

Article

It Flows Both Ways: Relationships between Families and Educators during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This is a critical moment of extraordinary rates of teacher burnout exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to implement effective intervention and policy, we must identify the drivers of educators' stress and factors that may act as protective mechanisms. The complexity of this problem calls for a social–ecological approach. In this study, we investigated the impact of individual, organizational, and relational factors on educators' pandemic-related stress. Using hierarchical multiple regression, we found that secondary traumatic stress and family, school, student, and community relationships significantly predicted pandemic-related stress after controlling for race, age, and gender. Family, school, and community collaboration is well-documented to benefit students; however, our results suggest that these relationships also benefit teachers, and may have been a protective factor on pandemic-related stress. That is, the positive influence of family, school, and community relationships flows both ways—to students and their families as well as to educators. Our findings highlight the importance of more research on secondary traumatic stress and home–school–community collaborations to mitigate teacher stress and burnout, as well as the implication for practice to increase emphasis on these issues in teacher preparation and ongoing professional development.

Keywords: teacher well-being; teacher stress; family–school collaboration; families; COVID



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1. Introduction

COVID-19 has resulted in dangerously high levels of pandemic-related stress among educators [1,2] and high levels of teacher burnout [3] especially among special educators [4]. Further, it has been associated with loss of loved ones or colleagues, isolation due to public lockdowns and restrictions, fear of illness, and anxiety about the ambiguity of when the world would return to some semblance of normalcy [5]. For teachers, these stressors were exacerbated by professional demands to switch to online teaching formats and class management via online video chat, in addition to balancing the needs of their students and their own personal sources of stress [3]. As a result, teacher burnout and turnover are exceedingly high [1,3]. Burnout stems from emotional stress that surpasses a person's coping resources [6]. From a social–ecological perspective, teacher stress and burnout are affected by individual-level factors (e.g., level of resilience) and forces outside themselves, including organizational-level practices and relational-level factors, such as home–school–community collaboration. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of individual, relational, and organizational factors on pandemic-related stress of educators (i.e., teachers and school personnel).

2. Conceptual Model

Based on Bronfenbrenner's [7] ecological systems theory, the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) social–ecological model enables the examination of the connection between individual, relationship, community, and societal factors that affect well-being [8]. Overlapping rings circling each factor in the model illustrate that they influence each other.

This model underscores the necessity of examining complex issues across multiple levels at the same time, and has been used in studies on public health, well-being, workforce resiliency, and teacher and healthcare provider burnout (e.g., [9–12]). For this study, we use a modified version of the CDC’s model to include individual factors, organizational factors, and relational factors as a lens through which to analyze this complex issue. Individual-level factors included race, gender, and age, as well as levels of resilience and secondary traumatic stress. On the organizational level, we assessed teachers’ school culture, and on the relational level, we incorporated collaboration between family, student, and school (see Figure 1).

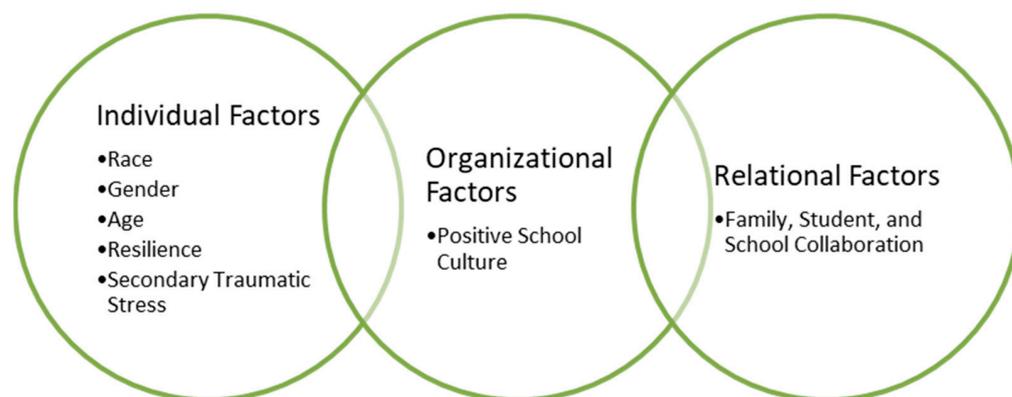


Figure 1. Social-ecological model.

2.1. Individual-Level Factors

Prior research highlights individual-level factors that may contribute to teachers’ increased pandemic-related stress. In this study, we examined secondary traumatic stress [13–18] resilience [19–23], gender identity [24–27], and years of experience [6,17,28].

2.1.1. Secondary Traumatic Stress

Figley [16] defines secondary traumatic stress (STS) as “the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other—the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person” (p. 7). STS results from learning about a traumatic event experienced by someone else [15]. Individuals in helping professions are at risk for developing secondary traumatic stress symptoms, such as feeling depleted or fatigued, lower self-efficacy, and lower feelings of safety and security [16,29]. Likewise, the pandemic increased levels of secondary traumatic stress [30]. Rates of STS among teachers vary among studies. Koenig et al. [18] found that 43% of teachers surveyed demonstrated symptoms related to STS, while Borntrager et al. [31] found that nearly 75% of educators reported symptoms of STS. Additionally, STS was higher for teachers working with students with disabilities [14,17].

2.1.2. Resilience

The pandemic brought new sources of adversity for educators and students. Resilience is the capacity to bounce back and move forward from challenging experiences [22]. Educators’ resilience builds protective mechanisms to reduce stress and burnout, such as healthy relationships and coping skills [19,20,23]. However, educators’ internal resources were taxed during the pandemic, making them particularly susceptible to stress and burnout [21]. We expected resilience to have an inverse relationship to pandemic stress, where increased resilience would modulate educators’ capacity to adapt to challenges that arose from COVID-19.

2.1.3. Gender Identity

Females report higher stress levels than males [24]. During the pandemic, women appear to have fared particularly worse during lockdown periods, due to juggling demands

of their own family's needs on top of job stress [26]. Likewise, women in helping professions, including educators, are more susceptible to secondary traumatic stress [25,27]. Thus, we expected that females in this study would exhibit significantly more pandemic-related stress than males.

2.1.4. Years of Experience

Novice teachers are at greater risk for leaving the field of education [17]. Less experienced teachers often have underdeveloped coping and class management skills that may make them susceptible to stress and burnout [6]. Novices in helping professions are more likely to experience secondary traumatic stress than those who have been in the field longer [28]. Conversely, Duli [32] found that years of experience may mediate teachers' stress, where more experienced teachers are more susceptible to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

2.2. Organizational-Level Factors

Positive school culture has been correlated with lower teacher stress [33–36]. Research has documented organizational factors that lead to teacher stress during the pandemic. Răducu and Stănculescu's [37] cross-sectional analysis of 330 elementary school teachers documented major antecedents of teacher burnout, which included stress generated by workload, students' misbehavior, and low professional recognition. Among numerous organizational factors shown to affect teacher stress before the pandemic (see [36,38]), Kaden [39] highlighted the additional hours and increased behavioral management brought on by the pandemic.

2.3. Relational Factors

Research demonstrates that relationships among families, schools, and community agencies can benefit all educational stakeholders [40,41] through improving equity in student outcomes [42], including student behavior, achievement, and attendance [43]. Family, school, and community collaboration can also foster trust among all stakeholders in the school community [44], an outcome which also leads to improved collective efficacy within the school community [45]. Strong relationships among educators and students have also been shown to improve student behavior, academic achievement, school engagement, and social standing among peers [46].

Scant research documents the impact that strong and positive relationships with families have on educators. Instead, research has highlighted the correlation between difficulty with these relationships and increased stress for educators. Pressley [47] found that collaborating with families increased teacher stress, especially since the COVID pandemic began. In their study of the experiences of teachers of students with severe disabilities interacting with families during the pandemic, for example, Francis et al. [48] found that parents were perceived as directing school decisions, teachers felt unable to meet parent expectations, parent–teacher communication was difficult, parents had to learn to be their children's teachers, parents were exhausted, and teachers felt helpless and stressed.

Research on positive educator–student relationships has demonstrated that they are reciprocal, benefitting both students and educators [49]. A long line of research shows that students' relationships with educators can have a positive effect on students' academic achievement (e.g., [13,50–52]) Research demonstrates that student–educator relationships can be motivating and personally rewarding for educators [53–55]. Conversely, negative relationships between educators and students have been linked with teacher stress [56] and burnout [57].

Research has also shown that relationships between schools and community agencies can be reciprocal [58,59]. Gross and colleagues [60] demonstrated that schools and agencies within the communities where schools were located had reciprocal, synergistic relationships that extended the work of both schools and community agencies. Creating such partnerships takes time, especially in rural communities [61], but can promote teacher well-being as well as the well-being of students and families [59].

2.4. Current Study

Teacher burnout, and especially special education teacher burnout, is a multi-faceted problem with influences on multiple ecological levels [62]. In order to support teacher well-being and retention and to promote a healthy educational system, we must first understand the social–ecological factors that cause and mitigate the effects of pandemic-related stress among educators to inform intervention. In this study, we investigated the impact of individual, organizational, and relational factors on pandemic-related stress of educators. The specific research question addressed was: *What factors are most salient in predicting pandemic-related stress among educators in a rural state?*

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Participants for this study were a convenience sample of public-school educators in rural, suburban, and urban school districts across one state in the northeastern United States. Two hundred and sixty-three teachers and school personnel from 17 different schools across five school districts completed the survey. The majority of participants identified as White (95%) and female (82%). The age of participants ranged from 19 to 71 years old, with a mean age of 47 years old. Participants had various roles within the school, including teacher (38%), special educator (12%), school counselors and social workers (8%), paraprofessionals (28%), and other (11%). Three percent of participants did not identify their role. Finally, participants identified as being in the field for between less than 1 year to 49 years, with an average of 17.2 years.

3.2. Procedure

The data for the current study were part of a larger evaluation of a trauma-informed training initiative across several districts in one northeastern state. The cross-sectional survey data were collected in the Fall of 2020. Surveys were distributed to schools using an online data collection and secure storage system called RedCap. Participants were invited to participate in the study via a link in an email sent by either the principal or special education administrator in each school.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. COVID-19 Related Professional Stress

Professional stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic was measured by asking participants to rate the degree to which the pandemic has disrupted their work life, where 1 indicated no impact at all, and 10 indicated a major impact. Single item measures of stress have been used in several other studies and have been found to be reliable and valid [63–65]. Houdmont and colleagues [65] noted that single item measures are appropriate for the assessment of job stress on the basis that (a) global stress will affect work outcomes, (b) if applied in a workplace setting, the measure will be viewed by respondents as relevant to work, and (c) single-item global stress scores tend to correlate with psychosocial work environment perceptions (p. 4).

3.3.2. Demographics

Demographic variables included *age, years on job, race, and gender identity*. *Race* was measured as White and Non-white to protect the identity of individuals. *Gender identity* was measured as male, female, and “not listed (please specify).”

3.3.3. Secondary Traumatic Stress

The Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (STSS) [66] is a 17-item measure designed to assess symptoms associated with secondary traumatic stress. Specifically, it is a standardized instrument that measures the effects of working with students or clients who have experienced trauma.

3.3.4. Resilience

Participants' resilience was measured using the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) [67], a 6-item scale that asks participants to rate their ability to handle stressful life events. The scale uses a 5-point Likert scale and includes questions such as, "It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event" and "It's hard for me to snap back when something bad happens" (reverse coded). Cronbach's alpha for this sample was 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency.

3.3.5. Positive School Culture

Positive school culture was measured via a composite score of 9 items, which asked participants to rate their perception of trauma-informed school practices, social-emotional safety, and cultural responsiveness within the school [12]. Example questions include: "Faculty and staff respond with care and compassion to one another", "students with trauma are talked about in a strengths-based manner", and "the school has rituals and routines that emphasize culture and a sense of belonging". Cronbach's alpha was 0.81, indicating good internal consistency.

3.3.6. Family, School, Student, and Community Collaboration (FSSC Collaboration)

FSSC Collaboration was measured using a composite of 5 items, such as "School-wide practices and decisions are made with input from students and families", "My school has a healthy partnership with community providers", and "Student perspectives are sought out for problem-solving and planning" [12]. Internal consistency was strong ($\alpha = 0.81$).

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.0. Data screening led to the elimination of 30 cases that had no value for the dependent variable. Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of individual, relational, and organizational variables in order to predict pandemic-related stress among teachers and school personnel. Results are presented in Table 1. Preliminary analysis was conducted to ensure there were no violations of the assumptions related to linearity, multicollinearity, independence, homoscedasticity, normality, and influential outliers. No assumptions were violated based on this preliminary analysis.

Table 1. Hierarchical Linear Regression Model.

	Variable	B	Std. Error	t
Block 1: Individual ($R^2 = 0.11$ ***)	Constant	6.7	0.72	9.3 ***
	Race (non-white)	0.05	0.52	0.1
	Female	-0.17	0.33	-0.5
	Age	0.01	0.01	1.1
	Resilience	-0.01	0.03	-0.3
	Secondary Traumatic Stress	0.59	0.12	3.8 ***
Block 2: Organizational ($R^2 = 0.12$ **)	Constant	7.2	1.08	6.7 ***
	Race (non-white)	0.06	0.52	0.1
	Female	-0.17	0.33	-0.5
	Age	0.01	0.08	1.1
	Resilience	-0.01	0.01	-0.2
	Secondary Traumatic Stress	0.57	0.16	3.6 ***
	Positive School Culture	-0.01	0.01	-0.6
Block 3: Relational ($R^2 = 0.14$ ***)	Constant	6.9	1.08	6.4 ***
	Race (non-white)	0.01	0.51	0.01
	Female	-0.22	0.32	-0.7
	Age	0.01	0.01	1.2
	Resilience	-0.01	0.03	-0.4
	Secondary Traumatic Stress	0.56	0.16	3.6 ***
	Positive School Culture	0.01	0.01	0.9
FSSC Collaboration	-0.06	0.03	-2.1 *	

Note: * p -value is less than 0.05, ** p -value is less than 0.01, *** p -value is less than 0.001.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results of our analyses. In step 1, individual level variables, including age, race, gender, resilience, and STS level, were included in the model, explaining 11% of the variance in pandemic-related stress ($F = 4.13, p = 0.001$). After the entry of the organizational level variable of positive school culture in step 2, there was no significant difference in the change statistic. However, in step 3, the addition of the relational level variable of FSSC collaboration led to a final significant model that explained 14% of the variance in pandemic-related stress, $F(7, 167) = 3.66$. The addition of the organizational and relational variables explained an additional 3% of the variance, r -square change = 0.03, F change = 4.2 ($df = 1, 160$), $p = 0.042$. In the final model, STS and FSSC Collaboration were the only significant contributors to pandemic-related stress, taking into account the other organizational and individual level variables.

5. Discussion

In this study, we used a social–ecological approach (CDC, n.d.) to investigate the individual, organizational, and relational-level variables that may have contributed to teacher stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. From a social–ecological perspective, these factors work together to stabilize, mitigate, or exacerbate teachers' level of stress and burnout.

On the individual level, our findings indicate that educators' level of secondary trauma was the only significant predictor of pandemic-related stress; as STS increased, pandemic-related stress increased as well. Teachers may have already struggled with stress management or may have not yet developed the coping skills to modulate the stress response [6], which may make them susceptible to developing STS. Likewise, if a person has difficulty managing stress in one area of their life, sources of additional stress may compound their struggles. Thus, educators susceptible to STS would likely also experience pandemic-related stress due to both their own stress load and vicarious stress experienced by their students. This is a particularly important finding, because STS can lead to increased burnout [68], and it illustrates the need to continue research on this important topic to develop ways of mitigating the effect of STS for teachers.

We predicted that gender identity would be a significant predictor of pandemic-related stress; however, our sample was 95% female, thus, there may not have been enough power to properly test this assumption. Additionally, educators' years of experience was not a significant predictor of pandemic-related stress. Less experienced teachers may have struggled with managing student behavior and course content [69], while seasoned teachers were more likely to report trouble transitioning to technology-based lessons [70]. Likewise, years of experience is often a proxy for age. During COVID-19, older teachers reported higher levels of stress and burnout due to concerns about their health and becoming ill [70,71], while younger teachers reported concerns related to at-home work stress with young children in the home [72]. Thus, years of experience may not be a significant predictor, as the pandemic brought on new stressors that transcended years of experience or age and manifested differently within subgroups of teachers. Future studies should include a broad sample of teachers with regard to gender identity, years of experience, and age categories, as well as geographical area.

Finally, with regard to individual factors, resilience was not a significant predictor of pandemic stress in this study. This is surprising because resilience is thought to act as a protective mechanism against personal stress [19,20,23]. However, STS and resilience are highly correlated, such that the variance in resilience that correlates with pandemic stress overlaps with that of STS. Thus, while STS shows up as highly significant, resilience may not be significant in this model because it does not add any additional explanatory power. This result may indicate that the stress teachers felt during the pandemic was ambient or social stress, where generalized resilience was not necessarily predictive, and those prone to STS may have suffered more pandemic-related stress due to their sensitivity to the experiences of others.

On the organizational level, positive school culture did not significantly impact teachers' pandemic stress. Perhaps being physically outside the school and working from home decreased the importance of school climate on educators' stress level. This aligns with, for example, Herman et al. [1], who found that teachers reported less work-related stress after the onset of COVID-19 compared to earlier in the school year. We would expect that the return to school may affect the importance of positive school culture, which typically reduces teacher stress [33,34,36].

Finally, on the relational level, FSSC collaboration was the only other significant predictor of pandemic-related stress in our model; pandemic-related stress decreased with more FSSC collaboration. There is well-established evidence of home-school collaboration benefiting students [40,41] and of educator-student relationships benefitting both students and educators. Strolin-Goltzman and colleagues [73] found that increased collaboration with community partners was a protective factor against job stress and secondary trauma among the child welfare and mental health workforce. Our results suggest that FSSC connections may also act a protective mechanism for teachers' well-being and decrease the likelihood of burnout, highlighting the reciprocal nature of home-school relationships.

5.1. Limitations

The results of the study should be considered through the lens of its limitations. The study was conducted on a convenience sample of school educators in a rural state, limiting external validity. It is possible that the respondents who completed the survey differ systematically from those who did not participate. Although this dataset included variables across individual, organizational, and relationship levels of the CDC's social-ecological model, it did not have a variable that could act as a proxy for the societal level. Future research should consider the impact of societal variables. Further, causality between the independent and dependent variables cannot be determined due to the cross-sectional nature of the study. In addition, we did specifically recruit special educators to participate in this study, and we did not examine the effect of these variables on teacher well-being specifically related to students with disabilities.

5.2. Implications

This study results in numerous implications for research and practice. First, research should further investigate the effect of positive family-educator relationships on teacher well-being. While some qualitative research has shown that teachers benefit from relationships with families (e.g., [74,75]), a deeper understanding of this correlation could inform school systems, teacher professional development, and preservice teacher preparation. Second, as relationships change over time and may vary significantly by context, future research on this topic should employ a longitudinal design with random sampling. Third, researchers should consider separating educators by roles (e.g., classroom teacher, social worker, special educator) and students by some characteristics (e.g., age/grade, disability diagnosis, gender) in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of these relationships.

There are also many implications of this study on practice. With the increased urgency to retain educators, school systems must act quickly to increase teacher well-being. This study suggests that relationships between families, students, and communities can be a protective factor for educators, and school administrators might consider how to strengthen these relationships without increasing educator responsibility. As suggested by Pressley [47], clear role definition among educators and clear administrative communication can help reduce teacher burden in collaborating with families. Furthermore, administrative leaders can facilitate reciprocal relationships and ensure comprehensiveness in establishing trust with community partners [58].

Teacher preparation programs are inconsistently and insufficiently preparing incoming teacher for skills to effectively build positive relationships with families, students, and community partners [76-78]. In addition, as expectations and roles relating to educating children continue to evolve post-pandemic [48,79], school administrators should

facilitate ongoing school-wide professional development, emphasizing building positive relationships with families, students, and community partners. Strolin-Goltzman and colleagues [73] note the importance of moving beyond self-care to include relational strategies for addressing stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout in teacher preparation and professional development. Epstein and colleagues [80], in their evaluation of an administrative initiative to focus on developing stronger family partnerships, found that schools with higher quality partnership programs, stronger implementation activities, and collegial support for partnerships took more steps to collaborate with families, and were also more successful in communicating with families. Similar to the findings in our study, they concluded that, “Due to COVID-19, partners in education—parents, teachers, administrators, and students—grew to appreciate each other more than ever before” (p. 15).

6. Conclusions

The study described in this paper demonstrates that strong organizational efforts to foster relationships between educators, families, students, and community partners may help educators mitigate pandemic-related stress. In considering strategies for post-pandemic wellness of the education workforce, creating skills and support for relational systems can create benefits that flow both ways.

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