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Examining Urban Teachers' Working Conditions Response to Resilience Following the Results of Covid-19

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Abstract

There are many rewards associated with teaching in public schools, but there are also several challenges such as understaffing, limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and underpaid employees. All of these issues combined often lead to burnout and mental health concerns among public school teachers, particularly those in urban settings. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, literature regarding teachers' psychological distress has increased in a general sense; however, there remains limited exploration of a potential increase in job-related mental health concerns of urban teachers after the onset of COVID. Therefore, in this study we compare the 2018 (pre-COVID) and 2020 (early-COVID) results of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey in order to answer whether there has been a change in the psychological distress of urban school teachers in North Carolina since the onset of COVID. Based on the findings, we offer recommendations to key stakeholders in an effort to better support the health and outcomes of K-12 urban school teachers as they continue adapting to the ever-expanding and ever-evolving implications of COVID.

Keywords: urban teachers, mental health, compassion fatigue, burnout

Increasing responsibilities and tight budget constraints, coupled with greater classroom sizes and more diverse student bodies have caused public school teaching to become one of the most demanding occupations in the United States today (Benson, 2018; Bottiani et al., 2019). According to Bottiani et al. (2019), approximately 46% of teachers report high volumes of day-to-day stress, which is comparable to that of healthcare professionals. The stressors and burnout that many urban teachers experience is greatly influenced by the job demands and a lack of support for them to meet those demands (Benson, 2018; Milner, 2012). Teachers experience challenges related to adapting to various student learning styles, supporting students with special needs, managing administrative work, and adjusting to changes with educational policies (Benson, 2018; School of Education, 2021).

Specifically in urban schools, teachers must implement innovative strategies to be effective while also navigating added challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and high-stakes accountability policies (Ouellette et al., 2018; Shernoff et al., 2011). While these factors, among others, have explained why many teachers experience psychological distress that leads them to seek pathways out of the profession, it is now critical to examine the added effects of pandemic-related stressors on teachers' mental wellbeing. According to a report from the CDC Foundation (2021), teachers report increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, and substance misuse since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, studies also suggest that the prolonged nature of teachers' perceived lack of support and limited options for stress relief while constantly adapting their instruction contribute to their increasing levels of stress, anxiety, and depression as the pandemic continues (Alves et al., 2021; Anderson et al., 2021; Sokal et al., 2020).

Therefore, while acknowledging the extraordinary circumstances faced by all teachers serving in the midst of a global pandemic, urban school teachers are being confronted by uniquely compounding challenges that pose a distinctive threat to their mental health, retention, and impact on the vulnerable students they serve. Thus, we begin this exploration with an overview of our theoretical framework followed by a thorough review of literature regarding urban school teachers' working conditions, stress, and mental health, including how these things have been impacted by the pandemic. Next, we present a study that compares the psychological distress of urban school teachers before and after the onset of COVID. Though there have been

many recent studies measuring the effects of the pandemic on teachers' mental health, there remains a gap in the literature concerning its specific impact it is having on teachers who were already working in higher-than-average stress environments (Bottiani et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Williams III et al., 2023).

We utilized data from the 2018 (pre-COVID) and 2020 (early-COVID) North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NCTWC) Survey results to answer the following question: Has there been a change in the psychological distress of urban school teachers in North Carolina since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic? To answer this question, we conducted a descriptive analysis comparing the 2018 and 2020 school district means for selected constructs of the NCTWC Survey. We then discuss our findings, which inform the recommendations we offer to key stakeholders to support urban school teachers' mental health, retention, and academic impact amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical Framework

The term "burnout" was adopted in the 1970s to describe symptoms of job-related psychological distress, though how it is currently recognized has evolved through several conflicting definitions (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976; Maslach & Leiter, 2017). The definition that has shaped current understanding of burnout was provided by Maslach and Jackson (1981): "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind" (p. 99). According to these authors, burnout extends beyond stress and is identifiable by its three main dimensions, which are exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy.

The exhaustion dimension "represents the basic individual stress component of burnout" (p. 38) and describes the fatigue individuals experience as a result of being overextended at their workplace (Maslach, 2006). This exhaustion may then contribute to cynicism, which is the second dimension that "represents the interpersonal context component of burnout" (p. 38) and manifests as a negative, detached posture toward the job and people associated with it (Maslach, 2006). Finally, inefficacy, the third dimension, "represents the self-evaluation component of burnout" (p. 38) and is demonstrated by individuals questioning their purpose or effectiveness at their job (Maslach, 2006).

Teacher burnout is a critical issue in urban education and, if left unresolved, may lead to more chronic mental health concerns such as anxiety and/or depression (School of Education, 2021). Certain reasons for burnout specific to ~~among~~ urban teachers include overcrowding, limited funding, high emotional demands, lack of training, challenging teaching conditions, and high-stakes testing policies (Jeon et al., 2018a, 2018b; Shernoff et al., 2011). Further, teachers often feel obligated to work beyond their contracted hours, including weekends and long nights, in order to meet the demands of their workload (School of Education, 2021). In doing so, however, they develop an unhealthy work-life balance that which contributes to burnout (School of Education, 2021). Unfortunately, when factors such as these compound with no perceived source of relief, teachers often feel discouraged and incapable of meeting their students' needs and intended learning outcomes (School of Education, 2021). Burnout is often used to describe this feeling among some teachers, however compassion fatigue may more accurately describe the feeling among others due to its emphasis on secondary traumatic stress (Figley, 2002).

Compassion fatigue was originally coined by Joinson (1992) to describe a unique form of burnout "resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (Figley, 1995, p. 7). This is particularly likely in urban schools, which are often characterized as having high needs and low resources. Further, teachers serving in these contexts are often expected to also meet the emotional needs of students, which may become overly demanding at times (Benson, 2018). So because they are already tasked to work in high-stress environments without significant access to resources, this added demand may increase teachers' feelings of overwhelm and exhaustion, leading to burnout or compassion fatigue and ultimately resulting in their lowered job performance and increased attrition (Benson, 2018; Camacho & Parham, 2019; Hoffman et al., 2007; Shernoff et al., 2011).

Review of Literature

Urban School Teacher Stress and Burnout

Previous studies reveal high volumes of stress and burnout experienced by public school teachers. Stress is defined as the manner in which external conditions threaten a person's well-being (Abel & Sewell,

2010). Specifically, teacher stress is described as the state of unpleasant conditions including worry and exasperation that arise from job expectations and that are detrimental to teachers' physical and mental health (Abel & Sewell, 2010). Comparably, a considerable amount of literature declares that teachers experience an immense amount of psychological distress including non-specific stress, feelings of depression, and work-related emotional fatigue. Explained, psychological distress involves the clinical depression and/or apprehension whose expressions are considered physical and emotional (Bottiani et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Williams III et al., 2023).

According to Schmidt and Jones-Fosu (2019), urban school teachers face additional stressors that are uncommon for non-urban teachers, including a lack of resources and funding, along with intense workloads and more vulnerable students. Milner (2012) explains that these stressors are associated with intense work responsibilities and limited job support. Milner also contends that urban schools are associated with having crowded student populations, usually surpassing the accessibility of finances and resources necessary to sufficiently serve them. As a result, urban schools face-concerns such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient funds, and scarce resources. Since these concerns usually relate to teachers' challenging working conditions, they simply add to the existing level of stress that teachers often face.

For this reason, it is important to closely monitor teachers' breaking points as they can negatively affect their mental health and job performance. Likewise, Abel and Sewell (2010) state that it is necessary for public school administrators to focus their attention on teachers' stress levels and burnout symptoms, which may vary in urban and non-urban school systems. Due to their level of authority, Dolph (2017) reveals that administrators have the power to enforce certain strategies that will support teacher working conditions and improve school efforts. Their ability to create positive change, particularly in schools with high populations of underserved students, demonstrates that their leadership and heavy involvement play a significant role in enhancing the value of urban schools.

Further, several studies have noted the increase in teachers' feelings of stress and burnout since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic (e.g., Alves et al., 2021; CDC Foundation, 2021; Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). In their study of 285 teachers in Poland,

Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik (2021) found a decrease in teachers' mental health between the first two waves of the pandemic. The parameters for the first wave were defined as March 16–June 26, 2020, the first-time teachers in Poland were moved to distance education, and the second wave was defined as December 2020–February 2021, when teachers were sent home a second time to facilitate distance learning again. In their findings, these researchers identified a 1.62% increase in the number of respondents who experienced mild, moderate, severe, or extreme levels of stress (45.52% to 47.14%); a 3.81% increase in teachers who experienced at least mild levels of anxiety (46.9% to 50.71%), and a 10.86% increase in those who experienced at least mild levels of depression (44.14 to 55%) (Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021).

Thus, while the initial onset of the pandemic caused stress, anxiety, and depression among many teachers, its prolonged nature may have exacerbated those feelings or the triggers that caused them. The CDC Foundation (2021) conducted a similar study to understand the pandemic's "social, emotional, academic, and mental health impacts on school communities" (p. 2). According to this research, among teachers who experienced increased difficulty focusing on work, 37% of them reported clinically significant symptoms of depression and 31% reported clinically significant symptoms of anxiety (CDC Foundation, 2021). These symptoms were likely a result of burnout, which is also evidenced in the finding that 53% of teachers were considering leaving the profession, more than they had before the pandemic. Among these teachers, 35% also reported symptoms of depression (CDC Foundation, 2021).

Consequences of Urban Teacher Stress and Burnout

Stress can negatively impact teachers' job contentment as well as their overall success with students. It can lead to concerns regarding their physical and psychological health, damage their relationships with students, and result in poor job performance (Abel & Sewell, 2010). This level of stress causes teachers to invest less time and passion in their profession, and if extended for too long, may eventually lead to burnout. All of this is relevant because when teachers are unhappy and unproductive at work, it is likely to extend beyond their career and into their personal lives and family relationships (Abel & Sewell, 2010). Relatively, work-related stress and mental health concerns among teachers can develop into physical or mental absence from work, thus leading to ineffective teaching and useless work behavior. These concerns can cause teachers to become less

compassionate toward students, lose interest in class preparation, develop limited patience for classroom interruptions, and feel less interested and devoted to their career (Schmidt & Jones-Fosu, 2019). The significance of these are extreme because the road to recovery may be substantive for teachers lacking the mental capacity and well-being to perform in their roles.

For example, Jeon et al. (2016) found significant associations between teachers' stress and their responsiveness to their students, as evidenced by the emotion regulation and coping strategies they employed. According to this study, "teachers in more chaotic child-care settings had less reappraisal and coping skills, which in turn, was associated with lower levels of positive responsiveness to children" (p. 83). In addition to demonstrating less support and encouragement to their students, other studies have also revealed significant associations between teachers' stress and decreased professional commitment, increased conflicts with students, decreased communication with parents, and lower-quality math and literacy instructional practices (Buettner et al., 2016; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Jeon et al., 2016; Whitaker et al., 2015).

Bottiani et al. (2019) find that burnout and stress are common among public school teachers and even more prevalent in urban schools with demanding jobs and limited resources. Still, minimal information exists regarding the factors associated with burnout and mental health involving urban school teachers or how the characteristics of teachers' wellbeing applies to their classroom efficiency. Further, in their research on the psychological distress of teachers, there is plenty of information surrounding the issues that influence the mental health of urban teachers, yet limited research exists regarding the actual mental health of urban teachers. Thus, the present study aims to build upon prior research related to the mental health of urban school teachers in order to determine how the pandemic has potentially influenced their psychological well-being. Building upon the findings of previous research, the results of this study offers insight into urban school teachers' burnout and their subsequent impact on students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

Data

Data for this study was drawn from the 2018 (pre-COVID) and 2020 (early-COVID) North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NCTWC) Survey, which was chosen due to its higher than national average (7.3%) population growth (12.4%) over the last decade (Tippett, 2021) and the relatively stable teacher attrition rate during the pandemic (8.2% or 7,735 teachers left North Carolina) (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022). At the start of the pandemic, North Carolina teachers were instructing more students than ever before (Tippett, 2021). Given the attrition rate, which was slightly higher than in the prior three years (8.1%), the researchers felt it necessary to investigate how teachers in North Carolina, who were instructing more students than ever, perceived their working conditions during a time where many states experienced tremendous teacher attrition due to the pandemic.

The data from this study were collected from the 2018 and 2020 results of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NCTWC) Survey. This anonymous statewide survey is offered biennially to educators in North Carolina during the latter part of the academic year (March to April) and is designed "to measure teaching conditions in schools and their impact on teachers' careers" (NCTWC Survey, n.d., para. 3). The Survey had a 91 percent response rate in 2018 (109,453 responses) and an 84.45 percent response rate in 2020 (102,545 responses), thus providing a representative perspective of the "structural strengths and improvement opportunities for [North Carolina] schools and districts" (NCTWC Survey, n.d., para. 2).

The survey posed statements to participants, to which they responded using a 5-point scale (i.e., "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree") or a Yes/No dichotomy. Educator responses from each school were averaged to comprise a district mean for each survey item. For this study, we compared district means on items identified to be indicative of psychological distress. The survey items were grouped into categorical constructs, and we extracted data from the following four constructs: Facilities and Resources, Managing Student Conduct, School Leadership, and New Teacher Support.

Facilities and Resources

The Facilities and Resources construct included items that assess teachers' access to appropriate instructional support and materials. It offers significant insight since studies have found that teachers' psychological distress is heavily influenced by their work environment and conditions (Bottiani et al., 2019; Bottani, 2020; Fox & Hemmeter, 2009; Jeon et al., 2018a). Thus, the following three items from the Facilities and Resources construct were analyzed: (1) Teachers have sufficient access to a broad range of professional support personnel; (2) The school environment is clean and well maintained; and (3) The physical environment of classrooms in this school supports teaching and learning (NCTWC Survey, 2020). Participants used a 5-point Likert scale to record their level of agreeability with each of these statements.

Managing Student Conduct

Items from the Managing Student Conduct construct were selected according to study findings that link teachers' psychological wellness to their disciplinary and classroom management self-efficacy (Dicke, 2014; Djonko-Moore, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014, Yoon, 2002). As such, three items were extracted from this construct, which are as follows: (1) Policies and procedures regarding student conduct are clearly understood by faculty; (2) Teachers consistently enforce rules for student conduct; and (3) The faculty work in a school environment that is safe (NCTWC Survey, 2020). Participants were instructed to respond to these statements using a 5-point Likert scale for agreeability.

School Leadership

Many studies have identified administrative support to have a strong influence on teachers' job satisfaction, stress, and burnout, all of which impact their psychological wellbeing (Campoli, 2017; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2016; Fiorilli et al., 2017; Oulette et al., 2018; Saas et al., 2010; Stanley, 2020). Thus, items in the School Leadership construct measured the extent to which teachers perceived their administrators to support them. For this study, the following three items were analyzed: (1) There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school; (2) The school leadership consistently supports teachers; and (3) Teacher performance is assessed objectively (NCTWC Survey, 2020). As with the previous two constructs, participants used a 5-point Likert scale to respond to these statements.

New Teacher Support

Finally, four items were extracted from the New Teacher Support construct, since many teachers burn out within their first three years of teaching due to a perceived lack of support (Albright et al., 2017; DeAngelis et al., 2013; Raue et al., 2015). Participants responded "Yes" or "No" to the following statements from this construct: (1) As a beginning teacher, I have received a reduced workload; (2) As a beginning teacher, I have received formal time to meet with my mentor during school hours; (3) Overall, the additional support I received as a new teacher improved my instructional practice; and (4) Overall, the additional support I received as a new teacher has helped me to impact my students' learning (NCTWC Survey, 2020).

Procedures

The entire sample included all 115 school districts in North Carolina. Prior to descriptively analyzing differences between individual items and constructs between 2018 and 2020 survey responses, the school districts were grouped based on their urbanity as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2006). As such, school districts in this study were classified as urban (n=11), suburban (n=16), rural (n=72), or town (n=16). The data was screened to determine if outliers were present, ~~to~~ of which there were none.

As outlined in Table 1, means of favorable survey responses in 2018 and 2020 were determined for each construct and item. For the Facilities and Resources, Managing Student Conduct, and School Leadership constructs, the percentage of respondents who indicated "agree" or "strongly agree" were aggregated together to determine the mean for each item. For the New Teacher Support construct, the percentage of respondents who indicated "yes" was recorded as the school district mean for each item. The researchers chose to utilize percentages to give an overall picture of what was occurring in each district, rather than raw data or any other type of index. Finally, the school districts were disaggregated by their urbanity, and the item and construct means for each locale were determined (see Table 1). All data screening and analysis were conducted through STATA 16.0 software. The data was screened for any outliers.

Table 1

Urban School District Means for North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Constructs for 2018, 2020, and 2022 Academic Years

	Facilities and Resources			Managing Student Conduct			School Leadership			New Teacher Support			
	Professional Support	School Environment	Physical Environment	Policies and Procedures	Consistently Enforce Rules	Safe School Environment	Trust and Mutual Respect	Leadership Support	Teacher Assessed Objectively	Reduced Workload	Formal Mentor Meetings	Improved Instruction	Impact Student Learning
2018	81.30	81.11	87.04	79.37	74.67	88.07	73.78	77.52	87.67	28.26	58.96	80.89	81.78
2020	79.26	76.63	85.96	76.04	72.44	87.44	72.56	76.48	86.74	28.7	56.44	81.7	83.63
2022	75.67	70.62	82.2	73.99	70.69	86	72.19	76.17	82.57	27.5	53.66	79.39	80.52

Findings

Across all four analyzed constructs of the NCTWC Survey, educator responses declined between 2018 and 2020. Detailed comparisons of each construct and the district locales are presented in this section.

Facilities and Resources

With regard to the Facilities and Resources construct, there was an overall decline in favorability from 2018 (M=84.11) to 2020 (M=82.33). Additionally, each locale saw teachers' ratings drop from 2018 to 2020. In terms of overall access to professional support, school environment ,and cleanliness of the physical environment, rural districts saw the largest decline amongst all locales. Notably, urban school districts experienced the lowest teacher response ratings in 2018 and 2020 for each question/statement in the Facilities and Resources construct with exception to ratings on professional support. While rural school districts had the highest mean rating for professional support across both years (M=81.88 and M=79.56), school districts that were classified as towns experienced the highest mean teacher ratings for both school environment (M=86.06 and M=81.88) and physical environment (M=90 and M=89.38) across both academic years. Each district locale maintained a favorable rating among teachers who taught in the district during the 2018 and 2020 academic years.

Managing Student Conduct

Overall, there was a slight decline in favorability for the Managing Student Construct construct between 2018 (M=83.61) and 2020 (M=83.07). Urban school districts obtained the lowest mean teacher rating for each question within this construct. However, suburban (M=91.31), rural (M=89.06), and town (M=90.75) school districts saw an increase in response rating averages in the 2020 survey year for the question related to a safe school environment. Teachers in suburban school districts responded more favorably to the item concerning student conduct and policy and procedures in 2020 than in 2018. Still, each district type saw teachers' responses decrease on the item that assessed whether teachers consistently enforce rules for student conduct. Still, as it relates to Managing Student Conduct as a construct, teachers provided overall positive ratings.

School Leadership

There was an overall decrease in favorability regarding the School Leadership construct in 2018 (M=82.37) versus 2020 (M=81.58). However, teachers in urban school districts viewed their school leadership more favorably in 2020 or just as favorably in 2020 as they did in 2018. Urban school districts were the only district type that did not see a decrease in mean response ratings in the 2020 academic year. While response averages for objective teacher assessment (M=75.18) and leadership support (M=86.09) remained the same between 2018 and 2020, teachers in urban school districts viewed trust and mutual respect only slightly more favorably in 2020 (M=71.55) than in 2018 (M=71.09). Notably, teachers from suburban school districts had the highest mean ratings across each individual item within the School Leadership construct.

New Teacher Support

Concerning New Teacher Support, teachers responded less favorably overall in 2020 (M=62.74) than they did in 2018 (M=63.10) The findings across both years indicate that novice teachers did not believe they were provided a reduced workload (M=29.59 and M=30.37). However, more new teachers in urban and suburban school districts perceived themselves to have a reduced workload in 2020 (M=29.00 and M=31.50) than in 2018 (M=26.09 and M=29.67). It is to be noted that reduced workload is the only item for which teachers disagreed with the prompt provided. Interestingly, in regards to perceiving that their support improved their instructional practices and helped them impact student learning, novice teachers in urban and rural districts offered a higher average rating in 2020 than in 2018. Still, across all district types, novice teachers indicated favorable responses regarding having formal meeting time with their mentor, their support improving their instructional practices, and their support helping them impact student learning.

Discussion

Several takeaways have emerged from this study's findings related to teacher burnout and psychological distress. This study is meaningful to the field of education since teaching was considered a stressful occupation prior to the pandemic, resulting in nearly 8% of public school teachers leaving the profession yearly either through retirement or attrition (Diliberti et al., 2021; Pressly et al., 2021). Teachers who

experienced burnout prior to the pandemic, particularly those teaching in low-income, poverty-stricken schools, carried this condition into the pandemic which resulted in further feelings of anxiety, panic, unhappiness, and feeling overburdened. The uncertainty of the future, coupled with teachers' emotions and having to return to a virtual, in person, or hybrid classroom setting, eventually took a toll on their mental health (Baker et al., 2021). Additionally, teacher attrition slightly increased in a few districts by early fall 2020, and by the end of the 2020-2021 school year, teacher burnout increased while teacher morale decreased, thus indicating higher attrition rates. This is impactful to the teaching profession because when teachers leave, it decreases student achievement, hinders schools from building logical curricula, and forces districts to spend additional funding to recruit for their replacements (Diliberti et al., 2021). Therefore, acknowledging teacher stress is very important as it can impact teachers in various ways, having a reverse effect on one's physical and mental health, and even leading to poor job performance. The situation becomes more concerning when anxiety is taken into consideration since this is not deemed to be a normal reaction in stressful environments. (Pressly et al., 2021).

First, a surprising finding was an increase in urban teachers' perceptions of trust and mutual respect from school leadership from 2018 to 2020. Other locales expressed less trust in 2020 than in 2018. During a period where teachers were demanded to do more in their position, the increase of trust and mutual respect in urban areas could be from school leaders giving teachers more autonomy and offering more praise and grace during the onset of COVID-19 (Harris & Jones, 2020). While most teachers by locale believed that leadership supports teachers was sufficient, teachers in urban areas were not more or less satisfied with the support offered between years. What is known from the literature is that supportive colleagues help ~~to make~~ teachers remain in the profession longer (Papay et al., 2017), but it is unclear to what extent is support actually being articulated in the prompt. It is possible that this prompt requires additional clarification or definition, as teachers could be interpreting "support" in different ways. Support during the 2018 academic year may be vastly different from the type and styles of support school leadership offered to teachers, given the conditions the entire world was in during the 2020 academic year. To achieve this end, the survey would need to be redesigned with prompts that allow for the types of actions/styles of support school leadership offered, so data analysts could accurately ascertain new trends regarding levels of support offered during and post COVID-19.

Secondly, novice teachers indicated a less than desirable workload, which is consistent with extant literature (Amitai & Houtte, 2022). However, the findings suggest that during COVID-19 more novice teachers in urban and suburban locales stated their workload was reduced than in the previous service. Perhaps having a larger density of teachers in urban and suburban areas allowed schools and districts to protect novice teachers better than in rural and town locales that ~~which~~ do not have an excess of resources and personnel. Along with a reduced workload, novice teachers in urban areas in 2020 felt they had a greater impact on student learning than in the prior survey year. Notably, in 2018 novice teachers in urban schools had the lowest approval for the prompt "impact student learning" and nearly identical approval rating as suburban schools, which had the second highest approval rating of all locales. Although there is an array of studies that articulate ~~the~~ student~~s~~ "losses" ~~gained~~ during the pandemic, there are none to the authors' knowledge that investigate teachers' actual impact on student learning in a positive fashion. It is plausible that as teachers in the study saw themselves spending more time on the social, cultural, and even emotional needs of their students, they felt a greater connection to students' ability to learn the content, resulting in a more favorable result than in 2018. Again, further qualitative analyses are required to explore the narratives that shaped how teachers responded the way they did on the 2020 survey.

The implications of these findings are significant because when teachers experience psychological distress, it is more difficult for them to connect with their students, deliver effective classroom instruction, and sustain in the teaching profession (Bottiani et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2019; Jeon et al., 2014, 2018b; McLean & Connor, 2015). Specifically examining urban schools in North Carolina, the finding potentially illuminates how numerous competing factors (i.e., classroom management, support from leadership, increased trust from leadership to teachers) may not be attributing to them leaving the classroom but actually remaining in the classroom as per the relatively low change in attrition rates from 2018 to 2020 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). Additionally, by including data from school districts across North Carolina–a state made up of 78 rural counties, 16 regional city or suburban counties, and 6 large urban counties–this study gives voice to the experiences and possible wellbeing of teachers working within the full spectrum of school environments (NC Rural Center, n.d.). For urban schools beyond North Carolina, the data from this study offers a

glimpse of certain factors (e.g., trust by school leaders) that administrators should improve to assist in retaining veteran and novice teachers. It would be interesting to ascertain how teachers in urban schools outside of North Carolina (e.g., New York City, Chicago, Baltimore, St. Louis) would respond to the survey and if their responses would be similar or statistically significant from urban schools in North Carolina.

Thus, teacher self-care and other support for teachers' wellbeing are likely to benefit both educators and their students. Earlier research has examined a variety of possible variables that have affected teacher anxiety and stress, such as the classroom and school environment and educational factors (Pressley et al., 2021). Accordingly, between 2018 and 2020, teachers in North Carolina expressed an overall decline in their satisfaction with their work environment, disciplinary and classroom management self-efficacy, and school administration. Likewise, new teachers expressed an overall decline in the support they received as they settled into their roles as educators.

Particularly, urban school teachers indicated declining satisfaction for ten of the thirteen survey items between 2018 and 2020, all of which were also lower than teachers in all the other locales. Research has already shown that the added stressors teachers in urban schools face causes them to have increased psychological distress and turnover (Albright et al., 2017; Bottiani et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Williams III et al., 2023). Additionally, the CDC Foundation (2021) found that 53 percent of the 1,842 teachers they surveyed, "said they were considering leaving the field or retiring more now than they were before the pandemic" (p. 18). Among these teachers, 35 percent were experiencing increased symptoms of depression since the onset of the pandemic. This study identified several factors that were impacting the teachers' mental health (i.e., depression and anxiety), and among them were "issues with school's physical infrastructure", "lack of funding or resources", "lack of key staff", and "lack of supplies" (CDC Foundation, 2021, p. 20). Similar to the CDC's findings, this study found that there was a decrease among all teachers regarding their satisfaction with their schools' facilities and resources, but this decrease was most pronounced for urban district locales. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly evident that urban school teachers and students are at an increasing risk for expanded disparities.

This is true especially now that impacts of the pandemic are combining with (and contributing to) the "Great Resignation," which is the term adopted to describe the mass exodus that happened "between April and

September 2021, [when] more than 24 million American employees left their jobs, an all-time record" (Sull et al., 2022, para. 1). Not only are teachers, and particularly urban school teachers, not exempt from the Great Resignation, but they are likely leading in numbers (Ingersoll, 2002; Nguyen et al., 2020). Thus, it is critical that policymakers as well as district and school administrators put certain parameters in place that buffer the effects of uncontrollable factors such as the pandemic and increase the amount and types of support offered to teachers that mitigate their stress and promote their psychological well-being. This may be executed by creating protective factors and reducing emotional strain, specifically in teachers' immediate surroundings, with the overall purpose of strengthening teacher coping and avoiding teacher burnout (Baker et al., 2021).

Recommendations

Many recommendations have surfaced from the findings of this study. Because mental health and burnout are critical issues for urban school teachers, it will require a combined effort from teacher educators, teacher recruiters, policymakers, and school officials to assist urban teachers to navigate this process. To begin with, teachers need the option to participate in stress-reduction intervention programs as a way of helping them to cope with stressors. Additionally, professional development and mentoring opportunities should be offered to teachers to help them with responding to the needs of students as they work through their own wellbeing.

Urban teachers specifically need guidance to help them mentally manage the demands that come along with working in urban schools. As emphasized by the Facilities and Resources construct, this may be executed by offering more reasonable expectations, authentic preparation, and overall support. Additionally, when teachers cope with stress on the job, it can sometimes be ineffective since most of the stressors extend beyond their control. For instance, as suggested by the Managing Student Conduct construct results, inexperienced teachers struggle to balance and cope with multiple issues that arise simultaneously in their classroom each day (Schmidt & Jones-Fosu, 2019).

Accordingly, school administrators have a major influence on teacher burnout. Thus, the following recommendations are for urban school administrators to support their teachers' psychological wellbeing:

- Offer teachers additional time for class preparation time during normal school hours and recruit parent volunteers to assist with the day-to-day classroom responsibilities. This will reduce the possibility of teachers falling behind and increase their classroom productivity. According to the New Teacher Support construct, a lighter workload and informal training time would make teachers feel more supported overall.
- Provide a team of highly effective veteran teachers who serve as mentors and offer social, emotional, and professional support to novice teachers. The School Leadership responses suggest that school leadership serving as a support system for teachers will increase their overall psychological distress. This may be executed through mentoring programs where first year teachers are assigned to veteran teachers, and the two establish personal relationships that allow for shared emotions and experiences. Also, this will serve as a solution to high attrition rates and help first year teachers to cope with work stressors (Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017).
- Provide support groups that allow teachers space to share similar experiences amongst their colleagues. These groups can be facilitated during induction where first year teachers are introduced to licensed mental health professionals who exchange their services for earning continuing education credits. The groups will help prevent burnout by providing teachers with spaces necessary for them to build trust and collegiality, share solutions to issues and concerns, and receive resources to manage stress and wellbeing. Since teacher burnout happens over time, it is important to mitigate symptoms early, which will help prevent educators from arriving at breaking points.
- Administer a survey for teachers to select an advocate, who should be a colleague, to serve as a teacher-administrator liaison for their school. The purpose of the teacher advocate will be to function as the voice of the teachers, particularly for those who want to share their concerns but are hesitant in doing so. Therefore, the advocate will be held to a high level of trust to ensure that all of the teachers' suggestions and concerns are received by the appropriate administrator, all while keeping the teachers' identities discreet and making sure that necessary action steps are taken. As

a result, the aim is for teachers to feel more valued and appreciated in the workplace, while creating an atmosphere of belonging and mutual influence. For this reason, advocacy for the teachers should be a priority to promote team building and confidence among everyone involved.

- Offering monthly Wellness Days for teachers. Teachers should be encouraged to take one day off work each month for them to focus on maintaining their wellbeing. Further, licensed mental health professionals can be responsible for contacting teachers on their Wellness Day to ensure they are well and offer support where necessary. Like most holidays, monthly Wellness Days will increase teachers' motivation, satisfaction, and morale by allowing them to look forward to a guaranteed paid day off from work each month, during which they can take a mental break and prioritize their wellbeing (Vizuete, 2021).

While these solutions are directly targeted at teachers, there are additional steps urban school administrators can take to support their teachers' wellbeing. As it relates to limited funding, administrators should request for more financial support and in the interim navigate ways to reduce costs and operate their finances to maintain current inventory and staff. Concerning high emotional demands, administrators should be sure their teachers feel able to complete the challenging tasks of their jobs. Therefore, they should offer teachers formal training sessions that focus on expanding their emotional skills, which should ultimately lead to reduced burnout.

Regarding lack of training, administrators should also provide their teachers with valuable professional development opportunities that prepare them to implement culturally responsive, trauma-informed classroom management, adapt their instruction to changes in educational policies, and maintain proficient skills in educational technology. Finally, regarding challenging work conditions, it is critical that administrators evaluate teacher performance and student learning outcomes in ways that extend beyond political rubrics. By establishing work boundaries and prioritizing the mental health of educators, administrators will be taking tremendous steps toward resolving teacher burnout (School of Education, 2021).

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study offers important findings related to the gradual decline in teachers' satisfaction with their working conditions, it also has some limitations that are necessary to be acknowledged. First, the NCTWC Survey was distributed between March and April 2020, which was the same timeframe that teachers across North Carolina were mandated to move to remote instruction to prevent the spread of COVID. This, in addition to the fact that there was no control group in this study, means that a direct connection cannot be established between the pandemic and the decline in favorable survey responses. However, it can be reasonably implied that, as the switch to remote instruction was taking place, issues that already existed were exacerbated among veteran teachers who had never taught in virtual settings and novice teachers whose training did not prepare them for such an unforeseen circumstance. Offering another perspective, many teachers may have approached the extraordinary obstacles they faced with a degree of optimism at the onset of the pandemic, which could explain the subtle changes in the NCTWC Survey responses between 2018 and 2020. Therefore, it should also be considered that the prolonged nature of pandemic may have caused more dramatic changes, which should be analyzed in another study once the 2022 Survey responses are released.

Also related to COVID, another limitation of this study is related to the terminology in some of the NCTWC Survey items. If teachers were already moved to remote instruction when they completed the survey, some of the items may have been misleading or led to misleading responses (e.g., "The school environment is clean and well maintained," "The physical environment of classrooms in this school supports teaching and learning," "The faculty work in a school environment that is safe," etc.). At the time of data collection, the 2022 Survey was not yet accessible; however, the 2022 NCTWC Survey would solicit more accurate responses if it includes verbiage that acknowledges the extended period of time teachers spent teaching virtually.

Further, another limitation of this study is that it analyzed the means of districts, which does not infer the perceptions of individual schools or teachers regarding their working conditions. Future research could extend this study by analyzing differences between the individual schools represented in the Survey data. This would produce increased study reliability and validity since classifying school locales would be more accurate than district classifications, and would allow for more consistency within the sample. Additionally, a future study

that analyzes differences between individual teacher responses across race and gender could offer critical insight into the effects of the pandemic on teachers' racialized experiences in urban environments. As Kohli (2018) found in their study, urban schools often have hostile racial climates that impact the retention of teachers of color. These hostile environments also often lead to racial battle fatigue, which has detrimental impacts on the wellbeing of teachers of color (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Therefore, a future study should include an analysis of the pandemic's influence on these pre-existing racialized contexts.

Finally, this study did not include any statistical analysis to measure the significance of differences in the survey responses. We were unable to conduct analysis of variance or regression analysis because this study's sample size and the skewness of the data would violate their major assumptions. Thus, because this was limited as an exploratory study, the findings cannot be generalized to all teachers in 2018 and 2020. Future studies should consider expanding this study to a national analysis of teachers' psychological wellbeing across school types (e.g., urban, rural, etc.).

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the issues that K-12 urban school teachers face on a daily basis as they continue adjusting to the continuous implications of COVID. We discussed the causes, coping mechanisms, and consequences that teachers experience due to job-related burnout and stress. The initial question raised in this investigation was whether there has been a change in the psychological distress of urban school teachers in North Carolina since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the study determined that there was a decrease in agreeability among all of the responses to the four NCTWC Survey constructs between 2018 and 2020, however, a statistical difference could not be detected.

The future direction of the study would be to compare the 2022 (current-COVID) results of the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey to the 2018 (pre-COVID) and 2020 (early-COVID) results. The 2022 results will reveal teacher feedback that is more directly related to their experiences teaching during a pandemic, as opposed to their experiences during the beginning stages of COVID. However, it is currently clear

that the psychological wellbeing of urban teachers is at high risk and immediate action to sustain them is necessary.

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