
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Emotional and Professional Challenges in Remote Teaching: Examining Teacher Well-Being, Burnout, and Socio-Emotional Learning Through the Job Demands-Resources Model

Benjamin Boison¹✉, Anne Burke²

¹Director, Centre for Learning and Teaching Innovation, Aurora College, Canada

²Professor, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

Corresponding Author: Benjamin Boison **E-mail:** benboison1@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an abrupt shift to online learning, significantly increasing both the professional and emotional demands placed on educators. This qualitative case study examines the experiences of seven elementary school staff members in Newfoundland and Labrador who participated in the ADVOST project, focusing on how they navigated the challenges of remote instruction and the coping strategies they employed to maintain their well-being. Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, this study explores how high job demands—including increased workload, digital adaptation, and the emotional labour of student support—affected teacher well-being and how job resources helped mitigate stress and sustain engagement. Findings indicate that emotional exhaustion and burnout were prevalent, particularly due to the blurring of professional and personal boundaries, extended work hours, and the need for continuous student support. However, educators also demonstrated resilience through strategic adaptation, drawing on peer collaboration, professional experience, and structured socio-emotional learning (SEL) practices to manage stress. SEL emerged as a critical job resource, helping educators regulate emotions, sustain motivation, and foster engagement in digital learning environments. Educators who incorporated structured emotional check-ins, student engagement strategies, and relational pedagogy reported greater well-being and job satisfaction. Despite these benefits, formal SEL-focused professional development was inconsistent, with many educators relying on self-directed learning rather than structured institutional training. Beyond individual strategies, the study highlights the importance of institutional support in fostering sustainable teaching environments. Educators who had access to professional collaboration, administrative backing, and clear policies on workload management were better positioned to navigate remote instruction. As digital and hybrid learning models continue to shape the future of education, this study calls for evidence-based, SEL-focused professional development initiatives that provide practical strategies for managing emotional labor, preventing burnout, and strengthening teacher resilience. By situating teacher well-being alongside instructional effectiveness, this research contributes to Canadian and international discussions on educator sustainability, offering actionable solutions for improving institutional support, professional learning opportunities, and long-term resilience in digital education settings.

| KEYWORDS

Teacher Well-Being, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL); Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, Remote Teaching

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The shift to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most significant transformations in modern education, fundamentally reshaping how teachers engaged with students and delivered instruction. Practically overnight, educators had to integrate digital tools, redesign lesson plans, and maintain student engagement in a virtual setting, often with limited training and institutional support (Reyes, 2022). While this transition was necessary to ensure continuity in

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education, it also intensified job demands, including increased workload, technological adaptation, and heightened emotional labor. At the same time, job resources—such as peer collaboration, professional learning opportunities, and administrative guidance—were often constrained, leading to widespread professional strain and uncertainty (Kotowski et al., 2022).

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) provides a valuable framework for understanding the stressors and coping mechanisms teachers experienced during this period. JD-R posits that workplace stress emerges when job demands exceed available resources, increasing the risk of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and professional disengagement. The sudden move to online learning disrupted the balance between job demands (e.g., extended work hours, pedagogical shifts, and socio-emotional responsibilities) and job resources, contributing to increased fatigue and professional dissatisfaction (Trammell & LaForge, 2017). Many educators faced challenges in maintaining student engagement, adapting assessment strategies, and managing blurred work-life boundaries, while also providing emotional support to students in an unfamiliar digital landscape.

Beyond instructional challenges, the shift to remote education also reshaped the relational dynamics between teachers, students, and their families. Research indicates that educators found themselves providing not only academic instruction but also emotional reassurance, as students and families navigated new stressors associated with home-based learning (Friedman, 2020). Parents, in turn, grappled with the dual burden of overseeing their children's education while balancing work responsibilities, often relying on teachers for both academic guidance and emotional support (Pastoril et al., 2024). These broader socio-emotional challenges reinforce the urgent need for structured professional support systems to help educators manage their evolving roles in digital education.

Teacher well-being is a critical factor in effective instruction and student success, yet the pandemic amplified emotional pressures, placing educators at a higher risk of burnout and compassion fatigue. Burnout refers to chronic emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from prolonged occupational stress, while compassion fatigue describes the emotional toll of continuously supporting others through distressing experiences (Walter & Fox, 2021). Studies suggest that teachers struggled to maintain engagement in virtual classrooms, where traditional cues—such as body language, spontaneous student interactions, and informal check-ins—were significantly diminished (Reyes, 2022). This absence of interpersonal connection made it more difficult for educators to assess student comprehension, provide individualized support, and sustain a sense of classroom community.

One of the most effective protective factors against burnout and compassion fatigue is socio-emotional learning (SEL). Traditionally recognized as a framework for student well-being and emotional regulation, SEL has increasingly been acknowledged as a job resource for educators, helping them manage stress, build resilience, and sustain professional motivation (Billett et al., 2023). Teachers who actively incorporate SEL strategies—such as mindfulness, emotional self-regulation, and peer collaboration—report lower stress levels, greater job satisfaction, and improved engagement in digital classrooms (Kim et al., 2024). However, while SEL has strong potential as a burnout prevention tool, many educators lacked access to structured SEL-focused professional development, leading them to implement these strategies informally and independently (Stelitano & Steiner, 2021).

This study explores how elementary school teachers and non-teaching staff in Newfoundland and Labrador navigated the emotional, professional, and technological demands of online teaching during the pandemic. Using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, we examine how job resources—such as SEL strategies, peer collaboration, and professional support—helped mitigate the challenges of remote instruction. By incorporating both teaching and support staff perspectives, this research contributes to broader discussions on educator resilience, burnout prevention, and the role of structured SEL in sustaining professional well-being.

As education systems continue evolving in response to technological advancements and new learning models, prioritizing teacher well-being and socio-emotional learning will be essential. Ensuring that educators have access to structured SEL training, targeted professional development, and institutional support is crucial for preventing burnout, fostering engagement, and promoting emotionally sustainable learning environments. By situating teacher well-being at the center of educational policy and professional development initiatives, institutions can create a more resilient, engaged, and empowered teaching workforce that is well-prepared to navigate the complexities of digital and hybrid learning.

2. The Shift to Remote Teaching and Its Impact on Teacher Well-Being

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented shift in the educational landscape, requiring teachers to transition to remote instruction with limited preparation and support. While digital learning environments offered opportunities for continuity in education, they also introduced significant pedagogical and psychological challenges. Teachers were required to restructure their lesson plans, master new digital platforms, and maintain student engagement, often without adequate training or institutional guidance (Zou et al., 2021). Beyond instructional changes, some Canadian educators also assumed new socio-emotional responsibilities, as they became frontline responders to students' emotional and mental health struggles in an increasingly disconnected learning environment (Spadafora et al., 2025).

Teachers reported heightened emotional exhaustion, often working extended hours to adjust content delivery, troubleshoot technical difficulties, and provide one-on-one student support. In many cases, these additional efforts were made without sufficient administrative support or professional collaboration, leading to increased stress and diminished job satisfaction (Granger et al. 2023; Sims, 2022). Research indicates that excessive workload expectations are associated with lower confidence and job dissatisfaction, contributing to burnout (Rodriguez, 2020). Additionally, studies have found that job satisfaction is negatively associated with emotional exhaustion, underscoring the impact of inadequate support on teacher well-being (Wang et al., 2024). Research highlights that when work-related stressors increase without corresponding institutional support, educators face a heightened risk of burnout and disengagement (Koenig et al., 2018).

This imbalance aligns with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which posits that job strain emerges when job demands (workload, emotional labor, role ambiguity) exceed job resources (training, peer support, emotional resilience strategies). The transition to online learning presented a high-demand, low-resource scenario, where teachers were expected to maintain instructional quality and student well-being without adequate tools or professional development opportunities. This study applies the JD-R framework to explore how teachers navigated these challenges and what resources were available—or lacking—to support their well-being.

3. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model: Concept, Relevance, and Application

3.1 Theoretical Foundations of JD-R

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), provides a framework for understanding how workplace conditions impact employee well-being and job performance. The model proposes that all work environments consist of two key factors:

- Job Demands, which require sustained effort and, if excessive, contribute to stress and burnout.
- Job Resources, which support employees in managing their workload, fostering engagement, and sustaining professional motivation.

The JD-R model suggests that when job demands outweigh available resources, employees experience exhaustion and disengagement. Conversely, when job resources are abundant and strategically applied, they buffer against work-related stress and contribute to higher professional satisfaction and productivity (Bakker et al., 2014).

3.2 Relevance of JD-R to Teaching and Remote Learning

Teaching is a high-demand profession, requiring intellectual, emotional, and relational engagement. Educators must manage diverse learning needs, respond to student behavior, and balance administrative expectations, all while fostering a positive classroom environment. The JD-R framework is particularly relevant to education because teachers' effectiveness and well-being depend on the availability of job resources that mitigate professional stress (Hakanen et al., 2006).

Remote learning further intensified these stressors by eliminating many of the traditional job resources available in face-to-face settings, such as peer collaboration, informal student check-ins, and direct classroom management. This study uses JD-R to explore how teachers' access (or lack thereof) to job resources shaped their experiences of burnout, compassion fatigue, and socio-emotional learning (SEL) practices in virtual teaching environments.

4. Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Teaching

4.1 Burnout in Remote Teaching

Burnout is a psychological state of exhaustion resulting from prolonged workplace stress, characterized by emotional fatigue, depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The shift to online instruction increased burnout rates among educators, particularly due to heavier workloads, technology adaptation, and the blurring of personal and professional boundaries (Topçu et al., 2023).

Within JD-R, burnout occurs when high job demands (workload, emotional labor, constant digital connectivity) outstrip available resources (training, administrative support, emotional coping mechanisms) (Bakker et al., 2008). Studies show that teachers without access to peer collaboration and structured digital pedagogy training were more likely to report feelings of exhaustion, detachment from students, and reduced teaching motivation (Fute et al., 2022).

4.2 Compassion Fatigue in Teachers

Compassion fatigue occurs when educators become emotionally depleted from consistently supporting students facing personal hardship (Figley, 1995). This phenomenon is particularly relevant in online learning, where many students faced increased anxiety, socio-economic instability, and mental health struggles during the pandemic (Kishimoto & Asano, 2024).

JD-R suggests that compassion fatigue emerges when teachers' emotional labour (a job demand) is not counterbalanced by adequate support systems (job resources). Without emotional coping strategies, teachers exposed to student trauma on an ongoing basis experience mental depletion and disengagement from their roles.

5. The Role of Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a Job Resource

While SEL is often framed as a student-focused intervention, research increasingly recognizes its benefits for teachers, particularly in managing stress and sustaining engagement in demanding work environments (Sandilos et al., 2022). Teachers who apply SEL principles, such as emotional regulation and relationship-building, report lower stress levels and improved classroom management. Particularly, in virtual teaching settings, where teacher-student interactions are often less personal, SEL provides strategies to maintain emotional connections, helping educators foster engagement despite physical distance (Stelitano & Steiner, 2021).

From a JD-R perspective, SEL serves as a critical job resource that helps teachers manage emotional labour and mitigate the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Studies show that teachers trained in SEL experience reduced emotional exhaustion and higher job satisfaction, as SEL provides practical strategies for handling student distress while maintaining professional well-being (Brackett, 2019). By integrating SEL into their teaching practices, educators not only support student learning but also enhance their own resilience, making SEL an essential tool for sustaining teacher motivation and engagement.

5. The Need for SEL-Focused Professional Development

Despite its benefits, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) remains underutilized in teacher training programs, with many educators lacking formal instruction on integrating SEL into their professional practice. Research indicates that teachers' perceptions of SEL and their self-efficacy in teaching it are crucial for effective implementation (Jomaa et al., 2023). Teachers who believe in the importance of SEL and feel confident in their ability to teach it are more likely to integrate SEL practices into their classrooms. However, many educators rely on informal learning or self-developed strategies, leading to inconsistent implementation. From a JD-R perspective, SEL training functions as a protective job resource, equipping teachers with tools to handle emotional demands while maintaining engagement and well-being (Bakker et al., 2008). Without structured professional development in SEL, educators may struggle to manage the socio-emotional challenges of their role, increasing their risk of burnout. Expanding SEL-focused training in professional learning programs could strengthen teacher resilience, ensuring that educators have the necessary skills to support both their students and themselves in increasingly complex learning environments.

6. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how elementary school staff in Newfoundland and Labrador navigated the emotional, professional, and technological demands of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. A case study design is particularly suited for research seeking to understand complex, real-world experiences within a specific context (Yin, 2018). Given the deeply personal and evolving nature of teacher well-being and socio-emotional learning (SEL) in online classrooms, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of both individual and collective experiences.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth emotional challenges not previously encountered in traditional classroom settings, intensifying teacher stress, isolation, and emotional exhaustion (Chen et al., 2025). Teachers bore such inherent pressures and had to adapt quickly to digital instruction while simultaneously managing their own well-being and the heightened emotional needs of students. The lack of physical interaction, increased workload, and blurred work-life boundaries created a unique emotional toll, leaving many teachers struggling to balance professional expectations with personal resilience.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) serves as the theoretical foundation for this study, providing a lens to examine how teachers balanced high job demands (e.g., increased workload, emotional labor, digital adaptation) with available job resources (e.g., SEL strategies, peer collaboration, professional support mechanisms). By analyzing the experiences of seven elementary school staff members, this research explores how educators coped with burnout, compassion fatigue, and emotional exhaustion while leveraging SEL practices as protective job resources.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How did elementary school staff experience and navigate the emotional challenges of teaching in virtual classrooms during the pandemic?
2. What role did socio-emotional learning (SEL) play in supporting teacher well-being during this period?
3. What strategies did educators develop to mitigate compassion fatigue and burnout in a digital learning environment?

6.1. Participants

The study involved seven elementary school staff members, including five teachers and two non-teaching staff, who actively participated in the ADVOST project (Socially Innovative Interventions to Foster and to Advance Young Children's Inclusion and Agency in Society through Voice and Story). ADVOST is a transnational research initiative and the Canadian strand of the project, and the Canadian strand focuses on integrating digital media, play-based approaches, and culturally responsive arts-based teaching to foster children's agency and inclusion in education (Burke and Collier, 2024).

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a widely used qualitative research technique that ensures the inclusion of individuals with directly relevant lived experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). The selection criteria included:

- Direct experience with remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated emotional, technological, and pedagogical challenges.
- Active involvement in the ADVOST project, which focused on professional learning and SEL strategies for virtual instruction.
- Representation of diverse roles within the school system, ensuring a range of perspectives on teacher well-being and online pedagogical adaptation.

The use of purposive sampling ensured that the study captured a variety of perspectives, recognizing that educators experienced different socio-emotional stressors and instructional demands depending on their role, digital literacy, and access to institutional support. Previous research highlights that sampling educators based on their experiences with digital learning environments strengthens the validity of qualitative studies on teacher well-being (Hodges et al., 2020). To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and brief biographies were developed to contextualize their teaching experience, background, and specific challenges encountered in virtual instruction.

These are the abridged bios for participating school staff in this study:

I. School Administrators

Claire (Principal, 10+ years of experience) has led inclusion-focused initiatives and collaborated with families to address equity challenges in online learning. She played a key role in helping teachers integrate culturally responsive strategies while ensuring access to digital resources.

Elena (Principal, 5+ years of experience) observed that while some students thrived in a flexible digital setting, others struggled with engagement and emotional connection. She noted that students became more open about their cultural identities online, creating opportunities for enhanced peer learning and inclusion.

II. Elementary School Teachers

Sophie (20+ years of experience) specializes in inclusive teaching in under-resourced schools. She adapted visual-based strategies and adjusted her instructional methods to overcome language barriers and engagement challenges with families during remote learning.

Maya (15+ years of experience) is committed to student-centered learning and worked to ensure students saw themselves reflected in online education. She highlighted the need for structured professional development on integrating cultural responsiveness into virtual classrooms.

Lena (7+ years of experience) integrates creative instructional strategies, including music and storytelling, to maintain student engagement in remote settings. She adapted lesson structures to accommodate diverse home environments and student needs.

Isla (10+ years of experience) emphasizes community engagement and one-on-one student support. She observed that remote learning helped some students excel while others struggled, reinforcing the importance of flexible engagement strategies.

Nora (10+ years of experience) specializes in math and science education, embedding cultural elements into her lessons. She emphasized SEL as a critical tool for maintaining both student engagement and teacher resilience in online classrooms.

This diverse sample provides insights into the intersection of SEL, cultural responsiveness, and digital pedagogy, informing the study's examination of teacher well-being in remote learning environments.

6.2 Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore educators' experiences with remote instruction, burnout, socio-emotional resilience, and instructional challenges. This method was chosen for its ability to capture personal narratives while allowing the researcher to probe emergent themes as they arose (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Given the emotional sensitivity of the topic, open-ended discussions were encouraged to facilitate candid reflections on teachers' lived experiences, as Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, ensuring geographical inclusivity and accessibility, particularly given pandemic-related constraints. The virtual setting offered a flexible and convenient space for discussion. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and explored themes such as:

- Emotional well-being and burnout – Participants shared insights on how they navigated stress, exhaustion, and emotional labour during remote teaching.
- Challenges in remote teaching – Teachers reflected on the difficulties of maintaining instructional quality, engaging students, and adapting to digital platforms.
- Use of SEL strategies – Discussions revealed the extent to which teachers integrated socio-emotional learning (SEL) techniques to support both students and themselves.

- Support systems and professional development – Participants described the availability and effectiveness of institutional and peer support in sustaining their well-being.

Rather than following a rigid questionnaire, the interviews were flexible and responsive, allowing participants to raise issues they found most relevant. Themes were analyzed in relation to existing research on teacher stress, emotional labor, and SEL integration. The timing of the interviews was particularly significant, as they were conducted when educators were actively reflecting on their pandemic experiences. Many participants viewed this study as an opportunity to contribute to broader discussions on teacher well-being, recognizing the long-standing vulnerabilities in educator support systems that the crisis had exposed.

Through this qualitative approach, patterns, insights, and coping mechanisms emerged, offering a deeper understanding of the personal and professional impact of remote instruction.

6.3 Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to examine educators' experiences with remote instruction, burnout, socio-emotional resilience, and professional challenges. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and ability to identify patterns across qualitative data while allowing for both researcher-driven and participant-driven insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitated systematic coding, organization, and retrieval of themes from the interview transcripts.

6.3.1. Justification for Thematic Analysis and Use of ATLAS.ti

Thematic analysis was particularly well-suited for this study because it enabled an in-depth exploration of teachers' lived experiences while ensuring that patterns and themes emerged organically from the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). ATLAS.ti was used to enhance rigor and transparency in the coding process, allowing for efficient identification of co-occurring themes, automated keyword searches, and cross-referencing of participant responses. This ensured that data analysis was systematic, replicable, and structured, reducing the risk of researcher bias (Friese, 2019).

6.3.2. Data Set and Thematic Process

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, as they provide rich, in-depth insights into participants' experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). Case study research benefits from context-specific data that allow for a nuanced understanding of complex phenomena (Stake, 1995), making interviews a particularly valuable approach for exploring the ways elementary school staff experienced engagement challenges and instructional adaptations in online learning.

Each semi-structured interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, involving seven elementary school staff who shared their perspectives on student engagement, pedagogical challenges, and socio-emotional well-being in online teaching. The interviews followed a flexible but structured approach, ensuring that key topics were covered while allowing participants to expand on their experiences freely. The guiding questions focused on:

- How did online learning impact student motivation and participation?
- What strategies did you use in a digital classroom?
- What challenges did you experience in supporting student learning remotely?
- How did institutional policies or professional development influence your teaching?
- How did your role as a teacher change during the transition to online learning?

These questions were designed to elicit personal reflections, pedagogical strategies, and institutional support mechanisms, aligning with the study's focus on autonomy, competence, and relatedness in online learning (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). While the guiding questions emphasized instructional and systemic dimensions, the semi-structured format allowed participants to expand on areas they found meaningful (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Several educators spoke candidly about responsibilities that extended beyond formal instruction, particularly in relation to caregiving and emotional support during the pandemic. These insights enriched the dataset by illuminating the broader roles teachers took on to address students' physical and emotional well-being in a time of disruption.

Data Analysis Process

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework, supported by ATLAS.ti's analytical tools, to identify recurring patterns in participant responses. The process began with familiarization with the data, where transcripts were uploaded into ATLAS.ti and read multiple times to ensure immersion. Initial memos were recorded within the software, capturing first impressions and key ideas.

In the generating initial codes phase, ATLAS.ti's auto-coding tool helped identify frequently occurring words and phrases, which were then refined manually. Key codes that emerged included:

- Burnout and emotional exhaustion
- Compassion fatigue and resilience
- Socio-emotional learning (SEL) strategies
- Institutional support and professional development gaps

As the process advanced to searching for themes, codes were categorized into macro-themes, refined based on co-occurrence patterns identified in ATLAS.ti. Four emerging macro-themes stood out:

1. Emotional exhaustion and burnout
2. Adaptive SEL strategies in digital teaching
3. Work-life boundary erosion and stress management
4. Institutional support and professional development

Following this, the reviewing themes phase involved checking consistency and relevance using ATLAS.ti's co-occurrence table. Any overlapping themes were merged or refined for better representation of the data. In the defining and naming themes stage, final labels were assigned to ensure clarity and coherence, emphasizing:

- Teacher resilience and coping strategies
- Digital adaptation and instructional challenges
- The evolving role of SEL in supporting teacher well-being

Finally, in producing the report, the findings were integrated with direct participant quotes, existing literature, and interpretations guided by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The use of ATLAS.ti provided a systematic and replicable method for coding and categorizing qualitative data, ensuring that the themes reflected the complexity of participants' experiences.

6.3.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board to ensure compliance with research ethics in educational studies, covering schools (teachers, children, and the learning community). Ethical considerations were particularly crucial given the sensitive nature of teacher well-being research, requiring adherence to confidentiality and informed consent principles. Ethical issues in teacher research have been a subject of discussion, with scholars emphasizing the importance of ethical guidelines for educational studies to maintain professional integrity (Murray & Underwood, 2016).

- Informed consent: Participants were fully briefed on the study's objectives and procedures before voluntarily agreeing to take part. Prior studies have highlighted that informed consent is a fundamental requirement in school-based research, although some educators debate its necessity when working within their own schools (Murray & Underwood, 2016).
- Confidentiality measures: Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant identities, and interview recordings were securely stored. Ethical standards stress the significance of maintaining confidentiality in teacher research to prevent potential professional repercussions (Bryan & Burstow, 2018).
- Emotional well-being precautions: Since the study focused on potentially distressing topics, participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage or decline to answer sensitive questions, and they could call a counselling line for mental health, if the need arose. Ethical considerations in teacher well-being research underscore the importance of allowing teachers to have autonomy in their participation and ensuring their emotional safety throughout the study (Yildiz, 2022).

Recognizing the lasting impact of COVID-19 on teachers, this study sought to amplify educator voices, ensuring that their insights contribute to institutional changes in teacher well-being policies and professional development strategies. Ethical considerations play a crucial role in supporting these changes, particularly in upholding teachers' rights and advocating for institutional reforms (Safdar et al., 2022).

7. Findings

This study provides insight into the experiences of educators as they navigated the complexities of remote teaching, focusing on burnout, compassion fatigue, and the role of socio-emotional learning (SEL). Through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three dominant themes emerged:

1. Emotional adaptation and burnout in remote teaching
2. Compassion fatigue and the emotional responsibility of supporting students
3. SEL as a job resource for sustaining teacher resilience

These findings align with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), demonstrating how high job demands—including emotional labor, digital adaptation, and student support—contributed to burnout and compassion fatigue, while job resources such as SEL, professional collaboration, and adaptive coping strategies helped sustain teacher resilience.

7.1. Emotional Adaptation and Burnout in Remote Teaching

A prominent theme that emerged was the emotional and cognitive strain associated with online teaching. The shift to virtual instruction required educators to redesign engagement strategies, adapt to new technologies, and maintain instructional quality, all within a compressed timeline. Many teachers described an increased workload, longer hours, and difficulties maintaining work-life balance, which amplified feelings of exhaustion and burnout.

Heightened Job Demands and Workload Expansion

Elena reflected on the chaos of the initial transition, highlighting the lack of preparedness and inconsistent guidance across the district:

"For us, in the first year, in 2020, it was really chaotic. You know, we didn't know what was happening, and we just kept getting this message of 'Hurry up and come up with all these plans but don't implement anything yet, because we want to have a unified front.' But then you would see on Twitter that these people are doing this, and this person is doing that. It was really just disjointed across the district."

This lack of clarity and coordination created an environment of uncertainty, increasing teachers' job strain while offering limited job resources for support.

Emotional Exhaustion and Digital Fatigue

Several educators described the emotional labour required to maintain engagement in a digital setting, emphasizing how online teaching demanded constant energy and enthusiasm. Lena compared remote instruction to a performance, where teachers had to work harder to capture and sustain student attention:

"You couldn't feed off the energy of the kids. It felt like you were constantly performing, or like trying to grab their attention and constantly trying to keep things moving and upbeat. It just sort of felt like you had to give a lot more, you know, a lot more emotions and a lot more gestures."

Sophie similarly highlighted the lack of reciprocal energy exchange between teachers and students in virtual classrooms: *"In a classroom, it's that energy given to you. We share it more—you know, like it's given to the students, they give it back to me. But online, I had to up my game in order to make sure that they were feeling engaged and excited, and to really make sure that my personality and my love for them was really coming across."*

These findings explore teacher burnout, which highlights how high occupational stressors, limited direct social interaction, and emotional labour accelerate burnout. Within the JD-R framework, these factors illustrate how high job demands were not adequately counterbalanced by available job resources, leading to increased exhaustion and professional strain.

7.2. Compassion Fatigue and the Emotional Responsibility of Supporting Students

Beyond instructional challenges, educators emphasized the intensified emotional labour of ensuring student well-being. Many teachers described checking in on students as an additional layer of emotional responsibility, often leading to compassion fatigue—a state of exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to students' emotional distress (Figley, 1995).

Emotional Labour in Student Check-ins

Isla described how the school board emphasized student mental health over academics, increasing teachers' caregiving responsibilities:

"The first year that we shut down, they basically said, you know, while the academics are important, we want to make sure all of our students are okay. So, let's just connect with them and make sure you're checking in to see what they've been up to."

Nora spoke about the challenges of monitoring student well-being remotely, particularly when visual cues were absent in virtual spaces:

"Some students weren't turning on their cameras, and I worried about them. Were they okay? Were they struggling? In a classroom, I'd pick up on those things naturally, but online, I often felt like I was missing pieces."

Expanding Roles Beyond Teaching

Educators also extended their responsibilities beyond the classroom, organizing food deliveries for vulnerable students. Claire described these efforts:

"We were worried about their emotional well-being, and also their physical well-being. A lot of our school community relies on the breakfast program and lunch programs at our school. We delivered a lot of food. We'd do like long car lines, all the staff would meet at Sobeys, and we'd load up a bunch of bags into our cars and go deliver food to families."

These findings highlight how teachers not only managed instructional demands but also took on additional caregiving roles, contributing to heightened job demands without sufficient institutional support (Bakker et al., 2008).

7.3. SEL as a Job Resource for Sustaining Teacher Resilience

Despite these challenges, teachers recognized SEL as a critical job resource that supported both their own well-being and student engagement. Many educators implemented SEL strategies informally, using emotional check-ins, mindfulness activities, and trust-building approaches.

Building Trust and Emotional Connections

Isla emphasized the importance of establishing trust through SEL, particularly in digital spaces where students initially felt disconnected:

"I had to build trust with them and I had to make connections with their families, so that they could feel when they came online, not to be scared but rather feel safe, just like I would if they came into the classroom. It took a few weeks before kids actually felt that trust."

SEL as a Self-Regulation Tool for Educators

Some teachers found that SEL not only supported students but also helped them manage their own emotional stress. One educator reflected:

"I think teachers used SEL as much for themselves as for students. Just the act of checking in, talking about emotions, and taking moments to pause helped us stay grounded, too."

Lack of Structured SEL Training

However, some educators felt that structured SEL training for teachers was insufficient, particularly in an online context. Maya noted:

"I think the training we received for online learning was really very limited in all aspects, specially making sure that children were represented in different ways, and that we were meeting all those needs. I wish there was more training, period."

These findings align with Brackett (2019), who emphasizes that SEL is a protective factor not only for students but also for educators navigating high emotional demands. Within the JD-R framework, SEL functions as a job resource, buffering against the negative effects of high job demands and promoting professional sustainability.

8. Discussion of Research Findings

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the emotional, professional, and systemic adjustments educators navigated during the transition to online learning. While some of these findings reinforce existing research on burnout, digital adaptation, and socio-emotional learning, this study also offers a more nuanced understanding of pedagogical identity shifts, the evolving role of digital tools, and the importance of access to technological resources in ensuring effective teaching. By comparing these findings with prior literature, this section explores how the study aligns with, extends, or provides new perspectives on existing research in the field.

One of the key areas where this study supports prior research is in teacher well-being and workload management in online teaching environments. Previous studies (Wahab et al., 2024; Magalong & Torreon, 2021) have documented how increased screen time, extended lesson planning, and adapting to new digital platforms can contribute to higher cognitive and emotional demands on educators. Similarly, participants in this study highlighted how the transition to virtual teaching required them to redesign engagement strategies, integrate digital tools, and adjust communication methods to maintain student interaction and participation. These findings are consistent with research (Crews et al., 2008; Amiel & Orey, 2006) that emphasizes the need for institutional support and structured approaches to managing digital teaching demands.

A notable contribution of this study is the exploration of pedagogical identity in online instruction. While much of the existing research on digital learning focuses on technological preparedness and instructional effectiveness (Bright, 2012), fewer studies examine the impact of remote teaching on teachers' sense of professional identity. This study expands on previous findings by demonstrating that teaching is not only about content delivery but also about relational engagement, student interaction, and the spontaneity of classroom discussions. Participants in this study shared how they had to adapt their teaching styles, develop new digital engagement methods, and rethink their instructional presence in ways that aligned with the online learning environment. This aligns with research (Ariffin et al., 2021), which found that educators who incorporate socio-emotional learning (SEL) techniques into digital instruction experience greater confidence and resilience in maintaining effective learning environments.

This study also contributes to discussions on the role of digital platforms in shaping teaching practices. While some scholars (Green, 2018) highlight the ways in which technology enhances instructional creativity and engagement, this study suggests that the effectiveness of digital tools depends on contextual factors, including familiarity with technology, available training, and institutional support. Participants emphasized that the ability to use digital resources effectively was not simply a matter of access but also of professional development opportunities and experience with technology integration. This supports findings

(Turgeon & Thompson, 2004; Ming, 2005) that structured training programs help educators maximize the potential of digital learning tools, ensuring that technology complements rather than complicates instruction.

Furthermore, this study builds on prior discussions surrounding equity in digital teaching resources. Much of the existing research on the digital divide has focused on student access to technology, with less emphasis on how teachers experience and adapt to differences in digital infrastructure. This study highlights that while many educators successfully transitioned to online instruction, factors such as reliable internet access, updated devices, and access to IT support played a role in shaping their experiences. These findings extend prior research (Ariffin et al., 2021; Green, 2018), which argues that institutional investments in digital infrastructure contribute to more sustainable teaching practices in remote and hybrid learning environments. By recognizing the diverse experiences of educators, this study reinforces the importance of providing ongoing training and resources to support effective digital instruction.

Additionally, this study contributes to research on educator work-life balance in digital teaching. Previous studies (Green, 2018) have explored how increased reliance on digital communication can blur boundaries between professional and personal time. However, this study offers a more nuanced perspective, showing that the ability to establish work-life balance in an online teaching environment is closely linked to digital fluency, time management strategies, and institutional expectations regarding communication outside of scheduled hours. These findings align with research (Turgeon & Thompson, 2004; Ming, 2005), which emphasizes that clear guidelines for digital communication and structured time management practices help prevent work overload and sustain educator well-being.

Taken together, these findings both reinforce and extend existing literature, demonstrating that successful digital teaching is influenced not only by technological tools but also by instructional strategies, training opportunities, and institutional resources. While prior research (Bright, 2012; Amiel & Orey, 2006) has focused largely on the challenges of adapting to digital instruction, this study highlights how educators developed strategies to navigate new teaching models, sustain engagement, and maintain professional fulfillment in evolving learning environments. Future research should continue exploring best practices for digital teaching, the long-term effects of online instruction on teacher well-being, and how institutions can further support educators in leveraging technology effectively for student learning.

9. Practical Implications for Teachers and Schools

The findings of this study highlight several key areas where educational institutions, policymakers, and professional development programs can enhance support for educators in digital learning environments. As remote and hybrid instruction continue to evolve, it is crucial to implement evidence-based strategies that sustain teacher well-being, promote effective pedagogy, and ensure equitable access to digital resources.

One of the most immediate implications concerns teacher professional identity and instructional autonomy. The study found that many educators experienced a shift in their pedagogical roles, moving from dynamic, in-person instructors to facilitators of digital content. Prior research suggests that teacher autonomy enhances motivation and job satisfaction. For instance, the Job Characteristics Model developed by Hackman and Oldham emphasizes that work designed to be complex and challenging, characterized by high levels of autonomy, skill variety, identity, significance, and feedback, promotes high intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Institutions can support educators by providing greater flexibility in instructional methods and ensuring that digital policies do not overly constrain pedagogical creativity. Training programs should move beyond basic technology use and focus on helping educators integrate interactive, student-centered approaches into online instruction.

The study also reinforces the importance of structured digital training and ongoing professional development. While some teachers adapted quickly to online platforms, others faced a steep learning curve, particularly in navigating student engagement, assessment strategies, and new communication expectations. Existing research highlights that educators who receive structured social-emotional learning (SEL) training report higher levels of confidence and professional satisfaction. For example, Brackett et al. (2012) found that educators proficient in self-management are more likely to display positive affect and higher job satisfaction (Brackett et al., 2012). Thus, institutions should incorporate continuous professional learning initiatives that address not only technical proficiency but also digital pedagogy, student motivation strategies, and mental well-being practices. Programs that emphasize collaborative problem-solving, peer mentoring, and sharing best practices can be especially beneficial in fostering a strong professional learning community for teachers adapting to online instruction.

Another critical implication is the need for balanced digital monitoring policies. While learning analytics, engagement tracking, and lesson recordings have been integrated into many digital classrooms, this study suggests that these tools should be used as supportive mechanisms rather than restrictive oversight measures. Prior studies argue that data-driven insights can enhance teaching efficiency, but educators have emphasized that excessive monitoring may lead to unnecessary stress and limit instructional creativity. For instance, research indicates that while data-driven insights can enhance teaching efficiency, excessive monitoring may lead to stress and hinder creativity (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2011). Institutions should develop policies that protect teacher autonomy while ensuring accountability, perhaps by focusing on qualitative feedback mechanisms rather than rigid

engagement metrics. Administrators can engage teachers in open discussions about digital policies to ensure that monitoring tools support rather than restrict their professional agency.

In addition, this study underscores the importance of equitable access to digital teaching resources. Much of the discussion on the digital divide has focused on students, but this study reveals that teachers, too, experience disparities in technology access. Schools and districts should prioritize long-term investment in digital infrastructure, ensuring that all educators have access to reliable internet, updated devices, and IT support. Policymakers must recognize that digital fluency is not solely a teacher responsibility—rather, it should be institutionally supported through technology grants, targeted funding, and infrastructure improvements.

Finally, institutions must address teacher work-life balance in remote instruction. Prior studies have documented how persistent digital communication can blur professional boundaries, leading to extended working hours and potential burnout. For example, research indicates that excessive reliance on computers may diminish human interaction and interpersonal skills, impacting work-life balance (Mehall, 2020). This study reinforces the need for clear digital communication protocols, such as establishing "offline hours" to ensure that teachers are not expected to be perpetually available for emails, meetings, and student inquiries beyond scheduled work times. Institutions should also encourage self-care strategies and resilience-building programs, particularly in long-term hybrid or online teaching models.

Thus, these findings suggest that institutions play a vital role in shaping sustainable digital teaching environments. Supporting educators goes beyond technology training—it requires holistic policies that empower teachers, provide equitable resources, and protect professional well-being. Future institutional efforts should focus on creating flexible, teacher-driven solutions that sustain engagement, motivation, and instructional excellence in digital and hybrid education models.

10. Conclusion

This research offers a close look into the emotional and professional lives of elementary school teachers as they navigated the transition to online instruction in Newfoundland and Labrador. As with all qualitative work, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the case study approach produced detailed, context-rich findings, the small number of participants limits the extent to which the results can be applied to other settings. The study was not designed to capture the experiences of all teachers, but rather to document how one group responded to the emotional and pedagogical demands of online teaching. Second, the research focused on a particular moment in time—the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—when uncertainty and institutional pressures were especially intense. While this period revealed important patterns of stress and adaptation, future work could explore how these experiences shift as digital and hybrid models become more established. Third, the study drew solely on the perspectives of educators. This focus was deliberate and grounded in the study's purpose, but it does mean that perspectives from students, families, or policy actors were not included. Although this limits broader institutional insight, it allowed for a deeper understanding of how teachers themselves experienced and responded to the challenges they faced.

Looking ahead, future research could adopt longitudinal designs to explore how burnout, compassion fatigue, and the use of socio-emotional learning evolve over time, particularly as schools move toward more permanent digital or hybrid structures. Studies that examine the impact of structured, SEL-focused professional development across different types of school settings would also be valuable in identifying what kinds of support are most effective. Finally, research that brings together the perspectives of teachers, students, caregivers, and administrators could offer a more complete picture of how institutional demands and supports shape teacher well-being. These directions would help build on the insights of this study and inform practical efforts to promote healthier, more sustainable teaching environments in digitally mediated education.

10.1 Study Limitations and Future Research

This research provides insight into how a group of elementary school teachers experienced and responded to the shift to online instruction in Newfoundland and Labrador. While the study produced meaningful findings, a few limitations are worth noting. First, the number of participants was relatively small. This was appropriate for the qualitative case study design, but it does mean that the findings reflect the experiences of a specific group, not all educators in Newfoundland and Labrador and Canada. The aim was not generalization but to offer a detailed account of how one set of teachers navigated the emotional and professional challenges of teaching online during the pandemic. Second, the study focused on a particular moment—during the early and most uncertain phase of COVID-19. This period brought urgent changes and exposed a range of stress points in education systems, but it does not speak to how teachers' experiences may have shifted in the years that followed. Third, the study included only the voices of teachers and support staff. This was a conscious decision based on the research questions and focus. Still, the absence of student, family, or policy perspectives means that the broader institutional context is not fully captured. That said, the choice to centre educators made it possible to explore their day-to-day realities with more depth.

Future studies could return to similar questions using a longer timeframe to further understand how teacher well-being, burnout, and the use of SEL change over time—especially as blended and digital models become more routine. It would also be worth looking at how formal SEL training affects teacher resilience, particularly in schools that vary by size, region, or resources. Including students, families, or school leadership in future work could offer a fuller picture of how support systems function—or

fail—when demands on teachers rise. These directions would extend the work done here and offer practical guidance for improving staff well-being in schools adapting to new ways of teaching.

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