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"I Just Couldn't Do It Anymore": A Study Of Post-Pandemic Teacher Burnout

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“I JUST COULDN’T DO IT ANYMORE”: A STUDY OF POST-PANDEMIC TEACHER BURNOUT

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom, who passed away in 2019. My mom was a nurse, and as far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a healthcare professional and follow in her footsteps. I told her that I was going to be a doctor so I could help people who were in pain, just like she did every day. She encouraged me to pursue my dreams, and always pushed me to avoid the path of least resistance, telling me that it was a lot of work, but it would pay off in the end. Even when I decided that healthcare was not for me, and I chose to become a teacher, she told me to keep going, and that no matter what I did, she was always going to be proud of me. Well, Mom, I know this is not the type of doctor that I had originally planned to be, but I believe that with my research, I can still help people who are in pain, just like you did. All that hard work and dedication paid off, and I know that I would not have gotten where I am today without your constant love and encouragement. Thank you, mom. I love you!

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Abstract

Teachers are burning out at an elevated rate following the COVID-19 pandemic and little research has been conducted to understand what is contributing to their burnout. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what factors in the post-shutdown pandemic environment are contributing to burnout in veteran teachers (teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience), and why some of these teachers subsequently decided to leave the profession. The central research question was, what factors are contributing to burnout in veteran teachers in the post-shutdown pandemic environment? The theoretical framework used in this study was the Job-Demands Resources theory. This study was conducted from a pragmatic worldview and borrowed elements of phenomenology, specifically the Reflective Lifeworld Approach. Participants were veteran teachers who quit teaching in the years following the pandemic, and they completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES) before participating in a semi-structured interview. The results showed the factors that contributed to burnout in these teachers were lack of coherence, lack of student accountability, unsustainable workloads, and erosion of professionalism. The number of job demands on teachers increased and the number of resources either stayed the same or decreased, causing excess strain. The pandemic exacerbated underlying issues already present within the profession, and teachers no longer feel that society treats them as professionals. This study was an exploration of burnout in this current era and calls for administrators and policymakers to make changes to the field to reduce burnout and increase teacher retention.

“I JUST COULDN’T DO IT ANYMORE”: A STUDY OF POST-PANDEMIC TEACHER BURNOUT

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries all around the world are experiencing teacher shortages (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2022a). While the conversation around teaching shortages is nothing new, quarantines and other stressors created by the pandemic have left teachers burnt out and are causing many to rethink their career choices (Darling-Hammond, 2022). Public school teachers have consistently experienced some of the highest burnout rates compared to other professions, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this problem. While researchers have conducted many studies on teacher burnout over the last few decades, the unprecedented nature of the global pandemic leaves many questions as to the impact that it has had on teacher burnout and sustainability in the field of education.

Statement of the Problem

In 2016, UNESCO (2022a) estimated that around 69 million teachers were needed worldwide to meet the goal of having basic, universal education by 2030. As of 2022, UNESCO (2022b) do not expect to meet that goal, as teacher shortages persist, and in some countries, they are increasing. In the United States, estimates may understate the severity of the problem, as the numbers that states are reporting represent the number of highly qualified teachers needed to meet the demand (García & Weiss, 2019). However, not all current teachers are highly qualified, as they do not meet the experience, certification, or education requirements. In efforts to combat the increasing shortage, many states are resorting to hiring more of these unqualified teachers (Sutcher et al., 2019). This diminishes student achievement, as the difference in achievement

between a student taught by an unqualified and a highly qualified teacher can equate to as much as a full grade level of achievement in one school year (Hanushek, 1992). This also has a disproportionate impact on high-poverty and high-minority schools, as these schools often have the largest amount of teacher turnover each year (Sutcher et al., 2019). According to data collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), there were 567,000 fewer educators in the workforce in 2022 than there were before the pandemic, with the ratio of hires to job openings decreasing each year to its lowest point of 0.55. This means that even with the return to classrooms following the pandemic, the shortage continues to increase, and it is not getting better. Clearly, the teacher shortage is one of the greatest challenges facing education today. There is an urgent need to understand more about the dynamics leading to this shortage.

Factors Contributing to Teacher Shortages

An analysis of teacher shortages in the United States conducted by Sutcher et al. (2019) found that the teacher shortage is a multi-pronged issue. First, the number of highly qualified teachers has declined over the last decade, as enrollments in teacher preparation programs have declined. The reason for this decline in enrollment could be due to the high cost of attending these programs, as applicants may not be willing to spend the money and possibly go into debt to enter a field where they will earn less than in others that require similar education levels. Second, following the recession of 2008, districts have attempted to return to prerecession class sizes and class offerings, increasing the demand for teachers. Third, there has been an increase in student enrollment. This means that to decrease pupil-teacher ratios, schools must hire even more teachers to fill positions. Finally, teacher attrition, the number of teachers that leave in a school year, has increased.

Of these four sources, teacher attrition has the greatest impact on the shortage, representing at least two-thirds of demand each year (Sutcher et al., 2019). Teacher attrition has been increasing since the early 2000s (Ingersoll et al., 2014), to the point where more teachers are now leaving the profession than those that remain in the classroom until retirement (Diliberti et al., 2021). Attrition rates in the United States are twice as high as in other countries, with 90% of teachers hired to replace those who left, the majority of whom left before retirement (Darling-Hammond, 2022). This high rate of attrition combined with the decreasing supply of qualified teachers, has caused the teaching profession to become increasingly unstable (Ingersoll et al., 2014). While job openings in public education started to outpace hires before the pandemic, the gap has only widened since March 2020, with approximately 100,000 more openings than hires in June 2022, meaning that attrition is rising (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). There are not only huge financial costs to replacing teachers each year (Sutcher et al., 2019), but also professional costs, as there are concerns that teaching knowledge will dissipate as experienced teachers leave (Ingersoll, 2001).

Reasons for Teacher Attrition

Most teachers do not stay until retirement age, and their reasons for leaving are varied. In their analyses of the Schools and Staffing Survey data from 2013, Sutcher et al. (2019) found that 55% of teachers who left reported dissatisfaction with the profession as their most important reason for leaving. Reasons for this dissatisfaction included policy issues, such as testing and accountability, administrative issues, such as lack of input in school decisions, and issues with teaching conditions, such as large class sizes and student behavior. Results from this survey were in line with those of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD, 2020) Teaching and Learning International Survey in 2018, where they found a negative

association between turnover intentions and satisfaction with working conditions. These working conditions have changed over the last 20 years, and the responsibilities of teachers have greatly expanded. In the current sociopolitical environment, the public expects teachers to teach students not only the curriculum but also how to develop a sense of belonging and responsibility in the world (UNESCO, 2022a). The accountability movement resulted in the introduction of more data tracking and documentation, as well as the standardization of curricula, giving teachers less autonomy in their classrooms, and more administrative tasks to attend to (Scott et al., 2001). For many teachers, job satisfaction comes from actively teaching their students, but this increase in workload has reduced the pleasures of the job and has left teachers feeling stressed.

In their report on stress and attrition, Diliberti et al. (2021) found that teachers cited stress as the most common reason for leaving the profession early. While teaching is a highly stressful career (Herman et al., 2018), the number of stressors has continued to grow over time. Acute stress is strongly and positively associated with job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions, and the OECD (2020) reported that 18% of teachers experienced a lot of stress at work, with 49% of teachers saying that administrative work was a major source of that stress. These results suggest that more hours of administrative work, as opposed to hours actively teaching, can result in high levels of stress for teachers. The growing demands on teachers combined with the lack of resources leads many teachers to burn out, forcing some to choose their health over the profession they love. Enter the pandemic.

Burnout and the Pandemic

In a study of burnout conducted during the early stages of the pandemic, 80% of teachers reported burnout as a moderate or major concern (Diliberti & Kaufman, 2020). In addition, about 25% of respondents said they were likely to leave the profession before the end of the 2020-2021

school year, with the majority stating that they likely would not have left before the pandemic. Of those who decided to leave the profession that school year, about half left because of the pandemic (Diliberti et al., 2021). This trend continued into the following school year, as a survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA) in January 2022, found that 66% of teachers reported feeling burnt out, and 55% were thinking of leaving the profession earlier than they had originally intended (Walker, 2022). A Gallup Panel Workforce Study conducted in February 2022, showed similar results, with 44% of teachers saying they always or very often felt burnt out at work (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). Even as recently as July 2022, the American Federation of Teachers (2022) conducted a survey of their members, with 79% showing dissatisfaction with their jobs and 40% claiming they may leave in the next 2 years. Although researchers have conducted studies on teacher burnout during the pandemic, most have focused on burnout during the shutdown, when teaching was remote (Chan et al., 2021; Hilger et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021; Sokal et al., 2020; Soncini et al., 2021; Weißenfels et al., 2022). Although some of the stressors cited in these studies persist, such as the lack of training on new technology introduced during the shutdown (UNESCO, 2022a), teachers are back in their classrooms. There is a gap in the research as to what is causing burnout levels to remain elevated in this post-shutdown pandemic environment.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that I used in this study is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, and it consists of eight propositions.

Proposition 1

All job characteristics can be classified into one of two categories: job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are “physical, social, or organizational aspects

of the job that require sustained or mental effort and therefore are associated with certain physiological and psychological costs" (Demerouti et al., 2001, pp. 501). Job demands for teachers can include work overload, accountability pressures and testing, administrative paperwork, and so forth. Job resources are "aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development" (Demerouti et al., 2001, pp. 501). Resources for teachers can include autonomy, participation in decision-making, extra planning time, and so forth.

Proposition 2

Job demands and resources contribute to two different processes: motivation and strain (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands can lead to overtaxing and eventually exhaustion, and a lack of resources can lead to disengagement, which is when one withdraws from their job and develops a negative attitude toward the work. When demands are high and resources are low this leads to strain, or additional exertion needed to manage demands while attempting to maintain job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). High levels of strain can eventually lead to burnout if the employee cannot cope with the demands. Whereas job demands and a lack of resources contribute to burnout, only available resources contribute to engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Engagement is *"*the mental state where employees feel full with physical energy (vigor), are enthusiastic about the content of their work and the things they do (dedication) and are so immersed in their work activities that time seems to fly (absorption)" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017, p. 274). The strain process and the motivational process are independent of one another, and this study will focus on the strain process that leads to the development of burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Although these processes are conceptually

independent, burnout is negatively related to engagement (Bakker et al., 2004; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Proposition 3

Job resources can have a buffering effect on strain caused by high job demands (Bakker et al., 2005). Disengagement can be a coping strategy for dealing with high demands (Demerouti et al., 2001), but increasing available resources can also help employees cope with the demands (Bakker et al., 2010). Demands and burnout are positively related, and resources and burnout are negatively related (Crawford et al., 2010). Therefore, high demands and low resources will produce the highest levels of burnout (Bakker et al., 2005). If it is not possible to reduce demands, then increasing the number of resources can alleviate strain and reduce burnout symptoms (Crawford et al., 2010). Increasing resources can also lead to increased motivation, having the dual effect of preventing burnout and increasing engagement (Schaufeli, 2017).

Remaining Propositions

The remaining propositions paint a clearer picture of the relationship between the strain and motivational processes, so I will briefly discuss those here, although they are not vital to this study for understanding the development of burnout in relation to jobs and resources. Proposition 4 states that job resources can influence motivation, even when job demands are high (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This means that high job demands can have a motivating factor, but only when there are sufficient resources to meet those demands (Bakker et al., 2010). Proposition 5 states that personal resources, such as self-efficacy and optimism, can have a positive effect on motivation and a buffering effect on strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). While this buffering effect could help reduce the instances of burnout, it does not have practical implications for policymakers, since these personal resources are specific to individuals. Proposition 6 states that

motivation has a positive effect on job performance and strain has a negative effect on job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Chapter 2 includes an in-depth review of the impact of teacher burnout on the school and the students.

The first six propositions took a top-down approach, assuming that the organization is responsible for setting the job demands and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Propositions 7 and 8 refer to positive feedback loops known as job crafting and self-undermining, where the employee's behavior takes an active role in influencing strain and motivation. Job crafting occurs when employees increase their job resources and decrease job demands to optimize their work environment. Employees motivated by their jobs will engage in job crafting, which leads to more resources and even more motivation. Self-undermining is the reverse of job crafting, where employees who are under strain will perceive and create more demands for themselves, which can create even more strain.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what factors in the post-shutdown pandemic environment are contributing to burnout in veteran teachers (teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience), and why some of these teachers subsequently decided to leave the profession. Teacher attrition as a phenomenon is not the focus of this study, however, understanding the connection between a teacher's experienced burnout and subsequent attrition is important to school leaders and policymakers.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of veteran teachers experiencing burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?

2. What factors contributed to veteran teachers' experience of burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?
3. What was the deciding factor that drove veteran teachers to leave the profession earlier than they had intended?

Significance of the Study

As stated earlier, there is a gap in research on teacher burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment. It is important to understand the impact that the pandemic has had on teachers, as they continue to burn out and leave the profession at higher rates than those seen pre-pandemic. In response to teacher shortages, policymakers will often focus their efforts on getting more teachers into the profession, through strategies such as boosting teacher preparation programs, making it easier to transition to teaching from other careers, and reducing barriers to licensure (Sutcher et al., 2019). While these recruitment strategies address the shortage in the short term, the problem will continue if attrition rates remain as high as they are. Recruitment of new teachers is important, but policymakers and leaders must make efforts to keep effective teachers in the field. Often, little attention is paid to teachers once they have joined the profession (Sutcher et al., 2019). Ingersoll and Smith (2003) used the following metaphor to illustrate the issue of focusing efforts solely on recruitment:

> In short, recruiting more teachers will not solve the teacher crisis if 40-50 percent of these teachers leave in a few short years. The image that comes to mind is that of a bucket rapidly losing water because of holes in the bottom. Pouring more water into the bucket will not do any good if we do not patch the holes first. (p. 33)

The findings of this study will help policymakers and school leaders understand why teachers are burning out and leaving the profession at such high rates following the pandemic.

This will allow them to create policies that remove sources of burnout and provide support to teachers. Reducing attrition would have the greatest effect on eliminating the teacher shortage, and it would allow money that districts are currently spending on hiring new teachers each year to go toward mentoring and supporting teacher development (Sutcher et al., 2019). Focusing strategies on retaining teachers will also address issues caused by high attrition rates, such as instability in curricula and school culture, as well as the achievement and opportunity gaps that exist between advantaged and disadvantaged communities (Darling-Hammond, 2022). Fixing the issues that cause teachers to burn out and leave will also make the field more attractive to new teachers and will help them be more likely to stay until retirement (OECD, 2020).

Clearly, the interventions that policymakers and school/district leaders are currently putting into place are not working, as attrition worsens following the pandemic, and burnout remains a major concern for teachers. Education is in dire need of solutions now, because if we continue to wait to solve these issues, soon there will not be enough qualified teachers to keep schools functioning and the overall quality of education in America will suffer.

Definition of Terms

I used the following terms frequently throughout my study:

- **attrition:** teachers leaving the profession
- **burnout:** "a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 399)
- **depersonalization:** "unfeeling and impersonal response toward students" (Maslach et al., 2018, p. 31)
- **emotional exhaustion:** "feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted from one's work" (Maslach et al., 2018, p. 16)

- **job demands:** “physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained or mental effort and therefore are associated with certain physiological and psychological costs” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501)
- **job resources:** “aspects of the job that may do any of the following: (a) be functional in achieving work goals; (b) reduce job demands at the associated costs; (c) stimulate personal growth and development” (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 501)
- **novice teacher:** teachers with fewer than 5 years of teaching experience
- **personal accomplishment:** “feelings of competence and successful achievement in one’s work with students” (Maslach et al., 2018, p. 31)
- **strain:** the additional exertion required to meet job demands while maintaining job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)
- **teacher turnover:** teachers leaving a school for any reason
- **veteran teacher:** teachers with more than 10 years of teaching experience

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

As discussed in Chapter 1, teacher burnout is a major issue in the United States, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated it. This chapter will provide a review of the literature to better understand the phenomenon of teacher burnout. I will begin by discussing a brief history of the research on burnout that led to the development of a burnout instrument, as well as how research has evolved over the past 40 years. I will then narrow the discussion to teacher burnout, highlighting the major factors that have contributed to burnout in teachers, as well as its consequences. I will discuss the research on burnout in novice teachers and veteran teachers, highlighting the differences. Finally, I will discuss the research on teacher burnout during the pandemic.

Background on Burnout

In this section, I will discuss the progression of research on burnout, highlighting major contributions and theories. I will identify the three components of burnout, discuss research on the relationship between the components, and describe the development of the first standardized instrument to measure burnout. Finally, I will explain how researchers developed the Job Demands-Resources Theory as a model of burnout and engagement.

Early Burnout Research

The first phase of burnout research began in the 1970s and focused on defining and explaining the phenomenon of burnout. Freudenberger (1975) observed emotional depletion and loss of motivation in workers at an alternative healthcare clinic and borrowed the term burnout, which referred to the effects of chronic drug use, to describe the phenomenon. Initially studying

emotions in the workplace, Maslach (1976) observed the burnout phenomenon in a broad range of human resources professions, in which providers had sustained interactions with their recipients. As a result, research on burnout in the workplace began with caregiving and service occupations. Research from the clinical perspective focused on identifying the symptoms of burnout and the resulting negative health effects, while research from the social-psychological perspective focused on the relationships between the providers and recipients, and their situational context (Maslach et al., 2001). This marked a shift towards viewing stress as a response to transactions in the workplace.

Components of Burnout Syndrome and the Maslach Burnout Inventory

In the 1980s, research became more quantitative, and researchers shifted focus to assessing burnout. In their seminal work, Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined burnout as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind" (pp. 99). They identified three components of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Maslach et al. (2018) defined emotional exhaustion as "feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted from one's work" (p. 16). Although exhaustion is the most widely observed aspect of burnout and is necessary, it is not sufficient alone (Maslach et al., 2001). Depersonalization refers to the development of cynical attitudes towards recipients and results in distancing oneself from them. Although emotional exhaustion represents the basic stress response of individuals, depersonalization represents an interpersonal dimension (Maslach et al., 2018). Reduced personal accomplishment refers to reduced feelings of competence and achievement from one's work (Maslach et al., 2001).

Maslach and Jackson (1981) published the first version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) in 1981 and initially intended for its use in human resources occupations. They developed the MBI with the perspective that burnout is a psychological response to daily experiences in the work setting. Since its publication, the items have remained the same, and researchers and practitioners have recognized the instrument as the leading measure of burnout in many countries. They released a second edition of the MBI Manual in 1986 and included a new survey designed for educators called the MBI Educator Survey (MBI-ES), which replaced instances of the word "recipient" with the word "students" (Maslach et al., 2018).

In the 1990s, researchers recognized that burnout occurred in occupations outside of human services and education, and Maslach et al. (1996) published a general survey (MBI-GS) for use in other fields. The MBI-GS represented the largest deviation from the original survey, as they removed and reworded multiple questions for application to a broader array of professions. Regardless of the version administered, there is no cutoff score for diagnosing burnout in an individual, as burnout is a continuous variable.

Relationships Between Components

Having a standardized measure of burnout allowed researchers in the 1990s and early 2000s to investigate potential influences and consequences of burnout, as well as the relationship that exists between the components (Maslach et al., 2001). Researchers found a high, positive correlation between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Maslach, 2003), although emotional exhaustion was a stronger factor than depersonalization, and more reliable as an indicator of burnout (Kalliath et al., 2000; Maslach et al., 2018). Researchers showed that personal accomplishment was negatively associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). There were also efforts to determine a sequential

link between the three components. Researchers established a sequential link between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, providing evidence that depersonalization is a coping mechanism for individuals to deal with sustained emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001; Sonnentag, 2005). Although evidence showed that high emotional exhaustion was a primary determinant of depersonalization (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993), the link to reduced personal accomplishment was less clear (Maslach et al., 2001).

Although some claimed that a decrease in personal accomplishment develops concurrently with increased depersonalization (Alarcon, 2011), other researchers claimed that reduced personal accomplishment is a function of exhaustion, depersonalization, or both (Byrne, 1994). Still, others claimed that reduced personal accomplishment is a possible consequence of burnout that can develop independently, and not a component of it (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Lee & Ashforth, 1996), which led to the development of an alternative burnout instrument. Critics of the MBI argued that personal efficacy is an element of engagement, and therefore should not be on a burnout instrument (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Critics also argued that the MBI only includes the emotional aspect of exhaustion and should include cognitive and physical aspects as well (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). Demerouti et al. (2001) developed the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory to address these concerns. The Inventory removes the personal efficacy component and includes two scales, which are exhaustion and disengagement. Disengagement refers to withdrawing from one's job and developing a negative attitude toward the work, which can include the people or the job in general. Although these are valid critiques of the MBI, the instrument remains the leading measure of burnout, and most of the research on burnout in education uses the MBI-ES. Therefore, I used the MBI-ES for my study, as it allowed me to better situate my research into the larger body of research on teacher burnout.

Models of Burnout

In addition to researching how the components of burnout were related to each other, researchers attempted to explain the causes of burnout. Multiple theories arose to explain burnout; however, researchers cite two theories the most in the literature. Maslach and Leiter (1997) developed a theory in which burnout develops from chronic strain due to a mismatch between the demands of the job and the personality of the worker. These mismatches include work overload, lack of control, lack of reward, lack of community, lack of fairness, and value conflict. Work overload refers to having too many job demands in a short period with too few resources. Lack of control occurs when leaders deny workers the opportunity to make choices and participate in decision-making. Lack of reward occurs when leaders fail to recognize workers for their contributions, leaving workers feeling devalued. Lack of community refers to the isolation that workers feel in the workplace when there is physical separation or when they are too busy to get together. Fairness means that workers feel respect, and their employers confirm their self-worth. Finally, value conflict arises when employers expect their workers to do something they feel is unethical or does not align with their personal beliefs. Leiter and Maslach (1999) developed the Areas of Worklife Survey to assess workplace context, and it is a companion piece to the MBI.

Hobfoll (1989) published an alternate theory to explain job-related stress, known as the Conservation of Resources theory. According to the theory, people seek to obtain, build, and protect job resources, such as social support and emotional stability, and job demands will threaten those resources, resulting in strain. Demerouti et al. (2001) adapted this theory to explain burnout, stating that high job demands and low job resources for extended periods can lead to burnout. In addition to explaining the development of burnout, JDR theory also showed

that resources, such as job control and professional development, lead to job engagement. Research supported this theory, showing that job demands such as workload and time pressure were significantly related to burnout, especially the emotional exhaustion dimension (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Demerouti & Bakker, 2008; Hakanen et al., 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Research also showed that while high demands and low resources led to burnout, only high resources contributed to work engagement (Schaufeli, 2017), which supports the claim that workers may be more sensitive to excessive demands than resources provided (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). For a more in-depth explanation of the JDR theory, refer to Chapter 1. For this study, I used the JDR theory as a conceptual framework because I wanted to investigate what role, if any, resources played in the development of teachers' burnout.

Teacher Burnout

While teaching can be a rewarding profession, it can also be very stressful (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Burnout is likely to develop the longer people work in demanding environments, and as teaching is very demanding, burnout levels are higher in teachers than in other professions (Hakanen et al., 2006; McCormick & Barnett, 2011). In this section, I will discuss the research on teacher stress and job satisfaction, the job demands and resources of teachers, and the influence that these have on burnout.

Job Satisfaction and Stress

There are many reasons that teachers enter the teaching profession. In one study, researchers found that teachers included working with others, professional challenge and growth, professional efficacy, and making a difference as sources of satisfaction (Scott et al., 2001). In another study, researchers identified four main sources of teacher job satisfaction, including cooperation and teamwork, autonomy, variation and unpredictability, and working with children

(Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). They also determined that positive relations with administration and colleagues were positively related to teacher wellbeing. Although these aspects were positively related to job satisfaction, a lack of these satisfiers negatively affected job satisfaction, along with erosion of professionalism, increased paperwork, and lack of respect and pay (Scott et al., 2001). Prolonged stress, which is often a consequence of high job demands (Betoret, 2009), negatively affects job satisfaction (Ferguson et al., 2012).

Teaching Demands

Teachers must face numerous job demands, including low student motivation, discipline problems, time pressure, value conflicts, role ambiguity, conflicts with colleagues, and lack of administrative support (Antoniou et al., 2006; Ferguson et al., 2012; Hakanen et al., 2006; Kokkinos, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Multiple researchers showed that time pressure, a combination of work overload and stressful workdays with little time for rest, and student misbehavior were major stressors for teachers and significant predictors of depression and burnout (Boyle et al., 1995; Byrne, 1994; Ferguson et al., 2012; Kokkinos, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Time pressure is strongly related to emotional exhaustion (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017); a strong predictor of low well-being (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018); and is associated with lower levels of job satisfaction and motivation to leave the profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). There are mixed findings in the literature as to which variable is the stronger predictor of burnout: time pressure (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018) or student misbehavior (McCormick & Barnett, 2011).

The workload of teachers has also been increasing over time, and many teachers feel as though the demands placed on teachers have reached a level that is unsustainable (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015; Timms et al., 2007). In addition to an increase in teaching-related workload,

which includes tasks such as preparing for lessons and actively teaching, research shows there has been an increase in non-teaching related workload, which includes meetings, testing, and correcting social problems (Maslach et al., 2018; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). Teachers have become inundated with external work including increased testing and accountability measures (Glazer, 2018; Tye & O'Brien, 2002); pressure from parents and politicians (Maslach et al., 2018); and ongoing school reforms (Räsänen et al., 2020), which teachers regard as distracting from their ability to teach (Scott et al., 2001). These pressures are a bigger predictor of burnout than teaching-related work (Lawrence et al., 2019).

Resources for Teachers

Although there is evidence that teacher well-being is more strongly related to job demands than resources, high job demands alone do not always result in teacher burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Demands can have a motivational effect when job resources are high (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), as job resources can mediate the effects of job demands on burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). Additionally, while high demands and low resources negatively influence teacher well-being, only job resources are associated with engagement (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). This means that low resources have a double effect of leading to increased strain and lower motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Examples of teacher resources found in the literature that have a negative effect on burnout and a positive effect on engagement include positive and supportive social relations, more supportive principals, and value consonance (Klusmann et al., 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Other teacher resources previously studied include school climate, job control, professional development, and perception of a collective school culture (Hakanen et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Teacher

burnout is most likely to occur when the job demands overcome resources and the teacher's ability to cope with the strain (Maslach et al., 2001).

Consequences of Teacher Burnout

Burnout is a very personal phenomenon, and it can have serious and lasting effects. In this section, I will discuss the consequences of teacher burnout for the teachers themselves, their students, and the school.

For Teachers

As research on burnout began in the field of psychology, investigators have frequently reported the effects of burnout on mental health. Burnout has been associated with negative mental health effects including anxiety, depression, irritability, low self-esteem, negative affect, and helplessness (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Kahill, 1988; Maslach et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). Researchers have also shown a positive relationship between burnout and somatic symptoms such as fatigue, gastrointestinal issues, headaches, and insomnia (Kahill, 1988). In addition to mental and somatic symptoms, teachers experiencing burnout can also develop negative behaviors with which to cope, including alcohol and drug abuse, which have a negative impact on their personal relationships (Lowenstein, 1991). Maslach et al. (2018) called for investigators to conduct more research on the short- and long-term effects of burnout on health.

While the personal consequences of teacher burnout need additional exploration, researchers have widely investigated the professional consequences of burnout. To cope with emotional exhaustion, teachers show various forms of job withdrawal, including absenteeism, lower productivity, less investment in the job, and attrition (Farber, 1991; Maslach et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Those who stay in the profession show lower productivity and

develop negative attitudes towards students and the profession (Byrne, 1994). Teachers can feel inconsequential as if the tasks are endless and the rewards are not worth the effort (Farber, 1991). As a result, teachers can experience reduced accomplishment and decreased job satisfaction, which have negative effects on their students, their peers, and the school (Maslach et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

For Students

Teacher stress and burnout not only impact teacher well-being but also affect students in their classrooms. As teachers burn out and withdraw, involvement in classroom activities declines (Maslach & Leiter, 1999). This will likely impair teacher-student interactions and the classroom climate (Guin, 2004), and in response, students are likely to change their perceptions and feelings towards the teacher, and their behavior in the classroom (Maslach & Leiter, 1999). Research has shown a negative relationship between the depersonalization component of burnout and student motivation (Shen et al., 2015), which may lead to diminished learning and engagement (Herman et al., 2018; Maslach & Leiter, 1999). Students' sense of efficacy often declines, which can lead to decreased academic achievement (Herman et al., 2018; Maslach & Leiter, 1999). This can increase disruptive behaviors from the students, which makes it more likely that the teacher will show turnover intentions (Herman et al., 2018).

Turnover Intention and Attrition

Teacher burnout and turnover are global concerns (Räsänen et al., 2020), and while burnout does not always lead to turnover, there is plenty of research showing a relationship between the two. In this section I will discuss research on burnout and the intention to quit, the

relationship between turnover intention and attrition, reasons that teachers cite for attrition, and the consequences that burnout and attrition can have for the school.

Turnover Intentions. Teachers who associate their development of exhaustion with their work environment are more likely to express the intention to move to another school or leave the profession altogether (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Turnover intent is one of the strongest predictors of actual turnover (Griffeth et al., 2000), and research shows that burnout is a significant, positive predictor of turnover intentions, as teachers may entertain persistent turnover intentions as a coping mechanism for work-related stress (Billingsley, 2004; Goddard & Goddard, 2006; Leung & Lee, 2006; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Räsänen et al., 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Weisberg & Sagie, 1999). Intentions to quit may develop gradually as demands increase with insufficient resources and can be cumulative, increasing over time and being persistent (Räsänen et al., 2020; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Burnout also negatively correlates with job satisfaction, which is a predictor of turnover intentions (Alarcon, 2011; Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Although turnover intentions do not always lead to turnover, research has shown that burnout is related to attrition and early retirement (Leung & Lee, 2006). Studies are less clear as to which components of burnout are related to turnover. Some studies showed that only the emotional exhaustion component was significantly related to the intention to leave and the dominant determinant in turnover (Leung & Lee, 2006; Weisberg & Sagie, 1999). Others claimed that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were both strongly associated with turnover intentions (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Still others showed evidence that all three dimensions of burnout were meaningfully associated with turnover intentions (Goddard & Goddard, 2006; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Räsänen et al., 2022).

Reasons Teachers Leave. Regardless of the mechanism, the risk of teacher attrition from burnout may be increasing over time (Madigan & Kim, 2021), and researchers and leaders need to understand what is pushing teachers over the edge. Earlier in Chapter 2, I discussed research on aspects of the profession that are associated with job dissatisfaction for teachers. As low job satisfaction is associated with higher turnover, it should come as no surprise that teachers cite the same reasons for job dissatisfaction as the reasons they quit. Research and surveys have shown that factors such as a lack of administrative support, student discipline issues, a lack of input in decision-making, time pressure, accountability, low pay, insufficient time for planning and collaboration, and frustration with the curriculum, were all reasons teachers cited for leaving the profession (Billingsley, 2004; Glazer, 2018; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll et al., 2014; Ladd, 2011; Leung & Lee, 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Sutcher et al., 2016; Tye & O'Brien, 2002). Multiple studies showed that school leadership played the biggest role in preventing attrition when compared to other factors (Ladd, 2011; Leung & Lee, 2006). Although there is abundant research investigating the relationship between burnout, job satisfaction, turnover intention, and attrition, I found little research investigating which job demands or lack of resources specifically led burnt-out teachers to decide to leave. In my study, I further investigated the job demands that lead to burnout and subsequent attrition.

Consequences for the School. Graham (1999) pointed out that there are negative impacts on schools when a teacher burns out, whether the teacher decides to leave the school or stay.

> One important distinction that we need to keep in mind…is the one between "burnout," which is a state of mind, and "attrition," which is an act. Burnout may cause attrition or attrition may be caused by any one of a number of other factors. More seriously,

> however, burnout may *not* cause attrition, and for the children who endure a teacher suffering acute burnout and for the colleagues who endure a teacher in such as state, the educational experience is sufficiently damaged. (p. 286)

For those who decide to stay, burnout can lead to lower work effort and lower quality performance (Ladd, 2011). This can have negative effects on collegiality and relational trust among the faculty, since other teachers might need to take on more responsibility for planning (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Burnout can also spread, since stayers can cause conflict and disrupt job tasks, leading their colleagues to experience symptoms of burnout themselves (Maslach et al., 2001). This loss of engagement by the burnt-out teacher can lead other teachers to leave the school or the profession as well (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Additionally, experiencing burnout and having turnover intentions can damage quality instruction, student-teacher relationships, and relationships with parents (Räsänen et al., 2022).

For those who leave, turnover creates other issues for schools. Studies showed that turnover had a significant negative impact on student achievement in math and reading (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). High turnover rates can also negatively affect student achievement in other teachers' classrooms (Ronfeldt et al., 2013), as other teachers may have to carry more of the instructional burden (Guin, 2004). Even when teachers leave the school to go to another school or district, the school must fill the vacancy, which has fiscal and academic costs (Sutcher et al., 2016). As schools and districts struggle to fill gaps, classrooms become overcrowded, teachers become overworked, and the quality of teaching suffers (UNESCO, 2022b). Consistent turnover in schools can disrupt and prevent the development of a coherent education program, which diminishes teacher effectiveness and quality and negatively affects student achievement (Sorenson & Ladd, 2020). This can negatively affect the school climate

making it less likely for teachers to develop trust and collaboration, and results in less unified instructional programs, as schools must restart their instructional focus each year (Guin, 2004).

Burnout and Teaching Experience

Maslach et al. (1981) developed the MBI from the perspective that burnout is a psychological response to one's daily work experience (Maslach et al., 1981). As each person's response to their work is subjective, not everyone will experience burnout in the same way. Researchers have conducted multiple studies to determine what personal characteristics influence the development of burnout, and one of these characteristics is tenure, or the amount of work experience that one has. In the United States, novice teachers have the highest rate of turnover, with as high as 50% leaving within their first 5 years (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Studies have shown an association between burnout and serious intention to leave the profession (Goddard & Goddard, 2006), and a relationship between job dissatisfaction and attrition in beginning teachers (Harmsen et al., 2018). Research has also shown that how leaders apply workloads and how beginning teachers develop resources in the first few years can be critical in preventing them from leaving the profession early (Goddard & Goddard, 2006). As teachers gain more experience and specific capital, or job-specific knowledge, they are less likely to leave the field (Borman & Dowling, 2008).

In addition to new teachers, those at the end of their careers also have high rates of attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008), with most teachers using early exit schemes and retiring early (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2014). Teachers cited dissatisfaction with nonteaching related workload, financial factors, and feelings of emotional exhaustion as reasons they decide to retire early (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2014). Although it is clear that teachers are more likely to leave the profession at the beginning and end of their careers, there are mixed findings

on the relationship between burnout and teaching tenure. Some studies showed that burnout was directly related to time teaching and that teachers with more experience were more likely to burn out than those with less experience (Dias et al., 2021; Graham, 1999). Other studies showed evidence that age and tenure protected against burnout (Antoniou et al., 2006), with years of teaching being negatively associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and positively associated with personal accomplishment (Nápoles et al., 2022; Yorulmaz & Altinkurt, 2018). Regardless of whether tenure and burnout are associated, teachers with more experience are more likely to stay in the profession as they have invested more in their careers and see the loss of pay and benefits as an incentive to stay (Tye & O'Brien, 2002). This study investigated sources of burnout for veteran teachers and their decisions to leave the profession as a result.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the education system, and it is unclear how long the effects will continue to show. Most of the research about burnout during the pandemic investigated burnout during the shutdown, while people isolated in their homes. In this section, I will discuss research on burnout during the pandemic, looking at the demands and resources during this time, and the impacts on veteran teachers.

Demands of Virtual Teaching

Research shows evidence of a variety of demands that increased stress levels for teachers during the pandemic. When schools shut down, school districts expected teachers to switch to teaching online in a short period using new technology with which they were unfamiliar (Pressley, 2021; Răducu & Stănculescu, 2022b). This uncertainty and ambiguity left teachers feeling emotionally exhausted in the first few months of the pandemic (Chan et al., 2021).

Teachers faced new job requirements with minimal training, including learning new virtual pedagogy, managing student behavior in digital classrooms, and troubleshooting technology issues for students, all of which increased their already full workloads (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Diliberti et al., 2021; Pressley, 2021). Teachers had to work longer hours, blurring the line between work life and home life, which could have exacerbated previous family-work conflicts (Diliberti et al., 2021; Răducu & Stănculescu, 2022b). Teachers became the first resource for parents navigating technology at home (Pressley, 2021), and they had to support students' social and emotional needs during the shutdown. Other job demands identified as contributing negatively to teacher wellbeing during remote learning included concern for the wellbeing of others, health struggles, having multiple roles, and negative perceptions of the profession (Kim et al., 2022).

Resources and Coping

While the job demands on teachers increased significantly during the shutdown, job resources did not always increase in response. One study found that a lack of resources played a bigger role in the development of burnout than workload (Weißenfels et al., 2022). Another found that limited resources, a lack of administrative support, and a lack of preparedness to build relationships with students increased the risk of developing burnout during the shutdown (Răducu & Stanescu, 2022a). To help teachers learn the new technology, districts flooded teachers with resources and training on how to teach remotely, which teachers saw as a demand, as they had little time to implement the new training (Babb et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2020). However, when districts reduced demands on teachers and provided time for them to implement strategies with which they were already familiar, the teachers were then able to add these resources later and see them as supports, once they became accustomed to teaching virtually

(Sokal et al., 2020). Studies showed that three resources contributed positively to teachers' resilience during this period, including social support, work autonomy, and coping strategies (Kim et al., 2022). Teachers' resilience also significantly correlated with their attitudes towards change, their self-efficacy, and their attitudes towards technology (Sokal et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers who practiced group planning and perceived greater collegial support were able to cope better and experienced greater accomplishment (Babb et al., 2022; Sokal et al., 2020).

Effects on Veteran Teachers

As the pandemic occurred within the last three years, there is little research investigating burnout in veteran teachers during the pandemic. Two studies showed that veteran teachers may have been more likely to experience difficulties with adapting to online instruction and showed lower personal accomplishment when compared to younger teachers, who may have been more confident in using technology (Răducu & Stănculescu, 2022a; Weißenfels et al., 2022). Since many experienced teachers were less familiar with technology, they were likely to suffer more from a decrease in resources (Hilger et al., 2021). Additionally, experienced teachers were more likely to rely on materials and lessons designed for in-person instruction, which did not translate well to online instruction (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021).

Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted findings from research on burnout over the last 40 years, beginning broadly with general burnout, and then narrowing the focus to veteran teacher burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic. While initial research into burnout was exploratory, with researchers seeking to understand the components of the phenomenon, most of the research since has been explanatory, with a focus on finding the variables with which burnout correlates. This

quantitative approach has led to much progress in understanding what factors might influence the development of burnout, and what consequences may be associated with it. However, with the advent of new technology and various policy changes, the educational landscape is always changing, and there may be new job demands influencing teacher burnout. I believe these changes necessitate a return to exploration in the form of qualitative research.

With the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating longstanding teacher shortages, it is important to understand why early retirements and resignations are rising (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). Students around the country have returned to in-person learning, and school districts are no longer operating remotely. This study explored veteran teacher burnout in this post-shutdown pandemic environment, to determine the underlying causes. It fills a gap in the research, as there are few studies published at this point investigating this new period.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In this chapter, I present the research design of this study by addressing the theoretical perspective, sampling procedures, participant characteristics, instruments used for data collection, procedures for data collection and analysis, delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and ethical considerations. This study is situated in the pragmatic paradigm, although it borrows methods from phenomenology. Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data generation. This design made it possible to understand the lived experiences of teachers experiencing burnout and to identify the common themes that emerged from their stories.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of veteran teachers experiencing burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?
2. What factors contributed to veteran teachers' experience of burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?
3. What was the deciding factor that drove veteran teachers to leave the profession earlier than they had intended?

Conceptual Perspective

Although this study borrowed aspects of phenomenology, I conducted it from the pragmatic paradigm, which had major implications for the research design. In this section, I will give a brief description of pragmatism as a worldview, my rationale for choosing

phenomenological methods, and an overview of the specific phenomenological design that I chose.

Pragmatism

A major philosophical debate that continues to exist in academic research is the opposition of objectivity and subjectivity (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000). Researchers who take a positivist stance believe reality exists outside of human beings, and the goal of research is to uncover that objective reality one study at a time through quantitative methods. Conversely, constructivist researchers believe that reality is subjective and created by human beings. Using qualitative methods, these researchers will try to co-construct reality with their participants. Pragmatists, however, believe that the acquisition of knowledge is a continuum. They take the stance that there is an objective reality, but people ground that reality in individual experiences and the environment. They see no issue in asserting that there is a world that exists outside of consciousness and that everyone has their interpretation of the world (Morgan, 2007).

The main goal of pragmatic research is to create knowledge for change and improvement (Goldkuhl, 2012). Pragmatists believe that inquiry exists to solve a problem or answer a practical issue and that the meaning of a concept is the practical consequences of that concept. Therefore, they will use whatever philosophical assumptions, methodology, or instrumentation they believe will answer the research questions and produce results (Goles & Hirschheim, 2000). Researchers can accomplish this using a single method (like this study), but more often they use mixed methods, which incorporate qualitative and quantitative elements (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The most important factor that drives research in the pragmatic paradigm is the research questions.

Phenomenology

Phenomenological studies describe the lived experiences of individuals and the common meaning they share of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Although I was interested in hearing the individual experiences of burnout that teachers had following the pandemic, the focus of this study was to investigate the themes that emerged across their experiences. As stated earlier, the goal of this research was to help policymakers and school leaders understand why teachers are burning out, so understanding the essence of burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment will help them make better decisions on how to mitigate it. I also chose phenomenology because of the openness that exists in the research design. There is no perfect method or approach to phenomenology, as researchers use unique approaches to investigate different phenomena (Vagle, 2018). This allows the researcher to use whatever tools or techniques necessary to explore the essence of the phenomenon, which aligns well with a pragmatic perspective.

Reflective Lifeworld Approach

The phenomenological approach that I drew from in this study is the Reflective Lifeworld approach (Dahlberg et al., 2008). In their approach, Dahlberg et al. (2008) highlighted openness in all aspects of research, allowing the phenomenon itself to determine the methodological considerations. They stress that the researcher should be able to use techniques found in other approaches, which supports the use of a survey as a screening method, which I will discuss in the section on data sources. They also emphasize the importance of situating the research questions within a context which works well with my study, as I chose to situate the phenomenon of teacher burnout within the post-shutdown pandemic environment.

Another key characteristic of this approach is the use of bridling (Dahlberg et al., 2008). Whereas bracketing, a common practice in descriptive phenomenology, seeks to set aside any pre-understandings of the phenomenon at the beginning of the study, bridling is an active process of attending to those pre-understandings throughout the study. Dahlberg et al. (2008) did not believe it is possible to completely set aside pre-understandings, so they called for the researcher to refer to those ideas throughout the study and to be reflexive on how they influence their thinking. The purpose is not to ignore those pre-understandings but to acknowledge them so that the phenomenon has a chance to emerge on its own.

Participants and Sampling

I used criterion sampling to identify the participants for my study. Participants in this study were former public-school teachers who left the profession in the past two years, earlier than they had originally intended, and who attributed their departure to burnout. Focusing on the last two years situated the phenomenon within the context of the post-shutdown pandemic environment. Participants were teachers who taught in elementary or secondary schools. The Reflective Lifeworld approach purposefully does not suggest a specific number of participants to include to maintain openness, stating that the more complex a phenomenon is, the more participants it calls for (Dahlberg et al., 2008). I included 10 participants in my study, which was enough to understand the complexities of the phenomenon. Table 1 includes demographic information for the participants.

To identify participants, I used convenience and snowball sampling. As I was not able to access exit surveys, I asked other teachers to provide me with information on teachers they knew who quit or retired early in the last two years. I reached out to these teachers via email or phone number to ask if they would be interested in participating in my study. For those interested, I sent

them an email with the consent form, and then a follow-up email with a link to the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES). I asked the teachers to take the survey remembering what it was like to be in the classroom in their last year of teaching. The MBI Manual suggests telling participants that the purpose of the survey is to measure job-related attitudes to avoid sensitization to burnout (Maslach et al., 2018). However, as the bulk of data collection came from semi-structured interviews, I informed them of the true purpose of the survey in advance, to build trust. I sent participants who showed symptoms of burnout a follow-up email asking for their participation in a semi-structured interview. I also asked if they knew other teachers that may be interested in my study, as a means of acquiring more participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Years Taught	Level/Subject	Setting
Brenda	33	Middle School Social Studies	Urban
Brittany	12	High School Social Studies	Urban
Heather	12	Elementary Gifted Resource	Rural
Lisa	32	Elementary General	Rural
Maria	15	Middle School Band	Rural
Nadine	30	Elementary Dual Language	Urban
Pattie	10	Middle School English	Urban
Sally	19	Middle School Social Studies	Urban
Suzy	13	Elementary General	Urban
Wendy	10	Middle School Math	Urban

Data Sources

In this study, I used three sources of data: MBI-ES, an interview protocol that I developed, and a bridling journal that I kept throughout data collection and analysis.

MBI-ES

I used the MBI-ES to determine if participants experienced burnout at the time they left. Maslach and Jackson (1981) developed the original MBI in 1981, and it was the first standardized measure of the experience of burnout in the workplace. They originally designed the measure for professionals in human services, such as nurses, police officers, and therapists, where employees have sustained interactions with people. In 1986, teacher burnout was a growing concern, so they developed the educators survey, with instances of the word "recipient" being replaced with the word "students."

The instrument consists of 22 items that measure three constructs: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2018). Table 2 includes the items corresponding to each construct and an example item for each. Each item measures the frequency with which educators experienced feelings related to each construct on a seven-point scale, ranging from zero, meaning they never experienced the feeling, to six, meaning they experienced the feeling daily (Maslach et al., 2018). Once the participants completed the survey, I calculated scores for each construct.

Table 2

Subscales of the MBI-ES

Construct	Items	Example
Emotional Exhaustion	1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 13, 14, 16, 20	I feel emotionally drained at my work.
Depersonalization	5, 10, 11, 15, 22	I don't really care what happens to some students.
Personal Accomplishment	4, 7, 9, 12, 17, 18, 19, 21	I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.

Note. MBI-ES = Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey

It is important to note that those administering the survey cannot add the scores for each subscale together to produce an overall burnout score, as participants may experience any or all symptoms of burnout (Maslach et al., 2018). There is also no cutoff score for the scales diagnosing an individual with burnout syndrome (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005). This allows flexibility for the researcher and acknowledges that individuals experience burnout differently (Maslach et al., 2018). Additionally, higher scores in the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales indicate higher levels of burnout, while higher scores in the personal accomplishment subscale indicate lower levels of burnout. This means that a person experiencing the highest level of burnout would score high on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but low on personal accomplishment. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to add these scores together, as they would cancel each other out, and dilute the scores for each scale. The three scales have shown good internal validity and stability over time (Maslach et al., 2018).

Interview Protocol

The main data source in this study came from interviews with the participants. It is typical for phenomenological interviews from the reflective lifeworld approach to be unstructured and for the interviewer to let the participants talk about what they would like, redirecting them back to the phenomenon when necessary (Dahlberg et al., 2008). However, unstructured interviews can be difficult to conduct and may generate little to no data about the phenomenon, so I opted to create a semi-structured interview protocol (see Table 3). The protocol had six interview questions with each pertaining to a research question. To assess the trustworthiness of the protocol, I conducted a pilot test with a previous colleague who fit the criteria. After conducting the pilot test, I refined the instrument to reword any confusing questions and added any questions that I felt would elicit a clearer understanding of the phenomenon. As these interviews were semi-structured, I asked follow-up and probing questions throughout. I asked the participants to explain or elaborate on answers they gave to the interview questions, and I asked them to provide more information on potential topics of interest. I did not include these questions in the protocol, as I developed them during the interviews, and they were specific to individuals. This helped maintain openness.

Table 3

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Research Question	Interview Question
1. What are the lived experiences of veteran teachers experiencing burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?	1. In your own words, how do you define burnout? 2. Think of a time in the last 2 years when you felt burnt out, and describe the experience in as much detail as possible. 3. Describe in as much detail as possible the impacts that you feel burnout had on your work.
2. What factors are contributing to burnout in veteran teachers in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?	4. What factors do you feel contributed to your experience of burnout?
3. What was the deciding factor that drove veteran teachers to leave the profession earlier than they had intended?	5. How did you make the decision that it was time to leave teaching as a career? 6. What changes to education do you feel could be made that might have influenced your decision to stay or leave?

Bridling Journal

Throughout data collection and analysis, I kept a bridling journal. I made an initial entry before any data collection took place to record any thoughts, feelings, and experiences that I had with the phenomenon. Once data collection began, I made entries after each interview to ground my thinking and acknowledge any ideas that may have prevented the phenomenon from emerging on its own. I made entries in the journal throughout data analysis of the interview transcripts as well.

Data Collection Procedures

I first reached out to potential participants via phone call or email, depending on the contact information that referring teachers provided. I asked them if they would like to

participate in a study on teacher burnout. If they indicated interest, I emailed a consent form to them, along with the link to the survey. Once they completed the survey, I sent a follow-up email asking if they would like to participate in an interview to discuss their results and provide more in-depth information. If they agreed, I asked if they preferred to participate in person or if they would like to schedule a Zoom session to meet virtually. I scheduled the interviews for 1-hour time slots, but because the interviews were semi-structured, they took more or less time, depending on the richness of the answers. Regardless of whether the meeting took place virtually or in person, I recorded the interviews using Zoom, to allow for auto-transcription, with participant consent. Once I finished conducting the interviews, I downloaded and edited the transcriptions to accurately match what participants said in the interviews before data analysis took place.

Data Analysis

I did not run any statistical tests on the results of the MBI-ES, as the number of participants was too low for the tests to have any significance. However, I did look at the scores of each subscale to determine the extent of burnout for the participants. For analyzing the interviews, I followed an approach similar to the one laid out by Vagle (2018). As with all phenomenological analyses, this involved a whole-parts-whole process, where I oscillated between reading the whole text and parts of the text. I emphasized giving participants a voice and allowing the phenomenon to reveal itself, but since I took an interpretive stance, I related participants' experiences to the Job Demands-Resources theory when forming the conclusions.

To help with the analysis of the data, I chose to use NVivo 14. Once I had cleaned up the transcripts, I loaded them into the software. The first step in my analysis included a holistic reading of the entire text. During this step, I read each transcript to become reacquainted with the

text, but I did not take any notes. Next, I did a second reading, where I read and coded each transcript line-by-line, marking lines that had initial meaning. During this step, I recorded thoughts in my bridling journal regarding my holistic understanding of the phenomenon. At this point, I cleaned up my codes by combining items with similar meanings and sorted them based on the research question that they helped answer. I then sorted the codes into patterns of meaning, or themes, to help organize and synthesize the data for my discussion of the findings.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

In this section, I will describe the delimitations that bound my study, the limitations of my study design, and the assumptions I made when planning the study. Because context is important to the reflective lifeworld approach (Dahlberg et al., 2008), multiple delimitations guided my study. I placed most of the delimitations on participant selection, as I wanted to ensure that all participants experienced the phenomenon in a similar context. All participants:

- were veteran teachers
- worked in public schools during the pandemic
- quit teaching within the last two school years, earlier than they had originally intended
- experienced burnout when they decided to leave

Although participants also had the experience of attrition, the focus of the study was on their experience of burnout. I chose participants who left teaching in the last two years to investigate if the pandemic played a role in their decision to leave. I also chose participants who had already quit, as opposed to those claiming the intention to quit, because intention to leave and leaving are not the same thing.

There were five limitations that I identified in the design of my study. First, I did not have a direct way of finding participants, so I relied on other teachers working in the field to help me locate them. This means that I could have had participants referred to me who did not actually experience the phenomenon, so it required more scrutiny and screening in selection. Second, I used a survey to identify participants who had experienced burnout in the past and were no longer experiencing it. I relied on participants' memories of the experience, which could have been inaccurate. Third, asking teachers if they were burnt out when they left may have caused sensitization to burnout, so the results of the MBI-ES may have been inflated. Fourth, all of the participants in my study were female. There could be differences in burnout experiences between men and women, and the male perspective is unintentionally missing from my study. Finally, a limitation of qualitative research is the inability to generalize the findings. I took steps to ensure transferability to other contexts, but the experiences of these participants do not represent the experiences of all teachers.

I had the teachers take the MBI-ES remembering how they felt in the last few months of teaching. I assumed that since burnout has a strong emotional component, participants would be able to remember this feeling. I also assumed that because participants were burnt out when they left, burnout influenced their decision to leave. As with all research, I assumed that my participants would answer all questions openly and honestly.

Trustworthiness of Data

To establish the trustworthiness of the data, I used multiple strategies laid out by Lincoln and Guba (1985). First, I had prolonged engagement with the phenomenon and maintained openness throughout the study using a bridling journal. This prevented me from arriving at conclusions too soon. Second, I clarified my researcher bias by writing a researcher as an

instrument statement. In this section, I explained prior experiences that I had with the phenomenon, as well as any orientation that may have influenced the findings. I also accomplished this by using the bridling journal since I was able to attend to any prior conceptions as they arose. Finally, I used rich, thick descriptions to write a detailed account of the participants and the setting. Although I cannot generalize qualitative findings to a population, writing as detailed an account as possible can help ensure that the results are transferable to other contexts.

Researcher as an Instrument Statement

I have worked in public schools for the last 9 years, and for the first 7, I was a classroom teacher. I worked through the pandemic and left the classroom to pursue a coaching role at the end of the 21-22 school year. Although I did not take a burnout assessment, I am confident that I was burnt out during the pandemic, so I do have personal experience with the phenomenon. Had I not been pursuing my administrative endorsement and already had the intention to leave the classroom, I might have considered leaving the profession because the experience was intensely stressful.

Since I have this deep, personal experience with the phenomenon, I took extra precautions to ensure my experiences and feelings did not drive my interpretation of my participants' experiences. I chose to keep a bridling journal because I have so much personal experience with the phenomenon under study. I recorded my thoughts throughout the study to maintain openness. I also used member checking so that participants could see my interpretations of the data and to ensure that I accurately represented their lived experiences of the phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

In this section, I will discuss ethical considerations that I made to protect my participants from harm. I obtained my Human Subjects Certification through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) at the University of Miami by completing their online compliance training program. I submitted my proposal to the William & Mary Education Institutional Review Committee (EDIRC) for approval using their Protocol and Compliance Management system. The committee approved my proposal upon ensuring that I took appropriate steps to protect participants and that I had a plan for acquiring informed consent.

I sent all participants a consent form through Microsoft Forms that they signed before they could participate in the study. In this form, I provided participants with an overview of the study and informed them that there were no known risks to participating in this study. I did not offer any incentives for participating in this study. Participants could leave the study at any time or have their data excluded from the manuscript if they decided they did not want to continue. I assured participants that I would keep their information confidential, and I asked them to pick their pseudonyms for the study, with most opting for me to pick one for them. After conducting the interviews, I downloaded all the transcripts and videos, stored them on a flash drive, and deleted the original copies from my computer. I kept the flash drive in a locked drawer inside my desk, so it always remained in a secure location. I used member checking to have participants look over their transcripts and the draft report to ensure they felt that I had accurately represented their experiences. Finally, all participants were teachers who left teaching, so I determined that there was little chance of employer retaliation.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this qualitative study, I explored burnout in veteran teachers who left education in the years following the pandemic. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of veteran teachers experiencing burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?
2. What factors contributed to veteran teachers' experience of burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment?
3. What was the deciding factor that drove veteran teachers to leave the profession earlier than they had intended?

Throughout this chapter I will present the themes that emerged throughout my analysis of the data organized by research question. I will support each claim with excerpts pulled directly from the interviews to allow the participants to speak for themselves. I will begin this section by providing the results of the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES). However, as stated earlier in chapter three, I did not run any statistical tests on these data, as they only served to provide a more holistic picture of each participant's burnout experience.

MBI-ES Results

All participants took the MBI-ES before participating in interviews, and I have included their results in Table 4. The MBI manual provides a range for each scale indicating if a participant scored high, medium, or low for that scale.

Table 4

MBI-ES Results

Name	Emotional Exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal Accomplishment
Brenda	High	Low	High
Brittany	High	High	Low
Heather	High	Medium	Medium
Lisa	High	Low	Medium
Maria	High	Low	High
Nadine	High	Low	High
Pattie	High	High	Medium
Sally	High	Medium	High
Suzy	High	High	Low
Wendy	High	High	Low

Note. MBI-ES = Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey

All participants scored high on the exhaustion scale, while scores varied across the other two scales. Those participants with high exhaustion, high depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment had the highest levels of burnout, according to the survey. However, all participants showed signs of burnout on at least one scale. Results of the MBI-ES were largely consistent with participant responses during interviews.

Lived Experiences

As this was a qualitative study that borrowed elements of phenomenology, my first research question sought to understand the experiences these teachers had returning to teaching following the COVID-19 shutdown. While many teachers did leave teaching during remote instruction, all of the participants returned to the classroom with students and completed at least one school year before leaving the profession. Four themes emerged when participants described

their experiences of feeling burnt out: mental and physical symptoms, pervasive thoughts, negative emotions, and coping behaviors.

Mental and Physical Symptoms

The first theme that I identified from participants' experiences was mental and physical symptoms associated with being burnt out. Mentally, at least half of the participants reported feeling daily stress and anxiety from going to work. One of the participants, Heather, described her experience of burnout as "being stressed on a daily basis and feeling unable to keep up with the demands of the job." Similarly, Brittany defined burnout in the following way:

> Having too many metaphorical tabs open in your brain, and these tabs are expectations that could be placed by yourself, your boss, clients, friends, family, and then you either fail to complete the tasks, or those completed tasks are met with negativity by others, and then, once you receive that negativity or failure to complete the task, it leads to exhaustion and anxiety.

This prolonged stress and anxiety extended outside of work as well, with some participants explaining that the thought of going to work was anxiety-inducing. Wendy described this experience as "just dreading going to work every day," following this up by saying, "I'm gonna cry when I have to think about going into work." Pattie described her experience of work apprehension as wanting to "run away from it, because you just feel that feeling in the pit of your stomach." Two participants explained that their anxiety was so bad that they had to take medication to deal with the symptoms. Wendy explained, "I'm tired of having to medicate myself to walk into school. I should not work in an environment where I have to take medicine to calm my nerves." Two other participants shared that their anxiety led to physical symptoms, with Maria experiencing migraines and Brenda sharing, "I would feel stomachaches."

In addition to stress and anxiety, over half of the participants mentioned feeling exhaustion all the time. Maria described burnout as “being completely exhausted. Being exhausted mentally. Being exhausted emotionally.” She went on to say, “It was sustained, and I would say that sometimes it feels heavier than other times, but a general sense of no relief.” She also added that “because I was exhausted, I started making mistakes and missing some of the little things in my job that normally wouldn’t be missed.” Other participants explained that they were physically exhausted and lacked energy, as Lisa shared:

> You just don't have the energy or attention to do what you feel like you need to do to complete your job. It's not that you don't know how, it's just that you don't have the physical energy or attention to get everything done that needs to be done, and it's more repeated. It's not just a one-day thing. It's like over time you find yourself having less and less energy.

Suzy described her lack of energy as frustrating when attempting to work with students, stating that “there were some who needed so much, either behaviorally, academically, and I just didn’t have the energy to help all of them.” Lisa also shared an example of her physical exhaustion and the snowball effect it had on her:

> A month ago, coming back from Christmas break, I had a really hard time getting anything done on the weekend before the following, the second week of school back. I mean, I just couldn't do anything. I was too tired, and so I paid for it the whole next week. I just was disorganized and couldn't get anything done. It just kept building, being multiplied with time.

Pervasive Thoughts

On top of the anxiety and exhaustion, multiple participants experienced pervasive thoughts, some related to their perceived inability to perform their jobs, and others about the state of education as a profession. Lisa explained that she had a good group of parents and students in her final year, attributing her burnout to herself, saying, "it makes you internalize it more when it's not any of those things. So, you're just looking inward." Other participants described this self-attribution as well, with some explaining that they felt ineffective. Brenda questioned her own abilities as a teacher, recounting her experience trying to teach students in the current environment:

> I felt like it was my fault if the kids weren't learning. I felt like I had to keep trying harder, because the classroom changed, and I felt like I had to learn some new way to teach that used to work for me in the past and all of a sudden wasn't working. I kept trying to go, ok, what can I do to fix it? What do I need to change about myself? I kept thinking I had to fix me, and I didn't realize until after I had left it wasn't me.

Nadine shared a similar experience with shaken confidence, describing her experience attempting to teach with new technology after returning from COVID:

> I don't feel like I was being an effective teacher, because I couldn't do what everyone else was doing. And then you start questioning yourself. Well, maybe I can't keep up with the technology. So, maybe I'm not the best person to keep teaching, instructing these students, because I can't keep up with that.

While Suzy and Wendy did not share the same self-blame as other participants, they did share a similar feeling of ineffectiveness, with Suzy explaining that "there were a few kids I was getting through to, but overall, I didn't feel like I was making a difference."

Along with feeling ineffective, participants shared thoughts of helplessness and fatalism when viewing education. Suzy shared in her definition of burnout:

> Feeling like, no matter how much more work and time I put into it, I just couldn't keep up. I'm like, you're never gonna catch up. And then, like I was working hard, but not helping. It's almost like banging your head against a wall.

She continued to say, “I realized I’ve been teaching for a while. I know it’s not gonna get any better.” Three other participants echoed this idea that the state of education is not going to improve, with many citing this as their reasoning for choosing to leave, as Lisa explained:

> I had to hit 65, which I did, but then, as I reflected on the next year, it's not gonna change. It's not like, okay, you're in a rough spot, but next year will be better. We're gonna still have tons of kids. They're gonna still be giving us stuff to do. I don't think any of the things that are being required are gonna really change out in the next couple of years. And it was like, do I really wanna keep doing this?

Brittany also expressed sentiments of helplessness, sharing that she “experienced this feeling of why do I even try? Why do I keep doing these things and keep having this negative reaction?” Maria explained that she did not think anything could fix education, stating:

> I think it's gonna continue to be really difficult for teachers to avoid burnout for the foreseeable future. I don't know that it's gonna get better for teachers. I think there's gonna have to be major change. So, what is that change?

Negative Emotions

Along with pervasive thoughts, participants described a range of emotions that they experienced, or failed to experience, from burnout. Three participants described persistent sadness when they recounted their experiences. Nadine shared that the feeling of ineffectiveness

with technology "was too much for me, and that's when I was breaking down, and I was crying." Suzy shared a similar experience, stating, "I feel like I just gave up, and also, I was crying a lot. That was embarrassing." Brenda and Wendy did cry during their interviews, albeit for different reasons. Brenda expressed sadness over her perceived ineffectiveness, breaking into tears when she said, "I just care so much." Wendy began to tear up when she said, "I'm going to cry when I have to think about going to work," signifying that work was a source of trauma for her. She continued, saying, "My husband has begged me to quit this job since October. He's like, 'it is killing you.' He said, 'I hate seeing you this sad, hate seeing you this down.'"

At least half of the participants expressed feelings of guilt over letting down themselves, their students, and their colleagues. For example, Nadine felt she had let her students down, saying:

> There were probably a lot more technology things that I should have been incorporating in my classroom to keep up with everyone else, but I was just over the whole technology thing. And then I felt like, well, that's not fair to my students, because technology is very important, and they need to be learning it.

Brittany also expressed guilt over how she interacted with a student:

> There was one of my former art students who came into my classroom and was excited to tell me that he got an art scholarship to a university. I was excited for him, but also all I could think about, and this is awful, I feel bad even saying this, but all I could think was like, okay, cool, please leave my room. Even though he came in to tell me because of my class he went on to do advanced art. But I just didn't care. I just was thinking about how that was my planning period and I wanted time to myself, and that's just wrong. I shouldn't feel that way, but I did.

With all the academic and behavioral needs of students in her classroom, Suzy felt guilt over not feeling she could give the students what they needed, explaining, “I didn’t have enough time to help the ones who really wanted to learn.”

Two of the participants explained that their guilt caused them to detach from students as time went on. Pattie shared that she initially felt guilt over not volunteering her time outside of contract hours to sponsor clubs, but went on to say:

> I used to feel guilty. Oh, the kids, you know, and like part of me does. Like, I feel sad that they don’t have those opportunities. But it’s not my job to take on the weight of that. I’ll just decide not to take on that emotional weight anymore.

Wendy’s detachment from her students led to other emotions such as anger and bitterness, and ultimately her decision to leave the field, as she shared:

> There’s so much guilt I am carrying right now for leaving, and I’m trying to deal with that guilt. That’s why I can’t go to another school right now. I need to emotionally detach and deal with the guilt. Deal with the anger. Learn to trust people again, because these kids have taught me not to trust anybody, and that’s not cool. I feel like I have such a bitter outlook right now.

While emotions such as sadness, anger, and bitterness developed in response to burnout, half of the participants reported the loss of one positive emotion, which was joy. These teachers all expressed that joy and job satisfaction were initially present in their careers, but over time that joy eroded, and job satisfaction dissipated. In Nadine’s experience, dread replaced her joy:

> I always loved it. That was always, you know, my passion, and I loved getting up. For years! You know, I made it 30 years, but I always loved it. And in the last couple of years, it was just like I dreaded getting up and going in.

Maria, a band teacher, shared her loss of joy at having the students perform, and explained why it was difficult to feel the joy anymore:

> When people asked why I left teaching, it is because I just didn't experience joy doing it anymore. You have a great performance, and you have all the parents and the principal emailing you to tell you how wonderful it was. And I thought it was nice of them, and I was glad the students had a great performance, but I didn't feel the joy of it. I think in the end, if one parent sent an unkind email, it would outweigh the 10 great ones, and it was very difficult to let go of that negative thing that was said. It was a me thing, but I think that's what played into the loss of joy.

Pattie shared a similar sentiment about other tasks outweighing the joy, explaining that "every good thing about being in the classroom with students was just kind of stripped away. You couldn't really be in it, because everything about it made you feel dread." She went on to say that "there's almost nothing that you used to previously see as sparking joy or bringing you some sort of validation. It doesn't do that any longer." Lisa also shared her feeling of malaise around doing activities she used to enjoy with students, claiming, "I just didn't feel the personal satisfaction of, wow, that is really fun. It's just I was kind of like, bleh, when it's all finished."

Coping Behaviors

In dealing with the pervasive thoughts and negative emotions of burnout, participants developed various coping behaviors, which involved disengagement. In Pattie's case, she pulled away from the students, explaining:

> I thought about and got upset like about their home life when I learned about it. And you know, it would really consume my thinking. I'm a parent now, I just compartmentalize those emotions to my own kids, and I'm not caring as much. I find myself caring about

> them when they are in the room, but there's sometimes when they say some things, and I'm like, that's not something I can do anything about. I don't care, you know? And I feel bad sometimes.

Wendy also disengaged from the students and from the work. She shared an experience of returning to school from being sick, to notes about students misbehaving, saying, "I stripped the room down to bare bones. I got rid of everything. It was a blank room then. I said, 'I'm giving you what you give me. You're giving me nothing. You get nothing.'" She then explained how her pedagogy changed as a result:

> I used to be so anti-worksheet. Everything was hands on. Let's do projects. But for the rest of the year, I printed up work packets. We're just gonna do work packets because it's not that I don't care. My care was wasted. I made it as easy on myself as possible, and if that meant putting them in rows and giving them worksheets, that's what they were getting. I was surviving.

Brittany's change in pedagogy mirrored Wendy's:

> I no longer spent a lot of time lesson planning as much as I used to or coming up with unique approaches to projects. That used to be my absolute favorite thing to do. Taking the content objectives, and like conceptualizing the most fun way to present the material was kind of like a puzzle or a game for me, and I just loved doing that, and I'm actually an artist on the side. So, thinking creatively is really important to me. But even despite all that, I couldn't make myself care to go that extra mile anymore, because I was afraid of getting hurt again, either by students or administration.

Along with putting in less effort at work, some participants explained that they no longer took work home with them, in an effort to establish boundaries. Maria said, "I just couldn't do

my job and stay after school and work for free, and then come home and have any time or energy left for my young child." Pattie's experience was similar, saying:

> I just stopped caring if anything looked to me like it was gonna cause an impact on me not being able to do the workouts I wanted to do, spend the time with my kids, or make me stay up late at night on the weekends, and I was like, I'm just not gonna do it anymore.

Other teachers called out of work as a coping behavior. Wendy shared that "I never, ever called in sick before this last year. I had to be really, really sick to take time off. That year, it was like, screw it." Suzy shared a similar experience when describing a particularly difficult student, saying, "He will be back in the classroom tomorrow. I'm calling in sick. I wasn't that kind of teacher before to just be faking sick, but I won't be here tomorrow, because I can't."

Factors Contributing to Burnout

The second research question focused on investigating the factors that contributed to burnout in the post-shutdown pandemic environment. Four themes emerged when participants identified the factors that contributed to their burnout: unsustainable workload, lack of coherence, lack of student accountability, and erosion of professionalism.

Unsustainable Workload

A major theme that arose when analyzing factors that contributed to burnout was the unsustainable workload with which teachers must contend. Within this theme, four subthemes arose: class sizes and composition, time pressure, non-teaching workload, and working outside of contract hours.

Class Sizes and Composition. Two participants identified large classes sizes and highly diverse groups of students as barriers to meeting the academic goals of all students. Wendy described her experience in her last year:

> The smallest class I had was 22. The others were 26 and 29. We were packed into a tiny room, and it was absolute hell for me. I had a highly diverse group of kids. Within one class, I had a kid who was—this is a sixth-grade class—who was on a 10th-grade level in math, along with another child who was on a second-grade level.

A lack of support staff to assist teachers compounded the issue of having large, highly diverse classes. Lisa, an elementary teacher, described her frustration at the school district telling her why she would receive no support in her classroom:

> I know they say, "Well, the building can't accommodate more people for class sizes." They cut assistants year after year after year. When I first came here, we had one assistant for four teachers. And because we had four teachers in fourth grade and an assistant, she would help pull kids, and she would do other things. You know, we've got 26 kids, and there's no push-in assistance for kids that don't have an IEP.

Time Pressure. Most of the participants identified time pressure, the combination of a large workload with little time to complete it, as a major factor that contributed to burnout. While teacher's workloads are already strenuous, Lisa claimed that "there's days where I feel like it's not sustainable. Central office continually puts more and more expectations on us, and they never take anything off." Multiple participants echoed this idea of increasing expectations and responsibilities of teachers. Brittany described this as "wearing too many hats," and said that

"each year it seemed like we're expected to be responsible for four new things that weren't expected in the past." Nadine also described this experience:

> It was just the amount of extra things that kept piling up. It was constant, it was something new. You've got to learn this now. You've got to do this, you know? You need to fill out this form. We need this information.

As the teachers' workloads increased, the amount of time they had to complete those tasks decreased. Lisa explained that "I just can't keep at pace with all the things they added into requirements every year. They're just not allowing the time to do it." Suzy shared her frustration with the lack of time when describing planning at the elementary level:

> Elementary teachers don't get enough planning time. You're with the kids so often. And on paper you've got a little bit of time before and after school, and 40 minutes a day, but we know there's at least once or twice a month there's before school or after school staff meetings. You've got meetings during your planning time, depending on how your administrators run it. I've had years where we had 3 out of 5 days we had meetings. Like, when are you supposed to do silly things like going to the copier?

The lack of planning time was not an issue unique to elementary teachers. Brittany, a high school teacher, also bemoaned the lack of planning time, sharing that the issue was not the number of blocks set aside for planning, but the number of different classes for which she needed to plan. She shared, "That last year I taught IB History, AP History, AP European History, and Art. I know I had a least three preps."

Non-Teaching Workload. While the workload for teachers has increased, participants shared that tasks that contributed most to burnout were non-teaching related, or tasks that did not involve planning or actively teaching students. As stated before, teachers had difficulty finding

time to plan with all of the extra meetings they attended. Lisa shared an elementary perspective, describing the process of data teams in her district and the extra work they added:

> So, we've added this process, which can be two meetings a unit, because you have a pretest meeting, posttest, plus putting all your data in. That was done for every unit in math. But then they added social studies to it last year. So that's extra meetings with that. We had to meet at least two days a week for planning math and planning reading, but then, if you have any team meeting planning that has to be done for social studies, science, field trips, that has to be added another day when we're not meeting with people outside of our team.

Pattie, a middle school teacher, claimed that "you have to be with the kids all the time, and if you're not, you're in a meeting. You're not planning." She continued to say, "Either that or you're covering for someone else who's out sick," indicating that teachers often had to pick up classes when substitute positions went unfilled.

In addition to more meetings and covering other teacher's classes, the state government of Virginia also passed laws that changed the attendance policies, placing extra pressure on the schools, and ultimately the teachers, to improve attendance. Lisa shared that "attendance is now added in. The parents text you, and you have to copy the text and send it to the office because they have to have documentation." Brittany also mentioned attendance as an extra responsibility, saying that she had to "keep up with unexcused versus excused absences and change the code in the grading system." The state also passed laws in response to current events requiring training for teachers on new topics, for which some teachers felt they were not qualified for and should not have been responsible for. Brittany explained:

> For example, we have to sign off on things like how to properly use a tourniquet or administer Narcan. That was a new one we got this year. Students who [overdose]. And we have to watch these videos. And then we get a Narcan kit. And then it's like, well, you know, it's just a scary thing to think about. Like, are you expecting me to know how to use this and do this? And anyways, how to identify petite mal seizures. That was a new one this year. How to aid a bullet wound victim. How to help students having diabetic comas. How to prepare for and deal with active shooters on campus. Helping students in crisis with that training I don't have as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

Participants also identified increased testing as a non-teaching related factor that influenced burnout. Brenda shared that "testing became a huge emphasis for the classroom, and all of a sudden teaching became about the test." Lisa's experience mirrored this, explaining the additional testing that she now had to administer at the elementary level:

> So, we added the two extra Virginia Growth Assessments. We kept the Map testing. I think there's more that I'm blanking on. They just keep putting more in there to be done. Data teams with social studies, so there are now pretests and posttests for each unit, and it's just a lot.

Nadine, an elementary dual language teacher, shared the unique challenges she faced with testing in her setting:

> So, you're gonna have 24 kids in your classroom, and we expect you to teach half of your curriculum in Spanish and half in English. But that never happens because you've got all the pressure of the [Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening] assessments. They're looking at your scores, you know your [Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening] scores and your math scores, and that's all in English. So, you're not really doing justice

to the dual language program because you can't. You just kind of fake it. You're trying to do whatever you can do to keep everyone happy.

Working Outside of Contract Hours. Most of the participants cited working outside of contract hours as a factor that contributed greatly to their burnout. In addition to actively teaching students, teachers must find the time to plan lessons, grade papers, attend meetings, and so forth, which they must complete for the instruction piece to take place. Brittany shared that this takes much more time than is available in the work week, saying, "my district says that we're on the clock for 35 hours each week, and I just think it's hilarious. Definitely on the clock way more than that." Pattie claimed that while she could have planned lessons at work, the quality would have been lower:

> We have no time to plan meaningfully for that, and it's like kind of putting the quiet part out loud that you have to do everything you need to do for your job at home so that you can do it when you get here.

Participants also explained that the amount of time they needed to work outside of school to get everything done was significant. Nadine shared her experience with working at home:

> The amount of hours I was spending outside of school planning and preparing was ridiculous. I'd come home at like what? 4:30? I'd work to like 6, maybe. Sometimes 7. Sometimes I have dinner and go back to it. And on the weekends, I would try to take 1 day, but there was 1 entire day, usually Sunday. From the time I got up, until the time I went to sleep, I was working and planning. I felt overwhelmed with the planning.

Wendy's experience mirrored Nadine's, when she described the additional time needed to complete work for data teams:

> Basically, we were collecting data, and they wanted us to do all this data collection and analysis and form out lessons based on all this data. When? I take that stuff home. I mean, I have spent so many Saturdays where I have gotten up at 6 o'clock and worked until 9 o'clock at night on my couch. My husband would bring food to me when they ate. Literally hours and hours.

Participants shared that while this extra work outside of contract hours was detrimental to their personal time, it was necessary to prevent falling behind. Heather, an elementary gifted resource teacher, stated that to complete gifted testing of students on top of pushing into classrooms, "the scoring was done at home. A lot of things were done outside of school hours to the detriment of personal time." Lisa echoed this:

> Every weekend giving up time for things, and it does get in the way of doing some other things. I just don't feel like I've gotten as much downtime on the weekend unless I intentionally don't do it, and then I pay for it the next week.

Two participants shared that while their employers did not require them to work outside of contract hours, they made no efforts to protect teachers from the need. In Wendy's experience her administrator was surprised when she refused to stay after:

> Our AP, in one of our math meetings, recently said, "So, have you all started thinking about after school tutoring?" I looked at him and said, "I won't be doing after school tutoring. I tried at the beginning of the year and the thought of staying after with these students makes me want to cry." Another teacher spoke up and asked if it was an expectation that they stay after school and tutor. The AP said, "No, I just assumed that you all would want to do that to get them caught up."

Pattie shared her frustration as well, claiming that the teaching profession "historically is one that doesn't respect boundary, and it bleeds into all aspects of your life." She went on to share that although districts claimed not to expect teachers to work outside of contract hours, they placed value on it with the way they rewarded employees:

> Because teachers don't give 250% outside of contract hours, they're not winning Milken awards and are not getting teacher of the year, and they're not getting nominated for whatever bogus award of the week the school has for staff morale. Not that those things matter in the long run, but it does when you care about your credibility and your professionalism.

Lack of Coherence

A second theme that emerged when participants described the factors that contributed to their burnout was a lack of coherence in the curriculum and within their schools. Within this theme were two subthemes: lack of consistency, and lack of purpose and clarity.

Lack of Consistency. Change is inevitable within education, as new technology and pedagogies are developing regularly. However, too much change at once can make it difficult for teachers to adapt. Participants shared their frustration at attempting to adapt to the changes brought on by COVID-19 as students returned to the classroom post-shutdown. Pattie claimed that "There was constant change in everything. Every procedure, every routine, every expectation, and every five minutes it felt." She went on to explain the difficulties that this created when trying to teach, but not knowing when or how quickly the district would make changes, saying, "Basically, any given day if the numbers of sick students got into a certain zone,

I had to be able to shift everything, to be able to teacher virtual." In recounting her experience, she mentioned Canvas, which is a learning management system:

> At the beginning of that year, all we heard was, well the least you all can do is keep up your Canvas pages because you don't have to do lesson plans. Keep those up and we'll leave you alone. About 4 weeks into the year, we all got called into a meeting. Yes, we do have to do lesson plans now, and they were so detailed.

This lack of consistent expectations made it difficult for teachers to find their footing, but some teachers also cited the rapid change in technology as a burnout factor. Heather shared that she watched other teachers quit following the pandemic, claiming that "the technology is too much to keep up with." Nadine shared her personal struggles with the change in technology, citing it as the main reason she felt it was time to leave teaching:

> I had a good support system telling me, "You got this. You can create a Zoom meeting. You can do Canvas. You can upload this." And I kept telling myself I could do it, but the amount of energy that I had to spend to do that was just overwhelming me. When you think of something that you just never imagine yourself doing, and then it's thrown on you so quickly, and you have to master it. It was too much for me.

Other teachers claimed that while they did experience rapid changes during COVID, they felt that COVID worsened already existing issues, changing the landscape of education. Brittany stated, "I felt there were problems even before the pandemic, but I think it exacerbated all of that. A lot of the societal changes that we see happening worsened a lot faster as a result of COVID." Lisa described the change in parent expectations and attitudes towards education brought on by COVID:

> I'll get emails from parents saying their child needs a self-care day, let me know when they can hop on Zoom. I think we preach self-care. Some people took it really to heart, but self-care sometimes comes on the backs of other people that are having to get things done because of your self-care.

Lack of Purpose and Clarity. Related to a lack of consistency, participants explained when leadership made decisions, they did not always appear to have a clear purpose. This lack of clarity and purpose in decision-making was a source of frustration for teachers. Lisa explained that many initiatives in her district were "launched when directions aren't even clear. When they don't have a good feeling." Heather explained how she felt the current model of gifted teaching in her district did not work for her school:

> I feel like the coordinators don't come look at what we're doing. The current program was piloted at another school with just two students in a first-grade classroom. That was it. The teacher pushed in and wrote lessons. The coordinator had all these wonderful things to say about all the enrichment she could do. The other gifted teachers and I felt like, it's great, but we can't do that. We're in too many places. We've got too many classrooms. So, curriculum was written and just given to us.

Nadine shared a similar experience, stating that the dual language program did not work because they made decisions that were not appropriate for her setting:

> My numbers went down, and the district said, "You don't have enough kids. You only have 12, the other teacher only has 12, and other first grade teachers have 25 kids in their room. So, you're gonna have 24 kids in your classroom, and we expect you to teach half your curriculum in Spanish and half in English."…The district doesn't care that my kids

> are learning Spanish. They don't come in and say, "Oh wow, they can speak and use verbs and do their math in Spanish." That's not what they care about.

Along with lacking purpose in decision-making, multiple participants felt there was no purpose to some of the programs they used and the amount of data they collected. Lisa discussed the data teams in her district, saying, "We're gathering data, but I don't feel like we really take the time to say, 'What does this data really mean?' It's just here's a number, get it on the data wall." Heather echoed the sentiment of collecting data for the sake of collecting it, sharing her experience in the gifted program:

> I have these push-in lessons, and I'm collecting everything these kids do and putting a grade on it. Then we're filing it in a folder that moves with them to the other grades. I keep asking the director, "Where's this going? What's happening with it?" You know, she keeps telling me, "The superintendent thinks this is wonderful." And I think, "You aren't the ones in the classroom keeping up with it."

This idea of superfluous programs was also present in Nadine's experiences, as she described using a mandated program with the students that she felt did not have a point:

> There's a reading program in this county that is mandated, and they actually get on and check how many minutes our students are on. Then they look at the data and what the kids are doing. I would look at that data too, because you could pull reports, and a lot of it just didn't match. I had some kids that weren't even reading, and I was like, "How did you even get to this level?" I'm looking at what they're doing and I'm like, this is worthless. They're not learning anything from this.

In addition to decisions made for students, some participants shared that they felt decisions made for them about professional development were also pointless. Brittany cited

"attending irrelevant professional development meetings" as one source of burnout. Lisa went in depth with her explanation, explaining how she felt professional development had changed in her district:

> There's nothing fresh and new. In the past, they'd bring in outside sources to come in, and you would feel invigorated, pumped up. Yeah, I'm gonna try that. Now we're getting everything in-house within the district, and they're not doing anything to pump people up with new ideas. We've got a wealth of sources around us. And then since COVID, it's mostly been on Zoom, which is even more impersonal.

Lack of Student Accountability

A third major theme that emerged when participants discussed factors that contributed to burnout was a lack of student accountability in academics and behavior. While academics and behavior often go together, I will separate them for this discussion.

Academics. Half of the participants identified issues with student academics as concerning and a major burnout factor. One issue that participants mentioned frequently was apathy, or students not caring about education, as Brenda explained:

> I felt like the students had apathy. The intrinsic value to learn seemed to be gone. I'm just sitting in your class. There became too much of that. I felt like the students could walk out. They didn't value what was going on in my classroom.

Brenda also shared that for students who didn't show engagement, she personally felt responsible, stating, "I kept trying to find a way to make them want to care about something in my class." Lisa described her experience working with students over the last two years of her career, explaining that the students were showing less engagement with the lessons and didn't want to work, saying they "didn't have a real work ethic." She continued by saying "I do think

they get overwhelmed easier. I told them how much homework we used to give, and they about fell out of their chairs." Wendy shared that she felt that students weren't interested in school, saying, "I'm a good teacher. I give and give, but I give when there is a receptive audience." She then provided an example of student disinterest:

> Eighty percent of my students are below grade level. And it's like trying to catch them up is impossible because they don't apply themselves. They don't study, and I'm like, "Why didn't you study?" "I had cheerleading practice. Our coach gets mad if we don't come to practice." "Well, how do you think I feel when I give you an assignment and you blow it off?"

Brenda shared that when students did show engagement, they did not always produce quality work. "I saw work that to me was so unacceptable for a sixth-grade student to turn in to their teacher."

Participants also shared that they felt the student population had changed during their careers, and that these issues were not always present, or at least not as severe. Brittany shared:

> At one point, the kids were engaged. I would have kids tell me that they hated history before they took my class, and then they would write me these letters later, saying how much they loved history, and I don't get any of that anymore. I used to get tons.

Brenda also described this shift in student mindset, saying, "There's a sense of loss, of pride in their work. I used to see a lot of those aha moments where kids would find something. They were thrilled about it. Then I stopped seeing it." She also shared, "I competed at history day competitions where kids put an intensive amount of work into a single project, and there was a sense of pride in what they had accomplished."

Participants went beyond simply describing the academic issues they saw with students and pointed to issues that they felt existed within the district and within the education field. They identified various issues that resulted in decreased accountability for the students, and in some cases, increased accountability for the teachers. Brenda shared her frustration with multiple issues, saying, "I just felt like all of a sudden there was no accountability in the classroom. It didn't matter whether the classwork was done. Homework was not allowed and sitting in my classroom earned you a 50." Wendy, a teacher from the same district, said that she was also concerned with the lack of fairness caused by the grading policy:

> It's very frustrating to me that just because a child is on my roll, they get a minimum of 50, whether they showed up or not. The kid who worked hard to make the 65 gets about the same grade, and it is just so unfair.

Lisa also mentioned the lack of homework, stating, "I don't feel like we were piling on the homework expecting 45 minutes, but now we don't give any homework. The expectations in the classroom have been lowered." Brenda felt that the lack of homework in her district reduced the need to practice the material, placing more responsibility on the teacher:

> I feel like teaching is reciprocal. It's not me putting something in your head. It's you and I working together to gain some knowledge, and for me to get good at anything, practice is involved. I don't get good at something hearing it once. I don't get good at writing one sentence. It takes practice, and practice is not valued anymore.

Along with lowering the rigor, multiple participants also mentioned that school districts were setting students up for failure when they do not hold them accountable for failing a grade and push them along to the next grade level. Sally shared her experience with this:

> In the United States, at least in our county and surrounding counties, as long as you finish that grade, you're moving up to the next grade whether you fail or not. It's doing a disservice, rather than putting them on a track that they need. You need to give them something extra. Help these kids. They need it. What are we teaching them to be when they grow up, especially if they feel like a failure? It's not teaching them that they can succeed, and all kids can succeed.

Nadine also felt that districts were not giving students what they needed to succeed, explaining that the process for getting academic help for students was arduous and time-consuming:

> I wasn't able to reach those kids when I couldn't give them what I know they needed. The process was too long and overwhelming. Like, I sent some kids on to second grade and then saw them in third grade, asking myself how I sent them on. But you don't retain anymore, and you don't have all those extra services that you used to be able to get quickly. You go through the whole child study process, and they go on to the next year with a new teacher and they wipe out everything, because they want them to have a fresh start each year. A lot of things don't make sense to me anymore.

In Heather's experience as a gifted teacher, she noticed a change in attitudes towards gifted services, saying, "People outside of education ask me, 'Haven't they done away with gifted?' They're trying to make things more homogenous. It's the whole mentality of we don't want anyone to feel bad. Everybody gets a trophy."

Behavior. In addition to academics, multiple participants explained that student behavior was a concern, with one citing it as the major factor that contributed to her resignation. Wendy cited language and disrespect as big concerns, sharing, "I have had the f word used at me so many times by children at that school. I'd never said the word, but it's quite a part of my

vocabulary now, but that's how they talk. No respect." Similarly, Suzy claimed, "The language is just shocking, and it's about half the class." She then shared an experience she had with students being disrespectful to another staff member:

> Two girls got in trouble in the cafeteria. They had the lunch monitors there who got paid to come in a few hours a day. You know, keep an eye on them, wipe tables in between. And the lady went up to them and said, "Girls, you dropped some food on the floor. You need to pick it up." They said, "No we don't, that's your job." And when she told me, I talked to them. I said, "You are fifth graders. You can pick up your own garbage. If food falls on the floor, you pick it up, because that's what grownups do." They said, "She shouldn't have taken this job if she didn't want to clean up after kids."

Participants mentioned that this type of behavior was new and was getting more severe. Brittany stated, "I wouldn't say it was totally absent 10 years ago, but a lot of the concerns I have now were much smaller than they are now. It's like every year they grow larger." Brenda echoed this statement, saying, "Kids were screaming at each other, and that kind of stuff didn't use to take place in the classroom." Suzy explained that while the rise in student misbehavior occurred before the pandemic, COVID did exacerbate existing issues, preventing her from using classroom management strategies that worked in the past:

> I tried different strategies. Like, okay. Let's rearrange the desk, but we couldn't rearrange them very often because of COVID stuff. But like, if you don't want to learn, go ahead and put your head down. I'm just gonna talk to the kids that want to learn today. That didn't help because they acted up and distracted the class so much. I was like, just what do I do with these kids?

All of the participants who claimed that student misbehavior was an issue cited experiences with lack of administrative support. Brittany shared that "in the experiences where I am having problems with students, I'm not getting any help or administrative support in dealing with it. This has happened countless times over the last 10 years." One way that administrators failed to support their staff was by having a lack of presence, and not responding to calls for help. In Wendy's experience, when she would call for an administrator, the front office staff would not let her speak with them:

> I've called for help before. The principal always said, "If you need help, I'll be right there." Well, no! Whenever I would call for assistance, the secretary would say, "We don't have anyone right now." I went to the principal and said, "You told me to call if I needed help. I've called three times and haven't gotten it. What's going on?" He said, "I think she's just trying to protect us."

Suzy shared that her administrator thanked the staff for not bringing behavior issues to him. She said, "We got an email once where we were thanked for trying to handle things in our classrooms and not sending students to the office."

When administrators would respond to discipline concerns, there was not always a resolution. Wendy explained that when a colleague went to the administrator over safety concerns with a student, the administrator claimed she could not help:

> The teacher went to the AP for help, and the AP said, "I don't think that's a good idea. She doesn't like me. I really don't have a bond with her, so I don't think that I can help you with that." Excuse me? You don't get a choice whether she likes you or not. You are her assistant principal. You don't have a choice in this.

Suzy shared an experience she had with how administration chose to handle a particularly difficult student when he threw a water bottle across the room at her:

> I called and I got somebody out of the hallway to cover my class. He went to the office. Spent the rest of the day there. But besides him going to spend the day sitting with the assistant principal, where he got one on one attention, which was kind of a reward for him. He didn't get stickers or lollipops, but he got help with his work, which he needed, and that was all that happened.

Suzy continued to say that later "Nobody came from the office to say, how's it going? We need to set up a plan so his behavior's better. There was no follow-through on what we were gonna do with this kid."

Participants also mentioned lack of support from parents when discussing behavior. Wendy, a middle school teacher, shared:

> Three parents out of my 100 and some odd students would contact me occasionally. I would call and reach out to them. Your son is not working. Your daughter is disturbing my class. All I would get is "I'll talk to them." I had one girl email me and said, "My mother said not to contact my grandmother anymore, and to not reach out to her again." I said, "First of all, I don't take messages from children. Your mother is welcome to call me and speak with me in person."

Maria said that her administrator was not supportive when parents would reach out, stating they "would sometimes bend to, you know, pacify the parents more than what I would say is the right thing to do."

Erosion of Professionalism

The final theme that emerged when discussing factors that contributed to burnout was erosion of professionalism. Participants felt that parents, politicians, leaders, and society did not treat them like professionals Within this theme, five subthemes emerged: lack of autonomy, lack of input, political pressure, lack of value, and lack of compensation.

Lack of Autonomy. Multiple participants shared lack of autonomy as a cause of burnout, because they were not able to make choices in their classrooms. Participants were more concerned with leaders telling them how to teach, rather than what to teach. Some districts mapped out their curriculum pacing to the day, and they expected teachers to be at a certain place at a certain time, as Nadine explained:

> Administrators used to pop in like, "This is an amazing lesson!" You don't get that anymore. It's like, "Oh, I saw on your schedule that you're supposed to be teaching math at so and so time. Why are you doing a reading lesson?" Well, maybe I seized the moment, and I taught something!

She shared that in many lessons, teachers also did not get a choice in what they said.

> Like, your reading group is very scripted. It's word for word. It's insulting to me as an educator. That you're telling me word for word how to teach this child how to read when every child is different. There's not a script to teaching.

Wendy also commented on the scripted nature of the curriculum, saying, "Today you're gonna do Unit 11, Part 1. Tomorrow, Unit 11, Part 2. It is so scripted."

Some districts also expected their teachers to use specific pedagogy, and to not deviate. Wendy described the challenges she faced with the expected instructional strategy:

> And so, they tell us, "Well you need to have small groups." Well, it's hard to have small groups with 45-minute classes, when it takes 10 minutes to get them settled and they expect you to do a 10-minute exit ticket. So, you've got 25 minutes to do small groups and to teach these children.

Districts also expected teachers to have students use certain computer programs for a designated amount of time each week. Nadine shared:

> As part of the instructional day for the students to have independent work, there was a big push for it to be on their Chromebook. So, you want to give them some quality work to be doing, right? No, we want them on this reading program. It broke my heart. I told the students, "You have to get on. You don't have a choice." I could think of like 20 other things that you could be doing that would help your reading more than that program.

Teachers felt that in addition to districts telling them what to teach and when, the amount of oversight from building leadership and district leadership had increased. Lisa explained:

> Apparently, they're now monitoring gradebooks for x number of grades a week in there. I understand you don't want to go a whole marking period with three grades in there. But some subjects don't lend themselves as easily towards more grades. Unless I fake it and say here's a lab, everybody gets 100 because they were in the room, and I need grades. It's not just that, I'll catch up on grades, but they're pulling it up and checking it.

One participant shared that while autonomy may be desired, too little involvement from administration can also be detrimental:

> I will say it's one thing I love, and hate is that I do have a bit of autonomy. There's nobody checking on me very often. They just expect that I'm doing my job. But there are

> times where I would appreciate feedback, whether it's positive or negative, because I feel like, I'm just in my own little world, and I don't know you know, did I do a good job?

Lack of Input. Another subtheme within erosion of professionalism was lack of input. Some participants claimed that administrators and curriculum coordinators did not ask for or welcome their input on decisions. Lisa stated, "I don't feel like they ever ask at the level that's using the program. 'How's it working? Do you feel strongly about this, that it's good?' They're never asking." Participants expressed their concern over not having more input when they felt children needed services. Nadine shared her frustration at the child study process:

> You know, back in the day, and because I was teaching so long, if you had a child with a suspected learning disability or something and I knew they needed help, I could go to somebody and say, "She needs help now, like, what can we do?" And it's not like that anymore. Now, it's like, okay, you start the child study process. And then, you know you do this. You try all these different strategies, and you go back, you know, to the meeting. And they're like, "All right. Let's go back to the drawing board. You need to try more." How much do you want me to try when I'm telling you this child is failing? They're falling through the cracks.

Sally's experience mirrored Nadine's:

> The county doesn't respond really well when you want to move children into where they need to be. I did everything that I could. I mean, I documented everything. If they needed a behavior plan, I was walking around the class with a clipboard. But for some reason it's just, they weren't helping particular students, and at the same time, they're not helping the students that did belong in the classroom, education-wise. It just didn't feel like they were

> very responsive to what the students needed. And we're trained as professionals. You know where the deficits are. If we're experts, why not ask us?

Other participants felt that when leadership did seek input, they chose not to use it, or it served as a way of checking a box to seem inclusive. Lisa stated:

> Whenever you do give input, I feel like it's just kind of brushed over. It's not really listened to. And you feel that way with the surveys too. A few things that come out okay, they check the box. They ask this, but there's no real intent to really do anything with it. It's just, "Yeah, we checked." I mean, I know a couple of the meetings have been, okay, "Let's talk about everything you like about this new thing," but they never get around to what's not right with it. They don't want to hear it.

Pattie echoed this sentiment, saying that when teachers offered solutions. "that's not the solution that was used." She also felt this extended beyond school and curriculum leaders to the school board and the superintendent, stating they were "just a little tone-deaf as to what they think we're saying and what's actually being done."

Political Pressure. Many of the participants mentioned politics as a contributing factor towards burnout. Participants were concerned that politics has eroded their professionalism, as individuals outside of the profession make many of the important educational decisions. Maria explained the ramifications it had on her career:

> Politics are having a huge impact in schools in ways that they haven't before. It was very disheartening. And you know, the idea that a teacher could lose their job because of something arbitrary that a parent didn't like seemed like a real thing that could happen suddenly. And I just didn't want to be part of that kind of system anymore.

The concept of parents having indirect power over educators was present in other participants' responses as well. Wendy stated that the power extends beyond the local government to the state government:

> The state has no clue. These legislators have no clue what a school is like. They sit there, and they make laws, and they have no idea what they're making laws about. They just do whatever sounds good to the parent, sounds good to them, as long as it gets votes.

Heather felt that while some parents may have more power in the current sociopolitical environment, others had less. She said, "I worry about all the controversy in education. You know, parents being afraid to speak up, or they're being demonized when they do." Suzy shared a similar concern, and worried about the impacts that polarization might have on children. She stated, "I don't know if seeing adults arguing like that on TV, on social media, and in person is more like, is this what adults do? There's a lack of empathy."

Participants shared that politics had limited their ability to discuss certain topics and choose instructional materials and had even changed the curriculum in some cases. Nadine shared her disgust with having to shut down conversations with her students over politics:

> That part is horrible. When I hear things like, you know, you can't use the word gay. We don't talk about that. It's just, it doesn't make any sense to me. And I agree that we don't need, I don't need to be teaching a kindergartener, okay, this person's gay. No, but I should be able to discuss it if it comes up.

Maria shared the same concern:

> What am I supposed to say when a student brings it up in the classroom? "I'm sorry I can't talk about it right now because I know this child over here has parents who would be really offended by this."

She also shared that politics has influenced what music she could choose to have her students perform in her band classroom. She said, “Oh well, can't pick this music because it was written by a gay man, or you know. And we talk about who the composers of our music are. It's just it's too much.” Nadine stated that she was concerned that politics were censoring history and the impacts that it might have on the next generation:

> And then the whole thing about, you know, you can’t teach about slavery. It keeps going and going and going. It's like, at what point is this gonna get too much? You're hiding history. You're not addressing anything. These kids aren't learning, you know, about the past and what happened.

Lack of Value. Another subtheme that emerged within erosion of professionalism was lack of value. Participants claimed that society no longer viewed teachers as valuable, lacking the respect and reputation that comes with being a professional. When asked about factors that caused her burnout, Brittany shared:

> I would say not being treated like a professional by students, parents, and administration. So, there's a lack of respect for what teachers do. They are not seen as experts on what they do at all. It is just constantly a game of being disrespected.

Pattie shared that this lack of reputation that teachers have in society pushed her to make a career change, saying, “Your time and your professionalism are being questioned constantly. I feel like everyone is just like, ‘Oh, you’re a teacher. That’s it?’ I don’t want a job that makes me feel like an idiot.”

Three participants felt that administration did not value their positions. Maria described her experience in advocating for the band program at her school:

> As a music teacher when you come into this field. You know already. You're going to have to continue to raise awareness of why music is important in the schools that you work in. But I found, at least in my last position, that it was becoming increasingly difficult each year to maintain a high level of teaching because of the way scheduling in the school was impacting the music programs. And it was exhausting trying to educate the principals every year about why their choices could and did harm enrollment in my programs.

Heather, a gifted teacher, felt that the district did not value her position in the way they handled substitutes:

> And I feel like it's not really valued as far as, like part of it is when I'm out. There's no substitute, because they feel like well, it's gonna be too hard, you know, for somebody to go to different schools, if it's multiple days that you're out. But I think it's also a sense of, these kids are going to be fine. You know, if it's a [special education] kid, they're gonna get upset if, you know, they're not getting daily instruction, but for Gifted, it's kind of like, oh well.

In Brittany's experience, she felt her administrator did not care about her:

> I don't even believe that my administrators know anything about my life. They don't try to learn about their employees. Alright. There probably are a handful that they're close with, I guess. I don't even think they know all the subjects I teach honestly.

She also did not feel they respected her contributions to the school as an IB teacher:

> Last year in our IB graduating class, we had a 100% pass rate, and that was the first time we've ever had that in the history of teaching IB at the school. The 100% pass rate was

> really awesome and all we got was a little good job email. That was it. There was no kind of celebration for what we did, because it's a lot of work for the IB test.

Two other participants claimed that they felt devalued as people, by the students and by administration. Wendy described how her administrator reacted when she booked a substitute for three days due to a serious illness. She shared, “I knew I needed to recover, so I put in for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. My principal emailed me and asked, do you really need that many days off?” Brenda shared a devaluing experience she had with her students, which ultimately led her to retire early:

> I felt the student didn't see me as something to respect, because in my wildest dreams I would never go knock a person who had a sling on their arm into the wall, and they would come in laughing about it and take their seat. I got to the point where I seriously did not wear the sling because I felt like it was drawing attention. They saw me as weak or something. They saw me as something that they could make fun of, and I had just had an injury, and I felt like I'm not valued. And I said, it's time to go. I'm not valued in this building.

Lack of Compensation. The final subtheme that emerged under erosion of professionalism was a lack of compensation. Participants felt that their employers did not compensate them commensurate with their time and effort. Maria shared that she felt the pay discrepancy among how different states pay their teachers was unfair, saying:

> My sister-in-law, who teaches kindergarten, makes $30,000 more a year in Iowa, where the cost of living is lower, than I made here in Virginia. I think a lot of teachers in Virginia don't realize that teacher pay here is that low compared to other places. I just happen to know because I lived and taught there. And so, I have friends teaching in

> Nebraska that have the same level of education and almost the same number of years of experience, making substantially more, right? Knowing what we're paid in this state doesn't equal the effort we put in, like, at all.

Brittany also mentioned pay discrepancy, but she focused on the discrepancy in how different disciplines compensated their teachers:

> Our state legislature actually passed a law that gives around $20,000-$25,000 extra to math and science teachers for the same exact work. The only thing that they have to do is, I think, maybe 30 hours of PD per year, extra, or something. Which is not that big of a deal to add on. They can do it, you know, in the summer, or whatever. But anyways, as a history teacher that made me feel like, okay, why am I doing this extra work?

Wendy felt that her district should have compensated her more for needing to work at home, saying, “I don’t get paid for this. If they want it done, they can find me some more hours, and pay for some more hours. I’m not doing it anymore.” Sally shared her frustration at her district not paying her to write curriculum:

> Am I getting paid for what I am doing? They gave us a new [learning management system]. I spearheaded going through and doing all of sixth and seventh grade and passing it out to everybody in the county. I did not get paid for that.

She then claimed that she took a stand against working for free, stating, “I wasn’t being compensated for the extra that I was doing, and I got to the point where, when I was asked to do extra, I started saying no.”

The Decision to Leave Education

The third and final question guiding this study sought to understand the deciding factor in why these veteran teachers experiencing burnout made their decision to leave or retire early

following the shutdown. Although each participant had a unique experience with making their decision to leave education, there were similarities in their responses. The same themes from Question 2 emerged in Question 3: lack of student accountability, erosion of professionalism, and unsustainable workload. While lack of coherence was a contributing factor towards burnout, none of the participants claimed that it was their reason for attrition.

Lack of Student Accountability

Three of the participants cited lack of student accountability as the deciding burnout factor that resulted in their exiting the profession. For Wendy, the cumulative experiences of students misbehaving without consequence weighed on her, causing depression and anxiety. She shared that it affected her personal life, with her husband asking her multiple times to quit. She chose to stay for a few more months, until she eventually quit before the end of the school year. She also shared an experience she had prior to teaching of another teacher she admired, and a promise she made to herself:

> I was walking the hall, and I watched my daughter's second grade teacher. My daughter had her years before that. So, I knew her, and I really admired her. But I watched her screaming at this second grader, just railing on him. I mean, you could hear her down the hall. And I thought, that is horrible. How can she treat a little child like that? What is wrong? So, I went to the team lead, and I said, "I don't know if you all can hear what's going on, but she's really [being mean to that student]." And that was about the time, like I said, that I decided to be a teacher. But I told myself, I remember telling my husband, "If I ever get angry like that, I'm leaving the profession." And I'm angry like that right now. So, it's time for me to get out.

In Suzy's case, she explained that the behaviors were worse in her district, and that she felt she had not prepared her students adequately for the standardized tests as a result:

> I was crying a lot, and I realized that I had been teaching for a while. It was not going to get any better. That year I had students that were not ready for their [standardized tests], and I felt I didn't teach them enough.

She also shared that she had a similar experience to Wendy, where her significant other asked her to quit teaching:

> I had switched to this new district because I moved in with my boyfriend. And he was saying, like, "You're miserable to live with. Like I don't think this is gonna work out." Like it's not worth staying here teaching to destroy a 14-year relationship. And when he said, "Do you wanna quit? I can cover your health insurance." Oh, I had never thought of that!

Brenda explained that students' declining academic abilities had been concerning for a while, and that the decline did not seem to bother other teachers on her team. She also shared that she was fearful at the possibility of becoming indifferent towards it:

> I didn't wanna become the teacher that doesn't care whether I teach the curriculum. That doesn't have a reaction to the work the kids were handing me in. So, I think I'm always gonna worry that I won't care, because I still care about it, and I'm not even in the classroom anymore.

While this fear pushed her towards early retirement, it was a single incident with students that ultimately pushed her over the edge:

> I would never in my wildest dreams, as an 11-year-old, slam a teacher into a wall, walk in the room, and wanted to make a scene and have everybody laugh because I told them all what I just did. And I just felt like I'm not a human. It's time to go.

While these three teachers cited student issues as the main reason they left, three other participants made a point to tell me that the students were not the issue for them. Lisa, a retiree, explained that she would continue to work with students in some capacity, despite leaving the classroom. She said, "I think I'm probably going to sub next year because it's not the kids." Maria shared that her relationship with the students left her feeling conflicted when choosing to quit:

> Leaving was kind of bittersweet, because in my final year of teaching I had some of the coolest kids, and I knew they would be devastated when I told them I wouldn't be their teacher after that year. I still wanted to give them a great experience, even though I knew it was taking so much of me to do that. In general, it wasn't the students at all.

Heather claimed that it was working with the students that motivated her to stay as long as she did. She explained, "What always carried me through was the love of the kids and feeling like I'm touching their lives and making things better for them."

Erosion of Professionalism

Three of the participants cited an erosion of professionalism as the deciding factor contributing to burnout that led them to quit teaching. Pattie decided that the way society viewed teachers made hope for the profession a lost cause, and that she would rather do something else where society treated her like a professional:

> I didn't see the end. I didn't see it changing. Just the kind of blatant disrespect for boundaries with, like your time and your professionalism being constantly questioned. I

> was like, I don't want to be in a job, basically, that makes me feel like an idiot… It was more about the title for me. People just not assuming what I know based off me just being a teacher.

Brittany shared that a major concern for her was the lack of respect she garnered, stating, "I would say not being treated like a professional by students, parents, and administration. There's a lack of respect for what teachers do." She also claimed that COVID exacerbated this, saying, "A lot of the societal changes we see happening worsened a lot faster as a result of COVID." She explained that she had actually intended to get out teaching sooner, but the pandemic prevented her from doing so:

> I started looking to get out in January of 2020, because I had nothing keeping me here, and then the pandemic happened, and I felt kind of stuck. It's hard for teachers to transition out of teaching, and I'm realizing that now, as I apply for other jobs, making our skills transferable. So, I gave up on that, and that was when I came to terms with okay, I'm just gonna finish up these 10 years.

For Maria, the continuing effort to fight for administration to value her position was the deciding factor, as she shared earlier about having to explain to her principals why their decisions harmed her band enrollment. She explained that politics was also a major factor, concerned that she might lose her job over parent comments. She further explained that this erosion of professionalism made leaving education an inevitability:

> It was probably inevitable, because I had lost the joy, and I probably hadn't felt it for several years. But it's easy to sign a contract and say, "I'll do it for 1 more year, and maybe things will feel different next year." I just couldn't do it anymore.

Unsustainable Workload

The remaining four participants cited unsustainable workload as the deciding factor to leave. Like Brittany, Heather felt that COVID had exacerbated issues in education, but pointed more to the workload, saying, “COVID was a major setback. There were too many demands on teachers to supply data, and not enough teaching and learning.” She also stuck with teaching through the pandemic, like Brittany, albeit for a different reason. She explained, “I wanted to have a year where the kids were not wearing masks, that felt pretty normal to go out on. I know how much I’m gonna miss them.”

Lisa, like Pattie, took a moment of reflection and decided that things were not going to change in education, and that the amount of work would only get worse:

> I reflected on the next year. It's not gonna change. It's not like, okay, you're in a rough spot but next year will be better. We're gonna still have tons of kids. They're gonna still be giving us more stuff to do. I don't think any of the things that are required are gonna really change out in the next couple of years. And it was like, do I really wanna keep doing this?

She said that she too wanted to stick through teaching during the pandemic, explaining, “I was not going to have COVID be the end of my career. I wasn’t going to end it on that note.”

Nadine also felt that the workload had become unsustainable, and that she did not feel like she would be able to keep up with it. She pointed to a dramatic shift towards using more technology in the classroom as the turning point:

> It was very hard for me. And technology is still a challenge for me. I don’t like it. I know that I have to learn it because it's a necessary tool. You can't avoid it. But yeah, that was. That was very difficult for me. That was the beginning of the end for me.

In Sally's case, the increased workload had eroded her joy, similar to Maria, which led her to seek changes:

> It just got to the point where what was on my plate was bigger than any of the satisfaction that I was getting from it. And I mean, I questioned it. I listen to a lot of podcasts, and as a researcher, I read a lot. Like what's going on here? Some things I looked at were teaching a different grade level. Well, I was teaching two grade levels. So, it wasn't the grade level. I had already switched grade levels. I looked at changing schools. Well, I have already changed schools, so it wasn't a matter of changing schools. Changing counties. I've already done that. I went through the steps in the process. I needed something different in my life, and it came at a time when I could retire, even though it was for very little pay.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the main findings from my study. I first provided the results of the MBI-ES to show the levels of burnout that the participants experienced. I then reported the themes that emerged, organized by the research question they answered. Throughout their stories, these teachers painted a grim picture of the direction that education is heading. The way they described their daily experiences made it feel like they were fighting a losing battle all the way up to the end, where they finally gave up hope and needed to leave. Whether they experienced joy at never needing to return or sorrow at the loss of a career they loved, all these teachers were set up for failure by a lack of leadership and the various policies and practices currently in place. In the next chapter, I will present the conclusions based on these findings, implications for policy and practice, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand what factors in the post-shutdown pandemic environment contributed to burnout in veteran teachers, and why some of these teachers subsequently decided to leave the profession. This chapter includes a summary of the major findings and a discussion related to the literature on teacher burnout, using the Job-Demands Resources (JDR) Theory as a framework. Also included are the major implications for policymakers and school/district leaders. The chapter ends with recommendations for future research and a summary.

Summary of Major Findings

In this section, I will summarize the major findings of my study, organized by the three research questions and the results of the Maslach Burnout Inventory Educators Survey (MBI-ES).

MBI-ES Findings

When responding to the background survey, all participants self-reported feeling burnout at the end of their careers. On the MBI-ES, all participants scored high on the emotional exhaustion scale, while there were mixed results for depersonalization and personal accomplishment. Participants with high emotional exhaustion, high depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment experienced the highest levels of burnout. Results of the MBI-ES were mostly consistent with responses during the interviews, although some comments were at odds with the depersonalization and personal accomplishment scores.

Research Question 1

Four themes emerged when analyzing the lived experiences of these teachers: mental and physical symptoms, negative emotions, pervasive thoughts, and coping behaviors. These themes describe the subjective experience of burnout that these veteran teachers had returning to the classroom following the pandemic shutdown. Participants described experiencing consistent mental and physical symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety, and stomachaches, because of the high stress they dealt with daily. They also described difficulty in keeping up with the work and explained that this resulted in negative outcomes professionally, such as forgetting to do important tasks and becoming disorganized.

In addition to mental and physical symptoms, participants also experienced a range of negative emotions in response to the work environment, such as sadness, anger, fear, and guilt. Participants felt these emotions regularly and described feeling them not only when present in the classroom, but also when thinking about work. Many also described a loss of the joy that was initially present earlier in their careers and that they no longer experienced.

Accompanying these negative emotions were pervasive thoughts about their own perceived abilities and the state of the education profession. Participants shared thoughts of helplessness and ineffectiveness, as they described their inability to keep up with the work. They also consistently expressed that the issues they were experiencing would not improve, and that education as a career would only get worse.

Finally, participants described developing coping behaviors as they continued to experience high levels of stress. They described disengaging from the classroom and the school environment, as they switched to using more worksheets and refused to take on additional school

responsibilities. In some instances, participants disengaged from the students, no longer showing interest in their personal lives, and blaming them for their burnout.

Research Question 2

Four themes also emerged when analyzing the factors that contributed to burnout: unsustainable workload, lack of coherence, lack of student accountability, and erosion of professionalism. These themes represent the main patterns of meaning that emerged when participants described what contributed to burnout in the last few years of their careers. Participants felt that the amount of work required to successfully teach was more than they could complete in the workweek. They frequently mentioned time as something they did not have and explained that they consistently needed to work outside of contract hours to be prepared for work the following day. Participants described the workload as increasing each year with much of that work being non-teaching tasks, such as meetings, duties, and testing. They also pointed to class size and makeup as factors saying that there were too many students with highly diverse needs in one classroom, and that it was not possible to give each student the attention necessary for their success.

In addition to workload, participants identified student issues and lack of student accountability as burnout factors. Student academic issues were a concern, such as apathy and low-quality work. Participants shared that districts were not holding students accountable for their academics, blaming the lack of a rigorous grading system, the absence of practice, and the refusal to retain failing students. They were also concerned with students not receiving additional help, describing the process as arduous and a waste of time. Along with academics, participants also shared student misbehavior as a major concern, saying that students failed to show respect and participate in class. Again, participants pointed to a lack of accountability, explaining that

school leaders and parents were failing to hold students responsible for their actions. Lack of administrative support was the largest concern, with school leaders not being present around the building, failing to show up to classes when teachers needed their support, and failing to address the causes of the behaviors.

Along with student issues and workload, participants identified erosion of professionalism as a contributor to burnout. They felt like society no longer respected the teaching profession or viewed teachers as experts, despite having a license and advanced degrees. Lack of autonomy was an issue, as districts told participants what to teach, how to teach it, and in some cases, what to say during the lesson. Lack of input was also a concern, with teachers feeling that school and district leaders did not seek their input, and when they did, they did not incorporate it into decision-making. Participants felt political pressure from society and parents, saying that they could not choose certain instructional materials or discuss certain topics for fear of retaliation. They also shared that politics were especially concerning now with an emphasis placed on parents' rights. Participants shared that they felt devalued in society and that the reputation of being a teacher was negative, with this change occurring throughout their careers. They also felt devalued by administrators who did not develop a relationship with them or undermined their decisions. Finally, participants did not feel appropriately compensated for the work they did, sharing that they were frequently asked to work outside of contract hours with no payment.

The final theme in the factors that contributed to burnout was a lack of coherence. Participants explained there was a lack of consistency in school and district expectations, and that leaders made changes constantly. They also shared that while COVID necessitated many of the changes at the time, it has exacerbated underlying issues that already existed in education.

Participants felt that when leadership made changes, they made them quickly, lacked purpose, and they did not communicate expectations clearly. They felt that many of the programs that districts implemented existed only to check boxes and did not benefit the students.

Research Question 3

Three of the four themes that emerged in question two also emerged in question three, with lack of cohesion being the only theme that participants did not point to as their reason for exiting the profession. I asked participants how they made the decision to leave education, and while it was a combination of factors that led to burnout, they each identified a deciding factor that led them to exit the profession. Three participants pointed to a lack of student accountability, with two sharing that the behaviors were so bad that their anxiety was negatively affecting their home lives, prompting their partners to ask them to quit. One shared that a particularly powerful incident with students led her to retire early. Three participants cited erosion of professionalism as their reason for quitting, feeling that society no longer valued teachers, and that parents held the power within the schools. The remaining four participants, all of which retired early, cited the unsustainable workload as their reason for leaving. Three of the four mentioned that COVID had exacerbated this issue, shifting the focus to learning loss and increasing the amount of data they needed to collect. Some of the participants across groups mentioned that while COVID did make things more difficult, they had stayed until things returned to normal before leaving.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, I will draw conclusions about veteran teacher burnout following the pandemic by discussing the findings and how they relate to the literature.

An Increase in Job Demands Caused Excess Strain

In reviewing the results of the MBI-ES and the findings from research question one, participants all reported experiencing excess strain. Persistent strain can lead to burnout, with consequences being exhaustion, job-related anxiety, health complaints, and so forth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), all of which participants experienced. Participants also experienced psychological effects such as helplessness, negative affect, and low self-efficacy, and physical symptoms such as fatigue and gastrointestinal issues, all of which are consistent with the literature on teacher burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Kahill, 1988; Maslach et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015).

According to the JDR model, strain develops when job demands are high and resources are low, leading to additional exertion needed to manage the demands while attempting to maintain job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). There is evidence of this throughout the participants' experiences, as they talked about not being able to keep up with the demands and not feeling like they had what they needed to get their jobs done, whether it be planning time or additional assistance. Most of the demands mentioned by participants were non-teaching related, and they described these as increasing yearly, distracting them from being able to teach, which is consistent with the literature (Glazer, 2018; Maslach et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2001; Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014). High levels of strain also explain the behaviors that participants developed to cope with burnout. To reduce the strain of dealing with high demands, teachers will use coping strategies such as absenteeism, lower productivity, less investment in the job, less involvement in classroom activities, and attrition (Farber, 1991; Maslach & Leiter, 1999; Maslach et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017).

Job Demands Increased While Resources Stayed the Same or Decreased

Throughout the study, participants claimed that the job demands continued to increase from year to year, while available resources either decreased or stayed the same. Job resources are negatively related to burnout, meaning that increasing the number of resources can reduce burnout symptoms (Crawford et al., 2010). Therefore, when job demands are high and resources are low, this can lead to the highest levels of burnout (Bakker et al., 2005). Additionally, since resources have a buffering effect on strain and can help employees cope with demands, removing resources needed can make demands even more stressful (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001).

Participants provided multiple examples of district and school leaders increasing the number of demands, while simultaneously failing to provide resources to meet those demands. Curriculum coordinators increased the amount of data collection taking place in the classroom, while also increasing the number of meetings needed to discuss these data, reducing planning time for teachers. When students misbehaved in the classroom, administrators expected them to handle it, removing the resource of administrative support and placing extra demand on the teachers to manage difficult student interactions. Leaders chose to implement new programs without clearly explaining their purpose or benefit, while also not providing useful and timely professional development to support implementation within the schools, placing the burden of learning new tools on the teachers. Finally, parents would go to the school board or administrators with demands, and administrators would not support the teachers, creating more work for the teacher.

The Pandemic Exacerbated Existing Issues in Education

All the themes that emerged in question two are present within the literature, most of which predate the pandemic. Table 5 includes the factors discussed in this study and the relevant literature that supports them.

Table 5

Burnout Factors Found in Related Literature

Burnout Factor	Supporting Literature
Workload Time Pressure Class Size and Composition Non-Teaching Workload Work Outside Contract Hours	Antoniou et al., 2006; Byrne, 1994; Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Demerouti & Bakker, 2008; Hakanen et al., 2006; Kokkinos, 2007; Maslach et al., 2018; Pressley, 2021; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Scott et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015
Erosion of Professionalism Lack of Autonomy Lack of Input Lack of Compensation Political Pressure Lack of Value	Glazer, 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Maslach et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015
Lack of Student Accountability Academic Issues Behavior Issues	Antoniou et al., 2006; Byrne, 1994; Ferguson et al., 2012; Hakanen et al., 2006; Kokkinos, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015
Lack of Coherence Lack of Consistency Lack of Purpose & Clarity	Chan et al., 2021; Glazer, 2018; Raducu & Stănculescu, 2022b; Räsänen et al., 2020;

During the height of the pandemic, school districts shuttered their doors and transitioned to a fully virtual setting, with all students having a device at home, and teachers delivering instruction remotely. As expected, this created new demands for teachers, including having to learn multiple new technology tools in a short period, adjusting in-person lessons to virtual ones,

job ambiguity, and so forth, on top of having concerns about their health (Kim et al., 2022; Pressley, 2021; Răducu & Stănculescu, 2022b). While participants did mention struggles during the shutdown, they focused more on the aftermath of the pandemic. Now that their districts had spent the money to acquire devices for all students, there was no way they would return to the way things were before the pandemic. Teachers discussed continuing to learn new programs as their districts pushed for increased data collection to combat learning loss during the shutdown. Parents had more access to their child's teacher than ever before and were able to view their grades and the work that their teacher assigned at any point. The profession had new demands, and leadership did not provide teachers with the resources to keep up, including time and meaningful professional development (Sokal et al., 2020).

Having shared this, participants also explained that while these demands were challenging, this was a continuing trend in education. The pandemic exacerbated underlying issues already within education and was not the source of their burnout. Teachers already felt that the work on their plates was increasing leading up to the pandemic, and that it reached an unsustainable level before the shutdown. Districts were already pushing new programs and initiatives that lacked coherence in implementation, just to introduce more new initiatives a few years later. Student issues were already a concern, but with a new push toward self-care for all, districts made more excuses for students as to why they would not hold them accountable. In my own experience as a teacher, there was a reprieve in demands placed on teachers following the return to in-person instruction, as the district did not want to overload teachers and push them out. However, that reprieve has now passed, and the district placed even more demands on teachers, expecting them to make up for the years of learning lost by students.

Society Does Not Treat Teachers as Professionals

In addition to the increasing workload, participants also pointed to a lack of student accountability and erosion of professionalism as their reasons for exiting the field. While student misbehavior was a major concern, these participants explained that even when they tried to involve parents and administrators in behavior management, there was little to no involvement. Additionally, they felt the policies and procedures in place by the district, state, and federal governments hindered their ability to do their jobs. The various factors within these two themes indicate that at all levels, no one trusts teachers to perform their jobs. In addition to working with students, teachers find satisfaction in professional challenge and growth, professional efficacy, autonomy, and variation and unpredictability (Scott et al., 2001; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018), and when these are absent, job satisfaction decreases. Participants felt that their degrees and their years of experience should afford them respect from the community. However, the reality is that those outside of the profession without expertise are the ones making many of the decisions.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As this was not a large, randomized quantitative study, I cannot generalize the experiences of these teachers to the population of teachers in America. However, these findings highlight that there are many concerns that teachers have about the state of education that leaders at the school and district levels, and policymakers within the local, state, and federal governments need to address. In this section, I will provide recommendations for policy and practice related to the findings and supported by the literature. Table 6 includes a summary of my recommendations.

Table 6

Recommendations for Policymakers and Leaders

Findings	Related Recommendations	Supporting Literature
An increase in job demands caused excess strain	Reduce the workload for teachers	Lawrence et al., 2019; Madigan & Kim, 2021
Job demands increased while resources stayed the same or decreased	Increase the resources available to teachers	Hakanen et al., 2006; Klusmann et al., 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2018
Society does not treat teachers as professionals	Give teachers more autonomy in the classroom	Hakanen et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2015
	Increase the amount of input teachers give and use that input in decision-making	Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Räsänen et al, 2020; UNESCO, 2022b

Recommendation 1

Teachers reported increasing demands each year, along with shifting expectations. Each additional demand placed on teachers increases the amount of strain and can eventually lead to burnout. Therefore, the first recommendation I suggest for policymakers and school/district leaders is to reduce the workload of teachers, specifically the non-teaching related workload. Additional tasks placed on teachers such as testing and extra meetings can be distracting and reduce the amount of time teachers spend with their students actively teaching and remediating. Reducing the demands on teachers can be highly effective in reducing burnout (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Focusing specifically on reducing the non-teaching-related workload can be more effective, as these tasks contribute more to burnout than teaching-related tasks (Lawrence et al., 2019). Since COVID resulted in an increase in data collection and analysis, school leaders such as curriculum coordinators should reduce the amount of data collection and meetings required to

analyze the data. Policymakers should reduce the amount of testing required to give teachers more instructional days to deliver the content. This would reduce the time pressure created by the assessments as well, since teachers would have the last few weeks of school to deliver the content instead of reviewing for an assessment. Administrators should reduce demands by limiting the number of staff meetings and by limiting required lesson plans to those teachers who are on an academic plan.

Recommendation 2

The literature supports that burnout is most likely to occur when demands outstrip resources (Maslach et al., 2001) and that low resources can have a doubling effect of increasing strain and lowering motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In this study, participants experienced an increased number of demands while resources stayed the same, and in some cases decreased. Therefore, my second recommendation is to increase the number of resources that teachers have, especially when adding new demands. For school administrators, being more supportive of their staff can diminish burnout and have a positive effect on engagement (Klusmann et al., 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). This can include being more supportive in conversations with parents, increasing building presence, and helping teachers develop strategies for handling student discipline issues. Administrators can also increase planning time by helping find substitutes for occasional half-day planning. For building and district leaders, designing a meaningful professional development program can help increase engagement (Hakanen et al., 2006). Any time leaders make decisions, they should clearly communicate their purpose to teachers, along with providing a timeline for implementation. Leaders should provide targeted professional development to give teachers the resources needed for successful implementation. Finally, policymakers should provide financial and physical resources when they implement new

policies to help districts hire staff and make the changes without requiring teachers to take on additional demands.

Recommendation 3

Teachers reported that they lacked autonomy within their classrooms, and that they were not able to choose specific instructional strategies or materials. Therefore, my third recommendation is to increase the amount of autonomy that teachers have in their classrooms. Teachers see autonomy as a resource and a source of job satisfaction, so giving them more choices can increase their motivation and decrease their strain (Hakanen et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). While teachers cannot make all the choices, they should make the instructional decisions, when possible, since they are the content and instructional experts. Unit pacing guides can help direct new teachers early in their careers, but district leaders should give teachers choices in which order they deliver the intended learning outcomes within a unit, the activities they choose to teach content, and the structure of their lessons. School leaders should focus their observations on the teacher's pedagogy and evidence of student engagement, rather than using them as a means of holding teachers accountable to the pacing guide.

Recommendation 4

Teachers reported that they were not involved in many district and state-level decisions, and that when leadership requested their input, the decisions they made did not reflect that input. Therefore, my fourth recommendation is to give teachers more involvement in decision-making at all levels. Räsänen et al. (2020) and the UNESCO (2022b) call for teacher participation in decision-making and a balancing of top-down-bottom-up dialogue to promote autonomous teachers and improve the status of the teaching profession. When district leaders make decisions that impact the classroom, they should include teacher representatives on committees or send out

surveys to collect teacher input. They should consider this input when making decisions. Additionally, building administrators can take teacher input to leadership meetings to ensure that district leaders hear their voices. Principals can use the Hoy and Tarter Simplified Shared Decision-Making model to ensure they include teachers in decisions when they have expertise to offer and a stake in the decision (Hoy & Tarter, 2008). Policymakers at all levels should seek the input of education lobbyists and weigh this input against the input of the public.

Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation served as an exploration into the factors that contributed to burnout in veteran teachers following the pandemic, and their subsequent decision to leave the profession. The pandemic necessitated many quick changes to the profession, and this study will help researchers and practitioners understand the influences these changes have had on teacher burnout. Between the limitations of my study and questions that arose during data analysis, I have multiple recommendations for future research that will help widen our understanding of teacher burnout following the pandemic.

First, I would recommend investigating the differences in burnout experiences between teachers who chose to retire early and those who quit education before retirement. While all teachers in my study reported feeling burnout at the end of their careers, those teachers who quit before retirement experienced higher burnout levels than those who retired earlier than they had intended before the pandemic. Those teachers who quit also pointed towards student issues and erosion of professionalism as their major burnout factors, while the retirees pointed towards the unsustainable workload. It is unclear whether this finding is related to a limitation in my study design, and there are mixed findings on whether burnout increases with tenure (Dias et al., 2021;

Graham, 1999) or decreases with tenure (Antoniou et al., 2006), warranting further investigation into these two groups.

Second, I recommend investigating the factors contributing to burnout in administrators following the pandemic. This study focused on teacher burnout, and I made suggestions on how administrators could reduce it, but I did not account for administrator burnout. Since the pandemic brought many changes to the field, administrators have also had to adjust to these new demands. Administrator burnout is also a phenomenon with a large body of literature, and it would be helpful for district leaders to understand the factors contributing to their burnout following the pandemic.

Third, I did not include novice teachers in my sample because burnout in novice teachers has been well-documented in the literature. However, with the pandemic adding new demands and the hiring of so many new teachers in response to the teacher shortage, this warrants an investigation into the factors contributing to burnout in these new teachers. Changes to legislation reducing the barriers to becoming a teacher also mean that teachers may be coming in less prepared to meet the demands of teaching. An investigation into this group could help administrators and school district leaders plan targeted induction programs aimed at preventing burnout in these new teachers. This research could also help state educational organizations and universities better prepare preservice teachers to contend with the factors contributing most to burnout.

Fourth, I recommend investigating the causal mechanism that leads burnt-out teachers to decide they need to leave the profession. While this study focused more on the factors leading to burnout, teachers did describe their experience of attrition, providing some insight into their decision-making process. Participants described their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and coping

behaviors that developed as they experienced burnout. They also described the environmental factors that contributed to this burnout. A future study could analyze these teachers' decision-making processes using Social Cognitive Theory as a framework, studying the cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors that work together to drive the decision to leave. In addition, a study that explored the experiences and decision making of those who were burned out but elected to remain in teaching would be instructive.

Fifth, I recommend investigating if there are differences in burnout experiences between male and female teachers. All of the participants in this study were female, which was not an intentional decision. Another study that is more gender-balanced could provide a wider perspective and give voice to a subset of teachers that were missing from this research. There may be differences in how men and women react to burnout, or in the factors that contribute to burnout more strongly in these different groups.

Sixth, I recommend investigating if there are generational differences in burnout experiences. The participants spanned multiple generations, including boomers, generation x, and millennials. A future study could investigate if teachers from different generations experience the same burnout factors or if they use the same coping mechanisms to handle the added stress. There were also differences in levels of burnout between the teachers who quit, many of whom were younger, and those who retired early, indicating that age might have played a role in their experiences in addition to tenure.

A final recommendation for future research would be to investigate if there are differences in the incidence of burnout in rural versus urban schools. Participants were in various school contexts, and it could be important to understand if this affected the different resources or demands they experienced. This research would also place a greater emphasis on the impact of

school setting on burnout, as not all schools face the same challenges, and not all interventions will necessarily be successful at reducing burnout across all contexts.

Summary

This study aimed to understand the factors contributing to veteran teacher burnout in the post-pandemic environment, and their subsequent decision to leave the profession. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews, this dissertation identified four major factors that contributed to the burnout of these teachers: unsustainable workloads, lack of coherence, lack of student accountability, and erosion of professionalism. The findings from this study produced four conclusions. First, job demands for teachers are excessive and are leading to increased strain. Second, increases in job demands have not been accompanied by increased resources. Third, the pandemic exacerbated already underlying issues within education. Finally, teachers feel society no longer treats them as professionals.

In conclusion, policymakers and leaders within education must implement several changes to turn this trend around and fix the teacher shortage. The typical solutions that states have employed have aimed at increasing the number of teachers entering the profession by removing barriers to licensure, making it easier to transition to teaching from other careers, and bolstering teacher preparation programs. Although lowering the standards for becoming a teacher might increase the number of teachers entering the field, it does not resolve the issues that are causing so many teachers to leave. This revolving door of teachers means constant hiring, making it nearly impossible for schools to create a cohesive educational program. It also means constant spending on recruitment and training for new teachers, just for those teachers to burn out and leave in a few short years. Now is the time for good policy and strong leadership.

Leaders must make changes to retain high-quality teachers, or the quality of education in America is going to suffer irrevocably.

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