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PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF STRESS AND BURNOUT  
AFTER COVID-19 ON EDUCATORS: SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN RESILIENCY  
AND FACILITATING ADVERSARIAL GROWTH POST-PANDEMIC

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A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Education and Human Development of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Education  
in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development

Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation, and Organizational Development  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2024

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A Dissertation Approved on April 23, 2024

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the person who made me feel the most loved in my life, my Sweetie, Billy. I know you walk beside me daily as I go through both good times and bad, during the very late nights, and in the wee hours of the morning. You were my person. You believed in me and in all my dreams and aspirations. You did everything you could to support me. I could not have asked for a better friend, husband, and father for my children. Ethan and Elyssa are so fortunate to have had you the years they did. I accomplished this feat because you were with me in spirit. You sat on my desk all the long nights and pushed me to keep going when I wanted to cry and throw my hands in the air. I did this for you. I was comforted in knowing you would be so proud of my accomplishment. This would not have been possible without you. I am reminded how you would humorously say we would be “Doctor and Mr. Hawkins”. Well, here it is, Sweetie. I did it. I will miss and love you forever.

Darling, I never showed you  
Assumed you'd always be there  
I took your presence for granted  
But I always cared  
And I miss the love we shared

And I know you're shining down on me from Heaven  
Like so many friends we've lost along the way  
And I know eventually we'll be together  
We'll be together  
One sweet day

Mariah Carey and Boyz II Men

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Mom, I did it! You have always said you knew I could do it, so here it is. You

have always believed in me and I am so happy that you were here to see me finish.

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## ABSTRACT

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF STRESS AND BURNOUT AFTER COVID-19 ON EDUCATORS: SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN RESILIENCY AND FACILITATING ADVERSARIAL GROWTH POST PANDEMIC

Rebecca Hicks-Hawkins

May 10, 2024

COVID-19 has not only caused anxiety and fears among teachers for their own health and that of their families; they are also facing increased responsibility. Planning periods had been replaced with coverage periods, where teachers must teach other classes when their colleagues are out—often due to illness—because the supply of substitute teachers cannot meet the demand (Barton & Dickason, 2022). Teaching is a demanding profession, and there will always be stress associated with a job where so many external factors come into play (Hansen, 2013).

However, in the face of adversity some teachers were thriving. They are showing up and creating environments in which their students can succeed. It is notable that adversarial or post-traumatic growth is in play. Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is a theory that explains this kind of transformation following trauma. It was developed by psychologists Richard Tedeschi, PhD, and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD, in the mid-1990s, and holds that people who endure psychological struggle following adversity can often see growth afterward (Collier, 2016).

This qualitative action research project utilized the phenomenological method as a means of synthesizing job demand theory, resilience theory, and post-traumatic

growth transcripts. Postliminary, I will disaggregate the data to make connections and draw insight on the phenomenon of post-traumatic growth after COVID-19 in teachers.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	vii
Chapter 1:INTRODUCTION.....	1
PURPOSE OF STUDY.....	5
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	6
SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY.....	6
THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND METHODOLOGY .....	8
DEFINITION OF TERMS.....	8
LIMITATIONS OF STUDY.....	10
ORGANIZATION OF STUDY.....	11
SUMMARY.....	11
Chapter II: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	13
INTRODUCTION.....	13
HISTORY OF TEACHER STRESS AND BURNOUT.....	15
TEACHER STRESS AND BURNOUT DURING COVID-19.....	21
JOB-DEMANDS RESOURCE THEORY.....	23
RESILIENCE THEORY.....	26
POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH.....	30
SUPPORT DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND.....	32
SUMMARY.....	35

Chapter III: METHOD.....	37
INTRODUCTION.....	37
RESEARCH FOCUS.....	37
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	38
ACTION RESEARCH DESIGN.....	38
LIMITATIONS.....	40
POPULATION AND CONTEXT.....	41
DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES.....	43
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	46
RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY.....	46
TRUSTWORTHINESS.....	49
SUMMARY.....	50
Chapter IV: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS.....	52
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT.....	52
RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY.....	53
PARTICIPANT PROFILES.....	56
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OVERVIEW.....	57
LACK OF EMPATHY AND SUPPORT.....	61
ACCOUNTABILITY.....	63
SELF-RELIANCE.....	65
AUTHENTICITY.....	69
FRAMEWORK ALIGNMENT.....	72
SUMMARY.....	79

Chapter V: DISCUSSION, REFLECTION, IMPLICATIONS.....	81
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS.....	81
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.....	83
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	86
IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	88
CONCLUSION.....	89
REFERENCES.....	91
APPENDICES.....	111
APPENDIX A MISSIONSQUARE RESEARCH INSTITUTE REPORT.....	111
APPENDIX B POST TRAUMATIC GROWTH SURVEY .....	112
APPENDIX C FARBER’S PARTICIPANT QUESITONS.....	114
APPENDIX D BRIEF COPING SCALE .....	116
APPENDIX E INTERVIEW QUESITONS.....	117
APPENDIX F INFORMED CONSENT.....	118
CURRICULUM VITA.....	12

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Late in December 2019 the world was about to undergo a drastic, unpredictable transformation. A scientist in China confirmed that a mysterious new pneumonia-like illness identified in Wuhan, China could be transmitted from human to human (Katella, 2021). What sounded initially like what could have been pneumonia, presumably remedied with medication, led to a global pandemic in a matter of a few short months. COVID-19 is a virus named SARS-CoV-2 and was discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. It was very contagious and quickly spread around the world causing respiratory symptoms that could feel much like a cold, a flu, or pneumonia, but leaving thousands dead and dying worldwide. Other parts of the body were affected by the disease leaving those stricken weak and unable to carry out even the most ordinary activities. (Center for Disease Control, 2019).

Nations across the globe closed their borders and shut down their economies to try to contain the spread of COVID-19. People were forced to adjust to a more isolated lifestyle, limiting social interaction professionally and personally. The world was upended by the COVID-19 virus, leaving no one immune from dealing with extreme changes in our lives this horrific event imposed on us, including the possibility of death. This global shutdown also impacted formal education as March of 2020 saw many schools and districts across the United States make the decision to close their brick-and-mortar buildings and provide services to students virtually to limit social interactions and thus reduce the risk of virus spread.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown of schools forced teachers to move to online environments to ensure students continue their studies. This was not an easy transition and success depended on educators having or quickly acquiring the skills, knowledge, and competencies for online teaching (Winter, et al., 2021). Although educators today are generally proficient in knowledge of technology use within the classroom, many were unprepared for the great undertaking that was expected of them. Overnight, schools went from traditional classrooms to virtual ones. Teachers had to adapt to unexpected conditions while teaching in unprecedented ways and were challenged to establish daily connections with students, families, and colleagues. As a result, teachers' levels of stress and burnout has been high throughout these unusual pandemic times (Zamarro, et al., 2021).

COVID-19 created a situation in which teachers felt especially stressed and burned out. Contributing factors were not only due to virtual teaching or a hybrid model where teachers were teaching both in-person and virtual at the same time. The challenges of teaching in a post-pandemic world did not mitigate when education returned to in-person learning. Once back to in-person classrooms, teachers were charged with contact tracing, limiting physical proximity, and monitoring the wearing of masks all playing a part in adding stress to an already stressful situation. Reports studying the prevalence of depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout in teachers, published from December 2019 to June 15, 2021, show that teachers report levels of anxiety (17%), depression (19%), and stress (30%) (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). These are significant findings.

At the onset of the pandemic, teachers were attempting to serve students as best they could through an environment, they were not previously accustomed to using. Synchronous as well as asynchronous classes were scheduled. Some schools even moved



to what was considered hybrid – one set of students in the classroom and the other set learning simultaneously from home via a digital platform. Preparing for these two different modes of delivery required twice as much work. Teachers were expected to serve both in-person students and virtual students in the classroom at the same time. Teachers, for whom hybrid was the second or third iteration of pandemic teaching, found juggling students in person and online at the same time to be a near-impossible act, with lessons having to be reinvented to simultaneously make sense for two distinct sets of kids (Shah, 2021). As the pandemic continued teachers were expected to do even more.

Another unexpected stressor for teachers was that they were trying to teach and attend to parents that did not know how to help their children with technology issues. Many teachers were learning technology as a teaching tool and virtual environment as they experienced it for the first time, yet parents seemed to expect teachers already knew how to navigate this new way of schooling. Limited access to technology by some families compounded the issues associated with technology and when combined with limited at-home help for those having access to online learning, teachers faced systemic issues of access they were not prepared to address.

Educators also had virtually no control over the actions of states and other agencies attempting to make decisions based on what was best for the majority of the public. The patchwork of bans and mandates among states and localities regarding teachers and students receiving vaccines and wearing masks, the changing guidance by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the wait for approval of vaccines for those under the age of 12 only exacerbated the challenges that public schools were facing as they dealt with COVID-19 (MissionSquare Research Institute, 2021). These were just a few of the concerns with the COVID-19 virus from the educator's point of view

(Appendix A). Many of these factors plaguing educators were out of their control. Given that, what was in the circle of control of educators or administrators?

Teaching has always been a demanding profession. The global pandemic highlighted many of the issues that make teaching so demanding, yet some teachers seemed to handle the changes and the stress better than others. How did these teachers endure educational hardships such as COVID-19 and come out on the other side, resilient and exhibiting adversarial growth? As an educator, I was interested in researching how COVID-19 has impacted practitioners in the field of education, leading to stress and burnout. A staggering 55 percent of educators were thinking about leaving the profession earlier than they had planned, according to a National Education Association (NEA) survey of its members released in January 2022 (National Education Association, 2022). A mass exodus of teachers was expected over the next few years. What specifically was prompting this thinking? How could this dilemma be addressed?

I also investigated what intrinsically motivated educators to overcome these issues and thrive in the face of adversity. This adversarial growth needed to be addressed to not only help the educators, but also for the benefit of the students they were expected to assist. The teachers “experiencing adversarial growth” have built resiliency, worked to combat stress and burnout and have stayed in the profession despite the consequences of the global pandemic. Although not unscathed, they had thus far succeeded in staying the course each day they go into schools. This crisis presented an unprecedented opportunity to draw on resilience research to study the connections between tragedy and resilience, struggle and accomplishment, and hardship and hope for our global community (Kaye-Kanderer & Feingold, 2021). Teachers were still expected to produce proficient

students, as if everything in schools was as it was prior to fall of 2019 - when the world met COVID-19.

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of educators who thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic amid increased stress due to job demands when burnout was common. Further, this study sought to gain insight as to how to best support and coach educators in resiliency and adversarial growth. When the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing educational challenges and introduced new ones to a profession already struggling (Marken & Agrawal, 2022), some educators were able to continue and even thrive in the face of adversity.

Although this study was focused primarily on the COVID-19 pandemic, the information gained will help teachers and administrators to find avenues of strength and resiliency to continue in their careers when the stress is mounting, both professionally and personally, often with burnout as a likely end product. Assessing individual resilience expands our understanding of stress resistance and adaptation. The results of this study provides insight for administrators and those in a position of authority in educational realms ways to better support teachers in times of unpredictability and ever-growing stress.

Increasingly, empirical studies focused on identifying the characteristics of individuals who managed to thrive despite living in difficult circumstances, such as parental mental illness or poverty (Garmezy, 1991, Werner, 1992, as cited in Beutel et al., 2017). Identification of these characteristics had the potential of helping teachers uncover their sources of strength and resilience, thereby allowing them to share their lived experiences that led to their post-traumatic or adversarial growth. By sharing and relating

to other teachers and administrators, these resilient, thriving teachers were able to open dialogue and inspire other teachers to become more resilient and thrive under post COVID-19 conditions. This study was centered on these four research questions:

#### Research Questions

RQ1: What are contributing factors of stress and burnout among educators relative to their experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic, from March 2020 to present, from the perspective of classroom teachers?

RQ2: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how are stressors pre-COVID-19 similar to or different from post-COVID-19 stressors?

RQ3: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how have they developed resilience to combat stress and burnout during the global pandemic and the aftermath?

RQ4: From their perspective, what resources would benefit classroom teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth?

#### Significance of the Study

This study was significant because the literature investigating how educators were affected psychologically by COVID-19 is limited, as there is ever changing information about COVID-19 and how to deal with the impact of the virus. It was important to understand the history of teacher stress and burnout and how it has affected teachers over time as well as how COVID-19 brings a different view to the difficulties of the past.

There was no shortage of stressors for teachers who returned to the classroom in 2020–2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pressley, 2021). The adverse conditions and related stress continued through the 2021-2022 school year. COVID-19 restrictions, including a national lockdown, continued social distancing, compulsory quarantine, and

organizational measures of remote working, were imposed in many countries and organizations to combat the coronavirus. These limitations and restrictions have caused different impacts on the employees' mental health worldwide (Liu et al., 2021). Teachers were not left unscathed in this crisis, leading to an exodus of teachers during this trying time in our society. There were approximately 10.6 million educators working in public education in January 2020; today there are just 10.0 million, a net loss of around 600,000 (Walker, 2022).

Teaching is a demanding profession, and there will always be stress associated with a job where so many external factors come into play (Hansen, 2013). COVID-19 has not only raised the normal level of stress for teachers but raised anxiety and fear among teachers for their own health and that of their families. Adding to that is the fact that they were also facing increased responsibility. Teachers are key actors in everyday school routines. For example, they must prepare instruction, teach classes, assign grades, and monitor students. In total, the expectations and demands placed on teachers are multifaceted and ubiquitous—meaning that teachers must have the ability to meet a variety of different requirements (Klusmann & Waschke, 2018, as cited in Stang-Rabrig, et al., 2022) which were exacerbated with COVID-19. Planning periods have been replaced with coverage periods, where teachers must teach other classes when their colleagues are out—often due to illness—because the supply of substitute teachers cannot meet the demand (Barton & Dickason, 2022).

However, in the face of adversity some teachers are thriving. They are showing up and creating environments in which their students can succeed. It is notable that adversarial or post-traumatic growth is in play. Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is a theory that explains this kind of transformation following trauma. It was developed by

psychologists Richard Tedeschi, PhD, and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD, in the mid-1990s, and holds that people who endure psychological struggle following adversity can often see growth afterward (Collier, 2016).

#### Theoretical Underpinnings and the Selection of Methodology

This qualitative study will employ phenomenology as the primary method for collecting data via semi-structured interviews. Phenomenology has grown considerably over the last 20 years as it is considered a highly appropriate approach to researching human experience (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Phenomenology allows the researcher to delve deeper into the interview exploring the lived experiences of those being interviewed. Examining the lived experiences of the participants calls for an interpretive phenomenological analysis methodology, using in-depth interviews with open-ended questions, examination of written or digital records provided by participants, and observations of participants during the interview process. In a phenomenological interview there is a relationship between researcher and participant that moves from observational in quantitative research, to dialogical in qualitative research, and then to reflective in phenomenological research (Munhall & Oiler-Boyd, 1993). Such reflectivity appears to acknowledge that the researcher is an important component in the research process (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000).

#### Definition of Terms

- Burnout - syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed; the three symptoms included in the list are: feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job or feeling negative toward one's career, and reduced professional productivity (WHO, 2019)

- COVID-19 - (coronavirus disease 2019) is a disease caused by a virus named SARS-Co V-2 and was discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. It is contagious and has quickly spread around the world. COVID-19 most often causes respiratory symptoms that can feel much like a cold, the flu, or pneumonia. COVID-19 may attack more than the lungs and respiratory system. Other parts of the body may also be affected by the disease (Center for Disease Control, 2023).
- Eustress - a positive form of stress having a beneficial effect on health, motivation, performance, and emotional well-being (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)
- Homeostasis - state of physiological calmness or balance, and occurs when our bodily functions are running smoothly in conjunction with low stress levels (DiGregorio, 2020).
- Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) - a theory that explains this kind of transformation following trauma. It was developed by psychologist Richard Tedeschi, PhD. and Lawrence Calhous, PhD. in the mid-1990s, and holds that people who endure psychological struggle following adversity can often see growth afterward (Collier, 2016)
- Resilience -the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress - such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors (American Psychological Association, n.d.)
- Stress - the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people feel and behave (American Psychological Association, n.d.)

## Limitations of the Study

One limitation of the study was that the subjects will be self-reporting, therefore the data is subjective. As interviews were the main method for data collection, the participants may not have wanted to verbalize their feelings or may have over embellished due to frustration levels. This study also required self-reflection by the educators that are participants. They had to reflect on their thoughts and actions not only from memory, but in real time. This reflection could have had the potential to have educators overwhelmed with the information they wanted to share.

Participants may have been a bit reluctant to share details of their personal trauma experiences, therefore this fact could have presented a limitation as well. The avoidance of this discussion had the potential to skew the results of the interview. In addition to intentionally not sharing, some who could be struggling with the effects of long COVID may have had problems with attention, memory, and executive function (Fong, 2022). The residual effects of the illness could have had an impact on the answers given by participants. They may still unknowingly be in an altered state of thought.

Another limitation of the study was that there is often confusing and still unknown information about the spread of the virus and whether the virus is in a sort of remission at this point. As of this writing, the pandemic seems to have dissipated to the point that relative normalcy has returned to much of the world. But as we saw in 2019 and 2020, that could change quickly, thus further influencing teacher perception. The study focused on the stressors that impact teachers from March 2020 at the onset of the global pandemic to the present day, post-pandemic recovery.

Finally, experiences are subjective, also presenting a possible limitation. Experiences in which some people may find an exhibit of resilience, another person may



not. Aimee J. Palumbo, an assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Temple University's College of Public Health said, "How some people tell their stories is a study of resilience and we have to consider how this has impacted everyone different from ourselves by acknowledging everyone's experience (Wellington, 2021). The participants' truth has been acknowledged and accepted to honor the sharing of their vulnerabilities and resilience.

### Organization of the Study

I have organized my study as follows: Chapter 1 includes the introduction, purpose, research questions, significance of study, theoretical underpinnings and selection of methodology, limitations to the study, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 provides a literature review supporting the study including a history of adversity faced by educators. Chapter 3 provides an overview of research methods and design and the context for this qualitative case study. Ethical considerations are included, as well as data collection sources, procedures, and analysis. Chapter 4 includes the reporting of the data and a review of the data analysis and results of the study. Chapter 5 provides a summary of findings and implications for further research on the subject.

### Summary

Chapter 1 highlighted the plight of teachers during the uncertain time beginning with the onset of the global pandemic in March 2020. The purpose of the study was to gain insight as to how administrators can best support and coach educators in resiliency and adversarial growth through an investigation of the lived experiences of teachers that seemed to thrive during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic amid increased stress due to

job demands and burnout. This study enables the lived experiences of teachers that thrived during this time to be a model for others that are struggling to rediscover strengths they have within themselves, to be resilient, and thrive. Also, this information helps administrators support teachers, not simply with doughnuts and buzzwords, but genuinely help them.

This chapter also discusses the reasons for choosing phenomenology as the research method, citing that interpretive phenomenological analysis will be used for data analysis. Limitations for the study were also examined in this chapter. Chapter 2 explores the literature that supports this study. The history of teacher stress and burnout, teacher stress and burnout during COVID-19, job demands-resources theory, resilience theory, and post-traumatic growth theory have all been investigated through a review of the literature.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of educators who thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic amid increased stress due to job demands when burnout was common. Further, this study sought to gain insight as to how to best support and coach educators in resiliency and adversarial growth. It was my desire to better understand the challenges faced by teachers with the compounded stress due to a pandemic, as well as explore how some teachers exhibit resiliency and present post-traumatic growth. The results of this study provide insight to administrators and those in a position of authority in educational realms ways to better support teachers in times of unpredictability and ever-growing stress. There were four research questions guiding this study.

RQ1: What are contributing factors of stress and burnout among educators relative to their experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic, from March 2020 to present, from the perspective of classroom teachers?

RQ2: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how are stressors pre-COVID-19 similar to or different from post-COVID-19 stressors?

RQ3: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how have they developed resilience to combat stress and burnout during the global pandemic and the aftermath?

RQ4: From their perspective, what resources would benefit classroom teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth.

In this chapter, a review of literature relevant to stress and burnout on teachers since the inception of the American system of education is presented. The chapter begins with a discussion of job-demands-resource theory, setting a background to explain how demands and resources have effects on job stress and motivation. Then to set a historical context relative to the challenges presented to teachers during a pandemic, the chapter continues by providing reasons for stress and burnout amongst teachers over time. Next, teacher stress and burnout during COVID-19 is addressed, as well as how to support teachers during this time of additional stress. Finally, resilience theory explores the commonalities of individuals who overcome traumatic events in their lives and provide insight for others in similar situations, resulting in post-traumatic or adversarial growth.

Recently, the realities of teacher stress and burnout have been at the forefront of educational discussions amidst the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the idea of teacher burnout and stress are not new. Educational research dating back 50 years cites teacher stress and burnout as a factor for leaving the profession. A series of autobiographical accounts of disillusioned teachers in the 1960s first sparked public interest in teaching and the problems of teachers (Farber, 1991).

A 2016 study by Pennsylvania State University cites school organization, job demands, work resources, and teacher social and emotional competence as four main sources of stress (Greenburg, 2017). Fifteen years earlier, a report examining international research and educational publications about teacher workload and related stress cited imposed and centralized system accountability, lack of professional autonomy, relentlessly imposed change, constant media criticism, reduced resources, and moderate pay all relate to teacher stress (Naylor, 2001). Farber (1991) traced teacher stress back into the 1960s in his book *Crisis in Education*, a time when teachers were

under the scrutiny of the public, causing excessive stress on teachers. As job demands have increased and job resources have dwindled, the rate at which teachers have left the profession has steadily increased over the past decade and a half. Then came COVID-19. The previous sources of stress were exacerbated with a world pandemic. This study adds to the developing knowledge of teacher stress and resiliency during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

#### A History of Teacher Stress and Burnout

Stress, whether positive or negative, physical or non-physical, occurs in daily living as a natural phenomenon (Coon, 1992). Positive stress, also known as eustress, is a form of stress having a beneficial effect on health, motivation, performance, and emotional well-being (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). While some people use positive stress to inspire them. Others fell victim to the negative stressors in their lives. Both personal and occupational stress can take its toll on a person. Hans Selye, the founder of stress theory, defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it” (Selye, 1973) in 1936. That beginning research became a catalyst for other research on stress.

The term occupational stress appeared in the early 1970s. (Marland, 1981). Although not always called teacher stress, it was evident that even in the early 1930s attention was being paid to the plight of teachers. For example, unusual nervousness and nervous breakdowns were noted by Hicks in his 1933 work entitled, *The Mental Health of Teachers* (as cited in Coates, 1974). In the 1940s, Hans Selye defined stress as the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it (Selye, 1956). The demands on teachers have had an impact on their minds and bodies. In 1951 National Education Association recorded that 43 percent of a sample of 2,200 teachers reported that they were working under considerable strain and tension, followed by a 1967 survey

that stated that 78 percent of teachers participating in the survey indicated they experienced strain at a moderate or considerable level (as cited in Coates, 1974).

Between 1955 and 1975, education was the fastest growing service whether in the public or private sector (Cheshire, 1976, as cited in Travers and Cooper, 1995). The increase in this growing education service led to even more teachers dealing with the impact of strain and tension.

In an article by Sally Reed of the *New York Times*, it is stated that stress was striking teachers with greater frequency, noting that in 1961 28% of teachers had 20 or more years of experience and that by 1976 the percent had fallen to 14% (1979). In 1977 the *Chicago Tribune* concluded that public school teaching is among the most stressful occupations in the United States (Marland, 1981). The term “burnout” was coined in the 1970s by the American psychologist Herbert Freudenberger. He used it to describe the consequences of severe stress and high ideals in “helping” professions (U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2020). The factors involving stress became so prominent, “burnout” was first investigated as a crisis of overextended and disillusioned human service workers (Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999/2006). In the 1980s stress was recognized as producing the condition of teacher demoralization, dissatisfaction, feelings of unproductivity, and meaningful professional lives (Gold, 1985). Burnout caused by high levels of stress related to inordinate time demands, inadequate relationships, large class sizes, lack of resources, isolation, fear of violence, role ambiguity, limited promotional opportunities, lack of support, etc. In addition to resulting in a number of emotional and physical illnesses, burnout manifests itself in increased job turnover and absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, mental and physical withdrawal and detachment, increased inter- and intra-individual conflict, and a general reduction in individual and ultimately school performance (Cunningham, 1983).

Teachers continued to teach through the decades and their burdens of stress and burnout became more apparent. Situations became so dire, the 1990 Carnegie Report indicated that ‘nearly 40 percent of the teachers report if they had it to do over, they would not become a public school teacher (Carnegie Foundation, 1990, as cited in Gold, 1993). Teachers were breaking under the constant stress imposed on them with little to no control of their required professional responsibilities. Although school employees throughout the United States are clearly affected by work-related stress, they often lack the programs, resources, and tools needed to support the management of their stress and the promotion of overall wellness (Lever, 2017).

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century marched forward, the federal government began to take a greater interest in the education of American children. The 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report began an examination of the concerns about schools in the United States and their ability to meet the educational needs of their students exacerbated stress levels for teachers. *A Nation at Risk* noted the educational foundations of our society were being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatened our very future as a nation and a people as well as to seemingly have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Scrutiny of not only the education system, but teachers, created an intensely stressful situation.

In addition, the report suggested that teacher training programs require more of prospective teachers and that teacher pay be tied directly to student achievement (*A Nation at Risk: Summary & Effects on Education*, 2014). In 1983, the average teacher pay was \$21,935, equivalent to only \$19,781 in current dollars (Digest of Education Statistics, 2009). Already cited as being a low wage career requiring a college degree, teachers were stressed that their pay could be directly impacted by the achievement of

their students.

A 1989 Education Summit began more extensive involvement in education from the federal level. With 49 of the nation's 50 state governors participating, the summit was ground zero for standards-based reform and was, in part, formed as a response to *A Nation at Risk*, the watershed 1983 report that warned that American education was lagging behind international peers and imperiling the nation's economic security (Wiener, 2019). The summit set forth grand goals - goals educators had no control over but were expected to achieve. For example, two of the six goals coming out of the 1989 Education Summit was for all children to start school ready to learn and every adult American be literate (Department of History, Institute for Social Research, and School of Public Policy & Vinovskis, 1999). These are goals educators were expected to achieve, although they were not completely in the educators' control. There were various factors that would have to meld together to be successful in reaching these goals, including support from family. However, this was indeed an education summit and therefore educators bore the brunt of the expectations for goal attainment. The summit produced the nation's first education goals defining what results and aspirations the U.S. should have for its young people and its education system (Manno, 2018). The positive, but lofty goals caused stress on not only the education systems, but educators themselves to increase.

The education goals and subsequent reforms did not stop with the 1989 Education Summit. Teachers were met with new reform and new goals with The Goals 2000: Educate America Act became the centerpiece of the Clinton administration's education reform program (Ravitch, 2000). Amy Wilkins, analyst for an independent Washington-based group called the Education Trust, said that the fine print in his (Clinton) plan reveals weaknesses in one provision that claimed to "end the



practice of hiring emergency-certified teachers.” (Anderson, 1999). This provision had the potential to cause stress to an already overburdened education system and directly impact those already teaching in the classroom. When a school district is experiencing teaching shortages, they prioritize filling the job with an adaptable, trainable professional. Sometimes these are professionals having worked in other fields, even tradesmen who are looking to get into vocational training, and/or school personnel and paraprofessionals who would like to become classroom teachers (Dorian, 2021). This would add additional tension on the educator workforce, as they would bear the consequences - work overload and increased class size due to dwindling numbers of teachers.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was approved by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. The law, which reauthorized the ESEA of 1965 and replaces the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, mandates high-stakes student testing, holds schools accountable for student achievement levels, and provides penalties for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress toward meeting the goals of NCLB. Although initially, the positive attributes of NCLB were touted in public view, such as increasing test scores of students of color and requiring teachers to certify at higher levels, critics complained that the federal government was not providing enough funding to implement the requirements of the act and that it had usurped the states’ traditional control of education as provided for in the Constitution. Moreover, they charged that the law was eroding the quality of education by forcing schools to “teach to the test” or to lower standards of proficiency in language and mathematics while neglecting other parts of the curriculum, such as history, science, and art (Duignan & Nolen, 2023).

With the Obama administration came yet more reforms and changes. It was as

though once educators began to feel confident with the expectations set before them, an administration would decide that education needed reform again and drastic changes should take place. At the center of many changes were more expectations of already wavering educators. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), an adaptation of No Child Left Behind, signed by President Obama in 2015, was explicit in goals. Goals for academic standards, testing, accountability, and plans for struggling schools were included in this latest reform movement. There was no question of the careful thoughtfulness and planning that took place to provide American students with the best possible opportunities for a successful education, but an already fragile workforce in the field of education would be challenged once more.

Under ESSA, schools were under the microscope to determine how they were meeting or not meeting the academic needs of their students. The labels of Persistently Low Achieving Schools, and later Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) and Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) were doled out based on school performance as compared to other schools through the School Improvement Grant initiative undertaken by the Obama administration. Not only were teachers under the everyday stresses endured in a classroom setting, but they also had to worry about the state departments of education identifying them as failures. One consequence of identification would be states and school districts must create plans to try to help get the school back on track (Lee, 2021). Another consequence and one of the largest and most impactful would be the removal of principals in the lowest achieving schools. Along with the plans came education recovery leaders from the state department descending on schools. Meetings, professional development, observations, explanations became even more intense, and extreme stress fell upon the shoulders of teachers. The barrage of inspections forced teachers to live in a constant state of

alertness, exasperating emotional strain.

As Donald Trump took office in January 2017 as the next President of the United States of America, there were more drastic changes and uncertainty, putting more stress and pressure on teachers. Although no major legislative moves were made, there was a push to undermine previous educational advancements by past administrations. From administrative appointments in the education department to government funding for education and schools, the political climate in the realm of education was unsettling. With the appointment of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education, Trump faced nearly immediate scrutiny. She was known to have no related experience to the position to which she was appointed. With the backing of President Trump, DeVos proposed schemes to privatize public schools through vouchers, called for deep cuts to federal education funding, rolled back protections for vulnerable children, and shilled for the for-profit college industry that has defrauded countless students (Litvinov, 2019).

Teachers endured added stress by the very department that should be protecting them, students, and the educational system. DeVos seemingly not only attacked the very education she was supposed to protect and promote, but also the public education system in the United States. From proposing funding cuts to promoting privatization to rolling back protections for vulnerable children, she has ignored the voices of educators across the country about what students need (Menas, 2020). On the heels of this reform movement, COVID-19 swept across the nation. Mandates, policies, and procedures related to COVID-19 evolving nearly weekly, continue to be a stress on educators. This global pandemic would change the face of education.

Teacher Stress and Burnout During COVID-19

Teachers have faced trials and tribulations because of their choice of occupations

in the service field over the years. However, despite the unyielding pressures associated with COVID-19 they have continued to show up and support students. Education systems and educators were forced to adopt “Emergency Education”, transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning pedagogies to remote virtual platforms, despite the challenges posed to both educators and the learners (Godber & Atkins, 2021). Suddenly, teachers had to orchestrate teaching and learning online. However, with the vast number of unknowns with the virus, leadership and administration had to move at excessive speed with decisions, not being able to prepare themselves, much less their staff.

Moving to socially distanced rooms, hybrid teaching or teaching completely in a virtual setting became the only option, an unknown for most of the education world. Leaders knew not what repercussions those decisions would hold. They had no choice. They had to think of physical safety for their charges first. As teachers worked to improve the student experience, they were using unfamiliar technologies, balancing multiple teaching models, and continuing to worry about returning to face-to-face teaching. In addition, many teachers were caring for their own children while teaching (Steiner & Woo, 2021). These additional personal stressors, when combined with the constantly changing professional demands COVID-19 highlighted, teacher stress escalated (can you find a citation?)

In these foreign modes of teaching, teachers were faced with yet more expectations on their work and on their time. Spring of 2020 quickly became a whirlwind of simply trying to learn enough about the new learning environments necessitated by the restrictions caused by COVID, how to continue teaching in these unfamiliar environments, and complete the last months of the school year amid a global pandemic and economic shutdown. Educators across the country shifted quickly to connect with students and families and support students through distance learning.

Teachers and principals both indicated that teachers had received some training to equip them for this work, but they also identified gaps in that training, especially in terms of training to support particular student groups, such as students with disabilities or homeless students (Hamilton et al., 2020).

In the midst of the chaos of a global pandemic, teachers were expected to teach in a way unbeknownst to them as well as teach others what they had not yet learned. While facing new requirements for instruction, job expectations, and classroom environments, districts pushed teachers to learn new virtual instruction pedagogy and made teachers the first resource for parents struggling with instructional technology (Pressley, Ha, & Learn, 2021). Further challenges to online learning included poor internet access, home environments uncondusive to online learning, student difficulties with self-discipline and self-directed learning, lack of professional development for faculty, absence of holistic quality assurance systems, and means of supporting not only students' academic learning outcomes, but also their social and emotional development (Zhu & Liu, 2020).

When the 2019-2020 school year was over, teachers were exhausted and burned out from the demands placed on them. However, there was hope. With roughly three months until the beginning of the new school year, vaccines had begun to circulate, and many had hopes that the new school year would be back to 'normal'. There would still be protocols in place for the safety of everyone but being able to teach from a school building was a welcoming idea to teachers. The planning for the 2020-2021 school year was met with trepidation. With spikes worldwide in the number of COVID-19 cases, local school districts were forced to make difficult decisions about how to proceed entering the new school year. Nearly one in four teachers said that they were likely to leave their jobs by the end of the 2020–2021 school year, compared with one in six

teachers who were likely to leave, on average, prior to the pandemic. Black or African American teachers were particularly likely to plan to leave (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

### Job Demands-Resource Theory

The job demands-resource theory (JD-R) originated in the human resources sector. The theory was developed by Arnold Bakker and Evangelia Demerouti to counter the theories of demand-control and effort-reward imbalance (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). The psychologists set out to combine the role of job demands and job resources while explaining how demands and resources have effects on job stress and motivation, whereas neither demand-control theory nor effort rewards theory intertwined all these elements. Demand-control theory describes job strain as particularly caused by the combination of high job demands, like work overload, and time pressure and low job control, with the idea that if employees can decide how to meet their job requirements, they do not have job strain. Robert Karasek's demands-control theory was criticized by Johnson and Hall (1988) as recognizing aspects of limitations such as lack of exposure data with stress being evaluated based on a single measure in time and incomplete models of the stress process, but ignoring equally important, psychosocial work characteristics that were ignored.

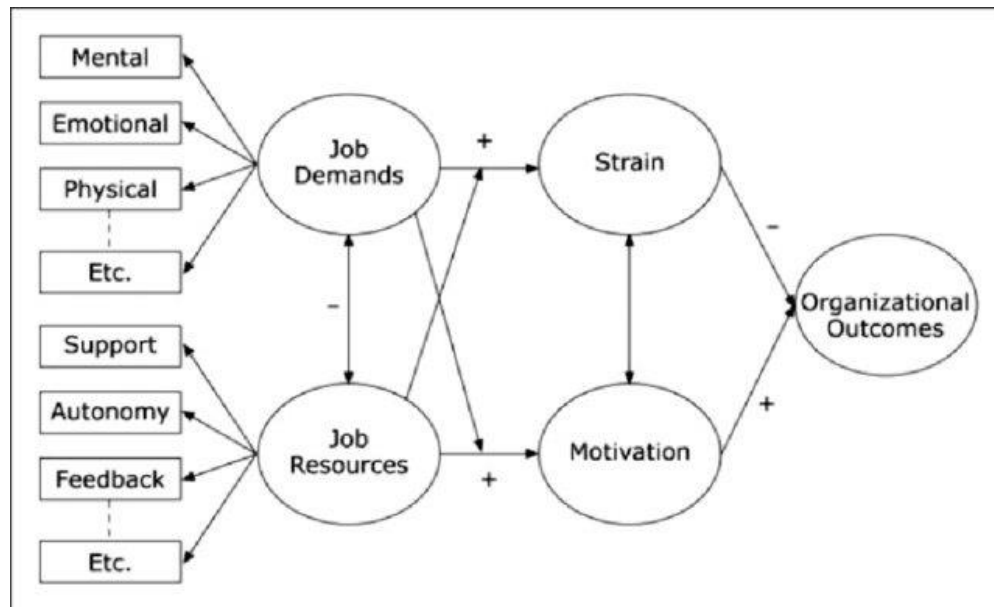
Also, used in the evolution of the Bakker and Demerouti job-demands theory was effort-reward theory. Effort-reward theory, first introduced by Johannes Siegrist, is a theoretical model of a psychosocial work environment with adverse effects on health and well-being that focuses on a mismatch between high efforts spent and low rewards received at work (Ren et al., 2019). The effort-reward imbalance model, like the demands-control theory, is also criticized, with autonomy not being incorporated, but instead focusing on the most important resources being salary, esteem reward, and status

control (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Concurrently, Bakker and Demerouti also challenged whether either of the two theories were applicable to any job position or whether in certain occupations other combinations of demands and (lack of) resources than the ones incorporated in the models may be responsible for employee well-being. These earlier theories, although producing valuable insights to what influences employee wellbeing, did not consider stress and motivation collaboratively, which is remedied in the job demand-resource theory (Chen and Cooper, 2014). Demand-control theory and effort-reward theory therefore did not offer a clear picture of all facets of stress in the workplace, leading to the birth of the JD-R theory.

The JD-R theory has come to be one of the most popular and widely published frameworks for understanding employee health and performance (Granziera et al., 2021). Job demands-resources theory was introduced in 2001 to identify antecedents of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). The JD-R model is applicable to various occupational settings in order to detect consequences of specific work environments on employee well-being and employee performance (Lesener et al., 2019). This is a reason for using JDR in this research study. This study seeks to understand possible antecedents for the resiliency and post-traumatic growth presented in some teachers during the time of COVID-19. The following model of job demands resource theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007, as cited in Van Droogenbroeck, F. & Spruyt, B., 2016) illustrates where there are optimal work conditions (high resources - motivations and low or average demands -strain) and when work conditions are at the lowest (high demands and low resources). This is a simple visual, however, when thinking about expectations and demands being placed on teachers, it may serve as a catalyst for thoughts about how to reduce demands and

increase resources for optimal teacher performance.



Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The job demands-resource model above shows basic job demands and resources. For best results, when job demands are low and job resources are high, leading to low strain and high motivation, the organizational outcomes are optimal. For example, if teachers can choose their curriculum without feeling as though they are being coerced and are allowed to formatively assess students along the way, somewhat leading their teaching (high resources/low demands) there could be positive effects for the teachers. However, if forced to ‘choose’ a curriculum with specific demands within the curriculum and from administration (low resources/high/demands), there could be negative effects on the teachers.

### Resilience Theory

In the field of developmental psychopathology, it (resilience) refers to the ability to cope with challenges and threats while maintaining an internal and integrated sense of self (Garmezy & Masten, 1986, as cited in Ledesma, 2014). COVID-19 has been a



substantial challenge and threat to teachers today. While some teachers succumbed to the challenges, even leaving employment as classroom teachers, others did not and actually thrived in the conditions of COVID-19. Many have been able to cope with the challenges, showing resilience despite the increased demands of their job. Resilience has been a key in the posttraumatic growth exhibited by some teachers during COVID-19.

As a pioneer in research on resilience, Norman Garmezy worked with others in the field to produce the earliest examples of efforts to stress the importance of examining protective factors in “at-risk” populations, and they laid the groundwork for future work in the area of resilience (Cicchetti & Garmezy 1993). Michael Rutter, a protégé of Garmezy and leader in child and adolescent psychiatry, defined resilience as, “An interactive concept that is concerned with the combination of serious risk experiences and a relatively positive psychological outcome despite those experiences” (Rutter, 2006, as cited in Shean, 2015). A great deal of groundbreaking work has been done by Rutter to show that resilience cannot be predicted by a single variable and that patterns of coping under stress will vary over the life span (Rutter, 2006, as cited in Unger et al., 2013). In line with this thinking, resiliency from effects COVID-19 (a single variable) could not be predicted. Resiliency seems to develop over a lifetime of learning how to deal with adversarial situations productively.

Resilience theory seeks to explore commonalities of individuals who are successful, despite difficult situations, and how others can develop similar characteristics, so they, too can be successful (Easterly and Myers, 2017). In the midst of a global pandemic, there are individuals that are navigating the waters of COVID-19 better than others. Resilience theory investigates the positive factors that attribute to elasticity after adversity. COVID-19 has had a traumatic effect on the lives of many people. However,

the ways in which people choose to react to adversity makes all the difference. Some have difficulty in recovering and others work through the difficulties using resilience.

The American Psychological Association defines resilience as the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands (n.d.). This is a widely accepted definition. However, there have been studies exploring resilience across different disciplines, with each discipline configuring a definition fitting to their tenets. Social sciences are no different, defining resilience as the ability to recover from negative life experiences and become stronger while overcoming them (Henderson & Milstein, 1996, as cited by Ledesma, 2014). This definition is fitting when discussing education and educators in the time of COVID.

The pandemic has forever altered the way educators and education is viewed across the United States. This collective experience has changed us as human beings and has dramatically altered the way we teach and learn. Many of these changes, both good and bad, will likely impact K–12 education for years to come (National Education Association, 2021).

The personal resource of resilience is essential for growth in adversity. Many who experience trauma—such as being diagnosed with a chronic or terminal illness, losing a loved one, or experiencing sexual assault—not only show incredible resilience but thrive in the aftermath of the traumatic event (Kaufman, 2020). The trauma in this case is the impact of COVID-19. The adversity faced by educators came from multiple directions - government mandates, school district administration mandates and practices, parent concerns, and student issues related to learning and social interaction. Mandates passed down from county and state governments

required teachers to switch from in-person learning to that of a virtual world found teachers meandering through platforms from which they had not previously experienced. This was a quick change, in a matter of days, for this complete transition. This shift alone was a major challenge for teachers, as was the following month and a half when many teachers taught remotely for the first time regardless of grade level or content area, while also living in a pandemic (Leech et al., 2020). As teachers were still learning platforms, many were expected to present lessons from a distance that were just as engaging as in-person lessons. Coronavirus (Covid-19) presented a new challenge for teachers, another detour that must show rigor and resilience in teachers and stakeholders for the benefit of children's educational success (Cromer, 2020).

A survey by the American Institutes for Research even posited that it is possible that fulfilling the expectation for weekly family outreach placed a larger burden on teachers in high-poverty and rural areas, as establishing and maintaining teacher-family communication during distance learning may require more time and coordination in contexts where access to technology is limited (Hodgman, 2021). Parents' expectations were also weighing on teachers, as they were asking teachers how to work components of the online platforms that the teachers themselves had not yet learned completely. Students that participated in the virtual meetings expected that teachers would create interesting lessons online, oftentimes leaving the virtual meetings when they were no longer wanting to engage in school. Amidst all the expectations from others, teachers were to remain stoic and to treat their online audiences as if nothing was out of the ordinary. All of this coupled with personal adversity brought teachers at times to tears, doubting their own competencies.

These mounting factors come into play when teacher resilience is in question.

How can organizations and administrators provide extra support in times of trauma and adversity for those on the frontline of education? How will teachers become more resilient? Teachers will be more resilient when they are provided the opportunity to access the support that they truly need. The deeper a teacher's resiliency reserves, the greater protection that professional has from the symptoms of burnout. Without resiliency, the result [of teacher stress] is that many talented men and women with high expectations of achievement are dispirited and disillusioned, furthermore, some leave the profession, but others stay and are plagued by a multitude of physical, emotional and behavioral stress-related manifestations (Milstein and Golaszewski, 1985, as cited in Travers & Cooper, 1995).

#### Post-Traumatic Growth

COVID-19 has challenged teachers; however, some have been able to tread through the unknown waters and come out on the other side showing growth and positivity. It is important to highlight possibilities for this phenomenon and provide suggestions to assist other teachers in following the process of recognizing their ability for post-traumatic growth. The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) (Appendix B) measures the extent to which survivors of traumatic events perceive personal benefits, including changes in perceptions of self, relationships with others, and philosophy of life, accruing from their attempts to cope with trauma and its aftermath (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Using this instrument can assist teachers in seeing where they were able to overcome and go beyond in not only their professional lives, but also their personal lives. By acknowledging and celebrating the achievements that have been made in the face of a global pandemic, teachers are able to see positive attributes of the situation into which they were suddenly thrust.

Post-traumatic growth has been evidenced in some of the most horrific events.

We see this in people who have endured war, natural disasters, bereavement, job loss and economic stress, serious illnesses and injuries (Tedeschi, 2020). Post-traumatic growth focuses on positive psychology to explore how some people can go beyond and even thrive in adversarial conditions. The latest adversity event, COVID-19 pandemic, has slowed down or put stops to many organization processes for several months, forcing learning institutions to be closed and to change their mode of teaching (Dewi-Izzwi et al., 2020). Due to closures, teachers pivoted and were able to provide both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. This was something many educators had not experienced, thus adding another stressor upon already stressed teachers.

With the desire to reach every student, teachers took on the role of student once again, delving into virtual platforms that would enable them to engage students as much as possible in this alternate learning dimension. According to Jia Wang, an adjunct professor at the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, “COVID-19 changed the lives of K–12 students and teachers. They went through a totally intensified amount of worry and fear about the disease, about the impact on their family and finances, [and] on themselves, while the pandemic forced teachers and schools to suddenly incorporate online learning and teaching” (McDonald, 2022). Added to the daily professional and personal expectations, some found the stress to be too much, buckling under the pressure, some even leaving the profession. Others, however, were able to take the opportunity as a challenge. It is these teachers that are standouts in the group. The post-disaster mental health literature and trauma research have shown that adverse effects on psychological health do not always occur and that traumatic experiences can even lead to positive emotional states and growth (Finstad et

al., 2021). Investigating how they were able to maintain positivity during this dark time will help administrators, as well as other teachers, to work towards building that positivity, sparking post-traumatic or adversarial growth.

#### Support During COVID-19 and Beyond

Educators have been quietly walking away from the profession for years prior to COVID 19 because of poor compensation and lack of respect, autonomy and support (Strauss, 2021). For years, teachers have had little to no voice in the decisions made that impact them, therefore demoralizing the teaching profession and the people that have dedicated their lives to education. Lack of support brings to light negative aspects of the profession and highlights the discouraging environment teachers endure.

In 2015, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Badass Teachers Association (BATs) conducted a survey of teachers and school staff on the quality of their work life in response to concerns regarding work stress that educators had reported to BATs. The results indicated major sources of stress as uncertain job expectations, negative portrayals of educators in the media, adoption of new initiatives without proper training, as well as time constraints, including lack of time to use the restroom at work, mandated curricula, large class sizes, harassment, and violence at school (American Federation of Teachers, 2017). Teachers are drowning in stress and are in dire need of support. Some have given up on getting the support they so desperately need.

COVID-19 has exacerbated the issue of mental health among students; however, teachers are frontline players that also need support with their mental health also (DeWitt, 2020). Teacher stress levels skyrocketed as they pivoted to teaching online, in socially distanced classrooms, or both at the same time (Will, 2021). Self-care is touted as the solution to the impact of a global pandemic. An article entitled *Teachers Are Not*

*Ok, Even Though We Need Them to Be* (Will, 2021) outlines stress that educators are under, noting that the only solutions teachers are presented are “self-care”, with the responsibility of finding time for themselves becoming another stress inducing issue (Slade, 2021). Stress from changing to online teaching overnight and teaching in socially distanced classrooms to trying to engage students while they have their choice of activities at home were some of the challenges facing teachers. When “self-care” becomes another ‘thing’ teachers have to do, it does not support teachers.

As teachers transitioned back into schools in the fall of 2021, “self-care” was still a buzz word. Yet, no true support of “self-care” was revealed. School systems can no longer afford to pay lip service to the importance of well-being or offer fragmentary programs or initiatives. Well-being must become an integral part of what they do (Rebora, 2022). The usual expectations teachers have dealt with for many years were still part of their lives, along with COVID protocols, providing a treatment for ‘learning loss’, and the assumption teachers were ready to also provide social-emotional learning and support for students while restoring the world of education from the impact of the pandemic. Although those in the education sphere have engaged in a great deal of discussion about the best way to provide social and emotional supports to students during and after the pandemic, it is essential that the social and emotional needs of educators are also part of the conversation, especially since educators are often the individuals most likely to provide initial supports to students (Ferren, 2021).

With teachers at the helm to ensure the initiatives were successful and in hopes of bringing back the feeling of a ‘normal’ school year, students were participating in new, fun activities aimed at engagement. Not only were teachers responsible for planning and presenting academic subjects, but they were also addressing the social and emotional

needs of students, something many teachers are not equipped to do. However, on top of grappling with how to deal with the various needs of students, teachers revealed their workload had increased considerably since returning to the classroom and have attributed their levels of burnout to work expectations in place that are perceived as unsustainable (Sokal et al., 2021). With limited research available on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching, the current findings elucidate which stressors are most proximal to burnout (COVID-19 related anxiety, anxiety about teaching demands, parent communication, and administrative support), and thus, what areas schools, districts, and researchers need to attend to in order to maintain the critical teaching workforce (Pressley, 2021). Addressing teacher psychological needs should be thought of as multidimensional – no single dimension (either the intrapersonal, interpersonal or organizational) alone will be sufficient. Principals should expect to work both one-on-one as well as collectively with teachers to address school working conditions which support their psychological needs as learners (Ford et al., 2019). A 2019 study by Mind Share Partners found that even before the pandemic, six in 10 employees had experienced symptoms of mental illness in the past year, but most never told anyone at work about it (Gewertz, 2021).

School leaders must adjust their expectations of teachers considering COVID-19 protocols (Phillips, 2020). Providing support for teachers will require asking some difficult questions and accepting the answers given. The perception one has is his or her reality. Courage must be exhibited by administration to get the answers they need but may not truly desire. Workshops where teacher participants are allowed free reign of their feelings along with the chance to offer solutions to educational institutions and their representatives is one suggestion, among several offered by Farber (1991) still could be effective in supporting teachers through this time of uncertainty. Farber



created questions to ask of participants for both teachers and administrators that supplied insight into school life as perceived by teachers (Appendix C).

These questions along with awareness and true understanding of stress and burnout types, symptoms and strategies for supporting teachers can go a long way, at least if only showing that the administration recognizes there is an issue and is willing to investigate it more and learn how to better help teachers. Acknowledgement of stress and burnout is not enough. Administrators must do something to support and foster resiliency among their teachers.

### Summary

Expanded research is needed to further understand impact of stress and burnout after COVID-19 on educators and how to support teachers in resiliency, as well as how to facilitate post-traumatic or adversarial growth. The identification of the characteristics of people that have experienced growth after trauma is essential to developing a protocol for assisting teachers discover their sources of strength and to build resilience. The issues that educators face that cause stress and burnout have a long history in the United States, COVID-19 is simply an addition to that long list of stressors. Even though some teachers have been resilient with the ever-changing policies and procedures involving the pandemic, others have thrived. Investigation into this phenomenon will help administrators to better provide support for those in their charge. Beyond the current research, implications for reculturing schools is imperative. The schools prior to COVID are not the same ones two years ago. The culture of a school will determine how successful strategies were in building resilience among teachers and foster posttraumatic growth. This study provides a voice to teachers that have proven it is possible to go through trauma and despite the trials, come out on the other side stronger and more resilient. The study has the potential to create lines for open dialogue for other teachers

as to how they themselves can become more resilient and thrive. The study contributes to the depth of knowledge administrators need for ways to acknowledge the struggles of teachers with trauma and support teachers in their adversarial growth and resilience.

## CHAPTER III: METHOD

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study regarding the impact of stress and corresponding burnout of educators due to COVID-19 as well as how resiliency is used for adversarial growth. This chapter establishes a focus for research and implications for use of the information gained as a result of the investigation. Using surveys, interviews, and previous research on teacher stress and adversarial growth will allow the researcher to delve into how educators suffer burnout from the stress of COVID-19 as well as how some teachers are able to grow in the face of trauma. This information can then be used to assist educators in overcoming the consequences of working during a pandemic alongside the stressors faced by educators regularly, both in their professional and personal lives.

### Research Focus

The research focus for this study was an investigation of the resiliency and post-traumatic growth of educators during and post COVID-19. This study explored what made the difference in the lives of these people and others who were less resilient in these times. The research questions were developed out of the desire to assist not only the educators to share their stories in hopes of helping others, but also to inspire teachers to work at building stronger relationships with students in adverse situations. The study identifies traits or characteristics that allowed the educators to move forward and put any trauma incurred in respect to COVID-19 behind them. Finally, post-traumatic growth was

investigated, as there are people that were able to not only overcome after the trauma, but also to grow and thrive after that experience. Identification of the traits and characteristics is important because this may improve the lives of others, both educators and students.

#### Research Questions

RQ1: What are perceived contributing factors of stress and burnout among educators relative to their experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic, from March 2020 to present, from the perspective of classroom teachers?

RQ2: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how are stressors pre-COVID-19 similar to or different from post-COVID-19 stressors?

RQ3: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how have they developed resilience to combat stress and burnout during the global pandemic and the aftermath?

RQ4: From their perspective, what resources would benefit classroom teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth?

#### Action Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative research techniques were appropriate because those techniques allows research around how people experience aspects of their lives, how individuals or groups behave, how organizations function, and how interactions shape relationships (Teherani et al., 2016).

Phenomenology was the primary method for data collection, specifically participant interviews, and surveys. When researching the human experience this approach is very much applicable (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). The interpretive phenomenological analysis methodology allowed the researcher to deeper examine the lived experiences of the participants in the study. Job-demands-resource (JD-R) theory, resilience theory, and post-traumatic growth theory were used as a foundation for determining support and relevance for this current research.

Job-Demands-Resource theory model is a theoretical framework that tries to integrate two independent research traditions: the stress research tradition and the motivation research tradition (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). The study was an investigation of stress-inducing and motivating factors as determined by educators during COVID-19. The job demands and resources of educators were explored and used to help determine avenues for assistance from administrators to better support their teachers. While subjective in nature due to the fact that interviews were used to gain insight as to what the educators personally feel are demands that are stress-inducing or causes of burnout, as well as resources that helped to motivate them and increase the likelihood, they would continue employment as an educator. This idea of motivation leads to resilience, another key theory in this study.

With its emphasis on competence despite exposure to adversity, the concept of resilience has long been attractive to applied practitioners seeking to promote strength in vulnerable individuals, groups, and societies (Yates et al., 2015). Resilience theory investigates the adversity faced by people and highlights how they were able to overcome and even thrive in challenging times in their lives. Adversity is somewhat subjective. What is an adversity to one person may not be to another. However, in the case of

COVID-19, there was widespread adversity among many populations. The study was designed to focus on teachers and designed to probe into the work environment as perceived by the participants and seek to see the positive ways that they were able to be influenced in the face of adversity. During the interviews, negative experiences were shared as well, potentially indicating signs of stress or burnout. Participants were able to elaborate on their answers, furthering insight of post traumatic growth.

### Limitations

One limitation of this study was that the study participants self-reported their lived experiences and perceptions, therefore there is some subjectivity. The findings of the study rely on the honesty of the participants. Also, there is the idea that perspective is reality, which could be influenced by the environment in which one lives. Traumagenic is a label for a type of environment that can create traumatic stress reactions. The environment activates real physical, emotional and psychological change that becomes enduring characteristics in the individual (Arizona Trauma Institute, 2019). If an individual perceives the environment they are in as traumagenic, then that would present a limitation also. The perspective they have, however, will be his, her, or their truth.

Another limitation was that the participants may have been hesitant to share personal details of their trauma experience with the researcher, therefore limiting not only the interview responses, but the pool of participants. Participants were sometimes aversive to verbalizing the nature of their trauma during the interview process, perhaps not being completely transparent. In addition to intentionally not sharing, some who could be struggling with the effects of long COVID may have problems with attention, memory, and executive function (Fong, 2022). They could still unknowingly be in an altered state, answering questions.

People may view their experiences as resilience, where others may not, presenting a limitation due to subjectivity. However, I considered that with each interview, people are telling their truths and they are allowing me inside their personal space and sharing their vulnerabilities and resilience. “How people tell their stories is a study of resilience,” said Aimee J. Palumbo, an assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at Temple University’s College of Public Health. “And we have to consider how this has impacted everyone different from ourselves by acknowledging everyone’s experience” (Wellington, 2021). I acknowledged and honored the truth each person shared throughout the course of the study.

Finally, although COVID-19 as a medical condition has been researched widely, there is still information that is unknown as to the effects on the mental and emotional state of humans post-COVID. Although the intensity of the pandemic seems to be in remission, as the world has moved to what many would consider ‘normal’ in their world, it is important to note that information can still be confusing, due to variants not only in the disease itself, but also in the research of the disease. With different strands of the illness coming to light, such as omicron, delta, and alpha, as well as any others on the forefront, it is difficult to know what effects there could potentially be on participants.

#### Population and Context

The target population for this research was educators having been classroom teachers before, during, and after COVID-19 meaning teachers that were teaching from 2019 to present. While initially using this criterion sampling, It was important to pose initial criterion questions to include gender, race and ethnicity, family status, years of teaching experience, and teaching level, as well as questions from the Brief Resilient Coping Scale (BRCS) (Appendix D) developed by Sinclaire and Wallston in 2004 to

determine if a participant felt his/her/their lived experience brought out resilience during the situation and if he/she/they actually thrived in the experience. Educators self-reported as having been impacted due to COVID-19 and were screened for resiliency using the BRCS portion of the initial criterion questions.

Educators many times engage in professional development to learn how to combat the effects of trauma with students. What is usually not considered is that the very people receiving training to help students may be dealing with trauma as an impact of the pandemic. However, they seem to be able to put aside said trauma and continue to overcome the stress or fight back against burnout that is due to this trauma. These educators go unnoticed, while the media focuses on the overwhelming stress and burnout others are enduring. There is much discussion of those that could no longer handle the stress and are taking drastic measures like giving up on their profession. On the contrary, there is little to no focus on educators that are overcoming and even thriving during the pandemic. There never seems to be a question of how they did it. How were they impacted? How did they move on? Where did their strength and resilience come from? How did they put these events behind them to build the lives they have today?

Teachers were chosen as the preferred participants of this study because they serve our youngest students and have challenging experiences in the classroom. The home lives of students have been disrupted and they already bring emotional baggage to school. They could bring and project their negative feelings from home into the classroom. Individuals that sometimes project what they feel, leading to an environment that is less than positive for learning. Projection is the mental process by which people attribute to others what is in their own minds. For example, individuals who are in a self-critical state, consciously or unconsciously, may think that other people are critical



of them (McWilliams, 2020). COVID-19 changed lives.

It would be optimal for the school environment to be a safe place for students. Being able to provide a way to help these teachers overcome adversity will in turn help younger students to have a mentally healthy, less stressed- and burned-out teacher in their classrooms. The impact of the study on students could be positive, as they have a positive role model in their midst daily. This research may well change the future of children with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) due to their exposure to living through a pandemic. Negative projections could be replaced with positive ones. If they see their teachers as a positive light in dark times, they too will be able to envision a bright future. Children need this light.

#### Data Collection Procedures

I began recruitment for study participants with a mass invitation to teachers in my previous district to complete a survey that includes criterion-based questions about race and ethnicity, gender, years of teaching experience as well as the Brief Resilient Coping Scale (Appendix C) (Sinclair and Wallston, 2004). Information from this scale enabled me to narrow down a pool of participants for the study. Scores on this scale range from 4-20, with scores of 14-20 showing the likelihood of being highly resilient people. Those with scores falling between 14 and 20 were invited to participate in interviews.

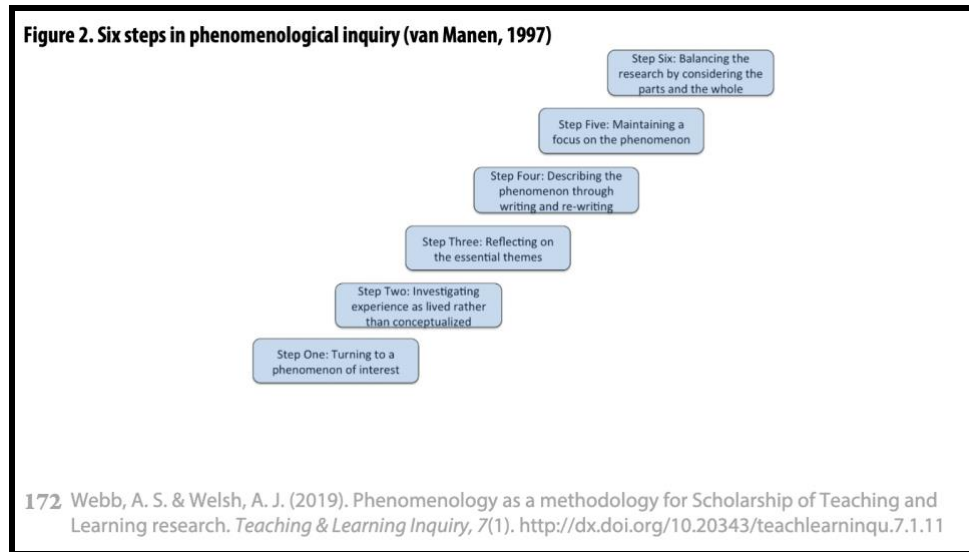
Once individuals qualified for the study and agreed to participate, I provided the questions prior to the actual interview along with various ways participants could share their anecdotes. This helped participants to be better prepared for the conversation during the interview. Some may have felt more comfortable with digitally sharing their lived experiences based on the questions while others may have chosen to write down their thoughts in narrative form, while others still may have prepared a photo journal to

refer to as the actual interview occurs. In these phenomenological interviews, I moved from simply observing to engaging in dialogue with the participants and finally reflecting (Munhall & Oiler-Boyd, 1993).

After garnering approval from twenty participants, I incorporated interview questions I revised (Appendix E) to fit this context from Farber's (1991) interview question list (Appendix C) in his book, *Crisis in Education: Stress and Burnout in the American Teacher*. Farber's questions are more generalized, so I used those questions as a model from which to create my questions, concurrently adding questions that focus on the events that were impacted due to COVID-19 in the lives of each person. Also, there were questions about how the individual perceived they were able to overcome and continue teaching and thriving during the pandemic. After completing the questionnaire and compiling the results, I reached out to each participant, asking if a face-to-face meeting or video conference was more convenient for discussing their answers. This was also where I gained insight into each personal story of their COVID-19 experience.

After conducting the interviews, using in vivo coding, I filtered the ways in which resilience methods each participant attributed to helping them to thrive in the classroom during a pandemic. I looked for common threads and coded the interview of each of the participants in their journey to productivity and success as an educator despite COVID-19 or other endured trauma. I looked for why or how he, she or they were able to overcome the trauma of COVID-19 in his, her, or their life and classroom. I used Van Manen's Six Steps in Phenomenological Inquiry (illustration below) to help me analyze data collected. These steps were (1) turning to a phenomenon of interest; (2) investigating experience as lived rather than conceptualized; (3) reflecting on the essential themes; (4) describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting; (5)

maintaining a focus on the phenomenon; and (6) balancing the research by considering the parts and the whole (Van Manen, 1997, as cited in Webb & Welch, 2019).



Using this information, I returned to the participants to get more clarification of the positive influences or events that changed the trajectory of their lives. This “member checking” increased the validity of the study as well as provide an avenue to verify with participants an accurate representation of the results of their interviews. I explored what their strategies were so they could be replicated and taught to other teachers still struggling with the stress and burnout due to COVID-19. These participants were the front-line responders to the negative impact of the pandemic on children. By identifying a source of strength and inspiration from their point of view, other teachers could be mentored on how to overcome in the face of adversity. This research provides hope and a way for administrators to better support teachers that are full of stress or suffering from burnout. This research could also offer insight into how administrators can possibly curb the expected ‘mass exodus’ of teachers in their schools. This research will add to the body of research of each of the three theories, job-demands theory, resilience theory, and post-traumatic growth theory and research about teachers during and post COVID-19, a

new research area that is growing in the areas of education, psychology, and trauma, to name a few.

### Ethical Considerations

When considering ethicality, we must look at several aspects – value, scientific validity, fair participant selection, informed consent, and respect for enrolled participants (Gelling & Munn-Giddings, 2011). In terms of value, this extends beyond basic research. The value lies in the lives of educators impacted by trauma due to COVID-19. This research has the potential of assisting educators that are considering or on the verge of leaving their career. We need to continue growing our profession. This research could also enlighten administrators at all levels and places with guidance on how to better support teachers who are in their charge.

Adherence to scientific validity took the form of methodically administering the surveys and interviews as well as carefully disaggregating data and analyzing data, as to not skew any of the data that may lead to the desecration of the research results. Because the participants had an opportunity to choose to become a part of this action research, there was fair participant selection. No participant decided to withdraw from the project, so there was no need to eliminate his, her, or their previously provided interviews, surveys, etc. from study. Finally, every part of the research was confidential, and participants had access to overall results at the end of the project. They were informed of possible risks and benefits from their participation and were given the opportunity to withdraw at any time from the project. Ethical considerations were taken and are of great importance, especially when involving the privacy of teachers and the information they freely share about their experiences in their buildings during the pandemic.

### Researcher Positionality

My childhood home was chaotic and unpredictable with adverse childhood experiences (ACE) being a norm. With daily emotional, verbal, and physical abuse, there were plenty of opportunities to project my emotions onto others in my classroom. Rather than transferring my emotions, I retreated into myself and avoided contact with many people. Children present their trauma differently, possibly from one day to the next. Because students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures, teachers are not always able to correctly predict the emotions that students bring into the classrooms with them each day. My personal experiences with adversity as a child and adult were catalysts for my research.

As an elementary educator that was impacted by COVID-19 personally and professionally, I will speak from experience with the trauma associated with this pandemic. I have been able to keep the pressures many are feeling in their classrooms minimal and have thrived during this uncertain time. I have reflected on the impact of COVID on my own life and have questioned my ability to continue, almost as “normal” when others were so gravely impacted. I have questioned what is in me that enables me to do this. Listening daily to others’ conversations constantly discussing learning loss, COVID trauma, and educator stress and burnout, I wonder about others like myself. Now, the reflecting educator becomes the researcher, seeking out others that may shed more light on the phenomenon. Examining myself as a researcher and understanding any personal biases is essential.

As an educator, I do not feel as though I have been severely stressed or have experienced burnout as a result of COVID-19. I did change jobs during this pandemic upheaval and changing jobs can be stressful. In July 2019 I moved from a district I had been with for 20 years and became an administrator in a neighboring district.

Unfortunately, shortly thereafter, the state ruled that the district would consolidate with another district and my administrative job would not transfer to the newly merged school district. As the main source of income for my family, the stress of this situation was overwhelming. I was able to secure a position in a much larger district, however it was back to the classroom. Although I was nervous about the move and returning to the classroom, I looked at the change as an opportunity for professional growth, hoping for advancement and changing my perspective from one of stress to one of accepting a challenge. Professional situations like this have impacted my biases over the past.

Explicit or implicit, my biases may have a greater impact on my feelings about COVID-19 than I originally thought. It does make a difference. For instance, I have a tendency to not give a ‘pass’ to others because I refer back to the hardships I survived in my abusive childhood, going on to become a three-time college graduate, while working full-time, and being both a wife of a blind man and mother of two children. Along with these challenges, four months after the unexpected death of my husband, the pandemic began. Fall of 2020 I began my doctoral journey. I struggle with excuses for why people cannot seem to overcome whatever feat is before them due to my journey and my resiliency. I suffer from “if I can do it, you can do it” too often and I need to be aware of that bias in my personal and professional lives.

The way I maintained an unbiased interviewer’s mind was by placing judgment on neither the educator nor the source of the trauma. The educator (participant) is simply a victim of circumstance. The traumatic events that shaped this time in their lives were, hopefully, coming to a close. They now may be facing the repercussions of previous decisions, much like I experienced. By investigating other educators that have been able to overcome stress and thwart burnout, I am able to pinpoint how they did it

and this study will share that information. I also have been able to gain knowledge about teachers that thrived with adversarial or post-traumatic growth. These stories of these educators could inspire others. What could they pass on that may help other educators to move on with their lives and not dwell on the trauma due to COVID-19? What were things that helped them to focus on the good and keep a positive mentality? How were they able to squelch negativity and instead grow either personally, professionally, or both during such trying times?

A portion of Richard Milner IV questions were applied. For example, the questions of “In what ways do my research participants’ racial and cultural backgrounds influence how they experience the world? How do I know?” and “In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my research, and how I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences? How do I know?” are two of the focus questions. The findings related to these questions will be included in chapter 4, as they are important to better understanding the lived experiences of teachers.

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness, a combination of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability, is pertinent to qualitative action research (Connelly, 2016). The credibility of this research was established through methodological triangulation of surveys in the form of online questionnaires, interviews, and scholarly research with connections to resilience, job demands-resources, and post-traumatic growth. Using interviews for data collection, I gained insight from any underlying phenomena I may not have previously been aware of involving the participants or their experiences. This research is applicable to other areas involving adults that have overcome adversities to become productive and

successful.

Other service professions such as doctors, nurses, social workers, or psychologists may also benefit from this research. These are people that may be able to make a positive impact on the people they serve by reflecting on how they were able to conquer influences of COVID-19. This transferability will help others to see that this research can have alternate facets concerning participants. Confirmability is created by providing an organized route of data analysis, confirming rationale for decisions I made as a researcher. It may be the decision to include additional questions that may evolve during the participant interviews. This reliable research could be replicated with educators of different levels. Finally, dependability was established with the Institutional Review Board at the University of Louisville reviewing the study design.

#### Summary

This chapter discussed phenomenology as the main research methodology in this qualitative action research project. One focus of this chapter was how to effectively administer questions while recognizing the importance of the participants as human beings. The questions presented in the survey are personal in nature and may be difficult for people to discuss. This can also be viewed as a limitation to the research. Chapter 3 examines the researcher's role, an educator impacted by COVID-19, as well as gives insight to what is being asked of other educators impacted by the pandemic, causing stress and burnout. Moving beyond simply observing participants, chapter 3 discusses how surveys and interviews were used to glean information from participants about their experiences personally and professionally, as well as how they were able to overcome and thrive despite the upheaval in their lives. I looked for connections between the participants to gain greater understanding of how to help other teachers to follow a



similar trajectory in defeating the effects of COVID-19 to become or continue to be productive, successful educators. The following chapter presents the results of the surveys and interviews. Data analysis will also be included and the final chapter of the study will include implications and recommendations.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to report the perceptions about the amount of stress, burnout, and post-traumatic growth of teachers in a rural area in the time of before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter details the findings of this phenomenological study to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are contributing factors of stress and burnout among educators relative to their experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic, from March 2020 to present, from the perspective of classroom teachers?

RQ2: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how are stressors pre-COVID-19 similar to or different from post-COVID-19 stressors?

RQ3: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how have they developed resilience to combat stress and burnout during the global pandemic and the aftermath?

RQ4: From their perspective, what resources, as related to stress and burnout, would benefit classroom teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth?

In chapter four I will first discuss researcher positionality, provide a profile of each participant, a review of how data was coded, and finally how the findings from the data analysis aligns with each of the research questions in the study.

### Theoretical Framework Alignment

Phenomenology was the primary method for collecting data via semi-structured interviews. The human experience is the basis for this research and the perceptions of teachers is certainly fitting. Delving deeper into their lived experiences allowed me to

gain valuable insight into their true, unapologetic thoughts and feelings. Without judgement and criticism, teachers gave their honest opinions and perceptions. Use of open-ended questions gave the participants an opportunity to go beyond a basic answer and to reach into their hearts and minds for their truths. They were able to reflect on their experiences and perceptions. In the interviews teachers were found to be extremely thoughtful and articulate. They were also aware of sensitivity of others, although they were often feeling forgotten themselves.

Phenomenology offers the researcher the advantage of not only interacting through observations, but also through dialogue. The conversations within the interviews were just as valuable as the answers to the prepared questions. The interpretative analysis was a comfort to the participants, helping them to feel comfortable in sharing their innermost thoughts and perceptions. Reflection of participants was also evident during interviews. This reflectivity enables the researchers to be an important component in the process of research. Use of phenomenology allows the participant reflects, so does the researcher, which is instrumental in qualitative research.

#### Researcher Positionality

When one is impacted by trauma, I feel as though they may look to others who may have similar experiences with whom to connect. This is what initially led me to this study. My personal experiences with trauma as well as living through a pandemic were what drove my research. A childhood riddled with abuse, a military dependent with constant uprooting of my life, miscarriages, and the deaths of my husband and my father, I have endured significant trauma. I recognize there are others having been through similar experiences and even more traumatic ones. However, I often think about how it is that some people go through trauma, label themselves as victims, and spiral into a

world of constant self-pity, always looking for others to support and coddle them while some people take the trauma and instead learn and grow from their experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic was one such traumatic experience.

As I lived in a world that was shutting down due to the virus, it became apparent that teaching as I had known it would cease. This was a trying time for many teachers, as they felt overwhelmed with many either contemplating or actually quitting the profession completely. Some became victims of the virus, not only physically, but mentally. They seemed to allow the virus to dictate their lives completely, living in complete fear. Consciously, I could not become a victim of circumstances and lean into my depression, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but instead sought avenues to strengthen myself both mentally and physically, while taking on the task of supporting my students and families as a teacher.

I chose to exercise, eat healthy, and spend time with family and pets during the pandemic. I sought more mentally stimulating activities such as learning new things, which excites and intrigues me. I began learning new technology for teaching my students, enrolled my dogs in obedience classes, went through the remodeling of my home after the passing of my husband, and began working on my doctorate. It was in the beginning of my doctoral program when it really came to light what I wanted to research, that being, what drove people to thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic amid increased stress due to job demands when burnout was common. I also wanted to investigate how to help administrators support teachers in resiliency and adversarial growth. This is important to me, not only as a teacher, but also as an aspiring administrator.

There are many facets to my profession as a teacher, all of which were under extreme pressure during COVID-19. There was not only stress from trying to do the

general job of teaching, but so many other things, such as learning new technology and being expected to teach it to families before we had learned it ourselves, and fostering caring relationships with students and families. Throughout this time, it was as if teachers were expected to be ‘on’ all the time, meeting the needs of those they serve. However, I believe that it was often ignored by administrators during this time of crisis that teachers had families and personal responsibilities, too. This could have been due to increased responsibilities leading to more stress on administrators from the district and state levels, but no matter the source, it still occurred. When the camera was off, some teachers were expected to complete extensive paperwork, create videos and slideshows, and provide much emotional support for those outside of their households by connecting through online apps or through phone calls, all the while administrators were promoting self-care, wellness, and the need for teachers to keep students engaged and learning at high levels to reach proficiency.

Because I have the ambition of becoming a building administrator one day, I feel it is essential to support teachers in a genuine way. Although academics is important, emotional intelligence is as well. I believe that if I can truly understand what it is that helps teachers to feel supported and encouraged that I will be better able to serve my staff in the future, leading to my staff supporting students, building a strong climate and culture in the building and within my school community. I feel that by gaining insight about what is perceived as factors of stress and burnout for teachers, how teachers develop resiliency and thrive, and what teachers are saying they need as resources of support from administrators, then I will be able to better serve my school, not only in the role of an administrator, but also in my current role as a classroom teacher. Driven by my curiosity, I began examining myself first.

Personally, I have a will that is undying and an intrinsic burning to thrive. I reminisce about traumatic events I have experienced and go back to the idea that I have persevered through the event and learned from it, building resiliency. Each time something happened that I would later look back on and realize was a traumatic event, I was able to have insight as to how I had overcome the situation and somehow came out better and stronger on the other side. How can I help others to learn how to do the same and grow and thrive after traumatic events? It is my mission to explore other teachers and look for commonalities that help to answer my questions so that I can be a positive influence for and supporter of teachers in my building.

#### Participant Profiles

The 12 participants in this study were teachers in central Kentucky, employed at a small, rural district before, during, and post COVID-19. The participants ranged in age from late 20s to mid-50s. A districtwide net was cast to engage participants in the study these 12 teachers chose to participate by returning consent forms and scheduling an interview time. The chart that follows provides a demographic profile of the subjects with their age, years of experience, and education level. To protect anonymity, the ages and years of experience of teachers are divided as follows: 25-40 years of age and 41-55 years of age and 13-24 years of experience and 25-36 years of experience. BS or BA refers to either a bachelor's of science or a bachelor's of arts. MA refers to a master's degree. Rank I refers to teachers that hold a masters and an additional 30 hours of a formal program of study. Plan II 5th year refers to 32 hours in addition to a bachelor's degree. NBCT refers to a national board-certified teacher. EdS refers to education specialists. Also, the content area of each participant has been noted as either core (reading, writing, science, math, social studies) or other certified teaching areas.

*Table 1. Demographics of Interview Participants*

Teacher	Referred to as	Age	Years of Experience	Education	Content
Teacher 1	A	41-55	13-24	BS, MA, NBCT	core
Teacher 2	B	41-55	25-36	BS, MA, Rank I	other
Teacher 3	C	41-55	25-36	BS, Plan II 5th year	core
Teacher 4	D	41-55	13-24	BS, MA	core
Teacher 5	E	25-40	0-12	BA, MA	other
Teacher 6	F	41-55	13-24	BS, MA, NBCT	core
Teacher 7	G	41-55	0-12	BA, MA, NBCT	core
Teacher 8	H	41-55	13-24	BS, MA	other
Teacher 9	I	41-55	13-24	BA, MA	other
Teacher 10	J	25-40	0-12	BS, MA, Rank I	core
Teacher 11	K	41-55	13-24	BA, MA, MA, EdS	core
Teacher 12	L	41-55	13-24	BS, MA	core

#### Data Collection and Analysis Overview

Initially, criterion sampling was used to determine selection of participants.

Criterion includes teachers who had experienced perceived stress and/or burnout because of the many facets of COVID-19, specifically focusing on teachers demonstrating

resiliency and even thriving during this time. To qualify for inclusion in the study, teachers must have been active in the classroom before, during, and post COVID-19. Questions were structured around resiliency, stress, support, years of teaching experience, level of education, and teaching grade level, creating a purposeful sampling of participants with various backgrounds.

Identification of the potential research participants began by first receiving approval from the superintendent to interview teachers in the small, rural district. Then an email invitation was sent out to teachers in the district asking for participants that met the requirement of teaching before, during, and post COVID-19. Once teachers self-qualified to the teaching requirement, they were sent the informed consent to sign and return. After collecting the consent forms, the participants were sent the Brief Resilient Consent Form (BRCS) to complete via email. Those initial participants scoring between 14 and 20 on the scale were contacted for a one-on-one interview. The dates and times for the interviews were determined by what was convenient for the participant, with each session lasting no longer than 60 minutes.

During the semi-structured interview, the participant answered questions created by the researcher that were adapted from the Farber participant questions (Farber, 1991). The questions placed an emphasis on stress, resiliency, and support and were provided prior to the interview, allowing the participant to deeper contemplate their answers. Interviewees also rated themselves on a post-traumatic growth inventory, developed by Tadeschi and Calhoun to assess post-trauma growth and self-improvement and is one of the most valid and reliable resources for evaluating personal growth that follows a stressful encounter. Permission was granted by interviewees for recording and



transcription of the interview with the researcher. Confidentiality of all responses was expressed to the participants.

Upon completion of interviews, I coded the interviews using qualitative data analysis software to discern codes and then themes. The software assisted me in using a grounded theory approach of open coding, specifically in vivo coding, creating codes while working through transcripts. By using in vivo coding, I was able to use the words of the participants to help develop initial codes. During the first cycle, I reviewed the participant transcripts looking for terms that kept reappearing in the transcripts. Terms were underlined in the transcripts within the software program and categorized. The codes were added to the table as terms that most participants mentioned in their interviews. After the first cycle of coding was complete, I continued with focused coding, using the most frequent or significant codes. Themes of unrealistic expectations, accountability, self-reliance, and lack of authenticity were developed from a collaboration of first and second cycle coding. These themes were consistent throughout the participant interviews and were validated, as all 12 participants' quotes led to the themes in the table below.

*Table 2. Coding Cycles and Themes*

Research Question	First Order Coding	Second Order Coding	Theme
What are contributing factors of stress and burnout among educators relative to their experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic, from March 2020 to present, from the perspective of classroom	administrators:  just checking off boxes  trying to find something you're doing wrong	lacking relationship or communication  giving teachers feelings of lack of support	lack of empathy and support

teachers?	not everybody's voice is heard  don't have your back		
From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how are stressors pre-COVID-19 similar or different from post-COVID-19 stressors?	student behavior  going back to 'normal'	Students still had behavior issues but they are more pronounced.  Parents are held less accountable, as are students.  Administration walkthroughs prior to COVID-19 were more frequent and post COVID-19 they have lessened but the feeling of being scrutinized is still there for several.	accountability
From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how have they developed resilience to combat stress and burnout during the global pandemic and the aftermath?	looking out for self instead of hoping others will notice  just do it  don't lay down	participating in exercise and family activities to combat stress  leaving school work at school instead of working on it on their personal time  refusing to give up or let the situation get the best of them	self-reliance and mindset
From their perspective, what resources would benefit teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth?	came down to who your administrators were as support varied	obvious to teachers the genuine, authentic empathy and support from administration	support and authenticity from administration

	Some administrators were naturally better able to support teachers.		
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### Lack of Empathy and Support

When discussing the contributing factors of stress and burnout in research question number one, most participants were stressed due to the demands or new expectations of the building administration. They did have other stressors, however at the base of most stress were the actions of the administrators in the building. Each participant had experience with either a lack of empathy or lack of support from administrators, although it was often mentioned that it was seemingly unknown by administrators how their actions were causing additional stress on the teachers. Some participants felt that stress was placed on administration at the district level, and it was trickling down to teachers.

First-order coding revealed that teachers felt that some of their colleagues were treated differently by building level administration and that they were being constantly monitored and scrutinized by administration. Upon further review, during second-order coding, it was found that teachers felt a sense that they were lacking in support from administration and that while communication needed to be improved, relationships were not fostered during the teaching time at the height of COVID 19. Sources of stress during all phases, before, during and post-COVID 19, were instructional walkthroughs, continuous additions of items to do, and feeling as though administrators were not

empathetic to all the responsibilities classroom teachers were already shouldering.

The researcher made note of perceptions by participants that were evidence of feelings of lack of support and empathy which led to direct quotes from participants mined from interview transcripts. Participant K said, “So don't tell me that that's for the kids. That's for you for your little walkthrough so that you can check a form or whatever”, when discussing stress felt when administration does walkthroughs under the premise they are for the kids, but are really just looking for ‘gotchas’ of teachers. Participant B mentioned, “You were being judged by the walkthroughs you because we always felt like that they were trying to catch us not doing what we were supposed to be doing not teaching on the map”, noting that is a factor of stress being scrutinized by administration without empathy or understanding of teacher autonomy. Participants also discussed how this has been ongoing, similarly to lack of empathy by administration.

Participant G felt a lack of empathy when she shared “I think just the pressure of trying to get the kids where they need to be and then the kids are not where they need to be academically, but I'm still expected to get them to proficient or distinguished and they're already so far behind because of COVID that it feels like it's impossible to get them there but it's still expected to get them there.” Participants discussed how they felt there was so much ‘added to their plate’ and the feeling that administration had somehow forgotten what it was like to be in the classroom, much less during a pandemic, which no administrator had experienced from a teacher lens.

Teachers felt a lack of support although it seemed to the participants that administrators thought they were supporting teachers. When talking about support from administration with respect to parent concerns, participant G noted, “just the backing of admin to really have your back and know they have your back. They'll say they have

your back, but I don't know that I feel it in my core that they have." During every interview the participants made mention of a lack of support from administration in some way, usually in a way the administrators would not realize they were not supporting the teacher in the way needed. Typically, administrators often attempt to show support and empathy for teachers in ways that are minimal in resources but appeal to teachers. Once such way is sponsoring "special days" for teachers. Offering a jeans day was mentioned with laughter. Then on more serious notes guilt-free offerings of a day off, a mental health day, were more attractive to teachers. Participant E added, "If this is the way we've always been doing it, maybe that's not the best way. Just listening to people looking to see what needs to be changed." Feelings that teachers wanted to be truly heard and understood by administrators was evident. From the perspective of teachers, the main source of stress and burnout was at the hands of the building administration and the failure of administrators to truly recognize and meet the needs of the teachers in their buildings.

#### Accountability

Student behavior problems have continued to rise over the past three to four years, according to a recent survey by the EdWeek Research Center (Prothero, 2023). Research question number two brought to light student behaviors and the 'new normal' of COVID-19, resulting in the theme of accountability. Seven out of the 12 participants cited student behavior being a major stressor prior to COVID-19 as well as during and after. However, it was the perception that student behavior has been more prominent post COVID-19. Participants explained how not only were there more challenging behaviors, but also that it seemed to them that consequences were few, leading to even more behavior issues. They also emphasized the lack of parental support as it related to

student behavior issues. Participant A had a “wish that administration would help with doing those tiers for the behavioral like they do for the tiers for reading and math. How do we get this kid to tier two? How do we get them to tier three?” The participant also mentioned the difficulty in ensuring a safe environment with “amped up behavioral issues”, as well as a perceived increased immaturity of students. Participant A also had feelings of defeat with student behaviors as a classroom teacher.

Participant H, with exasperation, emphasized managing student behavior as being the complete responsibility of the teacher saying, “I think student behavior is a need and there needs to be more ways to address it besides just falling on the classroom teacher.” The teacher felt accountability was being placed on the teachers instead of administration support with student behaviors. Teachers were expected to complete checklists or point sheets for students with severe behaviors throughout the day which interfered with teaching students that were behaving and ready to learn. The interview with participant J added, “I feel like we’ve kind of lowered expectations of parents and kids and then we keep putting more expectations on teachers. When people keep saying okay stay in focus on what’s in your control, but then here let’s put all this weight on you of all these things that really are out of your control like behavior.” The perspective was once again that students are not being held accountable for their behavior with more expectations being placed on teachers. Participant B stated, “Really the biggest, I don’t know, button pusher for me was I had, just like everybody does, but I had behavior problem kids and when you’re in a small group and you’re trying to do something and they’re crawling in the floor or smacking or slapping people and are rolling around on the floor”, later mentioning, “I mean, they’re not only affecting themselves, they’re affecting kids that I had at the time and then you have such a short amount of time with them and so I guess

really for me, just behavior without me being able to really hold them accountable”. This participant felt as though there was a disservice to students that were not behavior problems and that the students that were ready to learn were unable to due to behavior issues of another student.

Another participant mentioned that teachers spend time dealing with behavior modifications for students with behavior issues, unable to focus on students whose behavior was appropriate for the classroom and were trying to engage in the learning. There was a participant perception that behavior issues were taking away from the learning environment of the classroom and that there was little to no accountability for students or parents. Participant L added, “The kids are learning how to make excuses to get around doing their work and we’re just not holding them accountable for it or their behavior because of COVID.” This participant felt as though COVID-19 was used as an excuse for worse behavior post COVID-19. It was the perception of the participants that teachers were responsible for student behavior issues and there was little accountability for students or parents by administration. Teachers were discouraged by student behaviors, their inability to do their jobs as a result of the behaviors, and by the seeming lack of knowledge of administrators on ways to better support teachers.

### Self-Reliance

Self-reliance enabled teachers to cope with the various aspects of COVID-19 and was a way that teachers were able to become resilient. Teachers developed resilience to combat stress and burnout during the global pandemic and the aftermath in different ways. First-order coding resulted in the teachers’ ideas that they had to look out for themselves rather than expecting others to look out for them. There were also comments about teachers deciding that they just had to ‘do it’ and not ‘lay down’ when asked about

how they developed resilience. Exploring the transcripts more for second-order coding, the researcher was able to identify quotes from the participants to drive the direction towards the theme of self-reliance. Teachers were refusing to give up or let the situation get the best of them as well as relying on themselves. They were finding ways such as self-care practices like increased physical exercise take care of themselves. Teachers were also making a conscious effort to do school related work only during school time instead of working at home on their own time. They were taking back their personal time.

COVID-19 impacted the profession and “teachers faced a wide range of additional pressures, including unexpected shifts in schooling mode, learning new technologies, and managing personal health concerns. These pandemic-related challenges had the potential to alter both the retention of the existing teacher workforce and the supply of new teachers willing to enter the profession” (Bacher-Hicks, 2023). “Teachers have been experiencing higher stress and lower morale since the start of the pandemic, according to multiple surveys. There’s been a steep drop in teachers saying they’re enthusiastic about their work or that the stress of the job is worth it” (Barnum, 2023). In a time when teacher attrition was on the rise and the profession was dwindling as stress was growing, these teachers were able to be resilient, despite having similar experiences as other teachers during COVID-19.

During the interviews, participants shared personal experiences that could be considered traumatic, for example miscarriages, divorces, caring for sick, elderly family members, having major health problems, and family deaths. However, none of the participants let the personal trauma in their lives take control. They were able to overcome or manage their trauma, allowing them to be more resilient during the COVID-



19 era. Participants were able to enlist coping strategies that assisted them in being resilient. This resilience spilled over from their personal lives into their professional lives.

When speaking of how they were able to handle the stress from their professional lives, during interviews participants spoke proudly of how they took back their lives from the overwhelming world of teaching in various ways, after having so many expectations placed on them by their administrators, district, state, and even nation. There was also the recognition of insight about the participants' mindsets when it came to taking care of themselves and not relying on others to help them. Participant J found a few different ways of self-care that led to resilience. The teacher stated she had been living alone and had to do things for herself so that helped build resilience for her.

Other ways of building resilience during the time of COVID-19 was mentioned by Participant J of "getting into faith" and "running and working out". Exercising was also mentioned by Participants G and I. Faith and scripture reading were also ways that Participants A and L were able to build resilience and take care of themselves. Participant G added, "I've gotten better about leaving early, right after school and not staying and dwelling on it. I used to spend a whole lot of time planning but now I do my lessons but don't spend the whole day on it. I do what I can and then spend time with my family. I used to not do a lot of things on the weekend. They would ask me to go and I'd say no but I don't do that anymore." Her family time became a part of self-care for her, leading her to a more fulfilling personal life. Participant A used puzzles, walks in the evening, and staying off of her phone and other electronics as a means of self-care that enabled her to relieve stress during the pandemic.

Practicing a positive mindset and mental strength came to the forefront of several

interviews. Although the participants did not explicitly say they were practicing a positive mindset and mental strength, their quotes were indicative of practicing a positive mindset and having mental strength. Participant B shared her thinking that, “today was harder or the past year was hard, but goodness, if you can survive that and you just gotta keep going” as a way she was able to overcome challenges and get through to the next day and challenge ahead. She had cared for and lost her mother to Alzheimers and then was caring for her ill father, all while experiencing her son moving to another state for college, her husband having serious health issues, and working as a full-time teacher.

Another interview by Participant F revealed that when taking college classes, having a toddler at home, being pregnant and having premature twins in the neonatal unit at the hospital, the participant had begun building resilience that continued through COVID-19, “That’s when I hunkered down and was like, all right, I’m gonna sit here and I’m gonna do this and I had to adapt. I had to find my own ways to adapt. I can get through this because there’s been a lot worse I’ve been through.” This participant felt that because she was able to adapt to her previous situations, she had mental strength and a positive mindset. She also added that she had already “overcome the adversities of being stereotyped as a Hispanic female who’s just going to have babies and that’s it, so I had to overcome that in order to prove that I can be a successful educator.” This mental strength and positive mindset were also exhibited in the interview with Participant B. She shared, “I mean you just have to find a reason to keep going. I mean there is something internally in you that you have to, that you have to keep going”, showing that she had mental strength, resilience, and even perseverance which was similar in other interviews as well. Participant D said, “I mean I guess you need to learn not to dig your heels in and not be set in your ways and just understand that stuff happens and be able to

move on.” This was evidence that some participants were able to put traumatic events behind them and not allow that to affect them in the future in a negative way. They used their personal traumatic experiences to build mental strength and develop the mindset that they had the ability to make it through other challenging times. These participants remembered times in which they had adversity and had been able to overcome the situations. They were able to find times in their lives that they would consider ‘worse’ and reminded themselves if they could get through those situations then they could get through whatever was currently plaguing them, even in the case of COVID-19.

Considered “Coping Teachers” by Fox and Walters (2022), “These teachers tended to have positive mindsets, good coping mechanisms, and used a variety of self-care strategies.” They also noted that teachers “tended to have very positive attitudes, high levels of self-efficacy, and found ways to cope to do their job” (Fox and Walter, 2022).

#### Authenticity

Although teachers were able to articulate their lack of support from administrators post-pandemic, they struggled to name resources that would benefit teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth. However, some participants were, after some thought, able to offer insight as to what they thought their administrators did well when supporting them post-COVID-19. First-order codes unveiled the idea that some administrators were naturally able to meet the needs of teachers, but other administrators seemed inauthentic and as though they had “just went through the motions”, according to Participant C. Similar to the results of first-order coding for research question number one, support and empathy from administration came to the surface. Delving deeper into the transcripts for second-order coding, the interviews revealed participants felt that some administrators were using a protocol or procedure for ‘support’ that were doled out as

district expectations for administrators when connecting with teachers.. Also during second-order coding, participants shared that it was obvious to teachers when there was genuine, authentic empathy and support from administration. The theme of lack of support and authenticity rose to the top as the answers to research question number four about the resources that would benefit teachers in post-traumatic and post-pandemic recovery and growth.

“Just as students know if teachers care or not, teachers know if school leaders care or not” (Young, 2022). This was validated by responses from participants in the study. Participant G shared “I felt like it (support) wasn't as genuine I don't know as it should be and I don't know That's just kind of how I feel.” This was also reiterated by Participant J with, “Honestly it seemed like they tried to (support) in words and emails and say take time for self-care but then here let's add this and this and this and this to make up for this and this and this and this that we lost so it didn't feel as genuine.” It should be noted that this is where the researcher did find a bit of variation in participant answers, although some had the same administrators, however, participants were still able to discern the authenticity of empathy and support from administrators.

Although there were different feelings from participants about the empathy and support from their administrators, some teachers were working in the same building as other participants in the study and working with the same administrator. Many perceived that some teachers were treated better than others. Participant G noticed a definite difference in how teachers in her building were treated. “The emotional side - they will give it to some people but not everybody gets that emotion poured into them, for example, there was a teacher whose mother died a few weeks ago and nothing was sent out to say, ‘Hey, this person’s mother died’, but then a week or so later when somebody

had a toothache and everybody got this text about that, so it's not even on the emotional support." Participant A voiced, "I think a lot of mental health has been focused on the kids, but teachers are burned out and teachers are emotional, you don't know what you can or can't say because you don't want to come off negative at the same time. Your stress levels are to a hundred or whatever, but some administration just doesn't get it." These participants were speaking about their current administration, post-COVID-19, which is different than the administration that was during and prior to the pandemic.

Of the prior administration in their building, Participant C was excited to say, "I'm gonna tell you when (administrator) came in, he trusted us and that meant more than anything. I felt like I could do what I needed to do in my room." This same administrator was praised by Participant B. "He was still there that first year back after the pandemic and I mean, I don't know, I just felt like we just went from absolute craziness to just right back into what we were doing before and I mean granted then that first year back we were doing like that A/B schedule but maybe it wouldn't have gone so smoothly had we not had him as a principal." Participant A cited how their administrator knew "how to make you better and some know how to make you feel like you are such a valuable part and I've had that kind and I've had the other kind and I'm much happier under the ones who make you feel that celebrating the things you do well and trying to improve on those things so that you can become a rockstar. It is how you are a good administrator not nitpicking the things you don't do." Of the group of 5 administrators connected with the participants, there was one that stood out to the participants as having true, natural authenticity and support.

This information sparked me to review research question four. I probed the transcripts further for resources that would benefit teachers in recovery and growth post-

pandemic. Although material resources were not at the forefront, the need for relationship and culture building for administration came to the surface. Participants were not looking for resources for themselves, but instead for their administrators to assist the administrators in supporting teachers in their buildings. Participant A suggested that administrators would definitely try to build relationships and get to know everybody and care if they had less on their plates. There was a sense of lack of time to invest in the people within the building because pressure was also on administration to keep things running appropriately in the building, even with the added stressors of COVID 19. Another suggestion was from Participant G. "I just think it would be nice if schools would allow you a time to get together with others to do let's say, go to the gym or whatever but I don't think I would ever happen but it would be nice to have something like when we used to go on trips with the staff." Participants knew what they needed but felt as though it was actually a need for their administration to be responsive.

## Summary

### Research Question 1

Participants stated that one contributing factor of stress and burnout were job demands. Everyday job demands became exacerbated by additional layers brought on by the pandemic. Resources needed for teaching and learning brought a need for teachers to think outside the box and go above and beyond for their students. For example, beginning in March 2020, teaching using manipulatives was a struggle for one participant. Participant B stated that she had to make plans to travel to visit students that did not engage in online meetings during math and that she also took time to drop off manipulative to the homes of her students. This was not something that was required of her, however, she knew without this support her students would not get the best learning

experience she could offer at the time. Since then, she has made every effort to have manipulatives in the hands and available digitally for student use, even when they are only to miss a few days of school due to illness.

Another source of stress that is ongoing since the pandemic are issues with behavior, which as viewed by most participants as more pronounced, interfering with the job of the teacher. Not being able to do what they are passionate about and paid to do brings great stress. Participant L stated, “Certain behaviors are hard to handle on your own and just getting supported. Sometimes you feel like you are dealing with those behaviors and it doesn’t go any farther than you.” Participant A had a similar stressor with behavior, saying, “I wish administration would help with those tiers for the behavioral like they do for the tiers for reading and math. How do we get this kid to tier two or three interventions?”

The stress of having an administrator who was not as genuinely supportive as teachers felt they should be was also a stressor during and post-pandemic. Participant G confided that, “They (administrators) need to be talking to people and really see how you’re feeling and how they are coping without being like something they just have to do because the district expects it, just to see if you’re struggling.” Participant K shared, “There are those administrators out there that use the schedule as a punishment like you’ve made them mad instead of discussing in an honest way whatever issue there is with me or others.” Participant J added to the idea of missing authenticity among administrators by stating, “I like to think intentions (of administrators) are good but a lot of times when there is no follow-through, and it becomes a pattern and it’s kind of like the words lose their meaning a bit. And sometimes it can make you bitter as an educator.” Exploring the lived experiences through these participants gave honest and open

information about stressors that job demands, behaviors and administrators place on educators that have existed during the pandemic and continues today.

#### Research Question 2

When exploring the similarities and differences of stressors pre and post-COVID, participants acknowledged that there were many similarities, however they were more intense or compounded by the pandemic. Reflection on the part of the participants revealed similar perspectives of the stressors. For example, Participant F offered, “Being resilient. I had to be resilient before the pandemic. I ended up divorced, had all three children on my own with me a majority of the time and then trying to also make sure they had their academic, social, and athletic stuff running as well as me doing my master’s classes in between normal teaching and coaching duties and expectations, as well. It was pretty much the same before, during, and after COVID, so I am still being resilient. During COVID though, I had to definitely be more careful and organized with my planning and execution of accomplishing all the things I had to accomplish.” Participant D revealed that what was stressing to him both pre and post-COVID was more focus on accountability of teachers than assistance. “Administration puts more focus on accountability rather than giving assistance but in COVID it was like what you could do - like Google Sheets, and logging in and writing down what you were doing every hour and constantly being available. It got worse with COVID because they didn’t know what they needed or wanted or what the district needed or wanted so the accountability that was always more important than the assistance became even more important to my administrators.”

A few differences of stressors pre and post-COVID were mentioned by participants. Participant H made notice of expectations before and after COVID. “I guess



over time expectations have gone down. Pre-COVID we had a different principal and expectations were there, don't get my wrong, but you were supported by your principal with the expectations that were set and were helped if needed. Now though, it is stressful to know that the administrator we have now has these expectations probably from the district, I don't know, but he doesn't even fully understand the implementation of the expectations much less how to help with support. Well, not with everybody. That's stressful knowing that the person that is supposed to be leading the charge doesn't have a clue about the direction you're going in and expects you to know. That's stressful every day when you asked questions about things and there's never a clear answer communicated. That is a different stressor to what we had before COVID."

Again, administrators made a difference in the stress level of educators.

Participant A stated, "I think and no fault of anybody in particular, there's some shortages and I think ideally it would be good to be able to take care of yourself, you know take a mental health day. Before it was not a big deal to literally say you needed a break. Now though, you may not be told no that your day wasn't approved for a personal day or questioned about a sick day, but administrators in a roundabout way let you know it is kind of an inconvenience and that everyone else will have to cover. I used to not feel guilty when I needed a day and now I do and I had some serious health issues. That is something that has gotten worse since COVID because we don't have coverage."

When listening to the words of educators, unworried about repercussions, it is evident that whether stress was similar or different pre and post-COVID, stressors could have been addressed at the administrative level. The things that were stressful to most participants were perceived to be out of their control, but were perceived to be more controllable by leaders in their buildings and districts. The role of an administrator in

stress, causing it and mitigating it, is too great to be ignored.

### Research Question 3

Developing resiliency can combat stress and burnout. Participants in the study were able to discern ways in which they were able to overcome the mounting stress during and after COVID-19. From the perspective of the participants, it is evident that they took responsibility for their own resilience, looking within for relief from stressful times they were experiencing. Participant J, for example, was living alone, which led her to depend only on herself. As she had recently moved out of her family home, she was aware any relief of stress was solely up to her. “I’m big on mindfulness. I figured out I loved running and working out and that was kind of how I burned off a lot of school stress. Just going out running a lot and then kind of writing a lot and reading a lot more. I guess introspect personal growth because when the world shut you down, you didn’t have much else to do.” She also made mention of her spirituality and how faith became more important to her, guiding her in growth of resilience and combatting stress and burnout.

Participant G built resilience and resisted stress by giving herself permission to take breaks and be present with herself and her family. “I’ve gotten better about leaving early, right after school, not staying and just dwelling on it. And then on weekends, I used to spend a whole lot of time planning but now I do my lessons, but I don’t spend the whole day worrying over how much I get done. I let it go and spend most time with family. They used to ask me to go here or there but before I wouldn’t because it was always in the back of my head that I needed to do my lessons and stuff but I don’t do that anymore. It was hard to do at first but now I just do it.” She also said she set her gym up in her basement and that she tries to focus on herself and gets up and goes for walks and doing what she wants when she gets home instead of stressing over school. “I did have

guilt at first but I guess that I talk a lot in my head and saying you've got to get through this. It'll be fine. I do personal pep talks, too. I remember my mom telling me to not let this one kid or whatever get you down or you got to fight through it and that's how my mom was. She was just somebody that she didn't believe in letting one little thing knock you down." The phenomenon of resilience is experienced by people in many different ways. From exercise and intentional time with family and friends to remembering how others helped in prior times of stress with words of wisdom, stress and burnout can be overcome.

#### Research Question 4

When exploring ways participants were able to combat stress and burnout by developing resilience it was found that oftentimes these participants created or developed on their own. However, one must contemplate how teachers with less experience developing their own resiliency could be assisted in their pursuit of resiliency. These may be teachers who previously have not had what they would consider traumatic life events or faced similar stress in their past. How could schools and administrators help these teachers? What role could these participants play in supporting other teachers in post-traumatic growth and resiliency? What resources schools could supply to benefit teachers in post-traumatic, post pandemic recovery and growth? The main resource was the administrator in the building and the connections and relationships they could build and encourage among staff.

It is key that administrators and schools are fully aware of their direct impact on resiliency and ways in which stress and burnout can be reduced among their staff.

According to Participant B, "It's not with doughnuts and jeans day! Especially when you have to pay to wear the jeans!" A way that schools and administrators could help teachers

in reducing stress and growing resiliency was stated by Participant G, “I just think that it’s nice to have available time to get together with others and go to the gym or go on trips like we used to as a staff, like a relief time or even have a 30 minute time to walk together. Just something to bring us together would help with support.” “Meeting groups or anything like support groups with teachers helping, mentoring, checking in on the teachers that are burned out or stressed. Just providing the time and safe space for that would be good”, offered Participant A.

Participant F shared, “Personally, I would like to see more of the group activities that we used to do. Those really built us up as a unit. Things like outings, trips, and even our Hawk Patrol, where we went out to kids’ houses and celebrated them as Hawk of the Month, that was where we bonded and grew. We made connections as people not just co-workers and that helps with being resilient, especially with new people in the building and less experienced teachers. They can be outside the building and building relationships with others in similar situations. But there has to be some initiative by administration to help organize these things intentionally and it’s just not at our school now like it used to be. Several of the instrumental people have left so there’s that, but I guess they weren’t administrators; they were just people who were true leaders and really cared about us.”

Continuing with resources that would benefit teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth, again, the administrator was the fulcrum. Participant B added, “Shielding us from some of the petty things that they can take care of themselves instead of involving the whole staff. We don’t need blanket emails that just cause anxiety for everybody wondering who did what and if it was us. Being up front and going to people directly goes a long way.” Along the same lines, Participant E stated, “I think

giving a personal card that shows you noticed or cared. Now, not the kind where I'm on a checklist and it happened to be my day that you find something good in my class, leave a Post-It and say nice things. Like that you noticed something going on in my personal life and cared enough to genuinely show concern type of card or note.”

Participant H stated that "Some thought (office staff) he just hung the moon. But they did not have to deal with the inconsistencies and playing favorite we had to as teachers. We used to do a schoolwide program for positive behaviors and the kids were on board, our attendance was up, and behavior was less stressful. When we got a new administrator, he just didn't buy into it and it made it difficult for the rest of us because we weren't as supported as we were before. He would say he was all about it but you could tell he just wanted to let us do everything with it and not really be truly a part of it. It's kind of died out now. We still have the posters and stuff and some of us older teachers in the building still do it, but it's not really the building expectation so much anymore and you can really tell. People are just sick of him pretending and looking for other initiatives he thinks would make his mark on our school. When you have something that works and people feel supported and like their school is thriving, why would you just not jump on board, both feet in, especially when good things are happening? I don't know. Maybe he wasn't the best fit for our school.” Participant K even explicitly named a source of stress and how a particular administrator was literally her biggest stress and how the day that administrator retired was the best day of her career.

## Chapter Summary

The findings confirm that administrators may not realize the deep impact of the stress they relay, lowering chances for resiliency. Supporting schoolwide initiatives and

making sure that is something you are willing to support when taking a position really speaks volumes to teachers. They may be thriving and with a little investigation and without judgment, allowing them to be candid in speaking, an administrator can gain so much insight as to resources that their staff needs to grow in resiliency, beat stress, and love coming to their workplace each day. The resources teachers need are administrators that are genuinely supportive and truly know that staff on not only a professional level but also a personal level.

Chapter five will offer administrators recommendations for ways they can show genuine support for teachers. Not only is the support important, but also the way the administrators facilitate growth after trauma, particularly post-COVID-19 when teachers have prior extensive trauma. Implications for practice and further research in adversarial or post-traumatic growth will also be included in chapter five.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, REFLECTIONS, IMPLICATIONS

### Discussion of Findings

This phenomenological study was an exploration of the impact of stress and burnout before, during, and post COVID-19 from the perception of teachers as well as how teachers perceived support from administrators during and post pandemic. My desire in this study was to investigate educators that thrived during the pandemic although stress was increased and perhaps gain insights that would be helpful for schools and districts as they strive to meet the needs of their teachers. There is growing research delving into the impact of COVID-19 on educators, however there is a gap in the research of implications for administrators of how to best support educators, especially those who have been through traumatic events such as COVID-19. Through this investigation and insight gained from educator interviews, it was my aim to offer ways administrators could better support teachers, particularly during times of unpredictability and ever-growing stress. In this study the following questions guided my research:

RQ1: What are perceived contributing factors of stress and burnout among educators relative to their experiences during the COVID-19 global pandemic, from March 2020 to present, from the perspective of classroom teachers?

RQ2: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how are stressors pre-COVID-19 similar to or different from post-COVID-19 stressors?

RQ3: From the perspective of the classroom teacher, how have they developed resilience to combat stress and burnout during the global pandemic and the aftermath?

RQ4: From their perspective, what resources would benefit classroom teachers in post-traumatic, post-pandemic recovery and growth?

Personal stress people experience daily is an expected part of the human experience. Things like housing payments, taking care of a family, dealing with illness are what may be considered 'normal' stressors in life. However, the demands of a job in education, especially as a teacher, along with the additional stress of the impact of COVID-19 left many teachers questioning their choice of profession, or even deciding to go in another direction professionally. This study investigated the pandemic from a teacher lens and allowed the voice of teachers to be heard and used to help other teachers by offering insight to administrators. Perceptions are key and perception is often the reality for the teachers, and that is true of those interviewed for this study. Their lived experiences provided avenues to learn about how they viewed the stress pre-COVID-19 compared to during and post-COVID-19, how they combatted stress, what they would consider helpful from their administration, and what resources they think were needed to help others that would need better support when building resilience to stressors.

The interviewees were candid in their responses and to my impression, felt comfortable in sharing honest thoughts and feelings. This was especially important because the feedback was genuine, and the teachers were willing to share both the good and bad about their experiences and how those experiences could have been made better by their administrators. Although there were only a dozen participants in this study, the insight they offer can be useful for administrators at schools everywhere.

After reviewing the participant quotes and codes, as well as their alignment to the research questions, I concluded that although stress and burnout were on the rise during COVID-19, the teacher participants in the study were able to discern their support needs,



both personal and professional. They were resilient and articulated ways in which they were able to facilitate growth during and post-pandemic. Assessing individual resilience expands our understanding of stress resistance and adaptation. Investigation of the lived experiences of the participants who thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic offer insight to administrators for ways in which they can genuinely support teachers. Self-care and authentic, supportive administrators were key in the lives of all participants.

Upon completing the data analysis, it was evident that administrators were seemingly doing what they think is needed for success in their buildings. There is recognition that administrators, like teachers, are under a great deal of stress. “Test-obsessed educational cultures and standards-only curricula are forms of educational trauma that result in heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. It’s a well-accepted fact that educational methods emphasizing standardized tests are maladaptive and contribute to mental health problems. And yet it’s the law” (Gray, 2021). These demands are placed on districts from the state and federal levels, which trickle to building administration, often it seems without considering the human component in schools. However, for those in their care, the administrators that were able to best support teachers were those that had a way of shielding their staff from some of the demands placed on them and made the staff feel secure. Supportive administrators were noted as having empathy and the ability to build genuine relationships with teachers. The genuineness of the administrator was of great importance, as participants were keenly aware when administrators were apathetic, or simply going through the motions of being supportive, as if following a district protocol. The teachers were able to pinpoint specific ways that they felt unsupported and unheard by these administrators.

Implications for Practice

Teachers have always supported students impacted by traumatic experiences, and during COVID-19 the support of students was constantly stressed and needed. Support of students is essential, however, as interviews of study participants revealed, they often felt as though they, as teachers, were half-heartedly supported or not supported at all. Again, it is important to note that it was not as though the administration in the buildings with these particular teachers were not intentionally trying in most cases to be supportive but were missing the mark. It is crucial for administrators to understand what could be helpful for supporting teachers so that teachers can fully support students. Going straight to teachers to get answers is the key, however it is not always a comfortable situation for teachers to reveal their true feelings to the very people that need to understand them.

Teachers and administrators can attend trauma-informed training as professional development to help them address potential student issues and supports. This is often where trauma informed training and implementation stops. Teachers go into their classrooms and implement what they have learned with the hope that students feel supported, encouraged, and motivated to learn and grow. Unfortunately, in many cases, teachers are pouring from nearly empty cups. They give and give to students and are many times left wondering when they will get their cup filled, or worse yet, feeling they have no other option than to continue trying to give something they themselves are missing - support. This can lead to increased stress and ultimately burnout, and ultimately students will suffer. Administrators must start by supporting teachers emphatically with authenticity and empathy if they wish to support their students. With a more direct link to teachers, administrators must be able to create a culture in their building that supports the mental and emotional well-being of teachers, while encouraging resilience and growth. Genuine relationships are key in this support to

enable teachers to thrive. These relationships can be fostered with a culture of support in schools, and the participants in this study relayed how important it is that the administration makes the difference.

Participants shared that they felt the support they sometimes received from their administrator was not authentic, but instead was following a protocol. Protocols have a place in institutions, however they can be rather explicit and direct, leaving out the human element. Following a protocol, although efficient, may not be the best avenue when lending support for teachers. Administrators must be keenly aware of the need for real concern and support. Support cannot be feigned. Teachers know and without support they are unable to be as resilient and thrive. School culture plays a large role in support and in the end is the answer. Positive school culture fosters morale and in turn can lead to authentic relationships. Genuine relationships matter the most. Participants that felt that they were supported by their administration were participants that had a positive, open, trusting relationship with them. These participants that were able to facilitate adversarial growth and overcome not only the impact of COVID-19, but also personal challenges, did so in part because of the administrators they worked with each day.

These administrators were able to comprehend the teachers at a more personal level, leaving a protocol behind and instead leaning into personalness. Being able to recognize struggles teachers are facing in not only their professional lives, but also their personal lives is required to build relationships and fully support teachers as they in turn support students. This will require some vulnerability and trust between both administrators and teachers. Teachers in the study that felt unsupported were not able to have that personal connection to the administrators in their building. Culture comes into

play once again and administrators are main players in the building of school culture. A culture that is equitable, respectful, and encouraging. This cannot simply be a time of ‘going through the motions’ as authenticity is vital to the success of the school as a whole. Teacher perceptions are their reality, and their voice needs to be heard, understood, and genuinely listened to, not to be pushed aside but to incite action to make the school better for everyone there - students, teachers, and administrators.

Administrators need support also. The National School Climate Center should be contacted and administrators at the school and district levels should take advantage of everything offered through the center, beginning with their Comprehensive School Climate Inventory and getting School Climate Leadership Certification. Oftentimes it seems that this type of evaluation is done as a ‘box to be checked’. The results may be shared but when the results are used to shape the culture is when the data is truly powerful. This should be a regular part of the school year, possibly administering it every year to measure with consistency how things implemented in the district or building are working and the feelings toward them.

### Recommendations

With climate of a school playing such a large part in the overall success of a school, it is essential to work to create an environment for all to thrive, both students and staff. Unlike salaries and loan forgiveness, the climate of a building is something that administrators can directly influence. Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) would be an optimal place to start. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a framework in which staff and other key stakeholders (e.g., parents, students) work to develop consistent expectations and guidelines for appropriate behaviors for students in all areas of the school (Colorado Department of Education, 2024). In the

reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997, a grant to establish a national Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports was legislated to disseminate and provide technical assistance to schools on evidence based practices for improving supports for students with behavior disorders (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). Providing a framework that encourages a positive climate is healthy for both students and teachers. Teachers want to feel respected, valued, and understood.

With PBIS in place, not only are students benefitting from the positive environment and climate, but also teachers. Administrators should lead the charge in sharing and implementing the numerous benefits of having PBIS in their buildings. This will require forethought and intention. Not only providing professional development at the building level, but also going a step farther and investing in teachers visiting buildings at different stages of implementation and meeting with teachers to see the positive changes it has made within their schools. It is important that the schools that the teachers visit are similar to the demographic of the school in which they are a part. Also, making sure that all staff are trained in the PBIS framework is essential. All people from the bus drivers and cafeteria workers to the instructional assistants and custodians, they all need to be a part of the movement. Students and teachers interact with these people daily and they also have an impact on the climate of the building. They are an important component in full implementation. With the full staff committed to implementation, the positive benefits could be endless. PBIS is a fundamental in my recommendation. It is not a secondhand thought and must be strategically planned. Administrators need to make sure to secure funding to implement the full framework with fidelity and with supports in place to provide everything needed to enrich the school climate.

Another recommendation would be to support teachers and staff is to hold monthly events as a means to create and nurture a positive school culture and climate. These events can be as simple as a potluck lunch celebrating monthly staff birthdays or as elaborate as a staff outing to an amusement park. In my experience, I have done something as simple as setting up a coffee bar in the lounge with various flavors and decorated to be extra inviting. At the building level, I orchestrated a ‘prom’ and luau for our staff in the evening with significant others and dinner provided. I have been able to grow camaraderie at a district level with trips to places like Opry Mills, for example, as a Christmas shopping trip. It does take some extra effort to pull the larger events together, however, we are making memories and building shared experiences and stories for our school. These stories are important in the life of a school. A committee with people willing to go the extra mile for a positive school climate can be helpful in planning events.

A final recommendation would be to not forget we are in the people business. People matter. Being personable and caring in a genuine way was noted throughout interviews with participants. Authenticity is a key to reaching and connecting with teachers. Building relationships that are positive and encouraging to teachers made all the difference for participants. It was not the education level, the years or experience, or the accolades of their administrators. It was the fact that the administrators that made the most positive difference learned who the teachers were as people and respected their personal lives as much or more than their professional lives. The purposeful, personal interactions between staff cannot and should not be underestimated in the difference they can make in the positive climate of a school – all filtering down to our students.

Implications for Future Research

This study has allowed me to have insight into the minds of teachers that taught before, during, and after COVID-19 and see how they were or were not supported in resiliency and adversarial growth by their administrators. This research could give administrators a reason to rethink and possibly revise how they build culture in their buildings and how not only students are recognized and supported, but teachers as well. It could be a catalyst for administrators to reflect upon themselves and how the teachers in their building truly feel. They have to be honest with themselves and investigate ways in which they are equitable, respectful, trustworthy, and build positive relationships with teachers. A lot of responsibility is placed on administrators in the implications of this study because at the end of the day, they are in fact responsible for how their building runs and the culture and climate within. This is a heavy weight on the shoulders of administrators.

Future research should include an exploration into how administrators are being supported at the district level with trauma that may be impacting them or their ability to create an environment that is supportive and conducive to learning and teaching. It would also be beneficial to research the ways in which schools and districts choose the administrators to lead schools and how to ensure that the administrators will mesh appropriately with the district and school visions. It seems that resumes are checked, references are called, and votes are made. However, teachers are still working in buildings with administrators that are unable to build a positive relationship with staff and a supportive school climate. The inability to support teachers in resiliency and adversarial growth could lead to more stress and burnout among teachers and continue to exacerbate the situation of teacher attrition.

Along with teacher attrition comes the idea of work life balance. The focus of work life balance is an important aspect of the atmosphere in which teachers are living. Future research could include how work life balance relates to retention with teachers. A study involving work life balance and the inclusion of a four day work week for teachers may also be insightful.

Other areas that could be explored that connect with this research are areas that focus on environment. Examination of the environment within a school and how it fosters resiliency is another possibility for future research. An investigation such as this may be more conducive to more leaders, especially new administrators that are learning how to interact with their staff. Creating an environment that encourages resiliency may be a first step in the direction of meeting the needs of the staff on a more personal level.

#### Conclusion

It is of utter importance, now more than ever, to validate the perceptions of teachers. Again, perceptions are a lens in which people see their reality. Although administrators may not 'see' things the way teachers do, they must be aware of how teachers are really viewing their world at school. There is so much power in truth. Whether administrators like the teacher truth or not, it is essential to recognize and support it. This does not mean that administrators simply agree with everything teachers say they feel, but they must be understanding and empathetic. Teachers are the backbone of education, and it is crucial for administrators to not forget their time as teachers. Teachers need to know their voice is heard and feel they are taken seriously and not just getting lip service, resulting in no positive changes.

When polls or surveys are sent to staff, it is imperative for administrators to not take these personal or at face value. They need to dig deeper, put in more effort, and ask



the hard questions, even if the answers are not what they want to hear. That is how we all grow and in turn thrive. This research gave insight as to what teachers in the field may not say to administrators but were without fear able to state their true feelings with candor. This is only a small sample of teachers. In further research, it would not be surprising that similar conversations would surface.

Facing challenges daily are nothing new for teachers. Challenges with students, families, work-life balance, job demands, salaries, government policies are a part of this job that teachers love. Administrators do not have to be part of those challenges. Working to be supportive of teachers is non-negotiable. We are on the same team. Any way administration supports teachers will pay them and their school back in dividends. Make the investment in your students, schools, teachers, and the return you will get will be immeasurable.

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Appendix A:  
MissionSquare Research Institute Report

- 1** The vast majority (**90%**) of K-12 employees are **concerned about students in their school falling behind** as a result of the pandemic; **65%** are extremely or very concerned.
- 2** While the majority of both K-12 and other government employees say the pandemic has impacted the nature of their jobs, **K-12 employees were nearly twice as likely as other government workers to report difficulty in adjusting to these changes** (42% and 22%, respectively).
- 3** As of May 2021, **69% of K-12 employees were working fully in person**, a significantly higher percentage than the 50% of other government employees who reported no remote work. Prior to the start of the pandemic, only 18% of K-12 employees were engaged in any remote work.
- 4** K-12 employees were significantly more likely to perceive themselves to be at high risk of exposure to COVID at work, with **47% of K-12 employees feeling that in-person work is very or extremely risky**, as compared with 32% of other government employees.
- 5** Half of K-12 survey respondents reported that **they and their family have been negatively impacted financially by the COVID-19 pandemic**, with 10% reporting that they have been negatively impacted significantly. Far fewer other government employees (35%) reported a negative financial impact.
- 6** **K-12 employees** were significantly more likely than other government employees to be **very or extremely concerned about being able to retire when they want** (44% and 36%, respectively).
- 7** K-12 employees **most commonly reported feeling stressed (52%), burnt out/fatigued (52%), and/or anxious (34%)** about COVID-19 while at work, and were significantly more likely than other government employees to report feeling stressed, burnt out/fatigued, and/or afraid.
- 8** **K-12 employees** were significantly more likely than other government employees to **feel that the pandemic has made the public more aware of the importance of what they do** (61% vs. 37%). However, they were also significantly more likely to report that the risks they are taking during the pandemic are not on par with their compensation, and that working during the pandemic has made them consider changing jobs.
- 9** **Three in four K-12 employees (75%) were fully vaccinated as of May 2021**, and another 2% were partially vaccinated. Among other government employees, 67% were fully vaccinated, with another 9% partially vaccinated.
- 10** Asked to describe what one or two realistic actions their employer could take that would be most impactful in making their workplace a better place to work, **K-12 employees most often recommended promoting safety** by following CDC guidelines and providing/enforcing the use of PPE (22%), **the issuing of bonuses or raises (21%), and allowing work from home/remote work and flexible hours (13%)**.

K-12 public school employee views on finances, employment outlook, and safety concerns due to COVID-19 [K-12 public school employee views on finances, employment outlook, and safety concerns due to COVID-19](#)

## Appendix B: Post Traumatic Growth Inventory

### Post Traumatic Growth Inventory

Client Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Indicate for each of the statements below the degree to which this change occurred in your life as a result of the crisis/disaster, using the following scale.

- 0 = I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis.*
- 1 = I experienced this change to a very small degree as a result of my crisis.*
- 2 = I experienced this change to a small degree as a result of my crisis.*
- 3 = I experienced this change to a moderate degree as a result of my crisis.*
- 4 = I experienced this change to a great degree as a result of my crisis.*
- 5 = I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis.*

Possible Areas of Growth and Change	0	1	2	3	4	5
1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life.						
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life.						
3. I developed new interests.						
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance.						
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters.						
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble. <span style="float: right;">Text</span>						
7. I established a new path for my life.						
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others.						
9. I am more willing to express my emotions.						
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties.						
11. I am able to do better things with my life.						
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out.						
13. I can better appreciate each day.						
14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise.						
15. I have more compassion for others.						
16. I put more effort into my relationships.						
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing.						
18. I have a stronger religious faith.						
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was.						
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are.						
21. I better accept needing others.						

### **Post Traumatic Growth Inventory Scoring**

The Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) is scored by adding all the responses. Individual factors are scored by adding responses to items on each factor. Factors are indicated by the Roman numerals after each item below. Items to which factors belong are not listed on the form administered to clients.

#### **PTGI Factors**

Factor I: Relating to Others  
Factor II: New Possibilities  
Factor III: Personal Strength  
Factor IV: Spiritual Change  
Factor V: Appreciation of Life

1. I changed my priorities about what is important in life. (V)
2. I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life. (V)
3. I developed new interests. (II)
4. I have a greater feeling of self-reliance. (III)
5. I have a better understanding of spiritual matters. (IV)
6. I more clearly see that I can count on people in times of trouble. (I)
7. I established a new path for my life. (II)
8. I have a greater sense of closeness with others. (I)
9. I am more willing to express my emotions. (I)
10. I know better that I can handle difficulties. (III)
11. I am able to do better things with my life. (II)
12. I am better able to accept the way things work out. (III)
13. I can better appreciate each day. (V)
14. New opportunities are available which wouldn't have been otherwise. (II)
15. I have more compassion for others. (I)
16. I put more effort into my relationships. (I)
17. I am more likely to try to change things which need changing. (II)
18. I have a stronger religious faith. (N)
19. I discovered that I'm stronger than I thought I was. (III)
20. I learned a great deal about how wonderful people are. (I)
21. I better accept needing others. (I)

#### **PTGI References of Potential Interest**

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Appendix C:  
Farber's Participant Questions

1. In what ways does your school successfully meet the needs of teachers and other educational personnel?
2. In what ways does your school fail to meet the needs of teachers and other educational personnel?
3. How could your school best be designed to meet the needs of teachers?
4. Where along the continuum would you place yourself: one side, working in a self-contained vacuum or on the other side, working as a member of a community effort with a commonly defined system of goals and values?
5. Does your school work on a crisis-oriented model or does it feature continuous helpful input among its members?
6. What is the role of supportive services in your school?
7. What opportunities are there for teachers to share and contribute expertise and advice with each other?
8. What opportunities are there for teacher input into decision making (for example curriculum, textbooks, school policy)?
9. Who in your school is most likely to recognize when a teacher is suffering from stress or burnout?
10. Once a teacher has been informally identified as suffering from burnout-related problems, what is the typical response of your school? Ideally, what would you like it to be?

## Appendix D: Brief Coping Scale (2004)

### BRIEF RESILIENT COPING SCALE

© Sinclair and Wallston, 2004

<b>BRCS Instructions:</b> <i>Consider how well the following statements describe your behavior and actions.</i>	(1) Does not describe me at all	(2) Does not describe me	(3) Neutral	(4) Describes me	(5) Describes me very well
I look for creative ways to alter difficult situations.					
Regardless of what happens to me, I believe I can control my reaction to it.					
I believe I can grow in positive ways by dealing with difficult situations.					
I actively look for ways to replace the losses I encounter in life.					

Sinclair, V. G., & Wallston, K.A. (2004). The development and psychometric evaluation of the Brief Resilient Coping Scale. *Assessment*, 11 (1), 94-101. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14994958>

An online, self-scoring version is available at: <https://www.psytoolkit.org/survey-library/resilience-brcs.html#> (You will need to scroll down and click "run the demo" to access the online test.)

<b>BRCS Interpretation</b>	<b>Score range</b>
Low resilient copers	4-13 points
Medium resilient copers	14-16 points
High resilient copers	17-20 points

## APPENDIX E: Interview Questions

1. How would you define resilience? Post-traumatic or adversarial growth? (RQ3)
2. Have you had experiences in the past that you would consider times in which you were resilient?
3. How did you come through or deal with those experiences?
4. More recently, in what ways did the COVID-19 experience impact you both personally and professionally?
5. Specifically at work, what were sources of stress and how did you respond throughout the time, pre-COVID-19?
6. In what ways did your school successfully meet the needs of teachers and other educational personnel during and “post” pandemic?
7. In what ways does your school fail to meet the needs of teachers and other educational personnel?
8. How could school administrators best meet the needs of teachers during this time?
9. Who in your school is most likely to recognize when a teacher is suffering from stress or burnout?
10. Once a teacher has been informally identified as suffering from burnout-related problems, what is the typical response of your administration? Ideally, what would you like it to be?

## APPENDIX F: Informed Consent

### INFORMED CONSENT

#### TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY: PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF STRESS AND BURNOUT AFTER COVID-19 ON EDUCATORS: SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN RESILIENCY AND FACILITATING ADVERSARIAL GROWTH POST PANDEMIC

##### Summary Information

The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of educators who thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic amid increased stress due to job demands when burnout was common. Further, this study seeks to gain insight as to how to best support and coach educators in resiliency and adversarial growth.

Participants in this study will initially respond to an email to participate and if they opt to participate in the study, they will complete a pre-interview questionnaire, Brief Resilient Coping Scale. From that initial questionnaire, those scoring 1420 on the scale (scale is four to 20) will be invited to sit for an interview. Participants will be polled to determine if they are more comfortable submitting their lived experiences in writing or in person. The time commitment for this study per participant will not exceed two hours with less than 20 minutes spent on the initial email response, 30 minutes on the Coping Survey, and no more than one hour for the interview protocol.

There are risks to this study that are described in this document. The risks for participating in the study, while minimal, do still exist. There may be risks of revisiting the trauma of COVID 19 as they work through the retelling of their lived experiences. This may vary in degree by individual. The participants also risk their personal vulnerability in reliving their experiences with the researcher. There may be other unanticipated risks.

You might want to participate in this study because sharing the lived experiences of the COVID 19 era and demonstrating resiliency as evidenced on the Coping Scale questionnaire may help inform practices and experiences for future trauma experienced by education practitioners.

You may not want to participate in this study because of time commitment, the reluctance to relive the experiences of teaching during the COVID 19 era, or the lack of interest in the study itself.

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please continue to read below. If you have questions at any time, please ask us.

##### Why is this study being done?

The study is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Deborah Powers at the University of Louisville. Approximately 35 local participants will be invited to take part in this

research. The total number of participants across all sites is estimated to be 20. If you are signing this consent for someone, the words “you,” “my,” “me,” and “I” refer to the person you are signing for.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of educators who thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic amid increased stress due to job demands when burnout was common. Further, this study seeks to gain insight as to how to best support and coach educators in resiliency and adversarial growth.

Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and you do not have to participate.

Take your time to decide.

You may change your mind and stop taking part at any time, for any reason, without penalty. You will be told about any new information learned during the study that could affect your decision to continue with the study.

What will happen if I take part in the study?

If you consent to participate you will complete a pre-interview questionnaire, Brief Resilient Coping Scale. From that initial questionnaire, those scoring 14-20 on the scale (scale is four to 20) will be invited to sit for an interview scheduled at your convenience. You will have the option to submit your responses documenting your lived experiences in writing or in person. The time commitment for this study per participant will not exceed two hours with less than 20 minutes spent on the initial email response, 30 minutes on the Coping Survey, and no more than one hour for the interview protocol.

What are the possible risks or discomforts from being in this research study?

There are risks to participating in this study. There may be risks associated with revisiting the trauma of COVID 19 as you work through retelling your lived experiences. This may vary in degree by individual. You may also risk personal vulnerability in reliving your unique experiences with the researcher. There may be other unforeseen risks, as well.

What are the benefits of taking part in the study?

You may or may not benefit personally by participating in this study. The information collected may not benefit you directly; however, the information may be helpful to others.

The possible benefits of this study include assisting the field in determining practices of resiliency that assisted you in being successful through the COVID 19 era as an education practitioner.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in the study?

You could simply not agree to participate in the study.

Will I be paid?

You will not be paid for your time, inconvenience, or expenses while you are in this study.

How will my information be protected?

The data collected about you will be kept private and secure by a password protected electronic file. All documents will be secured in a locked drawer in a locked office and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. All information will be anonymously collected using an alias and will be reported similarly.

Who will see, use or share the information?

The people who may request, receive, or use your private information include the researchers and the study team.

Additionally, by signing this form, you give permission to the research team to share your information with others outside of the University of Louisville. This may include the sponsor of the study and its agents or contractors, those who provide funding to the study, outside providers, study safety monitors, government agencies, other sites in the study, data managers, and other agents and contractors used by the study team. If applicable, your information may also be shared as required by law (for example, to collect or receive information for reporting child abuse or neglect, preventing or controlling disease, injury, or disability, and conducting public health surveillance, investigations or interventions.)

We try to make sure that everyone who sees your information keeps it confidential, but we cannot guarantee this. Those who receive your information may not be required by federal or state privacy laws to protect it and may share your information with others without your permission.

Will my information be used for future research?

Your information will not be stored or shared for future research.

#### Acknowledgment and Signatures

This document tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. Your signature and date indicate that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in the study. You are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled by signing this informed consent document. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Printed Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number for participants to call for questions:

Deborah Powers, Ed.D. ; 502-852-6428; LEAD Department; College of Education and Human Development; Porter Building-Room 369; 1905 S. First Street; Louisville, KY 40292

Site(s) where study is to be conducted:

LaRue County Public Schools; 208 College St, Hodgenville, KY 42748

## CURRICULUM VITA

NAME: Rebecca Hicks-Hawkins

CONTACT: [hawkinswku98@gmail.com](mailto:hawkinswku98@gmail.com)

EDUCATION: Associate of Arts  
Elizabethtown Community College  
1995

Bachelor of Arts Elementary Education  
Western Kentucky University  
1998

Masters of Arts Education Administration  
Western Kentucky University  
2005

Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Organizational  
Development  
University of Louisville  
2024

## PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Elementary School Reading Interventionist  
Jefferson County Public Schools  
2023-

Elementary School Classroom Teacher  
Bullitt County Public Schools  
2019-2023

K-8 Principal  
West Point Independent Schools  
2019

Elementary School Classroom Teacher  
LaRue County Schools  
1999-2019

## CERTIFICATIONS AND ENDORSEMENTS

Elementary Education, K-4, self-contained 5-6  
Instructional Leadership, Supervisor of Instruction



Elementary Education Program Consultant  
Instructional Leadership, Principal  
Director of Pupil Personnel  
Gifted Education, K-12  
Gifted and Talented Coordinator  
Instructional Leadership, superintendent

#### AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

KASA Kentucky Women in Educational Leadership (KWEL)  
2019

LaRue County Key Maker Award  
2010

Gamma Beta Phi Society  
2005

Disney American Teacher Nomination  
2000

Kentucky Teacher Magazine  
1999

#### PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Kentucky Association of School Administrators

Kentucky Women for Educational Leadership

Kentucky Education Association

National Education Association

Western Kentucky University Alumni Association

#### PUBLICATIONS

Brydon-Miller, M., Hawkins, R., Johnson, M., Jones, V., Wade, C.,  
Woolridge, E. (in press). Harnessing the Affordances of Action Research  
to Address the Challenges of the COVID19 Pandemic: Educational  
leaders take action research online. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*,  
vol. 23, issue 2.