

**Drexel University**

**Research Brief no. 7**

**Teacher Burnout and Resilience: A Narrative Inquiry Study about Teacher Experiences in  
the Wake of COVID-19**

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May 7, 2024

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Volume Number , May 7, 2024

# **Teacher Burnout and Resilience: A Narrative Inquiry Study about Teacher Experiences in the Wake of COVID-19**

## **Abstract**

In the wake of teaching during the COVID-19 global pandemic, teacher burnout and retention became an issue nationally, as reflected in surveys conducted throughout 2020–2022 (Steiner et al., 2022). Quantitative studies from 2020–2022 began to illuminate personal and contextual risks and protective factors that influenced teachers' feelings of burnout or resilience, especially when faced with the challenges of teaching through the pandemic (Henson, 2020; Robison, 2022; Toporova et al., 2020; Washington State Department of Health, 2021). The theoretical framework used for this study was based on multisystemic resilience (Unger 2023), which posits that resilience is based on the access individuals and organizations have available to them in the nested systems they are a part of. Seven secondary teachers from one school in the Midwest were interviewed twice, and their stories coded for patterns using NVivo software. A researcher's journal was also used to track patterns and questions in the data. Data from the teacher stories emphasized that teaching during COVID-19 left teachers feeling a lack of professional effectiveness, emotionally exhausted, and cynical toward the nested school systems they were a part of. The results suggested the importance of leaders listening and implementing change in response to teacher feedback in addition to helping teachers access resources like collegial networks by allocating time and resources. The findings from this study can be used to help school leaders and policy makers address teacher burnout post-COVID-19, and give teachers the pivotal resources they need to build resilience.

## **Aim**

This narrative study aimed to explore how teachers' stories can yield deeper insight into the demands and resource provisions under which teachers have been functioning amid the pandemic, and how these multisystemic demands and resources have caused them to feel stressed or helped them adapt to access resilience.

## **Problem**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a paradoxical impact on students and teachers. It has drawn attention to the importance and need for teachers' empathic work in safeguarding and fortifying students' physical, social, and emotional well-being. At the same time, it has exacerbated the number of teachers experiencing burnout, thus making it harder for them to sustain the increasing emotional load of their work (Steiner et al., 2022).

## **Research Findings**

The research questions guiding this narrative inquiry study were:

- 1) What stories did teachers tell about their feelings of burnout (e.g., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and professional satisfaction) after teaching during the pandemic?
- 2) What stories did teachers tell about their feelings of resilience or dynamic, positive adaptation in the face of adversity after teaching during the pandemic?

A number of themes echoed through teachers' stories.

- Teachers felt burned-out during the pandemic, but even more so in the aftermath of the pandemic
- The pivotal role their principals and leaders played in increasing demands on them as well as their providing resources teachers needed to do their jobs during COVID-19 and in the wake of the pandemic.
- The importance systems placed on student assessment, advancement and wellbeing after the pandemic and the role these elements played in their feelings of burnout.
- The positive force collegial networks played in teachers' feelings of resilience
- The lasting effects from the pandemic which informed teachers' establishing boundaries to create work-life balance and sense of mission.

### **Results**

The study found the following results: empathic load and pace of change burned teachers out in COVID-19; leadership was a source for connection, but more often a primary contributor of uncertainty, disconnection, and depletion; teacher exhaustion rose sharply from bridging the gaps between the "new normal" and the "back to normal;" and finally, collegiate networks were mutually empowering, courage-building, and multiplied resources across systems for teachers.

### **Significance and Implications**

The results from this study can help school leaders and teacher educators provide teachers with the resources they need to avoid burnout, which would include acting on teacher feedback and encouraging teacher voice and efficacy. It could also help these leaders promote teacher resilience by building robust collegial networks.

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### **Lara Taylor, EdD**

#### **Bio**

Dr. Lara Taylor is a 30-year veteran teacher whose specialty is working with cross-disciplinary groups to implement Social and Emotional Learning programs and reflective writing through the secondary English language arts curriculum. Through her long-range experiences with teachers and students, she has come to the belief that cultivating wellbeing and resilience in teachers is the first step to helping students craft wellbeing and resilience for themselves. She is a resilience trainer certified by the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University and has worked with suburban and urban districts to develop site-specific teacher and student resilience programs through her own consulting firm. Her main areas of research include teacher burnout and resilience, as well as using creative expression to mitigate burnout and build teacher and student resilience.