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Secondary English Teachers' Experiences of Agency: Connections to Shifting Educational Contexts During COVID-19

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Secondary English Teachers' Experiences of Agency: Connections to Shifting Educational Contexts During COVID-19

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Virginia Commonwealth University

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused schools around the world to enter uncharted territory. Due to the unprecedented nature of the educational crisis, it was important to examine how teacher agency may have been affected. Teacher agency can have important implications for school climate, policy, and the experience of stakeholders. The main focus of this study was to cultivate an understanding of secondary English teachers' perceptions of agency as they navigated teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. An ecological framework was used to examine teachers' experiences of agency in the context of COVID-19. The study utilized a basic qualitative design with in-depth interviews serving as the data source. Transcripts were analyzed using inductive hand-coding and comparative analysis, and then synthesized for thematic connections. As a result of the qualitative interviews, six key themes emerged. The themes included: (1) From Face-to-Face to Faceless: How Student Engagement Impacted Teachers, (2): "I had no Paper.": How COVID Changed Teachers' Workload and Roles, (3) The Necessity of Flexibility and Innovation in Times of Crisis, (4) "We Put Everybody's Brain in a Blender": Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being, (5) "Wiggle Room," and How Agency Plays out Within a Bureaucratic Public School System, and (6) Looking Forward. The synthesized findings contributed to the literature by providing valuable insight into teachers' lived experiences and perceptions of agency during COVID-19. Additionally, the need for intentional and sustained attention to teachers' mental health and for improvement in supporting new and inexperienced teachers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as key points of significance. The study also suggests the need for future research, namely in examining the changes COVID-19 has had on teachers' agency and the possible long-term effects on education.

Keywords: Teacher agency, secondary teachers, English education, COVID-19

Chapter 1: Introduction

> "We don't even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear. We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological."
>
> –Rebecca Solnit
>
> *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*

Between 2020-2022 the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted nearly every aspect of education, including P-12 and higher education contexts. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), teachers, students, professors, and other stakeholders have experienced nearly constant change and even "whiplash" over the past few semesters as schools and policymakers struggled to navigate unprecedented conditions for teaching and learning (NCSL, 2021). These rapid changes to social and educational structures may have long lasting effects on students and teachers that remain to be seen. The president of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), Stephen Pruitt (2020) posited that if times are "unprecedented," so are teachers' responses; he described that, in the face of the pandemic, teachers were collaborating, working together, utilizing technology, and prioritizing students in new ways. The dynamic, lived experiences of teacher agency, at the intersection of changing educational contexts, was the primary area of interest for this study.

My preliminary interest in teacher agency stems from my own classroom experience. I spent several years working in a school often described by the local community and school system as "urban" and "underperforming." In my time at this school, I taught 9-12th grade English in an environment that became increasingly stifled and limited by a district-wide

preoccupation with test scores. Anecdotally, I often felt that teachers' experiences, insights, and creativity were passed over or set aside in favor of prescriptive and scripted lesson plans centered on test-related skills. This approach seemed to encourage getting necessary material into students' brains faster rather than fostering real-world skills or passion for material. My experience frequently left me feeling disengaged and discouraged. I often felt that teachers and students were suffering, reigned over by the need to produce test scores. When I taught seniors, I worried further that I was sending students into the world with the skill to identify a theme on a multiple-choice test (if *nostalgic* was an option, it was always the answer), but without the ability to write about their passions, construct coherent e-mails, or make a strong case for why a policy should change. In other words, while I was teaching test-taking skills, my students were missing out on English-related life and composition skills. Arguably, these missing skills could hinder full democratic participation in the processes that affect their lives and further disenfranchise low-income communities of color (Levinson, 2014). As a result of my own experiences, and recognition of the ubiquity of this problem, I came to realize more research on teacher agency, specifically in the new socio-educational context during COVID-19, was needed.

Background

Agency, as a social theory, relates to the ability of an individual to influence and/or contribute to realities relating to the workplace or other aspects of life (Billett, 2006, 2008; Leijen et al., 2019). Social theories of agency have been built in recent decades from Deweyian perspectives and have their roots in Dewey's theory of reflective thinking (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Dewey, 1933; Leijen et al., 2019). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) use the phrase the chordal triad of agency to refer to the terms iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective. In this model, agency is tied to past experiences, the analysis of trajectories and

demands, and to temporal elements of the past and the future (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Robinson, 2012). In education, agentic theories are more frequently being applied to teachers' experiences in teacher education, the classroom, professional development, and curriculum development (Biesta et al., 2015; Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway, 2019; Leander & Osbourne, 2008; Priestley et al., 2015). Primarily, I drew on the work of Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson, and synthesized their theoretical concepts to outline an ecological view of agency and to account for the influence of the contexts, resources, and constraints unique to the teaching environment (Biesta et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2015; Robinson, 2012).

Studying teacher agency is important because it helps researchers understand the wide confluence of factors that shape teachers' perceptions, experiences, and actions within their work environment. As noted, there are many elements, including personal histories, social contexts, relationships, and structures that can impact teachers' experiences of agency. Based on my understanding of teacher agency, I hypothesized that the social, environmental, and material shifts in education during COVID-19 may impact teachers' ways of describing and experiencing agency.

Need for the Study

COVID-19 has altered education in many significant ways (Milman, 2020). With few exceptions, educational stakeholders have been impacted by a shifting educational landscape (Lee-Heart, 2020). Teachers have been asked to change their jobs, curriculum, and pedagogical practices, often in a very short amount of time (Hill et al., 2020). Gathering, documenting, and analyzing the narratives of teachers allows for validating and recording the unique experiences of teachers in this historic time. This study was needed, because the words, ideas, perceptions, and experiences of teachers have the potential to inform policy, research, future disaster planning, as

well as give name to unique phenomena of our time. This study was designed to add to the literature on teacher agency, and it served as a unique opportunity to examine how disruptive factors can impact teachers' perceptions and experiences of agency. Further, these experiences provided insight into recommendations surrounding teacher preparation, virtual teaching and learning training, and hybrid curriculum policies. Lastly, current changes in teachers' roles, pedagogies, and experiences may have lasting impacts on the field of education beyond COVID.

Statement of Purpose

In designing and executing the study, the goal was to contribute to the existing literature on teacher agency and find a deeper understanding of the experiences of teaching in the COVID-19 pandemic. To effectively achieve this goal, the research focused on teachers' experiences of agency, specifically examining contextual relationships that may increase or hinder agency in a given environment or circumstance. This qualitative research study sought to further understand the emerging phenomena and lay the groundwork for future studies in either of the intersecting areas of interest: teacher agency or the teaching context of COVID-19.

My guiding research questions were:

RQ1: How do secondary teachers describe their lived experience of teaching during COVID-19? How do these experiences relate to or shed light on agency?

RQ2: How do secondary teachers perceive their agency in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What are the structures and contexts teachers identify as impacting experiences of agency?

Methodological Overview

The research study used a basic qualitative interview design. Qualitative methods were best suited for this inquiry because they facilitated the collection of rich data in a new research area where the goal was to enhance understanding (Maxwell, 2013). Further, the depth and richness of the type of data collected in qualitative research was most appropriate because I sought to understand teachers' perceptions and experiences of agency during COVID-19, which was an emerging area of research. Qualitative inquiry allowed the phenomena of interest to emerge more fully. In addition, the application of a basic qualitative interview method had the potential to illuminate experiences of the human condition that would be lost in a larger-scale or survey-based study.

In my data collection I conducted in-depth interviews with each participant. I engaged in semi-structured interviews and utilized open-ended and narrative-based questions to encourage in-depth responses and reflection (Bevan, 2014). In asking open-ended questions, I tried to encourage storytelling and invite participants to walk me through their experiences (Weiss, 1997).

My study sample was purposeful, and I was able to select six teachers with varying years of classroom experience; they ranged from three to 39 years in the classroom. I intentionally selected secondary English teachers as a group of individuals who have a shared content area experience with one another and whose daily work I am most familiar with from my own experience as a secondary English teacher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, I aimed to recruit a sample that was diverse along the lines of race, gender, and age, though my goal was not to contrast teachers' experiences based on these characteristics. I was, however, interested in

any differences in experiences surrounding teacher agency that participants described and attributed to individual or contextual factors.

A small sample size was appropriate to make it possible to conduct longer, more in-depth interviews with each individual. In utilizing a basic qualitative approach, the goal was to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the teachers and the meanings they attached to them. A constant comparison analysis was performed to look for emergent themes and patterns within the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

This study explored the lived experiences of secondary English educators and their experiences of agency in the context of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research endeavored to understand the contextual changes, structures, relationships, and goals that may have impacted teachers' narratives and experiences of agency. While there was a range of literature on teacher agency, and also on COVID-19, there was a gap in understanding at the intersection of these bodies of literature. This basic qualitative study explored teachers' perceptions and experiences of agency in order to capture lived experiences in a historical time, offer considerations for future teacher education policy, and inform decision-making in regard to disaster preparation and alternative teaching methods for the future. Additionally, this study provided the chance to highlight unique challenges and opportunities faced by teachers and society at large during this time.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the literature that is relevant to exploring the intersection between teacher agency and shifts in teaching experience and educational contexts due to COVID-19. To begin, I provide an overview of theoretical conceptualizations of teacher agency. In addition, I present a focused definition of agency honed from multiple studies to serve the purpose of this research. This section closes with an overview of the theoretical framework to contextualize my research and provide support for my inquiry into the intersection of these topics (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017).

Next, I present relevant topical research (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), including the methods and findings of several studies that focus on teacher agency. Then, I provide context for the study by describing the educational landscape altered by COVID-19. Further, I offer thematic findings from recent literature, framing some of the educational changes resulting from COVID-19. After that, I move to a brief discussion of literature related to teacher agency during COVID-19. Additionally, I include several studies about changes in teacher education during COVID, because I believe my study has the potential to inform policy in this area. It is helpful to divide the empirical literature into different sections as the research on COVID-19 is very new, and this allows for different findings to be examined. Simultaneously, I was able to look for areas of possible intersection for this study. In closing, I address a current gap in understanding in order to make a claim for the relevance, timeliness, and necessity of this study.

Description of Search for Literature

The two primary search tools used to conduct this literature review were VCU Libraries and Google Scholar. A preliminary search of “teacher agency,” on Google Scholar returned more than 12,000 articles. To narrow these results, I applied the following parameters: the articles

were published between 2000-2021, with the use of new search terms “teacher agency in secondary schools.” These articles were used to help design my study. In all cases, search results were further managed by examining the number of times the articles had been cited in order to be sure the most influential articles in the field were reviewed. Additionally, I examined the reference lists from these pieces to find other relevant sources, as well as eliminated those not from peer-reviewed journals.

A secondary search on Google Scholar of the terms “teacher agency” AND “secondary schools” AND COVID with the parameters 2020-2021 in place yielded 151 results. However, many of these articles were not based on empirical studies, and it was easier to narrow this pool based on relevant and high-quality content because the research on COVID-19 was still very new. Finally, I read and hand-searched references from the 151 results and relevant dissertations. It was helpful to search in this way as I was able to identify more easily additional applicable resources.

In all cases, priority was given to articles that focused on any of the following: secondary teachers, English language arts teachers, took place in the United States, and/or used qualitative methods, as these were most relevant to my study. Given that I was working alone to search and process the literature and given the abundance of published work on teacher agency, it is possible that some relevant studies have been missed in my search. However, several seminal pieces and researchers including work by Biesta, Billett, Emirbayer and Mische, Priestley, and Robinson were cited frequently across studies and the inclusion of their work helped provide a sufficiently comprehensive overview of the literature.

What is Teacher Agency?

Broadly, from a social sciences perspective, the term agency is often used to relate to an individual's influence or contribution to the reality of their workplace or other aspects of life (Billett, 2006, 2008; Leijen et al., 2019). This type of agency, in a wider social context, has been fairly extensively theorized, with some of its roots in Dewey's pragmatism, specifically his theory of reflective thinking (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Dewey, 1933; Leijen et al., 2019). In an educational context, there are various conceptualizations of the theory of teacher agency (Leijen et al., 2019). Scholars have developed different meanings and applications for the theory, the most relevant of which are outlined here.

Priestley et al.'s (2015) model represents agency as iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective. In application, iteration refers to the repetition or altering of past patterns based on training, experiences, values, especially as these elements relate to life and professional histories (Priestley et al., 2015). The practical-evaluative piece refers to the structural, material, and cultural contexts and constraints in which a teacher must make judgments and choose actions (Priestley et al., 2015). Lastly, the projective dimension refers to the temporal aspect of a teacher's experience of agency, whether it be short or long-term; the projective relates to the orientation of teachers' goals and experiences over time (Priestley et al., 2015). This view of agency connects well to Leander (2008), who posited that the achievement of agency is in dialogue with social and political forces. Further, Priestley (2015) frames agency not as an individual characteristic, but as something that can be achieved, and is in this view, "an emergent phenomenon, something that happens through an always unique interplay of individual capacity and the social and material conditions by means of which people act" (para. 3). This insight encouraged future exploration in the unique social and material realities produced by COVID, to

consider agency in this new reality as an emergent phenomenon. Utilizing a qualitative method to examine the lived experiences of teachers works toward filling a gap in understanding. Priestley's description of agency provided parameters and guidelines that defined agency, but fell short of expressing what it is, or is not, to be a teacher living with agency.

Similarly, Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2019) described teacher agency as a construct built around a teacher's ability to complete the act of teaching with a certain set of resources and limitations while also considering a teacher's beliefs, personal values, and individual characteristics. In addition, Priestley (2011) described agency as "the capacity of individuals to act reflexively within the possibilities bounded by their social and material environments to effect changes to their conditions or to reproduce them" (p. 16).

These definitions and quotations reflected important conceptions in forming an ecological view of agency, which accounts for the influence of the contexts, resources, and constraints unique to the teaching environment. In their 2015 work, Priestley et al. explored a shift in the context of educational policy and focus that they believed marked a return to agency. They posited that in many countries teachers are being more closely involved in curriculum development, being described as agents of change, and being considered as centrally critical to change initiatives. However, Priestley et al. (2015) further acknowledged ways in which teacher agency is confined by the contexts of the workplace, including accountability measures and teaching regulations. These intersecting realities often result in mixed experiences of policy and consequences (Priestley et al., 2015). This study invites future research surrounding how barriers within teaching contexts may structurally contribute to teachers' perceptions of agency and fill a gap in the literature surrounding how barriers to agency are lived and experienced. Utilizing a

qualitative interview methodology may help to elucidate these considerations in meaningful ways.

In a different piece on teacher agency, the same authors extended this framework stating, "practices are not just the outcome of teachers' judgements and actions but are also shaped by the structures and cultures within which teachers work" (Biesta et al., 2017, p. 39). This insight emphasized key elements of judgment and action, but also recognized that teachers must operate within complex structures. There may be circumstances hindering teachers' achievement of agency, or systems in place that could penalize teachers for challenging or working outside of an established framework.

As outlined, there are many elements and circumstances that can impact teacher agency, and I hypothesized that the social, environmental, and material shifts in education during COVID-19 may impact teachers' ways of thinking about, discussing, and experiencing agency.

Empirical Research Studies on Teacher Agency

Biesta et al. (2015) examined factors that both promoted and hindered teachers' agency, especially surrounding their individual belief systems. This study utilized research from a Scottish research project (2011-2012) titled *Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change*. The researchers drew from ethnographic case studies in which primary and secondary teachers provided in-depth descriptions of their beliefs surrounding students and their role as a teacher. The responses collected from teachers were interviews focused on teachers' beliefs and led to emergent themes such as beliefs about young people, beliefs about the purpose of teachers, and beliefs about educational purpose. The project focused on the narratives of six classroom teachers and examined how experienced teachers were able to achieve agency during curricular reform and evaluated factors that encouraged or limited agency (Biesta et al. 2015). The

interviews were analyzed using an open coding approach, which allowed for more flexible and nuanced analysis.

There were several key findings from the study. First, in considering the iterative dimension of teachers' experience with agency, there appeared to be frequent conflict with teachers' beliefs and the frequently muddled administrative discourses encountered in schools; seemingly, teachers often had a superficial understanding of these discourses (Biesta et al., 2015). This lack of clarity and vision negatively impacted teachers' view of their role in the dynamics of schooling. Another finding focused on the projective aspect of agency, in which teachers were often focused and efficient at achieving short-term goals within the existing framework of their school but lacked a clear vision of what was needed or desired in the long-term curricular frame (Biesta et al., 2015). While this study did not center on perceptions or lived experience descriptions explicitly, the use of in-depth interviews and a more open analysis inform my future research and invite a future focus on lived experiences surrounding agency.

In a recent study, Lockton et al., (2020) conducted a 2 ½ yearlong qualitative study focusing on the agency of math teachers in data use efforts across four middle schools. The researchers conducted over 85 interviews and performed more than 150 hours of observation. This study utilized three primary constructs: structure, culture, and agency. Observations and interviews were coded with an a priori codebook built from the researchers' conceptual framework centered on the three constructs. The researchers presented three major findings from the data collected. First, existing structures for data use – including frequent data-based meetings and a high level of focus on standardized test scores – had adverse effects on teachers' engagement with using data. Second, a culture of accountability resulted in demoralization and a restricted environment for teachers. Lastly, teachers exerted agency by pushing back on these

structures and looking for ways to shift the narratives surrounding data. Specifically, teachers argued for more significant links between student learning and changes in instruction (Lockton et al., 2020). The researchers noted, however, that "the structures and cultures of accountability in these low-performing schools were not easy to shift" (Lockton et al., 2020, p. 250).

Biesta et al. (2017) conducted a study of teacher agency that utilized ethnographic methods, and conducted data collection by observation, and both semi-structured individual and group interviews. This study focused on "the role of teachers' talk in their achievement of agency" (p. 39). The researchers were primarily interested in the way teachers' language and discussion of agency builds or hinders their ability to exercise control and drive the direction of their "everyday practices" (Biesta et al., 2017, p. 39). The researchers found differences in biographical elements, vocabulary, and possible influences of age, generation and experience that impacted teachers' talk. In addition, a unique finding from this study was that for some participants, policy discourse greatly impacted the way they spoke about their experiences and professions, which in turn was "limiting their opportunities for critical evaluation and alternative courses of action" (p. 52). For example, two of the study participants, specifically those who had come to teaching from a different field, were more limited in their vocabulary and talk and relied more heavily on language associated with current and recent policy. Further, the researchers suggested that improving opportunities for teachers' discursive growth, especially in teacher education and professional development programs, could have far-reaching impacts on teachers' language and long-term agency (Biesta et al., 2017).

In a qualitative Australian study, Robinson (2012) utilized an ethnographic approach to examine teachers' professional agency when faced with potentially conflicting policies surrounding writing student reports. The researcher shadowed the principal at a non-government

primary school for three months, and her research also expanded to include seven interviews with teachers as well as in-depth notes and observations from conversations around report writing in staff and preparation rooms (Robinson, 2012). Robinson (2012) was interested in how teachers at the primary school would adhere to or respond when they were asked to utilize new guidelines and requirements for writing reports about individual students. As such, she began to "question how professional agency is constructed in response to the constraints of policy text," (Robinson, 2012, p. 232.)

A significant finding from the study was a theme the researcher called "negotiation." The principal and teachers were able to work together to maintain the values of the school, while also meeting the new government issue standards. A specific example of this was the use of a quartile ranking system for students, which the government required, but the principal and teachers did not feel was authentically representative of their school's non-competitive environment. The exercise was completed, but instead of becoming a standard part of student's individualized reports it was available only upon request. The research showed that despite "control mechanisms in policy text" when strong relationships with colleagues were present, teachers were able to enact their professional agency by adapting and reshaping policy requirements to suit particular needs (Robinson, 2012, p. 231).

In one research study, Calvert (2016) focused on teachers' experiences with professional development and professional learning as it related to teacher agency. According to Calvert (2016), teachers experience agency when they can act in a purposeful and constructive way for the growth of themselves and their colleagues. Calvert posited: "Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities, teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and make learning choices to achieve their goals" (p. 4). The findings from

this research emphasized that in order for teachers to learn and engage effectively in professional development and learning opportunities, it was helpful and valuable to be "free from coercion" (p. 10). Study findings suggested that soliciting teachers' opinions and input can help to redistribute perceptions of control and value and increase personal investment and teacher agency.

When synthesized together, these studies provide valuable insights about teacher agency. A relevant implication from Biesta et al.'s (2015) study is that a clear vision of long-term goals may help facilitate teachers' agency. This study helped me to conceptualize the projective dimension of agency as temporal and forward-looking. This concept informed some of my analyses as I looked to determine how COVID-19 educational realities could impact the future of education and the future teachers may experience within or because of specific settings or circumstances. In analyzing Lockton (2020), the relevant concept of resistance surfaced as teachers exercised agency by intentionally attempting to shift a data-based accountability narrative. From reading this study, resistance emerged as an important part of agency as a phenomenon. While accountability measures often limit teachers' instructional paths, when these measures are rejected, removed, or altered, they become reappropriated as a part of the path to the experience of agency. This study provided a helpful concrete example of how teachers' experiences of agency can surface under restrictive environments. This connected to my data as I considered how teachers did or did not push back against accountability frameworks (or other structures) within a COVID context. From examining Biesta et al. (2017) a case could be made for the value of intentional discursive growth opportunities for teachers, as teachers with lower discursive awareness were less able to provide counter-narratives about their roles and profession. This became relevant to my study discussion as I considered teachers' language use

surrounding Covid-related change. From Robinson's (2012) study I gained insight into authentic and meaningful ways collegiality contributed to teachers' experience of agency.

As I looked for essential structures that contributed to the phenomenon of agency, these themes became points of connection to my research data. Specifically, examining Robinson's research ahead of the interviews, reminded me to consider elements of policy navigation and colleague relationships as I collected narratives surrounding teachers' lived experiences of agency within the contexts of changing policies and procedures in a COVID. In summary, these reviewed studies help form a critical foundation for my research inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework drew from the conceptualizations of teacher agency outlined above and was situated within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In developing my ideas, I drew from Ravitch and Carl (2016) who used the term "methodological ecosystem" to describe the conceptual framework. This metaphor was helpful in developing the conceptual framework, recognizing that relationships between parts are "dynamic and interdependent," (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 19). The concept of an ecosystem provided a salient and relevant background for my framework. From reading the literature and considering my research context, I chose to draw primarily from Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Biesta and Tedder (2006), Biesta et al. (2015), Biesta et al. (2017) and Imants and Van der Wal (2020) to adopt an ecological view of agency.

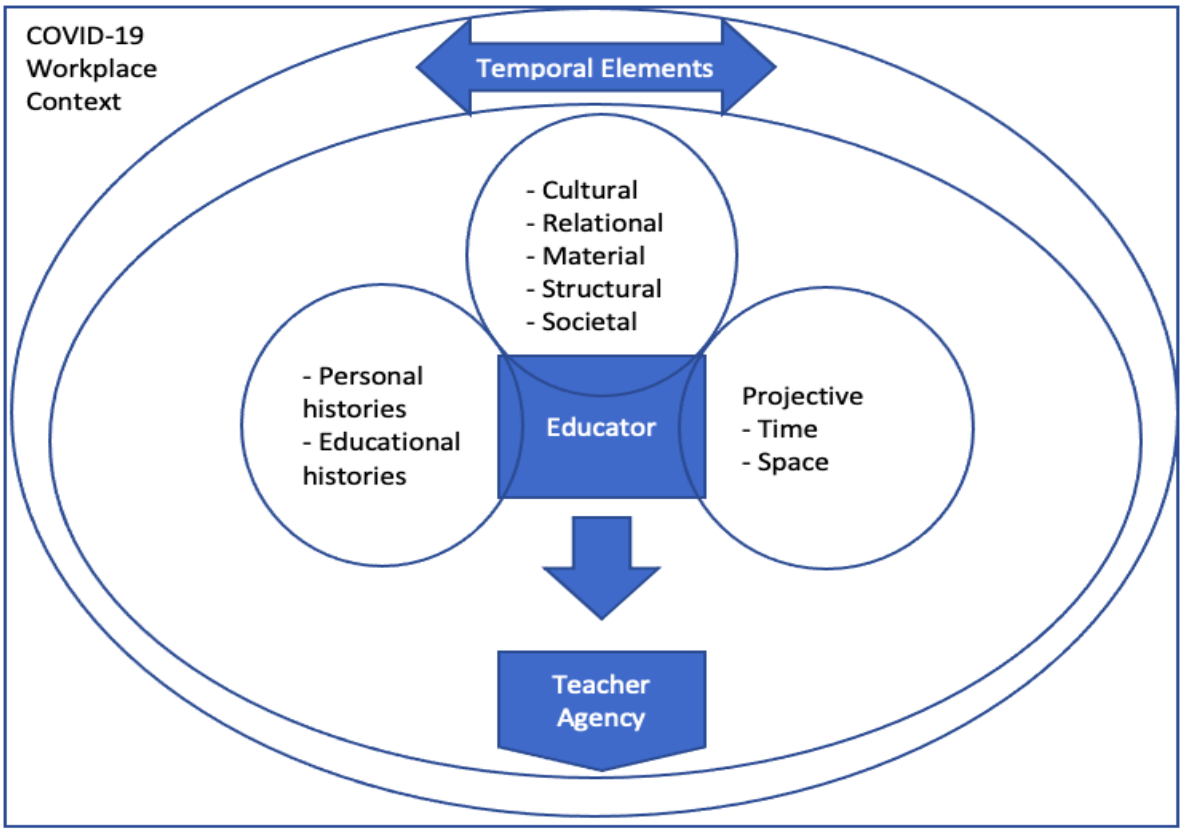
Emirbayer and Mische (1998), expanding on Dewey's pragmatism, conceptualized agency as a dynamic relationship between routines, motivating forces, and judgment. They argued that these intertwined elements, in addition to structural contexts, were key to understanding agency. Conceptualizing agency as ecological moves away from the "tendency to

think of agency as a capacity or ability individuals possess," and toward an understanding of how agency is achieved as "both a temporal and relational phenomenon," (Biesta et al., 2017, p. 40). This quotation highlighted the temporality and relationality that was key to my understanding of agency and critical to my application of this theory. This conception suited the specific needs of my study because it helped to explain the intersection of contextual factors that shape teachers' experiences of agency. More specifically, key components of an ecological view of agency take into account socio-cultural influences, such as workplace relationships, resources, school cultures, and curriculum (Imants and Van der Wal, 2020).

A visual representation of possible forces at play in an ecological view of teacher agency is found in Figure 1.

Figure 1

A Model for Teacher Agency



I adapted this visual from Biesta et al. (2015) to effectively demonstrate and visualize some of the forces and characteristics that impact agency. At the center is the educator's lived experience; this model reflects my purposeful decision to draw from an ecological model in which a teacher's experience is never separate from the contextual web in which they operate. I used this framework to help me to understand and explain my study findings. Based on my initial understanding of agency, as well as the COVID-19 context outlined below, I expected structural, material, and temporal aspects would be key to coding and making sense of my findings.

Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Education

Studies surrounding the practices, pedagogies, and experiences of teachers as a result of the global COVID-19 health crisis are only beginning to be conducted and theorized. By April of 2020, more than 1.2 billion students worldwide were affected by school closures (Li & Lalani, 2020). As late as 2022, many K-12+ students were continuing their learning in virtual and/or hybridized environments (NCES, 2020). Therefore, teachers, despite their initial job description or technological expertise, were being tasked with meeting students' needs in unprecedented ways. These shifts have the potential to be far-reaching, impacting teachers' decision-making processes, curriculum, lesson delivery, and more broadly, students' academic experience and socio-emotional well-being (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). Further, as predicted by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), the COVID-19 crisis continued to impact K-12 education into the 2021-2022 school year. As such, 50 million school age children, educators, and other stakeholders were impacted at a time when educational policies have rarely been more pressing and debated (NCSL, 2021).

Throughout COVID-19, educators and policy makers navigated many logistical challenges, including health screenings, universal mask use, and social distancing during transportation and time in the classroom, to safely support students' full return to the classroom (NCSL, 2021). Effectively meeting the needs of the country's students was no small task, and the long-term impacts of educational change for students and stakeholders remain to be seen. The presence of the uncertain and evolving circumstances mentioned above provided context for needed research and exploration.

Education and COVID-19 Related Empirical Studies

This section highlights recent thematic findings synthesized from studies focused on teachers' experiences in k-12 classroom education during COVID-19.

Theme 1: Increased Workload, and Teachers' High Level of Commitment to Making it Work

Kaden (2020) utilized a descriptive and explanatory single case study methodology to examine the experiences of a secondary teacher whose courses were shifted to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A salient theme from this study was the increase in teacher workload as "Mr. Carl," worked to plan, digitize, and execute lesson plans and materials to meet the needs of his students. In this instance, many of the textbooks he normally used for in-person instruction were not available in a digital format and creating new work streams and spaces at home proved to be challenging and time consuming (Kaden, 2020).

Theme 2: Increase in Freedom for Teachers

Across several reviewed studies teachers experienced increased flexibility in curriculum, and/or freedom in making pedagogical choices. Kim and Asbury (2020) stated: "Having flexibility and freedom from the national curriculum was also seen by many as an upside, allowing teachers to be creative and to differentiate in meaningful ways" (p. 1075). This seemed

to be a valuable silver lining for teachers—to be able to effectively take a step away from a more rigid curriculum in favor of making their own curricular choices and serving their students in the moment. Kaden (2020) cited examples of instruction, planning, lesson delivery, pacing, and assessment becoming more individualized after switching to online learning; in this study Mr. Carl prioritized class time to connect and evaluate students differently than he did during face-to-face instruction.

Theme 3: The Importance of Relationships

In Kaden (2020), Campbell (2020), and Kim and Asbury (2020), a common theme of the importance and value of relationships was observed. In Kaden (2020), the teacher who participated in a single case study expressed a strong sense that caring about his students' well-being and taking the time to humanize digital learning was more valuable than learning new content, he specifically stated that "personal conversations with my students remained the most powerful and meaningful way to check for understanding" (Kaden, 2020, p. 9). This study highlighted one teacher's commitment to meeting his students where they were and providing support and flexibility to help students navigate their academic and personal responsibilities.

Campbell (2020) noted the necessity for teachers and other educational leaders to reconsider priorities and come up with new strategies to serve their communities; "This has frequently focused on the importance of social connections, maintaining physical health and well-being and establishing routines that support both of those" (Campbell, 2020, p. 338). Educational stakeholders have had to work within unprecedented, and constantly changing, guidelines to serve students effectively and creatively.

Relationships among many different sets of educational stakeholders were discussed. According to Kim and Asbury (2020), teachers' connections to colleagues were deemed valuable

and necessary. As teachers dealt with stress, overwhelm, and quickly changing circumstances they endeavored to connect with colleagues, maintain and develop relationships, share strategies, and provide support to each other, establishing feelings of camaraderie and community (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

These studies highlighted the importance of feeling connected to others during stressful times; relationships between teachers, between teachers and students, and between educational stakeholders and their communities were described. Although these studies did not focus specifically on agency, experiences of agency were evident in some of the examples of teachers' decision making and contextualized actions for change.

Studies Focused on Shifts in Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Education during COVID

Similarly**,** while these studies on pre-service and in-service teacher education did not focus explicitly on teacher agency, experiences of agency surfaced frequently in findings. Additionally, the studies give valuable insight into the experiences of education professors and pre-service and in-service educational students during COVID-19. The inclusion of these studies informed my methodology and helped frame possible connections to future policies on teacher education and preparation as it relates to how teachers experience agency.

Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs have been transformed in form, approach, participation, and pedagogy as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Quezada et al., 2002; Scull et al., 2020). Quezada et al. (2020) noted that since the spring of 2020, Colleges of Education across the United States adopted "alternative plans, which included instructional methods, technologies, tools […] to ensure that the teacher candidates developed the expected knowledge, skills and dispositions, clinical observations, and student teacher supervision during their teaching experience as set by teacher licensure agencies," (p. 3). Specifically, this study

examined the changes and impacts of one teacher education programme at a liberal arts college in California, which prior to COVID-19, relied on a brick and mortar setting to prepare its students through hands-on field experiences to meet state licensure requirements (Quezada et. al., 2020).

Utilizing an autoethnographic case study approach, the researchers highlighted both challenges and opportunities that came to light as a result of shifting to online teaching and learning (Quezada et al., 2020). When faculty responses and narratives were coded and analyzed, five themes emerged: "Technology Based Instructional Strategies, Technology-Based Support Office Consultation, Alternative Technology-Based Course Assessments, Feedback for Learning and Teaching Improvement, and Social-Emotional Engagement in Courses and Support of Clinical Placements" (Quezada et al., 2020, p. 7).

In examining the theme of Technology Based Instructional Strategies, innovation in terms of revamping and hybridizing course materials and access came to the forefront as a positive opportunity. However, in both of the first two areas, teacher education instructors cited student issues of "Zoom fatigue," and the necessary addition of Zoom coffee meetings and Zoom office hours. In the theme centered around assessment, instructors cited a need for flexibility, deadline extensions, stress management, and the recreation or reimagining of assignments to produce digital products (Quezada et al., 2020). In relation to social-emotional engagement in courses and support of clinical placements, higher levels of stress were detected among teacher candidates as they shifted relationships with their master teachers and navigated their role in student teaching in a digital platform; in response, faculty created responsive small groups, checked in frequently for updates, and endeavored to meet teacher candidates' needs for collaboration and connection through synchronous sessions (Quezada et al., 2020). These

findings highlighted the challenges of maintaining established learning and power dynamics between teacher candidates and master teachers as their daily interactions shifted to become virtual as opposed to in their assigned classrooms.

In Australia, a small interview-based qualitative study was conducted to examine the perspectives of four professors specifically described as supporting high levels of interaction in working with preservice teachers after the transition to online course instruction (Scull et al., 2020). In semi-structured interviews, three themes emerged: access, participation, and engagement. In the theme related to access, participants noted that they had to adjust and adapt their content in order to suit the ever-shifting needs of their students. This revealed that teacher agency was dependent on the ability that teachers had to make these changes within a specific learning context, as both the professors and preservice teachers were learning to adjust their teaching strategies and course content in significant and timely ways based on the changing teaching contexts. One participant observed "'I think that we have to educate our students as well as ourselves about that online learning is a different type of learning, it's not just a transfer across from face-to-face classes'" (Scull et al., 2020, p. 4). Participants also noted the need for empathy, flexibility, and student tracking to ensure engagement and support, and the wisdom and necessity of taking time to imagine themselves as students experiencing a shift to online learning to help inform their instructional decisions (Scull et al., 2020).

In considering the theme of participation, interviewees tried to engage and connect with students, encouraged students to seek help, and prioritized social connections. Professors whose units emphasized collaboration and incorporated social interactions and support between professors and students were ranked more highly by students as well (Scull et al., 2020). Additionally, professors took the opportunity to streamline and customize their content; "It

seems the COVID-19 pandemic provided a license to personalize their teaching and make a number of the tacit pedagogical practices from their face-to-face teaching more explicit when teaching online" (Scull et al., 2020). This quotation highlighted a potentially higher level of teacher agency as teachers were given more space to adapt and restructure their courses to meet the needs of the populations they served.

A Canadian study focused on examining the emergency modifications to both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs at Simon Fraser University. Hill et al. (2020) found that teacher-learners noted that inequalities during COVID were being exacerbated, especially regarding Indigenous and immigrant families. Additionally, they expressed an awareness of the shortcomings of Western paradigms in fully meeting the needs of these diverse families (Hill et al., 2020, p. 6). The students of in-service teachers suffered from inequities related to access and resources and family support, furthering the awareness of the need for changes in the school systems. This related well to teacher agency, as in-service teachers began to reimagine ways they might utilize agency within their schools and educational contexts to alter existing structures under the context of the pandemic. Concrete examples of inequities seemed to support teachers' desire to create change, and this example illuminated the possible connection between specific resources needed to support agency.

Simultaneously, education professors were trying to meet the needs of their students as pre-service and in-service teachers. According to Hill et al. (2020), instructors had to be creative to help provide meaningful relational and experiential learning opportunities for students. Some instructors incorporated mindfulness and visualization techniques, in addition to other strategies to connect students to themselves and each other both in and out of class. Encouraging centering

practices and connections with the natural world were a few more holistic approaches that professors explored to help meet the changing needs of their students.

Thematic Connections from Teacher Education in COVID-19

Across the studies reviewed, several common themes emerged including: the need for instructional flexibility in times of crisis, the value of human connection in learning, the importance of synchronous instruction, the design and implementation of back-up plans, a need for improvement in terms of technological access, and digital equity among preservice teachers as well as the current/future populations they serve.

The initial rapid shifts to online learning produced an unprecedented experience, in many cases marked by fear and haste. At least initially, Milman (2020) noted:

> What is happening today can best be described not as online education but as *emergency remote teaching and learning* (ERTL) — or, as some have called it, pandemic pedagogy. We certainly can't expect ERTL to be like face-to-face schooling, nor should we expect it to resemble the sort of well-planned and designed online education that many have spent years learning to provide. (para. 4)

This quotation from Milman highlighted the urgency of makeshift plans and the initially triaged nature of these rapidly shifting educational frontiers. Teacher educators had to create fully virtual coursework almost immediately and out of necessity, while simultaneously "redefining new understandings of professionalism for their students within the online environment" (Hill et al., 2020, p. 6).

The increased levels of flexibility and understanding required by students and professors alike came to light as a source of humanity and connection, which in this unique setting, became

as valued as academics. In some cases, connection to peers and professors became a source of needed comfort and continuity.

These examples relate well to the structural aspects highlighted in an ecological view of teacher agency and expand on my belief in the robust need for additional qualitative research. The challenges, connections and experiences of teachers and students in these studies could be expanded upon to explore how teachers perceive and experience agency. It would be worthwhile to research further how professors altered existing or past structures to find alternative ways to reach their students outside of their usual classroom interactions.

Studies of Teacher Agency in COVID-19

In a recent essay, Campbell (2020) discussed wider views of power in the context of a "new normal." Specifically,

> What remains to be understood is what a more collaborative, autonomous, and empowered education system could look like both as a result of and in response to the work of teachers and school leaders during the pandemic. Arguably, the goal is not necessarily more autonomy, but the capacity to experience and act with agency.

Campbell (2020) drew on Biesta & Tedder (2007) to express agency as "how an individual can act by means of their environment, resulting from the complex interplay of individual effort, available resources and contextual and structural influences within the place and space of which an individual operates" (Campbell, 2020, p. 339-340). Campbell (2020) posited that during this turbulent time, there has been an increased necessity for teachers to purposefully redesign approaches, and interact with new ways of working, engaging, teaching, and practicing; this outlined a sound argument for the necessity and value of teacher agency during the pandemic and beyond. In this way, the amount of change forced upon teachers, combined with the amount

of change they themselves have been able to take ownership of, was a primary area of interest for this study.

Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway's (2020) study supported a similar theme. Drawing from an international survey that examined data surrounding pedagogy, ethical, attitudinal, and technical (PEAT) the survey was used to help determine teachers' agency during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020). The findings from this study revealed that regardless of teachers' preparedness or unpreparedness for virtual learning, "they were moderately prepared to use various digital tools and willing to make online learning work for them and their students" (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020, p. 239). This statement implied that regardless of experience and training, teachers were ultimately willing to work through challenges, technologically based or otherwise, in order to meet their students' needs.

Kim and Asbury (2020) found six recurring themes in their qualitative study. The researchers included 24 participants in a longitudinal interview study, each of which asked participants to describe a high point, low point, and a turning point during the first month and a half of the lockdown period. Their responses were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The researchers' theme titled "finding a way," connected to the findings of Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) as well. According to Kim and Asbury (2020):

> *Finding a way* incorporates participants' accounts of how, once the initial uncertainty had subsided, they adjusted their thinking and behaviour to provide remote education that would meet the needs of their communities, while preserving their own well-being and that of their pupils. (p. 1071)

This quotation echoed an important theme from several reviewed studies. Specifically, characteristics of determination, resiliency, adaptability, flexibility, and resourcefulness were

classified under themes such as “finding a way” and “making it work” (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). These findings may reflect that despite, or perhaps due to, extraordinary circumstances teachers feel called to continue to do what is best for their students in the face of challenging times. Further, this was echoed in Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway’s (2020) observation that “What most stood out in teachers’ responses were the positive attitudes. Although teachers lacked experience in online teaching and preparation, they were willing to go the extra mile to move teaching to online platforms” (p. 244). In combination, these studies provided valuable points to reflect on in the context of this study.

A Potential Gap in Understanding

The reviewed literature surrounding COVID-19 provided an overview of a nascent research area. COVID-19 has caused shifts across the field of education, and it was important and valuable to document and try to understand teachers’ experiences in these times. I entered this study specifically looking to develop a deeper understanding of teachers’ lived experiences and get closer to understanding the phenomenon of agency and what essential structures contribute to it.

Notably, this review also drew attention to parts of the field that have yet to be adequately explored—namely at the intersection of teaching and learning contexts because of COVID-19 and teachers’ lived experiences of teacher agency. My study endeavored to contribute to a greater understanding of teacher agency specifically as it related to the rapid and drastic shifts in K-12 education brought about in 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The study aimed to contribute to the literature in this area, as more research is needed to closely examine teachers’ experiences and challenges in this historic time.

This qualitative study focused on the lived agentic experiences of secondary English and Language Arts teachers. As such, this literature review laid the initial groundwork for a research study that examined, through qualitative interviews, teachers' experiences of agency in the face of challenging and unprecedented teaching conditions. The research findings have the potential to inform policy for teacher development, impact curriculum decisions, and have possible implications for the fields of preservice teacher education, professional development, and policy surrounding emergency conditions in the field of education.

Conclusion

This review has allowed me to conceptualize my interest more clearly in using an ecological view of agency while centering teachers' narratives about their perceptions and experiences of agency. An ecological view of agency seemed an especially relevant lens due the theory's focus on structures and conditions as impactful factors in determining teachers' agency. In reading studies with similar foci, I have gathered insight into various research methods and taken an in-depth look at emergent themes across them. Based on the way existing studies conceptualized agency and framed their inquiries, I felt that the use of basic qualitative methods were timely, relevant, and currently underrepresented in the research field. Although many of these studies point to where agency is grounded in context, there are yet few studies that attempted to address the phenomenon of agency during COVID-19.

In addition, reviewing the most relevant topical research has allowed me to create a theoretical framework aimed at filling a specific gap in understanding within the literature and to cultivate insights into new questions and considerations (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). I hoped to utilize the ecological theory of teacher agency in a new and potentially influential way, to record lived experiences to examine agency as a phenomenon, and to make room to discuss critical

structures and realities that may impact teachers' experience of agency. The body of research literature surrounding the possible long-term impacts of COVID on education is only beginning to be conducted and theorized. As such, there is a need for close examination of teachers' experiences in this tumultuous time in education. This study aimed to add to the body of literature surrounding the lived experiences of secondary English teachers and their perceptions of agency. Next, Chapter Three describes the methodology used for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Qualitative research is interested not just in events and behaviors, but more deeply in how study participants make sense of events and how their experiences and perceptions impact their behavior (Maxwell, 2012). In choosing a qualitative approach, my research goals were related not just to what happened, but also how study participants' responses were critical to the reality and phenomena I was trying to understand, as opposed to accounts that need to be verified for truth or falsity in absolute terms (Maxwell, 2012, p. 221). The participants' accounts set the standard for the truth of their own experience, that is according to their descriptions and memories, and these accounts were analyzed using a basic qualitative approach as outlined in the data analysis section. This desire for in-depth understanding supported the use of a smaller number of study participants whose individual accounts were analyzed and preserved as unique artifacts, as opposed to a larger scale or survey-based study which might aim to aggregate data across a larger sample of participants (Maxwell, 2012). This chapter provides detailed information on the study's research design, participants and recruitment, researcher positionality, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Design

My research design was a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This was a non-experimental, open-ended, interview-based design appropriate for conducting in-depth exploration of a new research area. This approach was best suited to help me understand an emerging research field and answer the research questions:

RQ1: How do secondary English teachers describe their lived experience of teaching during COVID-19? How do these experiences relate to or shed light on agency?

RQ2: How do secondary English teachers perceive their agency in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What are the structures and contexts teachers identify as impacting experiences of agency?

Basic Qualitative Approach

As a research method, the basic qualitative study builds from a constructivist epistemology. In interviewing participants, I recognized their realities are constantly being constructed by their interactions with the world and similarly, "that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon," (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 23). Further drawing from Merriam and Tisdell (2015) a basic qualitative research approach is concerned with subjects' interpretations of experiences, their construction of their worlds, and the meanings they ascribe to what they have experienced. Therefore, the main goal of the basic qualitative research approach is to understand the ways in which "people make sense of their lives and their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 23). This method made the most sense to answer my research questions, because I was interested in examining participants' experiences and the meaning they ascribe to contextual factors and social elements as they relate to agency. In this research study, interview data was analyzed by seeking and identifying patterns that characterized the participants' understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participants and Recruitment

My study participants were selected through a convenient purposeful sample. I used personal networks to recruit participants so that coordination with school districts was not

necessary. I recruited participants nationally by distributing recruitment letters (Appendix A) to colleagues who forwarded them to potential participants. I asked colleagues to oversee the distribution to avoid my own potential influence over participants. The teachers had to be in at least their third year of teaching, and they had to have taught during the 2019/2020, 2020/2021, and 2021/2022 school years. The size of the sample was appropriate for a basic qualitative study focused on the experiences of individuals. My interviews produced lengthy transcripts, and a small sample size was best for this study, because I had more time to devote to closely analyzing each transcript. I aimed to recruit six to ten teachers for my study. If possible, I wanted study participants to be diverse in terms of gender, race, years of teaching experience, and school setting. However, I could not guarantee this because I used a volunteer process to recruit the participants. In the end, I had six participants who completed my demographic survey (see Appendix B), who fit the requirements outlined above, and who wanted to continue through the interview process. I had several teachers respond to the initial email, but then not follow up by completing the demographic survey. I also had one participant who completed the demographic survey and then chose not to be interviewed.

Participants

Of the six participants, three identified as female and three as male. They ranged in teaching experience from 3-39 years, and taught in rural, suburban, urban, public, and private schools. A brief introduction to each participant follows.

Susan

Susan was a 70-year-old English teacher with 39 years of classroom experience. She had been at her current school through 14 different principals. Throughout the 2019/2020, 2020/2021

and 2021/2022 school years she taught senior English, with multiple levels including honors, college prep, and collaborative courses. She described her school as being Title I and having a large percentage of students who were members of an ethnic-racial minority. Additionally, her school was identified as having large English Language Learner (ELL) and Special Education (SPED) populations. Susan was frank and candid. She struck me as an engaging and experienced storyteller.

Dan

Dan was 30 years old and in his 5th year teaching. He identified as a White male, and he described his school as suburban. Dan stated that his school population was mostly White, middle, and upper middle class, and "affluent." Dan taught World Literature and American Literature and worked mostly with 9th and 11th grade students. He was also the high school cross-country coach; talking to Dan felt like conversing with a coiled spring. Dan was chatty, gregarious, outgoing, and eager to share–I got the sense that it felt good to talk about some of these topics.

Scott

Scott was a 27-year-old, White male, in his third year of teaching. He had experience teaching 9th and 11th grade, but at the time of the interview was teaching 12th grade. He described the high school he taught at as having an urban setting. He approximated that 90% of the student population was Black, 5% were white, and 5% were Hispanic. Scott's demeanor was quiet and a bit reserved. He took his time answering questions and was careful and discerning in his answers. At times, I perceived him as having a lot of underlying stress surrounding his teaching environment, and he described his most recent teaching experience as being "lonely," and lacking the camaraderie he experienced while student teaching.

Colleen

Colleen was a 56-year-old White female with 24 years of teaching experience. She had taught in public, private, and online settings. At the time of the interview, Colleen was teaching 7th and 8th grade English in an online setting. She worked for a county that had (since COVID) established and maintained an online schooling option for students. Colleen specifically stated that given the choice, she intended to stay teaching virtually for the rest of her career. She described her county's demographics as rural, 50% White, politically conservative, and mostly lower middle class in terms of socioeconomic status. Colleen was outgoing, opinionated, and vocal. She seemed to enjoy storytelling and sharing her experiences.

Robert

Robert was a 44-year-old White male in his 21st year of teaching. At the time of the interview, he was teaching 11th and 12th grade English, including AP level. He had a history of serving in the Peace Corps, had a certification in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL), and he also identified himself as the department chair. Robert worked in a public school in an urban environment. When asked to describe the population he served, he estimated that about 92% of the student population was Spanish speaking, with the bulk of students being from families who immigrated from Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic. Robert was easy to talk with, earnest and kind in his responses. He expressed devotion to the population he served and seemed happy to talk about the changes and challenges he had faced in the last couple of years.

Rachel

Rachel was a 39-year-old White female with 14 years of teaching experience. She had taught in a variety of school settings, including private, independent, and public charter schools.

At the time of the interview, she had been teaching 7th grade at her current school for six years. Her school population was about 80% White. Rachel's interview was unique within the study sample because she was the only participant currently teaching at a private school. Rachel was cheerful and professional. She shared a lot of personal details about her teaching journey, and we enjoyed bonding over both having had "pandemic babies" born during COVID-19.

Researcher Positionality

Acknowledging my positionality was to recognize that my identity, views, and conceptions of the world influenced not only my interest in the research topic, but also my understanding and interpretations of data (Holmes, 2020). Holmes (2020) encouraged qualitative researchers to locate themselves in relation to their subject, their participants, and their research context and process. In addition, Holmes (2020) noted the dimension of time, in that identifying and discussing one's positionality can be a time-consuming and often iterative process. I used these guidelines to address my positionality.

In relation to the study, I recognized that my education and former positions as an English educator have guided my interest in this topic. Additionally, I have beliefs, experiences, and memories of myself in this role that have shaped my outlook on how teachers might interact with curriculum and students. Spending time reflecting and memo writing on these experiences and beliefs made me better able to address potential biases where appropriate and to activate these experiences when applicable. These aspects of my positionality also allowed me to understand and relate to teachers' experiences.

When considering my relationships to participants it was not entirely clear how I would be viewed by others. However, through my participation request and my personal

communication I hoped to be viewed as professional, invested in the project, hard-working and open-minded. I do not view myself as intimidating in any way, but I recognized that my status as a doctoral student could produce a particular relationship dynamic and create reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). As such, I framed the data collection process as a collaborative effort by using friendly language and ice-breaker questions to help put the participants at ease and create a more conversational tone. I recognized that I cannot help but influence my research and be influenced by my research context (Holmes, 2020). However, I strived to write open-ended interview questions that encouraged authentic responses and open discussion of experiences without using language or cues that reflected bias or directed the respondents to answer in a certain way.

Data Collection

This section will provide an overview of my pilot study as well as detailed procedures for how data was collected.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in the Spring of 2021. This opportunity, conducted with a family member who is a secondary humanities teacher, was a useful exercise in practicing my procedure and receiving feedback on my interview questions. The pilot interview ran approximately 40 minutes and gave me insight into additional probes and follow-up questions I needed to consider in order to encourage lengthier and more detailed questions. Additionally, the pilot study gave me the chance to test run my transcription and analysis practice. Working with a secondary teacher in a related field helped me to gauge the level of interest and length of responses I might be able to expect from future participants and allowed me to adjust my plans accordingly.

Individual Teacher Interviews

In my opening language, as well as in my lay description, I explained to participants that the most important part of their participation was to give honest, candid, and detailed answers. In other words, there were no right or wrong answers, and participants giving honest responses that were true to themselves was the best type of participation. This information was relayed to participants via a participant information sheet (see Appendix C).

Semi-structured individual interviews, with open-ended questions, were conducted in March and April of 2022. Each interview was conducted in a private, online meeting room using Zoom software, and occurred at a prearranged time that was agreeable to the study participant. Each participant read and signed a consent form (see Appendix D) prior to the beginning of the interview. The interview protocol included an ordered list of open-ended questions and probes focused on encouraging the participant to provide detailed narratives and thick descriptions surrounding their teaching experiences and memories during COVID-19 (see Appendix E for the full interview protocol). The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were recorded using Zoom for later transcription using the Otter.ai transcription technology. I listened to audio of each interview several times, and I corrected the transcripts as I went. I recorded both audio and video using Zoom, because Zoom does not allow the user to pre-select audio only. However, after the interviews I erased the video recording as a means of protecting privacy. Additionally, as I created and edited the transcripts, I changed the participants' names to pseudonyms created from an online name generator. The anonymized transcripts were stored on a password protected computer in my personal study.

I spent time writing memos both before and after interviews, in an attempt to recognize and bracket my biases and expectations. I also wrote down my observations, interpretations, insights, and immediate connections to other interviews or experiences.

The interviews were focused on understanding the lived experiences of teacher participants and teacher agency as it was perceived and described by the study participants. Interviews are often the primary mode of data collection in basic qualitative studies and open-ended interview questions are often used to provide contextualization, capture the experiences, and clarify the phenomenon as it emerges (Bevan, 2014). When possible, I followed the qualitative interviewing advice of (Weiss, 1994) who stated: "permitting the respondent to talk about what the respondent wants to talk about, so long as it is anywhere near the topic of the study, will always produce better data than plodding adherence to the guide" (Weiss, 1994, p. 49). This quotation posits that taking time and allowing participants to have freedom in their narrative will produce more valuable rich descriptions; this logic is in line with the phenomenological attitude (Bevan, 2014). Additionally, I endeavored to build rapport with study participants by asking ice breaker questions, sharing a bit about my own teaching background, using non-intimidating body language, and beginning each interview with language that encourages storytelling and details. These tactics felt largely successful, and I believe by making participants as comfortable as possible I was able to build strong rapport with them. As a result, the data I collected was rich and authentic. In Chapter 5, I also offer some brief, more personal interpretations of elements of the interviews that I personally found particularly valuable, poignant, or transformative.

Data Analysis Procedure

Before and after interviews and analysis I engaged in a reflective process by continuing to question myself about my attitudes, beliefs, awareness, and the information I already have about the emerging phenomena (Bevan, 2014). Then, I worked to bracket away my presuppositions to meet the data with a fresh outlook (Giorgi, 2009, 1985). Immediately after each interview I wrote a memo on my initial responses to the interview experience. I included impressions of participants, idiosyncrasies, and specific notes that I wanted to integrate into later analysis.

I also personally transcribed my interviews, using the voice transcriber on Otter.ai to assist me, as opposed to outsourcing this work. This step allowed for another opportunity to immerse myself in the data and to pay close attention to any changes or adjustments that I wanted to make to my interview technique or questions. The transcripts were read the first time for accuracy and understanding. I read them as they were collected in hopes of improving my interviewing techniques as I went along. Reading through transcripts for clarity and understanding also helped me to identify areas that needed expansion or additional probes, and I felt that this strategy was effective in improving my interview technique over time. I printed the transcripts with a notes column on the right hand side to give space to record thoughts and meanings that emerge in the moment (Dahlberg et al., 2008). In order to best utilize the notes that I took, I utilized four notes categories suggested by Maxwell: 1. method notes: to notice if a certain question or probe worked well or didn't work, 2. non-verbals: a tone of voice or gesture that the participant made that would help to interpret what was said, 3. researcher state of mind:

to note how my own feelings or thoughts may have impacted the way I conducted a portion of the interview, and 4. emic: verbatim quotations by the participant that might serve as themes for a larger set of utterances (Maxwell, 2013). For example, as I was interviewing Dan, he used the jarring phrase "we put everybody's brain in a blender." As I was interviewing him, I jotted down the timestamp 28:46, because I had a visceral response to the phrase and wanted to come back to it. When I printed the transcript, this was coded as "mental health students/ mental health teachers," but I also circled the phrase to use in my analysis. The emic code later became part of Theme Four: "We Put Everybody's Brain in a Blender": Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), collecting and analyzing data simultaneously is usually preferable in qualitative research because collection and analysis are ongoing processes. timely engagement allows researchers to connect with data when it is freshest in their minds. I used these tactics by writing memos, adjusting questions, taking observational notes, trying out themes by collaborating with my advisor and committee members, and taking notes on how my data connected to my theoretical framework.

Coding

In conducting my data analysis, I started by looking for sections of the data that could be broken down into a unit of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) a data unit should be heuristic, in that it reveals information relevant to the study, and also should only be broken down to the level at which it can still stand alone as a piece of information. I used inductive coding to begin to label units as they arose. By choosing inductive coding I approached the data as if the familiar was strange (Dahlberg et al., 2008; Geertz, 1983).

This required a certain level of openness, staying open to the richness of the language, the idiosyncrasies and unique turns of phrase that honor the participants' true meanings in my findings. The use of emic codes makes room for meanings to arise organically from the transcripts. Next, I used axial or analytic coding to start to make categorical connections and groupings of codes within each transcript (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I did use the deductive code "agency," to looks for specific examples provided by participants that supported and hindered agency. I repeated this process with each transcript, keeping a master list of codes and categories that emerged as I went (see Appendix F for an excerpt of the codebook). As I conducted my analysis, I utilized the constant comparison method, and iteratively examined my codes as they were emerging. Using constant comparison allowed for consideration of new codes as the data is reviewed, which allowed room for shifts and adjustments within transcripts, as well as for the relationships between with and between data to unfold (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The purpose of this approach was to start making connections across units and across transcripts to look for trends, recurrences, and emergent themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Finally, I moved toward the synthesis portion of the analysis, keeping in mind that the analysis was a cyclical and iterative process. This is where I began trying to merge codes in order to seek broader and more overarching themes. For example, the codes mental health (students), mental health (teachers), social (students), social (teachers), wellness (students) and wellness (teachers), later became combined into Theme 4: "We Put Everybody's Brain in a Blender," Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being.

After I combined my codes into major theme categories I went back with highlighters, pens and pencils, and color-coded major sections to make them easier to identify when I was selecting quotations as evidence for the findings presented. The major overarching themes/colors I utilized were related to online teaching, socio-emotional well-being for students and teachers, expectations in COVID, explicit references to agency, innovation and flexibility, and links to the future. Through all of this I used a single copy of the transcripts so I could refer back to my interpretive notes on the right-hand side when I went back to write my analysis. When I was finished color-coding it was really powerful to lay the transcripts out on the floor and visualize the connections between participants (see Appendix G for an example of a coded page). For example, I used yellow to highlight codes related to wellness, and it was striking to see the way this color appeared frequently across every transcript. Although I initially planned to use Atlas.ti., deciding to use hand-coding was empowering and felt more authentic to me. With a larger number of transcripts, I feel that hand-coding could be cumbersome, but for this study it felt illuminating to physically immerse myself in the data. When it came time to write Chapter 4, I was able to use the search and find feature on my computer to locate quotations I had hand-coded and copy them verbatim into my findings section.

Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Transferability

Qualitative research can only be valid and reliable if it is carried out in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In order to maintain the ethical standards of my study, I went through IRB to receive approval, I only used volunteer participants, and I received consent ahead of beginning my study. To inform policy and practice, research must be rigorously conducted and present findings and understandings in a way that is meaningful to readers (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2015). I felt that I was a qualified researcher to conduct this study because I have experience in the field of English education, which made me more relatable to participants and qualified to record and interpret their responses. Additionally, I have completed other qualitative research as part of coursework and enrichment opportunities under the guidance of experienced professors and researchers; these experiences have given me valuable insight into the ethical and logistical concerns of qualitative research. I further established trustworthiness by taking steps to enhance credibility and transferability as appropriate.

Credibility

In qualitative research, the concept of credibility often replaces the idea of validity in quantitative research. The concept of credibility relates to showing the results of the research to be believable, namely, as believable and tied to the reality of study participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In my research study, there was a certain level of inherent credibility because human beings were being interviewed directly by the researcher. Participants' described experience narratives were directly recorded and analyzed, without the use of translation or other interference factors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Further, the idea of truth comes into play, and as the quotations and transcripts were directly recorded, the data collected was true to the words and experiences of the individual (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Transferability

As mentioned previously, generalizability of my findings is not the goal of this research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). However, the use of rich descriptions allowed for specific details and insights that may be relatable to readers. My analysis of lived experience narratives

provided insight into human experiences which may be transferable, or at least relatable, for use and understanding of similar contexts.

Trustworthiness

In considering trustworthiness, I endeavored to address this aspect of my research project by taking steps such as seeking counterexamples and writing memos. The use of counterexamples provided a means to keep in check the tendency to over-interpret or over-generalize findings. For example, I spent a lot of time rereading and examining Rachel's transcripts. Frequently, she was a thematic outlier, but instead of dismissing aspects of her narrative because they didn't align with other findings, I tried to dig in and reorient my thought process to make room for the juxtaposition of her experience to some of the other findings. Additionally, I used memos to mitigate the influence of my own preconceived expectations and biases, this helped me to maintain a perspective of self-awareness and reflection throughout my inquiry (Maxwell, 2013). One preconceived notion I noticed in a memo that I had to keep myself aware of was the idea that some secondary teachers may actually prefer teaching online. As an adult learner, I enjoy both in-person and online courses, but as a parent, I have a strong preference for in-person learning for my children. It was good to be aware of this preconceived notion ahead of time, and it was fascinating to hear Colleen discuss the many reasons she prefers teaching in an online model.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter reflects my findings as determined through inductive coding and the thematic analysis of six semi-structured interviews. Each interview illuminated my research questions in unique ways. However, the interviews simultaneously revealed a lot of overlap between the findings for my research questions. As such, I draw individual quotations and insights from each participant, as well as draw each into the larger thematic narrative of the study. In the next chapter I will further synthesize the findings and draw connections to other studies.

My review of the literature highlighted many studies in which teacher agency is seen as ecological; it is the result of a synthesis of forces and circumstances, some of which are dependent on the individual, but many which are external and ever shifting. I designed this study in hopes of not just recording, synthesizing, and analyzing the revelatory experiences of secondary English teachers in relation to agency, but also to look beyond the study and imagine how the participants' experiences might inform future studies as well as school policy in the changing face of education.

My guiding research questions were:

RQ1: How do secondary teachers describe their lived experience of teaching during COVID-19? How do these experiences relate to or shed light on agency?

RQ2: How do secondary teachers perceive their agency in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What are the structures and contexts teachers identify as impacting experiences of agency?

The pursuit of the answer to these questions guided my research as well as laid the foundation for my thematic analysis of individual interview transcripts. Additionally, these questions were at the forefront of my mind as I worked to synthesize and build a wider thematic narrative.

Through the six semi-structured interviews I conducted, six key themes emerged in my analysis. These themes built from the connections formed across individual interviews. The themes were: Theme 1: From Face-to-Face to Faceless: How Student Engagement Impacted Teachers, Theme Two: "I had no Paper.": How COVID Changed Teachers' Workload and Roles, Theme Three: The Necessity of Flexibility and Innovation in Times of Crisis, Theme Four: "We Put Everybody's Brain in a Blender": Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being, Theme Five: "Wiggle Room," and How Agency Plays out Within a Bureaucratic Public School System, and Theme Six: Looking Forward. In the following sections I highlight the importance of these themes, as well as significant sub themes, that emerged. In my analysis I have chosen to prioritize the language and stories of participants, to put forward their words and ideas so that the reader may authentically engage with the original language of the participants, as well as my analysis of the transcript. My goal was for readers to be able to understand the perspectives, words, and experiences of the participants, so that they too may "know" them, while also protecting their identities.

Theme 1: From Face-to-Face to Faceless: How Student Engagement Impacted Teachers

When schools abruptly shifted to a virtual format in the Spring of 2020, it rapidly changed the daily interactions between teachers and students. One of the first (and repeated) observations participants made surrounded students' level of willingness to show up online, participate, and show their faces, or not.

Five out of six participants commented on the frequency with which they felt they were teaching to “blank screens,” or “circles with students' initials.” Within these observations were layers of comments surrounding the possible reasons why students were choosing not to show their faces. In all cases it seemed as though teachers were not able to “require” students to turn on their cameras and, left to their own devices, many students did not. Engaging students in a virtual environment was described by Robert and Scott as “challenging” and others echoed similar sentiments.

Having the choice of whether to show their faces shifted the power dynamic and learning environment of students who were often working from home. Susan speculated that there was a level of embarrassment between students who felt they had less than their peers, implying that some students were hesitant to show their surroundings in comparison to their classmates. Robert posited that his particular population capitalized on the ability to choose whether or not to attend class; he noted “[I’m] sitting in front of a screen. The students that I work with, by and large, didn't join our meetings. If they did, they didn't turn their cameras on, it was just, it was untenable, but we made it work somehow, you know, it was just challenging.”

Dan faced similar hurdles, as many of his students would sign in and simply walk away– essentially logging their attendance for the day but checking out academically. Dan felt as if the 2019/2020 was the “lost year.” As his county shifted to online learning, Dan commented “most of the stuff that the counties and stuff made us do didn't really count or make any sense. And they kind of just said, like, ‘you don't have to do anything.’” Dan speculated his students’ lack of participation online reflected their understanding that teachers could not prevent them from receiving a passing grade in the virtual environment due to the county’s lack of required accountability. In the end, Dan felt like when COVID hit, he was no longer truly teaching. He

observed, “When you think of the word teaching, that wasn't happening in between March and the end of the school year. So, what I was doing was like, I don't know, like, outreach, like email outreach to like people who didn't want to respond.” The virtual environment did not feel authentic, and in many ways seemed to be a one-sided endeavor, because according to Dan, “The internet doesn't allow you to get to the *someone* in the same way that a face-to-face interaction does.” It is worth noting that as the number or roles teachers take on expands, their time spent focusing exclusively on teaching seems to diminish. It seems possible that as agency in general (to take on multiple roles increases) teacher agency specifically seems to decrease.

Robert’s school offered online “blended,” options for approximately a year and a half. He described this as an “intermediate phase” where students could opt to come into the building or work remotely, and he noted “Nearly every student I had elected to stay home.” Robert commented on the psychological challenge of this hybridized model in which he described himself as “either at home staring at a blank screen or I was in my old classroom staring at a blank screen sort of hoping for something to happen.” Similarly, in the Fall of the 2020/2021 school year, Dan went back to school with only six or seven people in the building, and initially, the virtual environment didn’t improve much, “[we] started out virtual and that was garbage. And no one wanted to do anything. So, you know, I was talking to a screen of empty, with empty rooms. [...] I ate lunch by myself, and I talked to people who didn't respond.” Susan joked that she and her student teacher were so accustomed to just seeing students’ initials in circles on the screen, that when “dress like the student day” came, she and her student teacher dressed up like circles with initials. Scott echoed similar sentiments about the challenges of students keeping their cameras off stating “There's a joke during virtual teaching that, like, you would ask a question, and would just be like asking a question into the void. Or there'd be many times that

your students weren't there with everyone's cameras off." These observations across participants reflected an initial struggle to cross the threshold of in-person to virtual learning.

Sometimes having cameras off was less of a choice and more of a necessity, as students with weaker or more inconsistent internet connections were not able to keep their cameras on and stay connected. Colleen pointed out "Cameras off, you know, oh, they can hear better with the camera off, you just have to balance and be patient and go with the flow." Robert pointed out different student populations had different participation levels in the virtual environment. His AP classes had higher participation rates, but his ESL classes sometimes only had one or two students show up. Robert also felt that for ESL students "it's a lot to ask people to sort of speak in front of a group and certainly, over the computer, it's somehow more complex." He felt that his students were more self-conscious and less likely to participate if they did not feel confident in their language skills.

These comments supported the theme of how student's online behavior impacted teachers' behavior. In these examples, to a degree, the increase in student agency coincided with a decrease in teacher agency. Teachers could not force their students to show their faces, an arrangement which gave students more agency to attend classes or just pretend to attend. Additionally, as Colleen, Robert, and Susan all pointed out, many students were taking classes virtually without parents or caretakers at home, leaving them with more freedom and unstructured time than they would have experienced in a traditional classroom setting. These new virtual spaces impacted teachers' experiences of agency, because while several participants mentioned they could exercise their host controls and had the ability to do things like create breakout rooms or read chats between students, they also had to face increased virtual independence on the part of their students.

Subtheme: Positive Uses of the Virtual Setting for Students

Several participants posited that despite the challenges, in contrast to the last section, some cases of online learning provided students with more positive agency, autonomy, and flexibility. Robert noted

> However, I did have kids sort of appreciate the, I guess the ease of it, just sort of the autonomy they had, [...] some kids would do like, one course all day, and I would, you know, they would come to my class, they would just get a whole bunch done. And I wouldn't see them for a week because they're going on there doing science all one day, math one day at night, that kind of worked for them. [...] I mean, it had its upside, where students have a little bit of agency in terms of how they access the material.

Robert's words observed a shift in student agency; students were experiencing changes and hardships in the COVID climate but were also experiencing greater levels of freedom in terms of accessing their schoolwork and structuring their own academic time and workflow. Colleen also speculated that with students who were thriving in the virtual setting she was able to provide them with more freedom and responsibility, such as when she allowed one of her more advanced book club groups to have their own virtual space: "I would just let them be in a breakout room, so I wasn't even there. And then other times, I turn off my camera off my mic, just because it was just so organic, in their flow of it." Colleen, who at the time of her interview had taught in the virtual environment for more than two years straight, also felt that sometimes the opportunity to participate in writing through the chat is empowering for students "you know, things that kids will put in the chat. to me, or the group, right, that they might never have said if they had been in [person]," this sentiment was also echoed by Susan, noted that for better or worse, sometimes students would share things in the chat that they wouldn't have been comfortable sharing out

loud in person; students also held side conversations amongst themselves not realizing she could read their conversations as well.

Lastly, both Colleen and Rachel's schools have kept Zoom as an option for students with extenuating circumstances. Even though her school has largely remained open for in-person instruction, Rachel said "We've kept zoom going anyway, for kids that are like, if kids are actually testing positive. Which happens, it happens periodically. Then they can Zoom after their second day." This allows students to keep up with classroom instruction during quarantines and not be as behind upon their return. Similarly, Colleen noted:

> I know it's gonna continue, and I hope it will continue for other counties, is offering the online options, right? Because some kids [provides medical example] being in an online school is phenomenal. If something's happening, they can just turn off the camera and walk away. So, some kids, it's really, it's hard because some kids do better in both environments, one or the other. So, I hope that that will continue.

These examples offer examples of scenarios in which the option to learn in a virtual environment can be beneficial to students and offer flexibility in times of turmoil or illness. This subtheme also supported the understanding that certain students may be better suited to different learning environments. Observing comments around students' increase in agency during virtual learning helped answer RQ3, because students' ability to make new choices in the virtual environment shifted the power structure of the classroom and impacted teachers' experiences of agency. The way teachers' roles changed will be further addressed in the next section.

Theme Two: "I had no Paper.": How COVID Changed Teachers' Workload and Roles

All six participants discussed the changes in their workload during their time spent teaching virtually. These observations ranged from the digitization of materials to the need for

different classroom management tools in an online environment. The theme “I had no paper,” reflects an in vivo code taken from Robert’s transcript. This phrase stuck out to me because it touched on the literal intangibility of teaching virtually, as well as struck a chord of a powerful change–the idea of English teachers without paper to physically write on or books to physically read was touched upon in most of the interviews. The subthemes for this section relate to physicality of materials, using online tools, and classroom management.

Subtheme: Physicality: Teaching with Intangibles

At least in the beginning, schools and teachers were largely unprepared to successfully maintain a rigorous and engaging online learning program. Teachers’ interactions with students were dramatically altered due to a lack of physicality, tangibility, and students’ newfound ability to control their virtual presence. Dan’s earlier observation that what he was doing wasn’t actually teaching reflects how environmental restrictions play a large role in agency. Dan also talked about how using physical vs. virtual materials shifted his approach.

Dan discussed the challenges of trying to use virtual materials that would impact students in a meaningful way.

> I tried my best to virtualize, that's not a word. But look, make it all virtual, like, you know, like, close to that stuff. But like, there's only so much virtual that you can -- there's only so many things that are tangible, you can turn virtual that have the same impact, you know? So I did the best I could with that stuff. And then the rest was kind of just a wash and like, let's hope this doesn't keep. It was like, let's hope that the bridge is brief and is fixed when I come back across the other direction. Because if it's not then like it's gonna suck again until I come back again.

Dan's communication style was animated and colorful. This quotation reflected his demeanor throughout the interview, where it was clear he had imagined comparisons and descriptions for the new situations of the digital classroom. He imagined working with only virtual materials as struggling to cross a broken bridge, and he hoped that when he came back across everything would be fixed and headed back to normal on the other side. Although this section focuses on virtual teaching, Dan extended his examples to talk about how even upon returning the in-person learning in the beginning of the 2021/2022 school year, the physicality piece remained a struggle. He described that for people who are tactile learners, it was kind of "Tough shit, basically, right?" because students were not allowed to share or sit close to each other, hands-on experiences or group work was basically non-existent. He pointed out students used to be able to share books and materials, but with that level of physicality off the table, teachers would have to find digital copies of texts, or choose something else entirely depending on what was readily available. Robert, who placed great value on choosing his curriculum commented:

> I had no paper. And so, I had to find the right text. And that's one of the hardest parts of my job any year is finding the right text and creating the right scaffold so that every student can find a, you know, that point of entry to the task, or text or whatever it is. That just became a little more complex.

Robert's comment highlighted the shift in the lens he used to try to choose texts for his students. Robert, the English department chair at his school, repeatedly emphasized the agency and autonomy he had in making text selections, however, his choices were limited not by his school, but by access and the availability of the "right" texts. Robert strived to choose texts that were relevant and accessible to his students. His commentary brought to light that management and procurement of materials may have been more time consuming and challenging for English

educators than for teachers in other content areas since English teachers tend to need whole texts or larger excerpts of texts than other subjects.

Subtheme: A Whole New [Virtual] World: Technology, Engagement, and Management

This subtheme emerged as four out of six participants specifically discussed the experience of learning to use new technologies in order to teach online. Susan, Colleen, and Scott discussed how teachers learned new technologies primarily on their own, while Rachel's comments centered around how this looked with substantial administrative support. Robert provided an example of using teacher inquiry where he used trial and error to make rapid adjustments based on student responses. Additionally, several participants also discussed how switching to online schooling shifted their classroom management strategies as well as created challenges related to engagement. In March of 2020, teachers were largely not able to function in the ways they were used to within the new space(s) of the online classroom.

Susan, who had 39 years of teaching experience at the time of the interview, talked about the need to diversify her virtual teaching portfolio:

> Well, if I'm looking at technology you didn't want to do the same thing over and over and over and over again, every day [so that] involves learning new tech, learning new technology. Which involves either being able to have virtual meetings with a coach, or somebody who could teach you, or learning how to use YouTube. YouTube is your best friend. So, that was one of the things, and I told the kids look, I think I was, I was 70 at the time. I said, 'if I can teach myself how to do this, then you have no excuse.'

Susan's demeanor was one of straightforward confidence. This example reflected a change in Susan's workload and highlighted her no-nonsense communications with her students. Having never taught online before, she had to engage with new technologies to keep things interesting,

and she challenged her students that if she could do it, then they could as well. Susan went on to talk about the new skills she and her student teacher showed their students, such as the necessity of collaborating on Google docs and respecting other's work in digital spaces. She commented, "You know, we taught them how to split their screen. One of the kids came in and said, 'Well, I just got a new monitor.' Okay, we hooked it up, and we walked them through the steps to do it."

Colleen echoed similar sentiments, even though she teaches mostly synchronously online, she felt that she spends a lot of time digitizing materials, making slideshows, and reinventing lessons to work in online platforms. Although (uniquely) she preferred online teaching, she said "And so, yeah, I spend a lot of time working, you know, extra, I would probably say, as an online teacher, I spend way more time working than I did when I was face to face."

Scott, who was very early in his teaching career when COVID began, talked about structural shifts he made to his classroom. He took a course through the Modern Classroom Project:

> They teach a model that is hybrid, where teachers record short instructional videos, and then have practice assignments and short quizzes at the end of what comes together as a lesson of sorts. And I tried to structure my classes in this way [...] so that students could continue to follow along with the class even if they were quarantined. So yeah, the hybrid them joining like a Google meet. And then also having our assignments online as well helped in some ways.

Scott was very reflective throughout the interview, and he was cognizant of the fact that his entire teaching career has been impacted by COVID. This quotation highlighted his willingness to try new things, but also showed that it was an entirely new approach than he had experienced during his student teaching.

Robert noted that he "definitely had to sort of double down on how I use technology, as we all did. And I was comfortable using technology. And, but my lessons were entirely digital. So, Google Classroom became our sort of go-to platform." This highlighted the shift away from traditional classroom learning, and toward a new platform. Even for seasoned teachers like Robert, who were used to incorporating technology into their teaching, this was a change. As was mentioned in the first thematic section, Robert also had many students completing work on alternative schedules, which led to him creatively reimagining how students could complete work on their own. He noted:

> So I had to create a lesson or an activity that a student could likely do at three in the morning, as opposed to 12 in the afternoon with me, you know, so I was creating materials that were, I mean, I would make an instructional video, literally, I would make a video of me explaining how to do the thing, right, and put it sort of as a link at the top of the page so that, you know, the student could complete everything on her own terms, or when it made sense for them, you know, had a lot of students working during the day and finishing their schoolwork at night, and that that's how they liked it. It was not ideal for me, certainly, but that was the situation.

This quotation included Robert's speculation that many of his students were working throughout the pandemic, and he commented elsewhere that his particular population had many issues with interrupted childcare and disrupted income sources within their families. These circumstances may help shed some light on why Robert's students were working more asynchronously. Robert also talked about his earlier attempts at online teaching and how they changed over time. He noted that in the beginning he would post on Google Classroom each day, "and it was just a

simple like, hey, check in question, this is what we're working on today, click here for the work." However, over time, he said he realized:

> That created too much workflow, even though they were baby steps to me, that seemed like a lot for the kids. So, I had to really revisit how structurally I presented things and kind of what it would look like to the learner. And you know, so a unit might get boiled down to just five steps, and then if I make contact with a kid, and I said, 'Hey, what step are you on?' And [they said] 'I don't know.' [I could say] 'All right, well, let's see.'

This shift impacted Robert's role as a classroom teacher, because rather than planning to meet face to face, or synchronously, he began seeing the materials through the steps each student would be taking and developing more guided tutorials to be prepared to meet them where they were each day.

Rachel talked about her experience preparing for online teaching in the Spring of 2019/2020. Her school stayed on Spring Break for an extra week to prepare for the shift to a synchronous virtual program. She commented, "I think for some other schools, for a lot of different reasons, had to kind of just like email, kids work or sort of like, work asynchronously. My school really hustled to pull together a synchronous program." Rachel talked about the amount of training available to her prior to beginning to teach virtually, noting that she learned how to use Zoom, set up screen casts and received guidance on creating virtual assessments. She commented that a lot of her support came from the middle school administration at her school:

> And then what was so amazing was that all of our administration didn't even take spring break. [...] So they had, they had been working together to come up with all these training sessions for us for their spring break. [...] But it was really awesome to see our administration hustling and the fact that they had done so much research and so much

> work and had been talking to schools in California to figure out what was working and not working, you know, those schools that had already been virtual for a week or two. And they had bought all of these programs, and they had trained different people around school to be facilitators in different sessions that you could join. I mean, I really did feel overwhelmed, but also supported that we had people kind of like a step ahead of us. [...] We were able to have a huge impact on our decisions. [...] Like, you could sign up for all of these different sessions, and all of these different topics that could be helpful to you, and different programs, different resources. [...] There were so many choices like menu items of what you would be interested in.

In this case, Rachel's commentary, while thematically aligned with other participants, provided a different tone and context. She was a bit of an outlier in many cases, because while her job and tasks certainly changed, she was the only one to speak extensively about the large-scale support, training, and resources her school provided to help make the transition more manageable and more successful. This contrast appears across several themes, and how the contrast speaks to the question of teacher agency during COVID will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Subtheme: Virtual Classroom Management and Intersections with Socio-political Contexts

Several participants noted the differences not just in teaching and engagement, but in how they interacted with students and managed their classrooms in an online setting. Colleen noted, "You know, I have kids with Confederate flags on their wall. And we have to ask them to angle their camera. There's a rule that says no flags, right, even if it's a US flag." Although Colleen offered this as a quick example of ways she has had to manage a virtual environment, it offered a bridge to think about the physical environments teachers are used to managing. Most of the time, teachers have classrooms in which they can control elements such as furniture arrangement and

decor. Colleen's observation brought to light the inability to completely control the virtual environment because students are in their own physical environment. Susan noted that most students were working from their bedrooms, and she put in place some virtual classroom rules, she smiled ruefully as she said, "You know, my deal was you had to have you had to have a shirt on and you had to have your bed made." These examples reflect the blurring of the school and home environment. In Colleen's example, what is usually viewed as private space must be considered through the eyes of teachers and peers; this could increase opportunities for student reflection in terms of what could be considered hurtful, offensive, or otherwise inappropriate. Similarly, Susan inserted herself into the home environment by imposing rules on chores and presentability.

Robert specifically discussed challenges of creating safe spaces online for students. He described the difficulty and necessity of meeting this need using the following example:

> We processed, the George Floyd murder and sort of the follow up, you know, Black Lives Matters protest over Zoom. And I was part of the community of people that helped to create our community safe space for our students who were processing it in their own ways, and also sort of not participating, but sort of witnessing a lot of the protests and sort of the local reactions to it. And that stands out, I mean, it's, that's the last two years will definitely be an indelible memory, but sort of dealing with that, and sort of just creating the safe space where kids could join a Zoom meeting and sort of talk about what's happening, but also trying to create structure and make sure everybody's voice was heard. And it's something again, you could probably do in a classroom with some planning, but relative ease, but to kind of manage that over Zoom and sort of make sure that it was a safe space, you know, and it became really complex. But you know, we did

> the right thing. I mean, we definitely gave kids a chance to sort of say what they were thinking on, on all sides, you know, what their experience is, what their opinions were. And that way, you know, that'll always stand out in my memory, I'd say.

This was a powerful reminder that schools are not just academic learning spaces, but truly social and emotional processing spaces as well. Robert talked about how he and his colleagues worked to translate many of the "teacher moves" that they would use in a face-to-face setting "just sort of translated them into the Zoom world. And, you know, maintain sort of host controls, if needed." This example related well to my third research question because Robert identified the socio-political contexts and the virtual classroom structure as impacting his experiences of being an agent in the virtual classroom. He felt empowered to build this safe space for discussion and maintain the structure using host controls. Additionally, the example Robert gave provided a chance to reflect on how socio-political contexts, which are key aspects of the ecological model for teacher agency, translated into the digital world. Here, Robert demonstrated how teachers navigated the social and political forces at play and cultivated an opportunity for agency by creating space for safe and meaningful conversations and connections to be made online.

Theme Three: The Necessity of Flexibility and Innovation in Times of Crisis

Another key theme that emerged was how much flexibility and innovation were needed just to keep classes afloat during COVID-19. Teachers commented on the shock and rapid changes that took place, as well as the need for flexibility that was needed to implement changes in the beginning of the pandemic. Additionally, participants shared some of the continued shifts in approaches and tactics that emerged in the following months and years.

Robert spoke poignantly about watching announcements from the local mayor and chancellor of education in the moments leading up to the announcement that schools would be going remote. He described this saying:

> We're going to stay home, for I think they said the next two weeks, which is laughable in hindsight [...] And I remember, you know, having that big, we have a big promethean board in my classroom, and we had sort of the live stream set up and the whole thing and it felt heavy. You know, I remember texting my brother as I'm planning, and I say, "don't mind me, I'm just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic over here," you know, like, it's really, you felt you felt this momentous thing that nobody quite could give description to. [...]There's sort of like other worldliness that sort of roots you in the moment you're like, this is actually happening.

This description was so stirring and interesting, because even though Robert was describing a moment from more than two years ago, he described it with such detail and emotion. His text to his brother highlights that he knew a major shift was coming, and teachers had to move through the "other worldliness" that was descending upon them.

Rachel described the early days in the pandemic stating "I think we all learned how to be flexible. I think we all learned how to just kind of like take it day by day," and she noted that once her school went back to in-person instruction, "It was just really intensive is the word that I would use, like, just so much supervision, so many duties. So much cleaning that happened." These changes marked a shift in teachers' duties as the amount of time Rachel described that she and her colleagues spent making sure students wore their masks properly, maintained distancing guidelines, and proctoring classes increased dramatically. She described the additional workload in regard to cleaning, space, and collaboration with colleagues "we had to wipe every desk after

every class and we had to hustle, like we used the biggest spaces on campus. We really had to work together. I'd say teamwork would probably be in there too as a positive word."

Dan echoed Rachel's comments about the level of cleaning responsibilities teachers had to take on. He noted:

> We get these [holds up huge sanitation bucket] and they're like, 'Hey, go between every class period, and the five minutes that you have, become the custodian, but like bleach style, not just like sweep.' [...] So we basically became chemistry sanitation people, in between periods, not at the end of the day. So that was a pretty big change.

Dan's description reflected how teachers were required to take on additional roles and responsibilities outside of their normal job descriptions. Although many participants talked about flexibility and the need to work together to make it work, there was also a very real sense that a lot of the cleaning and monitoring in terms of COVID mitigation strategies were top-down orders and put extra strain on teachers.

Colleen, who has remained virtual since March of 2020, talked about the need to utilize new tools and teaching strategies, she noted "So in teaching online this year, and last year, you have to be willing to have a, a, a new tool bag or kit. [...]Your toolbox has to have new things in it." Scott, whose first year of teaching was the 2019/2020 school year observed "I think largely, for me, the teaching experience has been one of a lot of experimentation. As a new teacher, I'm learning how to teach virtually, and with some of these new technologies." Scott's entire teaching experience thus far has been shaped by COVID, and he has been simultaneously beginning his teaching career and learning to use new approaches to teaching.

As well, Susan talked about creative ways to get students to take charge of their environments and participate. She said that a lot of her students were resistant to turning on their cameras:

> But then when we got into things like, okay, today is bring your pet to school day or bring your stuffed animal to school day, and we'd have these things that the kids would turn on their cameras, because they were eager to show off.

Susan noted that because most of her students were working from their bedrooms at home and she and her student teacher would get creative:

> Well, it was just something that, okay, you need to give them an incentive to be there. And if I see that you are cleaning up your room, and you're showing me that okay, my bed is made, and my clothes are not all over the floor now. Okay, you know, I used to send certificates home, put them in the mail and say, okay, congrats. Congratulations for having the neatest room of the day.

Susan's examples of innovation showed how she was constantly thinking about her students and trying to find ways to keep things interesting and fun despite challenging circumstances.

Rachel, the only participant who was teaching at a private school at the time of her interview, talked about the repurposing of spaces and the increased time spent outside:

> You know, normally you're kind of in the same classroom. We moved all over the place, all over campus, and we have a beautiful campus, and we were very much encouraged to teach outside. Right, that was, that was really different. They tented a lot of spaces, they got tons of outdoor chairs, they upped our WiFi…My school's unusual in how much they were able to sort of like, throw at it. I know, there was a lot of grant money available for

hopefully most schools. But they really went nuts, like making it work as best as possible. But it was very intense.

This statement supported the theme of flexibility and innovation, it also highlighted the unique perspective Rachel provided in this study. Based on my study, Rachel's school was unusual in "how much they were able to like, throw at it," in terms of resources and funding. Arguably, as the only private school represented in the study, Rachel's school was seemingly less limited by external stipulations. While some other participants, such as Susan, mentioned the reimagining of school events like an outdoor graduation, Rachel was the only teacher who spoke explicitly about teaching outside. When asked to expand on some memories that stood out, Rachel added "I think all the teaching outside last year, like we really taught a lot outside, which was actually in a lot of ways, kind of old-fashioned teaching." She went on to add that social distancing added a unique challenge noting, "So I think a lot of it was just the puzzle of how to have them still, like working together on things without actually being near each other." Rachel added that one of her greatest exercises in flexibility was teaching through multiple modalities at the same time. She described teaching one of her larger classes with some students in the room with her, others in a neighboring classroom watching on a live stream, and still others working virtually from home. She expressed, "So I think one thing that will stick out about that year was like literally feeling like my head was supposed to be like in three places, teaching three completely different groups of kids who were learning kind of in three very different ways."

Susan was also quick to bring up the need for flexibility, she commented, "Flexible. You had to be extremely, you had to be extremely flexible. You had to be innovative. You had to be mother, father, counselor, lawyer, you know, anything and everything." She described that her students were going through a lot of change and having to take on new roles in their own homes.

She felt that as an educator, it required a lot of understanding to help her students navigate their responsibilities. Susan brought up "A lot of my kids were taking care of nieces and nephews. They would say 'Okay, I got to go change my niece and put her down.'" [And I would say] 'Okay, you know, come back in 10.'" In these ways Susan felt the need to accommodate her students' home lives and allow them the space they needed to take care of themselves and their families.

Susan went on to describe ways in which her county tried to recreate traditions like graduation in new ways. She talked about the day students came to pick up graduation tickets and the school had set up stations to decorate graduation caps, and places to do photo shoots with one or two friends. She stated "But we tried, we tried to make it as much of a social thing as we possibly could without going over the mandated limits. And cleaning up after each group." Similarly, when students graduated and drove cars around the local racetrack, she said she received text messages from students saying '"Oh, my God, this isn't like we have to sit in a cap and gown and listen to a bunch of boring speakers. And this is wonderful!'" Susan's examples reflected several examples of ways in which teachers adapted to their surroundings and worked to provide positive experiences for their students within the new limitations of their learning environment. In this instance the element of adaptation feels closely linked to the ecological view of agency. This example was interesting because it related to all three research questions. In relation to RQ1, Susan's descriptive language during the interview provided insight into her lived experience of trying to give students some sense of belonging, normalcy, and socialization. For RQ2, this showed how teachers tried to do everything they could to make things fun and social for students without breaking new mandates. Lastly, the social distancing guidelines were presented as impacting the context in which teachers could live out their agency.

Subtheme: Expectations for Students During COVID-19 and "The Pandemic Hangover"

All six participants discussed how flexibility extended to expectations for students and how standards and requirements have shifted during COVID. Some of the initial changes occurred when schools went virtual in the Spring of 2020, but many teachers commented on how much expectations continue to be altered even as schools have returned to a new normal with in-person learning. This section highlights the experiences participants shared regarding adjusting their own classroom expectations and the way forward.

Dan talked about the abrupt shift to virtual learning in the Spring of 2020. He noted, "And then the county was just like, you know, you don't have to submit any work or do anything like you get kind of a free pass-- congratulations." Robert echoed similar sentiments, commenting that while he felt compromise was necessary due to the level of crisis, he simultaneously pointed out, "it was frustrating for a lot of us to see how dreadfully simple it was to get a credit, you know, if you showed up and you did one or two very basic things. Oh, yeah, you got that credit." Dan felt that students began to view deadlines as "arbitrary," and "meaningless," and Susan noted that her school implemented a policy that teachers could not give any grade below a 55, even if a student did not submit the work.

Scott seemed to feel that there was a lingering sense of "fatigue and burnout" that he observed in his students that occurred as a result of the COVID experience. He noted that when he created and shared assignments, "it feels like regardless of what we do, there's still a need for me to like, push and encourage to have my students engage in what we're doing." Dan felt that "there was this sort of like, infinite, you can turn in anything at any point, because we understand that you have some mental health pressure, because we're in quarantine. And that's new for everyone." Rachel expressed that despite the teaching challenges and necessary shifts in

approaches, “Our expectations, I felt like were very fair. They were–our administration was very supportive of like, cut what you need to cut.” Some of these observations were reflective of the intersection between mental health and expectations that seemed to arise in several interviews. Teachers expressed that during a severe disruption, while they did not want to add to mental health pressures students were feeling because of COVID, there were also elements of “real world” lessons that needed to be taught. These insights revealed that finding a balance between extending grace and lowering expectations was a frequent challenge.

Several participants expressed concern over the ways standards had shifted over the past several years without a clear guideline or expectation for returning to previous levels of rigor or standards. Entering the 2021/2022 school year, Dan pointed out that incoming freshmen had not had a full, normal year of school since they were in sixth grade. He felt that essentially, “80% of students didn’t do anything for two years.” Similarly, Robert has faced many challenges this past school year trying to return to more normal expectations:

> I mean, I can honestly say that the After Effects, I call it the sort of the pandemic hangover, is that these students really didn't want to return to our previous levels of rigor and expectation. Yeah. And so I spent from September to I estimate about the beginning of March, really pushing them to where they should be just psychologically, you know, in terms of just their daily expectations.

Dan felt that the COVID climate also altered the way he could talk to students about expectations and hold them accountable. He gave the following hypothetical example:

> I could, in the 2019 school year, a junior, I could talk to and be like, ‘Hey, man, like, you know, you could go work at McDonald's your whole life, if you want, but you could also try a little bit in here. And then maybe you don't have to do that. And like, that's an option

> for you if you want it and we're here anyway. So, you might as well, since you have to sit here next to me. It's not like you can just leave, so why not? Right, like, it's not gonna work.' And that would actually impact them. And now I could say that, and they'd be asleep and not care and the apathy, and the like. Yeah, it's just, it's crazy. I think the mentality of 'I don't have to actually do anything, and I'll still be fine,' has gotten deep into them. [...] And I don't think that's exclusive to here. Because a lot of teachers I know who don't teach here have similar experiences, right?

Dan's example shed light on the shift he has observed in students' responses to expectations. He noticed a marked difference between students from just a couple of years ago versus now. He primarily blamed the lowered expectations that occurred from the onset of COVID. Susan echoed similar sentiments:

> I don't think the maturity factor is what it should be. I think that at least, where I am, the idea of, 'Oh, give them grace, give them grace.' Yes, they need grace. Teachers need grace. But that grace has to stop in some way, shape or form, before we shove them out the door, because the grace does not exist, once they get out there. That has been very, very difficult. Just the two sides of the coin, you know, why am I giving you credit for a piece of work that you really didn't do? Because you put your name on a paper, I have to give you a certain number of points? How is that? I tried to explain that it's like a paycheck. Why am I paying you for not working? You know, what would your boss say? And I, you have to relate it to that. What is your boss going to tell you when you are on your phone the entire time, you're supposed to be dealing with the customers? There are, I think we're at the point where right now we have to teach them more accepting

> responsibility than we had to before. I think we need to teach them more of what the world expects from us. Yeah, I had to have a discussion with my seniors on apathy.

Robert, who works in an urban school system echoed these concerns. He stated:

> I mean, the biggest challenge that I face is student apathy. And I think apathy is another word for lack of agency or a lack of sort of– if a student has to see his place in the broader system, I mean, why would you work to go to college? If you don't know anybody's going to college? Why would you put in that-- it's a leap of faith. Yeah. And so that apathy, I think, was definitely kind of amplified during our remote time.

Dan, Susan, and Robert all worked in very different school systems in terms of setting and demographics, but they all expressed similar concerns about student apathy. In each of these cases, during the interviews there was a sense that the participants were not sure where things would go from here. The examples above highlighted issues of accountability and student buy-in. Dan, Susan, and Robert, all repeatedly use the word "apathy" to describe the marked differences they've noticed in student behavior. Additionally, other participants also noted that they were not sure when or if pre-COVID expectations would resume. Susan worried about accountability for the future. She noted that despite the return to in-person learning this year, her school has maintained the rule that students cannot receive any grades below a 55. She said recently: "I had one student who looked at me, and I said, 'Hey, you didn't do your essay, you need to do this, this, this and this.' And he looked at me and said, 'Give me the damn 55."' Dan expressed similar feelings and pointed out, "the expectations and the accountability and the acceptability of things, has dropped, I think, kind of in general. So that's something that's going to be hard to re-instill, I think, in people, and I'm not sure what age that's going to come back."

Colleen expressed how hard she tried to maintain her usual level of rigor, but she felt frustrated that expectations were not maintained across the board. she commented.

> Where I often got frustrated just with the system and things was when teachers just made excuses or didn't hold kids' feet to the fire. or when they said, 'oh, we'll just dumb it down, you know, we'll just do a little bit of that.' No! When teachers said, 'it was such a horrible school year,' and 'we're so glad that there's no more, you know, having to do online' and 'oh, it was a loss, a year of loss for the kids'. I don't agree. [...] Yes, there was some loss. Yes, there were some difficulties. But that doesn't mean that everybody is behind.

Colleen felt that despite the challenges COVID presented, it was important to find opportunities to create solutions, not just let things go. She stated "And I'm not gonna excuse you and give you a padded grade because you had anxiety or you had depression or oh, your internet wasn't working. Great. Thank you for letting me know those things. Here's what we can do." She went on to express that while she had many students who faced challenges, she worked with students and "extended a lot of grace," all without lowering her expectations. This specific example illuminated RQ2 because it reflected how Colleen was able to cultivate agency to navigate individual student relationships and offer support in ways tailored to their needs, while also maintaining high standards and resisting the pressure to "dumb things down."

Theme Four: "We Put Everybody's Brain in a Blender": Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being

One of the most significant themes that emerged in my research was the impact COVID had on mental health for students and teachers, as well as the necessary shift in focus toward socio-emotional health for all. All six participants discussed this topic more than once;

participants emphasized the ways they and/or their schools emphasized care for students, as well as how the increased attention to mental health impacted their teaching and interactions within the classroom.

Subtheme: Students' Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being

As COVID hit, secondary students faced significant changes to their academic and social lives. Robert pointed out that COVID was disruptive to the entire educational landscape:

> I mean it, the entire system sort of collapsed to the point where we were really just focused on wellness. So, we were really, first and foremost, just making sure students were safe and comfortable. And they had what they needed to be as well as they could be.

This statement highlighted the ways in which students' physical and mental safety became a priority over meeting academic benchmarks or expectations. Robert expanded further by explaining that a lot of his students lived in areas with high mortality rates due to COVID, and he spent a lot of time just making phone calls. He noted "And that was always the first thing. Are you okay? Do you have everything you need at home? Is your technology working? How can I help? [...] I mean, it really became sort of basic human needs, by default." He went on to describe how the whole teaching and learning model of community was disrupted:

> I think the biggest impact, and I guess this is obvious, but the biggest impact of being so separated is this lack of connection, just basic human connection. A lot of what we did, and then even when we came back, everybody was wearing masks and worried about distance and all, it just was so psychically disruptive, you know? The teaching and learning is such a communal experience, it's such a, there's a human exchange that is, *is* teaching and learning and it was severely damaged to the point where it almost sort of didn't operate. So a lot of what we were doing was just trying to maintain some

> connection, you know, just to remember that we're here together in some form. So, very, very complex.

Robert's quotation provided insight into the teaching profession as a whole which is largely based on human connection; this model was somewhat broken in a time when students needed it most.

Rachel echoed a similar sentiment when she observed that the overarching message from her school's administration was

> Let's focus on the kids' mental health and your mental health. And let's focus on taking care of each other. [...] Yes, we still want to have classes, but we aren't going to try to make this any more stressful for anybody.

This example highlighted the need for mental health to take precedence over academic achievement. Teachers also discussed how socio-emotional wellness played a part in their teaching approaches. Robert noted the unique position of English teachers to support mental health through writing, "I mean, a lot of what we deal with as English teachers is writing. And so, students often write and speak kind of from the heart, and we have to sort of honor that always." Robert felt that allowing students to write and relay their experiences had the added value of being somewhat cathartic. He also described using wellness to guide his curriculum, Robert pointed out that choosing curriculum "became more important during the pandemic, because I needed to do wellness checks, you know, a lot of the kind of 'Do Now [or warm-up] Questions' that I would do is okay, describe a time when this happened in your life." This quotation emphasized how Robert used his writing assignments to help meet students' emotional need to express themselves and process emotions.

Dan, who described himself by saying, “So typically, my style, just like with most things, is very low. Like low heart rate, low blood pressure, low stress, and chill. And that's just kind of how, who I am.” Dan used his naturally laid-back personality to help meet his students’ needs. He stated:

> I think the most meaningful thing that I've been able to do, probably over the past couple years, is be a person who's not like everyone else they interact with. And [when] I say everyone else, I don't necessarily mean literally everyone, but I think there's a significant increase in anxiety, worry, and stress. And just general mental struggle, since all this has happened. And granted, it was there before, there's definitely no way that we can say it wasn't there before. But, you know, we put everybody's brain in a blender when everybody had to lock down.

This quotation showed Dan’s intentional thought process in trying to be a source of calm in his students’ lives and his interactions with them. Dan described trying to incorporate things into his day-to-day routines such as keeping his classroom serene and playing soft music to create an environment that worked for him and that a lot of his students seem to gravitate toward.

Susan brought up trying to cultivate an online community by having lunch with her students on Zoom. She commented:

> We had our Lunch Bunch, where I would just put music on and we'd sit and we'd talk. And I had actually had a lot of parents who would join us, just because they happened to be home with their kids.

All these examples highlighted teachers using their agency to be sources of consistency and create community for students during challenging times. Susan seemed to feel that students reached out more than usual saying things like, “‘Hey, I don't know who else to talk to about

this. Where do you think I should go for help?'" She felt that the connections she made with students were valuable and important to them navigating the pandemic. She posited that in teaching "to me the connections are the key."

Scott brought up the challenges of having students with varying backgrounds and the struggle of trying to meet a wide range of emotional needs virtually**.** He gave a specific example of a student who stayed on after a virtual class to reach out for support:

> And he turned his camera on and was sitting in his bedroom. And he started talking with me about some of the things that were going on in his life. His grandmother had just passed away; he was dealing with some insomnia, that was related to some sort of undiagnosed mental condition that he was struggling with. I don't think it was schizophrenia, but he was having hallucinations. And was, yeah, having a hard time with completing the work that he needed to, and asked me if I would help him to graduate, essentially. All he needed was my class. But he was missing a number of things. And so, we pulled up his Google Classroom page and took a look at the different assignments and put together a plan. I emailed him and his mom the plan of what he was going to do when. I shared with him just that I was honored that he shared all that personal information with me.

Scott was proud that he had been able to meet the needs of this student by engaging with him virtually and helping him navigate his personal and academic struggles. However, he lamented throughout the interview that he felt he had many students whose needs he did not have the support or experience to meet.

Dan and Rachel both commented that they felt their students were happy when they did have the opportunity to come back and be in school in-person. Rachel commented on her middle school classes saying:

> Last year, our kids came back to school feeling really grateful that they were back in school, because most of their neighborhood friends going to public schools weren't in school. And so I think for the most part, they felt grateful. And they felt like they wanted to do their best. And they felt happy to be out of their houses. And happy to be cooperative. Yeah. Last year, I felt like student behavior was actually really quite good.

Dan echoed this sentiment about when his students returned to the building. He noted that most of his students were happy to see their friends and relieved to see people who were not just on a screen. He felt as though "the buy-in for school in general felt like it skyrocketed once we came back for real, on average. And I really like that. I don't know how long we're gonna ride those coattails." These two examples reflected students felt a sense of gratitude to return to a more normal school setting, and both Dan and Rachel implied that this positively impacted students' behavior and satisfaction with attending school in general. Further, Rachel said her school's message was to make the best of things. She described the 2020/2021 school year as "very subdued" and having a "strange feel" due to mask and social distancing restrictions, but she always felt "we were encouraged to try to, like, bring as much joy as possible, kind of into it all." As things have returned to closer to normal at Dan's school by the Spring of 2022, he noted "It's good to have them remember what it's like to be real people."

Subtheme: Teachers' Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being

Five out of six participants emphasized the ways in which teaching during COVID impacted their mental health and social-emotional wellness. Participants cited individual

challenges, as well as varying levels of dissatisfaction, discouragement, and disconnection they noted amongst their colleagues.

Dan talked about the mental hurdle of finishing the 2019/2020 school year. He described it saying:

> Sort of like, like when you read a book, right? Like, there's all these, like things that build towards something. And then it's like, you get to a point where the book kind of gets to like its breaking point, and then you realize it just was cut off and never cont, like somebody cut the rest of that out. And you don't get to read it, finish it.

I felt that this quotation from Dan was powerful because it served almost as a dividing line in his memory between how things were pre-COVID and how they were moving forward. He cut the word "continue" off in the middle as he spoke, which was so telling and reflective of the abrupt shift and lack of closure he felt at the end of the 2019/2020 school year. He still recalled the lack of ability to look back and see his students' progress throughout the year, and this reflects an incompleteness it seems possible for other teachers and students to feel when they look back on the COVID years.

Scott talked several times about the toll of isolation on mental health. He said that he had hoped for more "camaraderie" amongst teachers, more like the vibes he felt during student teaching. He noted that even coming back into the building "I've been in my own bubble a little bit." Even though his school has made attempts to build a virtual culture of connectedness, at the time of the interview, all of the staff meetings for Scott's school were still happening via Zoom. When he was being trained as a teacher, Scott felt he had more of a team. He cited lunch time as a social occasion where "everyone would eat lunch in the same room. But with COVID restrictions at the beginning of the year. We were all just eating in our own classrooms." This put

into perspective how even small, daily interactions like eating in a classroom with other teachers can have a big impact on how teachers perceive camaraderie and mental health.

Rachel mentioned several times that the message her school put out was "the number one thing is taking care of kids and taking care of each other, too." Robert talked about the importance of finding ways to support teachers through activities like wellness professional development. He described a quickly planned PD that came together organically before a holiday break:

> We just came up with four little activities for people to do. [...] People loved it. I mean, they needed that release, they needed that chance to just kind of say, 'Okay, I'm not okay, but I'm okay.' You know, like to know that somebody else is like that, too, is very important. Robert's statement promoted the value of teachers feeling seen and being able to recognize themselves reflected in others. The PD itself sounded fairly simple and easy to plan, but according to Robert it paid dividends in the amount of relief and connection people were able to gain from the experience.

Subtheme: Should I Stay or Should I go?

Throughout my interviews, four participants brought up how teaching during COVID had impacted their thoughts about whether they wanted to continue teaching. Dan mentioned:

> I never really thought I was gonna leave teaching, a lot of people did, that I talked to. They were like, 'this keeps up, I'm gonna leave and stuff.' And I said to myself, and to people, that if we had another internet year of school that I would stop teaching and I would not do it until they went back to normal. Which I still like if they do that again, I won't do it again because I can't do that again.

For Dan, teaching virtually represented a breaking point. Although he had no plans to leave the classroom, he would be unwilling to teach in a virtual setting again. He went on to describe the level of dissatisfaction he felt teaching virtually, and he expressed that it's important to him to feel like he's getting something out of the job he's doing. He felt like teaching virtually was not rewarding and that teaching it too challenging of a profession to not be able to feel like you get something out of it.

Robert, who frequently described himself as a teacher leader, talked about the significance of focusing on teachers' mental health. He expressed the need for sustained focus on teacher wellness when he said, "although it's always again, one of those things, it's paid lip service to" as a teacher leader he has had a lot of colleagues confide in him about "their real deep burnout, and frustration." He felt that teachers throughout his networks were "worried I think across the board about losing good teachers or losing new teachers who will become good teachers." He went on to express the importance of self-care saying, "I think we have to do everything we can to really make sure that we're taking care of, and taking care of ourselves and not, you know, seen as disposable." Further, it was alarming to hear from participants about the lack of support they felt new teachers received in general. Scott's experience as a new teacher aligned with Robert's analysis that:

> there's a lot of schools, including mine, that sort of take the sink or swim model for new teachers. And I was kind of joking, because now [in COVID] it's the sink or swim, and while you're swimming, we're gonna throw rocks at you model.

This sentiment, while said in jest, illuminated teacher wellness is essential to retention and success of educators.

Like Dan, Robert was not talking about leaving the classroom himself, but he felt that the pandemic had brought teachers' mental health and burnout to a perilous breaking point. Robert's commentary was compelling because he talked about mental health and wellness as being a shared responsibility among administrators taking care of teachers, teachers taking care of teachers, and teachers taking care of themselves.

Although Susan did not have immediate plans to leave the classroom, she was over 70 years old and felt that being past retirement age gave her a bit of an edge mentally. She commented:

> I'm also one of the few people who can say I can walk out at any time. You know, I know that I can't because of my own personal things that I need to do you know, but at any moment, there's some relief in being well past retirement age. You know, it's an interesting thing, because I know that I can do it. So, when things get really, really stressful, I can start weighing my pros and my cons.

Susan's thoughts on being able to retire on her own timeline reflected a sense of freedom that she could move on from her school whenever she's ready. She made a couple of similar comments throughout the interview, and her unique perspective implied that just knowing that she could leave if she wanted to was beneficial to her mental health. This created an interesting connection between agency and freedom, where Susan felt that knowing she had choices to make gave her peace of mind.

In contrast, Scott, who was the newest to teaching, began feeling during the virtual year that perhaps teaching was not the right fit for him. This juxtaposition provided a chance to make an interesting contrast between these participants and observe a U-shaped trend in terms of agency. In other words, it appears that agency may be the highest both at the end (closest to

retirement) when teachers are more established, and at the beginning of a career where they may feel that they can still turn back and choose a different career path. The mid-career teachers may feel the most constrained, by their investment in their school, retirement fund etc. Scott had been met with many challenges in meeting the needs of his student population and made several comments that he did not have a strong support system within his school. Even so, Scott decided to go through with his third year of teaching and hoped things would improve once students were back in person. However, soon after the school year began, he felt:

> Yeah, like, as I was sharing earlier, felt much more like, teaching was like a solitary sport. And that the environment was more rigid, than I was able to, like, work in and in just in a way in which I could thrive. And so, um, in the fall semester, I came to the point of realizing that I'm going to move on from teaching and start looking for another job. So, I've been looking for about three to four months now. But yeah, as a result of my experience the past couple of years have come to that point, that looking to still stay within the education sphere of things but probably outside of a school environment.

Scott was vulnerable and passionate about sharing these experiences. His comment that teaching was a "solitary sport" stands in contrast to Robert's statements about the importance of shared responsibility for teacher health and wellness. Although Scott was the only participant from the study who expressed an intention to leave the classroom at the end of the 2021/2022 school year, his challenging experiences may shed light on the experiences of other teachers who entered the classroom during tumultuous COVID times. Scott's experiences related to RQ1, as well as RQ3. He spoke extensively about his lived experiences, and he was able to share a high level of detail about the feelings and events that led to his plans to leave the classroom. In relation to RQ3, the surrounding structures of his workplace did not provide Scott with the support he felt he needed

to thrive; this provided a case example of a participant exercising agency through the choice to leave the classroom.

Theme Five: "Wiggle Room," and How Agency Plays out Within a Bureaucratic Public School System

This brief section sheds light on how teacher agency plays out within a bureaucratic school system. Teacher participants brought up different aspects of leadership and bureaucracy that impacted their school setting and as such, impacted their agency and the ways in which they were able to make choices and do their jobs.

Colleen noted that having supportive leaders has a direct impact on the climate of the workplace. She noted that if "Your principal and your administration have a good philosophy of how you do things, and they lead by example, and they are in the mix, and they are supportive of their teachers. That makes a huge difference." Colleen's words revealed her belief that good leaders are "in the mix," and part of the fabric of the school community. Colleen described how expectations from different stakeholders influenced her school environment:

> When, you know, we all get those unrealistic expectations from parents, or the school board or whatever. And I love it, when at the end of the day, we can say 'those are all great ideas, but we're going to do X, because that is what is in the best interest of the student.'

This quotation added some interesting dimensions to the conversation on agency, because--while Colleen seemed to take solace in her belief that her school is doing what is in students' best interests–-the wide variation in school approaches, even just among these six participants' schools, imply that there are varied beliefs in what exactly is in the best interests of students. In other words, while schools or teachers may feel they have the agency to make these decisions–

what is in students' best interests remains contestable. Colleen went on to say that due to her county and supportive principal she did not feel overly limited or restricted and she did not have to "turn in" her lesson plans. These factors increased her sense of agency and kept her from feeling "boxed in."

Robert felt that while he has maintained a high level of individual agency in his classroom,

> Now, more so than ever we get sort of these top down, ideas, mandates, you know, initiatives from the center is, you know, from DOE, the Department of Education or the chancellor on down. The bureaucracy in the urban Department of Education is staggering.
>
> [...] I realized not too long ago that a principal in an urban [school system] is really a middle manager. You know what I mean? You're a middle manager in a $40 billion corporation. [...]And then you realize, now he's got like, eight bosses ahead of him. [...] There are these sorts of global expectations of what's supposed to happen. But then the day-to-day, there is enough, at least in my experience, enough wiggle room to sort of make it something locally realistic or locally tenable.

Robert's explanation about principals being "middle managers" and schools and teachers having "wiggle room," in terms of what the day-to-day looks like has interesting implications for an ecological perspective on agency. While on a high level the "bureaucracy" which includes the department of education, chancellors, and other stakeholders might be reducing agency by controlling the school system, teachers largely retain control over what happens in the classroom and capitalize on "wiggle room" to utilize their agency and to make things "locally tenable."

Rachel, Robert, Colleen, Susan, and Dan all expressed at some point in their interview a similar sentiment, that while they were faced with mandates, increased responsibilities, and restrictions during COVID, and had varying levels of curriculum restriction, they still felt mostly able to actually run their classroom in the way they wanted behind closed doors. Robert noted "I have either the blessing or the curse of not having an administrator with an English background. So, they kind of let me do my thing," while Susan echoed similar feelings describing that she feels no one is "micromanaging me." Interestingly, Rachel, when talking about PD, noted:

> We were able to have a huge impact on our decisions. So, I would say they had us, um, I'm remembering correctly. Like, you could sign up for all these different sessions, and all of these different topics that could be helpful to you, and different programs, different resources. We all had to do Zoom, we all had to do a screencast thing, we all had to do a couple other things, but then there were so many choices like menu items of like, what you would be interested in.

This example stood out to me because throughout her interview Rachel expressed high levels of autonomy. However, in this example when she felt she was able to have a "huge impact," she was really only referring to her autonomy to choose which PD session to attend, not to have a high level of agency about what sessions occurred or how they were implemented. It was striking that Rachel described this opportunity as "huge" and it may indicate an interesting point about how much autonomy teachers actually expect to be granted.

These examples provided interesting snapshots of how participants perceived the impact of bureaucracies on their workplace and their agentic experiences.

Theme Six: Looking Forward

COVID has caused many changes in education over the past two years. This theme is a bit broader and reflects future-focused insights provided by participants. In some cases, participants made references to what they hope will change in the future as a result of COVID. Lastly, I include examples of positive changes that have occurred that teachers hope will remain as a result of this experience.

Susan, who had the most teaching experience of all the participants, commented that although she felt there are certain curriculum guidelines she had to adhere to, "nobody's micromanaging me." She went on to discuss her school's grading policy of no grades below a 55. By the time she felt things had stabilized in terms of a return to school she was ready for the grading policies to return to normal. She commented:

> So it was at that point where I had to become very vocal and say, Wait a minute, guys. Yes, there was a need for it. But what are we teaching them now? It's hypocritical of me to say that my kids are going to be ready to go out into the workforce, if I continue to do this. And I found out that there were a lot of people who agreed with what I had to say. [...] Yeah, well, being the deviant that I am, I had a young man today who on a quiz, didn't want to take the quiz, did not want to participate in the review that we had prior to. He was too busy on his Instagram. And he got a 23 on the quiz. I put a 55 in the gradebook. But in the comments, 'actual grade 23.'

Susan's comment provided interesting insight on agency, because while she was not able to reverse a grading policy she disagrees with, she did feel empowered to speak out against it. Further, she was comfortable playing the "deviant" and recording what she felt was the true and

accurate grade for her student. Susan's experience had implications for the future, because she chose to push back against the grading trends she felt were not productive.

Dan discussed how his school's approach to curriculum decisions and community has shifted as a result of COVID. He described his school:

> To use an analogy, [pre-COVID] they'd be like, 'let's hold hands and like, find a way to like, move together forward,' right? [...] Now, it's like, everybody get into your own, like, Ziploc bag and like, stand next to each other. And we'll move forward individually. And like, who cares? [...]Because all the focus is on doing all these mandated things. Like, you got to have this much space between these people, and you got to clean this much.

This example expressed the tension of agency and feeling pulled in multiple directions. In some ways "being in your own Ziploc bag," and moving forward individually seems like an increase in agency–because when left to your own devices, perhaps there is more room to make your own decisions. However, simultaneously, Dan showed how mandates have increased constraints in agency, because despite being more isolated, teachers were also being more regulated in the distancing and cleaning requirements they had to follow.

Scott echoed similar sentiments when he described how constraints in agency were institutionalized by his school's Lock-in Teach policy. He stated:

> Our school comes on the intercom and announces that we're going to be doing a Lock-in Teach, which is, I think originally was for an emergency, like a code orange type of announcement where there's a danger or possibly someone on the school grounds. And they're asking that, like teachers lock their doors, but that they continue to still teach. But we've been asked to do it and not let students out of the classroom. Okay, and that's a change that like, I've sought to follow, but has been, like, tough to manage a roomful of

> teenagers that sometimes have the various needs of needing to go to the bathroom or getting a drink of water and like telling them no, and that we're just going to stay in here for an hour and a half. Yeah. And so yeah, I think reacting to that, I've sought to allow students a certain level of freedom on days when we don't have to do that.

Following the onset of COVID, Scott's school has responded to negative shifts in student behavior by imposing more restrictive measures and utilizing the Lock-in teach method Scott described. While Scott expressed that he had to adhere to the policy in the hours it was in place– he responded by giving his students more freedom during class periods when the Lock-in teach was not imposed. Scott's response highlighted an interesting action-reaction in which the more agency is constrained, the more resistance is encouraged. This example also raises the question of whether teachers, moving forward, will continue to find small ways to resist and maintain their own agency and the agency of their students. Scott revealed that restrictive policies like this continue, despite the opportunity COVID raised to rethink past ways of operating schools. These examples connected well to RQ3, as Dan and Scott expressed their feelings and reactions to how these changing structures and school contexts impacted experiences of agency.

Subtheme: "Putting Your Money Where Your Mouth is": The Future of Digital Equity

The subtheme of this brief section is titled based on an in vivo code from Robert's interview. Colleen, Robert, and Dan specifically made comments that related to this subtheme.

Dan commented that although the internet is "ubiquitous," it requires creativity to use it effectively. He went on to say,

> It's still the internet, like you still have to have access, which not everybody does, sometimes screens, which not everybody wants to look at all the time, and we need to break screen addiction anyway. And there's still like peoples' [laptops] are dead and not

> charged. Like it's still not the same as [being] here. And all you need to do is be here in order to learn something today, like that was gone.

In this short excerpt, Dan hits on several issues relating to digital equity. In order to teach and learn successfully online, one must have the tools to do so. Dan pointed out that not everyone had internet access and not all of his students had reliable access to devices. Additionally, he presented the idea that in the past, just coming to school gave students a chance to learn something; however, with the inequitable distribution of technology and resources students had at home, that was no longer the case. Colleen, who taught in the most rural area of all the study participants noted, "Of course, a lot of our kids do not have internet access. And so, some of them went a whole quarter, when, like they had some packets, they could come pick up and do what I call busy work." She went on to say the packets could be turned in for teachers to look over, but this was not a consistent or equitable approach for these students. Although Colleen's school was able to go back in person in the Fall of 2020 (though she remained virtual), many students in her school system went the entire previous quarter with essentially no instruction. This highlighted the inequitable technology access faced by this rural community.

In contrast, Robert, who taught in the most urban school district of the study, also served one of the lowest income student populations. He pointed out that it was really only recently that he was able to rely on one-to-one computer access for his students. Robert captured this eloquently when he said:

> The other sort of watershed moment for this experience was the city had to ask, 'Who has access to technology and who doesn't?' There was always this sort of dirty secret about equity. You know, like certain kids in certain communities have computers and devices and internet and WiFi and the whole thing, and it's just, their teachers don't have to think

> about it. Whereas I had no access to that. We had Wi Fi in the building, we had about three computer carts for 400 kids. And that's how we did things. And then one day, the city said, 'Okay, well, if you don't have a computer, I guess we have to get you one.' And all of a sudden that it became, that should not go away, that putting your money where your mouth is, is the only way forward. I mean, if you're going to talk about equity, you need to back it up. So that I hope is forever our norm. You know, and I think we'll see. I mean, so much of what happens in education is based on politics and not education.

Robert's school system faced a significant reckoning in terms of providing one-to-one technology students in an effort to make virtual learning more equitable. However, at the time of the interview, this had only become a very recent reality, more than two years into the pandemic. In full transparency, upon reflecting on this section, I wish I had asked specific questions about how students' technology access impacted teachers' experiences as well as their agency. If I could go back, I would have done some more digging on this particular aspect of teaching during COVID.

Subtheme: Positive Changes

This subtheme highlights positive changes that participants feel were made because of COVID. In this section I focus on shifts participants hoped would remain after COVID.

The importance of socio-emotional learning and wellness ended up being a major theme from this study. Scott pointed out:

> I definitely think that like the social emotional learning, and the social emotional side of teaching is something that has been talked about much more since COVID started. And yeah, conversations about trauma, and about working with students who have undergone traumas, whether that is through the experience of COVID, or other experiences that

> they've had in their life. I do think that that is needed, and I'm hoping those conversations will continue to happen.

Scott felt that COVID brought some of these issues to the forefront of educational conversations and that's a change he hoped would remain. Robert shared similar sentiments, but specifically related to teacher wellness, and he provided concrete examples of how support for teachers might look. Robert, as part of the professional development committee for his school, described a time before a holiday break when the committee decided to "just do something easy." He noted:

> We just came up with four little activities for people to do. I mean, I did this wellness bingo game, another guy did yoga, somebody else just did sort of a dance thing. People loved it. [...] So, I guess that's something that we should carry forward into –sort of, remember, you know? We can't be there for the kids if we're not all the way there for ourselves, you know?

Robert's words provided a poignant example of teachers gathering to support each other in a simple, in-house professional development opportunity that Robert felt paid dividends in the camaraderie and support it provided.

Susan mentioned personal growth for students as a positive change. Despite the challenges, she felt that COVID forced students to be "not just concerned about themselves, but other people." She noted that some students were worried about family members and calculated their own risk tolerance based on the health of the people they lived with. She also said she hoped that these challenges might continue to lead to greater acceptance of others. She noted, "Whether it's the people who are the mask wearers versus the non-mask wearers. [...] We need to become aware of accepting individual differences. And I'd like to see that continue."

Rachel felt that COVID provided a chance to shake up the curriculum and look more closely at instructional decisions. She noted that, prior to COVID:

> I felt like habit and routine was sort of a lot of what drove what we did when we did it. And then I feel like since COVID, I don't know I mean, it did sort of make us take a hard look at like, why we were doing what we were doing. And like what, what sort of exercises or what instructional activities and what units were the kids really learning from?

Rachel expressed that time restrictions and changes to class structure provided a chance for teachers to think critically about what was working and let go of things that were not serving the students as well. Despite the challenges of reworking curriculum, Rachel felt that making these instructional choices made teachers think about "what is it the kids really need to know? [...] in some ways, it allowed us to kind of just rethink a lot of what we were teaching and how we were teaching it." She also added that the ability for teachers to teach outside when they wanted was a new freedom that came with COVID that she hoped would remain.

Dan expressed that although he felt virtual school was not an ideal long-term option for most students, he felt it was a great option to have available in certain circumstances. He pointed out that virtual teaching and learning provided options for homebound students, or students who were ill or had surgery. He said that before COVID, if a student missed a lot of school and failed a course, they would have to retake the course with the same teacher, but now "you can just go to the county's online class that exists for that year and you take that class, instead of retaking the semester for our school, and you can kind of be enrolled in both. I think that's amazing."

Rachel also noted that there were a lot of conveniences available with using Zoom. She pointed out that using Zoom provided new flexibility for working with parents,

> Like [for example] with parent teacher conferences, some of my parents came in, and we met in person last week. Some of them chose to Zoom, and then sometimes, maybe a mom would come in, but a dad would zoom in from work, which was like, great, you know? Whereas three years ago, he may not have, or she may not have been able to leave work to come.

Rachel expressed her hope that some of these positive uses of technology will stay in place as options for families moving forward.

Colleen, the only participant who wholeheartedly preferred virtual teaching, appreciated the improvement in classroom management issues and the reduction in non-teaching demands on teachers. She stated firmly, "if I never have to return to a face-to-face classroom, again, that will be my choice. I want to stay in the virtual world for the rest of my career and granted, I have 10 years until retirement." Colleen explained why she holds this position:

> I don't have classroom management issues. I don't spend 20-30% of my time managing the behaviors in the classroom, to the point where we can't get all that we should be getting done done. When I'm in virtual–the amount of expectations that are placed on teachers in a building, setting face to face, whether it's, you know, you have to run this club, or you have to do this duty, or you need to cover for another teacher. [...] It's the amount of stress and extra responsibilities that are placed on teachers in a classroom setting in a physical building. It's just very unfortunate.

Colleen felt that the virtual environment left her with more freedom as a teacher and with fewer constraints on her time. She described teachers as being overburdened with additional responsibilities while working in the school building. These examples of positive changes

highlight shifts in education participants noted and hoped would remain and become part of the new normal post-COVID.

Summary of Findings

In Chapter 4, the major findings from six interviews conducted with secondary English teachers were summarized. From these interviews, six major themes emerged. The critical themes from these interviews were: Theme 1: From Face-to-Face to Faceless: How Student Engagement Impacted Teachers, Theme Two: "I had no Paper.": How COVID Changed Teachers' Workload and Roles, Theme Three: The Necessity of Flexibility and Innovation in Times of Crisis, Theme Four "We Put Everybody's Brain in a Blender": Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being , Theme Five: "Wiggle Room," and How Agency Plays out Within a Bureaucratic Public School System, and Theme Six: Looking Forward. In the next and final chapter, the significance and implications of these findings are discussed. As well, suggestions for policy and practice, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research will be presented.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this last chapter, I will provide further insights into the key themes of the study. I will begin by discussing the significance of the study and put my findings into conversation with other relevant literature. Namely, I strive to draw cogent, timely connections between the experiences of the participants and recent studies in the field. Next, I offer my thoughts on the limitations of the research and its potential relevance and transferability. Then, I provide suggestions for possible directions for future research and raise questions that were not answered by this study. Lastly, I offer my closing thoughts on what this study meant both for me as a researcher as well as for the field.

Significance of Study Findings

In attempting to make sense of how my study findings translated into the field of education I drew connections between my key themes and literature in the fields of teacher agency and education during COVID-19. One of my most significant findings was that agency and wellness appear to have a reciprocal relationship. Additionally, my findings about "wiggle room" within bureaucracies were interesting, because while the "street-level bureaucrat" (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977) vein of literature already illuminated teacher agency in policy implementation, COVID presented a new context, unlike prior contexts that have been studied. The findings shed light on how teachers perceived their agentic position in terms of policy implementation, curricular control, and the social and political forces at play as a result of COVID-19 (Leander, 2008). In the section that follows, I outline how my findings contribute to the literature by putting my themes in conversation with other relevant theoretical ideas and studies.

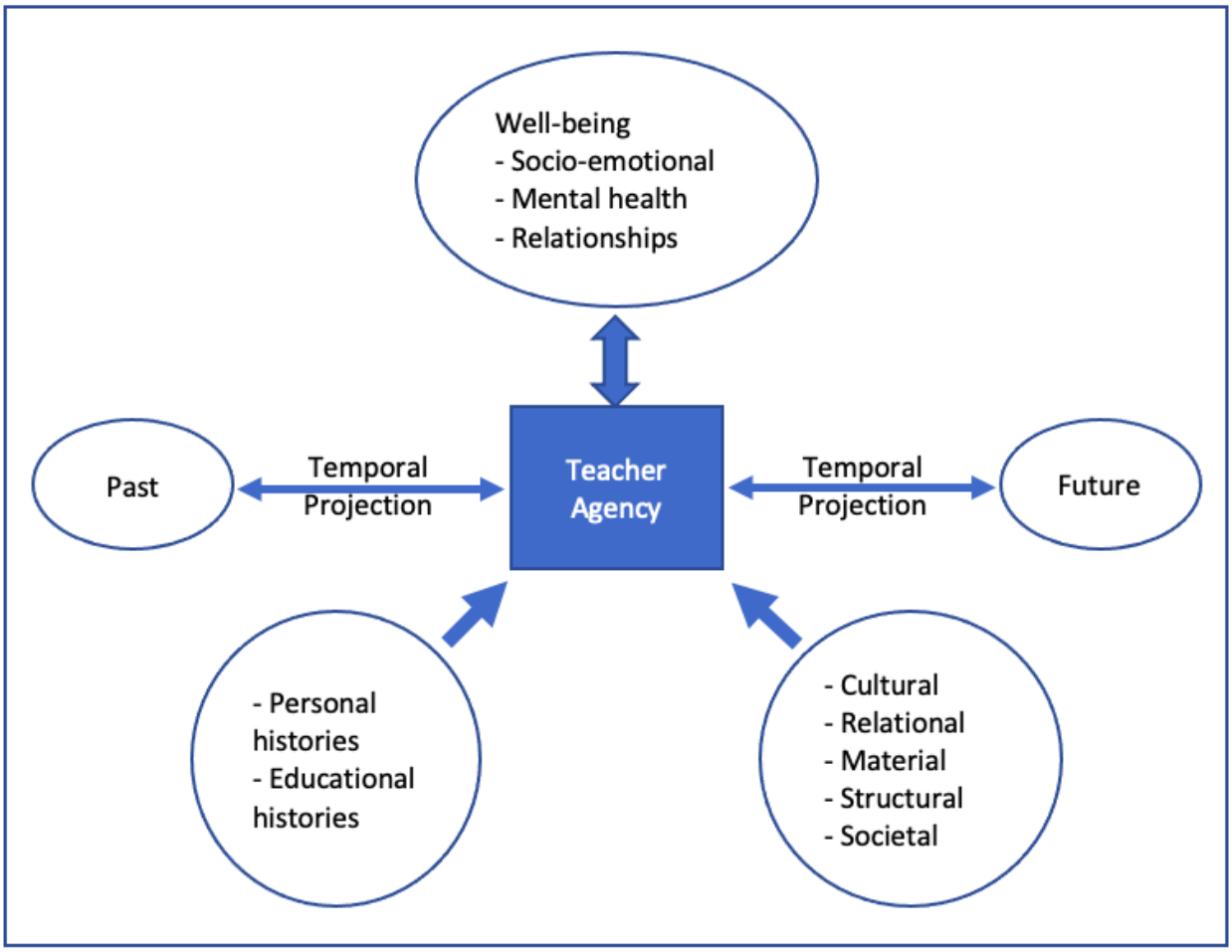
Regarding RQ1, the experience of being disconnected surfaced powerfully in themes one, two, and four. In theme one, the lived experiences of teachers were highlighted by their "faceless" interactions with students. This represented a sort of forceful severing in which human interaction, the presence of bodies in the same room, was removed from teaching. In theme two, the element of intangibility felt especially poignant, as we might imagine the everyday interactions of teaching and learning unfolding: passing out papers, placing a book in the hands of a student, watching students share materials or retrieve a dropped item for a peer. In imagining these scenarios, the essentiality of the tangible, the power in the quotidian is revealed. Saevi and Foran (2012) described the importance of the lived experience of education stating "the lived and living relational experience of the encounter between adult and child therefore precedes educational methods and procedures," (p. 51). In this description, the relational takes precedence over the instructional, and at the same time *becomes* the pedagogical. Similarly, van Manen (1991) used the term tact, to describe the practice of being oriented to others, and even further to be attuned to the needs and experiences of others. Teachers, in their most effective form, manifest pedagogical tact as a sort of reaching and receiving, an intentional way of choosing to be with students, and of teaching and meeting their needs based on the subtlety of interaction (van Manen, 1991). Disturbingly, the facelessness and intangibility participants described combined to form a sort of double-distancing in which teachers and students were at once removed from their environment and one another. These aspects of participants' lived experience related intimately to theme four, in which mental health for students and teachers was unpacked. All these scenarios pointed to an essential aspect of teaching that has been vividly revealed both through the strain of digital separation, as well as through the undoing of the

traditional secondary education experience in which humans can touch, reach, interact and truly *see* one another (Saevi & Foran, 2012).

Building from Theme Four: "We Put Everybody's Brain in a Blender": Mental Health and Socio-Emotional Well-Being, importantly, when teachers were able to express and experience higher levels of agency, it seemed to have a positive impact on their mental health. Furthermore, the inverse was also true: when teachers were feeling taken care of and supported, they were better able to activate and experience agency. Teachers' individual mental health seemed to directly impact the collective well-being of a school's ecosystem. Participants relayed that their stress levels, relationships with colleagues, level of expectations placed on them, and perceptions of support all contributed to their overall feelings of wellness. This sense of individual wellness appeared to be connected to teachers' perceptions of agency. For example, in looking more closely at the interesting connection between agency and wellness, I looked back at my visual of the ecological model of agency from Chapter 2. It is striking to note that mental health was not explicitly included in the original version of this model, nor did I include it in my initial adaptation. Therefore, I think it worthwhile to consider where mental health might best fit into this model. After conducting my study, I feel this model has some limitations–my findings helped illuminate the interconnected nature of agency and wellness. In creating a more nuanced model, I added well-being, mental health, and wellness as considerations that impact teachers' agency. The two-way arrow illustrates the reciprocal relationship between these elements. My findings strongly support the understanding that agency is ecologically derived. Agency is not simply a personality trait or something that is possessed (or not) by an individual, but rather a complex phenomenon situated within a shifting web of circumstantial elements.

Figure 2

A New Model for Teacher Agency



My study has revealed, as have others (Gewertz, 2021; Marshall et al., 2020) that COVID has impacted teachers' mental health, which arguably could be impacted by the relational, structural, and temporal elements that impact how teachers experience agency. From this study I argue that teacher mental health and wellness is critical to teachers' potential to fully express and experience agency. In a recent *Education Weekly* article Gewertz (2021) noted that according to survey data, teachers have experienced significant rises in stress and anxiety and their "morale has plummeted during the pandemic." The struggles faced by K-12 teachers seemed to be especially concerning, with teachers being more likely than other state employees to report high

levels of stress and burnout (Gewertz, 2021). In an EdWeek Research Center Survey from March 2021, 84% of teachers reported that teaching is more stressful than before the COVID-19 pandemic (Gewertz, 2021). The findings from this survey mirrored some of the findings from my own study. Five out of six of my participants reported increased stress and higher levels of concern for either their own mental health or the mental health of their colleagues. Thematically, my study revealed that camaraderie and discussion surrounding mental health was critical for these teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Robert summed this up when he pointed out how important it was for teachers to be able to gather and share how they were feeling; he noted that recognizing that others shared similar struggles was very important: "So, I guess that's something that we should carry forward and sort of, remember. We can't be there for the kids if we're not all the way there for ourselves, you know?" The need for camaraderie and community was echoed in Kaden (2020), Campbell (2020), and Kim and Asbury (2020), where a common theme of the importance and value of relationships was also observed. These insights have implications for policies regarding teacher wellness and support initiatives which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Theme Three: The Necessity of Flexibility and Innovation in Times of Crisis, was the theme that most closely mirrored the findings of other studies conducted on teacher agency during COVID. My findings suggested that teacher agency may be especially important in times of crisis and/or significant change because it allows those who are in daily contact with students to make innovative and timely decisions based on student needs. This theme connected well to the claims of Campbell (2020) who posited that COVID increased the necessity for teachers to intentionally redesign some of their approaches and develop new practices in the face of change. As well, Gudmundsdottir and Hathaway (2020) and Kim and Asbury (2020) produced similar

findings; these two studies classified study data that reflected characteristics such as teacher adaptability, flexibility, resourcefulness, and determination as "finding a way," and "making it work." My findings further illuminated these points, because all six of my participants gave multiple examples of innovation and taking initiative to make aspects of curriculum or instruction work for their students. These findings support the necessity and value of teacher agency in the face of the pandemic and beyond.

Connections to Teacher Agency Literature

In making broader connections to the literature on teacher agency, Theme Six: Looking Forward, was the theme that was most theoretically intertwined with theory on teacher agency. Specifically, Priestley (2015) framed agency not as an individual characteristic, but as something that can be achieved, and is in this view, "an emergent phenomenon, something that happens through an always unique interplay of individual capacity and the social and material conditions by means of which people act" (para. 3). My study findings supported, as well as complicated, this point. In thinking about agency as something to be "achieved", based on the narratives and interviews from study participants, agency was always evolving and was influenced by the unique contexts shifting in schools throughout COVID. My study supported this aspect of Priestley's theoretical position, as it seemed each study participant achieved some level of agency; I noticed this most in the way teachers expressed their unique ability to *choose* their students above all else in the face of a worldwide crisis. Teachers were often able to adjust how they taught the standards, design clever ways for students to socialize, and were frequently able to choose what was most vital in their curriculum. However, this achievement of agency was further complicated by the unpredictability of the social and material conditions teachers faced. Arguably, teaching is a dynamic profession, but the frequent changes, such as differences in

teaching mode, student attendance, and distance and quarantining guidelines to name a few, made the daily job of teaching perhaps more volatile than it was pre-COVID.

On a slightly different but related note, my findings suggested that support for teachers in terms of training and professional development also seemed to have a positive effect on teacher agency. This understanding connects with findings from previous studies surrounding professional development opportunities for teachers, such as Calvert's (2016) and Biesta et al.'s (2017) research which suggested teachers exercise more agency in PD when they are free from coercion and feel that their opinions are valued regarding PD. However, my study may complicate earlier findings, because the need for agency-supporting PD came up in regard to COVID-related topics such as managing a virtual classroom and designing virtual assessments. As well, this connected to the temporal aspect of the ecological model of agency. My study contributes to the literature by revealing that in times of crisis, where time feels compressed in some way, the professional development teachers needed to support their agency became very specific to the changing educational needs of COVID. School districts, as well as teachers, were operating under emergency time constraints where they had to make changes rapidly, which simultaneously increased and decreased opportunities for teacher agency. The increase in agency was a reflection of teachers being able to research and choose their own approaches as quickly as possible to help implement the changes. Here, teachers' individual action could be illuminated by Priestley (2011) who described agency as "the capacity of individuals to act reflexively within the possibilities bounded by their social and material environments to effect changes to their conditions or to reproduce them" (p. 16). However, a decrease in agency occurred simultaneously as administrators and school districts were rapidly implementing and requiring teachers to enforce new policies related to social-distancing, masking and cleaning, and virtual

learning. Further, the temporal elements discussed above connected with thematic findings from Biesta et al. (2015), a study that found teachers are often focused and efficient at achieving short-term goals within the existing framework of their school but lacked a clear vision of what was needed or desired in the long-term curricular frame. This theme related well to my thematic findings, as the unpredictability of pandemic life made it difficult for teachers, as well as other stakeholders, to make or enact effective longer-term plans.

From the findings related to Theme Two: "I had no Paper.": How COVID Changed Teachers' Workload and Roles and Theme Five: "Wiggle Room," and How Agency Plays out Within a Bureaucratic Public School System, I was able to draw thematic connections between my study and other recent studies on the impacts of COVID-19 on teachers. In a 2020 study that included 328 teachers, 92.4% of participants responded that, prior to the emergency transition to online teaching associated with COVID, they had never taught online before, and "very few had received any meaningful training from their school or school district," (Marshall et al., p. 48, 2020). This connected to my study findings, as none of the study participants had taught online prior to COVID. This represented a huge shift in teachers' job responsibilities, and only Rachel felt she had received extensive preparation to aid in the transition.

Further, the transition to online learning prompted the thematic sentiment that teachers "had no paper." This concept was especially poignant when considering implications for English teachers. The transition to online learning removed the physicality of actually reading a book, moving around the classroom while reading a play, or relying on materials such as class sets of novels. Robert made the compelling point, however, that he felt English teachers had the agency to create writing assignments that attended to students' mental health and well-being, he noted "students often write and speak kind of from the heart, and we have to sort of honor that always,"

and he expressed that he was able to use writing as a form of “wellness checks" during the pandemic. However, this experience, the loss of physical teaching materials, was perhaps a heightened loss for English educators, because they could not take their students to the library, and they could not feasibly make full digital copies of every text they may usually teach, and they were limited by the texts they could find online.

Considering the role bureaucracy played in my thematic findings, as well as other reviewed studies, my study revealed that mandates that promoted a culture of intense accountability, for example, high level changes on grading, created a sense of discontent and a desire for pushback among teachers. This was similar to the themes from prior studies surrounding how teachers’ experienced professional agency and student accountability (Lockton et al., 2020; Robinson, 2012). My findings mirrored general findings from Lockton et al. (2020), in which a culture of accountability resulted in adverse effects on teachers’ engagement. Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) and Robinson (2012) found that when teachers were met with strong control mechanisms, in instances where teachers had strong relationships with colleagues, teachers were able to utilize their professional agency collaboratively and adapt and reshape policy requirements to suit particular needs within their school. This related both directly and inversely to my findings in different ways. Several participants gave environmental examples of strict, mandated policies increasing (cleaning, mask requirements, lock-in teach orders) while their professional agency to alter these expectations seemed to be decreasing. There may have been something distinct about COVID-related policies that restricted teachers' agency more than other policies they're charged with implementing. However, teachers also expressed that even as policies were tightening and shifting in terms of logistics and the mode of teaching (i.e. online vs. in-person), in many cases they were able to find the “wiggle room,” a strong connection to

the theme of "negotiation" in Robinson (2012), and adapt their curriculum and expectations in ways they felt best served their students. According to a key point from Weatherley and Lipsky (1977), despite the role bureaucracy plays in establishing policies, the actual *implementation* of policies, and what that looks like, usually falls to teachers. To expand, an interesting takeaway may be that the COVID context didn't necessarily increase or decrease agency on the whole, but just forced teachers to employ their agency in new ways. These agentic shifts weren't necessarily empowering, in most cases it seemed that they were dedicated to "making it work," surviving, and supporting their students through this challenging time. While scope of this research cannot speak to all contexts, it is a significant contribution to the literature to find that themes of "negotiation, "wiggle room," and "street level bureaucracy" persist within the COVID context of this study.

Teachers' Experiences: Public vs. Private Schools

Although comparing experiences within public versus private schools was not an intentional focus of my study, the differences between Rachel's experiences working in a private school and Robert, Dan, Scott, Colleen and Susan's experiences working in public schools provided an interesting juxtaposition. Since Rachel was the only participant who worked in a private school, her experiences may not be generalized or representative of other teachers in private schools. However, many of her comments spoke to contextual factors that may be applicable to other private school settings such as funding, technology access, campus size, and the ability for administration to make decisions. Namely, when Rachel noted that her school's administration gave up their spring break to help design and implement new systems for synchronous instruction, she highlighted how quickly her school was able to pivot to online learning. Her school was not required to rely on district or state mandates to move forward with

the implementation of a plan to meet the needs of their students. In considering this aspect of Rachel's narrative, I wondered if it would be helpful to examine the emergency related policies that are in place for public schools that may help or hinder schools from pivoting quickly. This example generated a parallel question: What are the implications for school agency and school leader agency? In other words, it would be interesting to examine how a school or school leader's ability to act with agency to meet their specific populations' needs might impact a school's trajectory. While this larger question is beyond the scope of this research, this study provides a strong directive for examining this point with future research. Although Rachel felt her school had an overall more positive experience with navigating COVID, this does not suggest that privatizing education is the answer. However, Rachel's experiences do suggest that it would be worthwhile to examine the way school autonomy, funding, and student: teacher ratios might impact the ways schools navigate educational emergencies.

Recommendations and Implications for Policy and Practice

In this section I describe the implications of this research and make suggestions for policy and practice based on the findings.

English Teachers

My choice to focus on secondary English teachers, as opposed to teachers in other content areas, or other grade levels, reflects my own experiences as a secondary English teacher. Working with this sample was purposeful, as I felt best prepared and qualified to interpret and analyze teachers' experiences in this particular subset of the field. While I intentionally chose to focus this study on participants who were English teachers, the vast majority of participants' interview responses were not focused on English curriculum or methods for teaching English. I was very surprised that, while there were some comments about the lack of physical English

materials, or ways to use the content area to meet students' needs, the subject matter was not a major focus of the participants. This observation reflected that the major concerns were not about how to teach the curriculum, so much as how to meet students' general needs and ensure they were attending class at all. As such, the implications would likely be applicable to secondary teachers in general as opposed to English teachers in particular.

School Level Autonomy and Teacher Agency

The differences between the COVID responses in public vs. private schools that were considered in this study have implications for thinking about school autonomy, funding, class size, and outdoor education. Rachel's interview revealed that her school was able to pivot more quickly to creating a synchronous online learning program when COVID first started. It seems possible that this was able to happen more quickly and effectively, because private schools don't generally have the same level of bureaucracy as public schools in terms of passing and implementing policy. On the other hand, public school bureaucracies serve important functions such as ensuring the schools do not privilege some groups over others (in theory at least). In defense of bureaucracy, Labaree (2020), stated "At one level, your children are just part of the crowd of students in their school, subject to the same policies and procedures and educational experiences as all the others. By and large, privileged parents don't want to hear that" (p. 56). Labaree's position promoted bureaucracy as needed and necessary in order to make school systems more equitable. However, these positions are not dichotomous. It seems likely that public schools could have more autonomy, and simultaneously still be subject to overarching policies. Giving more autonomy to public schools raises a possible line of possible research to determine whether providing more autonomy to other schools would allow them to more quickly and effectively adapt in certain crisis situations. It may follow that giving more autonomy to

public schools, would also give their teachers more space to act with agency and choose appropriate adaptive behaviors in the face of crises.

Implications for Teacher Wellness and Retention

The significance of my findings have powerful implications for policies regarding teacher wellness and retention. Participants expressed a host of concerns related to this topic, including worries about teacher burnout, need for camaraderie in the workplace, a desire for organized wellness initiatives, and greater support for inexperienced teachers. As mentioned in the looking forward section in Chapter 4, findings suggest that teachers need significant, intentional wellness support to continue to grow as educators and to perform their job optimally.

These findings and concerns align with statistics published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); in January of 2020 there were approximately 10.6 million educators working the U.S. public schools, compared to 10 million two years later as a result of teachers leaving the field en masse (Walker, 2022). Additionally, according to a January 2022 survey by the National Education Association, 55% of educators were considering leaving the profession earlier than planned as a result of pandemic related stress (Walker, 2022). These concerns were echoed throughout my participant interviews.

Findings illuminated participants' desire for support and connection, especially in navigating really challenging professional times, such as COVID-19. Robert mentioned the value of a wellness PD at his school, noting teachers need a "release, they needed that chance to just kind of say, 'Okay, I'm not okay, but I'm okay. You know, like to know that somebody else is like that, too, is very important." He went on to say that self-care was critical to remember from this experience, and "we can't be there for the kids if we're not all the way there for ourselves, you know?" In closing, teacher wellness could be supported by larger systemic programming

such as longer-term stress reduction interventions. For example, Carroll et al. (2021) found teachers who participated in an 8-week stress reduction intervention initiative showed decreased levels of distress, as well as in improvement in overall well-being, and even reported an improvement in their commitment to teaching. Significantly, an improvement in well-being for teachers had positive impacts for students as well, "Specifically, reductions in teachers' self-reported distress and burnout were related to students' improved perceptions of their teachers' support in the classroom" (Carroll et al., 2021, p. 1). School climate and student outcomes are known to be positively influenced by teacher well-being (Baumeister et al., 2003; Ross et al., 2012). As such, intentional, sustained intervention that targets well-being and stress reduction could have long-term positive effects on teachers, students, school climate, and teacher retention.

Implications for Teacher Choice

Findings suggested that providing avenues for teachers to provide input on concerns such as curriculum decisions and professional development opportunities could provide greater opportunities for teacher agency. Choosing to elevate the teachers' voices; allowing teachers to feel not just heard, but valued on the classroom level, school level, and beyond may also increase teachers' sense of purpose and buy-in. Rachel noted the following regarding her professional development during COVID, "we were able to have a huge impact on our decisions. [...] We all had to do a couple other things. But then there were so many choices like menu items of what you would be interested in." Especially in a crisis situation, valuing teachers' perspectives could go a long way in supporting higher morale, and perhaps even improve teacher retention. It is feasible that, in looking back at the implications of wellness and agentic projection, teachers who stay in the field may grow their agency over time and, through a virtuous cycle, be more likely to stay in the field *because* they have higher levels of agency.

Limitations

In this section I do my best to address the limitations of my study honestly and critically. This study, conducted by me as a single researcher, under less-than-ideal research circumstances, was inherently limited in its scope. In particular, the study was limited by time constraints, the nature of a voluntary sample, and my own perspective as a researcher. My interests and values, despite my desire for neutrality, are imposed on the study at every level–its design, research questions, desire for a small-in-depth study, all reflect my own experiences, desires, and lens as a teacher, student, and researcher (Holmes, 2020).

In terms of time, the research was limited by both a self-imposed and university-imposed timeline due to dissertation funding. The research was conducted in the Spring of 2022, a full two-years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The timeframe felt a bit surreal, as much time has passed since the original inception of this dissertation idea, but yet we were still "in it." This in some ways represented a limitation in my ability to answer research questions, because in some cases I was asking teachers to recall as clearly as possible their feelings from two years prior, which can be difficult to do. Simultaneously, the interviews were taking place while COVID, and many related restrictions, were still in place. This meant that while teachers could be reflective, the entire experience was not fully behind them and their thoughts on these experiences may still change over time.

I wrote a memo ahead of and following each interview in an effort to explore my preconceptions and reflect on my thoughts and impressions. While this was a valuable activity, it is not without bias, as I can never be fully outside my own frame of reference (Holmes, 2020; Maxwell, 2013). Each interview was promptly transcribed, and my choice to do the transcription myself served as a valuable first pass at the data. The transcript analysis took place over the

course of two months, and while I spent hours poring over each transcript, reading, rereading, coding, and synthesizing, there is more–always much more. The thick rich descriptions my participants described were (are) bottomless in their potential to be mined for meaning. There was more than I could possibly have explored or analyzed.

Further, my choice to use the lens of agency both guided and limited my analysis. Choosing the lens of agency shaped my entire research project, beginning with the literature I read, the research questions I designed, my conceptual framework, and my interview questions. In analyzing the interview transcripts, the lens of agency led me to focus on certain points, utterances, and insights from the teacher participants, and had a different lens been applied–the findings would surely have been different. In other words, in analyzing these transcripts, there was much more that could have been explored and analyzed that simply fell outside the scope of this project. Suggestions for further research are outlined in a section below.

Limitations of Research Questions

Looking back at my research questions, I feel that there were a lot of overlapping responses that emerged. For reference, my research questions again were:

> RQ1: How do secondary teachers describe their lived experience of teaching during COVID-19? How do these experiences relate to or shed light on agency?
>
> RQ2: How do secondary teachers perceive their agency in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?
>
> RQ3: What are the structures and contexts teachers identify as impacting experiences of agency?

Thematically, it was more difficult than I expected to parse out answers as they applied to each question. In interviewing the study participants, I found that many of their stories and examples

contributed to a larger, more holistic narrative surrounding secondary English teachers' experiences of teaching during COVID. As such, RQ1 ended up being the question that was most completely and thoroughly answered. It was the most general and encompassed the largest portion of the participants' responses. RQ2 is the question that I feel received the least attention and had the fewest related response from interviews. In retrospect, I feel I could have narrowed one or two of my interview questions to focus more on perceptions. However, I still felt that my findings, as outlined in Chapter 4, answered each question. I expected my third research question to be the hardest to answer, but in fact I feel it ended up being the one with the most interesting findings. I speculate that this was because so many educational structures shifted during COVID that it was relevant and easy for participants to recall how recent changes to their teaching contexts impacted them.

Transferability

The intention of this study was not to produce generalizable knowledge. Indeed, in designing my research questions and interview protocol, I prioritized depth over breadth, choosing to focus on individual experiences and encouraging participants to share specific, intimate details of their experiences. However, despite the small sample of the study, the participants were heterogeneous in their gender identity, years of teaching experience, geographic locations, and school system demographics. Additionally, although the interviews conducted are a qualitative snapshot of the participant's experiences, and are not meant to be generalizable, it stands to reason that other teachers may have shared similar experiences, particularly those in similar school settings. As such, as long as context was carefully examined, some of the suggestions, experiences and ideas of the participants could be cautiously applied to discussions surrounding the many possible experiences of educators in similar contexts.

Future Research

Through considering the themes, subthemes, and further insights that came out of the interviews and were discussed in Chapter 4, I will make suggestions for future research and practice. Additionally, I make connections to existing studies on teacher agency. While this study was designed to build on existing literature, in some ways I felt it also raised more questions than answers because the field surrounding COVID-related research is so new.

More Studies Focused on Teacher Agency in COVID-19

At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic had been going on for just over two years, and further research that seeks to understand the long-term effects of COVID-19 should be considered. Many of the published studies in this time frame have been more focused on the effects and outcomes for students, but a longitudinal study of teachers' training, experiences and/or retention, as well as how these factors influenced student outcomes would be a worthwhile undertaking. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine ways in which teacher agency may change over time, and whether the educational shifts that occurred as a result of COVID could be linked to longer-term impacts on teachers' experiences and well-being.

More Studies Focused on Teacher Agency in Virtual vs. In-Person Settings

One of the key themes discussed in Chapter 4 was Theme Two: "I had no Paper.": How COVID Changed Teachers' Workload and Roles. This lends itself to the need for further research on the ways in which alternative classroom settings impact teachers' experiences of agency. Many of participants' comments related to this theme were very specific to teaching in a virtual environment for the first time, which led me to wonder whether this particular experience would have been the same had COVID, followed by virtual and hybridized schooling, not occurred. Although there is a fair amount of existing literature on teacher agency, there is yet

little research on how forceful or sudden shifts to virtual or hybrid programs may impact teachers' agency in the short or long term. In order to determine whether virtual teaching in general impacts teachers' experiences of agency, a comparative case study could be conducted to compare teachers working at wholly virtual schools before COVID and teachers who only taught virtually as a result of COVID. The other aspect, regarding rapid change, could be examined via teacher case study in areas where school systems have had a major shift i.e., to virtual or year-round schooling, or endured a recent crisis such as a natural disaster.

Different Participant Pools

Despite my desire for my sample to be as diverse as possible, of the six teachers interviewed, three were women and three were men, however, all were white. Although race was not a primary focus in my study, teachers' experiences of different aspects of identity such as race/gender/age etc. may be connected to agency in ways that have yet to be examined (Biesta et al., 2017; Vitanova, 2018). My participants were diverse in some dimensions; they varied in age, gender, years of experience, geography, and school profile. However, they did not provide a wide range of diversity in terms of race or ethnicity. Additionally, it would be interesting to further examine, perhaps through surveys or on a larger scale, ideas about teachers' agency based on their discourse and other biographical elements such as age, generation, and experience (Biesta et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The aims of this study were to examine teacher agency in a time of global crisis, as well as understand more about teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of agency during COVID-19. This study's major contributions included: providing insight on teacher wellness under crisis conditions, providing specific, concrete examples of teachers' experiences of agency in

uncharted educational territory, drawing connections to past literature on teacher agency, and providing strong direction for future studies.

Although the interviews conducted were in no way exhaustive in nature, they provided timely and poignant snapshots of the realities these secondary English classroom teachers faced as they lived and worked through the global COVID-19 pandemic. While the scope of my research cannot speak to all contexts, it is a relevant significant contribution to the literature to conceptualize the themes of "negotiation, "wiggle room," "street level bureaucracy," and "'making it work," that persisted within the COVID context of this study. Further, the study revealed that even in crises, where teachers are suddenly burdened with new responsibilities and expectations they had never been prepared for, they maintained agency/autonomy by "making it work" by whatever means necessary. At the same time, participants felt a loss of agency caused by their unpreparedness and lack of support for teaching or prioritizing their own wellness. My findings suggested systemic support for teacher agency may be especially important in times of crisis or significant change because it allows those who are in daily contact with students to make innovative and timely decisions based on student needs.

In closing, I could not be more grateful to the participants for volunteering their time and providing candid and insightful answers to my many questions. Through weaving together the thematic threads of these teachers' experiences, I have been humbled by their honesty, humor, and resilience, and I am still in awe of the seemingly endless depth of the material produced by the interviews. In my experience, COVID had a way of shining a light on the mundane; highlighting the things we once took for granted. Above all else, this experience and my participants have provided a story worth telling.

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Appendix A - Recruitment Email

Request to colleagues to circulate the email below:

Subject line for email will be: Seeking Participants for Dissertation Study-Recruitment Email Enclosed

Dear Colleague,

Hello! I hope this email finds you well and that you're having a safe and productive school year. I am currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Curriculum, Culture, and Change Ph.D. program at VCU. I am looking for secondary English teachers (6-12) to interview for my dissertation research project. I am writing to ask if you would be willing to forward the email below to your colleagues and/or educational networks. I ask that you do not discuss potential participation with your friends or colleagues, as there is a need for confidentiality in the study, and I would like to protect the identity and privacy of all future participants. All interested participants should email me directly at leekh4@vcu.edu.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this email.

Best,

Kristina Lee

Secondary English Teacher Participant Recruitment Email

Subject line for email should be: VCU PhD Student Seeking Participants for a Research Study

Dear English Teacher,

Hello, my name is Kristina Lee, and I am a former English teacher and a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am in search of secondary English teachers to interview for my dissertation study.

My research focuses on the lived experiences of educators teaching during COVID-19. I am conducting this research study in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum, Culture, and Change. The purpose of this study is to draw on individual, semi-structured interviews to examine and synthesize the lived experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am interested in your personal stories and your thoughtful candid responses. From the research findings, I believe my study has potential implications for policy, future practice, and teacher education and retention.

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to meet one on one via Zoom for approximately one hour. The interviews will take place between February and April 2022.

If you're interested in participating, please contact me via email at leekh4@vcu.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to read this email and for considering participating in this study.

Best,
Kristina Lee

Appendix B - Demographic Survey

Demographic Survey Questions

This survey is part of a doctoral research project at VCU about secondary teachersâ€™ experience relating to teacher agency during COVID-19. Your answers to these questions will help to determine your eligibility for the study and help the researcher to select participants with a range of educational and professional backgrounds. Pseudonyms will be used in transcripts and publications. Therefore, your name and/or the name of your school will not be made available to others or appear in any transcripts or publications. Please provide answers to the questions below by typing into the boxes.

* Required

1. First and last name *

2. Age *

3. Race/Ethnicity *

Check all that apply.

- [ ] American Indian or Alaska Native
- [ ] Asian
- [ ] Black or African American
- [ ] Hispanic or Latino
- [ ] Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- [ ] White
- [ ] Other: _____

4. Gender identity and pronouns: *

5. Email *

_____

6. If applicable, name of the institution where you received teacher training:

_____

7. Number of years teaching, including this one: *

_____

8. Subject currently teaching: *

_____

9. Grade currently teaching: *

_____

10. Were you teaching during the 2019/2020, 2020/2021, and 2021/2022 school years? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

11. Describe the setting of your current school: *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Rural
- ◯ Suburban
- ◯ Urban
- ◯ Other: _____

12. Your current school is public or private/independent? *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Public
- ◯ Private/Independent

13. Name of current school: *

_____

Appendix C - Participant Information and Consent & Research Study Information Sheet and Consent

Hello, my name is Kristina Lee, and I am a former English teacher and a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. This information sheet outlines the requirements, risks, benefits, and details of participation in my research project.

My research focuses on the lived experiences of educators teaching during COVID-19. I am conducting this research study in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum, Culture, and Change. The purpose of this study is to draw on individual, semi-structured interviews to examine and synthesize the lived experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am interested in your personal stories and your thoughtful candid responses. From the research findings, I believe my study has potential implications for policy, future practice, and teacher education and retention.

Participation Requirements

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to meet one on one via Zoom for approximately one hour. The interviews will take place between February and April 2022. The interview will be conducted at a time mutually agreed upon by both parties. The interviews are intended to be conversational and candid. Please know that there are no right or wrong answers, this is simply a time to share, discuss, and reflect upon your experiences and your thoughts about them. I will ask you to answer questions about your personal and professional experiences.

Zoom sessions will be video and audio recorded so they can be transcribed later for analysis. Video recording will be destroyed immediately for additional assurance of privacy. The audio recording of the interview will be retained, but all identifying information will be removed during transcription. No names or identifying information will be used or published.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer questions, and you may ask questions during the interview, as well as via email before or after the interview. Additionally, you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you may also request for your individual data to be withdrawn and destroyed. Requests to have data destroyed can be made orally or via email to leekh4@vcu.edu.

Risks or Benefits

There could be slight risks or benefits to participating in this study. The interview questions will ask you about your personal and professional experiences, which may cause you to feel positive

or negative emotions. While there are no expected direct benefits from participating in the study, your participation may help provide valuable information to the investigator and inform future research.

Privacy
VCU has established secure research databases and computer systems to store information and to help with monitoring and oversight of research. Your information will be kept in these databases and only accessible to individuals working on this study or authorized individuals who have access for specific research related tasks. Identifiable information in these databases will not be released outside VCU unless stated in this consent or required by law. Although results of this research may be presented at meetings or in publications, identifiable personal information about participants will not be disclosed.

Whom should I contact if I have questions about the study?
The investigator and university staff below are the best person(s) to contact if you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research:

Kristina Lee
Doctoral Student Investigator
Email: leekh4@vcu.edu
Phone: 757.876.2269

Dr. Hillary Parkhouse, Ph.D.
Dissertation Committee Chair
heparkhouse@vcu.edu

If you have general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, or if you wish to discuss problems, concerns, or questions, to obtain information, or to offer input about research, you may contact:

Virginia Commonwealth University Office of Research
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000, Box 980568, Richmond, VA 23298
(804) 827-2157; https://research.vcu.edu/human-research/

I have read the Participant Information Sheet in its entirety.
____ YES, I wish to participate
____ NO, I do NOT wish to participate

Appendix D - Email: Interest in Dissertation Study Follow-up: Information and Survey

Dear Potential Participant--

Thanks so much for reaching out and allowing me to contact you! My name is Kristina Lee, and I am a former English teacher and a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am in search of secondary English teachers to interview for my dissertation study.

My research focuses on the lived experiences of educators teaching during COVID-19. I am conducting this research study in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum, Culture, and Change. The purpose of this study is to draw on individual, semi-structured interviews to examine and synthesize the lived experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am interested in your personal stories and your thoughtful candid responses. From the research findings, I believe my study has potential implications for policy, future practice, and teacher education and retention.

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to meet one on one via Zoom for approximately one hour. The interviews will take place between March and April 2022.

1. At your earliest convenience, please read the attached information/consent sheet. If you agree to participate if you are chosen, please proceed to step 2. By completing the demographic survey, you are stating that you wish to participate if you are selected.
2. If you wish to move forward, please complete the short demographic survey by clicking the link below. All responses are recorded using REDCAP, VCU's secure web platform. https://redcap.vcu.edu/surveys/?s=PM7C3P4JRCD3NXRE
3. If more participants than are needed respond to the survey, I will use the demographic questionnaire to select a diverse participant pool according to the received responses.
4. After these steps, I will reach out to each participant individually to coordinate interview times.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you again for your interest!
Best,
Kristina Lee
Pronouns: she/her/hers
Doctoral Student, Curriculum, Culture & Change

Appendix E - Interview Protocol

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your teaching background and a bit about the classes you're teaching now? I would love to hear more about the demographics and general climate of your school.

2. Are there any specific words that come to your mind when you think about your experiences teaching during COVID?

3. Could you talk to me about what it has been like to teach during Covid? (Leave this as a probe: Are there any general thoughts or feelings that come to your mind positive, negative, or neutral when you think about teaching during this time).

4. (teaching is a very complex form of work–there are lots of aspects of the context that can be at play for example: cultural across race, class, gender, age, structural, interacting with administration, community, colleagues, students).

Pre-COVID What WERE the factors that have affected your ability to make instructional decisions in your school or classroom?

Since COVID has occurred, have any of the factors shifted or changed?

5. What are some of the teaching experiences that have really stood out to you this past year or two during COVID-19?

6. Kind of to build off of that last question –I'm really interested in a detailed experience that you've had teaching in COVID-19. Is there an experience that stands out that you could walk me through, frame by frame, as if it were occurring in a movie, a really significant teaching moment you've had this year?

Lived experience probes: Who was there with you? How did it feel to be in the room? What could you see or sense as you were having this experience?

7. To follow-up, can you describe or imagine how the same experience, or one or the other experiences would have looked last year in a pre-COVID context?

8. From your responses I get the sense that there were some instructional shifts. Can you share your experience of how you felt and experienced a particular moment where you were asked to make changes and how it felt to live out those changes? What kind of impact were you able to have on these decisions?

9. Now that mask mandates are being lifted, and maybe there's a bit of a shift starting to kind of start moving forward, are there things you hope might change or stay in the teaching profession in the future, as a result of these experiences?

As appropriate, these questions were used as probes:

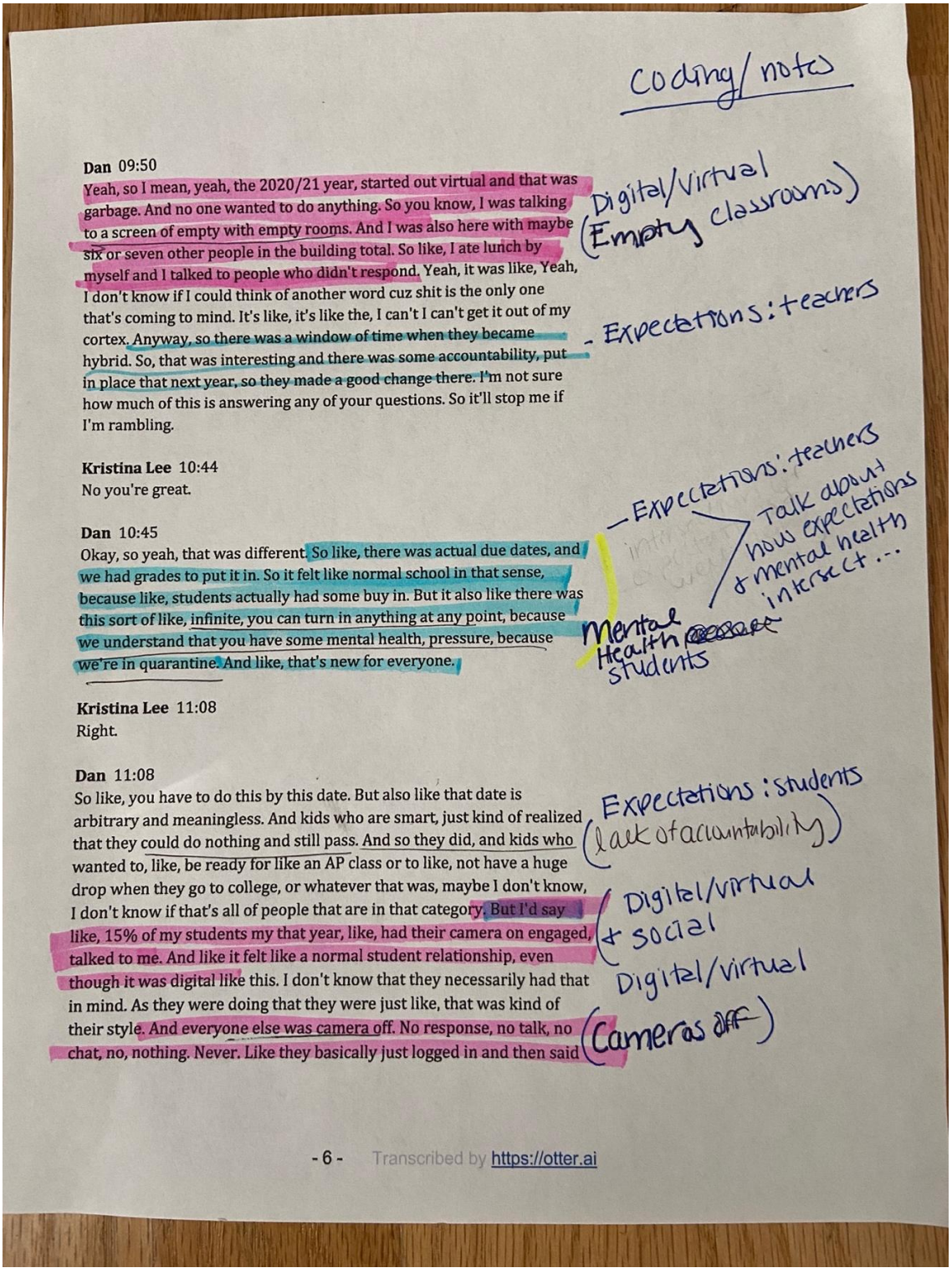
A. Back before COVID, what were some of hardest or trickiest decisions you had to make? (In this next question, I want you to describe your experience of your daily instructional decisions pre-COVID.)
B. Based on this experience you're describing it sounds like COVID may have impacted your instructional style or pedagogical decisions, can you expand on that part of your story? Or talk about how your work changed more broadly?
C. This story you're sharing really says a lot about how you interact with your students. Can you tell me a story about how your experience connects to your relationship with your students? Did anything enable or constrain these relationships?
D. How would you describe your experience of any changes in your teaching environment due to COVID? Can you describe a particular change in your teaching environment?
E. Can you tell me more?
F. If that's just not how you experienced it, can you tell me about that?

Appendix F - Codebook

Parent Codes	Combined Codes	Themes
Agency + (promotes)		**T2, T3, T5**
Agency – (limits)		**T5**
Curriculum changes	**Expectations**	**T3, subtheme 1,**
Digital (+/-)	**Digital equity**	**T6, subtheme 1**
Virtual (+/-)		**T1, T2, subtheme 1**
Technology (+/-)		**T2, subtheme 2,** **T6, subtheme 2**
Expectations: students	**Expectations**	**T3, subtheme 1**
Expectations: admin	**Expectations**	**T3, subtheme 1**
Expectations: teachers	**Expectations**	**T3, subtheme 1**
Classroom management		**T2, subtheme 2**
Flexibility	**Flexibility/Innovation**	**T3**
Innovation	**Flexibility/Innovation**	**T3**
Mental health (students)	**Student socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 1**
Mental health (teachers)	**Teacher socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 2**
Social (students)	**Student socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 1**
Social (teachers)	**Teacher socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 2**
Wellness (students)	**Student socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 1**
Wellness (teachers)	**Teacher socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 3**
Teacher retention/attrition	**Teacher socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 3**
Training and support (+/-)	**Teacher socio-emotional well-being**	**T6**
New teachers	**Teacher socio-emotional well-being**	**T4, subtheme 3**
Socio-political	**COVID changes**	**T2, subtheme 2**

Major changes	**COVID changes**	**T2**
Public vs. private		**T3**
Positive Changes		**T6, subtheme 2**

Appendix G - Example of Hand-Coded Transcript Page



Coding/ notes

Dan 09:50
Yeah, so I mean, yeah, the 2020/21 year, started out virtual and that was garbage. And no one wanted to do anything. So you know, I was talking to a screen of empty with empty rooms. And I was also here with maybe six or seven other people in the building total. So like, I ate lunch by myself and I talked to people who didn't respond. Yeah, it was like, Yeah, I don't know if I could think of another word cuz shit is the only one that's coming to mind. It's like, it's like the, I can't I can't get it out of my cortex. Anyway, so there was a window of time when they became hybrid. So, that was interesting and there was some accountability, put in place that next year, so they made a good change there. I'm not sure how much of this is answering any of your questions. So it'll stop me if I'm rambling.

Digital/Virtual (Empty classrooms)

- Expectations: teachers

Kristina Lee 10:44
No you're great.

Dan 10:45
Okay, so yeah, that was different. So like, there was actual due dates, and we had grades to put it in. So it felt like normal school in that sense, because like, students actually had some buy in. But it also like there was this sort of like, infinite, you can turn in anything at any point, because we understand that you have some mental health, pressure, because we're in quarantine. And like, that's new for everyone.

- Expectations: teachers
Talk about how expectations & mental health intersect...
Mental Health students

Kristina Lee 11:08
Right.

Dan 11:08
So like, you have to do this by this date. But also like that date is arbitrary and meaningless. And kids who are smart, just kind of realized that they could do nothing and still pass. And so they did, and kids who wanted to, like, be ready for like an AP class or to like, not have a huge drop when they go to college, or whatever that was, maybe I don't know, I don't know if that's all of people that are in that category. But I'd say like, 15% of my students my that year, like, had their camera on engaged, talked to me. And like it felt like a normal student relationship, even though it was digital like this. I don't know that they necessarily had that in mind. As they were doing that they were just like, that was kind of their style. And everyone else was camera off. No response, no talk, no chat, no, nothing. Never. Like they basically just logged in and then said

Expectations: students (lack of accountability)

Digital/virtual + social

Digital/virtual (Cameras off)

Vita

Kristina L. H. Lee is originally from Yorktown, Virginia. She graduated from Tabb High School in 2004, and the University of Virginia in 2008. At UVA she was an anthropology and English double major. She later graduated from UVA's Curry School in 2009 with a M.T. in English Education. Formerly a secondary English teacher, Kristina has experience working with preschool to college age students. She enjoys teaching, tutoring, and working with future educators.