachers' experiences and the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. Conducting qualitative research is the preferred method when the purpose is to explore or describe a phenomenon (Butin, 2010) or when a researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to it (Burkholder et al., 2020). Because of its naturalistic approach and iterative design, qualitative research can provide interruptive and transformative experiences that promote social change (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The design for this qualitative study was intended to explore teachers' experiences, build an environment of trust between myself and participants, and guide the discussion through a specific set of in-depth questions.

I used semistructured interviews to collect data. An interview protocol was designed with probing open-ended questions to elicit deep, descriptive responses until saturation. Individual interviews are the preferred way to collect rich data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) that describe EC teachers' lived experiences and perspectives regarding

their personal and professional challenges since returning to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic. Face-to-face interviews are preferred, but for convenience of scheduling or personal concerns on the part of the participants, virtual meetings were offered. Both in-person and virtual meetings were recorded for later transcription. In this way, I was able to collect thick, rich data as EC teachers described their current stress levels, sources of stress, and what types of support might ease teachers' anxiety while improving their overall well-being.

Participants included 12 EC teachers of kindergarten through second grade with at least 3 years of experience. The volunteers were chosen from a variety of schools within the SCSD. Participants are currently teaching in classrooms and must have been continuously employed at SCSD since before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic so they could share how their daily experiences have been affected by school closures, remote and livestream instruction, and the return to traditional in-person classrooms. The use of semistructured interview questions with carefully planned follow-up probes helped me gather EC teachers' perceptions of stress in their own words as it relates to their individual experiences throughout the course of the pandemic. In vivo and axial coding methods were used to analyze participants' responses and search for emerging themes. In vivo codes are useful to capture participants' lived experiences. Axial coding allows the researcher to identify higher level overarching themes (Burkholder et al., 2020). To reach saturation, I continued with the semistructured interviews and coding procedures until no new themes emerged regarding EC teachers' perceptions of stress and well-being.

Definitions

Definitions of the following key concepts and terms are provided to assist the reader and minimize possible ambiguities.

Attrition: Teachers leaving the profession or moving between schools/districts (Clark, 2022).

Burnout: Chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed may evolve into a more serious syndrome known as burnout. Individuals can experience a deep sense of disillusionment and hopelessness. Symptoms include feelings of exhaustion, diminished enthusiasm, cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy (Clark, 2022; Robinson, 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic: An infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus (WHO, 2023) that forced Northeastern schools to close their doors in March, 2020 and affected 98.6% of learners worldwide (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

Emotional exhaustion: Emotional exhaustion is defined as a state of feeling emotionally worn-out and drained as a result of accumulated stress from personal or work lives, or a combination of both. Emotional exhaustion is one of the signs of burnout (Cafasso, 2021).

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is a practice that develops attention and awareness through simple activities that support emotion management, reduce stress, and focus the mind (Abram, 2020).

Social emotional competencies (SECs): Strategies individuals use to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021).

Teacher well-being: TWB evaluates an individual's responses with a sense of awareness and the implementation of practices in cognitive, social, emotional, physical health and social conditions pertaining to teachers' work (Clark, 2022; Fraser, 2020).

Assumptions

Conditions within the study that may be taken for granted, or assumed, must be noted to identify them as critical, explain the basis for making the assumption, and relate to a procedure of the study that is not within the researcher's control (Burkholder et al., 2020). To explore EC teachers' perceptions of stress and the support they need to remain in the classroom, several assumptions should be considered. The first assumption is that participating teachers would provide honest, detailed responses to all interview questions regarding their perceptions of stress and wellness. Another assumption is that participating teachers can identify the signs and sources of stress in their personal and professional lives. Finally, it was assumed that participating teachers are familiar with district and state requirements for ongoing professional development and could articulate what specific professional development topics are needed to support them as they endeavor to remain in the classroom.

Scope and Delimitations

This study explored EC teachers' perceptions of post-COVID challenges and investigated opportunities to improve general wellness through professional development and administrative support. Previous research addressed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, but there is a gap in literature about EC teachers' perceptions of post-COVID challenges they face. Recent researchers have identified a need for professional development and training that supports EC teachers' well-being through these challenging times (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Dietrich, 2021; Jones & Ali, 2021; Mankki & Räihä, 2022; Shin & Puig, 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021), yet a gap in practice remains as such training is uncommon in many public schools in the northeast.

A variety of potential theories and models exist that support the focus and design of this study. The transactional theory of stress is influential as it conceptualizes stress and coping processes across occupational contexts including, but not limited to, education (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this theory, the authors explain that individuals experience stress when environmental demands exceed their ability to cope. Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy suggests that how people feel about themselves determines how they interact with others. Self-efficacy affects an individual's choice of activities, effort, and persistence and can be seen as a stress-coping strategy. More specific to understanding teacher stress, the prosocial classroom was chosen to frame and support the current study. It suggests that teachers with strong SECs feel more efficacious in the classroom, improve their outlook on teaching, and have more positive interactions with students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The authors presented two key premises that directly

relate to the purpose of the current study: Higher teacher SECs can reduce the effects of stress on teachers and students, and teacher SEC skills can be increased through training and support (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Delimitations set boundaries and narrow the study by specifying which participants and/or locations will not be included (Burkholder et al, 2020). I recruited only K-2 teachers within a large, suburban public school district in the northeast. Volunteers must have been employed with the research district for a minimum of 3 consecutive years to ensure that their experiences took place at SCSD before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study did not include preschool teachers. I chose to exclude preschool teachers who receive additional training in SEL as it plays a major role in their daily preschool curricula. As such, preschool teachers may perceive sources and levels of stress differently. Teachers of third grade were excluded because they are considered upper-elementary in SCSD. Academic and behavioral expectations above second grade differ from those in grades K-2. I also excluded teachers working in my own school and included only those K-2 teachers from the remaining seven elementary schools within SCSD. I have been employed by the same school for more than 21 years. As such, my personal relationship with close coworkers might have influenced how they respond to interview questions. The study is further delimited by not including teachers working in private or parochial schools because behavioral expectations for both students and staff along with professional development practices may differ. Exclusion of these groups strengthened transferability by focusing on K-2 general education teachers who

have similar full-day schedules and curricula comparable to other suburban public schools in the Northeast.

Limitations

All studies have limitations related to the design or methodology (Burkholder et al., 2020). Qualitative research is subjective by design. The researcher must consider their own positionality and experience throughout all phases of the study to account for possible unintended influences or misinterpretations. Limitations regarding the study must be considered. I recruited EC teachers to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary but limited specifically to teachers of grades K-2 with at least 3 years of teaching experience. While the seven schools eligible for participation in the study employ over 90 K-2 teachers, some may not be willing to volunteer or have the required minimum of 3 years of experience.

Another limitation is time and availability. The purpose of the study is to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC teachers post COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the classroom. Data collection for the study took place during the school year. With ongoing job responsibilities, some may have been unwilling to participate due to the very nature of their own stress. Therefore, participants who did volunteer may be under less stress or exhibit greater resilience skills which may have been reflected in their interview responses. To help overcome this limitation, I was as flexible as possible in scheduling interview times and settings that fit teachers' busy lives. I worked with school principals

as needed to offer individual incentives, such as having permission to leave early or enjoy a casual dress day, to those who participate.

Researcher bias is an important limitation to this study. As I am currently teaching within the district, I had to be aware of my own experiences and perceptions. My years of experience could have affected how I asked questions or responded to participants' answers. To address this potential bias, I worked to maintain a professional approach and not let my personal thoughts or opinions guide or influence the interviews or data analysis process. I carefully followed my interview protocols and keep reflective journal notes.

Finally, there are limits to transferability. The research district is a large PK-8 suburban public school system in the Northeast. Identifiable data and demographics are readily available on the district's website. They indicate a diverse population where almost 40% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meal plans. Given the same methodological approach, similar geographic attributes, and comparable social/political demographics, the findings of this study might be transferable to other large, suburban, public school districts. Future researchers might consider recruiting participants from urban and rural districts or from private and parochial schools, thus adding to the transferability.

Significance

An exploration of EC teachers' perceptions of post COVID-19 challenges and the support they need to remain in the classroom may provide useful insight to teachers, administrators, and policymakers. Current literature has identified a need for professional

development and training that will support EC teachers' social-emotional skills and well-being through these challenging times. A gap in practice remains because the support EC teachers need is not commonly offered. School leaders and policy makers can contribute to closing the gap in practice by offering training sessions that focus on stress management strategies, support adult SEL, and improve TWB. Whole school wellness benefits all stakeholders. It includes a plan that supports and retains teachers by interrupting the cyclical nature of stress, restoring their sense of professional efficacy, and developing positive relationships (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], 2021; Curry & Csaszar, 2021; Jones & Ali, 2021). The findings of this study may be used to guide local stakeholders such as district administrators and board members by identifying challenges EC teachers are facing and providing more information about the types of professional development needed to support EC teachers in these challenging times. Ultimately, the study may contribute to positive social change by illustrating the current state of EC teachers' wellness and improving the learning environment where students can grow, learn, and thrive.

Summary

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, much attention has been paid to the effect that school closures, distance learning, and isolation have had on young children. But SECs are important skills for both student and teachers in challenging times. Stress has been identified as the number one reason teachers leave the profession. Within Chapter 1, I discussed the background information, problem and purpose statements, research questions, conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. I listed definitions

of key terms and concepts necessary to support the reader. I noted assumptions that are critical to the meaningfulness of the study. I described the scope, delimitations, and limitations that may affect the findings. Finally, I explained the significance of the proposed study and its potential implications for positive social change. In Chapter 2, I provide an exhaustive review of the literature that lays the foundation for this study. I discuss in greater detail the conceptual framework that aligns with the purpose of this study. Chapter 2 will summarize the major themes discovered in the literature. I describe how the study fills a gap in the literature on practice. It also describes how the study may influence current awareness and knowledge with respect to practice in the field of EC education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will discuss current literature that is relevant to the current study. The problem is that EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern suburban public school district have returned to in-person instruction with many personal and professional challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Information is needed about how to address the personal wellness and needs of K-2 teachers so they may remain in classrooms and provide high-quality instruction. Research questions address EC teachers' perceptions of the challenges they have faced when returning to traditional in-person instruction after COVID-19 restrictions and mandates were lifted as well as the support and training EC teachers need to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom. The purpose of this study was to explore K-2 teachers' perceptions of personal and professional challenges since schools reopened full-time with in-person instruction and investigate the support they need to remain in the classroom.

The practice of teaching is often associated with stress. Researchers and educational professionals have been interested in stress and burnout among teachers since long before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Herman et al, 2018; Oberle et al., 2020). These concerns intensified when school closures forced changes in teaching formats with remote learning and social distancing (Love & Marshall, 2022). As schools reopened in hybrid models, teachers faced challenges that brought new focus to the stress and anxiety experienced by educational professionals (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022; Will, 2022). Several researchers explored the nature and sources of stress among teachers and found common themes including staff shortages, social

distancing restrictions, learning gaps, loss of teaching time, pressure from the community, and increased administrative expectations among others (Baker et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2022; Wakui et al., 2021). Hybrid learning plans brought students back into classrooms feeling disconnected, anxious, and ill-prepared while families struggled to support their learning from home (Baker et al., 2021). Many parents were caring for younger children, trying to work from home, or simply did not feel comfortable with the online platforms. Teachers reported feelings of anxiety, fear, worry, and sadness as they were charged with the responsibility to meet the increased needs of students and their families (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020), yet they often failed to address their own self-care needs (Cipriano et al., 2021). Increased job demands often resulted in a negative impact on teachers' work-life balance with long hours before school, after school, and on weekends. Teachers reported feeling like they were always on call (Baker et al., 2021). For many, the pull between work and home left teachers feeling inadequate and unsupported (Baker et al., 2021), resulting in higher rates of burnout and increased turnover (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021).

Teachers need support to prevent or overcome stress and burnout. Those who experience high levels of TWB can make a positive contribution to society by directly impacting student learning and achievement (Herman et al., 2018; Kwon, 2020; Oberle et al., 2020), yet there is limited research to support the understanding of what teachers do to maintain TWB and what to do if they do not succeed (Herman et al., (2020). The sections that follow contain discussions of the search strategies used, Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) prosocial classroom model as the conceptual framework, additional

theories associated with teacher stress and well-being, and an explanation of key terms and topics such as stress, burnout, well-being, attrition, social-emotional competencies, and professional development.

Literature Search Strategy

For the literature review, I searched for peer-reviewed articles, reports, and policy briefs that contained information about teacher stress and burnout, statistical data on factors that may contribute to rising teacher attrition rates, and strategies for evaluating and maintaining teachers' mental health and wellness. I searched for resources that were published in the last 3 years since the purpose of the study is to explore and investigate the challenges teachers faced since returning to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic that began in the spring of 2020. I used Google Scholar and the Walden University Library to begin my search. I found many informative articles listed in the references of prior studies. Several educational data bases such as ERIC, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis, ProQuest, and EBSCO assisted me in my search as well. I was able to narrow my searches in the Walden Library by setting the filters for peer-reviewed articles. I also used the Ulrich's Periodicals Directory to verify peer review for several resources. Key terms in my review of literature included stress, burnout, attrition, anxiety, coping, emotional exhaustion, COVID-19 pandemic, SEC, mindfulness, resilience, well-being, mental health, professional development, absenteeism, teacher shortages, and trauma.

I also conducted a search for prior studies or articles that cited Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) prosocial classroom model as the conceptual framework. These

resources often surpassed the 5-year limit for references, but the prosocial classroom model may be considered a seminal work that supports the study. By using a balance of seminal works with current articles and reports, I have designed this study to build on prior knowledge regarding teacher stress and professional development in ways that add to what is known and explore the current state of EC teacher stress and well-being while considering what professional development opportunities may offer the support teachers need to remain in classrooms. Following CDC and state policy recommendations, public schools in the research state lifted COVID-19 restrictions such as masking and social distancing in September 2022. My review of the extant literature yielded an abundance of information about how students and teachers were initially affected by restrictions and distance or hybrid learning models, but little research has been conducted to explore K-2 teachers' stress levels since the return to traditional in-person instruction or to investigate what support they may need to remain in classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

Definition of the Model

The prosocial classroom model is the conceptual framework for this study (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This model proposes three factors that contribute to creating healthy learning environments that promote positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students:

1. Teacher SEC aids in the development of supportive teacher-student relationships. Having the ability to recognize students' emotions and

understand the underlying factors that may influence their behavior can help teachers effectively respond to students' individual needs.

2. Teachers higher in SEC are likely to demonstrate more effective classroom management. More socially and emotionally aware teachers may notice student interactions and employ proactive strategies to manage behaviors. They may use facial expressions or verbal encouragement to promote enthusiasm and love of learning in students.
3. Teachers with higher SEC will implement social and emotional curriculum more effectively as they model desired social and emotional behaviors in the classroom. Their own use of SEC supports their ability to guide and support students through everyday situations as they naturally occur in the classroom.

The prosocial classroom model establishes teacher SEC and well-being as an organizational framework that can be examined in relation to student and classroom outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The authors noted that high teacher SEC may be especially important in classrooms of prekindergarten through elementary school where warm and supportive teacher-student relationships set the stage for future social, emotional, and academic success. The prosocial classroom model states that emotionally healthy teachers are more likely to engage in positive classroom interactions which enhance the learning environment (Sandilos et al., 2022). Teachers with strong SECs feel more efficacious in the classroom, improve their outlook on teaching, and have more positive interactions with students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Comparatively, burned-out

teachers and the learning environments they create can have harmful effects on student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

An exploration of teachers' stress levels and well-being was needed because many factors, personal and professional, may have an influence on teachers' SEC and job performance. With the appropriate support and training teachers will be more likely to remain in the classroom and continue building healthy teacher-student relationships with greater positive outcomes. Teachers set the tone of the classroom and shape the learning environment for students (Herman et al., 2018; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jones & Ali, 2021). Teachers model key life skills and behaviors such as confidence, self-efficacy, physical and emotional health, and the maintenance of personal and professional relationships.

Applications of the Model

The prosocial classroom model has been discussed at educational conferences and cited in several research studies (Abenavoli et al., 2014; Goroshit & Hen, 2014; Herman et al., 2020; Kwon et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). At an educational conference, Abenavoli et al. (2014) explained how several aspects of mindfulness can have positive outcomes with respect to student engagement, classroom management, and instructional practices as suggested by the prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers' well-being can influence academic and behavioral outcomes in the classroom (Kwon et al., 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017); warm teacher-student relationships promote deeper learning, and teachers' SEC skills help shape the nature of those relationships (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). High teacher SEC can reduce the harmful effects of stress on

teachers and their students (Herman et al. 2018, 2020). When teachers model high levels of well-being, student experience a more positive classroom environment in which to learn and grow (Kwon et al., 2019). In contrast, teacher stress, burnout, and coping skills may negatively affect the tone of the classroom, contribute to increasing rates of teacher turnover and absenteeism, and are likely related to academic and behavioral outcomes for students. Personal and professional stress can leave teachers feeling emotionally exhausted and uninspired, supporting the need for future qualitative research to explore training strategies that enhance teachers' emotional competencies (Goroshit & Hen, 2014). Teachers' SEC skills can be increased through training and support (Herman et al., 2018, 2020).

Significance and Application to the Current Study

Several researchers (Gómez-Domínguez et al., 2022; Hanno et al., 2022; Herman et al., 2018) cited the prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), which directly addressed the problem of high stress levels among students and teachers in the classroom. Although written before the COVID-19 pandemic, the prosocial classroom model is a strong conceptual framework on which to build my research. Teachers with higher skills in SECs are more likely to show effective classroom management, develop stronger relationships with students, and become positive role models for social and emotional learning. Strong SEC skills help teachers create a healthy classroom environment resulting in positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students. A teacher's well-being can be influenced by administrative leadership, school climate, education policy and demands, and degrees of stress in his/her personal life.

While teachers' SECs are needed in classrooms at every grade level, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) suggested that it may be especially important in the primary grades (pre-k through elementary) because a young child's experience with teachers can affect future relationships with teachers and peers. Children need teachers who model socially and emotionally healthy behaviors (Ho & Funk, 2018). When teachers actively listen and respond to young children, they show that their students matter, are safe to express emotions, and feel heard and accepted. Teachers play an essential role in ensuring that young children develop and learn in an environment of trust, affection, and respect (Ho & Funk, 2018). Students who have caring, supportive relationships with teachers are more engaged, enjoy learning, and are more self-regulated (Oberle et al., 2020). Conversely, negative relationships often predict poorer academic outcomes.

Teachers who lack the necessary resources to manage social and emotional challenges may enter what Jennings and Greenberg (2009) termed "a burnout cascade." They may feel less connected with students and use fewer prosocial approaches to manage classroom behaviors (Oberle et al., 2020). Increased troublesome student behaviors may leave teachers feeling emotionally exhausted. They resort to reactive responses to cope by creating a rigid classroom climate. Such a climate may continue to trigger negative student behaviors, thus becoming a self-sustaining cycle of disruption (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teacher stress and burnout can have serious effects on students (Oberle et al., 2020).

Although schools have adopted curricula on social and emotional learning for students, little attention has been paid to supporting teachers' SEC. Current challenges

and lack of support may be influencing some teachers' decisions to leave the profession. Administrators and school leaders can show teachers that they matter by carefully considering ways to support and develop teachers' SEC. While much emphasis has been placed on the value of children's wellness since the COVID-19 pandemic, children are likely to be healthy and happy when their teachers are physically and emotionally well (Kwon, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the challenges faced by K-2 teachers post-COVID and investigate what support they may need to remain in the classroom. The prosocial classroom model provided a strong conceptual framework and foundation on which to design the study.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

Stress vs. Burnout

Teacher attrition is a concern for all stakeholders in the field of education. Stress is the number one reason that teachers leave the profession (Diliberti et al., 2021; Jones & Ali, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stress as the body's response to anything that requires attention or action (WHO, 2021). As a natural part of the human experience, stress can help people get things done. Making simple changes to exercise, diet, and sleep patterns can help manage stress (Ragland, 2021). Under heavy stress, however, people may feel fatigued or anxious and struggle dealing with pressure. How a person responds to stress can affect one's overall health and well-being both personally and professionally.

High stress levels in the classroom can negatively affect the quality of education. Several researchers have surveyed teachers in grades K-7 who reported high stress levels

that were found to be associated with less-effective instruction (Herman et al., 2018; Oberle, 2020). In their own review of literature and theories, some researchers found that stress can lead to increased absenteeism and teacher attrition creating inconsistent practices and instructional gaps (Herman et al., 2020; Zamarro et al., 2022). Many researchers summarized extant literature and concluded that stress and burnout contribute to decreased quality in relationships with students and are associated with negative outcomes for both teachers and children (Herman et al., 2020; Oberle et al., 2020; Santoro & Price, 2021). Stress can be particularly impactful on teachers' ability to manage their classrooms and may negatively affect teachers' physical and mental health over time (Herman et al., 2020). Sandilos et al. (2022) observed first and second grade teachers using the Class Assessment Scoring System (CLASS K-3). The authors found that teachers with high stress levels and reduced emotional resources may struggle to engage with students, experience more problematic behaviors, and express negative feelings about the profession (Sandilos et al., 2022). When teachers experience stress, they may misinterpret student behaviors, struggle to problem-solve, and suffer from the inability to regulate their own emotions.

Stress and burnout are not synonymous. Burnout is defined as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed (Robinson, 2020). Symptoms include feelings of exhaustion, loss of interest in teaching, reduced feeling of professional accomplishment, decreased job satisfaction, increased absences, and attrition (Brasfield et al., 2019; Robinson, 2020). In 2019, Brasfield et al. conducted a quantitative study and surveyed teachers from preschool through the twelfth

grade. The authors found significant numbers of teachers reporting emotional exhaustion and burnout. They recommended the implementation of a comprehensive program to help teachers maintain wellness practices and reduce burnout symptoms (Brasfield et al., 2019). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pressley (2021) surveyed teachers in grades K-12 who reported that they have faced new demands and higher levels of stress due to new instructional requirements, parent communications, COVID-19 anxiety, and lack of administrative support. These new demands and concerns added to teachers' already full workload, lowered morale, and pushed stress levels to the point of burnout for many (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020; Pressley, 2021). The high rates of burnout have led to teacher shortages in many states which negatively affects school climate and student achievement (Brasfield et al., 2019).

Sources of Teacher Stress

By March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic had become a global concern that required a swift and immediate response. As a result, recent researchers have found that teachers report more job-related stress since the pandemic than the general adult population (Steiner & Woo, 2021). In one study, 75-85% of K-12 teachers surveyed indicated that they experienced increased stress compared to just one-third of adults working in other fields (Will, 2022). In another study, 91% of female preschool teachers reported elevated stress levels since COVID-19 forced schools to shut down (Rodriguez et al., 2022). Restrictions and isolation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic increased feelings of demoralization and burnout among teachers as lesson design and teaching practices needed immediate transformations (Santoro & Price, 2021). Will

(2022) noted that female teachers in all grades might be more likely to report increases in stress because the responsibility to care for their young children while working from home often fell on them. While some teachers stated that the possibility of risking their own health or that of a family member due to exposure was a source of anxiety and stress (Wakui et al., 2021), others were more focused on the changing work environment and intensified job demands (Bartlett, 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Miller, 2022; Robinson et al., 2022).

Some schools closed with little or no warning leaving teachers to adapt their teaching and prepare student materials overnight (Bartlett, 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Such abrupt closures may have led to higher levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion as teachers moved to online teaching with unfamiliar digital materials while receiving very little attention or support from administrators (Cipriano et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2022). During a virtual panel discussion, the superintendent of a large, urban public school district stated that his teachers are feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. The acting commissioner of the state board of education, expressed similar concerns and stated that about 55% of teachers have plans to leave the profession earlier than expected (Gagis et al., 2022). These rates are noticeably higher than the expected 8% attrition rate prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bartlett, 2021). Furthermore, the acting commissioner noted a drop of almost 50% in students enrolled in teacher preparation programs (Gagis et al., 2022). Statistics like these should prompt schools to attend to teachers' concerns now as a preventative action (Bartlett, 2021).

Teacher Attrition and Staff Shortages

Several researchers have studied attrition rates and vacancies as a source of stress for teachers at the beginning of pandemic shut downs and throughout the months of distance and hybrid instruction. RAND survey results summarized by Steiner and Woo (2021) indicated that educators closer to the classroom may experience more stress which threatens the teacher supply. In one nationwide quantitative study, teachers surveyed reported low levels of morale due to high rates of attrition (Marshall et al., 2022b). Noonoo (2022) interviewed teachers across the country and summarized several reasons teachers have left the classroom including anxiety, health and safety, and dysfunctional working conditions. With fewer new teachers graduating from preparation programs, schools may expect to see increased class sizes due to the declining number of available teachers to fill open positions.

For the teachers who chose to remain in the classroom, staff shortages have become an ongoing source of stress (Belsha, 2021). Teachers across the country reported several negative outcomes related to staff shortages (Marshall et al., 2022b). Exposures and quarantines forced many teachers to use all of their allotted sick days. Others may have sick and personal days available but are reluctant to use them because there are so few substitute teachers to cover the absence. Finally, teachers surveyed stated that the amount of internal coverage they have provided for each other is exhausting (Marshall et al., 2022b).

Abrupt Closures

On March 13, 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed for what was estimated to be a few weeks at most. Students were sent home with packets of work to get them started while educators and families worked to design a temporary learning plan. A few weeks became months and public schools within the research state finished the 2019-20 school year in a remote distance learning format having never reopened. Teachers had little guidance from administrators on how to proceed (ASCD, 2020; Cipriano et al., 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Grasping for quick solutions without a cohesive district plan, teachers chose from a variety of online platforms such as Zoom, Kahoot, Google Classroom, and Peardeck among many others (Ferlazzo, 2020). Teachers reported having to quickly become comfortable with the use of online teaching platforms and modifying their traditional methods to keep children engaged (Ford et al., 2021). Across the country, 5000 teachers responded to a survey and reported that they were unsure about how to use the new online formats, experienced time management issues as they attempted to balance work demands with family responsibilities, and spent a bulk of time before and after school hours responding to questions and criticism from families (Bartlett, 2021; Cipriano & Brackett, 2020) or serving as social workers and grief counselors (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Rodriguez, 2022). Teachers became exhausted as they began to manage these new challenges (Gewertz, 2020). Many expressed feeling a loss of professional efficacy, elevated anxiety, Zoom fatigue, and lower states of well-being (ASCD, 2020).

Changes in Relationships with the Community

In addition to the lack of administrative guidance, teachers experienced a change in relationships with families and the greater community that contributed to rising stress levels. When schools first closed, parents expressed gratitude and respect for their child's teacher. They realized what goes into planning and executing a day of instruction when they were called upon to assist in distance learning (Jankowski, 2023). By the fall of 2020, political tensions soared. The economy suffered from pandemic closures and social distancing. Teachers went from "Hero to Zero" as parents became frustrated and wanted the schools reopened (Bartlett, 2021; Jankowski, 2023). The school climate became increasingly "anti-teacher" as workloads intensified, parents became more critical, and students acted out in disrespectful ways (Marshall et al., 2022b; Noonoo, 2022).

The pandemic had negatively affected academic growth, especially for students of color, those in low-income areas, and English language learners (Li et al., 2023). Students with disabilities could not receive the support they needed while others in the LGBTQ+ community suffered from heightened risk for anxiety and stress due to isolation and abuse (Li et al., 2023). Teachers were often in the position to field complaints and accusations from various community stakeholders as pandemic closures remained in effect.

Student Responses to Changes in Teaching and Learning

A significant source of stress for teachers since the COVID-19 pandemic began may be related to changes in student behavior. Public schools within the research state reopened for in-person learning on alternative schedules in the fall of 2020. Students

attended school in a variety of ways including socially distanced classrooms with masking, fully remote/virtual instruction, or hybrid learning which offered a combination of in-person and live-streamed instruction (Pressley & Rangel, 2023). Being in school two days per week did little to support students' mental and emotional well-being that had suffered during months of shutdowns and social isolation (Bartlett, 2021; Robinson et al., 2022). Teachers described stunted behavioral and socioemotional development and reported an increase in classroom disruptions and disrespect toward teachers both in school and during live streamed lessons (Will, 2022).

Several researchers sought to understand these changes, likening the pandemic isolation and anxiety to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that are known to be potentially traumatic events that can disrupt childhood development, contribute to chronic health problems and mental illness, and negatively impact education and future job potential (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Parenting during the pandemic became highly challenging (Calvano et al., 2021). Araújo et al. (2021) also noted that parents experienced increased stress during the pandemic and stated that an escalation in "bad behaviors" among children might be a reflection of anxiety, excessive fear of getting sick, loss of loved ones, mood or anxiety disorders, or post-traumatic stress after witnessing increased rates of domestic violence and emotional abuse. According to these studies, several factors may have contributed to increased stress and anxiety among families. Challenges included home schooling and child care, social distancing measures and loneliness, lockdowns and restrictions involving health care, shopping, and masks, working from home while caring for children, and financial

insecurity after layoffs (Araújo et al., 2021; Calvano et al., 2021). Not all children experienced the pandemic the same way. For some, hunger, domestic abuse, mental illness, and substance misuse contributed to an environment of toxic stress at home (McManus & Ball, 2020).

With schools closed, children were cut off from resiliency building supports such as teachers, guidance counselors, school nurses, and friends (Bryant et al., 2020). During the extended period of time children remained at home, sleep routines and daily activities were altered, physical and outdoor activities decreased, and the use of electronic devices increased. Masks used to prevent the spread of the virus also covered facial expressions, making it hard for children to understand non-verbal communications and contributing to delays in language acquisition. These changes can have negative effects on emotional well-being and prevent child development from reaching its full potential (Araújo et al., 2021). The responsibility to put child development and emotional well-being back on track was placed on teachers.

New Concerns Regarding Learning Loss and Emotional Development

Teachers in every grade or subject area felt pressure to close learning gaps and support emotional delays from families, administrators, and the greater community (Rodriguez et al., 2022), yet hybrid classroom models yielded negative effects on student learning (Bartlett, 2021). Data collected from various socio-economic and ethnic groups made comparisons to illustrate months and years of estimated learning loss with plans for accelerated learning and intense tutoring (Dorn et al., 2020). EC teachers of preschool and kindergarten were distressed and unprepared to meet the needs of their young

students (Ford et al., 2021). Teachers reported that it was difficult to gain and keep their attention during virtual lessons (Shin & Puig, 2021). On in-person days, EC and elementary school teachers observed that young children struggled to meet basic behavioral expectations that would have been common before the pandemic such as sharing, walking down the hall, and following rules (Belsha, 2021). On distance learning days, teachers observed young children struggling to engage in lessons due to distractions by siblings, pets, and even home improvement projects (Dias et al., 2020). Middle and high school teachers noted an increase in fights between students who seem to have forgotten how to talk to each other (Belsha, 2021). Students suffering from learning loss may use a variety of misbehaviors to camouflage their academic deficiencies (Welsh, 2022). As teachers attempted to address learning and behavioral gaps, they reported spending less time on academics and more time on conflict resolution, answering parents' questions, and offering support or resources for families in need of grief counseling or assistance with food or financial insecurities (Belsha, 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2022). Reduced opportunities for direct instruction combined with severe social restrictions had taken their toll on young children's social skills and behavior throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Returning to full-time in-person learning would have many challenges. With many students returning from fully remote learning, it would be more challenging than ever to create positive, healthy learning environments in the classroom, thus adding to teachers' stress and burnout levels (Belsha, 2021).

Chronic Absenteeism and Safety Measures

Managing COVID-19 quarantines and chronic student absenteeism became another source of stress for teachers when schools returned to full-time in-person instruction. Students exposed to or testing positive for the virus were required to remain at home for a minimum of five days and could not return until receiving a negative test result. Teachers were expected to offer livestream access to daily lessons for the duration of all mandatory quarantines. This expectation required the use of digital tools and technologies that were unfamiliar to many teachers (Will, 2022). Livestreaming also brought up privacy concerns for students and teachers (Schwartz, 2020). Schools needed to secure access to the virtual classroom so that only students could get in while also setting rules and guidelines to protect the privacy of everyone at home or in the school (Schwartz, 2020). Many parents did not understand how to use the online platforms or were trying to work from home and found it difficult to support their young children (Harris, 2020).

School districts presented new COVID safety measures that added to the complex learning environment (Robinson et al., 2022). Classrooms must be set up to allow 3-6 feet between each student. Desks could no longer be arranged in cooperative learning groups. All children had to be facing forward and spaced apart from each other. Shared materials and learning centers were strictly prohibited to reduce the possibility of exposure between students. All students and staff were required to wear a mask at all times except during lunch. Enforcing these rules became another stressor for teachers.

Mask mandates became a source of anxiety and stress for students, families, and teachers (Robinson et al., 2022). Some researchers found that the regular and proper use of masks reduced anxiety (Li et al., 2021) and offered a level of protection as students returning to schools were less isolated, resulting in unpredictable threats of exposure (Guerriero, 2021). Others reported strong opposition and concern over their use and effect on children. Cardoza (2021) noted that teachers cannot see students' mouths or hear them as well when they are wearing a mask. Similarly, students cannot see the teacher's mouth when they learn to produce, blend, and spell sounds in words, creating anxiety for teachers about being effective in their work (Gershenson & Holt, 2022). Teachers found themselves at the center of political debates as families argued to "unmask their children" for a variety of reasons (Irving, 2022). School staff and administrators reported anti-mask demonstrations in neighborhoods and at school board meetings, sometimes accompanied by threats of violence against teachers who attempt to enforce safety rules (Guerriero, 2021).

Even with strict safety rules and policies in place, COVID-19 exposures and infections continued. As vaccines were approved and became readily available to everyone, district and state leadership announced a mandate that required all preschool through twelfth grade teachers to be fully vaccinated by October 18, 2021 or submit to weekly testing (Hartman, 2021). Consistent with general public opinion, some teachers in the northeast were reluctant to get vaccinated. They claimed that the mandate was unconstitutional, yet failure to comply would prevent them from practicing their profession (Stohr, 2022). More than 1400 qualified educators in New York City refused

to be vaccinated but did not qualify for medical or religious exemptions (Stohr, 2022). They were fired, thereby adding to the teacher shortage and overall state of anxiety. A year later, after the vaccine was approved for children, vaccine and testing mandates were lifted for teachers and staff within the research state (Fallon, 2022).

Teacher Mental Health and Well-Being

Teacher Well-Being (TWB) has been defined as teachers' responses to the cognitive, emotional, health, and social conditions pertaining to their work and their profession (Fraser, 2020). A guiding principle of the prosocial classroom model is the idea that TWB directly impacts the classroom environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers' SECs and well-being are central to the social-emotional support they can provide to students (Jennings et al., 2017). High TWB has been shown to help teachers manage stress and remain committed to their work with better resilience and motivation (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Fly Five SEL, 2022; Hascher & Waber, 2021). Comparatively, low TWB has been associated with teachers' inability to manage student behaviors, make decisions, solve problems, build relationships, and regulate their own emotions thus diminishing their ability to be effective educators (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Sandilos et al., 2022). Although a great deal of attention has been paid to students' healthy growth and development, there has been little focus on teachers' development of SECs despite evidence that teachers make important contributions to the learning environment and student outcomes (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teacher health and well-being took on an important role in schools' immediate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Herman et al., 2021). A large quantitative study

was conducted to examine whether burnout in classroom teachers in grades 4-7 was associated with students' perceptions of teachers' SEC (Oberle et al., 2020). Surveyed teachers who reported high stress levels were perceived as less supportive by their students. When teachers reported high stress, students often felt less engaged in learning and exhibited higher rates of behavioral problems (Oberle et al., 2020). Although the study focused on teachers and students between grades 4-7, the results may predict similar perceptions among EC professionals because the authors found that teaching younger students was significantly related to higher stress levels and burnout among teachers (Oberle et al., 2020). Other research confirmed and extended those findings adding that during the pandemic teachers reported increased feelings of demoralization and burnout (Santoro & Price, 2021). The authors recommended several strategies to consider including but not limited to the following: Administrators should build a culture of trust, respect, and open communication. Teachers must be able to share their concerns so school leaders can address the root causes of teacher dissatisfaction. School leaders should work to protect teachers' time by providing opportunities for collaboration and reducing administrative paperwork. Administrators should also prioritize teacher learning and training.

Effects of Stress on Teachers' Well-being and Resilience

While many researchers have studied the effects of stress and burnout among educators, Marshall et al. (2022a) sought to explore the reasons why some teachers remain in the profession. Through their quantitative research, Marshall et al. found that the pandemic has had a negative impact on teachers in two ways. First, teachers surveyed

said that the job has become more difficult with longer hours, masks, social distancing mandates, and virtual instruction. Additionally, with fewer students enrolling in teacher preparation programs, there are fewer teachers available to fill the openings created by early retirements and resignations. Faced with these challenges, Marshall et al. found that teacher autonomy and job satisfaction significantly and positively predicted a teacher's intention to remain in the classroom. Therefore, administrators and school leaders should encourage teachers' sense of autonomy through increased involvement in decisions and planning, open communication, and professional development intended to support TWB.

Social emotional learning (SEL) is not intended only for children. In December 2020 the ASCD recommended that schools seek out professional development providers to address SEL and TWB. While many schools were focused on addressing technical challenges associated with the transition to distance learning, they did little to support TWB (ASCD, 2020). Teachers need to be equipped with their own social and emotional competence skills so they can regulate their emotions, manage stress, and serve as role models for students (Fly Five SEL, 2022).

While there is still very little research on how pandemic-related stress has affected EC teachers in grades K-2, there has been some work that began to explore the topic. In 2021, Cipriano et al. surveyed over 6,700 teachers and support staff in Connecticut public schools including preschool, elementary, middle school, high school, and after school programs. The authors focused their questions on four basic points. How were school employees feeling about work? What were their sources of stress? What were their sources of joy? What were their sources of support? Teachers reported feeling

overwhelmed, stressed and anxious more than other emotions. The most common sources of stress included job demands, school regulations related to COVID-19, and lack of time, resources, and training. While positive interactions with students and colleagues did bring teachers joy, they still felt a sense of inadequacy and reported that schools did very little or nothing at all to support their social and emotional needs. Teachers asked for emotional support and access to self-care services, a reduction in workload with added planning time, and modifications to school safety regulations and adult training programs.

Another large quantitative study surveyed teachers of grades K-12 in New Orleans public charter schools. The purpose of the Baker et al. (2021) study was to describe the impact of COVID-19 on teachers' mental health, coping, and teaching. Similar to the Connecticut study (Cipriano et al., 2021), Baker et al. found that teachers surveyed reported considerable amounts of stress due to increased workload, changes required by administration, and added complications for those with family or caregiving responsibilities. Teachers noted that support they received from coworkers and some administrators was vital. In summary, teachers have reported being significantly impacted by the pandemic (Baker et al., 2021; Cipriano et al., 2021) which indicates a need for future qualitative research that explores teachers' stress and wellness. Baker et al. stated that school leaders and policymakers should not lose sight of supporting TWB to avoid the ripple effects of burnout and turnover.

Some research involved interviews with school leaders and administrators. In 2021, Carver-Thomas et al. interviewed several California superintendents and human

resources administrators to investigate the effect of the pandemic on the teacher workforce. Carver-Thomas et al. found that teacher shortages are a critical problem that has been exacerbated by early retirements, resignations, and lower enrollment in teacher preparation programs. Teacher workload and burnout have been major concerns since the onset of the pandemic. The administrators interviewed stated that high-quality professional learning is needed to support teachers' technology skills, reduce workload, and manage stress.

Mindfulness practices can give educators the ability to manage their emotions and address classroom problems more constructively (Jennings, 2021). School leaders tend to overlook the positive impact social-emotional learning can have on educators' well-being and success. Continued SEL and resilience training offered as professional development programs may help teachers meet their own needs, manage stress, and build more nurturing relationships with students (Fly Five SEL, 2022; Jennings, 2021). One such program is known as CARE for Teachers (CREATE for Education, 2020). CARE stands for Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education and was developed by Patricia Jennings (co-author of the prosocial classroom model), Christa Turksma, and Richard Brown. More than a webinar, CARE for Teachers offers workshops and retreats where teachers learn skills they can use in the classroom. Relaxation, movement, deep listening, and emotion-awareness training can help teachers reduce stress, improve concentration, and facilitate responsiveness.

Mindfulness practices can help but are no substitute for the broader, systemic change that is needed (Will, 2022). Failure to support teachers' mental health and

wellness may inhibit their ability to focus on students' needs (Rodriguez et al., 2022). At the Southeast Conference on School Climate in 2022, presenters Pressley and Hornsby-Griffin described an immersive approach to supporting SEL for adults in an Atlanta elementary school. Professional development for the school's teachers focused on six domains of self-care: physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual, and workplace/professional self-care. The program allowed teachers to be candid about their needs. Administrators listened and made an immediate plan of action. Routine meetings with the Self-Care Initiative helped teachers build trusting relationships, manage stress, and enhance their own well-being. More than 83% of the school staff joined the self-care initiative. Both teachers and school leaders noted improvements in learning environment and school climate. Pressley and Hornsby-Griffin stated that school leaders must ensure that teachers SEL needs are met. Cultivating the social and emotional competence of teachers improved the school culture and climate for all stakeholders.

It is critical to ensure that teachers are healthy and able to fulfill the growing demands of the job (Herman et al., 2021). School leaders and higher-level administrators need to monitor teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide support throughout the school year (Pressley, 2021). They should develop a wellness plan (Curry & Csaszar, 2021) and provide clear communication and protocols to help teachers feel safe in schools and reduce anxiety. As messengers of district decisions, teachers often receive the brunt of parents' criticisms. Schools and districts should provide clear communications with the community at large to reduce teachers' anxiety about managing parents' concerns (Pressley, 2021). School administrators should conduct "stay

interviews" that are not part of their annual performance reviews. Rather, during a stay interview, teachers could discuss what strengths or challenges they have noticed in their work since the pandemic began (Curry & Csaszar, 2021). Finally, schools that provide adult SEL and other supports (instructional, technology, or emotional) may help teachers feel empowered and valued, increase feelings of teacher efficacy and motivation, and encourage active collaboration among colleagues during this challenging time (Fly Five SEL, 2022; Pressley, 2021).

Implications for the Current Study

While the purpose of this study is to explore the challenges faced by EC teachers since returning to in-person instruction post-COVID and to investigate the support they need to remain in the classroom, there have been some researchers whose studies resulted in findings that suggest no increase in stress among teachers throughout the pandemic. Herman et al. (2021) studied TWB in schools across rural Missouri and Oklahoma. The risk of widespread COVID transmission was lower in these states but schools moved to distance learning models similar to those used in the northeast. Teachers who participated in this study reported lower stress levels and higher levels of coping after the onset of the pandemic. It is important to note that the lifestyle in these rural districts is quite different than in the northeast. Additionally, teachers reported that only 30-40% of students were attending and engaged in online instruction which would affect the overall workload. Findings of the current study might illustrate how professional expectations and stress levels differ between the two regions.

Several researchers have explored and described the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers, students, families, and the greater community, yet most have focused on the earliest months of school shutdowns and distance learning (Belsha, 2021; Shin & Puig, 2021; Welsh, 2022). Many authors agree that the implementation of strong SEL programs is needed to support students as they recover from the effects of social distancing and isolation (Davis, A., 2022; Davis, M., 2022; Sanders et al., 2023). Few studies, however, have prioritized the mental health and wellness of teachers today as schools have returned to traditional in-person instruction. High levels of stress and teacher burnout have been reported during the pandemic and several researchers have recommended follow up studies to collect data on TWB and wellness now that the demands of teaching have changed with the return of in-person instruction (Robinson et al., 2022; Shin & Puig, 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Jones and Ali (2021) stated that teachers with strong social and emotional competencies can manage the effects of stress on the job and keep students' learning on track, yet very little research has been conducted to understand what teachers might do to maintain their well-being (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Researchers have recommended using data collected from qualitative research to better understand teachers' well-being and seek out appropriate support strategies (Jones and Ali, 2021; Dyson et al., 2021; Sandilos et al., 2022). Other researchers have suggested that findings from this type of study might help reduce rates of teacher turnover and shortages, inform policy and practice; and ultimately improve students' learning and achievement (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2022; Welsh, 2022).

Summary and Conclusions

Stress and burnout among teachers have been well-studied since long before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Major themes in the literature included the differentiation between stress and burnout (Diliberti et al., 2021; Jones & Ali, 2021). Stress has been reported as the number one reason teachers leave the profession; however, burnout involves chronic, unresolved stress that leads to teacher shortages and poor student achievement (Pressley, 2021). Researchers identified the following sources of stress experienced by teachers throughout the pandemic: staff shortages, abrupt closures, poor community relations, students' learning loss, students' delayed emotional development, chronic absenteeism, and lack of administrative support (Belsha, 2021; Cipriano et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2022b; Robinson et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Teachers with high stress struggle to engage with student, experience more behavior problems, and fail to regulate their own emotions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Sandilos et al., 2022).

TWB has been identified as an essential topic for consideration as it may directly impact the quality of education for students. Teachers who do not receive the support they need may experience increased stress, anxiety, and depression (Gehl & Hackbert, 2019). While it is generally accepted that improving TWB may reduce stress and lead to positive outcomes for students (Bandura, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), little attention has been paid to developing teachers' social-emotional competencies. Most recent research has focused on the pandemic's effects on students and their families. Few studies focused on teacher wellness post COVID-19. Those that

did explore TWB and stress management included teachers of preschool through higher education (Cipriano et al., 2021). They were not specific to the unique experiences of K-2 teachers.

There is a gap in the literature that focuses on EC teachers' perceptions of personal and professional challenges since returning to full-time in-person instruction. Furthermore, a gap in practice exists with regard to the effective use of professional development to support teachers' social-emotional competencies, manage stress, and reduce attrition rates. The purpose of this study is to explore those challenges, understand how they affect teachers' well-being and student learning, and to investigate what support teachers need to remain in classrooms. The knowledge gained from this research may serve as a guide to educational leaders, school administrators, and policymakers who select or design support programs and professional development for teachers, thus filling a gap in practice in the field.

Chapter 2 included a concise statement of the problem and purpose of this study. I provided an exhaustive review of literature to illustrate what is known within the field of education related to teachers' stress levels, well-being, and perceptions of the challenges they have experienced since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The conceptual framework was defined and discussed. Extant research illustrates that future studies focused on teachers' SEC and stress management strategies are needed.

Chapter 3 includes the research questions meant to be answered in this study. The research design, methodology, and data collection are described. Plans for data analysis and management of possible biases or ethical issues are explained. The chapter ends with

a review of the necessary procedures to ensure trustworthiness of the findings and ethical treatment of the participants.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC (K-2) teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. A qualitative design was chosen to explore EC teachers' experiences and needs using semistructured interviews. The research took place in a large, suburban public school district in the northeastern United States. In Chapter 3, I describe the research design, explain my role as the researcher, identify the methods of participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection, and provide a plan for data analysis. I also provide strategies I used to establish the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, I discuss the ethical procedures necessary to protect the study participants and offered a summary of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions guided this basic qualitative study:

- Research Question 1: What do early childhood teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the challenges they faced when returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic?
- Research Question 2: What do early childhood teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support and training needed to maintain their well-being after returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic?

I chose to conduct a qualitative study to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC (K-2) teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. Ravitch and Carl (2021) recommended a qualitative research design when the purpose involves exploration and interpretation of the "ways humans view, approach, and make meaning of their experiences" (p. 4). Qualitative research allows participants to share the details of their lived experiences and values. This is the most appropriate method to answer the research questions. With semistructured, one-on-one interviews, I was able to collect data that describe teachers' perceptions, feelings, and needs for the purpose of exploring and understanding the challenges EC teachers are facing since returning to school after the COVID-19 pandemic (Burkholder et al., 2020). While quantitative methods using questionnaires with Likert scales were considered, the qualitative approach allowed me to have direct interactions with EC teachers, explore their personal experiences, and use probing questions to collect rich, descriptive data that may not emerge from a quantitative study.

In addition to the quantitative approach, other qualitative research designs were considered. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that focuses on the lived experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Interviews are the main source of data collection for the purpose of exploring and describing the meaning and essence of participants' responses. This method was not chosen because the goal of this study was simply to explore and investigate EC teachers' perceptions, rather than to contribute to the development of new theories (Dudovskiy, n.d.). A case study was also considered as

its major purpose is to describe behaviors and interactions related to a phenomenon (Burkholder et al., 2020). The most important feature of the case study approach is the bounded unit. A group of participating teachers from the same school district might be considered a bounded unit, however, one should not assume that their experiences and perceptions are unique to that district. The findings might be applicable and generalizable to other school districts with similar demographics. Additionally, case studies include and cross analyze multiple data sources. Relying solely on interviews, the case study approach was not deemed to be the best method for this study.

Role of the Researcher

As an independent researcher for this study, I had many roles. As an employee of the research district, I have been a teacher of first grade in the same school for 21 years including the years before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. During my tenure at SCSD, I have served as a teacher leader in many ways including mentor, pilot and implementation specialist, and professional development facilitator. I have assisted in writing school policies and district curricula. I have worked directly with many school and district level administrators. As such, I have a deep understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by SCSD EC teachers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (see Burkholder et al.,2020). My experiences and wellness could have affected my approach to interviews and/or interpretation of the data causing me to lose perspective and objectivity. I worked to be sure that my interview protocol and follow-up probing questions were designed to be impartial and did not reflect my own thoughts or perceptions.

I was the sole researcher and responsible for collecting data using semistructured interviews with participants who are my colleagues within the school district. In this role, I served as an observer as I collected and analyzed participants' responses to interview questions about sensitive topics and organized patterns of codes from my observations (Dunwoodie et al., 2022). The teachers I interviewed may know my position in the district. I had to step back from participating actively in the discussions to avoid sharing my own experiences so I will not guide or influence participants' responses (Burkholder et al., 2020). I attempted to recruit participants with whom I do not have a personal relationship that might influence interview responses. I sought out EC (K-2) teachers who are assigned to schools other than my own.

As the researcher, I strategically engaged in practices that helped me monitor my decisions and actions throughout the entire process (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used a reflective journal to identify unknown biases and record my thoughts throughout the data collection and analysis phases. I worked to conduct each interview with clear communication that did not lead or influence the discussion. I was an active listener and allowed participants ample time to respond to each question without imposing my own opinions or values. As the primary data collection instrument (Burkholder et al., 2020), I participated in the interviews and analyzed the data. I worked to examine and neutralize aspects of my positionality, experiences, and beliefs that might influence or shape the outcomes of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Methodology

For this study, I used a basic qualitative approach to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC (K-2) teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. The research was conducted in a large, suburban public school district in the Northeast. Qualitative research is the preferred method to collect data regarding lived experiences in a semistructured interview format. An interview protocol with questions and follow-up probes was be prepared to maintain consistency between individual interviews (see Appendix A). Open and in vivo coding were used to determine patterns and themes as they emerged from interview responses.

Participant Selection

The population for this qualitative study was EC teachers of grades K-2 who were employed by the SCSD before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I used purposeful and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling limits the study to include only participants who will be the most useful and informative regarding the research questions (Babbie, 2017). Although the research site employs teachers from preschool through eighth grade, participants in this study were drawn only from a population of EC teachers (K-2) who were willing to participate in the interviews and follow up discussions.

I began by contacting the district superintendent to explain the study and obtain his permission to proceed. After receiving the superintendent's approval, I referred to the district website to gather a complete list of K-2 teachers. Participants must have been

employed by SCSD before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to share their experiences. I distributed an invitation to participate using district email. I sent a brief description of the research study explaining my search for participants, the interview process, and a link to an electronic form where they could provide a personal email address and confirm they meet the inclusion criteria. The screening form confirmed that interested volunteers have been employed by the district to teach grades K-2 for a minimum of 3 years. Selected volunteers who met the study criteria received an email informing them they met the criteria and asking them to review the informed consent and reply "I consent." The consent form further defined the interview process, described the recording methods for transcription, and explained what steps would be taken to protect participants' identities.

Guest et al. (2020) suggested that six or seven interviews will capture the most themes and that 12 interviews are typically needed to reach a high degree of saturation. Therefore, I my goal was to recruit 12-15 EC (K-2) teachers with at least 3 years of experience at SCSD needed to participate in study interviews. I used snowball sampling, where volunteers suggested additional people for interviewing to reach 12 participants (Babbie, 2017). More participants were not needed to reach saturation.

Instrumentation

For the research study, the primary data collection instrument was the semistructured interview. The interview protocol and the researcher as the data collection tool are the primary instruments in qualitative studies (Burkholder et al., 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). An interview protocol was designed with probing questions to elicit deep,

descriptive responses from 12-15 EC (K-2) teachers (until saturation) from multiple schools within the research district (see Appendix A). Individual interviews are the preferred way to collect rich data that describe teachers' lived experiences and perspectives regarding their personal and professional challenges since returning to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person interviews are preferred, although virtual meetings were offered as needed for the participants' convenience. Each interview was recorded for future transcription.

I requested permission from the publisher of the Panorama Teacher and Staff Survey to develop the open-ended interview questions. This survey has been used by thousands of schools across the country including New York City, Dallas, Seattle, and San Francisco to help school administrators gather quantitative staff perception data, elevate teacher voices, and improve school climate. It does include some open-ended questions, but making modifications to the existing survey questions transformed the mixed methods survey into a qualitative collection instrument, which allowed for more rich, descriptive open-ended responses that sufficiently answered the research questions.

The interview protocol began with a welcome message including the purpose of the study. I explained that participants may stop the interview or decline to answer a question at any time. Interview topics and probing questions were developed from specific sections of the Panorama Teacher and Staff Survey (Panorama Education, 2015) relative to school climate, teaching efficacy, well-being, and professional learning. Interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to respond with thick, rich description. Clarifying probing questions were prepared to help participants provide as

much data as possible. Audio recordings allowed me to give all my attention to participants as they shared their stories. I used the Otter application to transcribe recorded interviews immediately after each meeting. This ensured that transcriptions were as accurate as possible. I concluded each interview by briefly reviewing the interview topics we discussed and asking if the participant had any questions.

The Teacher and Staff Survey was developed for schools and administrators who want to gather faculty and staff perception data meant to inspire meaningful conversation about school improvement (Panorama Education, 2015). Testimonial statements by several school leaders across the country indicate that the Panorama program has noticeably improved school climate and student success (Panorama Education, n.d.). In its original format, the survey includes a combination of closed-ended questions with five incremental response options and some open-ended questions. I have obtained permission to use the Panorama Teacher and Staff Survey (Panorama Education, 2015) as a guide to develop open-ended questions based on topics that address my research questions (see Appendix C). I focused the questions on the topics of teacher wellness, adult SECs, teaching efficacy, school climate, and perceptions of feedback, coaching, and professional learning. Based on the conceptual framework of the study, TWB can be influenced by these topics and may affect the quality of education students receive (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Questions were designed to elicit participants' personal experiences and individual needs. I worked with a qualitative methodology expert to review the interview protocol for ethical concerns, validity, and its ability to answer the research questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment of Participants

After receiving approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB approval # 07-28-23-0021712), I contacted the Superintendent of the research school district. I explained the purpose and methodology of my study and asked for his permission to begin the research by recruiting EC (K-2) teachers from elementary schools across the district. I used school websites to identify teachers in grades K-2. I used district email to contact the teachers and invite them to participate by following a link to an electronic screening survey where they could provide a preferred email. District email would not be used again beyond this point to protect participants' confidentiality. I sent a link to the screening form which briefly explained the purpose of the study, listed the criteria for participation, and provided my contact information so potential volunteers could consider participating in the study. Informed consent involves ensuring that all voluntary participants have a full understanding of any possible risks associated with participation in the study (Babbie, 2017). Interested volunteers who completed the screening form and met the criteria received the informed consent form via preferred email, and replied "I consent." The use of purposeful and snowball sampling methods helped me gather 12 volunteers who were interested and met the criteria for participation.

Participation

Purposive sampling is appropriate for the proposed study because only certain EC teachers in grades K-2 have the specific characteristics and experiences necessary to answer the research questions (Burkholder et al., 2020). Participation in this study was limited to include only those teachers who have been continuously employed by the district for at least three years. This ensured that they were actively working throughout each phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participation also required teachers to be available for an interview that could last up to 60 minutes as well as follow-up meetings that may be needed for further clarification and member checking. I explained several details related to the data collection process and reporting. To protect the identity of every participant, no one has been identified by name, school, grade, or SCSD employee number. Teachers understood that they may decline to answer questions or stop the interview at any time for any reason. Teachers were not asked to identify any students or school administrators by name when responding to interview questions. Finally, teachers received my contact information to use at any time if they have questions or concerns about the research or their privacy rights as a participant. Having a clear understanding and expectation of informed consent, privacy rights, and protection from harm (Babbie, 2017) may give participating teachers the confidence and comfort necessary to provide thick, rich, and descriptive responses to interview questions without fear or anxiety.

Data Collection

I used semistructured interviews to collect data for this study. This data collection method allowed me as the researcher to ask a set of open-ended questions that relate directly to teachers' perceptions of personal and professional stress. I prepared probing questions to further explore relevant topics that might come up during the interview. I prepared an interview protocol (see Appendix A) outlining both the open-ended questions as well as the probing questions to keep the interview discussion focused and on track.

Participants were contacted via their personal email to schedule a one-on-one interview at a time and location that was convenient, private, and met their needs. Out of respect for participants' busy schedules, several meeting options were offered. As per contractual agreements, no instructional time was used for the interviews. I offered flexible meeting times to accommodate teachers' schedules to include appointments before and after school. I met participants at a variety of locations (school conference room, public library, etc.) where they would be the most comfortable for the duration of the interview. Virtual meeting links were also offered as needed for any participants who could not meet in person. Phone interviews were considered as a final option; however, this method of communication can lead to misunderstandings and/or transcription errors and ultimately was not needed.

Prior to beginning the interview, I informed participants that their identities would be kept confidential, that they may stop the interview at any time if necessary, and that the entire discussion would be audio recorded for review and transcription purposes. I also reminded participants that they could refuse to answer any question for any reason.

During the interview, I repeated questions as needed or skipped questions if participants answered more than one question in a response. At the conclusion, I offered participants the opportunity to ask any questions they had. I thanked them for their time and willingness to participate in the study. I explained that they will be contacted again for member checking. At that time, participants were sent a summary of the data by email. They were asked to provide feedback, and/or consider the accuracy of my interpretations (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis is a critical part of qualitative research because the "data cannot speak for themselves" (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 234). It includes a multi-step process of looking through the data, identifying descriptive words, phrases, and patterns, and ultimately synthesizing these ideas into categories or themes that may be used to answer the research questions (Saldaña, 2021). The first step was to transcribe the recorded interviews into word documents. I used Otter, a voice to text application, to create the initial transcriptions. Then I listened to the recording again, comparing it to the written text and checking for accuracy. After printing each transcribed interview, I began the first cycle of in vivo coding by highlighting specific words or short phrases in the text, taking apart specific sections of the text that generate meaning, and connecting them to the research questions (Saldaña, 2021). I copied and pasted these segments of text from the first interview into an MS Excel coding spreadsheet. In vivo codes were recorded as 1st Cycle Descriptive in the spreadsheet. I repeated this process with second transcription and compared the codes from both interviews. After reviewing my notes on the interview

protocol and in my journal, I merged some codes that were similar in meaning and changed others to reflect more precise ideas. I repeated this process of gathering participants' quotes, creating codes, and merging or refining codes for the remaining ten transcripts. I sorted the spread sheet to join quotes with matching codes.

The second cycle of coding involved synthesizing the first cycle codes into categories or themes by analyzing and grouping them in a systematic order (Saldaña, 2021). During this cycle, I considered the actual statements made in first cycle descriptive and concept codes. Once again, I reviewed any notes I took during the interviews and throughout the 1st coding cycle. I attempted to combine any codes that align in concept or quality as categories and themes began to emerge. Internet tools such as Word Clouds were used to identify certain codes that appear so often that they demonstrate significance among the participants' responses (Saldaña, 2021). The synthesizing process also identified some data as outliers or discrepant responses that did not align with emerging categories or themes. Member checking provided additional insight needed for grouping or excluding discrepant cases from the final coding phase. A large number of discrepant responses did not arise; therefore, follow-up conversations and additional probing questions were not needed for clarification. I noted all discrepant cases that were not included in the emerging themes because they did not apply directly to my research questions but did support the conceptual framework of the study in ways that are discussed in Chapter 5. Future researchers may find these excluded cases applicable to their own study.

Focused (axial) coding strategies often follow in vivo coding because it searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop categories. It is appropriate for use in all types of qualitative studies (Saldaña, 2021). Focused coding helps develop categories and themes by comparing and connecting codes drawn from different participants' responses. As categories emerged, I searched for an overarching theme (or themes) that addresses and answers the research questions or demonstrates insight.

Trustworthiness

Whereas quantitative research relies on the notion of validity, the concept of truth is also reflected in qualitative research as trustworthiness (Burkholder et al., 2020). Several considerations relative to study design contribute to trustworthiness. Qualitative researchers rely on the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to increase the trustworthiness of the study (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Credibility

Credibility means that the findings of the study are believable and supported by the data presented (Burkholder et al., 2020). Reflexivity compels a researcher to thoughtfully examine his or her role in the research process. To improve the credibility of this study, I avoided recruiting teachers who work in my school. Ongoing discussions with university advisors and committee members who are not participating in the study have assisted me in drawing conclusions and eliminating researcher bias. I recorded notes and memos in reflexive journals and on my coding spreadsheets. I also provided the participants with opportunities for member checking so they could review the interpretations and findings for accuracy. Member checking allows the participants

opportunities to ask questions, identify errors, or note concerns regarding inaccurate interpretations, thus advancing the credibility of the study (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Transferability

Transferability means that the findings of a qualitative study have meaning and value that can be applied to other situations beyond the immediate research site (Burkholder et al., 2020). Although external validity is not the purpose of qualitative research, the extent to which the findings may be generalizable to other similar populations or geographic regions raises the trustworthiness of the study. Thick description means that the research report includes a description of the setting, description of the participants, and adequate evidence to support the findings (Burkholder et al., 2020). Readers should benefit from this thorough description in ways that help them assess the meaningfulness and applicability of the findings in their setting. To add transferability to this study, I have provided detailed descriptions of the large, suburban public school district, explained each step in the participant selection process, and provided a detailed account of the ways data were collected and analyzed so that future researchers might analyze and apply the details of this study to their work.

Dependability

Dependability means that there is evidence of consistency in data collection, analysis, and reporting (Burkholder et al., 2020). As with transferability, it is necessary to provide a detailed description of data collection and analysis methods for dependability so that future research on similar topics would yield similar results. I clearly explained the methods and ensured that the same procedures were used for each participant's

interview and transcription. Notes and memos were recorded and matched throughout the coding process. Member checking allowed participants to validate their responses and ensure their accuracy within the data. According to Burkholder et al. (2020), these documents form an "audit trail" that should be available for other analysts to assess dependability as needed.

Confirmability

Confirmability requires that other informed researchers arrive at the same conclusions when examining the same qualitative data (Burkholder et al., 2020). Thick description of the data collection and analysis methods as well as interview procedures aids other researchers who may try to verify the findings of this study. Reflexivity is a main strategy to employ when determining confirmability. A systematic assessment of one's identity, positionality, biases, assumptions, and values will bring to light inconsistencies and issues that may reduce the confirmability of a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Openly sharing details from field notes and memos is part of thick description and assists others in verifying the findings and applying them in other settings.

Ethical Procedures

It is my responsibility as the researcher to assess any risks and benefits that may be associated with conducting my research study. While my intention was to promote positive social change by identifying sources of stress faced by EC teachers and ascertaining which professional development opportunities might support teachers as the nation emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, there was the possibility that the data collection and analysis methods could put participants at minimal risk. The probability of

harm or discomfort anticipated in the research must not be greater than what may be ordinarily encountered in daily life for the risk to be defined as minimal (Burkholder et al., 2020). Although physical harm was unlikely in this study, some participants might have experienced discomfort or anxiety while responding to parts of the interview protocol.

Before beginning to recruit participants or collect any data, I submitted my proposed research study to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University. The IRB considered the potential benefits and contributions of the research in relation to its possible risks. The IRB evaluated and approved (# 07-28-23-0021712) my plan to minimize those risks (Burkholder et al., 2020). The informed consent process is one part of that plan.

Prospective participants were informed in advance of any risks associated with the study. They understood the purpose of the study as well as the data collection and analysis process. I clearly explained their right to expect confidentiality and respect. All participants were volunteers who met the criteria for the study. They had the right to decline to answer questions, stop the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time. A small financial compensation in the form of a gift card was offered for participation. Participants provided digital confirmation of consent before being included in the study. I reviewed the consent form with each participant at the beginning of each interview.

After IRB approval, I met with the superintendent of the research district. I explained the purpose of the research and answered any questions he had regarding data collection, analysis, and reporting. With his permission, I used the district email system

to contact and recruit potential participants. Personal email addresses were used for the remainder of the study to protect participants' privacy. Written statements via email were not collected as data. No personal information such as name, school assignment, or district employee identification number was openly shared. Participants were referred to by alphanumeric codes in all written documents pertaining to the study. To ensure the highest level of trust, transparency, and confidentiality, I have been available to answer any questions as needed. I provided each participant with written documents detailing informed consent as it applies to their rights to privacy and personal safety. As the sole researcher, all data collected has been stored on my personal, password-protected computer that is accessible only by me. Any printed transcripts or other information collected from participants has been stored and locked in my home where it will remain for 5 years as stated in Walden University policy. After such time, any remaining paper and electronic files will be destroyed and/or deleted.

Summary

Chapter 3 provided detailed information about this basic qualitative study to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC (K-2) teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. I discussed my rationale for choosing a qualitative design and explained my role as the researcher. I identified the prospective participants and the sampling strategies. The chapter included an explanation of the data collection instrument and source of the original published tool I used as a guide. Procedures for recruitment, criteria for participation, and methods for data

collection and analysis were discussed. Finally, I defined and described credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as they contribute to the trustworthiness of the research. Ethical concerns and plans to minimize risk were offered. Chapter 4 will describe the results and findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. The conceptual framework for the study was the prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), which framed the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the personal and professional challenges they faced when returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic?
- Research Question 2: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support needed post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom?

Within this chapter, I present the findings of the study. I describe the setting of the research school district and any conditions that influenced participants at the time of the study that may affect interpretation of the study results. Participant demographics and characteristics relevant to the study are also presented. Methods of data collection and analysis are presented including any unusual circumstances and discrepant cases and how they were factored into the analysis. Evidence of trustworthiness is provided to advance the credibility of the study, increase the transferability of the findings to other situations beyond the research site, and ensure dependability so that future research on similar

topics would yield similar results. The findings are organized to address each research question with tables and figures to illustrate the data. The chapter ends with a summary of the data analysis and findings as well as a preview of Chapter 5.

Setting

The setting for this qualitative study was a large, northeastern, suburban public school district. Over 6,500 students are enrolled in the 11 schools (PK-8) within the research district. The district's minority enrollment is 50% and 37.3% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meal plans. Only 2% of students are English language learners.

Participants were recruited using public information on the district website. The research district employs over 500 teachers, of whom, over 92% have at least 3 years of experience. All study participants were teachers of grades K-2 within the research district for a minimum of 3 years. All participants were volunteers. As such, data collection and study findings may have been influenced by the fact that certain teachers were unwilling to participate. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, some district employees explained that they had experienced extreme illness or loss, financial or food insecurity, or high levels of work-life imbalance that impeded their willingness to participate in the study.

I recruited 12 general education teachers who met the eligibility requirements and were willing to complete the entire process from the interview through member checking phases. Participants had classroom experience ranging from 8–26 years of service. Participants included teachers of kindergarten, first, and second grades. All but one of the

participants were female. Alphanumeric codes ranging from P1-P12 were assigned to protect the participants' identities. Table 1 illustrates participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Grade Taught	Years of Experience	Gender
P1	1	20	F
P2	1	26	F
P3	1	15	F
P4	K	8	F
P5	2	22	F
P6	2	12	F
P7	K	17	F
P8	2	24	F
P9	2	13	F
P10	1	9	M
P11	1	10	F
P12	2	14	F

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval (no. 07-28-23-0021712) from Walden University, I began recruiting participants. Data collection took place in the fall of 2023. I was able to follow the data collection plan outlined in Chapter 3 without exception or deviation. I began by sending out a mass email to all teachers of grades K-2 using the district website. I briefly explained the purpose of the study and requirements for eligibility. Interested volunteers responded by offering a personal email address I used for the remainder of the study. I used Google Forms to send an initial screening form, which confirmed each volunteer's eligibility. Next, using personal email addresses and Google Forms again, I sent volunteers the link to a consent form which explained the study in greater detail and

provided information prospective participants would need to proceed. Volunteers were informed that their names would not be used in the study, confidential information would be kept on a personal, password protected device for 5 years, and that they would receive a $20 Amazon gift card for completing the entire process. All 12 volunteers met the eligibility requirements and replied "I consent" on the Google form. As soon as the Google consent form was received, I scheduled an interview.

To provide as much flexibility as possible for participants, I offered interviews at a time and location that best fit their busy schedules. Some chose to meet me at the public library. Others preferred to meet me in a school conference room. Those with very busy schedules chose a virtual setting using Microsoft Teams. A semistructured interview protocol was used as a script to keep the discussion on topic (Appendix A). Depending on participants' responses, interviews varied from 20-70 minutes in length.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Otter app, which provided date and time stamps for each data collection event. While recording, I reminded each participant that they may decline to answer a question or end the interview for any reason. Each data collection event proceeded as described in Chapter 3 without deviation or complication. No one chose to stop the interview process or was disqualified from participating for any reason. Immediately after each interview, I played back the recording and checked the transcription for accuracy.

Data Analysis

After checking the transcription and correcting minor errors in accuracy or spelling, it was saved as a Word document entitled P1-P12 to protect each participant's

identity. I emailed each participant a short summary of their interview highlighting responses they had shared. Each participant confirmed receipt of the summary and that my interpretations were accurate. In this step, member checking indicated that no follow up was needed with participants for clarification or corrections.

The data analysis phase continued with a thorough reading of each transcript. I compared the transcripts to notes I had collected in my journal and in the margins of pages of the interview protocol during individual meetings. I also compared the data to concepts included in the literature review and the prosocial classroom model by Jennings and Greenberg (2009). Key words and phrases were highlighted within the text. Notes and possible codes were made in the margins. Next, beginning with the first transcript, I selected specific responses made by the participant. I copied and pasted them from the transcript document into an Excel spreadsheet. I used codes to label each key word or phrase in the column beside each response using the notes I made in the transcript margins. This process is recommended as the best way to sort and display data by breaking the data into parts with corresponding or opposing details (Saldaña, 2021).

Next, I added quotes and codes from the second transcript to the spreadsheet and compared them to the first set. I looked for similarities and differences in responses and codes. I reviewed both transcripts and considered any responses I may have missed. I added additional phrases I found on the second pass to the spreadsheet. I separated some larger quotes into smaller parts and made the appropriate adjustments to the spreadsheet by creating new, more precise codes. I repeated this process of entering quotes and codes from each transcript to the spreadsheet, comparing each new data set with prior sets,

looking for missed responses, and adjusting the codes for P3-12. This process enabled me to continuously compare and contrast similar statements in my data. Samples of codes and quotes are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Samples of Codes and Quotes

Participant	Code	Quote
P1	Overwhelmed	It's like a suitcase. When you keep pushing things into the suitcase you get to a point where it's going to burst.
P2	Student Behaviors	Student behaviors are off the charts. They don't know how to raise hands or sit or be quiet or socialize. They don't have empathy.
P5	Administrative Support	Support me by giving me help in my room or providing follow through and consequences for those who misbehave.
P6	Time for Breaks/Self-Care	It's little things like even going to the bathroom. I can't even go to the bathroom.
P11	Work-Life Balance	Bring home work, crawl into bed, sleep and wake up to do it all again.

When all of the data were entered on the spreadsheet, I created a second spreadsheet to sort and group all matching codes together. At this time, I decided that some codes were too broad and needed to be parsed out while other codes were similar enough to be merged together. I returned to the original spreadsheet and created new codes for some data to more clearly define the value and meaning of the quote. I finished with 49 more precise codes including but not limited to *Administrative Avoidance,*

Impractical Expectations, Work-Life Balance, Attrition, Student Behaviors, and *Supportive Training*. I repeated the code sorting process.

Data patterns emerged in this step as I found several similar quotes and codes appearing throughout the data at high rates of frequency. I used axial coding to connect ideas and create larger groups or categories (Saldaña, 2021). Based on common words and phrases, I merged similar codes together and created 13 categories including but not limited to the following: *Disengaged Leadership, Lack of Administrative Awareness, Perceptions of Administrative Response, Perceptions Affecting Teachers' Decisions to Remain in Classrooms, Student-Specific Challenges, Family-Related Challenges, Teachers' Self-Reported Needs,* and *Unpaid Time*. I color-coded each category within the spreadsheet and sorted the data by color to clearly define each grouping. Finally, I created an outline showing codes grouped under the appropriate categories. I organized similar categories within the outline under emerging themes and sorted the themes related to each research question.

There were a few discrepant codes included in the data analysis. Some of the perceptions reported by two participants (P5 and P12) were not shared by others and did not fit into existing categories, however, they did align with the conceptual framework supporting this study. Unlike most other participants, P5 and P12 described lower levels of stress and higher levels of overall wellness. P5 acknowledged all of the same concerns noted by others including changes in student behaviors, parental engagement, and administrative support. She also became ill with COVID-19 twice and was unable to work for several weeks. Specific strategies helped P5 through these challenges including

spending time with her family and pets, deep breathing exercises, taking walks, and avoiding bringing schoolwork home. Overall, P5 described her current wellness as "improved, growing, and stable." She reported focusing on her own health and wellness by finding things that make her happy outside of work.

Contrary to the responses of every other participant, P12 began by stating that she had no concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic since schools reopened for in-person instruction. She described herself as lucky because no one in her immediate family became ill. She did not experience any food or financial insecurity. She had an unusually small class of only 13 students with very supportive families. P12 took every new policy and directive in stride because she chose not to stress over issues that were out of her control. When asked about the added assessments and administrative expectations to close learning gaps, P12 said, "We're being called to do more. But I think that is our only option. Anything less would be a great disservice to the kids. I would want my own child's teacher to do the same for him." There were challenges, but P12 found that keeping a positive mindset and focusing on what was good helped her feel less stressed and maintain her overall wellness. Both participants (P5 and P12) stated that professional development should include training that promotes positive thinking and mental health.

Four important themes and two subthemes emerged from the data analysis process, which will be discussed in the next sections. Each theme is connected to the research questions and the conceptual framework for the study. A complete coding table is available in Appendix B. Evidence of trustworthiness is provided. Finally, a summary of my findings is provided at the end of the chapter.

Results

This basic qualitative study was designed to answer two research questions. As I sorted the codes and categories, I noticed that certain categories were related and could be presented as themes in response to each of the research questions as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Alignment of Themes to Research Questions

RQ1: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the personal and professional challenges they faced when returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic?
1. Theme 1: Teachers struggled to meet the changing needs and demands of students and families. 2. Theme 2: Teachers described professional challenges in responding to administrative demands. 3. Theme 3: Teachers experienced challenges to their overall wellness and satisfaction with teaching.
RQ2: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support needed post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom?
4. Theme 4: Teachers described specific gaps in professional support and development needs essential to maintain their personal and professional health.

In response to the first research question, three important themes emerged from my analysis of the participants' interview responses. First, teachers struggled to meet the changing needs and demands of students and families. Next, teachers described professional challenges in responding to administrative demands. Finally, teachers experienced challenges to their overall wellness and satisfaction with teaching.

The second research question asked, “What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support needed post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom?” During my review of the data, specific categories and a fourth theme related to this question emerged. Participants described specific gaps in professional support and development needs essential to maintain their personal and professional health. Improved administrative efforts to support and understand the challenges teachers are facing may reduce work-related stress and promote positive outcomes for students. Additionally, professional development that supports teachers’ SECs and improves overall wellness helps them meet the needs and demands of students and families.

Each theme will be discussed in detail within the following sections. A complete outline showing how participants’ quotes were coded and grouped into categories and themes is provided in Appendix B. To confirm that these four themes do answer the research questions, I reviewed participants’ quotes in the spreadsheet and compared them with data in the literature review. I shared the rich data with a university methodologist, who assisted me in organizing the categories into themes with respect to each of the research questions. We also discussed a limited number of discrepant cases within the data and concluded that those participants offered important perceptions but did not have a significant impact on my review of the data.

Theme 1: Teachers struggled to meet the changing needs and demands from students and families.

Participants reported several challenges related to meeting the needs and demands of students and their families upon returning to in-person instruction. This theme emerged from the following categories: *professional challenges, student-specific challenges, family-related challenges,* and *external impacts on students*, with each category noted in the data 20, 39, 24, and six times, respectively. According to participants, a teacher's job description changed significantly with the addition of many non-academic skills and competencies. After remaining home for several months during the pandemic, many students arrived for their first day of classes having never been inside a school building before. Students did not know how to use a public bathroom or water fountain. They had delayed social skills and less background knowledge on which to build new concepts.

Each participant expressed feelings of professional responsibility to students but reported that they often struggled to meet their post-pandemic needs. P1 reported challenges obtaining the resources needed to meet student and family needs. She explained that the research district includes some Title I schools that benefit from additional funding and programs while others do not. Furthermore, P1 noted that less funding in her school is unfair as it results in fewer programs and materials for her students. Prior to the pandemic, students would have shared a variety of resources from classroom materials and books to recess equipment, but when children returned to school, the sharing of materials was discouraged in an effort slow the spread of germs. P11

explained that “this was the reverse of everything we learned about teaching. Our first lessons at the start of the year are all about caring and sharing, but the children were not even allowed to be near each other.” P1 and P11 expressed that pandemic restrictions and insufficient resources affected overall student success and performance.

Five participants reported feeling frustrated and scolded for students’ low test scores. P9 expressed concern that state and local policies have changed making special education and intervention services more difficult to secure for students who need more assistance. She described how school administrators have linked learning delays to the pandemic, so many students in need of support no longer qualify for special services. P4 stated that “students and teachers can’t get the support they need until an exhaustive list of protocols has been completed. There used to be more respect placed on the words of teachers. Today we bring a case to the I&RS team knowing nothing is going to happen. My primary role was to be the triage and just stop the bleeding. There is very little in my control. We just observe, document, and wait for support.” These participants all similarly stated that it is important to analyze test scores but not to the exclusion of addressing other equally important post-pandemic concerns.

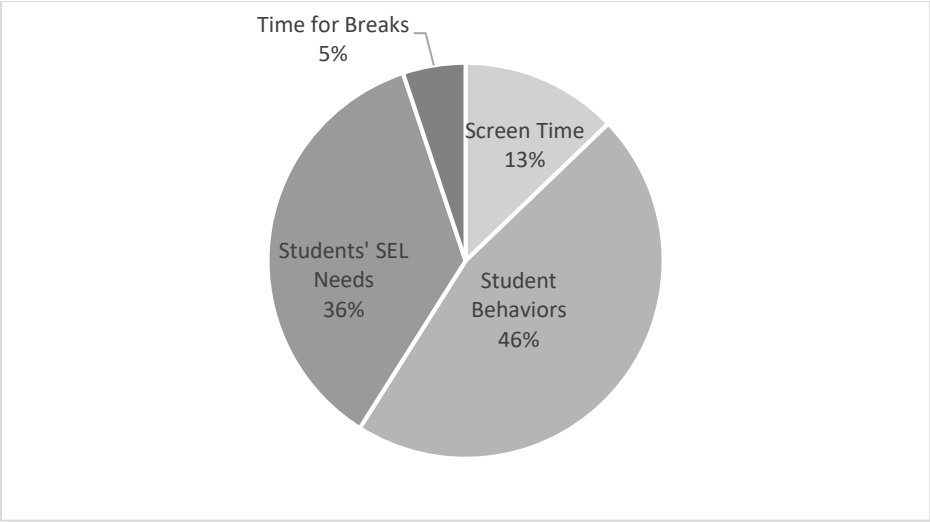
Student-specific issues were a common concern. Most participants predicted that academic skills would be low, but social and emotional competencies were also lacking. Most frequently (39 instances), participants spoke about changes in student behaviors and social-emotional development. According to P8, students returned to school with “more emotional outbursts, temper tantrums, and more aggressive behaviors than ever before. They lacked coping skills they needed to return to school full-time.” Overall, participants

reported that students have displayed specific behaviors including a decrease in stamina and work performance, inability to sit, listen, and engage with teachers and classmates. Students need more brain breaks and opportunities for movement and socialization.

Five of the participants suggested that excessive screen time was a possible contributor to decreased student performance and increased aggression. According to P5, "The kids just wanted to be on Chromebooks all the time. They didn't want to challenge themselves and didn't seem fazed by poor grades." P7 described the likelihood that while some parents were working from home, many children spent the day watching television or playing video games. Participants reported that excessive screen time could have affected students' language development, social-emotional awareness, and their ability to interact respectfully with peers and adults. Participants indicated that increased screen time paired with decreased social interaction may explain the behavioral concerns. Figure 1 illustrates the variety of student-specific challenges described by participants.

Figure 1

Student-Specific Challenges



Three-fourths of the participants (n = 9) reported family-related challenges (24 instances) that can influence students' performance in the classroom. They noticed a decrease in parent engagement in some cases involving parents who were not receptive or supportive when teachers contacted them about their children. While some parents became disengaged, others began to push back or challenge teachers who reported disciplinary issues. Participants reported that some parents seem angrier and more aggressive than ever before. P11 stated that "parents seem to have forgotten how much they valued us during COVID. Now they are not allowing their kids to take responsibility for their actions. We have seen a huge increase in [student] behaviors throughout the school but parents question and challenge every move we make." Most participants (75%) agreed with the perception that they have noticed a loss of respect for education in general.

Finally, half of the participants described external factors that can affect student behaviors and performance, noting that changes in family dynamics and financial struggles can affect how students present to school. P1 and P4 shared concerns about the effects of hunger and fatigue on students' ability to focus, interact, and learn. They have become aware of families who are suffering from food and/or financial insecurity. P9 reported that some families experienced divorce or lost loved ones paired with the loss of human interaction during pandemic restrictions. P6 and P12 pointed out that during fully remote or hybrid instruction students lost access to academic intervention programs and experienced inconsistent expectations for discipline between home and school. P2

reported that these types of experiences often create so much confusion for children that they act out or cry throughout the school day.

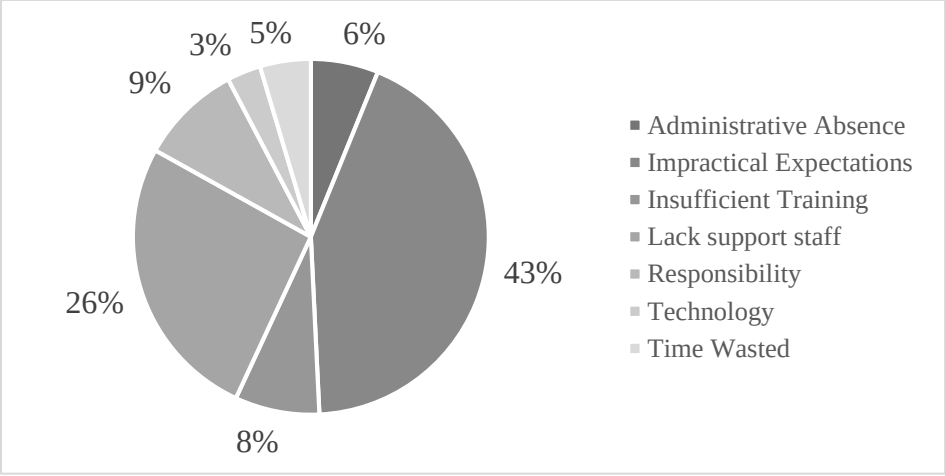
Theme 2: Teachers described professional challenges responding to administrative demands.

This theme was derived from the following categories: *lack of administrative awareness, disengaged leadership,* and *perceptions of administrative response* with each category noted in the data 65, 24, and 25 times, respectively. When participants shared their perceptions of professional challenges they have faced responding to administrative demands since returning to full-time instruction, they most frequently reported a lack of awareness on the part of school administrators (school principals and other district leaders). Half of the participants reported that one challenge was the expectation that teachers would be able to begin the year with the usual expectations for opening procedures, paperwork, and assessments, yet school leadership had not predicted the extent to which the pandemic had affected academic and behavioral development. Furthermore, almost every participant (*n = 11*) described the addition of several job-related responsibilities including new benchmark assessments, loss of time in meetings and completing paperwork, and provision of live-stream lessons using unfamiliar technology. Most participants (*n = 9*) reported that these administrative expectations among others were impractical and that there was a lack of support staff to help meet the demands. Every participant noted that quality support staff personnel are essential in a variety of school environments including classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, cafeterias, and the recess yard. P7 noted that district support staff employees “are often under-paid,

untrained, and shared between multiple classrooms. If we had help in each classroom it would free up time to focus on the skills students need most." While attempting to comply with new directives, participants noted that administrators were not present or available to assist. Figure 2 illustrates how often participants discussed incidents of administrative awareness.

Figure 2

Lack of Administrative Awareness



Participants reported feeling extra pressure from school administrators to close learning gaps and improve test scores which had dropped during the pandemic months. Seven participants noted that administrators repeatedly communicated the importance of getting test scores back up to pre-pandemic levels. New benchmark assessments which could only be administered to one student at a time were added to each classroom teacher's responsibilities. Participants indicated that teachers were given only a few weeks to complete the assessments. They were called into meetings during their preparation periods to review the data and set learning goals. P3 reported that teachers

were directed to slow down as needed, test, and retest while keeping up with the district-recommended pacing guide for curricula completion. Participants reported feeling frustrated because they could not keep up the pace while meeting students' needs. P2 said, "I had no time to establish routines, rules, and a classroom community. I am an experienced teacher, but I couldn't even teach writing because I didn't have time with all the new tests. I was failing them because it wasn't humanly possible to get it all done by myself." Every participant described a sense of responsibility and dedication to their students and the profession as a whole, yet reported feeling unproductive.

Administrative absence was noted by five participants 11 times as a contributor to their lack of efficacy. P8 and P10 stated that teachers looking for support and guidance often participate in PLC meetings, or Professional Learning Communities. P2 reported that they have invited administrators to PLC meetings, yet they do not attend. P1 and P3 noted that without guidance and structure, participants said that the meetings became unproductive and turned into vent sessions where teachers expressed burdens, discussed student behaviors, and unloaded workload stress. These participants commented that if administrators were present during PLC meetings, they might consider reducing or eliminating some of the less important or menial tasks to make room in teachers' schedules to meet current demands.

Eight participants reported dissatisfaction with district administration's response to post-pandemic concerns. P9 recounted a pattern of administrative avoidance in and around the school community. She described how district administrators visited schools and classrooms often prior to the pandemic, yet they are seldom seen out of their offices

now. P2 and P3 noted that teachers want help monitoring hallways, bathrooms, and the cafeteria. They stated that they believe administrators should be more visible, help enforce school rules, and provide disciplinary support when necessary. P9 said, “We haven’t seen a single supervisor in the building walking through classrooms and actually seeing what is taking place. I’m not sure they have responded to any challenges or concerns I’ve experienced.” Some participants like P8 felt that administrators do not want to hear teacher’s concerns and may not even be equipped to deal with what is happening in classrooms.

Half of the participants (*n = 6*) described being frustrated with administrative communications and follow-through. They noted a lack of clear guidance to staff and families regarding what to expect when school reopened. Upper-administration, including district supervisors and the assistant superintendent, communicated their expectations to staff in email messages that were described by P9 as condescending and unrealistic. P7 reported that most upper administrators “have been out of the classroom a number of years. They are telling us what to do but they have never tried it themselves. They fail to follow through on their own directives.” When asked to describe school administrators’ response to the needs of students and staff since returning to full-time instruction, participants reported several indications that school leaders did not seem engaged in the process including a lack of visibility, unwillingness to address teachers’ concerns, ignoring student behaviors, and failure to enforce school rules. P1 reported feeling like district administrators no longer trust in teachers’ talent and professionalism. She said, “When I first started teaching, my opinion was respected. Now I feel like I always have

to prove my case. I feel like they are watching me." A few participants (P2, P9, and P11) concluded that the quality of administrative responses, or lack thereof, to post-pandemic concerns has directly affected their daily approach to teaching and stress levels.

Overall, participants expressed that the absence of administrators, their impractical expectations with insufficient training, a lack of support staff, and the irresponsible use of technology and time led them to believe that administrators were simply unaware of the challenges teachers are facing. P11 said, "Nothing was ever taken off the plate... just more piled on." Administrators often appeared to be disengaged in their responses to teachers' requests for help and in dealing with student behaviors. Communications with staff were unclear and lacked practical solutions teachers could use. With behavioral and academic needs unusually high, participants struggled to comply with administrative expectations.

Theme 3: Teachers experienced challenges to their overall wellness and satisfaction with teaching.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. While attempting to learn about what support teachers believe they need, it was important to understand how participants describe their own stress levels and wellness. Ten of the twelve participants reported feeling overwhelmed and stressed out 57 times. They described feelings of frustration, exhaustion, anger, worry, and anxiety. P6 and P11 reported a loss of interest in family

and social events or just meeting up with friends. Two participants (P6 and P10) shared that they struggled to avoid taking their frustrations out on a spouse or children when they returned home. Two participants (P4 and P9) shared that they have started counseling and/or using anti-anxiety medications to help them through difficult times. Figure 3 illustrates the frequency of key words participants used to describe their current stressors and stress levels. Larger words indicate a higher frequency while smaller words were reported less often.

Figure 3

Frequency of Key Words for Stressors and Stress Levels

When asked about their decision to remain in the classroom, 10 of 12 participants commented that they have considered leaving the profession. Although most said they always wanted to be a teacher and thought they would enjoy the work for a long time, the heightened workload, pressure from parents and school leaders, and their own health and wellness have caused them to wonder if they want to teach anymore. P9 stated that “if

every year is this hard, it will not be sustainable. I would feel better if there was a little bit of thought and care put into the staff." Starting over in a new career was not a viable option for P4 or P6 because they have been the health insurance provider or the primary wage earner of the family. P4 reported that she is counting down the years until retirement.

Half of the participants described personal challenges they have been facing while managing the professional challenges. Like everyone else, most participants shared how they experienced loss of income, cared for loved ones who were sick, and dealt with their own health concerns. P11 suffers from an autoimmune condition. She experienced a full flare-up while managing the stressful work environment. Two others (P7 and P5) described getting COVID themselves as a serious issue. Not wanting to be away from their students any longer than necessary, these participants worked from home to provide substitute lesson plans and support as needed. Unfortunately, when they recovered and returned to work, the classroom was in disarray and the students' behaviors were more challenging than ever.

Seven participants described more serious effects of burnout sharing that where there was once excitement and enthusiasm, they now feel empty and alone because colleagues don't talk and help each other like they did before. Two participants (P6 and P11) described severe mood swings, weight fluctuation, and fatigue. There is no sense of work-life balance. P6 said, "I've had to set boundaries. I don't try as hard. I am done coming in early and staying late. It eats me up, but I just don't care as much anymore."

P4 finally decided to leave the profession. She felt that as a teacher she could be easily replaced, but her role as a mother was more important.

There were two participants who described lower stress levels and better overall wellness than most. P5 has struggled with the return to in-person instruction, but has made every effort to control her stress level. She said that activities like walking the dog, spending time with loved ones, and deep breathing exercises help her feel better. Although she no longer feels the same joy at work, she has focused on her life outside of the classroom and that has improved her overall feeling of wellness. P12 agrees that focusing on positivity is the key. Admittedly, her class was unusually small and well-behaved, so she did not experience the same stressors described by other teachers. By choosing not to become frustrated by experiences that are out of her control, P12 avoided the physical and emotional effects of stress and burnout. The perceptions shared by P12 will be discussed further in Chapter 5 as they apply directly to the principles of the conceptual framework of the study.

Theme 4: Teachers have specific professional support and development needs to maintain their personal and professional health.

The second research question asked, "What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support needed post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom?" Training and interventions to support teachers' well-being, make them more self-aware, and regulate their own emotions in ways that promote a more positive learning environment are the central ideas of the conceptual framework of this study. After analyzing participants'

responses, a fourth theme and two subthemes emerged. Participants reported the following needs they believe would assist in maintaining their personal and professional health.

Subtheme 1: Improved administrative efforts to support and understand the challenges teachers are facing may reduce work-related stress and promote positive outcomes for students.

When asked to describe school administrators' response to teachers' needs upon returning to in-person instruction, 10 of 12 participants agreed that it has been lacking. Participants reported that school leaders do not have a clear understanding or appreciation of the changing demands placed on staff since returning to in-person instruction. Common concerns among participants included a lack of administrative focus on what teachers have been facing. P10 pointed out that the pandemic did have a negative impact on student outcomes, but it affected everyone. Staff concerns and their well-being should be considered. P8 said that teachers want to feel like they have been heard when they approach administrators for assistance with challenging student behaviors and academic needs. Most participants ($n = 9$) reported that block schedules were not age-appropriate and should include more interventionists assigned for in-class support. Eight participants noted a concern regarding the way administrators handle parent calls. They want principals to support and defend teachers' decisions more often. P2 and P5 felt that administrators should lead with more kindness. They should ask what help teachers need, highlight and recognize the hard work teachers are doing, and provide more positive feedback. Additionally, three participants (P1, P3, and P6) stated that they would

appreciate it if administrators would consider the amount of unpaid time teachers work outside of contractual hours to prepare the classroom, complete district-required on-line training, and catch up on assessing and evaluating student progress. In the absence of administrative support and understanding, teachers find it hard to be motivated. P6 said, "We have some awesome teachers here, but it seems like they prefer to beat us down rather than build us up. We are starting to doubt ourselves." Essentially, participants said they want to feel safe and respected when asking administrators for help.

Subtheme 2: Professional development that supports teachers' social and emotional competencies and supports overall wellness helps them meet the needs and demands of students and families.

When asked about professional development offered by the district to date, all of the participants agreed that in-service training sessions were insufficient to support their current needs. P9 described how the PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support) program should support teachers dealing with challenging student behaviors, but training and implementation have not been consistent across the district, so it has been ineffective. P1 added that adequate training for proper implementation of the new benchmark assessments was not provided. Along with setting up the classroom and preparing student materials, teachers had to volunteer more unpaid time to learn how to administer the tests on their own. P2 described it as frustrating and time consuming at a time when teachers usually feel excited about the start of a new school year.

Eleven of the participants described district-provided training and in-service as repetitive and not useful. P11 said, "Nine times out of 10, district in-service is a waste of

our time.” Four participants (P2, P4, P5, and P9) recalled a recent in-service given by a behavioral specialist. They reported that the presentation came in May after teachers had spent 8 months without guidance and were unlikely to remember or implement any of the strategies the following year. Other participants (P2, P6, and P8) mentioned an online coaching program the district purchased to support teachers. P8 said that the website was not useful and a waste of time. She does not want to “open some website and search for something I want. I’m already making enough decisions throughout the day." Some district-provided professional development was described as incomplete or without thought. P3 and P7 recalled in-service time spent reviewing state test results and planning ways to enhance the first grade standards to improve third grade scores. P2 and P4 added that the district should work harder to vet the PD topics and/or presenters for content and applicability in EC classroom. These comments indicated participants’ perceptions that district-provided trainings have not been adequate to support their current needs in the classroom. P7 stated that district PD is so ineffective that she finds and pays for training that she can use on her own. The overwhelming consensus among each of these participants was that they would rather have time to work in their classrooms instead of attending in-service trainings that do not support their needs.

P12 stated that it is difficult to provide professional development that pleases everyone, yet participants did offer suggestions for improvement. Most participants (*n = 11*) suggested that presenters and topics should be chosen more carefully. They felt that they would be more engaged with presenters who have recent experience in the classroom and understand what teachers are going through. P4 suggested that

administrators should spend some in-service time getting to know the interests and strengths of their staff using personality assessments and team bonding activities so they can create stronger teams. Participants (*n = 7*) want professional development offered by presenters with current classroom experience that combines academic training with mindfulness, self-care, and time for planning, grading, and working with colleagues. P9 requested the inclusion of topics like nutrition and yoga which could go a long way in helping teachers create a learning environment where students thrive. P8 suggested a plan to schedule one half-day in-service per month just to allow teachers time to get organized mentally and physically. P10 noted that this small amount of time to grade, talk with veteran teachers, or just breathe could be instrumental in improving the classroom experience for everyone. Overall, participants reported that more attention should be given to providing training that supports teachers' professional and personal needs by choosing topics that directly address the daily challenges teachers face as well as making time for preparation, breaks, and self-care.

In the words of P1... "No one understands what we're dealing with. After a tough day, I still have to get dinner on the table and get my son to after school activities but I have to check papers, get grades out, and meet deadlines. I'm up late and it seems like I'm falling apart." Half of the participants shared that it would help if administrators asked how teachers are doing and how they could be more helpful. With that in mind, participants were asked to share any positive experiences they have had to learn more about their reasons for remaining in the classroom. There were several responses including a love for teaching and the children, support from family, friends, and

colleagues, the pride they take in seeing their students grow and develop, and simply being able to be around other people again. Three participants (P6, P11, and P12) also noted that having access to the quality health care offered by the district is important to them. Getting to know the interests, strengths, and needs of their staff as well as understanding the positive experiences that help teachers persevere through difficult times may assist school leaders in their search for ongoing training and professional development that is meaningful and supportive. A complete illustration how each of the four themes emerged from categories and codes is provided in Appendix B.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research relies on evidence of trustworthiness to illustrate and define the value of the study (Burkholder et al., 2020). To improve the trustworthiness of this study, I implemented the design plan described in Chapter 3. With the guidance of a university methodology specialist, I developed an interview protocol that gathered rich data in alignment with both research questions and the conceptual framework. I used member checking and thick description to strengthen credibility. I described in detail all methods used to recruit and validate eligible participants for transferability. I reviewed my journal notes, data collection, and analysis with the methodologist to improve the dependability. Reflexive journaling helped identify and mitigate unknown biases or ethical challenges to strengthen confirmability.

Credibility

The findings of the study must be believable and supported by the data presented (Burkholder et al., 2020). To support the credibility, I used a process known as member

checking. After transcribing and reviewing each interview, I sent the participants a summary of their responses as they related to the research questions. Participants were asked to respond by confirming the accuracy of my summary or noting any changes or additions they want to make. No inaccuracies were reported. Having confirmed the accuracy of my interpretations, I began the coding process. The entire data collection and analysis process has been carefully reported in great detail so readers may understand and draw their own conclusions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Furthermore, the university methodologist assisted me in reviewing the data analysis process, guided me with suggestions for improvement, and assessed my coding strategies for greater precision. There were no changes to the data collection and analysis plan described in Chapter 3.

Transferability

Readers may wish to repeat the study in an alternate location. Transferability ensures that future researchers will have enough details to apply the same study procedures and expect to find similar results (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I have provided a thick, detailed description of participant recruiting processes, use of an interview protocol, recording and transcription methods, and data analysis strategies for a future researcher who may wish to replicate or build upon this study in their own environment. As noted in Chapter 3, I have provided detailed descriptions of the setting, participant criteria and selection, and processes for data collection and analysis. Transferability enables future researchers to assess the meaningfulness and applicability of the findings with respect to their own setting and apply the same methods with similar results

(Burkholder et al., 2020), yet despite the efforts mentioned above, it should be noted that small qualitative studies like this one have very limited transferability.

Dependability

As with transferability, evidence of consistency in data collection, analysis, and reporting improves dependability of the study (Burkholder et al., 2020). To make this study dependable and repeatable, I have included thick, rich descriptions of the entire process from development of the interview protocol through data collection and analysis. An audit trail was kept for accuracy and as a method of reflection. The findings of this study are dependable because there was consistency in interview procedures for data collection. Transcript reviews, member checking, and reflexive journaling kept the data aligned with the research questions and conceptual framework. The accompanying coding table (Appendix B) lists quotes, codes, categories, and themes to further illustrate the process for future replication.

Confirmability

Informed researchers should expect to arrive at the same conclusions when examining qualitative data (Burkholder et al., 2020). Detailed descriptions of the data collection and analysis procedures provided throughout will assist the reader. Additionally, I have provided a systematic assessment of my own identity as the researcher and an employee of the research district. I described the steps I took to reduce or mitigate possible biases resulting from my position, assumptions, or values. I openly shared details from my journal notes and interview memos with members of my research committee. Together, we discussed possible biases as they surfaced through journaling

and reflection. We systematically reviewed categories and themes that emerged from the data. I have disclosed the entire coding process (see Appendix B). Quotes, codes, categories, and themes are listed to support and confirm the findings by retracing the steps described, thus improving the trustworthiness of this qualitative study.

Summary

Chapter 4 included detailed information describing the setting, methods of data collection and analysis, and presented the results as they related to each research question. The chapter also provided evidence of trustworthiness within the study. This basic qualitative study explored the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC teachers (K-2) since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic. It also sought to investigate the support teachers believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. I interviewed 12 EC teachers within a large, northeastern public school district using semistructured interviews.

Two research questions were the focus of this study. The first question asked, "What do EC (K-2) teachers in a large, northeastern public school district report about the personal and professional challenges they faced when returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic? Three themes emerged from the data. First, teachers struggled to meet the changing needs and demands of students and families. Categories within that theme included professional challenges such as addressing the academic effects and social delays created during hybrid and remote instruction, managing larger class sizes with an increase in troublesome student behaviors, maintaining positive communications with parents and families, and providing support

for students who have experienced severe food or financial insecurity. Participants felt a great sense of responsibility to help their students return to a sense of "normal" while addressing these concerns but found it to be challenging as student behaviors were unprecedented, families seemed disengaged or aggressive, and there never seemed to be enough time to get it all done. Second, participants described professional challenges responding to administrative demands. Categories within this theme included a lack of administrative awareness with respect to impractical expectations, lack of support staff, administrative absence or availability, and insufficient training to support teachers. Participants reported that school leaders and upper level administrators were focused only on improving student achievement on standardized tests. They reported feeling overwhelmed by the expectations placed on them to close learning gaps, manage behavioral concerns, and return to normal. Participants also requested extra help in the form of paraprofessionals and/or classroom aides to assist with student needs as well as some other duties in hallways, bathrooms, and cafeterias. Participants said that it seemed like school administrators were not present and available to support teachers through these challenges and did not provide professional development opportunities teachers found useful. Additionally, communications from school administrators indicated a decreased level of engagement, loss of respect for teachers' professionalism, and a general lack of trust, leaving participants feeling frustrated and unappreciated. Finally, participants experienced challenges to their overall wellness and satisfaction with teaching. Participants described increased stress and decreased wellness as they have tried to address students' needs and meet administrative demands. They reported asking

for help but finding themselves feeling alone and exhausted. Many have considered leaving the profession because they cannot find a reasonable work-life balance and the current stress level is unsustainable.

The second research question asked, "What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support needed post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom?" A final theme emerged with respect to this question. Teachers have specific professional support and development needs to maintain their personal and professional health. Contained within this theme were two subthemes. First, teachers would like to feel greater administrative support and understanding through these challenging times. Participants frequently spoke about the high frequency of times when teachers are called to meetings or to help with duty coverage during their planning time. Many noted a lack of time in their daily schedules to meet administrative demands, evaluate and report student progress, and prepare for upcoming lessons. Most noted a desire for additional support and coverage so they could use the restroom as needed. Finally, participants want professional development that helps them meet current demands and needs while supporting their own wellness. Overall, participants suggested that a combination of academic training paired with time for mindfulness, self-care, and time to catch up on work in classrooms would be helpful.

Participants' responses were also considered through the lens of the prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This model highlights the importance of teachers' SECs and well-being in the development and maintenance of supportive

teacher-student relationships. It illustrates a relationship between SECs and teacher burnout while suggesting that training and interventions that support TWB can make them more self-aware to regulate their own emotions in ways that promote a positive learning environment (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Administrative policies, student progress, and external factors have influenced teachers' stress levels, however, many have found several sources of support. Participants said they take comfort in being able to interact with colleagues again. They find support and advice from veteran teachers. Many rely on the support of family and friends. Most simply love being with students again and watching them grow. For some, district-provided health insurance was an added bonus. They reported taking advantage of the coverage to seek out counseling that has helped them manage the stress. School leaders can use the data described in these themes to identify work-related stressors among EC teachers and seek out appropriate professional development that supports adult social and emotional competencies.

Chapter 5 addresses the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and potential implications for social change. The four themes are discussed and concisely summarized within the context of the literature review and conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2. Limitations to trustworthiness as described in Chapter 1 are reviewed and recommendations for future research are offered. Finally, Chapter 5 suggests recommendations for practice and social change and the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the personal and professional challenges experienced by EC teachers since the return to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic and investigate the support they believe they need to remain in the K-2 classroom. There were two research questions that addressed this purpose. The design included semistructured interviews intended to explore teachers' experiences, build an environment of trust between myself and participants, and guide the discussion through a specific set of in-depth questions. Conducting qualitative research is the preferred method when the purpose is to explore or describe a phenomenon (Butin, 2010) or when a researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to it (Burkholder et al., 2020). Because of its iterative design, the qualitative research design can provide transformative experiences that promote social change and align well with the purpose of this study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Key findings related to each of the research questions and the conceptual framework of the study have been organized into four themes. With respect to Research Question 1, three themes emerged. Participants described high stress levels resulting from challenges meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of students and their families. Participants also reported high stress associated with professional challenges in responding to administrative demands as school leaders were perceived to display a lack of awareness and disengaged behaviors in their response to teachers' post-pandemic needs. One prior study did report lower levels of teacher stress during the pandemic

(Herman et al., 2020), which does not support the findings of the current study; however that research was conducted in rural areas of the western central region of the United States. Faced with these challenges in the northeast, participants recounted how their overall wellness and satisfaction with teaching have been tested.

Concerning Research Question 2, one theme emerged. Participants stated that teachers have specific professional support and development needs to maintain their personal and professional health. Professional development is needed that helps teachers meet current professional demands and needs while supporting their own wellness. Furthermore, a greater sense of support and understanding from school administrators is desired to support teachers through challenging times.

My intention while conducting this research was to explore the problem of increased stress related to the challenges of returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic. Ten of the 12 participants rated their current stress levels high and were concerned about decreasing overall wellness. The prosocial classroom model highlights the importance of teachers' SEC and well-being in the development and maintenance of supportive teacher-student relationships, effective classroom management, and the successful implementation of learning programs (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). While every participant reported that support from friends, family, and colleagues does help them through challenging times, there was an overarching concern that their current stress levels reduce feelings of teacher efficacy and are not sustainable. Gaining a greater understanding of teachers' perceptions of challenges and stressors may assist school administrators in identifying the training and support needed to maintain

teacher wellness so they can remain in classrooms. Chapter 5 interprets the findings as they relate to the conceptual framework or extend the knowledge in the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are discussed. The chapter ends with implications for social change and the conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

The literature review and the prosocial classroom model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) served as the foundation and conceptual framework on which this basic qualitative study was based. The research questions were answered as four overarching themes. The first three themes were related to the first research question because the findings illustrated the current perceptions of challenges EC teachers have faced since returning to in-person instruction. The fourth theme specifically addressed the second research question as participants listed their perceptions of district-provided professional development and self-reported needs associated with their ability to remain in classrooms. Each theme will be analyzed and described in detail, compared to the peer-reviewed research offered in Chapter 2, and supported by Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) prosocial classroom model, the conceptual framework, which is woven throughout the following sections.

Literature Related to Theme 1

Teaching has been compared to other high stress jobs including law enforcement, firefighting, and medical health care. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have reported that they have faced new demands and even higher levels of stress

(Pressley, 2021). Previous findings indicate that during the pandemic more than three-fourths of teachers experienced increased stress compared to just one-third of adults working in other fields (Will, 2022). Teachers began reporting concerns about declining student conduct and socioemotional development during the pandemic, and researchers proposed that such behaviors may reflect children's anxiety, post-traumatic stress, social distancing, and loneliness (Araújo et al., 2021; Calvano et al., 2021; Will, 2022). Current findings confirm and extend prior research as participants reported high levels of ongoing stress resulting from attempting to meet the increased needs and demands of students and their families. Post-pandemic concerns include changes in student behaviors, gaps in academic and emotional development, decreased parental engagement and respect, and the effects of external factors such as family dynamics and food/financial insecurity with high frequency. Participants in the current study reported an increase in challenging student behaviors and greater social-emotional learning (SEL) needs. They described students being unusually physical and aggressive. Children lacked self-control and coping skills, and they appear to need more attention and have less stamina than ever.

Relationships with families and the greater community also suffered. Early pandemic studies revealed that parents became angry and critical as school closures followed by distance and hybrid learning models persisted (Bartlett, 2021; Marshall et al., 2022b; Noonoo, 2022). Researchers concluded that rising political tensions paired with the struggling economy created an environment of frustration and disrespect toward teachers (Bartlett, 2021; Jankowski, 2023; Marshall et al., 2022b; Noonoo, 2022). The current study builds on previous research because participants explained that when

schools reopened for in-person instruction, the community expected a quick return to normal. Participants reported a change in relationships with students' families. They noted a decrease in family engagement, describing attempts to make contact and being ignored. Parents often did not answer phone calls or respond to written communications about their child's school performance. Families who did respond were sometimes aggressive or disrespectful toward teachers. With the rise in popularity of communication applications like Class Dojo or Remind, participants described 18-hour work days beginning before the school day and ending late at night because they were responding to parents who demanded immediate responses. Participants explained that teachers have been in the position to field parent complaints and accusations since pandemic restrictions went into effect. There has been little change to this concern for teachers since the return to in-person instruction.

The findings further show that the pandemic negatively affected academic growth as students spent an average of 18 months in fully remote or hybrid instruction environments using computers. Previous research findings address specific pandemic-related effects on students and support the current research. Excessive screen time reduces the amount and quality of interactions between children and their caregivers (Muppalla et al., 2023). It can have detrimental effects on language development as well as social and emotional growth. Participants similarly reported that students returned to in-person instruction lacking basic life skills and background knowledge and suggest that these negative outcomes are directly related to months of isolation paired with hours each day spent on a digital device.

Another finding was that academic and emotional support programs became more difficult to access during the pandemic. Some students, especially students of color, those in low-income areas, English language learners and those with disabilities suffered from heightened anxiety and stress during that time (Li et al., 2023). Because behavioral and intervention services were not provided during the pandemic, educators expected students to return to in-person instruction with learning gaps and emotional delays (Li et al., 2023). Current findings confirm those predicted negative outcomes and indicate that intervention services did not resume as expected when school reopened. Although teachers referred students for academic intervention and behavioral support, most were denied assistance. School administrators and behavioral specialists explained that these delays were a byproduct of the pandemic and would "return to normal" eventually.

Extant literature also reported that effects of the pandemic including anxiety, chronic problems with physical and mental health, loss of loved ones, and a rise in domestic violence can contribute to an environment of toxic stress and disrupt childhood development (Araújo et al., 2021; Calvano et al., 2021; McManus & Ball, 2020). The current study extends what is reported in the literature because participants described feeling added stress and responsibility to provide extra support to students and their families who have experienced adverse childhood experiences or ACEs. External factors including food and financial insecurity and changes in family dynamics were noted as pandemic-related experiences that had negative effects on young children. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) noted that high teacher SEC may be especially important in EC classrooms where warm and supportive teacher-student relationships can help young

children recover from adverse experiences and set the stage for future social, emotional, and academic success.

Literature Related to Theme 2

Like first responders, teachers and school administrators worked to quickly find solutions that would continue to support students' educational growth at the onset of the pandemic. The review of literature revealed how new fully remote and hybrid teaching models, social distancing policies, and safety protocols were implemented (Bartlett, 2021; Cipriano et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2022b; Noonoo, 2022; Robinson et al., 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Will, 2022). The current findings build on those studies because those initial decisions along with new administrative demands have had lasting effects on participants' perceptions of professional efficacy and student outcomes that have not been resolved since schools reopened for in-person instruction. Participants described administrative expectations as impractical and unrealistic.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted education by closing schools and isolating students from their teachers and classmates. Distance learning models were introduced as an emergency response intended to reach all students but were not always successful. There were significant changes to the learning environment for students and working conditions for teachers. Noonoo (2022) concluded that dysfunctional working conditions are one of the main reasons teachers have left the classroom during the pandemic. Teachers reported higher levels of anxiety and emotional exhaustion moving to online teaching with unfamiliar digital materials while receiving very little attention or support from administrators (Cipriano et al., 2021; Ford et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2022).

Furthermore, teachers had little guidance from administrators on how to proceed (ASCD, 2020; Cipriano et al., 2021; Steiner & Woo, 2021). The findings of the current study extend that knowledge by illustrating how teachers continue to struggle through professional challenges responding to post-pandemic administrative demands with little guidance or support.

Teacher workload and burnout leading to higher rates of attrition have been studied for decades. Extant literature investigated teacher stress and identified factors such as administrative demands and excessive workload (Agyapong et al., 2022). The current findings show that these factors continue to be major concerns since returning to in-person instruction. School administrators have been primarily focused on closing learning gaps and improving standardized test scores which had fallen during the pandemic. Making student achievement the priority, administrators added several new benchmark assessments for data collection beginning immediately in September. Participants reported feeling pressed for time as they attempted to assess every student within the first few weeks of school. Scavone (2021) described the value of developing classroom rules and academic routines in the first weeks of school, but participants in the current study reported that helping students get acclimated to their new classroom and classmates, learning rules and routines, and other activities that typically begin the school year had to be put on hold in favor of meeting administrative demands. Consequently, the findings of the current study show that students were unable to make a smooth transition from home to school, connect with their teacher and peers, and feel confident in knowing that school is a safe place.

Extant literature reported the effects of added workload on teachers. Teachers reported a significant lack of support and resources while they struggled to meet the demands of their increased workload without extra planning time in which to complete it (Cipriano et al., 2021). Faced with growing administrative expectations, Cipriano et al. also found that teachers need more time to collaborate and focus on teaching. The current study confirms and extends that research. Additional testing has been described as time-consuming and exhausting for teachers and students. Training has been inadequate for teachers to properly implement assessments and a shortage of material and human resources such as support staff affects their ability to manage large classes during testing periods. School administrators have become disengaged and unavailable to discuss teachers' concerns. Teachers described feelings of sadness and depression after sacrificing the beginning weeks of the school year to data collection. They reported feeling frustrated and ineffective.

Teachers and students need clear direction and open communication from school leadership. Pressley (2021) suggested that schools and districts should provide clear communications with the community to reduce teachers' anxiety and stress. The findings of this study show that no such guidance or direction was offered to teachers or families on what to expect academically or behaviorally as the school year began. From the perspective of participants, school administrators appeared to be disengaged and unresponsive. They communicated their expectations to staff primarily through district email. Participants reported that school leaders were not visibly present and avoided taking disciplinary actions when help was requested. Contrary to Pressley's (2021)

recommendations, the findings of this study indicate that teachers have experienced increased anxiety and stress due to a lack of administrative support. Cann et al. (2020) stated that school leaders can improve TWB by providing meaningful professional development, enabling teachers to participate in decision making and positive change, and ensuring that teachers feel valued. Without positive changes in administrative awareness and engagement, current challenges and lack of support may influence some teachers' decisions to leave the profession.

Literature Related to Theme 3

The prosocial classroom model illustrates a relationship between social-emotional competencies and teacher burnout (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). High TWB has been shown to help teachers manage stress and remain committed to their work (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Fly Five SEL, 2022; Hascher & Waber, 2021) while low TWB paired with work-related stress contributes to teachers' inability to regulate their own emotions, solve problems, and create a healthy learning environment (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020; Sandilos et al., 2022). Oberle et al. (2020) found that teaching younger students was significantly related to higher stress levels and burnout which has been named as the number one reason teachers leave the profession (Diliberti et al., 2021; Jones & Ali, 2021). Current findings build on these studies because the majority of participants (*n = 10*) described current stress levels as high, overwhelming, and unsustainable.

While stress is a natural part of life and oftentimes helps people get things done (Ragland, 2021), half of the participants in the current study described more serious signs of burnout. Robinson (2020) defined burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic

workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It can be particularly impactful on teachers' ability to manage their classrooms and may negatively affect their physical and mental health over time (Herman et al., 2020). Other research has shown that challenges to teachers' overall wellness can negatively affect the quality of education (Oberle, 2020; Zamarro et al., 2022). The current study supports these findings. Participants reported that the stress of meeting the needs of students and their families along with increasing administrative demands has left teachers feeling empty, exhausted, and ineffective.

The symptoms of burnout have significant consequences. It can lead to loss of interest in teaching, reduced feelings of teacher efficacy, decreased job satisfaction, increased absences, and attrition (Brasfield et al., 2019; Robinson, 2020). Burned-out teachers and the learning environments they create can contribute to increasing rates of teacher turnover and absenteeism and have harmful effects on academic and behavioral outcomes for students (Herman et al., 2018; Herman et al., 2020). The findings of this study confirm and extend these findings. Teachers described feelings of despair and decreased overall wellness. They no longer work outside of the contractually required hours. Teachers also avoid exerting more effort than necessary and rarely bring work home. Attrition continues to be a major concern in education because half of the participants in this study have seriously considered leaving the profession.

In addition to increasing demands at work and a lack of administrative support, teachers are faced with their own personal challenges. Previous research along with the conceptual framework (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) align with the findings of the

current study about stress and burnout because many teachers struggle to achieve a healthy work-life balance. At the end of the school day, teachers go back to caring for elderly parents and/or maintaining the busy schedules of young children. They have struggled to protect their own health. It has become difficult to enjoy social events with family and friends. A sustainable teaching career requires establishing a healthy plan that prioritizes TWB and supports positive learning outcomes for students.

The findings of the current study are consistent with Pressley's research (2021) in which he concluded that teaching demands and administrative support correlate with educator burnout. School administrators need to be sensitive to the fact that teachers are susceptible to the effects of stress and burnout due to challenges of high workloads and responsibilities. Administrators should provide the necessary resources for instructional and emotional support (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė, 2021).

Literature Related to Theme 4

The fourth theme answered the second research question: What do EC teachers in a large, northeastern public school report about the support needed post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom? Participants' responses fell into two subthemes. Teachers want professional development that helps them meet current demands and needs while supporting their own wellness. Teachers also want to feel a greater sense of administrative support and understanding through these challenging times.

The current findings confirm recommendations made by Santoro and Price (2021) stating that EC teachers require professional support and development that increases

social and emotional competencies to maintain their personal and professional health. Furthermore, district-provided in-service and professional development that helps teachers meet current demands while supporting their own wellness may improve feelings of efficacy and encourage them to remain in the profession longer (Marshall et al., 2022a). According to the prosocial classroom model, key factors to creating a healthy learning environment include high levels of teacher SEC, effective classroom management, and effective implementation of social emotional curriculum to guide and support students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This model reinforces the current findings as participants described their personal and professional needs for greater administrative support and communicated suggestions for a more appropriate use of district training and in-service time.

First, all participants in the current study said that they need ongoing professional development and training that helps them keep their skills and content knowledge current, but most (*n = 11*) said they are experiencing new challenges that extend beyond academic skills and mastery. The teachers who participated in the study want professional development that helps them meet current demands. Recent in-service days were described as a waste of time. Topics were either poorly timed or not appropriate for their needs. Presenters were ill-prepared to address topics like adult SEL or stress-management strategies. With the added assessments, data analysis, and paperwork, teachers want in-service time in their classrooms to catch up on work. The findings of the current study confirm previous research and build on the literature by adding that teachers do not want to waste time with training that is not meaningful. Instead, they have

suggested ways in which administrators might improve the professional development experience for teachers.

While schools have adopted curricula on social and emotional learning for students, little attention has been paid to supporting teachers' SECs. Teachers with strong SECs feel more efficacious in the classroom, improve their outlook on teaching, and have more positive interactions with students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Children are likely to be healthy and happy when their teachers are physically and emotionally well (Kwon, 2020). Teacher SEC can be increased through training and support (Herman et al., 2020; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The findings of the current study support previous research because teachers said that they want professional development that supports and develops their SECs. They added that professional development should be a combination of academic training and self-care. In-service topics might include mindfulness practices, yoga, meditation, or health and nutrition. Teachers want these sessions presented by people they can relate to. They believe that presenters should have recent classroom experience and understand the needs of today's educators. Teachers explained how administrators can communicate that they value teachers and the work they do by carefully choosing meaningful professional development that supports their social and emotional needs as well.

The literature shows that school leaders should work to protect teachers' time, provide quality professional development, and reduce administrative paperwork (ASCD, 2020; Baker et al., 2021; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Cipriano et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2022a; Santoro & Price, 2021). The findings of the current study indicate that there

was overwhelming consensus among teachers regarding the absence of administrative support and understanding. Participants suggested several ways administrators could offer more support including asking what teachers need, listening with honest concern, being an active part of the team, and offering solutions for unresolved academic and behavioral concerns. School administrators could show their understanding and support by developing daily schedules and coverage that provide for more release time or allowing staff to leave early occasionally to make time for self-care. Participants expressed a need for a "safe space" where they can share their experiences and get advice. They want to feel seen and appreciated. Administrators should build a culture of trust, respect, and open communication (Dinsdale, 2017). The authors of the Fly Five SEL program (2022) along with Jennings (2021) stated that continued SEL and resilience training offered as professional development may help teachers meet their own needs, manage stress, and build more nurturing relationships for all stakeholders.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations to a study may include sample size, gender distribution, and researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I recruited a small sample of participants for the current study. Using purposeful sampling, 8 eligible volunteers were drawn from the employee list of over 80 K-2 teachers on the research district's public website. Snowball sampling was used to recruit 4 more eligible participants. Time and availability may have been a limitation that prevented more teachers from volunteering. Teachers who struggled more to manage work-related stress may have avoided participation, thus affecting the resulting data collection and analysis. A larger sample size would produce

greater trustworthiness and possibly improve the transferability, but saturation was reached after 9 interviews when no new themes or categories emerged. I continued the interview process past the ninth interview to confirm that saturation had been achieved.

Gender distribution should also be considered as a limitation to the study. Of the 12 volunteers, only one identified as male. Like other participants, he reported heightened stress levels, but he managed the challenges differently, preferring sports and other forms of exercise over the responses to stressors described by the female participants. Having more male participants in the study may have produced additional codes and themes in the data.

Researcher bias should be considered a limitation of the study. I work as a teacher of first grade within the research district. My experience could have affected the way in which I posed the interview questions. My seniority in the district could have affected how participants responded. To address this potential bias, I worked with a methodology expert to design an interview protocol that was neutral in tone and did not lead participants to offer specific responses. I followed the interview protocol carefully and kept reflective journal notes to record any thoughts or feelings as they occurred. I reviewed this process with my university methodology expert.

Finally, there are severe limits to transferability. While the research district is one of the largest in the state with student data and demographics readily available on state and local public websites, population diversity including ethnicity and socio-economic status must be considered. Given the same methodological approach, similar geographic attributes, and comparable socio-economic demographics, the findings of this study

might be transferable to other large, suburban, public school districts. Future researchers might consider recruiting participants from urban and rural districts or from private and parochial schools, thus adding to the transferability.

Recommendations

Future researchers may add to the findings of this study. Research that recruits a larger sample size and includes teachers from private and parochial schools might contribute a wider variety of perceived challenges to the discussion. A study that purposefully recruits male EC teachers would bring additional viewpoints to light regarding strategies for stress management. A study in which the primary researcher is not employed by or connected to the participants in any way would minimize chances of unconscious biases.

One prior study was found that contradicted the current study. Herman et al. (2021) studied TWB in schools across rural Missouri and Oklahoma. The authors found that teachers reported lower stress levels and higher levels of coping after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future research could build on the findings of Herman et al. (2021) by exploring and comparing teachers' perceptions of stress in different geographic regions including urban, suburban, and rural settings. Future research might also investigate the differences between rural, urban, and suburban lifestyles and the perceptions of work-life balance across different geographic regions that may result in variations of stress management strategies.

Implications

The findings of the current study indicate that participants have experienced increased levels of stress and decreased overall wellness since returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic. They have struggled to meet the changing needs of students and their families. They also described challenges responding to administrative demands. This study has implications for positive social change by offering school leaders and administrators the necessary data to assess and understand how current stressors have affected teachers' perceptions of work-related challenges. The findings may assist school leaders in identifying the specific professional support and development teachers need to maintain their personal and professional health. Previous research and the prosocial classroom model support a common goal held by all stakeholders to provide a healthy learning environment where students thrive and suggest that TWB is a key factor in accomplishing that goal. Emotionally healthy teachers are more likely to engage in positive classroom interactions that promote deeper learning (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Sandilos et al., 2022; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Teachers' SECs can be increased through training and support. Building on Jennings and Greenberg's work, Kwon (2020) developed a model for whole teacher well-being that might inform school administrators looking for future in-service training topics. Kwon's (2020) model includes physical, psychological, and professional well-being along with workplace support. Mindfulness practices can give educators the ability to manage their emotions and address classroom problems more constructively (Jennings, 2021). The findings of the current study are consistent with the Jennings (2021) and

Kwon (2020) models. Examples of mindfulness and positivity were offered by two discrepant cases who shared that they currently have lower stress levels and increased wellness compared to others. They have benefitted greatly, both personally and professionally, from a variety of activities and practices to manage stress and improve overall wellness. One discrepant case explained how the power of positive thinking has helped her through these challenging times.

> I try to live my life with a positive mindset. I focus on the good and positive in everything. Being grateful for things. I try not to surround myself with negative people. Negativity spreads like a disease. I think it all comes down to mental health and being supported in that. We need a committee of like-minded teachers who are positive and actually care. Teachers who handle behaviors and other challenges well. We should have them spread that out like we do with other trainings. That is my second passion besides teaching. Spreading positivity, mental health, and helping people. Teachers sticking together and being on a team. I would love to see change like that.

Programs that spread positivity and help teachers develop SEC skills in relaxation, movement, deep listening, and emotional awareness are available. One such program is known as CARE for Teachers (CREATE for Education, 2020). CARE stands for Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education and was developed by Patricia Jennings (co-author of the prosocial classroom model), Christa Turksma, and Richard Brown. Based on the findings of the current study, school administrators could identify and locate programs like CARE to provide the support teachers need through professional

development. They might also focus on developing policies that allow for better time management, reduce excess paperwork and meetings for teachers, and create a more positive work environment that supports TWB.

Finally, the current study has illustrated the challenges faced by EC teachers as schools emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic and returned to in-person instruction. Multiple studies were conducted to explore the effects of the pandemic on children (Araújo et al.,2021; Bryant et al., 2020; Davis, 2022; Dorn et al., 2020; Kyerematen et al., 2022; Oberg et al., 2022). Others addressed the challenges teachers faced at the onset of the pandemic and through the initial stages of distance and hybrid learning (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Cipriano et al., 2020; Dias et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2021), but very little was known about how EC teachers were managing stress after schools reopened for in-person instruction. The few researchers that did explore teacher stress post-COVID were not specific to teachers of grades K-2 (Oberle et al., 2020; Steiner & Woo, 2021). The findings of this study add to the growing body of knowledge with its focus on teachers of younger grades. It can fill a gap in practice by leading school administrators to seek out appropriate professional development that supports the personal and professional needs of EC teachers.

Conclusion

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced an abrupt closing of schools worldwide and sent our youngest children home for months. Educators and researchers were instantly concerned with how school closures and distance learning strategies might impact students. I was reminded of the traditional greeting among members of the Masai

tribe in Africa. *Kasserian ingera* means… *And how are the children?* A response that all the children are well means that life is good among the members of the tribe (O'Neill, 2017). By prioritizing children's wellness, the people show that safety and responsibility are their main focus. It also reflects strength, intelligence, and respect. While these are valid concerns, I was moved to ask, "And how are the teachers?"

As the country emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic and schools reopened for in-person instruction, school leaders needed to understand what challenges EC teachers have faced, consider how those challenges may affect teaching and learning, and address teachers' needs by providing meaningful support and professional development so they might remain in classrooms. Prior research addressed some of these issues, but not specifically as they applied to EC teachers. Results of my study showed that EC teachers suffered from high levels of stress due to the professional challenges responding to the changing needs and demands of students, families, and administrators, leaving them feeling untrained, ineffective, and burned out. They have specific professional support and development needs to maintain their personal and professional health. My study filled a gap in practice by illustrating those needs and prompting school leaders to act. When teachers are supported, appreciated, appropriately trained, and have strong SEC, they are better prepared to create healthy and inspiring learning environments where children grow and thrive. When asked, "And how are the children?" we may respond confidently, "The teachers are well, and so are the children."

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date:
Time:
Interviewee Code #:
Location of Interview:

Research Question 1: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the personal and professional challenges they faced when returning to in-person instruction post COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: What do EC teachers (K-2) in a large, northeastern public school district report about the support they need post COVID-19 pandemic to maintain their well-being and remain in the classroom?

Parts of the Interview	**Interview Questions**
Introduction	Hello. My name is Julie Wright. Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my research. As you know, the purpose of this interview is to talk with you about the personal and professional challenges EC teachers have faced since schools reopened for in-person instruction and to learn about what support you need to remain in the classroom. This should take 30-60 minutes. You can decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. I will record the entire interview for transcription purposes. After studying your responses, I will contact you by email again so you can review my interpretations and summary of your interview and make any necessary changes. I will not identify you by name in my written documents and no one will be able to identify you from your answers.

	Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?
My first set of questions will relate to your employment with this district.	
Question 1: Confirm participant's eligibility by meeting the required criteria: • K-2 teacher • Minimum 3 years employed	Based on the information you provided, I see that you have been with the district for ____ years teaching ____ grade. How many years have you worked at your current school? How long have you been teaching in all?
The next set of questions relate to the personal and/or professional challenges you are currently facing since returning to in-person instruction. (RQ1)	
Question 2:	Please describe any challenges (personal or professional) you are facing since returning to in-person instruction. How are these challenges different than they were before the pandemic? • You said _____ (student behaviors, work/performance expectations, parental communications, family needs) are more challenging. Would you please describe that further for me?
Question 3:	Please describe any challenging new directives/expectations in the workplace since the pandemic? • How/why do you think those expectations have changed since the pandemic?

	• What affect have these expectations had on your stress level?
Question 4:	Please describe any other challenges you are facing. (work-life balance, communicating with students' families, connecting with the community?) • How have these relationships changed since before the pandemic? • How have these challenges affected your stress level?
The next set of questions relate to your perceptions of the support you believe you need to remain in the profession. (RQ2)	
Question 5:	What are the positive/negative aspects of working at your school?
Question 6:	What additional support do you need to create more positive interactions with coworkers, students, and families? What are your perceptions about how your school leaders responded to address your challenges/concerns?
Question 7:	Please describe your perceptions of recent in-service/trainings. In what ways do these activities support your individual needs and growth as a teacher? Is that sufficient? What additional support or training would help and encourage you to remain in the classroom?

Question 8:	Please share any sources of support (coworkers, families, administrators) that have helped you in addressing the challenges you've faced. • What kind of support might assist you in developing more positive relationships to resolve or lessen persisting challenges?
The remaining questions are related to a central idea that supports this research. It has been suggested that there is a positive relationship between teacher well-being and student success. (Conceptual Framework)	
Question 9:	What three or four words describe your stress level at work since returning to in-person instruction? In what ways does your current stress level affect how long do you plan to stay in the teaching profession?
Question 10:	Please describe any strategies that help you manage work-related stress. • Which strategy has been the most effective? Why/How? • What assistance might school leaders offer to help manage your work-related stress?
Question 11:	Please describe how the challenges you have mentioned affect your well-being. • What type of support might assist you in managing these concerns and improving your well-being?

Question 12:	What three or four words describe your overall wellness today?
Notes:	
Final Question:	Is there anything else about the challenges you have faced or your professional development needs that we have not had a chance to discuss?
Notes	
Closing	Thank you for your time. I will contact you one more time by email to review my interpretation and summary of your responses. At that time, if requested, we can discuss any changes or additions you might like to make. Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for helping with my research. Goodbye.

(Developed with permission from Panorama Education, 2015)

Appendix B: Codes and Categories Within Themes

Theme	Category	Codes	Quote
Teachers struggled to meet the changing needs and demands of students and families.	Professional Challenges	Academic Effects Basic Life Skills Intervention Process Resources Responsibility to Students	Work performance wasn't there. Students couldn't do anything for themselves
	Student-Specific Challenges	Student Behaviors Screen Time Students' SEL Needs Time for Breaks	Kids didn't know how to socialize when they came back...standing and screaming because they don't know how to relate to each other.
	Family-Related Challenges	Decrease in Parent Engagement Parental Push-Back Parental Communications or Expectations Decrease in Parent Respect	Parents make you question every decision you make. We're being talked to as if we don't have experience or education. They belittle us.
	External Impacts on Students	Family Dynamics Food or Financial Insecurity	Changes in family dynamics (food or financial security, child care, divorce, etc.) are trickling into the classroom.
Teachers described professional challenges responding to administrative demands	Disengaged Leadership	Administrative Avoidance Administrative Communications to Staff Administrative Follow-Through	Administrators shut me down and don't want to hear my concerns.

Theme	Category	Codes	Quote
	Lack of Administrative Awareness	Impractical Expectations Insufficient Training Technology Responsibility Time Wasted Lack of Support Staff Administrative Absence	Teachers couldn't keep up with the pacing guide while meeting students' needs and bringing up test scores.
	Perceptions of Administrative Response	Administrative Engagement Administrative Trust Administrative Respect	Administration does not respect our time or respect us as educated, mature individuals.
Teachers experienced challenges to their overall wellness and satisfaction with teaching.	Perceptions Affecting Teachers' Decisions to Remain in Classrooms	Attrition Longevity Burn Out Personal/Family Health Teachers' Emotional Effects Work-Life Balance	I teach because I love kids and I want to see kids happy learning. I don't see that today.
	Teachers' Current Stress Levels	Increased Stress Low Stress Overwhelmed Stressful Professional Responsibilities	I'm constantly crying and taking my frustration out on my own kids. My weight fluctuates. It isn't fair.
	Teacher Wellness	Decreased Wellness High Wellness Improved Wellness	I feel scattered, like a Jack of All Trades... constantly juggling and trying to be everything to everyone.

Theme	Category	Codes	Quote
Teachers have specific professional support and development needs to maintain their personal and professional health.	Perceptions of District Provided PD/Training	Impractical Training Quality of Training or Trainers Time Wasted	Nine times out of ten our district in-services are a waste of time.
	Teachers' Self-Reported Needs	Supportive Training Administrative Support Administrative Appreciation Administrative Understanding Safe Space Time for Breaks / Self-Care Time in Schedule Time to Prepare Unpaid Time	I'd rather have time in my classroom than waste two hours listening to someone talk about things I already know.
	Positivity that Sustains Teachers	Student Progress Positive Experiences Colleagues Health Insurance Sources of Support	The children are the reason I come back. It's nice to be around people again.

Appendix C: Permission to Use Panorama Staff Survey

The Panorama Teacher and Staff Survey (2015) was developed to gather teacher and staff perceptions of topics including their professional well-being, social and emotional competencies, professional development opportunities, and community relationships among others. Schools and districts are encouraged to customize the survey by selecting the topics that best align with their school improvement goals and priorities. The survey is free to all educators as long as they identify it so others may find it. The email communications that follow illustrate my intent to use the survey to develop my interview guide for the proposed qualitative research study and conveys permission from Panorama Education to do so.

Friday, February 3, 2023

Hello,

My name is Julie Wright. I am a doctoral student at Walden University pursuing my EdD in EC Education. I am preparing my dissertation proposal which involves developing an interview protocol. I am interested in using your Teacher and Staff Survey as a guide to help create the interview protocol. I have a few questions:

1. Page 4 of the survey states that you encourage educators to use the tool free of charge as long as the survey is identified so others may locate it. Does that offer apply to students as well?
2. I have included Panorama Education in my list of cited resources. What year was the survey published?
3. I am in [redacted]. Can you tell me any other schools or districts in the northeast that have used your survey?

Thank you,
Julie Wright

Friday, February 3, 2023

Hi Julie,

Congratulations on reaching this stage of your doctoral work! Please find my answers to your questions below.

1. If you are asking if, as a doctoral student, you can use our survey for your dissertation work, then yes.
2. 2015
3. That is not information we share, though selected information shared via our website may be of some assistance to you.

Best of luck with your research!

Sincerely,

David

--
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@ Panorama Education