COVID-19, Caregiving and Careers of Alberta Teachers and School Leaders

A QUALITATIVE STUDY

The Alberta Teachers' Association

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Preface

When the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 was a pandemic, on March 11, 2020, it also encouraged world governments to take strong action to limit and stop the spread of the novel coronavirus. Alberta, along with other provinces, announced a public health emergency shortly thereafter. As a consequence of health measures that were brought into force at the time, nonessential businesses were shuttered, schools implemented emergency online remote teaching, child care centres and recreation facilities were closed, and public and private gatherings were limited. The impact of these measures on the service sector was especially severe and, because women tend to be disproportionately employed in service-related occupations, the burden fell disproportionately upon women.

In particular, the economic recession caused by the pandemic has led to the loss of jobs for many Albertans and Canadians, but women have been much slower to return to the labour market. The disproportionate impact on women, particularly those living at the intersections of gender, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is coined the "She-cession" by economists such as Armine Yalnizyan.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on Canadian women generally, and on those in the kindergarten to Grade 12 education sector in particular, the Women in Leadership Committee of the Alberta Teachers' Association turned its attention in September 2020 to documenting the experience of women teachers and school leaders during the pandemic period. Given that the teaching profession is primarily female, at 74 per cent of the Alberta teaching profession (Alberta Teachers' Retirement Fund 2017), a systemic examination of the lived experience of Alberta teachers and school leaders who have caregiving responsibilities became a clear priority. Consequently, the Association embarked on a research project to explore the lived experiences of women teachers and school leaders. A qualitative methodology was adopted for this study, as it was hoped that the endeavour would provide rich description of the lives of women teachers and school leaders during COVID-19 so that meaningful supports might be identified.

The formulation of the research questions and research design was guided by the Women in Leadership Committee, who also supported the knowledge mobilization plan for this study. I wish to acknowledge the 2020/21 committee members for their efforts in bringing this study to life:

- Kathy Hoehn (chair), District Representative Calgary City
- Nancy Ball, District Representative Edmonton-McMurray
- Catherine Beaver-Hawman, teacher, Wild Rose School Division
- Joanne Harle, principal, Edmonton Public School Division
- Sonja Dykslag, principal, Wolf Creek School Division

Finally, I wish to recognize the teachers, school leaders and system leaders who volunteered to participate in focus groups or be interviewed for this important study. Your insights provide the teaching profession with a glimpse into the opportunities and challenges experienced during the pandemic and help to identify potential pathways for resilience and recovery. I trust that you will find in the following pages an effective representation of your thoughts, words and experiences.

Dennis Theobald
Executive Secretary

Executive Summary

The 2020/21 school year was like none other for students, teachers and school leaders in Alberta. This report documents the lived experiences of women educators during this exceptional year, recognizing that women were most likely to also face increased caregiving responsibilities at home. It asks how the layering of career and caregiving responsibilities impacted women educators' professional development and well-being. Five focus groups were held with women educators in March 2021, and 10 interviews were held with school leaders and superintendents in May 2021.[1]

> *We're expected to bring the calm every day, but there is chaos going on in our own lives and in our home. Because no matter what role you step into—whether you're a parent, a caregiver, whether you're a teacher—it's happening everywhere. Your personal, your professional life, and you just feel like you're keeping all the balls in the air at one time.*
>
> *—Secondary school teacher[1]*

Results indicate the following key findings:

- Constantly changing guidelines, ongoing uncertainty and having to adapt to public health measures greatly added to educator stress and anxiety. The substitute teacher shortage, exacerbated by the pandemic, further contributed to high workloads, preventing educators from taking breaks for self-care and causing more frequent shifts to online learning, which was a further source of anxiety.

- Educators assumed the emotional labour of reassuring students, colleagues and parents. They felt responsible for maintaining a sense of calm and responding to the heightened emotional needs of others. While such labour was appreciated, it also incurred time and well-being costs for educators.

- Professional demands impacted educators' home life, resulting in less time and energy to meet increasing care burdens. Most respondents noted that, as women, they were primarily responsible for child care in their family when daycare and schools closed. In the context of the pandemic, women could not draw on previously established familial and social networks to share child care responsibilities. Many women also had elder care responsibilities, which led to increased concerns about infection and feelings of guilt regarding potential COVID-19 exposures.

- The impossible challenge of balancing work and care responsibilities was particularly pronounced for school leaders, who were often unable to work from home during lockdowns and were responsible for public health measures within their schools. School leaders described spending weekends and evenings calling parents about exposures, often at the cost of their own care

responsibilities at home, and mitigating parent and staff concerns while dealing with their own sense of responsibility for student safety. With little support, they reported high rates of sleep loss, stress and anxiety.

- Many educators rose to the challenges posed by COVID-19, seeking out online professional development and education opportunities, and expressing a desire for greater leadership opportunities. There was a recognition that the skills they had fostered in terms of caring for and providing emotional support to others could strengthen the COVID-19 response and recovery within the education system.

- Enthusiasm for career advancement and leadership opportunities was mitigated by the inability of many to manage both care and professional demands, and perceived judgment from decision makers regarding attempts to ease this conflict by working from home.

- The context and challenges of COVID-19, particularly in terms of irreconcilable work and care responsibilities, directly impacted educators' mental and physical health, with almost all reporting feelings of exhaustion, stress and anxiety.

- Educators described feelings of moral distress: the internal conflict between the desire to provide high-quality education and care, and the inability to do so due to external constraints. Educators expressed guilt over not being able to ensure that students received previous standards of education and due to feeling that they were neglecting their own children. This doubling of distress was identified as increasing the risk of burnout, a concern shared by teachers, leaders and superintendents.

- Educators often felt that the double burden of care they assumed at school and at home was taken for granted and not supported by decision makers. Lack of prioritization of educators for vaccines was seen as indicative of neglectful attitudes to the risk they assumed and the essential role they filled.

- Educators felt supported when schools and divisions offered flexibility to work from home and meet care responsibilities. They appreciated division-level support to postpone the new curriculum pilot and the offer of free professional development days, which allowed time for self-care. They found peer and community support, even when virtual, encouraging, despite the trying circumstances.

Looking ahead to the next school year, educators expressed hope that much could be learned in terms of school priorities, community building and women's leadership potential. In particular, they had a number of recommendations for both the COVID-19 recovery phase and preparedness in case of future crisis. These centred on supportive policies, including recognition of care responsibilities, for female leaders and those seeking career advancement; greater mental health support; and reducing public health responsibilities on educators while prioritizing them for interventions.

Introduction

On March 15, 2020, in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic, the Alberta government announced the closure of all schools and daycares—a lockdown that would last the rest of the 2020 school year. Over the summer, as scientific understanding of COVID-19 increased and case numbers declined, the decision was made to reopen schools, with the option of online learning available to those families who chose it. Most students and teachers returned to the classroom in September 2020, for a school year like no other. COVID-19 case numbers quickly began to rise again, leading to secondary school closures in November 2020, and all schools shifting to online learning for the first few weeks of 2021. While such measures led to a temporary reduction in cases, numbers began to rise again in the spring, leading to, at first, isolated and then provincewide school closures in May 2021.

While there are numerous studies that have analyzed the impacts of COVID-19 on students' education, there are few on the experiences of and effects on educators. MacDonald and Hill's (2021) research in British Columbia explored teachers' early experiences of the pandemic and concerns regarding the 2020/21 school year. They found that teachers questioned how they might keep children safe and worried about supporting both online and face-to-face learning. Sokal, Trudel and Babb (2020) surveyed Canadian teachers in April and June 2020, focusing on attitudes toward change, with results indicating increasing levels of burnout and cynicism.

These studies, as well as most of those on teaching during other health crises, such as SARS and H1N1, do not explicitly consider the gendered nature of teaching and how teachers' gender roles might affect their experiences and the effects of working during a public health crisis. Two exceptions include a paper that discusses Italian female teachers' higher risk of negative mental health impacts (Matiz et al 2020) and a study from Chile that found that female teachers experienced more negative impacts on their quality of life, including work exhaustion and lower engagement, than male teachers (Lizana et al 2021). The otherwise lack of gender-based and feminist analysis of teacher experiences during COVID-19 is notable considering that the education field is distinctly feminized, with over 74 per cent of teachers in Alberta identifying as women. In addition, substantive research indicates that women are disproportionately impacted by the secondary effects of the pandemic, including increased unpaid care burdens, greater risk of violence, economic loss and heightened mental health threats (Bahn, Cohen and van der Meulen Rodgers 2020).

It is unlikely that female teachers in Alberta are isolated from such effects. For example, while not disaggregating findings by gender, MacDonald and Hill (2021) found the most profound impact for teachers was the shift that took place in terms of work–home balance. They write, "For teachers who had children, this was characterized as a juggling act, where the teacher was wearing many hats and responsible for both their own and other children's needs." Such findings indicated a relationship

between professional obligations of teachers and the unpaid care work primarily conducted by women. Prior to the pandemic, women in Canada did two to three times the amount of unpaid care work compared to men and, while men's share of care work has increased in the context of the pandemic, women continue to do the majority (Qian and Fuller 2020). Increases in unpaid care work due to the pandemic have been found to restrict women's opportunities for personal and professional development, as well as overall health and wellness (Bahn, Cohen and van der Meulen Rodgers 2020).

Recognizing that the majority of educators in Canada identify as women, and therefore are likely to have care responsibilities affected by the pandemic, this research aims to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women teachers and school leaders who have had to balance their professional obligations with caregiving responsibilities. It further considers what, if any, impact this has had on their professional development and well-being. The project was guided by the following research questions:
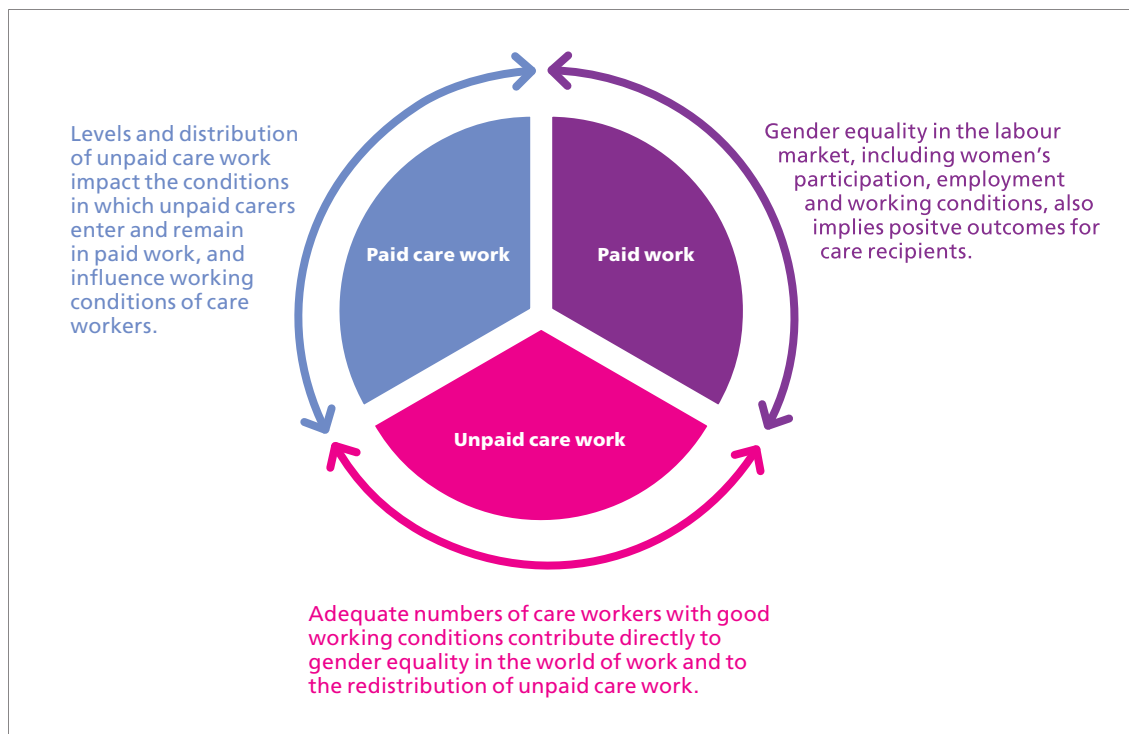
- What has been the lived experience of Alberta teachers and school leaders who also have caregiving responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the employment and/or career aspirations of teachers and school leaders who also have caregiving responsibilities?

- What current or potential supports, either formal or informal, do Alberta teachers and school leaders identify as being beneficial to help in balancing career and caregiving responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Following a brief description of the approach and methods of the research, this report first presents educators' professional lived experiences during the 2020/21 school year. Many of these experiences illustrate the general challenges that educators, regardless of gender, faced throughout the year. It then analyzes how these experiences were layered on top of the additional care responsibilities that women educators, particularly, experienced due to dominant gender norms and roles, and how this layering impacted educators' professional development and well-being. It concludes by considering what help was available to support educators in facing COVID-19–related challenges, what gaps in support were experienced, and how teachers can be better supported going forward and in the event of future health crises.

The focus on the relationship between career and care responsibilities recognizes that women educator experiences in particular are influenced by both their professional/public and unpaid/private roles, and the intrinsic relationships between such roles. Such relationships are illustrated through the circle of paid care work–unpaid care work–other paid work (Antonopoulos 2008). The circle of care demonstrates how the conditions, provisions and accessibility of paid care work directly impact the level, distribution and conditions of unpaid care, which, in turn, affect women's opportunities to enter and remain in paid work. Policy environments and gender norms structure the relationship between sectors. For example, when states shed responsibilities for social protections, such as education or child care, unpaid care work is shifted further onto women, with little recognition of this downstream effect

or effort to mitigate increased costs (Fortier 2020), many of which COVID-19 is making worse—in particular, because of gender roles and because women's jobs tend to be given lower priority than men's, since they are more likely to be part-time, lower income and less secure. This is particularly true during health crises such as COVID-19, which has exacerbated prepandemic vulnerabilities within the circle of care and created new stressors. While women educators' experiences teaching and leading have always been influenced by unpaid care responsibilities, and vice versa, these relationships have become even more fraught in the context of COVID-19.

Figure 1: Circle of Care

Levels and distribution of unpaid care work impact the conditions in which unpaid carers enter and remain in paid work, and influence working conditions of care workers.

Gender equality in the labour market, including women's participation, employment and working conditions, also implies positve outcomes for care recipients.

Paid care work

Paid work

Unpaid care work

Adequate numbers of care workers with good working conditions contribute directly to gender equality in the world of work and to the redistribution of unpaid care work.

—Antonopoulos 2008

This study further adds to the substantial literature on the ethics of care and care work within teaching, and how teaching remains feminized, not only in terms of resource allocations and recognition but also in terms of expectations regarding care. A number of studies document how the expectation to provide—often unpaid and unrecognized—care work contributes to labour exploitation (Ismael, Lazzaro and Ishihara 2021) and how teachers' caring approach to their profession is often manipulated by demands to work to the point of fatigue and burnout (Chatelier and Rudolph 2018). Some of this literature discusses the effects of emotional burnout on students, while other work focuses on the emotional labour of educators (Arens and Morin 2016). *Emotional*

labour refers to activities relevant to the emotional well-being and support of others (colleagues and students), often achieved through managing one's own emotional expressions. Research on gender and emotional labour finds that emotional labour is often expected of women, particularly women leaders, compared to men (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2021). Previous studies have documented the prevalence of emotional labour in female-dominated professions such as teaching, and how this work, along with other forms of care work, is rarely recognized and often undervalued (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006). To rectify such neglect, this study hopes to make visible the public and private care work that teachers have invested in the COVID-19 response, often at great cost to themselves.

APPROACH AND METHODS

In this study, the focus is specifically on how gender norms and roles have structured educators' experiences of the pandemic, while recognizing that gender identity intersects with additional social positions related to race, sexuality, ethnicity, (dis)ability and socioeconomic status. We use the terms both *female* and *women* to include those who self-identify as such, including those who might fit outside of the biological binary of female–male.

The research questions noted above were explored through a mixed methods approach including analysis of academic and grey literature, focus group discussions and semistructured interviews with school leaders and trustees. Focus group participants were recruited voluntarily through advertisements on the Women in Leadership Summit website and in the registration information, and purposefully by targeted e-mails. Interviewees were recruited purposefully by e-mail from the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA).

Five focus groups were held with 29 female teachers and school leaders in total. Three focus groups were held during the Women in Leadership Summit on March 5, 2021, and the remaining two the following week. In an effort to learn from a variety of experiences and incorporate intersectional analysis, focus groups were organized as follows:

- Educators from rural schools (six participants)
- Educators from Edmonton area schools (seven participants)
- Educators from Calgary area schools (six participants)
- School leaders (six participants)
- Educators who identified as Indigenous or racialized women (four participants)

To gain deeper understanding of key themes that emerged from the focus groups, 10 individual semistructured interviews with school leaders and superintendents were conducted in May 2021. All participants identified as women, except for one interviewee, who identified as a man.

Focus groups and interviews were held virtually through Zoom and lasted approximately one hour. All focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, with the recording transcribed. Focus groups and interviews were semistructured, with a mix of questions and discussions based on focus group and interview guides. Focus group participants were also asked to answer poll questions using the Zoom polling functionality.

After familiarization with the transcripts, the research team created a preliminary set of codes, which informed the development of a thematic framework used to sort and categorize the data. Researchers separately applied this framework to a selection of transcripts and then compared results, discussing any inconsistencies and refining the framework to reach consensus on thematic meanings and structure. One researcher then coded the remaining documents, discussing with the other as necessary.

This study received ethical approval from Simon Fraser University. Researchers received verbal consent from all study participants. Participant anonymity was preserved throughout the analysis and in the presentation of findings.

Figure 2. Focus group participants were asked to share one word that summed up the school year so far.

Teaching, Caring and Leading in the Context of COVID-19

In their research with teachers following the initial COVID-19 lockdown, MacDonald and Hill (2020) found that returning to school in the fall of 2020 created high levels of anxiety for educators, who were concerned about how to keep children apart, felt safety guidelines were unclear, and worried about the potential of further closures and transitions to online learning. Research participants expressed similar concerns about the start of the school year. One teacher reflected, "I think that a lot of teachers felt some concern with the PPE when we first started. Also, there was a lot of confusion about the return to school entry plans. We were basically required to create them on our own, kind of last minute." Additional cleaning and monitoring for sickness added to teacher responsibilities. A school leader described teachers in her school as "working their butts off sanitizing these desks a million times, they're watching for every little sniffle underneath the masks and they're just exhausted by the extra work other than teaching and I think that's the biggest impact we've had."

The need to protect against and respond to an unfolding pandemic continued throughout the school year as new information emerged, guidelines changed and waves of infections followed. A school leader noted that the need to "be adaptive and flexible, and to problem solve and to be nimble, and to learn new skills while trying to provide instruction for everybody else who is learning new skills has been extraordinarily difficult." Consequently, while educators mentioned that limits on extracurricular activities reduced some aspects of their workload, "that vacuum has been more than filled by all the uncertainty and just the nonstop changes and just that kind of feeling of what's coming next." And while they were quick to note that "teachers aren't afraid of hard work," the context of constant change and uncertainty led to feelings of never being caught up or prepared.

Inability to be prepared, combined with concern for student safety, led to high levels of anxiety. One principal recounted the experience of a teacher in her school debriefing a therapy session: "The first question she asked me in my therapy session was, 'What's the worst thing that could happen?' My answer was, 'Someone could die on my watch.'" This fear was echoed by other educators:

> So, in addition to being responsible for the learning piece, we're responsible for the health and the safety, as though we are a parent, right, if I just look at a single day. So that's heavy on a good day, which is why we arrange breakfast and lunches. But being responsible for health and safety of other people's children in the middle of a global pandemic is heavy, and anxiety inducing.

The personal and external expectations to keep students safe weighed on educators.

Educator workload was further affected by the provincewide substitute teacher shortage, which originated before COVID-19 but was exacerbated by increased teacher absences due to the need to isolate, and by substitute teachers often serving only a limited number of schools as a way to reduce risk of infection. When substitute teachers were not available, which was often the case, gaps had to be filled from within the school. One school leader noted

> The impact for staff is that whenever you don't have coverage for your building, you are then using internal coverage—who has a prep period, who has a piece of time, who has a lunch break, who has a recess break, who has time that is intended over the course of that day to allow them to recharge, to make sure that they have the energy that they need.

They went on to note

> I haven't met a teacher that hasn't rallied to help their colleagues and to provide internal coverage. Teachers have huge hearts and they are so giving. The issue becomes, certainly for a system like ours where we've had week after week after week, after week after week, of not having appropriate numbers of substitutes.

In high schools, the substitute shortage was often responded to by shifting to online teaching; if a teacher had to quarantine, they would instruct virtually from their home. One school leader described, "At one point we had 14 teachers away, and so to bring 14 subs in, we couldn't find 14 subs, and so then we ended up changing the system. Then the poor kids, if their teacher was quarantined, it's like, you guys, you're not quarantined, but your class is going to be online for the next two weeks, because we couldn't find subs." Virtual learning was recognized as a poor solution for both the students, who lost out on in-person learning and connecting with their peers, and the teachers, who had to work from home while dealing with the personal and family challenges of isolating and potential COVID-19 illness.

Shifts to and from online learning were described as "a gong show" and "no end of confusion," particularly when the shift was abrupt. One teacher described online learning as follows:

> It's 20 or 30 children on the other end of the computer that need computer assistance, that can't find their login, that aren't really sure, that are having volume problems, that need help. All of those problems need to be resolved while a teacher has things going on at home, that involve the rest of their world. And in addition, then trying to teach a lesson that they probably spent weeks getting organized, ready to teach in the classroom. And with no notice, now need to turn that into somehow doing it in an engaging way online.

While some teachers expressed pride in being able to adapt to online delivery, and got satisfaction out of learning new methods, most expressed concern about the gaps it created in access to education and how this would affect subsequent school years.

EMOTIONAL LABOUR: "WE'VE BECOME MASTERS OF DISGUISE"

Research participants described spending a great deal of time and energy engaging in "emotional heavy lifting with colleagues" and "smoothing over other peoples' anxiety." One participant explained

> So, as a principal, I feel such pressure to try to respond to other people's crises or emotions because I want to take care of them. I want to make sure they're OK to be in front of kids, you know. And that they're not carrying the weight of the situation into their day. Because we're with littles and they can pick up on that for sure. I mean, the older kids can, too. But that emotional piece of just regulating that emotional environment for folks.

Participants frequently mentioned the effort that went into trying to maintain a sense of calm or normalcy within the pandemic context. One teacher explained, "We're trying to create as much normalcy as we can for our students and families"; another described "the expectation that we're bringing the calm and not amplifying the chaos." This took a substantial amount of work, with one teacher joking, "I was just thinking, we've become masters of disguise. We present to our community and our students as though we've done this a million times." Such emotional labour added to educator workloads: "I believe that just the emotional load that it takes to navigate all those pieces is just very difficult, and it's not your regular administrative duties or teaching duties."

Such emotional labour was recognized as beneficial and essential by school leaders and superintendents: "One thing that I have seen that's been really positive this year is the increased desire in staff to build relationships with students. And so, because they are so concerned about them, they're really working hard to keep them engaged with school, regardless of whether it's from the point of view of just the teacher or, I guess, more in a caring, concerned kind of way." Another superintendent observed

> What I'm seeing in our women leaders is a real strong effort to try and support the emotional and mental health of the staff and the students and the families. That has been a dominant theme in our conversations, about what are they doing? How are they doing? How are they outreaching? What are they dropping off or texting or messaging or phoning? There's this heightened support network as a result, from the women leading in our system.

Others noted a new appreciation for those skills often recognized as feminine: "Those soft skills, the more caregiver type of mentality, I suppose, is very much being relied on right now, as people are recognizing the stress levels. And it is that kind of caregiving that's getting a lot of people through."

However, the emotional energy educators invested in others had costs in terms of their own well-being, time and resources. In particular, the severity of emotional needs expressed by students and the consequences of not meeting them particularly weighed on educators. One recounted how a student had interrupted an online class to express suicidal thoughts. Others expressed concerns about increased rates of violence within homes, economic hardship and substance use related to COVID-19, which "put a huge, huge pressure and stress on the schools, on the teachers and administrators."

> **A high school teacher described the challenge of setting emotional boundaries in the context of COVID-19:**
>
> *I was trying to sort of finish up the day, and a student popped in who had been unable to come in for a week. He needed to share some really powerful struggles and, you know, I wanted to be there for him. And so that started taking my day longer. And then I was walking out with my colleague, and she was telling me about her life and where things were at for her, and I was being an emotional support there. And we were literally walking into the parkade and this teacher starts pulling out of her parking spot, sees us, pauses, opens the window with tears in her eyes needing to communicate her struggle that day. And I'm looking at my watch thinking, OK, it's 5:30, you know, my family needs me too. And everybody's just on such a low-key level of stress, with the spikes of big stresses, and needing each other for community and communion to be able to work through some of the stuff. And so yes, it would be lovely if we could set those boundaries, but they don't exist because crisis and chaos, you know, doesn't always adhere to any sort of schedule.*

CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES: "THERE'S BEEN NO BREAK SINCE THE PANDEMIC STARTED"

Educators noted that increased workloads at school necessarily impacted their home life, commenting, "Of course you take it home with you." One school leader noted, "I go home every day very exhausted because I'm constantly trying to reassure staff or students or families." Yet, female educators noted they also faced increasing demands on their time and energy at home: "My primary concern will still be the school, but I am also primarily responsible for the logistics of my family and then I'm trying to do both of those." Another described her current situation: "Taking care of this family, booking vaccinations, taking time off work for COVID testing, me the one who gets called when my kid is sick. Longer days at work because of more time spent on just dealing with kids at school is impacting my family significantly." Consequently, 85 per cent of focus group participants described their work–life balance as either more difficult to manage or nonexistent, compared to the previous year (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Focus group response to the poll question "I would characterize my work–life balance since September 20202 as"

15%

27%

58%

- The same as last year
- More difficult to manage
- Nonexistent
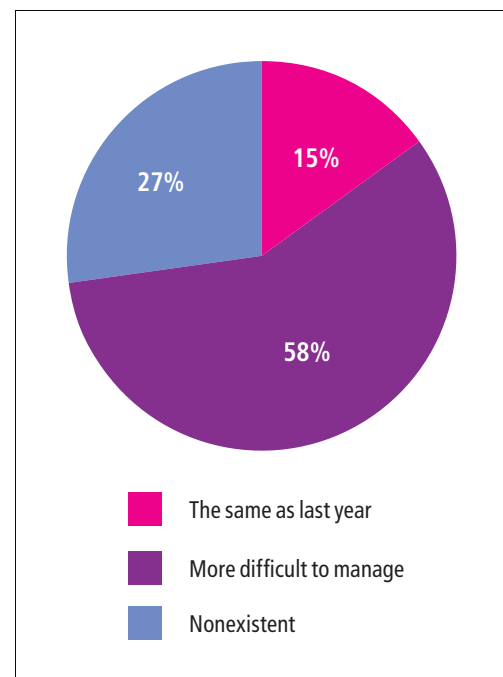
Respondents noted that increased care demands primarily fell on women due to their gendered roles as the primary care provider within their family. One educator noted a difference in how her children treated her and her husband: "When my husband, who is a teacher, shuts the door, they won't bug him. But they'll come—someone might come through that door at any moment and come ask me for something, right … because as the mom you're the go-to person." A superintendent similarly identified a trend of female teachers, particularly, trying to balance both child care and professional responsibilities:

> And one of the things that I'm seeing in my system is that they are also the caregiver in their home. And so, when their children are at home or there is a requirement, it is often the woman, the educator that is taking leave and going home. Where their partner is perhaps remaining in their job. It is the teacher that's going home and trying to teach online and care for the kids in the home. I think that there is a disproportionate responsibility to manage the global pandemic placed on women educators.

These conflicting responsibilities were particularly pronounced when educators' own children had to isolate or experienced school/child care closures, which was not an usual or one-off experience, with many educators noting that they or their children had isolated multiple times. One school leader noted that she "had some staff members that had to quarantine up to three times for upwards of 10 to 14 days. So again, if you're living with a family, you're basically stuck in [your] bedroom trying to manage your teaching assignments, stay away from your family, isolating, manage the day-to-day domestic responsibilities of being a parent or having food on the table or whatever else it is that you're responsible for." Teachers had to straddle two worlds by working from home during their own or family member isolation periods. Another school leader challenged, "Imagine if you are a mother with small children at home and you're trying to—schools have been closed down, you're trying to teach from home. At the same time, you have your children with you, because there's really no other place for them to go. So just imagine the huge amount of stress that caused."

Many mothers noted that, because they were teachers, they were also often the parent designated to support their children in online schooling: "When I had my little people at home, I would work until 5, go home, make dinner and then teach from 7 until 10. I would be prepping every day at school to go home and teach them every night. Which was exhausting." Another noted, "I was the one that was doing everything with her schooling, making sure, OK, I've got this printed for her, you know. … I would say my husband was useless at the time just because it was like it's just, you know, up to the mother to make sure the schooling's done and doing all that part of it."

Some mothers had opted out of paid child care as risk reduction strategy:

> So we took our kids out of child care to have them in one less cohort. So that's, again, also kind of a privilege and a financial benefit, but it comes at a cost. And that cost has been my mornings, my after school—I've got to run home because my kids are unsupervised … So, yeah, I'm grateful

they're not in child care, but that child care provided a service to me that allowed me to do my work. And I think, for women, that's been such a challenge.

Others noted that COVID-19 prevented women from reaching out to their networks for help in coping with added child care responsibilities. As one educator noted, "Our family child care model had been based on grandparents. So that was a real luxury to have in non-COVID times, but it wasn't sustainable in COVID times." Another noted, "I can't even put into words how not having a babysitter for a four-year-old in over a year has changed the landscape of life at home." In addition, the awareness that everyone else was also struggling meant that typical resources of community support were scarce.

> Women … are good at helping other women, right. In a good year I'm dropping off cooking on your doorstep, and I've got someone who drops off cookies on my doorstep, or I will take your kids on Saturday afternoon so you can go to the gym on your own. The problem is, we're all in the same boat, so the ways in which women have helped each other out since the beginning of time aren't doable right now, because everyone—I can't ask, because I know you're drowning too, and I can't help you, because I'm drowning too.

Inability to rely on family and social networks particularly impacted unpartnered mothers. "I have taken a lot of the brunt of things and it's different from having a two-parent or a two-caregiver family. Because at least you can trade off, you can say, you know what, I'm reading a book, I'm going to go for a walk, I'm doing this or that … There is no break, there's no break, there's been no break since the pandemic started."

Mothers did comment on one positive change in child care responsibilities—the lack of extracurricular activities meant less time driving children around, as did reduced commuting when they were working from home, but again, these changes incurred further responsibilities:

> With my own children, I'd say I'm doing less and I'm driving them less places because they're not in as many activities; they're still in some but not as many, but I'm also paying the price of that— I'm trying to help them be active, and engaged and social in a safe way after school. And it's all on me—I'm not just taking them to a coach. I'm trying to facilitate that. So it's a different difficulty.

Mothers noted the benefit of having more time with their kids when at home, but also that enjoyment of this was mitigated by trying to manage online teaching and other COVID-19 related tasks.

In addition to child care responsibilities, many educators also had elder care responsibilities; one participant noted, "I do think my own self personally—and I have heard many of the female staff talking about responsibilities—have greater responsibilities, like for parents or ageing relatives or the stress and anxiety that that puts on them." Another educator explained how COVID-19 had impacted her family responsibilities:

> Since my father passed away several years ago, I have tried to make Saturday a committed day to go see my mother. And because of this year, and how things are, and concerns over her health and well-being, it's not only a matter now of when do I see my mother, but it's also a matter of if she needs groceries. It's also a matter now of if she needs whatever, I'm the person that is doing that for her reliably … So there are greater home demands; there are greater professional demands.

Educators' professional risk of COVID-19 infection caused moral dilemmas about whether they should continue to provide care, and then increase their elder's risk of infection, or withhold care and further isolate the elder. Previous research by the ATA (2020) found that 71 per cent of teachers and school leaders were moderately to extremely concerned with bringing the virus home from school; such concerns were shared by participants in this study. One respondent said, "My parents are elderly—my dad is 70 years old and my mom is 66, and I know that as Indigenous people we're a little bit more susceptible, so I'm really scared"; another said, "I do live with my mother—she is over 65. And so, you know, one of my stresses is that being in the school environment, I could bring COVID home to her."

The constant fear of causing illness in one's family increased educators' anxiety. One educator noted, "Anytime the kid had their mask down, it was really triggering for staff, especially staff who—like, we have one staff member who is the caregiver for her grandparents, because her parents don't live here, so she's the one who goes to the home to see her grandparents." Another educator noted she was always concerned: "Am I going to get sick? I don't want to get my grandchildren sick, I don't want to get my mom sick. So definitely, this has been an exhausting year for that." For some, the fear of transmitting COVID has greatly impacted their personal time and routines. Educators took extra measures to protect those they cared for:

> So when I come home, at the door, all my clothes come off [laughs] and I then change, have a shower. And then that's how I start. So I feel like I restart my day when I come back home from work. And I do that every day and it's definitely not easy to manage, but I do it because I'm just so fearful of bringing COVID home. And I know they say it doesn't last on clothes, whatever, but I'm around 500 children. You can't tell me that I'm not exposed. So, that's what I do. So definitely harder to manage.

This constant concern and hypervigilance made both care work and teaching "more challenging, it's more demanding, it's more stressful because of all the concerns for everybody else's safety."

SCHOOL LEADERS: "THERE'S SHARKS CONSTANTLY SWIMMING AROUND ME"

Past research on planned changes in schools has specifically pointed to the importance of school leaders—principals and other administrators—in the change process. Sokal, Trudel and Babb's (2021) research on teacher attitude toward COVID-19–related changes similarly found that school leadership was a defining factor in teachers' experiences during the initial lockdown. In Alberta, school leaders played a particularly pivotal role in the COVID-19 response in terms of public health measures.

Most school leaders did not have the option of working from home during school closures and had to go to the school building unless isolating themselves, making it impossible to manage both professional and care responsibilities. One school leader recounted, "We were told, as leaders, you will be in your building. Why? That was the mysterious question. Why are we driving to be in an empty building when we have children at home who are unsupervised? So that balance was really hard." Another noted that she had to bring her children to the school with her: "So my two kids came with me every day and sat at the staff room table and did schooling on their own with not a lot of help from their mum. And so I would sort of toss snacks at them every hour or two, and check on them at lunchtime. But yeah, that was their experience, because that was my experience."

School leaders were the point of contact for teachers, students and families, and responsible for communicating and adapting public health guidelines to meet their specific context. For example, one noted that instead of e-mailing COVID-19–related information, she would call parents: "The other challenge we have is that we have so many families who do not speak English at home. And so you send documents, and they may be translated, but some of our families don't read in their home language either. So, it's much easier for us to phone, because there's usually a higher level of conversational English that we can get by on." Developing and communicating public health protocols added to stress and management burdens, with another school leader noting that during the first few months of the school year "every decision we were called out on." School leaders noted that while, on one hand, being in decision-making roles enabled them to develop appropriate policies for their schools, it was also "a great way of passing off responsibility, right?"

Many leaders expressed the feelings of responsibility for COVID-19 outbreaks, and that cases in their school reflect their performance as school leaders. One principal shared that "to have that perception and the … perceived community pressure that you'll do everything you can to keep them safe means that if somebody ends up not safe, it must be your fault. And that's a heavy load to carry." Principals felt they were literally asking people to trust them with their and their children's lives: "Now I'm introducing myself to staff in August and saying, 'Hi … please trust me with your life; come on into the building with 160 other people.'"

In the event of a COVID-19 exposure, most school leaders were responsible for calling potential contacts and relaying information regarding isolation and testing. One school leader spoke of how this affected her day:

> So, for example, today I had five bus kids—well, that just threw my whole morning so I couldn't deal with anything on my desk this morning because I had five bus kids who are close contacts sitting in classrooms and they just got identified. So I'm isolating kids, I'm putting them in spots, calling parents, settling those kids' nerves because when they hear they're close contact they automatically think they're getting something shoved up their nose and they're crying and they're scared, right? So that was the whole morning this morning, so all the things I had planned this morning are going to get done this evening or tomorrow.

School leaders were asked to do contract tracing at all hours of the day and over weekends. Another noted

> So, I got the call personally yesterday at 11, I had to be at the school at noon, didn't leave till 3 PM, so that was my Sunday. This is typical of every school administrator right now, having to go to their school; that principal [who] was just on the phone right now got a call last night at 10:15 PM, had to be at the school by 10:30, done calls at one o'clock in the morning.

Such responsibilities extended to the holidays:

> We were on Christmas holiday. So, my assistant principal and I were called back into the school to do the contact tracing, to phone the families and say that the last day of school, before the Christmas break, was the contact date. To which families said, you've just ruined Christmas for us. And, you know, it wasn't great.

The possibility of getting a call at any time impacted school leaders' ability to relax when not working. They described the anxiety of "waiting every minute on a weekend for the phone call to say you have a case of COVID in your school." Another noted that she "can't separate home and work any more. And maybe that's too much. I have to be on call all the time." Similarly, a school leader explained, "You know, at night I'll go to bed and I'll be thinking, OK, if this staff member is positive—then I'm contact tracing in my head before I even go to sleep at night."

Levels of stress were amplified by the emotional labour of communicating bad news to others and trying to support them in responding:

> You're having conversations with staff that they need to quarantine, and a hundred parents that they need to quarantine again and go get a COVID test done. So they're conversations where you need to be emotionally invested too, and you need to be caring for them and be sensitive and compassionate.

Another noted

> So not only have we had to do these contact tracing calls, you're getting calls all the time when numbers start to go up, where parents just need reassurance. And they're asking for you to tell them what to do, and we can't tell them what to do, so that's taxing too, because those conversations are taking 10, 12, 13 minutes a call.

While school leaders were willing to take on this additional work, recognizing their leadership responsibility in an extraordinary circumstance, it took a toll on their well-being: "So as an administrator, you know that your time is going to be—like, you don't have an eight to three job, or an eight to five job; you have evenings, you're on weekends. But most of that, in a typical year, you would know ahead of time. Now you're constantly on call." As another summed up, "I've used the analogy with people that I feel like I'm on this raft in the middle of the ocean and there's sharks constantly swimming around me, just getting close. Sometimes they're getting closer and closer and then boom,

we've got a case. So that's kind of what it feels like sometimes." The demands of the job prevented many leaders from taking time for self-care: "And then if I was to take a day they [the staff] really know when I'm not there; they're like, you know, are you OK, what's going on, how come you're not here? And so I try not to take any time away from the building because I feel like I need to be there to be supporting them." One leader said she had scheduled her vaccine appointment for a Saturday so that her work would not be affected if she had side effects.

**A school leader and single parent described her usual morning:**

So, as I drive to work when my kids are getting themselves to school, I'm talking through getting them out the door for 10 minutes, which—for all the moms out there—you just let them do it. You don't talk to them while they're doing it because then you have panic attacks on the way to work. So I stopped calling. But to live with that and have no one else here to get them out the door, and then be also getting anxious about the people [storming] my door as I walk in with all of their emergencies, is a lot. Right. And then to walk in and look like I have answers and solutions while my child can't find her gloves or her—you know—her brother isn't helping her or something.

School leaders noted that some divisions had been helpful in providing scripts for calling contacts and guidance on how to respond to queries: "They have really put a lot of effort in working on the front end to try to make that as efficient as possible. But they know that it's taking hours." Indeed, a superintendent described school leaders as "heroes in my eyes" due to all the extra work they were doing. However, in practical terms, school leaders were only offered five days in lieu, which many felt was insufficient: "I would like to have my time valued. The fact that I'm away from my family. The fact that I'm on call. The fact that five days in lieu is lovely, but when during a year of COVID am I taking five days off? When is that happening?"

Effects on Professional Development and Well-Being

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the career and leadership aspirations of many educators, from teachers to administrators. While some were deterred from pursuing career development, half of focus group participants were inspired to seize opportunities and take on more responsibility (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Focus groups response to the poll question "Has COVID-19 affected your career aspirations?"

29%

50%

21%

- Yes, it has inspired me
- Yes, it has discouraged me
- No, it has not had an effect
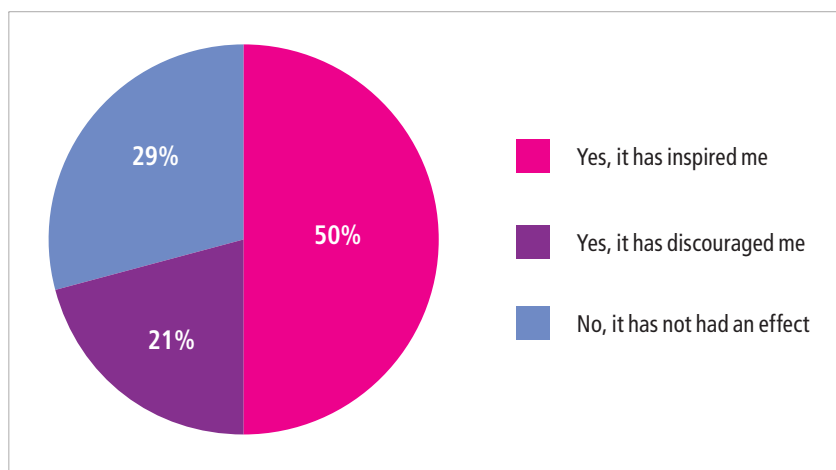
CAREER ASPIRATIONS: "WE AS WOMEN CAN STEP UP"

Educators were inspired by the urgent need for their skills and abilities in the context of COVID-19: "So I feel like I can maybe help in ways that we're needing moving forward, and I think that is actually where a lot of women can step up, moving forward, in light of all the challenges that we face in this pandemic," and "It gave us that sort of opportunity to look at ourselves and go, hey, you know what, actually maybe I could do this. Maybe I could do something a little more than I'm doing." Administrators similarly commended the ways educators have stepped up in response to the pandemic: "You know, teachers could say, I have no time right now, I can't even talk about these big things about school. And in fact, I think I've seen an increase in engagement. Yeah, and part of it, I wonder, is a craving for professional conversation and collegiality, and making decisions that impact the school in a positive way."

Women educators recognized that they might particularly bring some of the skills most needed during and following a pandemic. One educator commented on how her role as someone who cares for others positively impacted her leadership ambitions: "I am that person who feels that caregiver need for your colleagues, and when it looks like colleagues are getting beaten on sometimes, it's, well, how do I fix that? Well, you have to fix that from inside the system. Which system can I fix that through?"

The sentiment of aiming to meet care needs within schools was noted by other educators: "And also, I see now, maybe more than ever, the need for us to really be focusing on relationships and classroom environment, and really taking care of one another." A number of participants particularly discussed an interest in becoming a school counsellor, recognizing the urgent need for mental health services.

Of those considering career advancements, several appreciated the opportunity the pandemic created for more accessible, online learning options. For example, one teacher explained how online programming enabled her to pursue a master's degree:

> I think just the availability and opportunity is presented differently now because of COVID. So, for example, I've been wanting to pursue a master's for a while, and now, just because things are so available online, and I have a young family, and I have an office set up at home now, it's a little bit more accessible for me, just because of the way that the world is right now. And it might not have been something that I would have been able to as actively pursue even a year ago. So just something as simple as that has been helpful. It's a positive outcome from this situation.

Similar statements were made by other educators: "It has also inspired me then to start looking at applying for a master's and kind of working my way up possibly to an administrative position. And so just being able to connect that way with other people, although challenging and exhausting, it has inspired me to kind of become a better leader." Not having to travel to major cities, like Calgary or Edmonton, and being able to learn from home reduced the barriers teachers faced to pursuing further education themselves.

Others, who were not necessarily interested in pursuing a master's, benefited from more accessible professional development opportunities, describing themselves as "at the highest place in my teaching trajectory" due to online learning opportunities. One educator noted, "What I have truly enjoyed is all the online free PD and things that you can just do, and then I don't have to go and have wine and listen to hockey with the same fellow down the hall all the time. I can sort of have something else to do. I've learned all kinds of new things this year, and been able to explore some things in ways that I haven't been able to before." Shifting away from in-person networking and learning to online options created new opportunities for female educators to engage in career development.

CAREER DETERRENTS: "IT'S TAKEN THE WIND OUT OF MY SAILS"

However, others were discouraged and deterred by the pandemic. One educator stated that "a lot of women in leadership right now, this particular year, are saying there's no way. This is not my cup of tea." Similarly, a superintendent said

> I'd be surprised if especially some of our female educators just said, "You know what, yeah I'm not applying for that position right now because I just can't imagine doing it. And I don't even know next week if I'm going to be quarantined and what's going on." So, yeah, I think that barrier is there regardless, whether COVID is there or not. There's no question in my mind that barrier exists. Has COVID maybe made it a little bit worse? Probably."

Female educators cited increased care work outside of school as especially discouraging them from pursuing or continuing career development. One participant noted that COVID-19 "might make women take a step away from seeking leadership because this has been a lot for them. And it kind of reinforces them back into a recognition that they need to be the primary child care provider in some way, even as a working woman, and that stepping into leadership makes it more difficult for them." A woman who recently took on a new leadership position noted

> This is my second year as a vice-principal and it really took the wind out of my sails. I was so excited when I got this job and it was the year after I had a baby. So I was, like, I had a new baby and I found a daycare and I was going to be a school leader, and I was super excited. And I went through 19/20 in all of the not so greatness of it, but then I got here this year and I was ready to go and then it's just like, it hits you.

Child care responsibilities significantly affected ability to access career development and leadership opportunities. A superintendent shared the experience of one of their teachers:

> I guess it will depend if people have younger kids, or if COVID continues, they may not want to go into administration. I know, for example, one young woman whom I hired as a teacher—and I still keep in contact with her, and I have been encouraging her to go into administration, or to start her master's or something. And she's, like, oh, I've got way too much on the go right now, I can't do it. But you know, she's got younger children, she's teaching, plus everything that goes along with all of these quotas and the moving of everything so quickly at the high school level. So she's just overwhelmed with the pace of it. And then just the constant reaction to things that are changing all the time.

Inability to work from home or judgment about it was further identified as a barrier to pursuing leadership opportunities. One superintendent noted, "We have a few principals who have young children, who are women, who can't be in their school. If their children are isolated, they have to be at home. And they feel like the perception among their colleagues and even within their school community is that they're not doing their job." This perception was evidenced by another superintendent, who recounted

> I was speaking to a colleague of mine who is male, who I respect greatly. We were talking about somebody and their career trajectory, and he said, "Well, I don't think they'd be considered for that position because they're mostly working from home right now." And I said, "Do you realize she has two little ones? Like, that's her reality." And so, you know, I was glad to set him straight, but I don't think it occurred to him that that fell on her shoulders as a burden and that, really, that was the only way for their family to cope.

Witnessing the experiences of and judgment of women in leadership positions during COVID-19 discouraged others from advancing their careers. "There are people who come to me and say, 'I never want to do this job, because this is not what you signed up for, this is not, you know.'" The heavy scrutiny placed on members of educational leadership was not lost on teachers, deterring career ambitions: "And seeing leaders get criticized so heavily feels discouraging, right? … I don't want to sign up for that. … That just seems discouraging, I guess."

HEALTH IMPACTS, MORAL DISTRESS AND BURNOUT: "THE CRACKS ARE STARTING TO BE NOTICED"

The findings above speak to a highly stressful context of teaching, caring and leading in the context of COVID-19. Previous research on educator experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic has indicated that female teachers experienced more anxiety, as did educators with children in their household, irrespective of gender (Allen, Jerrim and Sims 2020). Stress was caused by a mismatch between job demands and job resources, ever-changing circumstances, and a moral sense of responsibility (Sokal, Trudel and Babb 2020). Findings presented above further confirm that constant uncertainty and change at school, and a sense of responsibility to cope with impossible work and care burdens, are primary drivers of high levels of stress and anxiety among educators.

In addition to these wellness impacts, a previous ATA (2020) survey found that 87 per cent of teachers and school leaders reported being exhausted at the end of each day. Respondents in this study expressed similar experiences: "As a teacher—I graduated in '02—I have never been as tired as I have been this year. I call it teacher pandemic tired. I'm exhausted. By the end of the day I don't even want to do anything. Between the pandemic stress, being micromanaged, it's exhausting," and "The staff that I talked to in our school are just exhausted." Many respondents noted that high levels of stress contributed to poor sleep. One educator said,

> I don't think I've slept really well since last March 16. Because every single day I drive in to work and I wonder, is this the day we're going to get another AHS call? Is this a day that we're going to get the call and that's going to be another six hours of our team having to deal with that? It's sort of that humming constant stress of what is about to happen—and that's why I said overwhelming and exhausting.

Stress and poor sleep, combined with high workload and care demands, resulted in increased illness for some educators:

> Yeah, well, people are just getting run down and they don't want to call in sick because they know they should but they don't want to because they know there's no subs because of the shortage. So, it's kind of a double-edged sword so then you're only going to get yourself sicker if you're not coming in, right? So they do their best to just kind of come in some days, maybe when they shouldn't be, and then running that worry that, is it exhaustion or am I getting symptoms? Should I be going for a test, should I be staying away?

Administrators reflected that "The cracks are starting to be noticed on educators, and then what will be the physical result out of that down the road? Because they're not taking care of themselves, they're just taking care of everyone else." Numerous participants similarly worried about the long-term physical impacts of the high stress and anxiety they were living with daily.

In addition to these health effects, many educators spoke of their inability to ensure that students met educational goals and of their struggles to manage care responsibilities at home, in ways reflective of

moral distress. *Moral distress*, a concept that originally developed in nursing studies, can be defined as a phenomenon that occurs when someone knows the right thing to do but cannot pursue that action due to organizational or institutional constraints (Godshall 2021). Research on moral distress among health-care workers has found it to be more common among women than men, and a primary determinant of poor mental health and burnout (Burns et al 2019). Much like nurses when they have to care for patients without adequate supplies, teachers expressed a sense of helplessness that they could not ensure their students' educational goals and well-being. A teacher who worked with children with special needs noted

> One of the hardest things that I had to face was, I worried about my kids. I worried—many of my kids are autoimmune compromised and so I worried if they would be okay. And then it was … they don't socialize as it is, you know, before COVID. And now, having them being stuck in their homes, how are they going to be okay, you know, were they going to be okay? How could I make … their life be normal, and try to achieve that? How was I supposed to support their families when I couldn't see them?

Teachers felt compelled to continue to provide high-quality education and support to students, even when physical distancing requirements and human resource limitations made it impossible. "I think that teachers always feel—or often, I would say—they feel a moral obligation to ensure that their students are educated and educated well. And during COVID, because of the way that things had been handled, I think that there's a feeling of not being able to do their best work, or perhaps failure in some way." Many educators spoke about feeling guilty that students would have learning gaps and suffer long-term effects from schooling interruptions. Being unable to meet student needs led to a sense of failure: "So I would say it's the constant unknown and trying to plan for that, and always feeling like you're failing."

Moral distress extended into educators' personal lives, especially when their occupational commitment infringed on their ability to meet care responsibilities at home. Respondents noted that it was simply impossible to meet both career and care goals: "Tangibly there are not enough—physically, there are not enough hours in the day to do everything that you ask of working mums, like, things in the home." Consequently, many respondents felt they were failing as parents in order to (just barely) manage their professional workload: "I feel like I'm spending more time with the school kids than my own kids. So, I'm at school and worrying about them more than I am my own children at home." This led to feelings of guilt, such as, "It will take me quite some time to get over the wrongness and the guilt of not parenting my own kids in the height of the pandemic from March till June." Mothers expressed anxiety regarding the quality of their children's care and education: "We have one child who is kind of old enough to leave on her own. But there's stresses around that. Like we don't feel like we're endangering her, but you know she needs more guidance, she needs more [attention] and she's not able to be social with friends right now. So I think the weight of that has been heavy." Many expressed concerns that their children were spending too much time on screens and were suffering academically: "So, my daughter was at home, home-schooling, at the same time I

was teaching online … and I mean my daughter's education basically ended up suffering as a result. On one hand it's like yes, I'm a teacher, so I mean I'm continually reading with her and spelling, doing activities at home. But at the same time, how much—like you can't balance two things." Not being able to strike a balance between the needs of children at home and students at school caused educators to feel that they were constantly failing on one front or another, as discussed by one principal: "I think it's always feeling, again, like they're letting someone down, and right now it's either they're letting their students down, or their biological children—the human that they birthed." This in turn led to feelings of helplessness: "I felt really defeated. I felt like I wasn't doing a good enough job … I felt like a loser. I was at a loss—how was I supposed to help my kids?—and I felt like I was losing every day."

Prevalence of distress, in terms of the impossibility of meeting both student and dependent needs, was linked to an increased risk of burnout. One teacher predicted, "I actually foresee larger administrator burnout. I'm so happy I have a fantastic administrator, but I see what she has to do in a day, and it's just not humanly possible. Like this has encapsulated her life in every way." Superintendents worried about burnout within their division:

> We're at a terrible risk for burnout of educators. We have people requesting leaves for next year; we have an increase in medical leaves that are occurring. We have individuals that we anticipated taking a leave next year asking for early leave. As a superintendent, probably one of my greatest worries is the health and well-being of our system. And will we have adequate staff going forward? Adequate *numbers* of staff—we have spectacular staff.

Another noted how rigid scheduling and inability to share responsibilities contributed to burnout, saying of her colleagues, "You guys are burning out because you're with the same student all day long and the high needs of the student—so yeah, you might have to be exposed to one more classroom cohort but I think it's worth the risk because I'm seeing you guys burn out here."

Many educators noted that they had lost their passion for teaching:

> I'm going to go with discouraged, in that this entire year, and I mean calendar year, so including last March onwards, we don't talk as much about student learning any more. That is, we're supposed to be instructional leaders. We talk about safety protocol and implementing rules, which obviously are really important. So that would be one piece—it's removed the reason why I do the work that I do.

Another respondent reflected, "People are feeling very … people are languishing. They just don't have any energy left to experience hopefulness or joy—they're not really depressed, but they're not really happy. So they're in a state of trying to just continue and get through things."

Support for Educators During COVID-19

Considering the daily challenges educators faced throughout the 2020/21 school year, and the resulting impacts on their well-being and careers, questions arose as to what types of support and assistance were offered, if the support corresponded to needs and what might be helpful in future. *Support* was conceptualized broadly to include physical, structural and emotional support coming from the school system, colleagues or personal networks. Many participants commented on the glaring lack of support. For example,

> There is nothing that I can see, like extra support … I haven't, like no one has contacted [me] specifically, no one has reached out to me based on being a single mother during this time, no one's reached out to me being an Indigenous educator at this time. There's been nothing.

Similarly, a school leader noted

> I would say that there has been absolutely no attempt at offering any support to leadership in any way during this entire crisis ... I have never had anyone call me or question how I was doing, and that maybe sounds petty, but it's like we're just expected to know all of the things that we need to do and do them, but we don't have any real support. So, I think that we're trying hard to support our staffs, where we've got staff trying really hard to support students and families, but we're in this no man's land of "OK you guys, just carry on."

RECOGNITION: "MAKING SURE PEOPLE ARE SEEN AND HEARD"

Recognition is an often undervalued form of emotional and physical support, in that noticing and compensating contributions can not only ease burdens, but also foster pride and a sense of accomplishment (Andrews 2011). However, overall, respondents did not feel their role in the COVID-19 response was recognized. As one educator noted, "I think some of the policymakers have underestimated the value of making sure people are seen and heard." In particular, there was a general lack of recognition that most teachers were also mothers, dealing with multiple COVID-19–related responsibilities. One spoke of government discourse, noting, "There was no room—even when they [gave] lip service to say, 'Only do what's best for your family,' that really wasn't—the reaction might have been some of the messaging, but not much." Those with heightened care responsibilities, such as having multiple dependents or being a single parent, felt particularly ignored: "Alberta government in their initial announcement had said, you know, 'We're going to address the parenting situation. We're going to be looking at some of the single parents.' And it never happened. The Alberta government never even, I don't think they had any response to single-parent families at all." Most participants expressed an overall feeling that their

gendered experiences as female educators and care providers were "not seen" and their related concerns were "not heard" by decision makers.

Participants linked lack of recognition to limited representation in decision making. One school leader noted that despite the majority of educators being mothers, space was not created for them to discuss their experiences as working parents or concerns regarding school safety:

> But there was no permission in the spring or summer for those of us with young kids at home—mums with young kids at home, in leadership roles—to speak up, to ask questions and to share our worries. So we've been quiet. We'd have a meeting and be very polite in the meeting and we would say, oh yes, we must be in schools, yes, they must be … But after the meeting, or quietly in the hallway, you know, somewhere else later you could say, "Are you terrified about coming back in August? Yeah, me too."

Another school leader noted feeling that even if educators were requested to give input, it was not listened to: "We'll get called to meetings. We're asked for input. But the decision is already made." Participants cited examples of denied requests that funding be directed to mental health support or that school leaders be able to work from home as evidence of lack of meaningful consultation.

Participants noted that this in turn impacted the effectiveness of decision making; "You know there is value in having the voice of leadership, in such a female-dominated profession, of a working mom. And often times that's missing." Another noted

> I think policy, decisions, comments made, all those things—you know they're through a lens of someone who is not living it. So, I think that decisions made are through a lens of somebody not living it. And it's well intentioned. And often they have their own children and they're not clueless and out of touch and all of those things. But a lot of them have never been a mom, and they're not the one with a four-year-old running around their ankles when they're trying to work. So they don't have that lived experience. And they don't necessarily reach out to people who have had it. And I think that would be a good [thing].

LACK OF SUPPORT: "ADDING SALT TO THE WOUND"

When educators were asked what type of support they needed, but were not getting, many commented on access to vaccinations:

> Our government decided not to consider us essential enough for a vaccination, so it was like then adding salt to the wound. So we're keeping your economy going because we're baby-sitting your kids and we're keeping them in school but you don't think we are special enough to maybe be bumped up the line a little bit to get the vaccination so that we can still come to school.

Others described not being prioritized as "a slap in the face," noting that that lack of early access was not just about protecting teachers' health, but also demonstrating that they were valued essential workers and that the risks they were taking were recognized.

> And so, to say there's no vaccine—to not say a thing about vaccines for teachers, as an example, is one thing. To say, we see you, we understand the risks that you're taking each day, we understand the perceived effect that that has on your life, and the impact on your families, and we will get you vaccines when we can. I think even if it doesn't change the date that they become available for teachers, it changes the whole—oh, well, okay, thanks, you do see me.

When it came to addressing unpaid care work, respondents noted a lack of supportive leave policies. While teachers did have limited access to paid or unpaid leave in the case of needing to isolate or care for family members in isolation, there was ambiguity about what to do when paid leave was exhausted. One respondent recounted that when her child's daycare closed due to an exposure she was told to "figure it out or quit." Another respondent noted that they had three family sick days, which was insufficient in the context of COVID-19 and, she felt, perpetuated the "whole notion [that] your job is far more important than your family." Many educators felt unable to take extended leave due to the substitute teacher shortage noted above and the awareness that their absence would increase workloads for their colleagues.

A number of respondents also commented on the lack of overall mental health support:

> Actually, I think that the piece that they left out was the people piece. So there were lots of rules about safety ... but there was very little—read zero—indication of how do we support, lots of what I would [call] surface attention to mental health and wellness. It gets discussed at every meeting and it says things like "Call Homewood Health," and so on. But nothing in terms, from my perspective anyway, there's nothing in terms of how to do we support our teachers, our support staff, our students, our families who are going through many crises during this time.

Some educators had sought mental wellness support through Homewood Health, a call service provided through the ATA, though most were unclear about whether it had been helpful or not. Others sought support from in school counsellors, who were seen as helpful but overworked.

ACTS OF SUPPORT: "THEY UNDERSTOOD THAT WE'RE REALLY TRYING"

Recognizing this context and the challenges many female teachers faced, some administrators and divisions allowed greater flexibility, which was greatly appreciated by respondents. One teacher, who was pregnant, was allowed to work from home to reduce her risk of infection. Another commented

> I've also been really lucky—I actually feel very supported by my principal and senior admin on days that I've had to pick up my daughter from daycare. Or [when] they've had cases, and my parents live in Red Deer, so I've had to take the morning off while my mom drives down from Red Deer and they've been really supportive in that way. So, in terms of those sorts of situations it's been a bit easier for me.

A superintended noted that their division had tried to provide options for teachers with children, and "where we've had success is providing as much flexibility as we can."

A number of participants had benefited from professional development days dedicated to self-care or their own priorities. One recounted

> We had a PD day for the district; it was a Friday in November and we were all talking about it and it was going to be virtual, etc. And then all of a sudden we got an e-mail—full-staff e-mail from our superintendent saying, "You guys have worked hard, you're stressed; we're just teachers. It's going to be a non-day, stay home. We gave you a holiday." So they took a PD day and let us stay home, which—to get that one day off was remarkable, and we had a lot of teachers that—you know, it doesn't make up for everything, but it showed that at least they understood that we're really, really trying.

The act of giving teachers a day to get caught up and take care of themselves was seen as both symbolically and practically significant, with many teachers commenting on how it enabled them to "catch my breath."

Similarly, numerous participants commented on how postponing the introduction of the new curriculum was widely appreciated. "Last thing teachers want to be doing is heading into a ton of PD on a really poorly written curriculum. To put [on] another level of pressure, the timing couldn't have been worse. And thankfully a school division superintendent stood up and said, 'We're not piloting, we're not piloting, we're not piloting.' Actually, across Alberta, the division level said, 'We're not going to pilot, this is bad timing, we don't have the resources, the teachers are not in the mindset to put a new curriculum into place right now.'"

Educators spoke of both the opportunities and the limits of virtual meetings in terms of fostering peer support. A number noted that COVID-19 had inspired new ways of connecting across the division. For example, kindergarten teachers in one division had started meeting regularly online, something they had not done before, and found positive. Others noted that online connections allowed a sense of a shared experience of dealing with COVID-19 and care responsibilities: "I'm so very, very grateful to have, to be working with other educators so that … when you're working with other people who are also teachers, they have been so compassionate. And when my kids interrupt me when we're in a meeting, they don't get angry and they just roll with it and laugh or talk with kids, and that has just made it so much more bearable."

Teachers also commented on the importance of receiving tokens of appreciation from colleagues, students and parents. One primary school teacher mentioned how a high school teacher had sent her school pizza at lunch to recognize that they were still working in the classroom while the secondary school had shifted online. Another noted that a student leadership class had taken on the task of sending kind notes to teachers. Others commented on food and gifts from parents and local businesses. One school leader noted such tokens helped teachers "feel seen," reinforcing that their

contribution to the response was recognized: "It doesn't have to be a big, or a trophy, but it's those emotional pieces, and I think it moves [us] even more when it comes systemically, or it comes from a supervisor, a colleague." They further noted that the schooling interruptions had created greater appreciation for teachers and the school system in general: "And I think that staff and students have both developed a greater appreciation for school, so the students are happy to be in school."

Looking Ahead

When educators reflected on their experiences during COVID-19 they noted the many challenges experienced, described above, while noting a sense of pride in what was achieved.

> But I also want to say that as someone who really loves change and challenge, I feel this was an exciting time, because we've proven how quickly we can adapt and how quickly we can produce. And I'm really proud of the teachers in our province. Not that this is sustainable, but I do think that the pandemic has helped us to sort of rethink our priorities and really come together in community to move forward together.

Many commented on the "silver linings" of learning new skills, being able to work from home and therefore reduce commute times, and form new—if virtual—relationships. They further reflected on how COVID-19 had challenged them to take professional risks and inspired them to take on greater leadership responsibilities. Educators spoke about the recovery from COVID-19 with cautious optimism that the school system and the broader community might learn from the past years' experience.

Concurrently, many predicted long-term impacts for students, themselves and their families. One commented, "It's not going to go away if everyone's being immunized. Those people whose family fell apart, or Dad committed suicide, they are still dealing with the after-effects of that for years and years to come. So this is not just, oh well, okay, we're all immunized and we're just going to go on tomorrow. There's going to be a lot of residual effects, for sure." Many felt that it would not be a quick recovery period.

> I think we have had a change to even take note of because we're still in survival mode. So I think the coming out of this is where my discouragement is. Because I think there's a false sense that it's going to be a quick adjustment. And I don't know that I believe that yet. I think it will be slow and I think there will be some bumps. And I think when you work with children and families, and knowing you hold that emotional weight of supporting them through the bumps, and continuing to look at oh—now we're anxious when we're all together, or now someone comes into your space. Like there's things coming that we are going to have to still navigate that will be hard for quite some time … And so I'm still discouraged by the length of how long this will take. And then there might be some permanent changes that you know we haven't yet figured out.

Looking ahead to the 2021/22 school year, many participants noted the need for dedicated time and resources for both teachers and students during the recovery phase:

> But in time, we need to understand that when we go back we'll have a bunch of kids that were on virtual learning that have done nothing. We have a whole whack of kids off home schooling; they've also for the most part done nothing. So we're going to have learning gaps for a year and

a half. ... So, what's that going to do to teachers? Well, that's a lot of work when you're trying to fill gaps and put interventions in place and have kids that are a year and a half behind the rest of their peers ... So we're going to need a lot of PD days to plan interventions and how to do pull out supports and all sorts of things to make it so.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further recommendations from educators for a positive COVID-19 recovery include the following:

- Continued online collaborations and meetings, particularly across divisions
- Activities to bring people together and connect in a safe way
- Continued flexibility, to allow working from home where and when possible
- Reducing extracurricular activity demands
- Robust, in-school mental health support for staff and students
- A holistic approach to supporting teacher well-being, including paid care leave days, access to counselling and other supports
- Professional development days dedicated to COVID-19 recovery activities, such as mental wellness, how to support students who have experienced schooling gaps and building community
- Resources to support women educators in pursuing career development, including support for care responsibilities that might restrict opportunities
- Ensuring diverse voices in decision making, and developing equity policies to guard against discrimination based on gender, care responsibilities or leave taken due to COVID-19

In the case of ongoing or future pandemics, educators recommended the following:

- Prioritizing vaccine access for educators to minimize their risk and the risk to children
- Emergency on-site mental health support
- Setting aside self-care professional development days
- Reducing reliance on educators for contract tracing or other public health measures
- Additional emergency paid care leave that is clearly communicated and standardized across the province
- On-site child care for those who have to be in the building during widespread lockdowns
- Meaningful consultation with teachers who have caregiving responsibilities in order to develop supportive policies
- Allowing flexibility in terms of work expectations, opportunities to work from home and priorities during a pandemic

Conclusion

During a school year like no other, female educators not only strove to provide quality education in a context of constant uncertainty, they also led public health measures while teaching their own children at home and caring for elderly relatives. They felt a deep sense of responsibility for the safety and well-being of students and family, an obligation further exemplified by the emotional labour they invested in prioritizing others' needs over their own. Their work burdens and care responsibilities were impossible to reconcile, leading to high levels of stress, feelings of failure, and self-guilt.

Rather than be defeated by such burdens, many educators rose to the challenge, taking on the task of keeping schools safe and families functioning. Some recognized opportunities to advance their career and leadership opportunities and seized them. It is possible that one of the silver linings that might emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic is an even more determined and committed cadre of women teachers and leaders.

However, this potential is threatened by lack of support for women educators, particularly in terms of managing both work and care responsibilities. Despite widespread evidence that workloads and care burdens were unmanageable and unsustainable, little effort was made to ease these burdens. Women leaders were particularly discriminated against in terms of refusing them opportunities to work from home or judging those who had to do so due to caregiving responsibilities.

Without improved support for educators, the risk of burnout is real. Supporting female educators requires first recognizing and then responding to the secondary mental and physical health impacts of the pandemic, then addressing the structural constraints—such as the substitute teacher shortage and lack of child care—that lead to moral distress and burnout. By listening to and acting on the recommendations of women educators, more resilient education systems and communities can be fostered.

Note

1. Editor's note: some quotes from participants and respondents have been edited in accordance with ATA style.

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