

# After the Before Times

## Teachers' Experiences of Pandemic Pedagogy

Sarah E. Barrett



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Pandemic Pedagogy

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*In memory of Valerie*



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# 1. The End of the Before Times

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After the pandemic seemed under control, the 2021–2022 school year was supposed to be business as usual in elementary and secondary schools, but the experiences of emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) had actually changed everything. In the Canadian province of Ontario, the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted schooling beginning in March 2020, and the provincial government declared a return to normalcy in the 2021–2022 academic year. And yet, as I write this in early 2026, teachers report that they are more exhausted, and that students are more rude, less ready for schooling, and less tolerant of its constraints (Sokal, Sharma, and Eblie Trudel 2025; Spadafora, Al-Jbouri, and Volk 2024). Further, there is an ongoing teacher shortage in Ontario with no easy solutions to mitigate it (Spadafora, Al-Jbouri, and Volk 2024; Council of Ontario Directors of Education 2025). Meanwhile, memories of ERTL continue to haunt schools. Although many, including myself, declared in 2020–2021 that the effects of ERTL would extend into the future, I am not sure that we imagined it would still be so five years on. But here we are, after the Before Times.

How did we get here, to a place in time so distinct that the time leading up to it earned the colloquial moniker *The Before Times*? In some ways, it is as if the COVID-19 pandemic with its lockdowns and school closures never happened; that that spring of 2020 and subsequent 18 months of fear, isolation and collective anxiety was something best never spoken of again. However, of late, there does seem to be an appetite to reflect on that time from a multitude of perspectives. After all, when we look back at the past, we see it through the lens of the present but hearing it described in the words of those who lived it, at the time when they were living it, can be truly profound. Knowing that other researchers would explore that historical moment according to their intellectual

interest, I decided to do the same. Ontario, Canada's shift to ERTL in March 2020 was so unprecedented that I was convinced that it had to be documented.

There is some wonderful scholarship already out there about what is now often referred to as pandemic pedagogy, with a great deal of it devoted to describing skills and techniques used during the pandemic (see, for example, Brooks DeCosta, Goyens Ward, and Cornell 2022; Pathak 2022; Leask and Younie 2021; Winter 2022; Schwartzman 2020). However, describing skills and technique is not the purpose of this book. Instead, my purpose is twofold: (1) to document K-12 classroom teachers' experiences of ERTL during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) to find, in the negative space of ERTL, the elements of a good-quality education.

The second purpose requires some explanation. In visual art, there is a concept of negative space, the empty space defined by the subject. For example, the rectangles and parallelograms of empty space defined by a dining room chair. Thus, I mean to examine what was missing during ERTL that prevented teachers from providing a good-quality education to most of their students.

In this chapter, I will provide a detailed description of the research project that resulted in this book, including my conceptual framework and methodology, and a brief chapter-by-chapter outline of the narrative. But first, I will provide a little personal context.

## A Disaster in Slow Motion

I remember the precise moment when *After the Before Times* began for me.

On the evening of 10 March 2020, after an announcement by the university administration warning that, due to the pandemic, the campus would most likely close as of the following evening, I went to my office to gather items I thought I might need at home over the next few weeks—books, policy documents, paper, other stationery. The campus, which was usually like a small city with its 53,000 students and more than 6,000 employees, was already mostly abandoned. The COVID-19 pandemic had been the object of media fascination for weeks, with the recent quarantines in Italy and the Netherlands, and when the first case

was detected in Toronto (Nasser and Blum 2020), we knew that what had come to be known as lockdown was a real possibility. I felt lucky because I had already completed my teaching for the academic year and was preparing for an extended sabbatical.

For kindergarten to grade 12 students in Ontario, March 11 was a professional development day leading into March break.<sup>1</sup> My family had decided to go on a field trip to the museum where we stayed until it closed. Afterwards, as we all sat in a restaurant, all at once, notifications on our mobile phones alerted us to the news that the province was going into lockdown. All schools and nonessential businesses would be closing their physical buildings for the next two weeks.

We met the news with a shrug—an extended winter break for the kids did not seem onerous and we adults had jobs where working from home was, from our perspectives, easily done. Therefore, we saw no cause for alarm. What we did not know at the time was that Ontario—Canada’s most populous province—would end up remaining in lockdown not for weeks, but for months, and, when all was said and done, schoolchildren would endure 135 days of ERTL, the longest number of days of school closure in Canada (Gallagher-Mackay et al. 2021).

Towards the end of March, I watched the chaotic transition to ERTL. News reports indicated that many students did not have the means to participate in online learning (such as high-speed internet and electronic devices) and efforts to give them what they needed to do so were slow, uncoordinated, and inadequate (Teotonio and Rushowy 2020). Further, it appeared to me that teachers, students, and parents were ill-prepared to teach/learn online. I wondered how I would have coped had I still been a high school teacher. Teaching is a highly contextual endeavor. Having taught high school chemistry for ten years before becoming a teacher educator, I could not imagine translating my highly hands-on cooperative-learning-based unit plans to online. How would I have felt? How would I have seen myself as a teacher? Further, this was a province-wide transition. All 160,000 public school teachers were being asked to engage in ERTL in a highly uncertain, socially fragmented, and health-threatening environment. I wanted to know how they had experienced

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1 In the province of Ontario, the school year has several days set aside for teachers to engage in professional development activities. On these days, students do not attend school.

the initial months of the pandemic during which I believed that the central tension for them would be the ways in which their expertise was suddenly undermined by the change in mode and context. I assumed that this change would result in an identity crisis—especially for more experienced teachers—because I imagined that, as their self-efficacy suffered, so too would their sense of who they were as teachers. Thus, in the spring and summer of 2020, after more than three months of ERTL, I surveyed and interviewed hundreds of teachers. What I found was that it was true that ERTL required new pedagogical skills that challenged many teachers' self-efficacy. It was also true that most of the teachers who participated in this study were frustrated and exhausted but, interestingly, not for the reasons I had assumed. In fact, the biggest concern expressed by the teachers who participated in the study was the profound effect ERTL had on their professional relationships with students, parents, colleagues, and even the school system.

## ERTL vs. Online Learning

Throughout this book I will be using the term emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) to describe the mode of teaching and learning enacted during the pandemic. I do this to distinguish it from online learning, which is designed for the online context and, in Ontario, involves students and teachers who have chosen to do it. Thus, students and teachers who choose online learning already have the means and circumstances to participate. In contrast, both in Ontario and globally (Bozkurt et al. 2020), ERTL was compulsory for all, in spite of the fact that not everyone had access to devices, internet, or home circumstances that would allow them to fully participate. Further, teachers had to do it regardless of their comfort level with technology.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, circumstances made it impossible for teachers to engage in the long-term planning necessary to develop content with coherent trajectories.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, I am careful not to make assumptions about online learning

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2 Australia adjusted more easily to the change due to its long history of distance learning in K-12 (Bozkurt et al. 2020)

3 Because ERTL had no defined end date, teachers could not plan their courses with context (online vs. in-person) in mind. Given the significant differences between in-person and online pedagogy, this meant that long-term planning became virtually impossible.

based on data collected during ERTL. I also avoid making assumptions about how people other than classroom teachers experienced it. Someone else might do a study concerned with students' or parents' perspectives but that is not the focus of this particular study and book.

## My Background

Since this is a qualitative study, one that focuses on meaning and process rather than counting and calculation, it is important for me to explain my background so that the reader can take it into account when they read my analysis of what teachers said to me during the study.

I bring a particular perspective to this work. I immigrated to Canada from Britain and, between my parents' tales about their schooling in pre-independence Jamaica, my older siblings' stories about British schools, and my own experience of schooling in Southern Ontario, I became fascinated with the influence of context on teachers' behaviour, even with respect to subjects that seemed universal on paper (math, science, physical education). Eventually, I became a teacher and taught high school chemistry, general science, and mathematics for ten years in two different high schools, where I also taught students who were 'at risk' for various reasons related to learning disabilities, home circumstances, and social class. Both high schools were hyper diverse—ethnically, racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically—and the second high school, because of its size, had multiple special programs and extracurricular activities. I was heavily involved in the teacher union (called 'teacher federation' in Ontario) and my extracurricular activities usually involved helping out with the music program, as well. This was a high school very much like the one I had attended as a teenager, with typical issues and challenges (social cliques, bullying, racism, Islamophobia, and a persistent institutional race blindness) which reflected the surrounding community and larger society. I lived in the neighborhood where I taught, which added an extra layer of intimacy to my interactions with my students.

'Intimacy' may seem like a strange word to invoke when discussing teaching and learning in a classroom, but it is indeed an intimate space. We are vulnerable when learning something new, especially in front of others, and even more so if we know we are being evaluated.

Consequently, teachers must endeavor to make their classrooms safe for students to learn, make mistakes, and contribute. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) described the ideal classroom as one where students feel safe to contribute to the class not only academically, but emotionally. hooks calls this engaged pedagogy, and this vision is what I consider to be a good-quality education. To me:

engaged pedagogy encourages civic self-awareness and agency both within the classroom and beyond. Within the classroom, students learn to interact with other students and engage with ideas in a way that promotes their ability to be part of a community while still feeling free to disagree with, critique, and take care of each other. Such an approach must be inclusive, flexible, and responsive to students' needs, moods, and abilities. (Barrett 2021, p. 103)

This vision of education reflects my values, and I suspect every teacher has their own vision of the ideal that reflects theirs. What I have learned from twenty years of researching teachers is that the values they bring to teaching are influenced by the values already embedded in schooling because teaching practice has a long history that is highly dependent on context. That context includes the characteristics of the students in the classroom, the culture of their school and school board that employs them, the community, and the regulatory and policy environment. It is also the case that teachers derive how they see themselves as professionals from the nature of their work and responsibilities, which means their professional identities are also context dependent.

## My Conceptual Framework

As noted above, it is important to explain the philosophies that underpin this study so that the path from my findings to conclusions make sense. In line with my Caribbean and African heritage, my research approach is based in the sub-Saharan philosophy of Ubuntu. Joan.Osa Oviawe defines Ubuntu in the following way:

Ubuntu is a philosophy of being that locates identity and meaning making within a collective approach as opposed to an individualistic one. As a result, the individual is not independent of the collective; rather, the relationship between a person and her/his community is reciprocal, interdependent and mutually beneficial. (Oviawe, 2016, p. 3)

Ubuntu is deeply embedded in indigenous sub-Saharan African cultures and is known by various names (this being the Xhosa term). As a philosophy, Ubuntu makes the ontological claim that is often expressed as 'I am because we are.' The 'we' includes not only other people, but animals, plants, and rocks in the past, present, and future (Murove 2009). Its teleology or purpose is that all must thrive, and its epistemology is building knowledge and wisdom together. All of this combines to obligate an ethical stance that, according to Thadeus Metz and Joseph Gaie (2010), does not fit neatly into any one of the Typical Four liberal ethical frameworks (deontology, virtue ethics, consequentialism, and ethic of care).<sup>4</sup> For instance, Ubuntu includes virtues but also describes a version of justice that includes caring. Beyond this, it also incorporates tradition as an important consideration in ethical deliberations.

My perspective of Ubuntu is decidedly feminist. Olajumoke Akiode (2018) has noted that we must be cautious in upholding traditions that have developed in the presence of colonialism because colonialism—with its objectification of Indigenous people, the land and its resources—influences how Ubuntu is lived. Further, tradition can be weaponized as an excuse to marginalize women. However, she goes on to say that the pre-colonial African worldview (such as that of the Yoruba) did not base social status on gender. This was because Yoruba ontology was based on a belief that everything in existence is both male and female. However, colonization, with its imposition of colonial patriarchal structures, had all but erased this idea. Thus, in post-colonial Africa, patriarchy was adopted as inherently African, ignoring Ubuntu's notions of complementarity. Pre-colonial Africa was indeed patriarchal but not in the hegemonic ways imposed by colonization. Akiode stated that because pre-colonial Yoruba society was not oppressive to women, this created a blind spot in the African philosophy which developed in Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to colonialism. She said, 'the marginalization of women or exclusion of women in African philosophy from the early era to the contemporary era is a result of the process of philosophizing from a mind that is not completely free from colonial influence' (Akiode 2018, p. 69). She concluded by calling

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4 I will explore these four ethical frameworks in detail in a later chapter, but you are welcome to read works by Immanuel Kant, Judith Sklar, John Stuart Mill, and Nel Noddings to get a feel for them.

an African philosophy that *excludes* women despite its African cultural origin and DNA of complementarity, inclusion, interrelatedness and interconnectedness as highlighted by concepts like 'Ubuntu' [...] an aberration [...]. This African philosophic enterprise is essentially an exhibition of a colonized mentality. (Akiode 2018, p. 70, emphasis added)

Akiode went on to declare that since pre-colonial Ubuntu inherently included both genders, this is the ontology that must ground it.

I take this perspective seriously and endeavor to embrace an understanding of Ubuntu that reaches back to pre-colonial African philosophies and the notion of complementarity. However, I also include the idea that the social construct of gender is a spectrum rather than a binary (Butler 1990). In other words, it is not my intention to lean on an ancient wisdom without incorporating current understandings that our communities have developed over time. Indeed, I recognize the considerations of tradition as a call to account for community as a non-hegemonic whole, not to impose the will of who holds power on everyone else.

What makes Ubuntu especially helpful for this study is that it is a holistic philosophy. It does not treat tradition or society as corrupting forces in the development of ethical individuals. On the contrary, it embraces the messiness of relationships, the supports and restraints of tradition, the necessity of individual actualization, and the contradictions and tensions these priorities collectively entail.

While Ubuntu is the philosophy that underpins the study, at various points in this book I will also introduce theories proposed by bell hooks, Etienne Wenger, and Doris Santoro. They each provide important lenses for making sense of teachers' experiences of ERTL and what that tells us about what constitutes a good-quality education. Their ideas inform the analysis you will read in the next seven chapters. Now that you know the perspective that I bring to this research, I will describe my methodology.

## An Exploratory Design

Since this is a study that explores an unprecedented situation, and because teaching and learning is context-dependent, my approach needed to create space for context and flexibility during data collection and analysis. With respect to context, LaShawnda Lindsay-Dennis

(2015) described an approach to research that takes into account history, culture, race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression that I find to be comprehensive. However, I temper this approach with a reparative reading of participants' words (Sedgwick, 2003).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) has written about two possible critical stances—the paranoid and the reparative. The paranoid stance is the most popular, and it focuses on exposing oppressions and the negative effects of unjust power relations for the purpose of motivating people to change them. However, she argued that a reparative critical stance has a different purpose—to highlight the ways in which selves and communities extract 'sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.' (p. 150). Thus, my critical stance is a perspective of teachers making do in less-than-ideal circumstances and the type of identities and communities they create. Sedgwick devoted an entire chapter of her book to critiquing the paranoid stance. Here, suffice it to say that although my approach in this study is critical, my purpose is not to search for power relations and oppressions but to develop historically and socially contextualized insights that are (1) true to teachers' voices without veering into advocacy, and (2) critical without objectifying their experiences. Following Lindsay-Davis, my methodology is based on concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, dialogue to assess knowledge claims, an ethic of caring, and an ethic of responsibility, all of which draws from multiple disciplines. This relational methodology is well aligned with an Ubuntu philosophy that emphasizes existential interconnectedness, responsibility to each other, and respect for community—all of which must be honored by a researcher as they interact with participants, analyze data, and report findings.

A paradox of qualitative research is that I must go into it with an open mind but know what I expect to find so that my methods are designed to create space to find it. Given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, however, this was challenging. Thus, while my past research indicated that it was highly likely that teachers' self-efficacy would have suffered during ERTL, I had to create space for teachers to express issues that I had not anticipated. Therefore, I adopted a sequential mixed-method approach. First, I conducted a province-wide survey of classroom teachers who had transitioned from in-person

to online teaching. The purpose of the survey was to determine the general attitudes, circumstances, and concerns of teachers to inform the interview questions. This survey focused on teachers' experiences with technology (both before and during ERTL), supports provided by the school board (including equipment and professional development, and accommodations for disabilities and caregiving responsibilities), and demographics. Each question used checkboxes and Likert scales but also provided space for participants to elaborate on their responses if they wished to do so. More than 750 teachers across the province did the survey and 100 provided anecdotal responses. Analysis revealed that teachers' primary concern was not their skills or lack thereof but relationships with colleagues, the school system, parents, and students. It was also clear from the tone of the anecdotal responses that emotions were running high.

At the end of the survey, I asked for volunteers for interviews that would take place over the summer break. Three hundred teachers volunteered. I chose fifty interviewees, matching proportions of gender, age, and panel (elementary/secondary) to the survey participants and having a variety of subject expertise and geographic locations.<sup>5</sup> Interviews focused on the transition to ERTL, assessment of students, professional relationships, and teachers' values. My experience as an educator and former high school teacher informs my analysis and aided me in developing rapport with the fifty teachers I interviewed, and this is the core data set informing this book.

Finally, we should establish how and why I am confident in the data collected and the subsequent analysis of it. The technical term for this is validity. First, since this study is based solely on how teachers experience their practice, I am not especially concerned with whether or not each teacher's description of circumstances is objectively accurate. For example, a teacher may say that they had a lovely collaborative class before the pandemic and yet if I had been there observing that class, I might disagree. However, since my concern is how the teacher

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5 Ontario is 1,076,395 sq km—larger than France and Spain combined. Therefore, there are major differences between different geographic areas such as climate, demographics, the availability of high-speed internet, and the sizes of school districts (most of the province's population lives in Southern Ontario, close to the Great Lakes).

experienced the class, it is not actually relevant what was happening objectively. Indeed, instead of basing the validity of my analysis of the interview data on an impossible-to-achieve objectivity, I used other methods common to qualitative research (Creswell 2013). Surveying or interviewing a large number of individuals is one way to increase validity. Another is to counteract confirmation bias. To do this, I provided space for teachers to comment on each survey question (to allow them to elaborate on their answers and/or critique the questions themselves) and looked for counter examples of emerging themes from both the surveys and the interviews. For the latter, this meant that whenever I thought I was seeing some sort of pattern of responses, I would deliberately search for evidence of its opposite.

For the interviews, I employed several strategies, including:

1. multiple interviews about each topic with different individuals;
2. purposeful sampling—aiming to interview teachers working in a variety of contexts (locations, grade levels, subjects) and matching the demographics of the survey participants; and
3. sharing my preliminary analysis with interviewees for feedback.

Data analysis began with identifying themes. I then searched for contextual factors to put those themes into perspective. The contextual factors include both the history of the profession and the historical and current policies that govern and influence it. From a teacher's point of view, government policy is usually represented by the mandated curriculum. Thus, for the most part, that is the basis of my description of the policy context. Finally, I looked for theories that seemed most likely to explain these contextualized themes.

## Narrative Structures

Since the focus of the interviews was relationships and interconnectedness, I have organized the chapters of this book in those terms. The book is divided into two sections—Context and Classroom. The Context section is concerned with teachers' relationships with those outside of their classrooms (government, school board, colleagues, parents) and the Classroom section is concerned with relationships within the classroom

community and with individual students and themselves. Each chapter in the Context section has a similar format—beginning with a spotlight on a particular teacher, a description of the relevant historical and current context, presentation of teachers’ stories, and then an interpretation through the lens of an appropriate theory. Chapters in the Classroom section are similar but with less emphasis on theory.

Chapter 2 provides a brief history of the relationship Ontario teachers have with the school system. The relationship between Ontario teachers and the government and school boards has, at times, been fraught by labor unrest and, at others, been characterized by the uneventful implementation of curriculum mandates. This chapter explores how that history affected teachers’ experience of the early days of the pandemic and the transition from in-person to ERTL. Chapter 3 explores teachers’ relationships with each other. This chapter uses Wenger’s (1998) theory of communities of practice and also incorporates a history of the roles of teacher education and provincial curriculum policies in order to provide context for those collegial relationships. Chapter 4 explores teachers’ relationships with the parents of their students. Here, Wenger’s theory with respect to professional identity within communities of practice is brought to bear on understanding teachers’ experiences. Chapter 5 begins the Classroom section with an oral history of the day-to-day work of ERTL. In this chapter, I present teachers’ narratives with little comment save the introduction and conclusion. Chapter 6 uses ideas from bell hooks (1994), Drysdale et al. (2016) and Rovai (2002) to explore the role of classroom community in teaching and learning and how it was affected by the implementation of ERTL. Chapter 7 describes teachers’ relationships with the students as individuals. That is, it engages the question of one-on-one connection between teachers and students and begins to consider it in terms of professional integrity. The work of Doris Santoro (2018), which highlights teachers who choose to leave the profession on ethical grounds is relevant here. Chapter 8 focuses on teachers’ self-regard in terms of integrity and continues to use Santoro’s work to understand that experience. Chapter 9, the concluding chapter, summarizes the findings described in Chapters 2 to 8, reviews the theories introduced throughout the book, summarizes how teachers experienced the relationships highlighted, and brings Ubuntu back into the picture to examine this matrix of relationships

in order to both understand teachers' experiences and determine the characteristics of a good-quality education.

I want to emphasize here, once more, that ERTL and normal online teaching and learning are not the same. The latter is usually voluntary, with teachers and students having the resources to participate. It is planned specifically for the online context and involves the usual long-term planning characteristic of any course along with assessment practices appropriate to online contexts. ERTL was mandatory for all, regardless of the readiness and willingness of teachers and students and, due to the fact that its ending could not be predicted, long-term planning was quite difficult to do. Further, given the labor conflict that was ongoing when ERTL began in Ontario—with one of the issues being the imposition of mandatory online learning—not only did most of the teachers I interviewed conflate ERTL and online learning, but their worst fears were realized in socially isolated circumstances. Thus, although I am not conflating online learning and ERTL, it is important to understand that many of the teachers who participated in this study did just that.

Finally, although this book focuses on teachers' experiences at a particular time and place, the negative spaces their stories outline within ERTL are relevant to anyone interested in what matters most in providing good-quality education to all.

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# I. CONTEXT

It is easy to imagine teachers as wholly independent, able to close their classroom doors and interact solely with their students. However, their professional lives involve many significant relationships. Thus, the context of teaching is a matrix of relationships. Each of these relationships influences how teachers experience their practice by defining professional norms, school culture, and the curriculum that teachers enact. I use the word 'enact' here with the recognition that teachers and students co-create curriculum in classrooms day to day. In this section, we explore how teachers experienced their relationships with the school system, each other, and parents during emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL).



## 2. Working Memory: Teachers' Fraught Relationship with the School System

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Over the course of her 18-year career, Kate had taught students from kindergarten to grade 12.<sup>1</sup> Through her love of literature, she had reluctantly chosen teaching as a career but now found that she enjoyed it. She began the 2019–2020 school year as a primary school literacy teacher in the middle of a province-wide labor dispute with the provincial government. As a result, six months into the school year, the teachers in her small town and throughout the province of Ontario, were fulfilling their duties during the school day but picketing their schools directly afterward. March Break would have brought welcome relief during a challenging school year. However, the pandemic intervened. She said:

We were told on the Thursday through Twitter that we were not going to be back [...] for two weeks after March break. [...] The school I was at was doing one of their after-school pickets. [...] And I said [to my colleagues], "Hey, guys, [look at] this." And they [said], "Wha-a-t?!" [...] So this was a surprise. And then the next day, it was chaos. Everyone [was saying], "What are we going to do?" and people were desperately putting together packages of homework to go home. [...] And someone said, "You know, we're not going to be back, this school year." And I [said], "That's ridiculous. Maybe [we'll be off until] Easter. But we'll be back." So that to me was a big surprise that we didn't go back.

When Kate told me about how she learned that schools were being shut down due to the pandemic, I was struck by the mode of communication.

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1 All study participants' names are pseudonyms and details may be changed to protect anonymity.

Teachers were informed that schools would shut down for two weeks after the one-week March Break, not through the official channels of their employer (the school board) but through Twitter, a social media platform. According to many of the teachers that I surveyed and interviewed, teachers learned about the lockdown and school closures at the same time and by the same means as the general public. I wondered what this told teachers about their status within the school system.

In this chapter, I will be exploring teachers' relationship with the school system and how it might have changed during the pandemic. If we think of the school system in Ontario, Canada as consisting of the provincial government (specifically the Ministry of Education and Minister of Education) and the school boards (who employ public school teachers) then teachers relate to the system on two levels—individually and collectively through their federations. The former tends to be almost exclusively with the school and school board, although they are certainly interacting (albeit one-sidedly) with the government through policies, guidelines, and curriculum documents.

To explore these relationships, I will be describing the history of teachers' relations with the government, moving to collective memory, and ending with individual experience.

## Pre-Memory

In the early days of Ontario's public education system, teachers were educated in highly government-regulated Normal Schools and university programs (Kitchen & Petrarca 2014). During this time, curriculum design and lesson planning were largely dictated by local and provincial governments. For example, an 1897 education policy document titled 'Instructions to teachers with respect to the public school course of study' says:

*Reading* – The teacher should use the phonic method. Great care should be taken in analyzing the sounds of which every word is composed. A new word should, where possible, be first introduced to a child's notice through the real object which it represents. In teaching the word "hat", the object "hat" should be before the child. Where the object is not available, a picture of the object should be drawn upon the board and underneath, the name of the object written. When the phonics sounds of one word are mastered, other words with similar phonics should be practiced upon - - Such as hat, bat, rat. (Ontario Department of Education 1897, p. 1)

Explicit instructions such as these were provided for every elementary school subject. One might have an image of a schoolteacher during that period being a woman in a one-room schoolhouse, teaching according to the dictates outlined by the Ministry of Education but largely isolated from other teachers. According to this image, the parameters of a teacher's work would have been directly negotiated between that individual and the school board. However, teachers began to organize themselves into federations beginning in 1888, agitating on behalf of their members for better pay and working conditions.

By the 1920s, curriculum documents evolved into lists of topics and skills that students were supposed to learn, leaving the pedagogical decisions to teachers (see, for example, Ontario Department of Education 1924). At the same time, the federations aspired to function like other professional bodies (such as the Law Society or Medical Association) and developed codes of conduct for their members.

By the 1950s, the government attitude towards teachers began to shift. According to Julian Kitchen and Dana Petrarca:

by accepting the work of the Report of the Minister's Committee on the Training of Secondary School Teachers (1962), known as the Patten Report, the government moved away from the image of a teacher as transmitter of knowledge to one of "a participating, creative responsible person who must be skilled in the complexities and subtleties of the educational process in a democratic society" (p. 17)." (Kitchen & Petrarca 2014, p. 63)

With this change in attitude, control over the curriculum of initial teacher education moved out of government hands and into universities where teachers were now required to have two bachelor's degrees to be certified (one in a subject and another in Education). Consequently, by the 1970s, teachers gained a sense of themselves as highly educated professionals with specialized knowledge that they expected the school system to respect. Indeed, from teachers' perspective, the story from here became a question of trust; that is, teachers' expectation that the government should trust their expertise in knowing what is best for their students with respect to both pedagogy and enacted curriculum.

## Working Memory

The current five Ontario teacher federations formed between 1918 and 1944, when legislation made membership of a federation mandatory for all public school teachers and gave federations authority to negotiate collective agreements on their members' behalf (Richter 2006). However, at that time, teachers did not have the right to strike if they were dissatisfied with working conditions or contracts. Instead, in instances when discussions with school boards or government broke down during contract negotiations, teachers would use the tactic of mass resignation instead.

### 1973–1995: The Era of Autonomous Professionals

In 1973, the Ontario government introduced legislation rendering mass resignations illegal and imposed compulsory arbitration. Teachers responded with a province-wide walkout. In the end, in recognition of the importance of minimizing disruptions to the school year, new legislation (Bill 100) specific to teachers' labor negotiations was introduced, granting teachers the right to strike (Kitchen & Petrarca 2014). Passed in 1975, Bill 100 was co-incident with mandated school curriculum changing from a curriculum-centered model (to which teachers and students were expected to conform) to a student-centered model. In the simplest terms, in a curriculum-centered model, if students failed to do well in school, it was the student's (and their parents') fault. However, in a student-centred model, teachers were to blame if students failed.

During this time, successive governments updated the mandated curriculum but did so after consultations with educators, through their subject associations and federations, and with subject experts in faculties of education.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in Ontario, the 1970s and 1980s were characterized by increasing autonomy for public school teachers.

In the early 1990s, when I joined the profession, the province was

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2 Beyond the federations, Ontario teachers organize themselves in groups according to school subjects, such as art, physical and health education, science, reading, and philosophy. They also have two organizations dedicated to age groups (primary and junior). These associations provide resources for kindergarten to grade 12 teachers and evaluate government policy.

governed by the left-leaning—and historically labor-supported—New Democratic Party (NDP). They consulted with educators and other education constituents as they revised the curriculum and introduced policies related to violence-free schools, students' transition from elementary to secondary school, and antiracism and 'ethnocultural equity'. They also established a Royal Commission to recommend reforms to the education system.

The Commission wrote a final report, titled, 'For the Love of Learning' (Ontario Ministry of Education 1995). Key recommendations included forging stronger connections between schools and communities and it advocated for both the continued professionalization of teachers and more integration of other experts into schools (including social workers, police, and child psychologists). It also mandated more involvement of other interested parties through parent-community councils and a college of teachers that would include both teachers and members of the public on its governing council.<sup>3</sup> The report was rejected by teacher federations (Schriever 2004) who objected to the accountability measures that the report recommended. However, the government response to the report was to propose the establishment of a college of teachers, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) (which would ensure the quality of education through standardized tests) and school councils.

These changes were not implemented immediately because the NDP was defeated in the next election.<sup>4</sup> However, the newly elected provincial government saw fit to implement a radical reform of the education system, justifying some of the changes based on the Royal Commission report and following through on some of the NDP initiatives.

### 1995–2003: Declining Influence

The conservative government's stated goals were to reduce the size of government, lower taxes, and balance the budget ('Ontario PC: The

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3 It is common to use the term 'stakeholder', but I am resisting this tendency to use terms from the business sector in a public sphere.

4 The party had alienated labor unions by imposing wage cuts on all provincially funded employees (including public school teachers). They were attempting to tackle the deficits brought on by an economic recession by cutting \$2 billion from the budget.

common sense revolution' 1995). They also immediately repealed Bill 100, meaning that the teacher federations became simply unions governed by the same labor laws as any union in the province. Significantly, labor laws in Ontario dictate when, during the process of negotiating collective agreements, workers are in a legal position to strike (outside of these times, any strike or mass work stoppage was illegal). Further, the federations, which had, like lawyers and doctors, served as both advocates and regulators of the profession, now had only one legal purpose—to negotiate collective agreements and represent individual teachers in disputes with their employer (Osmond-Johnson 2018). At the same time, principals, who had been considered colleagues of classroom teachers, were removed from the federations. They now served as management. Finally, the Ontario College of Teachers (where the majority of its governing council were not teachers) was established to regulate the profession.

Further, this government established a highly confrontational tone with teachers. First, the Premier of the province appointed a Minister of Education who had dropped out of high school, implying that one did not need any education or training to be in charge of the largest public school system in the country—a business background was enough. This Minister was quoted as saying that he intended to sow chaos in the education system to create a crisis that would allow his government to remove \$1 billion from the education budget (McConaghy 1997). Second, when teachers protested legislation that would significantly reduce teachers' classroom preparation time while increasing class sizes, and re-introduce standardized testing of students, the government responded by suggesting that teachers were only concerned with their workload, not their students. Third, in forming the Ontario College of Teachers, they implied that teacher federations could not be trusted both to regulate the profession and protect its members' interests.

There was more.

School funding was uploaded from municipal governments to provincial (centralizing fiscal control of the school system) and extracurricular activities (school clubs and teams) that teachers had been performing voluntarily would be deemed co-curricular activities and according to legislation they would be required to participate. Further, new teachers would be expected to take a qualifying test to be certified

(Solomon et al. 2006). With all of these changes, the relationship between teachers and the government was strained almost to the breaking point.

Teachers' relationship with the public was also less than optimal, as demonstrated by media stories about teachers being lazy and overpaid (see, for example, Wright 1995). This was a time when all public sector employees were facing pay cuts and private sector employees were facing layoffs, and it seemed that there was little time or patience for well-paid and well-pensioned individuals to complain about anything at all (Erl et al. 2023). Indeed, teachers themselves were not immune to these assessments of their collective character (Osmond-Johnson 2018).

Nevertheless, coordinated by their federations, teachers responded to these reforms by first refusing to do any extracurricular activities. Then, in the fall of 1997, all Ontario public-school teachers walked off the job. Since teachers were not in a legal position to strike, teachers called it a 'political protest'.<sup>5</sup> The issues in contention were mainly related to the \$1 billion the government was removing from the education budget, as well as the numerous reforms (both their contents and the speed with which they were being implemented). Teachers picketed their schools and rallied in front of the Ontario Legislature with the general public being surprisingly supportive. And yet, due to the burden of childcare on working parents, teachers returned to work after two weeks without their grievances having been resolved. The education reforms were implemented and the teachers' relationship to the system was fundamentally changed: the province controlled funding (not the school boards); the College of Teachers dictated codes of conduct (not the federations); principals were now management (not colleagues); parents expected to have a direct say in schools (through parent councils); and teachers now knew that even a two-week province-wide strike was not necessarily going to have any effect on education policy. For my part, having participated in these protests as the union representative at my high school, I decided to leave the profession, going back to graduate school and becoming a university professor who studies teachers' experiences.

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5 Since teachers were not in the middle of negotiating a collective agreement (and even within negotiations, the moment when strikes are legal is highly specific), there was no legal basis under labor law for withdrawing their labor. Therefore, teachers framed the action in terms of the right to collectively engage in civic protest. This also meant that there was no strike pay.

## 2012: Fighting the Education Premier

The conservative government that introduced all of the changes in 1997 was in power for eight years. When they were replaced with a liberal government in 2002, the situation was reversed. The new premier expressed a desire to be known as the Education Premier (Editorial, 2012) who would repair the relationship with educators. He immediately gave teachers more power within the Ontario College of Teachers and revoked other legislation that teachers had seen as particularly insulting to their image of themselves as professionals; however, the province retained control over education funding.

Ten years of relative labor peace ensued and collaboration with educators on curriculum revisions and education policy resumed. During that time, the province aligned all teachers' collective agreements to end at the same time, allowing the provincial teacher federations to negotiate the financial frameworks for collective agreements before local branches negotiated with individual school boards. This made the biannual negotiations more organized but also risked provincial action on the part of teachers when negotiations went awry.

In 2012, that is exactly what happened.

With the negotiations for the next collective agreement with teachers reaching an impasse, the government response was to impose pre-emptive legislation, banning strikes and giving the government the right to impose contracts. The teachers' response was rotating strikes, refusing to do extracurricular activities, and, on December 18<sup>th</sup>, a one-day strike by teachers in eight different school boards (including the three largest boards in the province). Although the offending legislation was repealed in early 2013 and found to be unconstitutional in 2016, the damage was done and the relationship between teachers and the provincial government soured once again.

## 2020: Déjà Vu

Five years later, a conservative government was elected. The new premier appointed a Minister of Education who was reported never to have attended a public school. He, in turn, appointed a deputy minister with no experience in the education sector.<sup>6</sup> Consultations with educators

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6 Traditionally, the Deputy Minister would be an expert in the field of Education,

on curriculum and policy revisions were significantly reduced and/or halted and, within a year, the labor strife that would eventually lead into the pandemic began. At issue were reductions in education funding and a proposal to make it mandatory for students to take four online courses in high school in order to graduate.<sup>7</sup> In response, the province's teachers enacted escalating job actions ranging from refusal to do extracurricular activities to rotating strikes (McGinn 2020). Finally, in February 2020, more than one hundred thousand public school teachers in the province of Ontario went on a one-day strike, shutting down almost all publicly funded schools in the province (Alphonso & Gray 2020; Alphonso & Perkins 2020). The last time such an action had been taken was 23 years before during the 1997 Political Protest (Chitpin 2020).

The similarities between the issues and circumstances teachers were protesting in the 2019–2020 academic year and those that precipitated the 1997 work stoppage were not lost on observers (Lemieux 2019): a conservative government (it had been a liberal government in the intervening years), a minister of education with no background in the education sector, union-sponsored rallies in front of the provincial Legislature, rolling one-day strikes, and failed contract negotiations. However, this 2020 conflict also had something new: the memory of the ineffectiveness of the 1997 two-week Political Protest (Martin 2009).

Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Ontario.

## The Transition to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL)

On 12 March 2020, two days before March Break, and only a few weeks after the province-wide one-day strike, the Minister of Education announced that schools would remain closed for two weeks after March Break and student learning would be handled through a website

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but this was not the case in Ontario at the time. Rather, the Deputy had managerial expertise in business.

7 The reason the government gave for the mandatory online courses was that it would prepare students to thrive in an increasingly digital workplace. Before this, some larger school boards already had some online courses for students unable to attend school in person (for example due to medical conditions or being elite athletes). However, teachers were worried that making online courses mandatory for all high school students was just a way to increase class sizes and reduce the number of teachers employed in high schools—in other words, another way to reduce funding to schools.

called Learn at Home (Ontario Ministry of Education 2020) which housed ‘some of Ontario’s best online kindergarten to grade 12 learning resources’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). These resources were designed by unnamed Ontario educators (see Ontario Minister of Education 2019–2020, letter dated 24 March 2020).<sup>8</sup> Reviewing the activities on the Learn at Home website, I found that, while the activities seemed good enough, there was no coherent trajectory to them. This is significant because teaching and learning require more than just good-quality activities. There must also be direction and purpose. Learn at Home did not provide this and therefore could not serve as anything more than a stopgap measure while the progress of the pandemic was assessed.

Meanwhile, the premier of the province had declared a state of emergency. He and the prime minister of Canada gave daily briefings/press conferences about infection rates and death tolls. Unsure of how contagious COVID-19 was and how it was transmitted from person to person, the province ordered all nonessential in-person business activity to stop. Everyone was ordered to stay home. Playgrounds were closed. Social distancing (staying six feet away from others) and face masks were introduced. Revised capacity limits to accommodate social distancing meant that essential businesses (like grocery stores and pharmacies) had queues outside their doors (with each person six feet away from the other). For three weeks, everyone who was not an employee in an essential business waited at home, hoping the infection rates would decline enough to go back to normal.

They did not.

In a letter to parents dated 31 March 2020 the Minister of Education announced that classroom teachers would take over ERTL on 6 April. (Ontario Minister of Education 2019–2020, letter dated 31 March 2020). This effectively gave teachers one week to adapt their curriculum to distance learning.

I asked teachers how they experienced this transition.

Tara, a grade four teacher in a large suburban school, described the transition from the extended March Break to teaching online as “a huge shock”, saying:

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8 These letters have since been removed from the government website.

I just remember us being told, "You're going to be off for two weeks" and they were going to do this at-home online program that the government had put out. And then all of a sudden...it felt so abrupt— [they said], "You're going to be off for four weeks. Don't worry... We'll go back." And then, all of a sudden, [they said], "No, you guys [teachers] are on."

After eight years of teaching at a large affluent suburban elementary school with a 'highly diverse' population, Tara had already incorporated online teaching platforms into her practice, but she still found the transition abrupt. In fact, all of the teachers that I interviewed described the transition as sudden and they had once again found out important information about the parameters of their work at the same time and by the same means as the general public.

Cameron taught a grade two class in a small school in a rural community. Prior to the pandemic, he, too, had already been slowly integrating technology into his teaching, using iPads and Chromebooks (although students had to share in groups of two or three). He already incorporated online learning into his teaching but in ways that he felt were age-appropriate. He said that, in working with his young students, 'their level of independence is a challenge' and he was worried about internet safety for them. He described the transition to ERTL as 'a ridiculous challenge.'

Teachers in the province were allowed to return to their schools to gather resources on 1 April and 2 April 2020, but all of the restrictions and social distancing had to be taken into account as this occurred. Cameron described how he experienced this:

Luckily, we were given the fifteen minutes to go into our classroom to grab resources if we needed [...]. And I grabbed my document camera from my classroom, and I also then uploaded a whole bunch of files that I had on my school-based Internet up to Google drive. And I'm literally trying to think "What do I need? What do I need? I could do this. I could do that." It was very hectic... Fifteen minutes became twenty-five minutes. That was okay but it was very hectic. You're literally grabbing everything you think you need and you're not sure. I came in with a checklist. I knew the five or six things to put into a bin. And then it reminded me of a time when there was a hurricane or something coming. And so, you go into that panic mode. "I need this. I need this. I need this."... It was like that but with teaching resources. "I might need that. I might need that." So at least I had it. So, I had my math textbook. I had my daybook, so I knew where I think I'd been.

At the time of the school closures, Cameron had been teaching for fourteen years. When we spoke in the summer of 2020, he seemed to have taken ERTL in stride, but what is remarkable about his description was that he likened the transition to preparing for an impending natural disaster. Listening to Cameron's description, the image that came to my mind was the disaster movie cliché of the scene depicting a store with almost empty shelves and crowds of people frantically grabbing all that they can before fleeing or hiding.

But that image was not quite right.

Cameron had been alone in his classroom, not allowed to be near his colleagues. His description was not uncommon, with most of the teachers interviewed describing the same fifteen-minute window to gather resources, with staggered times to avoid exposure to each other. I was struck by the eerie sense of isolation imposed by the circumstances. Usually, teachers plan programs together with other teachers of the same grades and subjects and here they were alone, scrambling to gather resources for a completely different approach to teaching and learning.

Ann-Marie had been teaching chemistry for nineteen years and, during ERTL, was teaching at what she called a 'fairly diverse' and affluent suburban high school. She said:

Nobody really knew how long it was going to last. After March break was extended [by two weeks], to suddenly be told, "Oh, you are starting online teaching in a week", the preparation time was very little. Even though we had done some blended learning and whatnot prior, we don't actually have full lessons for the entire curriculum ready to go to put it online. So, it was a little bit daunting at first.

Ann-Marie identified two problems that the sudden implementation of ERTL during the pandemic introduced into her teaching practice. First, not knowing how long ERTL would last affected her ability to do long-term planning. Teachers plan daily lessons based on an understanding of learning trajectories. Complex ideas and skills are learned over time and experienced teachers know how to build them with students, but this planning requires an understanding of the context in which that learning will occur (timelines, resources available, student characteristics and needs). Thus, it is crucial to know whether that learning will occur in person or online. During ERTL, teachers had little

knowledge of the context of learning for individual students because they did not know students' home situations. Some school boards sent out surveys to families to ascertain this but had limited success hearing back from parents (with the households who needed the most support and resources being the least likely to respond). Unlike in normal distance learning circumstances in Ontario, where participation was voluntary and families without the capacity to participate did not choose it, teachers could not assume that students had the resources they needed to participate. The second problem was being given only one week's notice after two weeks of silence. Planning effectively for online learning takes time.

There was one other problem: the fact that teachers found out that they would be taking over ERTL at the same time as the general public implied that the Minister of Education did not consider teachers when making decisions about these emergency measures. In fact, almost every teacher I interviewed lamented this lack of consultation or consideration of teachers' expertise and circumstances as ERTL began.

To be clear, none of the teachers I interviewed and surveyed criticized the Minister of Education for not knowing how long ERTL would have to last. No one could know. Their criticism was that, as far as they could tell, the Minister of Education's directives on how ERTL should unfold were done without consulting with teachers at all, whether through their federations or subject associations or an advisory panel. This was a continuation of what had happened over the previous six months, when teachers had picketed and protested while the Minister of Education and their union leaders made declarations about the dispute in the press. For teachers, the Minister of Education was the individual they perceived as the person they needed to get through to in order to get their concerns addressed. The after-school pickets communicated with parents who they hoped would, in turn, contact their MPs who would pressure the Minister. Further, the periodic protests in which teachers engaged in front of the provincial legislature were meant to communicate with the Minister directly. For the teachers, then, they had a very intense (albeit one-sided) relationship with the Minister of Education and were bewildered by the lack of direct communication with them during this crisis.

## Board Level Support and Complications

Regardless of what is happening at the provincial level, teachers' day-to-day connection to the school system is through their employers, the school boards. Although some school boards already had online learning for small groups of students, none were prepared for ERTL, and everyone was learning as they went.

Under normal circumstances, teachers can learn through professional development (PD) opportunities in the form of additional qualification courses, workshops, and advanced degrees through various venues, including universities, teacher federations, and school boards. Workshops offered by the latter tend to align with board-wide pedagogical initiatives, and ERTL was no exception, with school boards providing many PD opportunities for its implementation.

This decentralized provision of PD meant that it varied across the province, but Marcella's description was typical:

It could have been done in a much more organized manner and it caused a lot of stress and a lot of havoc, but on the same token, in a few weeks after, once things were normalized there were tons of workshops offered for the teachers. [...] tons of websites, tons of learning... but it was a few weeks after the fact.

Marcella had been teaching in a high-needs school in an economically challenged neighborhood for 28 years, teaching grade two during ERTL. Her school board, like others, provided many PD opportunities and videos to help students and teachers to adjust to the online platforms but, according to her, too late to be useful. Survey responses indicated that this was common across the province. Most teachers had to have ERTL up and running before their school boards could mobilize resources to teach them how to use unfamiliar online platforms. One survey respondent said, 'The board and ministry provided enough support a month after it was needed' and, as one high school English teacher, Alice, put it in her survey response:

...my employer provided technical supports but they came long after we were expected to have begun teaching and when we were well into the swing of marking and interacting so there was so little time to take advantage of the workshops being offered during the day when I was meeting with my students and balancing my [own] child's meeting with his teachers and classes. Not enough hours in the day.

There were other complications. When teachers' place of work shifted to their homes, not all of them had the necessary devices or internet connections. For example, some teachers, especially in northern Ontario, did not have access to high-speed internet, making video calls very difficult if not impossible. Phoenix, who taught in a middle school in a city in northern Ontario, said:

My stepson had to use the internet, and I had to use the internet. And we couldn't be on at the same time. And because all the kids [in the neighborhood] were online at the same time, I couldn't use it. So I was having to leave here and drive back to my original community because my house was still there and my daughter was living in it and she had better internet. So, I would have to leave here on Wednesday, and I'd come back here on Saturday. I was in tears for the first probably three weeks because I couldn't find a solution on how to teach properly. And then the school board did allow me to go into the school, but the problem was I got a letter saying that I could not tell anybody I was allowed in the school. So, the problem became I couldn't do [video calls] because of the kids seeing the background behind me. And I couldn't make phone calls because the bells would go off still during the day. So, if I was in the middle of a conversation, I'd have to go, "I have to get off the phone" because the bell was going to go. There were three of us that were able to be in the school, but we weren't allowed to tell anybody else.

What to make of this strange situation? There were other teachers with similar problems in other school boards and, according to survey responses, the solution some school boards offered was for teachers to park in the parking lots of nearby schools in order to access the school's Wi-Fi. I wondered why the school boards did not allow teachers to modify ERTL in ways that would better suit their circumstances. The Ministry of Education had mandated a certain number of hours of instruction but, in the beginning, at least, teachers had some flexibility with respect to whether their teaching was synchronous or asynchronous, with asynchronous approaches allowing for more flexibility for students, parents, and teachers.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, in mid-May, the Minister sent a

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9 Kindergarten to Grade 3 — Students will complete five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy and math.

Grades 4 to 6 — Five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy, math, science and social studies.

Grades 7 to 8 — 10 hours of work each week, focusing on math, literacy, science and social studies.

Grades 9 to 12 — Three hours of work per course each week for semestered

memo to school boards to encourage teachers to engage in synchronous learning (Alphonso 2020; Bischof 2020; Rushowy 2020). Looking through newspapers from the time, I see no public pushback to mandatory synchronous ERTL from school boards but there was from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation and other teacher unions (Bischof 2020). Mandatory synchronous learning complicated things for everyone. It certainly made things far more difficult for teachers like Phoenix whose access to the internet was not ideal. Also, with childcare centers closed, caregiving became a problem for many teachers.

One of the interviewees, Kendra, described her home situation in the following way:

I'm a mother of four; so, we have a pretty busy house around here [...]. We had quite a lot of challenges. So, trying to find that balance of trying to figure out how to teach my students while trying to take care of [my children] all at the same time was a lot to juggle. Childcare was suspended, so I had to do my best to take care of my kids while I was teaching as well.

The situation Kendra described was often called 'double duty' by teachers because they were simultaneously teaching other people's children while teaching their own children—each of whom was doing a different program with their teachers. In the survey, I asked teachers if they had caregiving responsibilities and how they were coping. One new high school English teacher, Beth, said:

I am overwhelmed working from home because I am homeschooling my seven-year-old and constantly nurturing my two-year-old. I need the separation of home life and work life.

Celine, another high school guidance counselor at an alternative school who was a single mother of four children under the age of ten, said:

The Board says do what you can in their overall messaging. [They] keep mentioning mental health. No regard for actual workload in terms of work assigned. [...] The Ministry [of Education] put us in a no-win situation. [I am] concerned about mental health and wellbeing of me, my kids and my students. Impossible.

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students, or 1.5 hours per course each week for non-semestered students

Ontario Minister of Education (2019–2020, September 5, 2023). *Letters to Ontario's parents from the Minister of Education*. Ministry of Education, <https://www.ontario.ca/document/letters-ontarios-parents-minister-education/2019-2020-school-year>

The surveys seemed to indicate a general mood of isolation and frustration. Of the survey respondents, 40% had caregiving responsibilities, and of those, 75% chose not to ask their school boards for accommodations. As one high school French immersion teacher said in the survey, 'I did not ask because I didn't expect to be supported. I knew the alternative was to take an unpaid leave.' An unpaid leave is no accommodation at all. Indeed, of the teachers who did ask for accommodation, 60% found accommodations offered by their school boards to be inadequate. Meanwhile, the Minister stated that teachers who were not doing synchronous video lessons should get more training, a solution that would not address the double-duty problem.

It seems as if teachers who were parents were on their own with no real support for this double duty from the school boards that employed them. As one experienced middle school teacher said in the survey, 'There was no option given for asking for help in caregiving. Our minister of education [...] doesn't consider teachers human enough [to have] kids and families.'

## The History of the Present

How Ontario teachers experienced ERTL was influenced by their relationship with the school system through the Minister of Education and their employers, the school boards. In their day-to-day work, teachers' main interaction with the larger system is through the mandated curriculum and preparing their students for provincial standardized tests. However, whenever their collective agreements are up for renewal or there are major changes in curriculum, policy, legislation, or funding, teachers must interact with their federations and, through them, the government more directly. This interaction is highly influenced by labor history.

In the early days of the public school system, teachers were given a very basic, government-controlled education and the curriculum and teaching methods were prescribed through detailed curriculum documents. As higher education became a requirement for teacher certification in the 1970s, teachers began to take over more of the planning, participating in curriculum development and implementing student-centered pedagogy. Further, teachers began to expect that they should be regarded as professionals, capable of self-regulation and individualized insights into students' needs. As a result, time and again, teachers have collectively

demanded recognition of their professional status and the autonomy to teach the prescribed curriculum in a way that they have determined works best for their students. However, in the mid-1990s, this image that teachers had of themselves was shaken by a government that appeared to hold teachers in very low regard. The resulting labor dispute, culminating in the two-week political protest, has colored Ontario teachers' experiences of conflict with the government ever since (Lemieux 2019). Thus, in the spring of 2020, the six-month labor dispute and the history of labor disputes preceding it had left teachers feeling distrustful of government and apt not to give the government the benefit of the doubt when its decisions seemed ill-informed about how teachers go about their work. This might be why, during ERTL, when the government failed to consult educators about how best to proceed, either through an advisory panel or discussions with teacher federations or subject associations, teachers assumed it was deliberate dismissal rather than an oversight.

During ERTL, teachers' relationships with the school system became much more individualized, as the Minister of Education turned to the public rather than the teachers' representatives. Individual teachers who were facing complications with ERTL due to caregiving and/or lack of access to high-speed internet found themselves struggling to accommodate their personal lives in light of their professional responsibilities and school boards failed to offer the support teachers felt they needed. Indeed, the sole support offered was professional development on the technical aspects of distance learning, the timing of which was not always helpful.

Still, I do not think that ERTL itself fundamentally changed teachers' relationship to the system. Over the last 50 years, the provincial government and teachers have really only interacted in the midst of major reforms or legislative changes, with teachers demanding consultation and governments largely ignoring them (Pinto, 2012). The pandemic did not change that. Indeed, if anything, the pandemic reinforced teachers' relationship with the school system and laid bare their status within it.

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Study Participants Featured in this Chapter

| Name      | Race       | Experience (years) | Role                           |
|-----------|------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Alice     | White      | 5                  | High school English            |
| Ann-Marie | East Asian | 19                 | High school chemistry          |
| Beth      | White      | 2                  | High school English            |
| Cameron   | White      | 21                 | Grade 3, homeroom              |
| Celine    | White      | 17                 | High school guidance counselor |
| Kate      | White      | 18                 | Primary school literacy        |
| Kendra    | White      | 7                  | Elementary school SERT*        |
| Marcella  | White      | 28                 | Grade 2, homeroom              |
| Phoenix   | White      | 15                 | Grade 8, homeroom              |
| Tara      | White      | 8                  | Grade 4 homeroom               |

\*SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher

### 3. Collegial Coping During the Pandemic Crisis

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Dipa<sup>1</sup> had arrived in Canada from India, already an experienced teacher, and, after several detours, found her way back into the profession, teaching at her present school ever since. Now she enjoyed the intellectual stimulation, teaching her students, and learning from them. When emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) began during the pandemic, she relied on her colleagues to help her to adjust. She said:

Honestly, if you have a bad team, then God help you. But our science department is amazing. We could call each other at 10 o'clock in the night. We would be up at six o'clock in the morning and say, "Hey, can you please look at this? This is not working." And they'd all be brainstorming.

At the time that we spoke, Dipa was a high school biology and special education resource teacher (SERT) working at an affluent high school with what she called 'intrinsically motivated' students and highly involved parents.

When the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the closure of Ontario school buildings and her teaching migrated to online platforms, she said she had no real complications—her children were grown, and she had the resources that she needed. However, she still said it felt like 'a disaster' and 'very stressful' because, as a science teacher, she had to learn how to do the lab work that the curriculum required in an online environment. She was thankful for the help of her colleagues.

In fact, many teachers told me about how they and their colleagues

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1 All study participants' names are pseudonyms and details may be changed to protect anonymity.

pooled their resources, skills, and talents to smooth out varying comfort levels with the online platforms and cope with the stress of adjusting their plans for the new conditions.

In light of this, the question to be explored in this chapter is how teachers experienced their relationships with each other during ERTL. This is important to explore because collegial relationships have a profound effect on how teachers experience their practice—both positively and negatively.

For this exploration, I begin by recounting the relevant history of teachers' relationship to the main impetus of their day-to-day work, the provincially mandated curriculum, and how this affected their professional relationships with each other. Next, I will share how the teachers I interviewed and surveyed described their relationships with colleagues during ERTL. I will then introduce Etienne Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice as a lens for understanding the teachers' narratives.

## Evolving Collegial Relationships

It is easy to imagine teachers working in isolation from their colleagues. After all, even during normal circumstances, it can appear to an outsider that, once teachers close their classroom doors, all that is left is themselves and their students. Indeed, in Dan Lortie's (1975) seminal book, *Schoolteacher*, he described teacher isolation as the most important structural impediment to improved instruction. However, Lortie's book was written right on the cusp of a major change in teaching practice, when teachers were transitioning to a collegial model. Therefore, his portrayal of the isolated classroom teacher may not be accurate. At the very least, it is not the description of how teachers experience their practice that they conveyed to me nor that I have observed in my research. Nor is it the experience that I had in my decade as a high school chemistry teacher.

Teaching practice within public schools has evolved over time, in direct response to the legislative and policy parameters of teachers' work. Specifically, historical changes in curriculum documents have had a direct effect on teachers' relationships with each other. In Ontario, from the beginning of the public school system in 1871 to the 1950s, teaching

was characterized by a pedagogy of recitation and memorization of a highly structured curriculum to which students (and teachers) were expected to conform (Hargreaves 1997). For example, this is an excerpt from the science curriculum document from 1897:

Botany must be taught from the actual plants, and teachers are recommended to take their pupils into the fields for the purpose of observing the habits of plants, and for collecting their own specimens. (Ontario Department of Education 1897, p. 5)

The above example demonstrates the way curriculum documents not only described what to teach but also how to teach. Similarly, for the history curriculum:

The names of some distinguished men of whom the pupils may have heard or read might be taken as a center around which the events of their time clustered, or the achievements of such men in defending their country or improving its social condition, or anecdotes illustrating great events in history, and the courage and self-denial of men who had served the country at their peril might be told, and the patriotic efforts of the noted men and women of the past cited to stir up a similar spirit in the minds of the pupils. (Ontario Department of Education 1897, p. 3)

Here, the document describes what content to teach, how to teach it, and the attitude the content should elicit in students. Beyond consulting about how best to manage student behavior, a teacher working with a curriculum document like this would be able to plan their work without having to interact very much with colleagues. Indeed, although teachers had already begun to form federations before this document was published in 1897, the main focus of the work of these federations had been working conditions rather than the curriculum. Thus, in spite of the fact that, as schools grew from one room to larger buildings, teachers had more opportunities to socialize with each other, teaching practice itself was not necessarily collaborative.

During this time, teachers in Ontario were educated in Normal Schools. In their history of teacher education in Ontario, Julian Kitchen and Diana Petrarca (2014, p. 57) state that ‘The term “normal” meant according to rule, with the focus on ensuring a focus on method rather than the needs of the children being taught.’ Further, the curriculum in these Normal Schools was dictated by the government. In fact, even when teacher education for secondary-school teachers moved to

universities in the 1920s, the government still controlled the teacher education curriculum along with the what and how of elementary and secondary school curricula. Thus, until the 1950s, nothing in teacher training had conveyed to teachers that collaboration was either expected of them or necessary to do their jobs well.

All of this began to change in the 1960s. A comparison between the high school science curriculum of 1960 and 1978 makes this clear. The 1960 document for grades seven to ten provides a detailed description for every activity so that it is not necessary for teachers to consult with colleagues about pedagogy, since the government has told teachers how to teach the content. The 1978 curriculum, however, lists topics and skills, not pedagogical approaches. In the absence of instruction from government on how to teach, teachers had to rely on themselves.

There were other changes that occurred during the 1970s: the provincial government relinquished control of the teacher education curriculum; all teacher education moved to university faculties of education; and the mandated curriculum became explicitly student-centered. In response, teachers began to collaborate more, and team teaching became increasingly prevalent. Also, at that time, Ontario teachers formed most of the subject and age-group associations that exist there today. These associations provide resources for teachers for lesson planning and have also regularly consulted with the provincial government as they continually revise the mandated curriculum.

This collaborative model of teaching is now what teachers expect even as they complain that the demands of their jobs make collaboration difficult (Barrett, 2013; Barrett et al., 2010; Barrett & Pedretti, 2006; Campigotto & Barrett, 2017). Still, it is not uncommon for teaching assignments in elementary schools to include teaching partners within grades or for high school teachers to be expected to plan and coordinate courses with multiple sections together. Further, beyond connecting with subject and age-group associations, classroom teachers work and consult with library resource teachers, special education resource teachers (SERTs), school counselors, English as a Second Language (ESL) specialists, child and youth workers, instructional coaches, school-board-level consultants, and education assistants (EAs). They also form both formal and informal professional learning communities through various social media platforms. Thus, today, the collegial nature of teaching is undeniable.

## Coping Together

During ERTL, several parameters of teachers' work changed more rapidly than ever: the location (from in-person in a classroom to online platforms); the curriculum (some school boards told teachers to aim to cover 25% of the curriculum); timing (hours of instruction were adjusted<sup>2</sup> and teaching was often asynchronous); and evaluation (the Minister of Education dictated that no student's grades should go below where they stood at the beginning of ERTL (McQuigge & Canadian Press, 2020)). Teachers employed various strategies to adapt.

## Learning Together

Of the 50 teachers I interviewed, all but three were already either team teaching or co-planning their courses prior to the pandemic. In elementary schools, it was common for teachers to have a teaching partner who had another section or class of the same course or grade. This meant that teachers were able to build on established relationships and shared understandings when schooling went online.

Chris was in a unique situation. Already retired and filling in for a teacher who was on a leave of absence, he was partnered with a teacher whom he had mentored when she was a student teacher. Now, they were working together and planning their grade four classes in a suburban elementary school. When I asked how he had figured out how to handle ERTL, he said:

Believe it or not, it was my teaching partner—she was awesome. She was a great resource to get to narrowing down the answers to an individual question rather than having to sort through a bunch of information to

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2 Kindergarten to Grade 3 — Students will complete five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy and math.

Grades 4 to 6 — Five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy, math, science and social studies.

Grades 7 to 8 — 10 hours of work each week, focusing on math, literacy, science and social studies.

Grades 9 to 12 — Three hours of work per course each week for semestered students, or 1.5 hours per course each week for non-semestered students.

King, A. (2020, April 6, 2020). *What you need to know about Ontario's at-home learning program, which launches today*. cbc.ca. Retrieved February 24 from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ontario-at-home-learning-program-launches-today-1.5522788>

try to figure out which it was. So, between the general looking at what the board had offered for training and my expert partner, I learned quite quickly. But it was daunting. It was very daunting in the beginning.

Chris was alluding to a common problem with professional development opportunities during the pandemic—their lack of specificity to the particular challenge or problem for which individual teachers sought solutions as they adapted their in-person plans to ERTL. Often, teachers had the general idea of how to use an online platform and had planned their work so as to make things manageable, but a small specific problem might get in the way of smooth execution. For Chris, having a more knowledgeable teaching partner provided the specific support needed.

Marcella had no experience with online learning when she had to begin teaching her grade two class online. She said:

I had great support from the staff at my school. I called different staff members from different grades to help me set up my Google Classroom and help me figure out how to create assignments. Because everybody was stressed out, I didn't want to burden one person. And the staff at my school are so incredible and supportive. If I did not have them, I would have floundered.

Marcella's recognition of how things might have been had it not been for colleagues was a common refrain amongst the interviewees. On the other side of this dynamic, it appears that those teachers who were more comfortable or familiar with the new platforms were generous with their expertise. As Kurt put it:

Nobody was hanging on to ideas. People were so willing to share. And I think that helped everybody so much.

Kurt was teaching a grade five homeroom in an affluent elementary school. In the past, he had been involved in a pilot project to introduce netbooks to younger students and so felt quite comfortable with using digital technologies in the classroom. Yet he still found himself having to learn from some colleagues while taking on a helping role with others. Rhea, a music teacher in an urban high school, said:

I spent a lot of time teaching my colleagues what I had learned. One teacher was having a mental breakdown. She [said], "I can't do this. I'm not going to do this." She was a mess. She was really not in good shape. And so, I spent a fair bit of time coaching her and coaching other teachers in how to manage the technology and what we've discovered. Being [Curriculum

Lead], I felt the responsibility to make sure we were sharing knowledge at all our department meetings. Once a week, we had a department meeting, and every department meeting would end with some new something tech. And we were fortunate to have a young new teacher fresh from teachers' college on our team. And she also had some tricks up her sleeve. So, it was great, people sharing what they had learned.

In her role as Curriculum Lead, Rhea saw helping her colleagues as part of her job. She invested the extra time with the colleague who was in distress and the weekly department meetings (normally, these would be monthly) also provided time and space for knowledge sharing. Through these formal and informal means, classroom teachers found ways to support each other.

### Consulting Each Other

Experts such as instructional coaches, special education specialists, and counselors were present in schools before ERTL began and they were invaluable during the transition. For example, Kurt said:

We have instructional coaches in our schools. They work with three schools each; so, they're not specific to our school, but pretty close. And I was fortunate that we had a fantastic instructional coach who was there for all kinds of support and ideas. So, I just learned a whole bunch of new programs.

In Ontario, instructional coaches were a relatively new addition to centrally deployed colleagues and although qualifications vary, they all have Bachelors of Education (one could imagine that a classroom teacher would be unlikely to take them seriously if they did not). For Kurt, the extra help was invaluable. More traditional forms of centralized collegial supports are district consultants and facilitators, who provide advice and curriculum leadership across multiple schools. Cameron, who was teaching grade four homeroom in a small rural school in northern Ontario, especially appreciated the curriculum consultant in his school board:

Within a week, our primary curriculum consultant had basically put together three or four different templates of "Here's what it could look like." They set up a Google classroom for primary teachers. They were doing daily video meetings and so on. So, we were getting a lot of support and there was no mandatory [approach required].

This last bit was important. During the first month of ERTL, no one was telling teachers that they must teach in any particular way—synchronous, asynchronous, small groups, or large. Those decisions were left to individual teachers. The experts were simply providing possible approaches and the facilitators themselves aimed to take a classroom teacher's lead on what they should provide. In his role as a board-level facilitator, Marco said:

[It] was critical to make sure that our colleagues had any support they needed. So very, very early on, we conducted a series of webinars. We did ten webinars on technology, on different topics. And then after that, we did yet another two rounds of something that we were calling coffee breaks, virtual coffee breaks where we would invite course-specific teachers. Let's say we would invite all the teachers who were teaching Grade Twelve Calculus to come and join and have a conversation as far as what was working, what wasn't working, any challenges they had and hopefully learning from each other and collaborating. It was extremely intense because we wanted to react quickly. We wanted to support teachers quickly.

Thus, because facilitators and curriculum coaches were also teachers, they were not only able to provide technical support but also help to reimagine school subjects for online platforms. Other teachers, who served as experts within their schools, also stepped up. Blake said:

It took a while for them to give us actual expectations of what they expected from us. As a SERT [special education resource teacher] group as a whole, we said, "Alright, how can we support these students online? Let's reach out to their classroom, teachers and say, 'Just a reminder: These are the students in your class that [we work with]. If you're noticing that they're not doing anything, you're noticing that they're really having difficulties [or] you're having a hard time reaching out to them [or if] you need to talk to someone who's different [or if] they're emailing you with a thousand questions and you just can't keep up with them, just a reminder: We're here to help you guys during that time, but also support the students.'"

This approach was echoed by all of the SERTs interviewed. The distribution of workload within each school was inconsistent but many support teachers (SERTs, guidance counselors, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, etc.) made a point of supporting classroom teachers as much as they could. Still, the primary source of support and collaboration for teachers was their pre-existing grade level and subject teams.

## Planning Together

At the beginning of this chapter, Dipa described how supportive and available her colleagues had been. Above and beyond these ad hoc collaborations, most schools formed or repurposed planning teams. For example, some teachers deepened their collaboration with experienced education assistants. Charles, a technology teacher at a large suburban high school, said, ‘We’d bounce ideas back and forth. So, it was team teaching, in a sense, the way that team teaching should be.’

Rhonda was a kindergarten teacher with seventeen years of experience. Currently teaching in an economically challenged and multicultural small school with a high number of recent immigrants and English language learners, she said:

We decided on our team that we would split up the workload. So, for example, I might look into the literacy aspects of, let’s say, storytelling, and then my partner might look at the writing and then somebody else might look into the math and we would put what we gathered into our shared Google Drive. And then we could pull out what we wanted to put into our classroom.

In this model, teachers collaborated on collecting resources but left the planning to individual teachers. In other schools, teachers took full responsibility for entire subjects. As Paulo, a physical education teacher in an urban middle school with a high immigrant and refugee population, said:

So, we met in that regard in terms of, “Okay, so who’s teaching what? Where were you?” And this person had never taught social science before. So, he was asking questions of the other social science teachers, “Okay. Where are we? What are we teaching? And who’s going to help me as far as curriculum and materials and so on, so forth.” There are four grade seven classes. And I taught two of the math classes. I took all four of the classes on. So, I taught four grade seven math classes which freed up the other math teacher to do different subjects. So, it was a little bit of division of labor, a little give and take. Not everybody was happy. Some people were like fish out of water, teaching things that they traditionally wouldn’t be teaching. But you’re teachers. You do what you have to do.

Although the assignments of duties were new, these teachers did seem to already be used to the idea of collaboration. As one might expect, when teachers had a sense that they could count on their colleagues

for help and support, the task of learning new platforms and adapting curriculum and pedagogy was perceived as do-able. Other schools did things slightly differently. Eloise was a French teacher in a large suburban middle school. She explained:

Because we were all planning together for the same subjects, we were also able to take turns doing the planning, so we weren't having to plan for multiple subjects each week. You might have a week where you were planning for two subjects and then you might have a week that you were planning for nothing.

Interestingly, during ERTL, Eloise had almost no interaction with teachers who were not teaching the same courses as herself. When I spoke to her in July, she mentioned that she hadn't interacted with or spoken to those other colleagues since March.

### Coping Alone

Not all of the teachers were in a situation where they had colleagues with whom to work. One survey respondent, Dianne, a mid-career elementary teacher, said:

For the most part, we were left to piece it together on our own [...]. Most teachers felt a bit isolated. Under normal circumstances we would wander into each other's classrooms to seek advice or share ideas. In the online learning period, I had no idea what or how most of my colleagues were teaching.

These sentiments were not expressed by most teachers surveyed but those teachers who were isolated seemed to believe all teachers were. The two adult day-school teachers that participated in interviews indicated that they, too, were totally alone. Indeed, some teachers reported that the distribution of work was extremely uneven, and this added to their sense of isolation. Alexandra taught grade one in collaboration with another grade one teacher but noted that she had felt quite isolated during the pandemic. Her teaching partner's life circumstances had meant that Alexandra had (gladly) taken on more of the work but colleagues who were supposed to provide some respite had much less to do (she described one as sitting around 'drinking margaritas'). As a result, she had not felt like she had much support from colleagues. Nevertheless, the majority of study participants reported high levels of cooperation and collaboration with their colleagues.

### Being There for Each Other

For teachers, there was much more to the experience of ERTL than technical savvy and being able to convert in-person curriculum to online. With the state of emergency declared by the premier of the province, the stay-at-home order, and social distancing, all teachers were as vulnerable to social isolation as everyone else. Consequently, many teachers made a deliberate effort to maintain connections beyond preparing lessons and tracking students. Isobel, who taught English in a large suburban high school, said:

People were using it as an opportunity to post PD [professional development] options for others, like, “Hey, I’m signed up for this. Is anybody else coming?” And at one point, I think the entire department was at one PD, which was really nice. I said, “Do we win a prize for the number of people who showed up?” So, yeah, I spent a lot of really conscious time being very careful about making sure that people weren’t isolated.

Wendy taught a grade three class in what she described as a ‘small town’. She talked about similar coping strategies for dealing with ERTL:

When we reached out to colleagues, I tried to do that for two reasons: partly to get help, but also partly to stay connected with people for my benefit and for their benefit too, [checking] on colleagues back and forth. I am very fortunate. The staff that I work with is amazing. We are quite a collaborative and fairly social staff. For the most part, everybody is willing to work with anybody else on staff and share ideas and that kind of thing.

It does appear that ERTL had a profound effect on collegial relationships. Carol was teaching English and Drama in what she described as a ‘very sweet school’. She said that ERTL was a less-than-ideal setting for her subject and she had struggled to keep her students engaged but she was very positive about how this crisis had affected her relationships with her colleagues, saying:

...the relationships that we’ve built and strengthened as a staff and as our admin and how we’ve all come together... [ERTL is] something that I hope I never see again in my career, but it definitely has helped us grow as staff.

Given all of this, is there a conceptual lens that can provide insight about how teachers experienced collegial relationships during ERTL? And what are the implications for how we think about teaching practice?

## The Nature of Teaching Practice

A conceptual framework that can shed light on how teachers experienced their relationships with each other during ERTL needs to account for workplace culture and professional development while respecting the impacts of current and historical contexts and practices. Reflecting on what teachers told me, I turn to the concept of communities of practice, a way to talk about workplace culture and how it evolves over time. Etienne Wenger (1998) was studying insurance claims processors, but his ideas are surprisingly useful for understanding any workplace. He described a community of practice as being a multi-dimensional entity that can neither be reduced to merely a type of community nor a type of practice. It represents a social theory of learning, where learning occurs through active participation in social communities. Further, simply working in the same location or department is not enough for a group of employees to qualify as a community of practice.

Reviewing current scholarship on communities of practice, the concept continues to evolve, with two distinct ideas of what it is. Some scholars describe a community of practice as a group of professionals getting together to learn new skills or create new innovations in their practice (see, for example, Ali Mohammed, 2022; Damjanovic & Ledford, 2024). In the education sector, these sorts of purpose-built groups are called professional learning communities (PLCs).

Teachers' PLCs might be formed by institutions like school boards or professional associations. Also, sometimes they are formed as part of research projects conducted by education researchers like myself. For example, some colleagues and I conducted a research project that created professional learning communities within the schools we were studying (Barrett et al., 2010). Sometimes informal PLCs are created by classroom teachers themselves either within schools and/or through social media platforms. Regardless of their origins or locations, PLCs can be part of a deliberate attempt to shift the culture of schools to adopt particular innovations or adapt more readily to diverse student populations. Several of the teachers I interviewed belonged to one prior to ERTL and others joined one during the pandemic.

Another idea of communities of practice conceptualizes them as arising organically and locally as a part of workplace culture (Akinyemi et al. 2020; Kim 2021). Wenger (1998) described these communities of

practice as having specific characteristics—mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. I will define each of these first and then provide examples from the data.

Mutual engagement requires participants working together and not merely side by side. Wenger says, ‘practice does not exist in the abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another.’ (Wenger 1998, p. 73). I take this to mean that teachers participating in this type of community of practice would be in constant dialog with colleagues about how they teach, how they manage their classes, and how they interpret the curriculum. Through these encounters of mutual engagement, and in light of past practice, they establish local standards for their work.

Joint enterprise, in Wenger’s scheme, is the teleology of the group—the purpose employees are trying to fulfill together. For teachers, the joint enterprise might be described as helping students to successfully complete their courses. Individual teachers might have other goals such as instilling a love of learning or developing specific skills, but the group as a whole is arguably aiming to get students through their courses successfully.

Shared repertoire is, to me, the most interesting. It is what defines the professional practice of the group, such as vocabulary, skills, tools, methods, and policies. It also encompasses how teachers interact with provincial policies, including curriculum documents and school board policies, and how teachers handle disciplining students or interacting with parents. Most importantly, shared repertoire is a way of talking about how group members adapt their practice to accommodate their context. Wenger says:

It is not necessary that a repertoire be completely locally produced. In fact, the bulk of the repertoire of most communities of practice is imported, adopted, and adapted for their own purpose—if only the languages they speak. But if there is hardly any local production of negotiable resources, and if hardly any specific points of reference or artifacts are being created in that context, then one would start to wonder whether there was really something that the people involved are doing together and around which they engage with one another in a sustained way. (Wenger 1998, p. 126)

Thus, one can determine whether a community of practice exists in a workplace based on whether or not mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire are present. This is useful because if it is determined

that a particular group constitutes a community of practice, one can use this concept to analyze how social learning within it unfolds.

Applying Wenger's scheme to teaching practice, it is conceivable that a community of practice did not necessarily exist for teachers during the first century of Ontario's public school system, because although teachers might have had limited mutual engagement and some sense of joint enterprise, teachers did not collaborate in their day-to-day practice to the extent that they do now because the mandated curriculum was highly prescriptive and did not allow for much interpretation. In other words, it does not appear that they had a shared repertoire as defined by Wenger. Nevertheless, communities of practice for teachers did eventually emerge as the parameters of teachers' work allowed for more local negotiation of their practice, which included how best to fulfill the curriculum expectations given local resources and the characteristics of their students. Wenger talks about the significance of the negotiation between the local and the global for any community of practice. At the local level, the communities of practice determine standards of practice through mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a continually evolving shared repertoire.

According to Wenger, any community of practice is subject to two tensions: between reification and participation, and between continuity and discontinuity. For our purposes, reification involves the establishment of social structures and artifacts that remain in place as different people join and leave the community of practice. For teachers, this includes the shared repertoire of procedures and approaches but also artifacts like attendance registers, daybooks, and report cards. Curriculum documents are also a reification, as they are an articulation of government intentions for the activities of the community of practice. Reification can thus come from within the community of practice or without. Participation, however, is always local. It is the process through which a community of practice adapts its practices to context. This process might pull activities away from established norms when new people join the community of practice, or new circumstances change the parameters of work.

Reification favors continuity. However, the tension between reification and participation can result in discontinuities, moments where community members break from past practice because of changing circumstances. Discontinuities can be a threat to shared repertoire if community members are not able to collectively align new practices to

the joint enterprise of the group. These discontinuities, then, cannot be resolved without mutual engagement.

Without doubt, ERTL created discontinuities in practice that each community of practice had to navigate. The value of using the concept of a community of practice to think about how teachers experienced ERTL rather than simply thinking of it as individual teachers adapting to new circumstances is that this social theory of learning naturally incorporates teachers' shared history of collaboration and the role of community in teachers' adaptation to the new circumstances. This is because ERTL was not characterized simply as individual teachers trying to get by, but as individual teachers attempting to preserve the pursuit of established goals to the standards that their particular community of practice had established. Each individual experience of ERTL cannot be separated from its impact on the community of practice and each community of practice cannot be separated from its impact on each individual's experience.

### Adapting Communities of Practice During ERTL

All but four of the teachers that I interviewed belonged to a community of practice as defined by Wenger. The four outliers were either teaching in adult day schools or running special programs. Some of the teachers reported experiencing a feeling of isolation. For example, a survey respondent and several interviewees had said that they missed spontaneous interactions with colleagues, in the staff room and hallways, and dropping into each other's classes. Still, the communities of practice that had existed before ERTL did tend to persist. Indeed, the discontinuities that ERTL introduced were accommodated through these existing communities of practice. Teachers found ways to learn from each other, whether through existing collegial groups or newly created ones. Teachers with more skills spontaneously offered help to those with less and groups of teachers sought to build knowledge and skills together. For example, Rhea had extra meetings with her department to share knowledge and skills and also helped struggling colleagues one on one. Kurt helped colleagues and also took advantage of the instructional coach's expertise. None of the teachers who described their collegial interactions in this way seemed surprised by this cooperation

and this indicated to me that their communities of practice were already collegial—where helping each other was the established practice. For example, Chris continued to work closely with his teaching partner, and Rhonda and her fellow kindergarten teachers divided up the workload. Similarly, as Blake, the SERT, described, those teachers who had roles as experts (ESL teachers, SERTS, facilitators/consultants) found ways to fulfil their roles differently without giving up their deference to the decisions of the regular classroom teachers with respect to how best to utilize their expert advice. Still other teachers, like Isobel, made a point of making connections with other teachers simply to ensure that all felt cared for. Thus, teachers' communities of practice persisted.

ERTL occurred within circumstances where all teachers were physically separated from their colleagues; that is, engagement with other educators was entirely mediated by screens and technology. What does mutual engagement mean under such conditions? Wenger notes that physical proximity does not, in itself, create communities of practice but I wonder if the corollary is true. Is a community of practice possible without physical proximity? For most of the teachers I interviewed and surveyed, it seems as though mutual engagement was maintained, albeit deliberately arranged by phone, text, email, or video call.

As for joint enterprise, in Ontario, it begins with the curriculum. Ontario's public-school teachers plan their programs backwards from the learning expectations listed in mandated curriculum documents and use provincially approved textbooks to plan how to get their students to these explicit levels of knowledge, understandings, and skills. During ERTL, some aspects of what teachers were trying to accomplish changed but these differences did not manifest within collegial relationships. In other words, based solely on what teachers said about their relationships with each other and how they learned together and adapted their practice, joint enterprise was not significantly affected by ERTL.

However, ERTL had a profound effect on shared repertoire. I have described shared repertoire with teachers' communities of practice as consisting of vocabulary, skills, tools, methods, and policies. Adapting the shared repertoire of teaching practice to the new circumstances of ERTL was a central project of teachers' communities of practice during the pandemic. Each school board dictated which online platforms teachers could or should use and how much of the mandated curriculum

teachers should aim to cover. Each school had to determine how best to accommodate workload and professional development, and every teaching staff had to adjust and adapt existing relationships so that their work could maintain established standards of practice and sustain teachers' mental health. I have described how the various communities of practice to which interviewees belonged adapted their shared repertoire through learning together, consulting each other, planning together, and being there for each other. These coping strategies served to update the skills, tools, methods, and policies necessary to do the work while strengthening existing relationships and developing new ones.

Most of the teachers that I interviewed and surveyed experienced their collegial relationships as reliable sources of timely professional development, spontaneous problem solving, and emotional support. A very few felt isolated and aware of what they were missing. That the collaborative and collegial model of professional practice was the norm both before and during ERTL speaks to a fundamental shift in how teaching is currently practiced in public schools. That is, given the means, teachers choose collaboration over isolation and, consequently, their ability to innovate is enhanced.

Finally, I do not wish to give the impression that, during ERTL and during normal times, teachers have large amounts of time to meet and plan with each other. Time for collaboration is rarely part of a teacher's official timetable, and even when it is, other demands can make these official planning slots feel burdensome (Barrett et al. 2010). Collaboration requires time and teachers' time is always extremely limited. Indeed, whether during ERTL or otherwise, it might be surprising to observe that teachers find the time to collaborate at all. However, the fact that it happens despite limited time is a good indication that the teaching profession considers collaboration to be essential.

My aim in this chapter has been to explore how teachers experienced relationships with other teachers during emergency remote teaching and learning and I used Wenger's conception of communities of practice to gain insight into what teachers told me about their experience. Teachers indicated to me that their relationships with each other were fundamental to their ability to cope with ERTL and their communities of practice found ways to adjust to the new context. Most reported that collegial relationships deepened and their communities of practice were strengthened, and those

few who felt isolated indicated that they were keenly aware of what they were missing. In fact, Dipa, the biology and special education resource teacher, was adamant that teaching in isolation was not the norm for her even before ERTL began. All of this indicates that the nature of teaching practice has changed over the past decades from the isolation described by Lortie to the communities of practice described by Wenger, and ERTL made that change impossible to deny.

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## Study Participants Featured in this Chapter

| Name     | Race        | Experience<br>(years) | Role                                        |
|----------|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Blake    | White       | 8                     | High school SERT                            |
| Cameron  | White       | 21                    | Grade 3, homeroom                           |
| Carol    | White       | 17                    | High school drama                           |
| Charles  | S. Asian    | 15                    | High school technology                      |
| Chris    | White       | 35                    | Grade 4 homeroom                            |
| Dianne   | White       | 15                    | Grade 6 homeroom                            |
| Dipa     | South Asian | 17                    | SERT, high school biology                   |
| Eloise   | White       | 5                     | Middle school French                        |
| Isobel   | South Asian | 20                    | High school English                         |
| Kurt     | White       | 27                    | Grade 4, homeroom                           |
| Marcella | White       | 28                    | Grade 2, homeroom                           |
| Marco    | Latinx      | 30                    | High school mathematics                     |
| Paulo    | White       | 26                    | Middle school health and physical education |
| Rhonda   | White       | 20                    | Kindergarten                                |
| Rhea     | White       | 15                    | High school music                           |
| Tara     | White       | 8                     | Grade 4 homeroom                            |
| Wendy    | White       | 25                    | Grade 3, homeroom                           |

\*SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher



## 4. Working with Parents: Teachers as IT Specialists, Coaches, and Social Workers<sup>1</sup>

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Growing up in a family of teachers, Alexandra<sup>2</sup> had come to teaching reluctantly but, in the end, found it rewarding. In the 27 years that she had been teaching, she taught grades four, five, and six before specializing in teaching English language learners, providing support to students in many different classes within her school. Then, in recent years, she chose to return to regular classroom teaching, responsible for a single class. At the time of the pandemic, when emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) was implemented, she was teaching a grade one class in a suburban elementary school. Alexandra was dismayed by the new responsibilities that had become part of her job during ERTL. She said:

The pressure being put on me...being put on teachers to be the single line of communication with families and parents who are struggling, struggling, struggling, [...]. I don't think I was ready for that. In teaching, you know that you're the front line and you know a lot about the things that go on inside the home and what kids are dealing with [but] I don't think I was prepared for the breadth of the responsibility or how to navigate that. I mean, I take my job very seriously. I love my kids.

Here, Alexandra expressed feeling a high level of pressure to provide assistance to parents that went beyond what she had been used to prior to the pandemic. The terminology she used—'front line'—also reflected

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1 The word 'parents' includes parents, guardians, caregiving and other close family members (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020–2024).

2 All study participants' names are pseudonyms and details may be changed to protect anonymity.

the prevailing discourse during the pandemic. Having issued a provincial stay-at-home order (known colloquially as a ‘lockdown’), the Ontario government had allowed for a class of workers, that they called ‘front-line workers’, to continue to work outside the home during lockdown in order to keep everyone else fed, safe, and supported (Government of Ontario 2020). Alexandra used this term in spite of the fact that teachers were not included in this official class of workers during the pandemic. This implies that she recognized herself as being part of a group of workers who were responsible for keeping people safe, even if they were not doing so in person. Indeed, the social isolation, technical challenges, and economic consequences of the lockdown meant that teachers often had to take on roles that had, in the past, been filled by community organizations and other government agencies. In doing so, teachers’ relationships with parents changed significantly during the pandemic. Therefore, in this chapter, I will be exploring how teachers experienced their relationships with parents during emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL).

## The Role of Parents in Schooling

Research indicates that active parental involvement in students’ education has a positive effect on students’ learning, regardless of age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status and can compensate for negative effects of socioeconomic status on students’ academic achievement (Barger et al. 2019, Sengonul 2022). Most current research undertaken on parental involvement focuses on the parents of marginalized students, usually those with dis/abilities or from demographically marginalized groups. The starting assumption of this research seems to be that if parents of marginalized students were more involved, the students would be more successful in school (see, for example, Fields et al. 2022; MacPhee 2021). Consequently, a lot of this research aims to find ways to involve parents more in their children’s educations. However, some researchers, such as Rabani Garg (2021), argue that most of this research regards marginalized populations through a counterproductive deficit lens. She suggests that the way to combat that problem is to recognize the agency and knowledge of parents from marginalized communities and support them in realizing their goals.

Government policy, as demonstrated through curriculum documents, reflects this understanding, but the role of parents has evolved over time. In fact, Ontario's public school system was originally designed to facilitate building a society with British middle-class values. To do so, free and universal public schooling was necessary to compensate for or erase cultures that did not reflect this vision (Axelrod 1997). Still, the Program of Study issued by the Ontario Department of Education in 1939 states:

The parents, also, have a right to know at stated intervals how their child is "getting along." And the wise teacher will enlist the parents' interest and support in his efforts to direct wisely the child's development. The report to the parents, therefore, should give the necessary information regarding the child's attendance and punctuality, his progress, his interests and attitudes. (Ontario Minister of Education 1939, p. 11)

It is worth noting that Indigenous parents of children who were in residential schools were not afforded this inclusion in their children's educations. Also segregated schools for Black students were part of Ontario's school system at the time because many Ontario school boards were not allowing Black students to enroll, in spite of parents' desire for them to attend (Cooper 1999).<sup>3</sup> I relay this history to make the point that, although official policy advocated for parent involvement—at least as far as being informed—in practical terms, this involvement was differentiated across different locations and demographic groups in the province, with parents in marginalized groups experiencing particular alienation from the public school system. Indeed, some Indigenous survivors of residential schools have reported their attempts to maintain contact with their parents continually thwarted and their respect for their parents and culture constantly undermined and, in some cases, destroyed (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). The last residential school in Canada closed in 1996.

Further, years after the last segregated school closed in Ontario in 1965, Black students were subjected to more severe forms of discipline in schools (Maynard 2017) in spite of the continual advocacy of their parents (see, for example, Parents of Black Children 2024). Similarly,

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3 Ontario law allowed Black parents to establish their own schools. School boards used this as an excuse to not allow Black students to enroll in regular schools and this left Black parents with no choice but to establish their own schools when they could (Cooper, A. P. 1999).

parents of students with special needs have fought hard for full inclusion of their children in public schools, but have had to engage in continual advocacy in order to ensure that their social and academic needs were being met (Weber & Bennett 1999). Today, the Ministry of Education website encourages parents to get involved in their student's education, mainly by staying informed, taking advantage of online resources, and contacting teachers if they are concerned (Ontario Ministry of Education 2024). However, parents in marginalized groups have had the most trouble in this regard because of the double indemnity of a lack of understanding of how to navigate the school system and the prejudices of the educators they have had to lobby. This book is written from the teachers' perspectives but one cannot ignore the history of how parents have been treated by the school system both when they were students themselves and as parents. This history informs parents' trust in the school system and its teachers. Perhaps as a result, although teachers are mandated to keep parents informed about students' progress, they are not always successful in establishing a rapport with every parent.

During the pandemic, teachers did not necessarily have direct access to their students. This was especially true when students chose not to turn on their cameras during synchronous classes or even failed to log in to online platforms. Teachers had to rely on parents who, in turn, had to rely on their own resources to help their children and youth to fully participate in ERTL (Nyanamba et al. 2022). This created a strange situation for teachers, where a large proportion of their interactions with their students (and their students' parents) were devoted to helping them to navigate the online platform and quite a bit less time on the pedagogical interactions relevant to the curriculum. Were this a physical classroom, this would have been equivalent to a teacher having to spend large amounts of their time helping students find the door to the classroom, and use their personalized key to open the lock, how to use a pen or pencil, how to find the notes on the board or open a textbook and how to put the assignment in the inbox on the teacher's desk. Repeatedly. Sometimes with the same students and/or their parents each day. All while the door to the classroom disappeared periodically, locking everyone out. Further, while teachers probably welcomed parent involvement, they might have felt more pressure because, in the physical classroom, their students' parents were not all

crowded at the back of the room, scrutinizing their every move. ERTL essentially created a situation where they were. Lessons were either available on the platform asynchronously or, especially with younger children, parents were sitting with their children during synchronous lessons. This added surveillance would have increased the pressure on teachers to do their job consistently well in a very unfamiliar context.

Although it is the case that when a teacher does not do their job well, it is a public failure, with dozens of witnesses (their students) and some of their students' parents, the day-to-day experience of teaching is relatively private. ERTL was different. Every aspect of their teaching was seemingly on display and available for parents to scrutinize directly. This introduced a level of surveillance that most teachers had never experienced before. This was the local context of ERTL. However, when I asked teachers if and how their relationships with parents changed during that time, they talked about the ways in which their roles had shifted from teacher to tech support and coach, and how they sometimes found themselves providing social and emotional support.

## Tech Support and Coach

The transition from in-person classrooms to online platforms involved a steep learning curve for teachers, parents, and students. Some teachers had already been using online platforms for homework and communication with parents but very few had used them for standalone lessons. In fact, the survey indicates that half of the teachers seldom or never used online platforms in that way. Interviewees noted that their students' ages were a deciding factor.

Joseph, who taught in a rural elementary school, was uncomfortable with the extent to which his role had shifted:

You're more like in a coach role with the parents rather than in a teaching role directly with the students. I think that's the issue. That's the dynamic. I enjoy the coaching role with the parents but that shouldn't be my main role.

This coaching role, while not entirely unfamiliar to teachers, was a reversal of the usual chain of connections where most communication with parents is through the students (Arapi & Hamel 2021). One of the themes that has emerged from research on parental involvement is that

teachers see themselves as the experts while parents are merely helpers in their children's education (Garg 2021). However, circumstances severely undermined teachers' pedagogical expertise. For example, Rhonda taught in a school in a lower-income neighborhood with a very diverse population, with many parents and children being English-language learners. She noted that, when the pandemic began, they had been using the Google suite already, albeit in a limited way and yet, she said, it had been a 'steep learning curve' for her:

I felt like I was more like an I.T. specialist to the parents than anything because it was constantly, "How do I get on? How do I do this? What's the code?" And then they would get it and then they couldn't get it open. And the joke became "How do you do Google Classroom? Well, you Google it!" because we didn't know how either.

Thus, Rhonda's experience of ERTL was one where she and the parents were explicitly learning the new virtual platform together; a partnership where she and the parents tried their best to learn and understand it. Many of the teachers interviewed said that part of the reason the coaching felt strange was because, due to the social, psychological, and financial issues the pandemic had created in the lives of many, teachers could not be sure the parents that they were working with had the capacity to do what was needed to help their students learn the material.

## Social Worker

During the pandemic lockdowns, the government and community supports that had existed for families before were either hard to access or unavailable, and access to public spaces was restricted. The situation was more complicated for the parents of students with special needs because on top of taking on the role of teachers to their children at home—while working either inside or outside the home—these parents had to contend with educational accommodations that usually required expertise in special education (McIntyre et al. 2023). Kendra, who taught a class for autistic students in a suburban elementary school said:

For a lot of parents that have kids with special needs, a lot of them really don't know where to go and they don't know what to do and they don't know what supports are out there. And they really feel very lost [...]. Part of my job, my responsibility, is to help guide them. And so, for some

of my parents, I think they knew that that was what I was continuing to try and do. For other parents, I think they really felt left out in the wind. They don't know what to do. Therapy is gone. They can't go to their community groups anymore. They can't even take their kids to the park. Some parents were afraid to take their kids on walks. Some parents were only letting their kids out in the backyard.

Kendra is describing a situation in which parents were left with almost none of the supports they had had before the pandemic to help them deal with their child's intellectual, psychological, and social needs. Kendra's ability to help was also impacted. She found that some of her students were unable to engage in synchronous online learning at any level. In these cases, she spent a great deal of time on the phone with the parents asking, 'What can I do to help you?'

All of this was complicated by the fact that socioeconomic divides were exacerbated, at that time, with many members of the professional class able to work from home and the working class largely risking their health going to work (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2022). Further, the social isolation parents and families were enduring due to the lockdown meant that, for many, teachers became their main connection with social services. This had been Alexandra's concern. Marcella, who taught grade two in a socioeconomically depressed school, was keenly aware of this, saying:

They were so happy to hear from me. I feel like the parents confided in me and... I kind of felt like I was a social worker or therapist for them as well and gave them ideas and suggestions of what to do with their kids; keeping them on a schedule. I also had to fill out surveys for them to get food cards [...] and I posted in my Google Classroom. I had a list of resources for parents. So, things that I would get sent from my principal on things to help guide the parents and families during COVID. [...] And I spoke to the parents a lot on the phone and really learned about their family situations and everything, which is not unusual with the type of school I work at. We work so closely with the families that we know the ins and outs of what goes on. But I definitely bonded with them in a whole different way. I was their lifeline.

Fortunately, in her high-needs school, Marcella had already made these connections with parents, and it seems that she felt comfortable taking on a little more responsibility in that regard. But all families were under a great deal of pressure. In fact, many of the teachers I interviewed

described conversations with parents who were at the end of their rope. In response, some teachers took it upon themselves to provide material aid for parents. For example, Wendy, an elementary school teacher in a small town, said:

Another teacher and I sent a couple of care packages to a couple of the moms, too, that were just having a hard time. Relationship building, too, and just letting them know that we cared about them

Dropping off care packages was very much in line with Wendy's approach to teaching. She said that she enjoyed 'getting to know each child and each family' and so she knew about her students' life circumstances. Other teachers found out about families' situations only after their first phone call to parents after ERTL began. For example, Phoenix, a middle school teacher in a city in northern Ontario, said:

I called [a parent] and we had a two and a half hour phone call...Just as soon as I got on the phone with the parent, the parent started crying and couldn't stop. [...] You've got the parent who wants your help and doesn't know what to do and is trying their best and their business is failing [...] and that's their livelihood; how do they afford food for their kids [now]?

Not only was Phoenix pointing to problems that she was not in a position to solve but, like most of the interviewees who noted that they were expected to prioritize the mental health of their students, she now found herself dealing with the mental health of her students' parents, as well. Sonny is a high school guidance counselor in a diverse urban school in a lower socioeconomic area. He said:

We had to be cognizant of the fact that the parents were struggling, too. They had been laid off due to the pandemic. They're struggling financially. Parents had to move because they no longer could afford the rent where they were living [...]. Having such limited ways to support them both from the emotional standpoint as well as in the supports in the community—which were closed or only online—was a difficult factor for our parents, too.

Sonny was especially aware of student circumstances and parents' ability to cope because his main job during the pandemic was following up when teachers relayed to him the names of students they were worried about. This was on top of the students he had already been

monitoring prior to the pandemic; but, similar to Phoenix, the problems he described here were not ones that he could actively solve. The families needed a social safety net, with financial support that could make up for their lost income.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the isolation that most were experiencing during the pandemic was complicated by fears about health and income. Consequently, many of the teachers I interviewed became an important source of moral support for parents. Geraldine, a high school mathematics teacher in northern Ontario, said:

I did have some that I found that when I was talking to them on the phone, you could really feel and sense their anxieties about just the entire pandemic situation. And I did have a parent that just needed to talk about the fact that they didn't know what to do with their kid who was having mental health problems that were being exasperated by the pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, Geraldine had not made a point, in her practice, of connecting with the parents of her sixteen- and seventeen-year-old students. However, ERTL did necessitate her reaching out to them much more often and when she did, she, too, found herself taking on the role of supporting the parents. It seems as though, in this circumstance, teachers represented something to some parents: someone who would be knowledgeable about social services and capable of assisting parents experiencing emotional struggles. It does not appear that teachers were given much support or training for taking on the role, other than principals sending them information about available services as they received it.

## Teaching by Proxy

Teachers have particular skills. They can:

- take a curriculum and develop it into long-term plans for helping students to learn it;
- write and implement lesson plans that take into account students' characteristics, available resources, and students' progress;
- assess students' understanding, skills, and well-being, and respond accordingly;

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4 The Government of Canada did provide temporary financial support, but these payments did not fully replace lost income.

- motivate students to remain engaged even when the work is difficult; and
- build community within the classroom and intervene when students' interactions are undesirable.

During ERTL, the teaching role had to be split in two because the face-to-face time between teacher and student was drastically reduced or non-existent. This meant that while teachers posted the work that needed to be done to online platforms for asynchronous learning, and/or arranged group video calls for synchronous learning, teachers were not in a position to motivate students who neither logged into online platforms nor showed up for video calls. Further, with younger students, it was essentially the parents who were doing the teaching, and being the teacher was a role for which most parents felt ill-equipped. The situation was complicated by the fact that, in May, the Minister of Education declared that the students' academic standing would not be adversely affected by the pandemic. Everyone interpreted this as meaning: 'grades cannot go down during ERTL'. This gave students and parents an escape hatch during an extremely stressful time. Student attendance (logging in to the online platform and showing up for video calls) began to decline.

Isla talked about her grade four students' declining attendance over the course of the spring of 2020, and the burden her students' parents carried as a result:

I had one parent: she tried her best to get her son, who is a lovely kid, but very stubborn, [to attend school]. And she said, "I'm doing my best trying to get him to do one thing a day. But I have to go back to work." [...]. It was hard because everyone was just doing their best.

Isla is pointing to a common response of parents, as the school closures continued for weeks and then months. In her small elementary school, which had a high population of immigrant families and English language learners, parents were not in a position to both go to work (whether remotely or in person) and monitor their students' schoolwork to the degree required. Indeed, many parents decided to opt out of ERTL and just wait until schools went back to in-person learning. Blake, a high school special education resource teacher said:

I even had one [parent] say, "It's not worth my kid having an anxiety attack in order to try to get them that additional percentage they need to pass this course when they can easily just do it next year in person." A lot of parents made that difficult decision with their students, and I couldn't fault them on that. They got to the point where they just said, "Thank you so much for all that you've done, but don't bother calling anymore because we're not going to engage."

In some ways, the scenario that Blake described might have felt like a relief because at least he knew what had happened to the student. However, it was often the case that the teacher was never able to find out why a student never logged on to the online platform or why they stopped attending video calls or stopped handing in work. Further, students could disengage in secret. For example, Jenny, a high school music teacher in a school for performing arts, said that sometimes, when she contacted parents about their child/youth's lack of attendance, it was news to the parent. She said:

A lot of the times, the parents thought the kid was up in their bedroom at school and they weren't. So, I was quite surprised to find out how many parents didn't know that their kid had stopped engaging.

Amongst the hundreds of teachers who participated in my study, a high number reported that many of their students were openly or secretly disengaged. This meant that teachers had trouble determining what their students needed (Barrett 2021). It was also a reflection of the lack of community supports and infrastructure during the pandemic, as many parents struggled to cope with supervising their children while working. This was on top of the fact that parents lacked the pedagogical skills to perform the role that had now been placed upon them. Erin, a special education resource teacher in a small-town elementary school said:

I definitely did get that sense [from parents saying] "We are not teachers. We don't know how to do this. We can't do this. You're asking us to do something, and we can't do it." And there were definitely some hard feelings, I think. [But] the situation was what it was, and we were trying to make the best of it.

'The situation was what it was'. This was also a common refrain. ERTL is not ideal and all of the teachers acknowledged that this situation could

be tolerated only because it was understood to be temporary. However, to many of the teachers I interviewed, the changes in the relationships with parents felt like they would be more long term.

## Evolving Relationships

Ontario's Education Act states that teachers have a duty to 'communicate with parents about a student's progress', and the Act contains no other references to parents and teachers working together. However, on the Ministry website, parents are encouraged to talk to teachers about their child's learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, n.d.). During ERTL, supporting parents became an essential part of teachers' jobs. For example, Kendra had seen connecting her students' parents to community resources as part of her job, and Marcella had called herself a 'lifeline' for struggling parents. Still, while many parents trusted them, teachers did not necessarily trust themselves to give the best advice in such an unprecedented situation. As a result, teachers mostly became a listening ear, a calm presence, a supportive peer in an isolating circumstance. However, for some of the teachers interviewed, these circumstances resulted in relationships with parents deteriorating over time. Erin said:

There was definitely a distancing in the relationship... Even when we changed the expectations and changed how we communicated, a lot of the feedback I got from the parents was [that] life is just too overwhelming right now. They were dealing with poverty or food scarcity or just not having a respite service. All of those things came into play. And part of our communication plan was ensuring at least weekly, if not more, that we were reaching out to parents saying, "How's it going? Is there anything I can do?" And they would stop responding. They would stop returning the phone calls. They would stop responding to the text messages. They would stop posting messages on the online platforms.

Erin is referring to her school's mandate to check on students who weren't logging in to the online platform or handing in work. Like most teachers, Erin could not be sure of students' home circumstances without contact with parents. She knew that the parents who needed help were less likely to maintain that contact and, when parents did not respond, she worried about students' welfare. This was a common phenomenon perhaps exacerbated by the fact that Ontario schools were closed longer than any others in the country (Gallagher-Mackay et al.

2021, Nyanamba et al. 2022).

On the positive side, although many parents gave up on ERTL and chose to wait it out until the new school year, most of the teachers I spoke with said their relationships with parents had either stayed the same or improved. For example, Cameron, who taught a grade three class in a rural school, said:

I feel like I had better relations with all the parents than I ever did because, you know, I was in communication with them a minimum of once per week. And there was often back and forth and from some families who often did not communicate with me on a regular basis at all. [...] I have four or five families that did not take part in the [online platform used prior to ERTL] and also, I never heard from them all year. All of a sudden, I was hearing from them, which was very nice.

Cameron appreciated these new connections and, in correspondence during the following academic year, noted that these new connections persisted after ERTL was over. It is easy to imagine how important consistent communication would be for an elementary school teacher, but this was important to high school teachers, as well. For example, Bill was a high school technology teacher in a northern Ontario town. He said that not only were his students old enough that if they were struggling he could talk to them directly, but that, because his subject was not an academic one, he rarely heard from parents under normal circumstances. ERTL changed that. He said:

I actually had a better relationship with the parents because I was emailing them back and forth so much and helping them out with all the questions they had where normally I don't have that much to do with the parents.

Bill said that he enjoyed the change. This was echoed by many teachers, who took pleasure in getting to know parents in different ways. Joseph, who taught a French immersion grade two class in a small rural town, said:

During distance learning, there was a lot I was able to talk to [parents] about how it was going for them and, at a personal level, about their struggles trying to balance everything. So that conversation wouldn't usually happen in class.

Joseph was describing a more well-rounded relationship with parents that is more about how parents are coping than about his students.

Indeed, Kurt, a grade four and five teacher in 'middle- and upper-class' neighborhood, said:

I enjoyed some of the email conversations I was having. With some of them, it ventured off of school and teaching and learning and into other aspects of what was going on and their experiences and how they were adapting. So, it moved beyond the school scope.

Kurt enjoyed getting to know the parents, as did many of the interviewees. In fact, across the board, from kindergarten to grade 12, teachers' relationships with parents were significantly affected by the pandemic.

### Fundamentally Changed

During the pandemic, teachers experienced their relationships with parents through new roles—IT support, coach, and social worker. These roles are not alien to teachers but the degree to which this was required of them was significantly greater than ever before. They were surprised by the amount of time they had to spend on the IT support but, for the most part, took it in stride. The coaching was also accepted although none saw it as ideal. Many parents did not know how to teach the material or help their children to understand the lessons posted online and teachers were sympathetic because they recognized themselves as the pedagogical experts and knew that this was a temporary situation.

However, the role of social worker was different. Under normal circumstances, teachers are required to report when students are in distress or in unsafe circumstances at home but the level of care they were expected to deliver to their students' parents during ERTL was above and beyond that. Teachers took on a greater role of providing information to parents about supports that were available to them. They also became a listening ear when parents were in distress.

Teachers took on this social worker role with varying degrees of comfort. For example, Wendy's school population and surrounding community were in need of these supports from schools prior to the pandemic. As a result, she already had the information, skills, and comfort level with providing this category of assistance. This was true for several of the teachers interviewed. However, for most, this role did

not sit well. I suspect that how teachers experienced the social worker role depended not just on an individual teacher's willingness to accept it, but also on their sense of support and recognition from their school or school board to take on that role. As a case in point, Alexandra, the teacher quoted at the beginning of this chapter, felt under pressure being the main source of information for her students' parents on matters related to economic and emotional stressors and while she did what she could, it was not her usual role and there was little support for it from her school other than sending her information to share with parents. Alexandra accepted without question that she needed to care for her students but did not feel comfortable with supporting parents to a level for which she did not feel qualified.

Beyond providing information, teachers were confronted with the deteriorating mental health of their students' parents but were given no real support for providing assistance. It was left to individual teachers to figure it out, one-on-one, on a case-by-case basis. Thus, teachers endeavored to build trust with parents to do what needed to be done with respect to teaching their students, while trying to provide the same level of empathy and care to the parents of their students as they would normally have done to their students themselves. However, the circumstances made that task especially challenging.

In general, although teachers had positive relationships with the parents of their students whom they were able to contact, there were parents whom they were never able to reach. From teachers' perspectives, they could not know why some parents were responsive and others were not; but we cannot ignore the fact that prior to ERTL many parents were already alienated from schools, which have not, as a rule, felt welcoming or been welcoming to all parents. Nevertheless, teachers knew that, during the pandemic, for better or for worse, their relationships with many of their students' parents had fundamentally shifted.

## Identities in Practice

Etienne Wenger (1998) described his work on communities of practice as a social theory of learning. He defined any community of practice as having three characteristics: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. For teachers, mutual engagement consists of

working together cooperatively (giving rise to local standards). Joint enterprise manifests as a shared goal of helping students to successfully complete their courses. Shared repertoire is the shared vocabulary, tools, methods, and provincial and school board policies, as well as shared expectations with respect to discipline and interactions with parents. Of the three characteristics of communities of practice, shared repertoire was most affected by ERTL. The new context required new board policies and these in turn required teachers to employ new skills. However, this chapter focuses on teachers' new roles, especially with respect to parents. Wenger had something to say about that, too.

First, he noted that individual factors that constitute identities are formed through community. Second, he described those factors as the following: negotiated experience, community membership, learning trajectory, nexus of multi-membership, and relations between local and global (Wenger 1998).

Relation between local and global is relevant to how teachers' relationships with the school system affect their professional identity. We explored those relationships in chapter two. Nexus of multi-membership is related to how teachers reconcile their professional identity with their other group memberships, which could be related to demographics (e.g. race, gender, social class, ethnicity) or other social groups (e.g. family, academic discipline, clubs). Learning trajectory accounts for how teachers see themselves based on their pasts and imagined futures. Community membership is the aspect of identity that is affected by their sense of the familiar and unfamiliar. Finally, negotiated experience is the aspect of identity that describes how teachers see themselves in relationship to how others see them. It is this final aspect of identity that is most relevant in discussing how teachers experienced their relationships with parents during the pandemic.

The role of IT specialist was thrust on most teachers when teaching and learning was shifted online. Most, if they had been using online platforms at all, had done so only superficially. These platforms were supplemental to the in-person classroom. Once these platforms became the classroom, no one could opt out and teachers were seen as the experts on the technical aspects of the platform whether they felt they had that expertise or not. This introduced two challenges; the first and most obvious was that teachers now had to learn how to use these platforms more deeply

and then teach many of the parents how to use them. Second, teachers were faced with the limits of their own expertise as pedagogues. Teachers like Marcella found the situation overwhelming and relied on colleagues to help them through but, as with all of the teachers, the coaching role was still a familiar one. Unfamiliar to many was the role of social worker. Some parents seemed to see the teachers of their children and youth as confidants with respect to their struggles during the pandemic. Teachers recognized the mental stress parents were under but lacked the training to deal with it. All they could really do was listen. Some just took this in stride, as Marcella did. Others, like Alexandra, were deeply uncomfortable. The difference was how teachers reconciled the identity others projected onto them and how they saw themselves. Marcella saw herself as a lifeline and was comfortable with that. Alexandra saw herself as a teacher being asked to be a social worker and was uncomfortable with that. These tensions affected teachers' relationships with parents and crucially how they saw themselves.

In teaching, context is everything. Provincial and school board policies that have shaped professional practice over time, current policies, mandated curricula, collegial relations, and parents' available resources all create the conditions that form the backdrop of teachers' experiences. Wenger's (1998) scheme reminds us that the relationship teachers have with parents not only impacts how they go about their practice, but also how they see themselves as practicing professionals.

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Study Participants Featured in this Chapter

| Name      | Race       | Experience<br>(years) | Role                               |
|-----------|------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Alexandra | White      | 27                    | Grade 4, Fr. Immersion homeroom    |
| Blake     | White      | 8                     | High school SERT                   |
| Bill      | White      | 29                    | High school, technology            |
| Cameron   | White      | 21                    | Grade 3, homeroom                  |
| Erin      | Indigenous | 14                    | Elementary school SERT             |
| Isla      | White      | 10                    | Grade 4, homeroom                  |
| Geraldine | White      | 16                    | High school mathematics            |
| Jenny     | White      | 23                    | High school music                  |
| Joseph    | White      | 30                    | Grade 2, French Immersion homeroom |
| Kendra    | White      | 7                     | Elementary school SERT*            |
| Kurt      | White      | 27                    | Grade 4, homeroom                  |
| Marcella  | White      | 28                    | Grade 2, homeroom                  |
| Rhonda    | White      | 20                    | Kindergarten                       |
| Phoenix   | White      | 15                    | Grade 8, homeroom                  |
| Sonny     | East Asian | 15                    | High school guidance counselor     |
| Wendy     | White      | 25                    | Grade 3, homeroom                  |

\*SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher



## II. CLASSROOM

In this section of the book, I treat the classroom as the central physical space for teaching and learning. It could be a space that is the main domain of an individual teacher (as is often the case with homeroom teachers in elementary schools), decorated and arranged according to their tastes and professional judgment, or it might be a room suited to a particular discipline, where several teachers use it at designated times (as is often the case in high schools). There are itinerant teachers, as well, who are perpetual visitors in other teachers' classrooms. Nevertheless, for many teachers, the classroom grounds their practice. They know who they are within those spaces, even if they are understood to be using someone else's space or a shared one. Even students recognize classrooms as the domains of their teachers, having difficulty imagining them outside of their classrooms and schools, and being a little startled to see them outside of these environments. Classrooms ground students' experiences, too. They recognize that school is not the same as home.

However, these physical spaces were unavailable to teachers and students during emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL). During ERTL, teachers had to find new ways to ground their practice.



## 5. The Daily Work of Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning

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Cameron<sup>1</sup> was teaching a grade two class in a rural elementary school during the pandemic. He had chosen to become a teacher after years of being a scout leader, going straight into the profession as soon as he had finished university. He loved the outdoors and appreciated the rural community in which he taught. He also had an affinity for technology and had been teaching coding to his young students for several years. He aimed to differentiate instruction and design lessons in such a way that students have the opportunity to gain and then demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and skills in various ways that match their talents and preferences. For him, the emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) that was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic made these goals challenging to achieve but, at the same time, he felt confident that he had the skills to implement this effectively:

I developed a flow eventually. [...] Monday was my planning day. Tuesday was my day to record videos. Of course I'm doing it a week in advance. So, I'm now starting to think ten days ahead. "What are kids doing this week? What am I going to make them do next week?" And I'm planning that now as they're trying to do the other things. It was a very strange mindset. And the days I was recording videos, I literally started at about 7:30 in the morning and just waiting for the upload time and so forth. By about 7:00 at night, I was maybe finished all those videos for the following week. Then I'm spending the rest of the week looking for additional resources, pdfs that the parents can download, different games that connect to what we're doing, different stories that kids can watch and listen to on YouTube and

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1 All study participants' names are pseudonyms and details may be changed to protect anonymity.

just putting it together into a four-page document that the parents could use for the following week. So essentially, I would email that pdf of that document to my parents every Friday.

Rereading Cameron's routine made me wonder about the mechanics of teachers' work during ERTL. What was it like for teachers to do the work during the school closures? I imagined planning would be extremely difficult in such a rapidly changing situation. Cameron said:

First, we all thought it was just going to be two weeks after March break. [I thought], "Okay, for two weeks I can come up with a few lessons." Then it became clear it's going to be a lot longer. So [then], you start thinking, "OK? How can I pace this out? What math strands have I not covered yet? What lessons can you do?"

For Cameron, it was also immediately obvious that he could not control students' home environments. Creating a learning space that was conducive to learning had been a natural part of his pedagogy in his physical classroom. ERTL removed that possibility. He tried his best not to make assumptions about the technology that students had at home:

There was a huge difference between those who had a lot and those who had almost nothing with technology. So, I had to design my home teaching with the perspective, "I'm assuming you don't have technology and you can do it with paper and pencil. But if you [have technology], there are ways you can go further."

Thus, during ERTL, differentiating instruction or designing lessons in such a way that students have the opportunity to gain and then demonstrate knowledge, understanding, and skills in various ways that match their talents and preferences had an added dimension, and that was accommodating the range of resources students had at home. I have noted that context is everything in teaching. However, teaching is a job with daily and weekly tasks within that context. Although the focus of this book is relationships, as we turn our attention to the relationships within virtual classrooms, it is important to understand the extent to which these quotidian tasks evolved during ERTL. My aim, in this chapter, is to provide a description of teachers' day-to-day experiences of planning lessons and assessing students' academic progress during ERTL. What is different about the format of this chapter is that it is mostly the teacher's words with minimal comment until the end when I bring in some theory.

## Planning Lessons and Assignments

Under normal circumstances, when a teacher plans out their lessons, they begin with long-range planning, based on the length of the course and the content and skills they are mandated to teach according to curriculum documents. At present, curriculum documents in Ontario are up to 250 pages long for each subject area—with elementary and secondary curriculum separate. The first 100 pages are largely devoted to rationales for why the subject is important, overviews of how the subject progresses from one grade to another, instructional approaches, and how the subject connects to other subjects. There is also a great deal of space taken up by discussions about accommodating marginalized students, respecting Indigenous cultures, culturally responsive pedagogy, and human rights. Benchmarks for assessment are provided as well, in the form of rubrics. Most of any curriculum document, however, consists of lists of expectations for each grade (subdivided into topics and domains). Teachers are expected to take these expectations and translate them into units of study that fit within the time allotted for the term, semester, or school year. It is through long-range planning that teachers determine how best to help students to build skills, knowledge, and understanding over time. Day-to-day lessons are then planned within this framework, but these lessons are dependent on context.

In Ontario, the pandemic school closures began the day before March Break, an annual one-week holiday. Teachers were told that school buildings would be closed for two weeks after the Break during which students would engage in online learning activities provided by the province. Two weeks later, teachers were told that ERTL would begin in a week and teachers would take over providing appropriate learning opportunities for students at that time. This sudden change in context meant that the long-range planning that teachers had already done had to be completely revised. Referring to an entrepreneurship course she taught in an adult day school, Valerie said:

It was a really neat course to teach in person, but not a good course to teach online. They actually designed the course so that it was really engaging and interactive and hands-on and it was awesome. But then I had to finish that course online. So, it was just pretty painful, boring.

This was true for many courses, which were simply not designed for distance learning. Also, in a province where more than a quarter of students are English Language Learners (Ontario Ministry of Education 2024), switching to a largely asynchronous and text-based platform created complications. Estelle, who was teaching a high school English as a Second Language (ESL) course, said:

I ended up having to limit my teaching to oral and reading because my students couldn't use their email. They couldn't email me their work. I could have, I suppose, in a complicated way gotten them to take a picture of it and then sent me the picture and then I could have corrected that, but I didn't. I chose to simply focus on oral and reading and leave writing out of it. This is my way of coping with it. I think that it took me so long to get them organized, to get them onto [the online platform], to show them how to work it that I just didn't have it in me to now get them to send me a written document, to put it in Word, to attach the Word document to an email and send it to me... I just thought, "No, I can't do that." So, I had them do their homework. They would write it out. And then I had them read the answer aloud that they had written. [...] And then I would send them a link to the video so they could watch it later at home and answer questions. So, I think that their oral language probably didn't suffer. And I don't think the reading suffered. I think I pushed them a bit harder on reading so [writing is] the only thing that probably wasn't covered as much as it would have been (in-person).

The situation that Estelle describes also complicated things for the subject teachers of English Language Learners. Carol, who taught drama in a small suburban high school, said:

For my ESL drama, I just pretty much dropped my curriculum altogether and just invented new stuff because my ESL Drama was mostly level A, B, which is the lowest, so you can't assume that if I write out instructions, they're going to figure them out, even with translation. So, that was a real challenge—figuring out how to make something good for them.

Carol did say, 'I came up with some good stuff in the end.' However, the efficacy of the usual approaches for accommodating students with a variety of special needs was limited. Erin, an elementary special education resource teacher in a small town (SERT) said:

This is the plan that we were given by the [school] board, and the implementation time was very quick turnaround. So that was difficult to sort of move the instruction from in person. I would characterize [in-

person teaching] as very individualized, adapting in the moment based on the students' needs. For students on the autism spectrum [for example], it was very flexible. And then when we went to online learning, I found it difficult to translate that type of feedback loop—provide instruction, get the feedback, adapt the instruction, get more feedback from the students—to an online platform that was still meaningful for them.

To complicate things further, some students with special needs were still entitled to individualized curriculum. Kendra said:

I found it really challenging being in a community class [for students on the autism spectrum] and being with six different students of six such vastly different needs. So, it wasn't as if I could say, "Okay, I'm going to upload this, and this is good for two of you. This is good for five of you." Everything that I uploaded had to be individualized. So, I kind of had to structure my time in my day for [whose programming] I was going to focus on for that day. And knowing that my goal was supposed to be an hour for them was a bit of a challenge because, I mean, our neurotypical kids have a hard enough time focusing for one hour continuously. For our non neurotypical kids, that's a lot to ask of them.

Kendra is alluding to a change in policy in late April 2020, when the Minister of Education mandated hours of instruction that were greatly reduced from the norm:

Kindergarten to Grade 3: Five hours of work per student per week, with a focus on literacy and math

Grades 4 to 6: Five hours of work per week, with a focus on literacy, math, science, and social studies

Grades 7 to 8: 10 hours of work per week, with a focus on math, literacy, science and social studies

Grades 9 to 12: Three hours of work per course per week for semestered students, and 1.5 hours of work per course per week for non-semestered students, with a focus on credit accumulation and graduation (Ontario Minister of Education 2019–2020).

This drastic reduction in instructional hours called for wholesale revision of the curriculum that was to be enacted. Isobel, an English teacher in a large suburban high school, said:

One of the things that ended up happening for all of us [was] that we just cut things out of the curriculum. And then the message from the [school] board was: "Cut it in half and then cut it in half again." So, they really recognized that they weren't calling it distance learning. They were

calling it emergency distance learning so that there was still connection that was made with the students. They're still doing some learning but also recognizing the number of complexities that were associated with the situation. I thought that was pretty smart on their part. I thought it was a pretty wise decision.

Reducing the curriculum to be taught so drastically, across the province, was unprecedented, however an important principle for long-range planning is that there is nothing to be gained by planning to teach more content than can possibly be covered, because then students are unlikely to learn any of the content well. Whatever is taught needs to be given the time it is due, or the teacher needs to decide ahead of time that a particular topic will not be taught in depth. Consequently, all of the teachers I interviewed agreed that reducing the curriculum that they intended to cover was absolutely necessary, but it was difficult for some teachers to determine how much work to assign in the new context of ERTL. Kurt, a grade four homeroom teacher, said:

One Monday, I had an e-mail saying that this was too much work. The same day I had a parent e-mail that said, this is not enough work. And I had a parent e-mail that said this is just the right amount of work. And I just dubbed that my Three Little Bears Day because I guess I didn't know where to go. And it was pretty much students of the same level. So, how do you deal with that? And then four days later, the one parent who said it wasn't enough was telling me it was too much.

Kurt's frustration was not uncommon. The pandemic introduced differential stressors on students' families and parents were not always in a position to supervise their children/youth to do the work assigned. Teachers had trouble ascertaining what the circumstances at home actually were and this made it difficult to determine what was an appropriate workload for students.

There was yet another complication. Long-range planning and lesson planning are not just a matter of mapping out the curriculum to be taught. Classroom routines are also part of any teacher's pedagogy. Maxwell taught high school English to students who were at risk of dropping out of school. He said:

On Mondays, normally I have them simply reading for pleasure for 75 minutes. I want to develop a facility for reading. And so that was just an ongoing assignment in the background. [During ERTL], I would just

tell them, “Please find time to read for pleasure if you can”. [Online], I [would] be giving them the same kinds of assignments I would give them in class, but I [didn’t] have the same opportunities to speak immediately off the cuff to clarify, to answer people’s questions. I always [said] that I could share with everybody what my answers were, but most students didn’t feel free to do that.

Through these routines, Maxwell had been trying to help students build particular skills. He was also noting how important it was for him to be there to help struggling students to understand the assignments he was giving them, but these routines were difficult to maintain during ERTL.

### ‘Beautiful Projects’

Educators know that the core of their work with students is activities and assignments. Through these, students engage with the mandated curriculum expectations and demonstrate their levels of achievement. Morty, who taught in an alternative high school, said:

I think one of the things was the assignments. Just because it’s a good assignment [in-person] doesn’t mean it’s a good assignment online. So, it was really looking at your assignments and making sure the instructions were crystal clear [...]. I do a lot of things orally with my students [because] a lot of them really stink in English. They don’t read and write very well. So, I try to do whatever I can orally, and we try to do it over the phone. But students weren’t engaging, so I had to try to make it as easy as possible for them to do the assignments in the best way that they could, giving me the information I needed to come up with a grade of some sort.

To provide space for differentiation and deep learning, many of the teachers I interviewed used project-based learning (PBL). PBL requires a great deal of planning and preparation and is always context-specific. Therefore, when the context changed, projects had to be reimaged. Niveen, a high school French teacher, was especially frustrated. He said:

All the projects—the beautiful projects that we had that we were doing all these years that we had prepared, our plans for teaching projects... Everything crashed. And we had to change course. We had to completely put aside all the big projects and did other things that could be accommodated on this kind of system. For example, me, myself, I took the opportunity to review some basics of the language that I could see all the time that my kids were lacking [...]. That’s all I did. I could not really get into the big projects.

Niveen was contrasting the rich learning that can occur through projects with the basics he had to focus on during ERTL. Similarly, Rhea, a high school music teacher, said:

So, our final for the end of the year for the Vocal Music Program is we're preparing for a concert. And that got thrown out the window because there is no concert, which means that those weeks of rehearsal... all of a sudden there's no weeks of rehearsal. Then there was the final project just for them to sing a final exam, which also is not possible when half the class doesn't have access to a computer or doesn't feel comfortable. There were just so many problems with that final project.

Stacey attempted to make up for the project in her high school social sciences course through smaller assignments designed to approximate all of the activities that would have gone into the final project. She said:

When we found out that it was just going to be three hours [per week] for the rest of the year, I had to make the call of just "We're not going to do [the culminating project]. We're not going to finish it. I'm sorry." And it was a really tough decision because, even for me, doing that project is one of those amazing things that they can feel so good about in the end. It's their own interests. But at the same time, if they don't have the knowledge about the theories, how are they going to be able to do that in the end? So instead, we did a lot of smaller little experiments. Like I had them go out and break a social norm, except I made it clear "Maybe don't go out. Let's do 'break a social norm' in your house." Then reflecting on how that made them feel, how that made the people around them feel and just trying to do little social experiments, just within the area that they were confined to or just seeing what was going on around them. And I said to all the kids, "I have the luxury of being in the social sciences to be able to kind of take advantage of what's going on and have you guys be able to learn and reflect on it and not just be at your computer constantly listening to me talk."

With all of these modified assignments, the nature of assessment was transformed.

## Assessing Achievement

Towards the end of April 2020, the Minister of Education had declared that students' grades could not suffer during ERTL, but teachers were still expected to assess students' work (Alphonso 2020). Teachers assess

student work for two purposes, to determine student progress in order to adjust their approach to optimize students' learning (assessment for learning), and to assign a grade (assessment of learning).

### Assessment of Learning

Assigning legitimate grades online proved difficult. Joseph, a grade two French immersion teacher, said:

One of the reasons why I can't assess my students is that I don't know what's coming from them and what's coming from their parents. When I assess them in the classroom, I know what they're able to do because I know what supports they're able to use and not use during a testing situation. Whereas when the work is being done with their parent and then submitted, I don't know how much involvement the parent had in what the student is producing. [Also] I'm just not able to communicate all that detailed feedback that I would in class through a messaging app or through online, especially when parents' availability was so limited.

Joseph was highlighting how the online format complicated teachers' ability to detect when students were handing in work that was not their own. While the involvement of parents in projects has always been a concern, the day-to-day interactions teachers have with students had been a reliable counterpoint. Not so in the online environment. Further, there were now sophisticated tools available for students to use to get around doing the work themselves. For example, Geraldine, a high school mathematics teacher, said:

With math, right now, there are so many technologies out there that will do the work for them. And there is [...] an amazing technology. And when a friend of mine told me about it about five years ago, she said this is going to destroy your career. So, with your phone or your tablet, you take a picture of your question and, provided that it's typed, this app will do the question and not just give the student the answer but show them every step.

Tools like the one Geraldine has described made it possible for students to produce completed assignments without learning anything. Even if students chose not to use them, they could still very easily work together in situations where they were supposed to work independently. Milena, a grade eight homeroom teacher, said:

Math assessment was the hardest. For tests, we used Google forms where I would make the quiz or the test and then they would submit it. But what ended up happening was that I was kind of playing Inspector Gadget. I have a group of friends... of boys, and they would tell you when they're submitting, it. So, one would submit right after the other and they would all get one hundred percent. So, [I thought], "OK, well, it was a team effort." I'm happy they collaborated and they kind of worked together on it, for sure. But I didn't feel comfortable assessing that. So when it came to math, what I ended up doing was I used their marks that we had in February and March in class and the other ones I just commented saying that they completed it, but I never actually gave them a mark on their report card for those strands, only because I didn't feel comfortable because I knew it was a little bit of everything. So that was that.

Perhaps the biggest complication in these scenarios was that one could not assume students were being graded on a relatively level playing field. Ann-Marie, a high school chemistry teacher in an affluent suburb, described the situation well:

The problem is that those students who were honest were getting the marks that aren't always great. Because they tried their best. And they were honest, and they were truthful to their assessments. Whereas you've got the students where you're surprised by how well they did. And then you wonder about the integrity of those assessments. So, then we started sort of backing off and said, "OK, you know what? It is what it is. Now, what we're going to do is maybe weigh our assessments differently." So maybe the pre-March break marks are going to have to be worth more. And the post COVID, we call them the "COVID marks", are going to be weighted, a little less, just so you don't have these skewed marks.

Ann-Marie's solution to the problem was a common one. Since the integrity of assessments was in question, it made sense to de-emphasize these grades in final calculations. This directly contradicted provincial policy, which states that grades should be weighted toward most recent performance (Ontario Ministry of Education 2010) but it is difficult to see how teachers could have upheld that policy, given the circumstances. The fact that grades could not be negatively affected by work done during ERTL at least seemed to provide the necessary permission to implement assessment policy differently. Frank, a high school tech teacher, said:

It was very, very difficult. It wasn't that I was no longer required to assess the student. I mean, I assessed my students who were participating. And for those who made the effort, even in a case where the artifact, if you will, didn't support raising the grade, I raised their grades based solely on the fact that they stayed engaged, that they made the effort. But the grade... It's not a terribly authentic thing. It doesn't necessarily reflect the outcome of a series of steps. It reflected the process more so than the artifacts. I tried to make it worth the kids' whiles to participate.

Thus, all of the teachers I interviewed recognized the artificial nature of the grades they were assigning in such extraordinary circumstances.

### Assessment for Learning

If assigning grades was challenging, assessing student progress in order to adjust teaching approaches to optimize student learning became almost impossible. This was especially true for students with special needs. Kendra, an elementary school SERT, said:

Because all of my kids' academics are based on an IEP [individual education plan], which are heavily modified expectations for them [...]. In the community class, it's more, "OK. How many times did I see that? Did you do it independently? What level of prompt did you require? I'm going to turn that into a percentage. I'm going to compare to your IEP." I can't do that online.

The necessity of being together in person is difficult to deny in Kendra's case, but for teachers in regular classrooms, what was lost in the online environment was more subtle. David, a grade seven homeroom teacher, said:

In a classroom, I can tell. "OK, that kid's having a bad day. I'll chat with them quietly. We'll put this aside for now." I couldn't get that personal feel. I couldn't get that personal touch. And so "Was this child really producing D work or is this child having some struggles?" "Is this student giving me C work when normally they produce, at the very least, B or is this that they're demoralized, and they just don't care, and they don't see the point in all this right now?"

The answers to the questions David was posing would have an effect on how he adjusted his instruction to optimize student learning. If the student was not understanding the material, David could try to teach it

to them in a different way, but if the problem was emotional, he had to take a completely different approach and focus on the student's mental health (as mandated by provincial policy). The problem was that he could not get those answers. All of the teachers indicated that they recognized their duties but lacked the information necessary to fulfill them. Monique, an elementary school French teacher, said:

You can't read what is happening at the other end [in students' homes during ERTL]. I think this is a problem... I'm a language teacher. We do listening [tests] a lot where you're listening between two or three different sentences to understand that sort of thing. [In person], I can see that Joey, he's got a cold today. He's not feeling all that great. Maybe as I'm walking through the room, I'm going to stand next to him. Maybe I can get him to perk up a little bit, so he succeeds. That's just working a room for a task.

What Monique was describing was one way to help students along as they were being evaluated—being present, so that the student knew they had support and keeping an eye out for students who may not be performing to their true potential because of emotional or material circumstances. The problem was that there was no 'working a room for a task' during ERTL because there was no physical room. None of the teachers I interviewed managed to find a way to compensate for the lack of physical presence that the online classroom imposed.

### Academic Amnesty

When the Minister of Education announced that grades could not fall below where they were on March 12, 2020, when ERTL began, it was meant to ensure that circumstances beyond anyone's control did not impact students' academic records. Assigning grades is such an ingrained part of what teachers do that I was not surprised that all teachers mentioned the impact of this change. Jenny, a high school music teacher in a school for the arts, said:

I had one kid who was out collecting bottles with mom because she [had] immigrated here [and] the husband left her and refused to keep sponsoring her. She is awaiting her immigration hearing for compassionate stay but those all got stalled. But in the meantime, she couldn't get served. And so, they were completely out of money. So that kid [was] not showing up to class [online]. I had another one who dropped out because both parents

were front-line workers, and they lived in a rural area and the internet's spotty at best. And she's just isolated and scared for her parents all the time. Clearly the midterm mark thing [where grades earned after the start of ERTL could not lower the student's overall grade, as mandated by the Minister of Education] [...] Thank God that existed because those kids shouldn't be penalized for that.

Jenny's students were experiencing multiple complications all at once due to the drastic reduction in government services that the pandemic imposed, the predicament of front-line workers who still had to go to work in spite of the dangers to their health, and the lack of infrastructure in rural areas. These were the students that the Minister's policy was meant to protect. Beyond this, many teachers put the situation into perspective. Paulo, a middle school health and physical education teacher, said:

How do I put this? And I don't want to make this sound bad. But it's middle school. You're not applying to university. It's not the end-all. And the mark is not always a pure reflection of one's ability. And I always mentioned that to parents when we do face-to-face parent teacher interviews. [...] But I feel like at the elementary level in middle school, the overall grade is not the end-all as far as what the student is capable of. So, I didn't put too much stock into that. It's more about the process. It's more about is he or she doing their job or are they working hard? Are they showing progress? That's more important, I felt.

Paulo's sentiments were echoed by many of the teachers of older elementary school students. With the fundamentals of reading and mathematics already established, there was room for students to make up for lost time later. Bill, a high school tech teacher, had had little participation from his students as the pandemic wore on. He said:

I corresponded with my principal and told him what was going on, and he told me that our school board's perspective was that the students were at home safe, that they weren't sick, that they weren't being subjected to getting the virus because there was a lot of stress involved, especially in March and April when it first hit. And they encouraged students and staff to concentrate on wellness first and on schoolwork second.

The fact that Bill's principal was giving these sorts of directives in March and April (before the Minister's announcement about grades) indicates that he felt comfortable with leaning on the mental health aspects of

the curriculum. Indeed, most of the teachers I interviewed mentioned prioritizing mental health. Eve, a kindergarten teacher in a middle-class neighborhood with a high immigrant population, said:

My principal immediately said, “Whatever happens at home, all you can do is improve.” So, I never felt that stress. My only stress about assessment was how they were feeling, how the kids were doing with being stuck at home and not being able to get out and see their friends. That was it. So, I didn’t feel that pressure. I wasn’t going to worry about it. There are other things to worry about. Not that.

Again, Eve was alluding to the bigger picture—extraordinary circumstances and the mental health issues that needed to be addressed first. Indeed, once the Minister imposed the grading policy in late April, some high school teachers were relieved. Jenny, the high school music teacher, said:

I loved it. I loved it. I’ve often said that I wish there were no grades in teaching. So, for me in terms of my pedagogical philosophy, it was superb. We all agreed on descriptive feedback. No marks or levels during the process just to sort of cement for them that this was about the process, not about the product. Because who knows what the product’s going to end up being in the middle of a pandemic when everybody has technology that’s unreliable and we don’t know what you’re doing. So, for me, that feedback was so much more rich. And for me personally, it was all anecdotal. We didn’t create a weekly rubric to go with this, particularly because they were so differentiated. [...] So, the marks not mattering, just freed us up to give authentic rich feedback.

Jenny was teaching a non-academic subject. It is important to note that none of the high school teachers who taught senior-level academic courses—English, history, social science, science, mathematics—felt this way. They worried about preparing their students for university.

## Teaching as Work

Teaching is a job with parameters that are regulated by legislation and moderated by local contexts. Ontario has a policy of student-centered pedagogy and mandates specific principles for assessment meant to ensure fairness, accuracy, and equity. Teachers in Ontario have

hundreds of pages of requirements and instructions on what needs to be taught to whom and why, and in what amount of time. They must plan lessons, assess students' academic progress and wellness, and report their assessments to students and parents, and they must do all of this while accommodating special needs and adjusting their approach based on individual students' needs. All of the teachers I interviewed had attempted to fulfill these policies as best they could but found the extraordinary circumstances extremely challenging.

ERTL introduced not only the online context but also reduced hours of instruction and a directive not to report students' grades below what they had been when ERTL began. As teachers planned their lessons with these new parameters, some struggled with determining what was an appropriate workload for students and parents. Others were unable to transpose in-person projects and activities to online. The integrity of assessments suffered. Large amounts of the curriculum were cut in favor of prioritizing mental health and teachers had difficulty assessing students' well-being. Still, some teachers embraced no longer having to worry about grades, even at the high school level.

In her book, *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay*, Doris Santoro (2018) explored the motivations of teachers who choose to leave the profession due to the values that brought them into teaching continually being undermined. According to Santoro, for these teachers, it is a question of integrity. In deciding whether they should stay in the profession or leave, she stated that teachers ask themselves questions related to personal integrity, professional integrity, and integrity of teaching. Thinking about how teachers experienced the day-to-day work of ERTL, it is the questions of the integrity of teaching that are most relevant. Santoro described these as pertaining to how a teacher sees their work as contributing to or diminishing teaching practice and collective professional standards. These standards are defined not only by policy but also through the history of the profession. Specifically, Santoro asked: How is what I am doing reasonably called teaching? How can my actions be deemed educative? (Santoro 2018, p. 573).

The teachers I interviewed clearly struggled with their answers to

the first question. They tried their best to create routines for themselves and their students and provide resources to help students to learn the material, but appropriate workload for students (a fundamental aspect of short- and long-term planning and therefore fundamental to teaching practice) was extremely difficult. Further, formal and informal assessment of academic progress and student well-being (another core aspect of teaching practice), was transformed. Was it still teaching if accurate and equitable assessment was almost impossible? Also, was it still educative if imagined learning trajectories could not be integrated into their planning?

ERTL is distinct from normal online learning because it is involuntarily and suddenly imposed on school systems responding to crises. None of the teachers argued against the necessity of ERTL during the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone in the school system had to adjust. My purpose in this chapter was to provide space for teachers' descriptions of their day-to-day work during ERTL. These descriptions make it clear that the physical context of teaching, epitomized by the classroom, has a profound effect on how they go about their work on a day-to-day basis and can significantly impact the integrity of their practice.

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## Study Participants Featured in this Chapter

| Name      | Race        | Experience<br>(years) | Role                                                        |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ann-Marie | East Asian  | 19                    | High school chemistry                                       |
| Frank     | White       | 7                     | High school tech                                            |
| Bill      | White       | 29                    | High school, technology                                     |
| Cameron   | White       | 21                    | Grade 3, homeroom                                           |
| Carol     | White       | 17                    | High school drama                                           |
| David     | White       | 26                    | Grade 7 homeroom                                            |
| Dipa      | South Asian | 17                    | SERT, high school biology                                   |
| Elle      | White       | 15                    | philosophy                                                  |
| Eloise    | White       | 5                     | Middle school French                                        |
| Erin      | Indigenous  | 14                    | Elementary school SERT                                      |
| Estelle   | White       | 21                    | High school English as a<br>Second Language                 |
| Eve       | White       | 16                    | Kindergarten                                                |
| Isobel    | South Asian | 20                    | High school English                                         |
| Geraldine | White       | 16                    | High school mathematics                                     |
| Jenny     | White       | 23                    | High school music                                           |
| Kendra    | White       | 7                     | Elementary school SERT*                                     |
| Kurt      | White       | 27                    | Grade 4, homeroom                                           |
| Marva     | White       | 25                    | High school English                                         |
| Maxwell   | White       | 24                    | High school English                                         |
| Milena    | White       | 16                    | Grade 8 homeroom                                            |
| Monique   | White       | 30                    | Elementary school, French                                   |
| Morty     | White       | 30                    | Alternative high school                                     |
| Niveen    | South Asian | 38                    | French                                                      |
| Paulo     | White       | 26                    | Middle school physical education                            |
| Rhea      | White       | 15                    | High school music                                           |
| Rhonda    | White       | 20                    | Kindergarten                                                |
| Stacey    | White       | 8                     | High school social science                                  |
| Valerie   | Indigenous  | 14                    | Adult education—high school<br>English and Entrepreneurship |

\*SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher



# 6. Maintaining Inclusive Classroom Communities at a Distance<sup>1</sup>

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It is perhaps a truism that, in order for students to learn, teachers need to establish a rapport with them. Experienced teachers are also aware that developing relationships between students is equally important. Consequently, they deliberately try to create a community within the classroom and the school. These communities are based on trust developed over time spent together over the course of the school year. In the spring of 2020, these classroom communities were disrupted by school closures in many jurisdictions. This chapter explores the ways in which face-to-face classroom communities were disrupted and/or transformed by the move to online platforms and the effect of this disruption on equitable access to a good quality education.

## Engaged Pedagogy as Quality Education

To use a word like ‘quality’ requires some explanation, as there are various conceptions of what counts as ‘quality’ in education. For the purposes of this chapter, I will define it specifically as engaged pedagogy. As described by bell hooks (1994), engaged pedagogy encourages civic self-awareness and agency both within the classroom and beyond. Within the classroom, students learn to interact with other students and engage

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this chapter appeared in the *Journal of Teaching and Learning*. Barrett, S. E. (2021). Maintaining equitable and inclusive classroom communities online during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 15(2), 102–116. <https://doi.org/https://jtl.uwindsor.ca/index.php/jtl/article/view/6683/5291>

with ideas in a way that promotes their ability to be part of a community while still feeling free to disagree with, critique, and take care of each other. Such an approach must be inclusive, flexible, and responsive to students' needs, moods, and abilities. It is perhaps because of this that engaged pedagogy (described variously, for example, as 'inclusive,' 'teaching for social justice,' 'critical,' etc.) is an approach that is often put forward as the best way to teach students who are marginalized either within society or within the school or classroom for reasons related to demographic categories, abilities, and/or circumstance. Thus, we have some authors arguing for particular content that will be more relevant to students' lives (see, for example, Barrett 2013; Bempechat et al. 2019), others for approaches that contextualize learning in politics (see, for example, Freire, 1970) or in the community (see, for example, James 2012), and still others advocating education that focuses on identities (see, for example, McKnight 2018; Miller 2018; Waterman et al. 2018). To this, bell hooks (1994) added treating lived experience as a legitimate subject for academic consideration. This is key. Education should not be an exercise in alienation from oneself, one's home, or one's community, not least because this added burden is a barrier to learning (Benner & Wang 2014; Young et al. 2017). Indeed, a student who is marginalized within the school system for any of the reasons above is vulnerable academically, socially, and psychologically (Sims & Coley 2019). Thus, through these inclusive practices, marginalization outside of the classroom is addressed through a nurturing community within the classroom. I assume that although it is possible to create community within a classroom without engaged pedagogy taking place, engaged pedagogy is not possible without community. Thus, as we consider what happened to classroom communities when school buildings closed and most migrated to online platforms, it is important to consider if engaged pedagogy is possible at a distance.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) was mandated for all students in Ontario, Canada, whether or not students already had the maturity, motivation, circumstances, and resources necessary to learn in this way. There was also an international health crisis that had adverse effects on mental health and family incomes. Therefore, given

the uniqueness of the situation, my purpose here is not to comment on online learning *per se*. However, since most school districts opted for online learning during the pandemic closures, it makes sense to look at some of the literature on developing classroom communities online.

## Creating Online Learning Communities

As noted, teachers recognize that creating community within their classes is important and, over time, develop skills to do so. However, the technical skills required of a teacher in the online environment may create situations where even experienced teachers are unable to translate that expertise to the online environment (Farmer & West 2019; Kaser & Hauk 2016). That said, researchers such as Kaser and Hauk (2016) described good qualities for online teaching as quite similar to what is needed for face-to-face teaching—flexibility, focus on collaboration among students, real-life experiences as a source for examples, and rapport with students.

It is tempting to focus on efficient knowledge acquisition as the sole purpose of online learning. Described by Gert Biesta (2012) as the learnification of schools, this approach can undermine or ignore the social aspects of learning. Yet we know that, online, the most powerful learning comes from students interacting with each other (Kaser & Hauk 2016). Recognition of the importance of community in encouraging student engagement online means that, to some, creating community is seen as the best approach to helping students to succeed (Drysdale et al. 2016; Rakes & Dunn 2015; Rovai 2002). Indeed, an oft-cited problem with online learning is the lack of community, and some researchers suggest that it is impossible to build relationships online (Farmer & West 2019) or at least a very real challenge (Baturay 2011). However, there are examples in the literature wherein it has been done successfully.

For instance, Drysdale et al. (2016) investigated the effects of creating mentor groups for an online high school. Using a model of community described by Alfred P. Rovai (2002), they found that, for the most part, the mentor groups provided a sense of community for students that was absent in their regular classes and that this in turn improved engagement and motivation with respect to academic achievement. This

contradicts Farmer and West (2019) to some extent but also highlights that the teacher must be deliberate about creating community because it is unlikely to happen spontaneously (Baturay 2011). It is an open question whether having already been a face-to-face community makes this easier or more difficult and what factors affect this. Still, if community is what is needed, a framework for evaluating the quality of the learning community is in order. Similar to Drysdale et al., I will be using Rovai's framework to do so.

Rovai (2002) described the elements that need to be present in online schooling in order to create a sense of community: spirit (which I will call sense of belonging), trust, common expectations (which I will call shared purpose), and high-quality interaction. Sense of belonging refers to students feeling that they are amongst friends and enjoy spending time together. Further, there is a sense that it is safe not only to nurture each other but to challenge each other, too. Trust is a feeling that one can rely on other students in the class and be assured that classmates care about and would not lie to one. Trust creates feelings of safety so that students can express themselves freely. Shared purpose relates to a shared sense of what the class is trying to achieve academically. High-quality interaction focuses on the nature of both student-student and student-teacher interactions being conducive to the above. Drysdale et al. (2016, p. 153) described this as quality interactions that 'foster(s) socio-emotional interaction' and 'includes empathetic messages and self-disclosure.' This model is consistent with what bell hooks described as her approach to teaching:

I might ask students to ponder what we want to make happen in the class, to name what we hope to know, what might be most useful. I ask them what standpoint is a personal experience. Then there are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountaintop and so we let go because the weight of it is too heavy. (hooks, 1994, p. 92)

For teachers to feel free to ask their students what they want to accomplish and for students to reveal, in front of their peers, what aspects of themselves they bring to the endeavor, while still being open to critique, requires the sense of belonging, trust, and shared purpose that Rovai (2002) described, developed over time through the quality interactions that Drysdale et al. (2016) identified. Rovai (2002) stated that a sense of community is indeed possible in online learning environments. The

specific questions to examine here, then, are (1) What can Rovai's model tell us about the efficacy of teachers' efforts to maintain the community they had created face-to-face when schooling moved online? and (2) To what extent can this model provide insight into the degree to which equitable access to a good-quality education was a feature of online learning during the pandemic school closures?

## Context

During the pandemic, the Ministry of Education mandated reduced hours of instruction for each grade level, focusing on specific subjects:

Kindergarten to Grade 3 — Students will complete five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy and math.

Grades 4 to 6 — Five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy, math, science and social studies.

Grades 7 to 8 — 10 hours of work each week, focusing on math, literacy, science and social studies.

Grades 9 to 12 — Three hours of work per course each week for semestered students, or 1.5 hours per course each week for non-semestered students. (King, 2020)

Although there was some confusion as time went on about how many hours had to be spent in synchronous learning, the above stipulations remained the same. Additionally, in response to the continued exponential growth of COVID-19 cases, the length of time that schooling was to remain online was repeatedly extended, compromising long-term planning.

All of the above parameters meant that this emergency distance teaching and learning was distinct from teaching online courses in normal circumstances.

## Sense of Belonging

Drysdale et al. (2016) broke down a sense of belonging into four components: recognition of membership in community, feelings of friendship, enjoyment of time together, and ability to challenge and nurture each other. The teachers I interviewed used various methods to maintain a sense of belonging online. For example, Estelle, a high school ESL teacher, mostly of refugees, was aware that her students needed

consistency; therefore, she arranged to meet with students daily and synchronously (resulting in many more hours of instruction than were mandated):<sup>2</sup>

I'm old enough to break the rules. And so, I did what I wasn't supposed to do and was able to connect with my students both in terms of how to get them online and the fact that I met with them every day at a certain time and Fridays at a certain time. We changed that [Friday] time because the boys had to pray at that time.

By adjusting the class schedule to accommodate the students' religious practice, rather than simply excusing the students who did Friday prayers from class, Estelle was sending a strong message of inclusion where it was not just the case that she was accommodating them but that all students were accommodating each other. Still, although many of the students chose to attend these daily classes, most were unwilling to turn on their cameras. Estelle tried to draw students out and encourage them to show their faces but was largely unsuccessful in that regard.

Rhea, a high school music teacher, is the first of two counterexamples. She team-taught a group of students out of whom a minority would be considered marginalized. Rhea used various techniques to run her classes but realized that they were losing the sense of connection they had had before the school building closed:

So, we decided we would have an open mic live. So, a kid with guitar plays through the song they wrote, and we hosted it all together for an hour and kids would write in the chat and they'd say, "Oh, you're amazing! Oh, I love your song." [...] And at the end of the person's performance, we would read through the chat comments so they could hear all the nice things that people were saying. We set parameters: "This is a place for community to come together and share. This is not a place for you to give your constructive criticism about how to improve." And it was really fun. And some of the teachers performed, too, which was really great and it felt like, here's an opportunity for a wider part of the school to come together. [...] And then at the end of the year that happened again.

In this instance, a sense of community was definitely fostered, yet any student who had a spotty internet connection would not have been able

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2 All study participants' names are pseudonyms and details may be changed to protect anonymity.

to participate fully. Indeed, Rhea mentioned that some of her students never logged onto the online platform because they did not have access to the internet. Thus, Rhea celebrated the community that she was able to maintain, but she admitted that some of her students did not have the means to be part of it.

Similarly, Erin, an elementary school special education resource teacher (SERT), whose practice had been based on connecting with individual students and their teachers, found that once everything went online, not all of her students managed to log on, and continuity was lost:

I and my colleagues [are] very worried about what will happen in the fall for those kids, whether they're moving from kindergarten to Grade 1 or even just between grades between the primary to the junior division. [...] I didn't get a lot of opportunities to have face-to-face interaction or even speak with those kids. They weren't able to get on the online meetings and so I do feel it's kind of out of sight, out of mind [for the kids]. And I think some will be excited when we do get face-to-face again. But I think there's going to be a lot of work to do to try and get back to where we left off.

Thus, from Erin's point of view, there was a deterioration of students' sense of belonging as students slowly lost their sense of connection over time. She could not be sure why that was happening, however, because if a student did not log on to the online platform or if the parents did not respond to email or phone queries, she had no information on which to act. This was a common refrain with teachers of younger students. In class, teachers had direct access to their students, but online, not only were they no longer face-to-face but all interactions were mediated (or not) through parents. An elementary school homeroom teacher, Wendy, said that even when they met synchronously, the entire dynamic changed:

They acted as if when parents come in and the child stands beside them all shy. That's how they acted. [And I ask them] "I know you. What are you doing?"

Sense of belonging was an aspect of community that participants seemed to naturally choose to foster, as they most likely did in their face-to-face classrooms; however, the online environment created a barrier between them and their students and between individual students that

was challenging to overcome. Further, because of this barrier, teachers could not easily adjust their approach to help their students to engage with the class. And yet, similar to Dyrsdale et al.'s (2016) findings, those students who did go online, and on camera, could have the sense of the belonging Rovai (2002) described if their teachers created spaces solely for community.

## Trust

Merle, a high school social sciences teacher, said:

If a person can create in their classroom a structure of trust and inside the structure is the warmth of loving each other, then people will take risks. And the kids who felt the most protected, the most comfortable, were the ones that stayed mostly.

As Merle describes, trust was an aspect of community that participants seem to have assumed they had before school buildings were shut down. He, too, taught a mixed group of students, with the marginalized being the minority. The above quote was his response when asked why he thought a small number of his students had immediately disappeared once teaching migrated online. The corollary of his assessment of the situation is essentially that if students were marginalized before the school buildings closed, they were also marginalized during the closures. Merle notes that trust is essential for community; however, the online environment undermined this in many ways. The components of trust described by Rovai (2002) include a student feeling that they can confide in others, that their colleagues and teachers will not lie to them, and that classmates and their teacher have good intentions towards them. In short, trust creates a feeling of safety. Trust is crucial with marginalized students who, by definition, have been shunted aside in some way by their classmates, their school, the school system, or society.

Kendra teaches a small group of students with autism in an elementary school, with ages ranging from three to eight. For her, trust was fundamental to making progress with them, socially or academically. However, this trust was fragile:

We've worked so hard to establish and build in that level of trust. [...]

We're dealing with non- neurotypical kids. That trust for them is huge. It's make-or-break in a special education classroom. If they don't trust you and you don't have that relationship with them, you can program all you want. It doesn't mean that you're going to get through to them. And for me, I have a couple of students that we've worked so hard over the years because—a lot of these kids I've had for two and three years—they've been with me for a while. And my biggest worry was that they were all going to think that I had abandoned them.

In this case, Kendra believed no real learning could happen in the absence of a sense of trust, but because of the nature of students' conditions and their ages, maintaining trust at a distance was unlikely. For Morty, who teaches in an alternative program with high school students at risk of dropping out of school, before schooling migrated online, trust motivated his students to persevere and also to come to him when they needed help:

I work with them on everything [including] mental health issues if they're having trouble at home. If they're having trouble with the government, I help them fill out the forms. I help them get health cards. [...] And so they're comfortable with me. They need help with those things and also to get help they need but if they're not engaging over the phone, my hands are tied. There's nothing I can do. So, I found that it was funny because two of the kids [with the] worst attendance, but really nice kids, said, "You know, I never thought I'd say this, sir, but I really miss your class. I can't wait until we're back in class again." So, that connection with them was really severed pretty hard. And for a lot of them, [they couldn't connect online] at all.

For Morty's students, it was difficult for them to engage with him. While the drop in participation was consistent with what was reported in most of the interviews, it was significant that these students were already in a precarious position. Their connection to school was mainly through the community Morty had created in this alternative program. But they were not able to maintain the connection and were thus even less likely to graduate.

The pandemic also created a situation where essential and/or front-line workers were put at higher risk of infection. This impacted their children. David teaches in an elementary school in a lower income neighborhood. He said:

One of my boys, his mom worked in a long-term care facility. And she worked a night shift and it's just the two of them living at home. And so

he altered his schedule so that when she was at work at night, he was up all night. And when she came home, she had what was her equivalent of supper, he joined her and then they would go to their rooms to go to sleep at the same time. So, they were on the same schedule. But then there was an outbreak at one of the homes. And so this kid is up all night long with nobody to talk to, worried that his mom is going to get the virus [...]. So, he's like, "Is my mom going to die?" and, "Am I going to be left alone? What's going to happen?"

The above makes clear the ways in which face-to-face classroom experiences can mitigate the effects of a student's home life. This student experienced isolation in ways that he simply would not have were it not for the school buildings being closed.

In each of the examples above, we can see that teachers were tasked with protecting students' confidence in their teachers' care and concern, but there was very little mention of trust between students from any of the interviewees. This sense of mutual trust and concern amongst students appears to have been absent.

## Shared Purpose

According to Rovai (2002), shared purpose with respect to learning includes having a shared understanding of the value of what is being learned and an explicit understanding of academic goals. All of the students are there, ostensibly, to learn something. However, common beliefs about the value of that learning could not be taken for granted.

Estelle told a story about one of her students who did not wish to show herself on camera even when she was in a one-on-one session:

One of the students was a student who was an only child and it was the mother and the daughter only in that family. [...] And at first when I was teaching the students online, she and her mother would both come on and the mother would help her. [...] And then near the end of the school year, I was teaching them one day and I could hear that there were other people there. And so I asked the student, "Oh, does your mother have friends there?" And so she puts on her camera so that I can see. And there are three adult women and their small children and the mother and my student. And they're all learning English from me at the same time. They're all there answering the question for her, which actually wasn't so helpful for her because she didn't learn as much as she might.

This was a rare anecdote relating to the larger community. Clearly this student's community valued what she was learning in school (how to speak English) and wanted to take advantage of the opportunity, too (perhaps to the student's detriment). In this case, the classroom closures allowed the community to participate in a way they could not have done otherwise. Yet this did nothing to encourage this student to interact with her classmates.

Sometimes, however, the community recognized schooling as purely transactional—to get the credential. For example, Blake, a high school SERT, taught in a small working-class town where most students did not go on to attend post-secondary institutions. He said:

As long as that student had an OK grade at their midterm mark [...] And unless they're going to a post-secondary institution next year where they felt that they needed that learning in order to continue moving on [...] And I can go and work all day and get money or I could potentially go online, raise my mark up [...] So I had a lot of students tell me the truth and say, "What's the point of me coming back when I have all these marks?" [...] It was hard to give them reasoning as to why it would be beneficial to them when they could be off earning money to go to college or their internship.

This situation was a common complaint from high school teachers who were interviewed. With the grades guaranteed, many students chose part time work over school. In Blake's case, without post-secondary studies on the horizon, the grade 12 students saw no reason to bother to continue with their high school studies.

Shared purpose speaks to motivation. When schooling moved online, motivation was what compelled students to participate, but once grades were no longer on the table, a shared belief in the value of schooling in this online form was not guaranteed. Indeed, all interviewees noted that many of the parents of their students decided their children could just opt out of participating in schooling at all.

## High-Quality Interaction

The nature of interactions between students and between students and teachers online, fundamental to building community, has arguably been addressed above. However, each of the elements discussed so far relates

mainly to the students' apparent beliefs. When specifically examining the quality of interactions, all of the interviewees were in agreement: overall, the quality of interactions definitely decreased.

Rhonda, a kindergarten teacher, set up a weekly online check-in form for students to note how they were feeling:

It was sad because we had an amazing class this year. [...] This was just a beautiful group of kids. They were very empathetic, very social. They just loved each other. And so to go from that and I think the quickness of it [...] March break [...] and then it just stopped. So, I think that [online] was a completely different atmosphere. [...] I was just sad because even the kids, they would say in some of their responses, "Oh, I miss my friends. When am I going to see my friends?" In kindergarten, social life is the foundation of learning socially appropriate ways to deal with each other.

Clearly, students needed not just to interact (synchronously) with their teacher, they needed to interact with each other. For kindergarten, as Rhonda notes, this was really the main purpose of school. Perhaps similarly, French Immersion students were no longer immersed. Eloise taught in a French Immersion middle school:

I think what this did was it took away all of those incidental communications you have with them [...]. I had students that I was trying to keep an eye on and keep up with because I knew they'd had interpersonal issues throughout the year [...]. [I kept contacting them] to make sure that they know that they still have that support.

While Eloise attempted to keep in contact with students who had, throughout the school year, felt left out or bullied when schooling was face-to-face, because these students of hers chose not to participate in the synchronous sessions she ran, the student-student interactions necessary to rectify the situation did not occur. She made attempts to create opportunities for students to learn about social exclusion in assignments, but these were done individually and could not replicate the effect of bringing students together physically to work on projects in the classroom.

Glenda is an elementary school homeroom teacher and, like most of the teachers interviewed, focused on interactions between herself and individual students. She tried to maintain a presence online so that students could know she was still there, but she admitted that it was still not the same as in-person had been:

And in teaching in the moment, it wasn't as spontaneous. [...] I did try to make a connection with them. I took a picture each week of a new flower that was in my garden because it was the spring and told them about it and sent them the picture and then the next week, "Oh, here's another one of my flowers. The name is..." And so every week they looked forward to what the new flower was in my garden, and they would draw a picture of it and send it back to me. But that's not a deep connection, really.

The quality of interactions clearly deteriorated when teaching and learning migrated from face-to-face to online. This happened in terms of quality of interactions, the decrease in interactions between students, the lack of in-the-moment spontaneous interaction, and the decrease in richness of each interaction. All of this resulted in the classroom community being diminished in the majority of cases.

It is important to note that, for these teachers, it is not the case that no students remained connected or that no community was maintained by these teachers within their classes. What was true was that, in all cases, teachers were forced to abandon students who they felt they could have reached were they face-to-face. As David, an elementary school homeroom teacher, put it:

I didn't like the idea of being told, "Listen, you can't do it for all the kids. Do it for as many as you can." I don't like that because I want to teach all the kids and nobody should be left behind. And so to [effectively] be told... "Cut your losses. If you can get 20, that's great." Yes, but those nine, they might need me. So, I never want to do that again if I can possibly help it.

## Discussion

All of the teachers interviewed noted that, once schooling moved online, student engagement dropped significantly as time went on. Beyond the attendance and technical problems, as they worked to translate face-to-face lessons to online, teachers focused on either the mental health of students or how to get the content across to students via the new medium.

Most of the teachers I interviewed lamented the loss of community but, for the most part, stated that their attempts to recreate the classroom community that had existed face-to-face failed. This is in keeping with findings in other studies (see, for example, Tartavulea et al. 2020). The

biggest barrier was lack of participation and engagement on the part of students. Many students chose not to log on or participate because they were satisfied with their grade. Others were unable to participate because of their circumstances. Still others attempted to participate but did not feel comfortable being on camera. This last is in line with what has been observed elsewhere, where students had privacy concerns such as 'anxiety/fear of being exposed/shame/shyness, desire to ensure privacy of the home/personal space, and chances that other people might walk into the background' (Gherhes et al. 2021, p. 1). Regardless of the reasons, because students and parents were able to cut off communications with teachers at will and without consequence, teachers had no means to rectify the situation. The participants featured here then resorted to focusing on student-teacher interactions with those who were making themselves available rather than the student-student interactions they would have encouraged in face-to-face classes. This lack of student-student interaction most likely led to further alienation on the part of students. Indeed, even the social distancing mandated for face-to-face classes has been found to have deleterious psychological effects on students (Sikhangezile & Modise 2020) and, although student-student interactions online have been found to be more widespread when facilitated by the teacher, they can also be more intellectually shallow (Yu & Yuizono 2021), which might be interpreted as students being less engaged. Although several teachers noted that they had had positive interactions with the students who did show up for synchronous meetings, in all of those classes, there were students who disappeared without explanation.

Students with special needs, living in poverty, or with pre-existing mental health issues and students who felt out of place in school or saw no point to schooling beyond the credential soon drifted away. This learnification of schooling had a disproportionately negative effect on students who were already marginalized.

Looking at this through Rovai's (2002) model, whatever sense of belonging may have been present in the face-to-face classes before the school closures deteriorated to the point that, in most cases, there was essentially no relationship between students. Trust in the group lost its context as learning became a one-on-one communication between

teacher and student. Shared purpose was undermined by the fact that grades could not drop below where they stood when the school buildings closed. Further, because of cameras being left off and most communication being text-based, the quality of interactions deteriorated.

Rovai's (2002) model provides a robust way to analyze the quality of community in online environments, but it does not speak to the context in which online learning occurs. Certainly, it cannot account for a pandemic and the complications that are part of an emergency situation. In this way, using Rovai's model can limit the scope of analysis. In the case of this study, conclusions that can be drawn are further limited by the fact that I focus on a small group of teachers during a particularly unique time. However, these findings do demonstrate how brittle the online environment was during the pandemic, with few options to address low student engagement and limited methods for compensating for the structural inequities that prevented the participation of students who, in the face-to-face environment, had either already been marginalized or had needed the most accommodations. No amount of success on the part of mainstream, more well-resourced students justifies allowing such inequity to continue. If community is what is required to make online learning successful for all, the infrastructure and resources need to be provided to make that community available to all.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter defining good-quality education as based in engaged pedagogy, defined by hooks (1994) as an approach that requires a classroom community built on trust and belonging. Engaged pedagogy is necessary to address and compensate for the marginalization that many students endure. I also noted that I wanted to explore whether there was equitable access to such an education during the pandemic. However, all of the discussion so far raises the question: Did these students have access to that type of education before the schools closed? The fact is that there is no way of knowing because pre-pandemic classroom observations of the participants were not possible. Thus, one might ask why such an approach should even be mentioned. Why not simply focus on the extent to which communities conducive to learning

and high student engagement were created online during the pandemic? The answer is that once one accepts that good-quality education is engaged pedagogy, the distance between what occurred during the pandemic and what should have occurred becomes apparent. Rather than a learning community based on trust, common purpose, quality interactions, and a sense of belonging, schooling deteriorated to low student engagement, low accountability, lack of interaction between students, and loss of community, with the negative consequences borne disproportionately by the most marginalized and vulnerable students.

It was an emergency situation, and so I am careful not to impose impossible standards. With the sudden change, unclear timelines, and psychological effects of the pandemic on teachers, students, and parents, the range of pedagogical tools utilized were narrowed, as has also been observed in other jurisdictions (Tartavulea et al. 2020). Further, I am not sure if engaged pedagogy is even possible online. However, it is noteworthy that the first academic, social, and psychological casualties when the emergency occurred were the most vulnerable students. This is what needs to be addressed. Now that we have experienced emergency province-wide closures of schools and seen the consequences, the education sector has a duty to ensure that the next time such an emergency occurs, the most vulnerable students are not once again put in a position where they must carry the burden of inadequate emergency and contingency plans. Our most vulnerable students should not be an afterthought.

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Study Participants Featured in this Chapter

| Name    | Race       | Experience<br>(years) | Role                                     |
|---------|------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Blake   | White      | 8                     | High school SERT                         |
| David   | White      | 26                    | Grade 7 homeroom                         |
| Eloise  | White      | 5                     | Middle school French                     |
| Erin    | Indigenous | 14                    | Elementary school SERT                   |
| Estelle | White      | 21                    | High school English as a Second Language |
| Kendra  | White      | 7                     | Elementary school SERT*                  |
| Merle   | White      | 30                    | High school social sciences              |
| Morty   | White      | 30                    | Alternative high school                  |
| Rhonda  | White      | 20                    | Kindergarten                             |
| Rhea    | White      | 15                    | High school music                        |
| Sparky  | White      | 40                    | French immersion – grade 1               |
| Wendy   | White      | 25                    | Grade 3, homeroom                        |

\*SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher

## 7. How Teachers' Experienced the Separation from their Students During the Pandemic

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Isla always knew that she wanted to be a teacher but graduated from university at a time when teaching jobs were scarce.<sup>1</sup> Her Bachelor of Education had prepared her to teach high school English and Drama, but she ended up teaching French in an elementary school. Still, after acquiring the necessary qualifications and settling into teaching this younger age group, she felt that her interests and academic background (including attending French Immersion and participating in the drama club when she went through K-12) had prepared her well.

There is an element of having a teaching persona. I'll give you an example. I taught core French and I'm going back into it now. And so, I would teach grade eight core French. And then in the next period I would teach grade four core French and then I'd be doing grade one introduction to French. And you're a different person in each of those classrooms because the kids need something different from you. So, I would almost be acting. [...] In my grade eight classroom, I can be kind of cooler, and we can tell jokes, and the information is much more intense, and their learning is so different. And then grade one, you're singing songs. It's just totally different. You have to be more bubbly and motherly in grade one than you are in grade eight. So, it's just like a different set of acting skills, I think.

For Isla, then, the variety made it enjoyable and challenging. During the pandemic year, she was teaching a grade four homeroom class, for

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1 All study participants' names are pseudonyms and details may be changed to protect anonymity.

the first time, in a school with a high refugee population. A quarter of her students were English Language Learners. She found that she was comfortable with teaching language but teaching all subjects beyond this was challenging. When emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) began, she and her students were already comfortable with using an online teaching platform, but her union had discouraged teachers from using videoconferencing. This had had a profound impact on her relationships with individual students. She tried calling her students to keep in touch, but on one occasion, the efficacy of this approach was made painfully obvious. She said:

He asked who it was and I said, "Your teacher". He said, "Oh, I forgot you!" And I don't know if it was just that I kind of threw him off, but this was about the beginning of June, and I had been emailing back and forth with him and left dozens of messages on his parents' phone. But I don't know. So, that really shook me and that was a hard day.

When she said this during our interview, it was clearly an upsetting memory for her. The idea that one of her students did not remember her seemed to show that all of her efforts to maintain relationships with them had been in vain. Isla missed her students and the connections she had established with each of them, a sentiment that was articulated by all of the teachers that I interviewed.

For many reasons, to be highlighted in this chapter, relationships between teachers and students are fundamental to teaching and learning. In what follows, I will be exploring how teachers experienced relationships with their students during ERTL. That is, although I have mentioned how these relationships were affected in previous chapters, this chapter focuses on how teachers felt about these effects. To do so, I will begin by reviewing the expectations of teachers in this regard, according to provincial legislation and policy (including curriculum documents). Also, because the teaching profession, like any profession, is grounded in its history of practice, I will provide some historical background on how policy has evolved over the last 50 years. After all, teachers do what they do partly based on what has always been done, as they have observed as students themselves (Lortie 1975) and what they observed as student teachers during their initial teacher education. This history, then, needs to be understood to put their current practices in perspective.

## Student-Centered Pedagogy

Ontario's curriculum documents and associated policies have always advocated centering the child, at least in terms of the developmental stages of younger children. However, centering the child as a unique individual became mandatory in the 1970s, with statements like:

No two children are alike. They differ in physique, social background, emotional disposition, outlook, tastes, talents, and ambitions. They differ in the rates at which they learn. These differences must be taken into account when evaluating the progress of children in school. (Ontario Ministry of Education 1975a, p. 12)

This document is clear about teachers not becoming obsessed with 'lockstep promotion' (Ontario Ministry of Education 1975a, p. 12) and, instead, recognizing that:

there is no set time or grade level at which every child can be expected to develop the ability to master an arithmetical process or to reach a given standard of reading achievement. [...] The grade system has tended to prevent far too many children from progressing at a rate that is natural to them. (Ontario Department of Education 1971, p. 12)

Further, a policy document from 1975 makes provisions for special education, saying:

The focus is still on the individual and his or her optimal development as a skilled, free, and purposeful person, able to manage himself or herself in an open society. (Ontario Ministry of Education 1975a, p. 11)

Significantly, at that time, the curriculum documents for grades one to six supported this philosophy by allowing for a great deal of flexibility to accommodate students' different rates of learning. For example, 'The Formative Years' (Ontario Ministry of Education 1975b) provides detailed aims to be accomplished over the course of three-year intervals. At the same time, high school students were given some latitude in the courses they took so that they could both fulfill required courses and choose electives based on their interests and talents. This general philosophy of student-centered teaching and learning has persisted to this day; however, there was a major shift in policy in the mid-1990s. First, in 1995, the language in the curriculum documents shifted from expecting teachers to provide opportunities for students to learn the mandated

curriculum to an outcomes-based model. Second, in 1996, mandatory standardized tests in grades three, six, nine, and ten increased the pressure on teachers to ensure students achieved outcomes, as these test scores are used to assess the quality of individual schools (Campbell et al. 2018; Cowley & Easton 2017; Yang 2012). Finally, in 1997, curriculum documents switched from three-year benchmarks to annual ones. For example, with this change, students were expected to learn to read by the end of grade one instead of by the end of grade three. The effect was immediate; a student who may not have learned to read until grade three went from being seen as normal to being constructed as a problem in need of intervention.

The 1997 curriculum documents also introduced a section on teacher and student responsibilities which goes beyond what is stated in Ontario's Education Act. It states:

Teachers and students have complementary responsibilities. Teachers are responsible for developing a range of instructional strategies based on sound learning theory. They need to address different student needs and bring enthusiasm and a variety of teaching approaches to the classroom. Good teachers know that they must persevere and make every reasonable attempt to ensure sound learning for every student. (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training 1997, p. 4)

In practical terms, this description of what is expected of teachers and students has not changed. What is new, however, is that, in 2020, Ontario curriculum documents for kindergarten to grade twelve began to include reference to mental health as part of the purview of teachers. For example, Ontario's mathematics curriculum for grades one to eight says:

By nurturing and supporting students' strengths and assets, educators help promote positive mental health and well-being in the classroom. At the same time, they can identify students who need additional support and connect them with the appropriate supports and services. What happens at school can have a significant influence on a student's overall well-being. With a broader awareness of mental health, educators can plan instructional strategies that contribute to a supportive classroom climate for learning in all subject areas, build awareness of mental health, and reduce stigma associated with mental illness. Taking students' well-being, including their mental health, into account when planning instructional approaches helps establish a strong foundation for learning and sets students up for success. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2020)

What all of this means is that Ontario teachers know that they are responsible for doing all that they can to both ensure each individual student is successful academically, but also that their mental health and well-being are optimal for learning. To achieve this, teachers must establish good rapport with their students as individuals and as a group. Rapport arises in the give and take of a teacher's encounters with their students, in an ongoing conversation that establishes a shared experience of teaching, learning, and caring (Adkins-Cartee et al. 2023). The quality of these relationships also affects how teachers experience their work. Given that, during the pandemic, the shift from in-person teaching and learning to distance teaching and learning fundamentally altered how students and teachers interacted, I made a point of asking interviewees how that change affected their relationships with their students.

## Policy Meets Reality

When teachers began ERTL in Ontario at the beginning of April 2020, it was understood that it would only be for one month (Alphonso & Friesen 2020). However, at the end of April, the Minister of Education announced two things: (1) schools would not re-open until September (although a modified summer school would be available) and, (2) although teachers should continue to assess and evaluate students, students' grades should not suffer (Alphonso 2020b; Ontario Minister of Education 2019–2020).

This two-month extension of ERTL, with its unprecedented parameters for assessment and evaluation, sparked a great deal of debate about the best way forward (see, for example, Alphonso 2020b; Little 2020). Further, with the threat of declining grades removed, stories of parents giving up on ERTL began to surface (see, for example, Alphonso 2020c; Washburn 2020). Many students were not engaging, and parents had grown weary of trying to get their children and youth to participate. Indeed, research done at the time indicated that student absenteeism was a global problem (Bozkurt et al. 2020; Yildirim & Simsek 2023).

By May 8, presumably as a method to make online learning more engaging and provide structure for students, the Minister of Education mandated specific hours of synchronous learning (via

video conferencing) for all Ontario public school students based on grade level (Ontario Minister of Education 2019–2020). Teacher unions opposed this, citing the privacy concerns of both teachers and students (Alphonso 2020a; Bischof 2020; Rushowy 2020a, 2020b) and there was a lively debate in the major newspapers about whether or not mandating video conferencing was the best approach to addressing students' struggles with ERTL (see, for example, Llewellyn & Llewellyn 2020; Regg 2020), but what was largely missing from this debate was an account of the daily experience of teaching in this way.

## The Wall

The policy and norm of student-centered pedagogy is well established in Ontario, with all teachers aiming to establish rapport with both groups of students and individual students. By the time school buildings in Ontario closed in March 2020, teachers in elementary schools (kindergarten to grade eight) and in non-semestered high schools had been getting to know their students since September. However, because most high schools in Ontario are semestered, and semester two begins in February, most high school teachers were only just getting to know their current students. The problem is that these relationships provide crucial contextual information that allows teachers to understand the meaning of the feedback largely in the form of body language that they receive from students as they teach. Unsurprisingly, during ERTL this feedback was extremely difficult to obtain. Eve described her experience of asynchronous ERTL this way:

It does feel like you're just throwing buckets of water down an empty well. You've no idea how many people are coming to do the activities [...]. And so, if you're not getting a lot of feedback that way, it's hard.

In other words, the physical separation from students disrupted the feedback loop that forms the foundation of good teaching. She was teaching a kindergarten class which under normal circumstances would have involved a great deal of real-time observation of student behaviour. She described it as throwing buckets of water down an empty well, but most of the teachers I interviewed invoked the image of a wall. Marva said:

It's like teaching through a brick wall. So, you're teaching, you're sending stuff out, but you can't see. You don't see the looks on their faces. You don't see the kids go, "Yeah. I'm not doing that." You just have to kind of judge by whatever [assignment] comes back.

Marva taught English in a high school and, here, she was alluding to the fact that many of her students stopped participating. However, in an asynchronous environment she did not have the necessary information to make adjustments to compensate. And yet, the Minster's solution of mandated video conferencing did not seem to solve the problem. Melina, a grade eight homeroom teacher, said:

In a not formal word, it kind of stank. I didn't like it. I'm going to be honest. We did Google meets about three times a week with my students where I went over questions for math [...]. And I went from a really chatty grade eight class that was always interactive, always answering questions, to ... it went mute. No one would talk. I had maybe the one kid that would answer questions and the rest of them wouldn't talk at all. So that was the biggest challenge was the "Are you guys the same people?" I didn't even know if they were really there. Are they playing video games? What's going on? And it was tough. It was very tough. Mentally, emotionally for me, not being able to reach them.

Melina was describing a situation where the character of her class changed significantly and, because they kept their cameras off, she lacked the feedback to improve on her approach. Significantly, she also described the emotional distress that resulted from that situation. The wording she used, 'not being able to reach them,' was much more relational than technical. An emotional connection had been severed.

## Camera Shy

Mandating synchronous video conferencing was controversial. Privacy was a concern raised by teacher unions and individual teachers (Rushowy 2020a). The solution adopted by many students was to turn off their cameras if they wished (Gherhes et al. 2021) but this was disconcerting for teachers trying to ascertain the efficacy of their lessons. Geraldine, a high school mathematics teacher, said:

I felt that it was very, very disconnecting. I would feel like sometimes at the end of the day, I had just been talking to the wall all day. There was no back and forth. And I really felt I had no idea if my kids understood what was going on. I didn't know if they were anxious, if they were stressed out, if they just didn't care...there was very, very little way to hear it out. And even the few times when I set up smaller group sessions, they still didn't put their cameras on. And I didn't ask. I felt that that wasn't the right thing to do to ask the student to put their camera on if they weren't comfortable with it.

Here, Geraldine talked about the lack of feedback for gauging the pedagogical efficacy of her lessons but she also mentioned ascertaining students' emotional well-being. Recall that provincial policy clearly demands that teachers pay attention to students' mental health. However, because of privacy concerns, most of the teachers I interviewed felt that they could not ask their students to turn on their cameras. Even when students did turn on their cameras, it could be awkward. Dipa, a high school biology teacher in a non-semestered school, said:

We had already built up our relationships before we went online, so I knew who I was talking to. If I call somebody John, I knew what he looked like, how he behaved, what his issues were, that he was a quiet person, needed to be prodded. There's a lot of body language that you see when you're in a class. Online, you have no understanding. And online, even if I'm face to face, I'm very uncomfortable because I'm looking at kids' bedrooms or their drawing rooms and I don't know who else is overhearing the conversation. And then there are kids chatting simultaneously behind my back. It's not the most comfortable feeling.

Dipa's words illustrate different layers of discomfort as she tried to ascertain how her students were responding to her lessons without crossing professional boundaries with respect to her students' privacy. As Eloise, a middle school French teacher, put it:

With regards to kids doing video conferencing, a lot of my students did not want to have their video or microphone on, which I completely understand. And there's lots of privacy issues around that as well. But it also became hard to tell if students were actually on the call or if they just kind of logged in and then were doing something in another window or walked away from the computer because you would ask questions, and certain students would always respond to you and then you get some students respond some other time or would rarely respond. And I was always trying to connect that up with their personalities in class and

think, "Well, normally they're a pretty shy kid. Maybe they just don't want to put themselves out there" or "Yeah, they talk a lot in class, but it's usually off topic. So maybe it's kind of normal that they don't have an on-topic question to ask right now." I also knew I was stressed out enough as it was and I'm an adult. I also didn't want to be calling the kids out and say, "Why aren't you talking?" Because it might legitimately be a thing like, "I don't have any questions today, but I wanted to come and join the conference and at least hear some other people's voices."

One can imagine Eloise throwing up her hands. How can you teach synchronously if you cannot tell if students are actually there? Meanwhile, Marco, who was teaching mathematics in night school, resorted to gentle begging:

And I used to tell them. "Can we just for three minutes... I just want to see your beautiful faces and see how everybody is." Because after that, sometimes you get the sense, "Am I talking to myself. Is anybody here?" I did have evidence that people were there because of the assignments and I could see where they are. But sometimes it was very lonely.

This loneliness points to the central issue—lack of connection. Stacy, a high school social sciences teacher, described it as 'horrible':

Absolutely. [...] Because I couldn't see their faces. And that's such a big thing, being able to see their faces and see their emotions. And also, particularly when we were talking about the different unethical experiments and just different happenings in the world. Those are really, really challenging conversations to have. And I even said this to my students. I said, "Some of these conversations that we're having... me talking to the computer screen is not my comfort level." And I completely admitted that to them. And I said, "I'm much more comfortable in class because I can see then are you getting uncomfortable or do you need to step out? Do you need to take a breath? Do you need to journal something?" I can see that. I can't see it when I'm only looking at myself. And I'm not hearing in their silence on the other end. Even in our synchronized classes, a lot of my kids would keep their mikes and their [cameras off]. Most of my college bound students would actually keep their mics and their videos on. My university-bound students kept them off, which I found very interesting. But just having silence on the other end. These are very sensitive topics that we're bringing up. We're talking about power struggles; we're talking about power relations. We're talking about why people feel powerful, why people have a sense of power. And having nothing on the other end was a huge challenge that I completely one hundred percent admitted to my students that it

made me uncomfortable, too, because I'm comfortable in the classroom. I'm not as comfortable talking to a screen about these things. [...] I said, "If at all you were uncomfortable at any point or you have questions or comments or concerns, I need you to just send me a message." And I had a couple send me a message, but not about concerns about being uncomfortable, but just about being happy that I talked about it.

Stacy's vivid description of attempting to tackle difficult topics in real time in the absence of feedback demonstrates the dialogical nature of teaching and how caring remains an integral part of pedagogy, regardless of the age of the students.

## Disrupted Relationships

The wall discussed by so many of the teachers I interviewed was their way of describing the flat group dynamics their physical separation from students imposed. There was an effect on one-to-one relationships, too. The fact that there was no physical classroom meant that the means to provide equitable resources was limited and, as has been noted, teacher's ability to assess the well-being of individual students was severely impaired. All of this meant that teachers' relationships with individual students changed significantly. Valerie, who taught adult students, said:

I missed out on relationships with students, so because of the discomfort of coming on camera and not seeing them face to face, I would try to reach out. A lot of times, they just weren't there, or they would log in and I couldn't see them. So, I didn't know if they were there when they weren't responding. Lots of them just had so many distractions going on in their homes, like their own kids. I had a woman with a newborn and two other little ones and a single mom. [I said], "I don't even know how you're here right now." [But] I couldn't see them. So, I missed out on creating connections with students and that's the basis of learning. Lots of them just fell behind and didn't get the credit. If I couldn't talk to them and I couldn't see what they were doing, they weren't doing it. They didn't feel comfortable. And I don't even know if that's what happened. Because some of them I completely lost contact with, and [they] just stopped coming. So, I don't know.

What Valerie was describing was a situation where she could not connect with her adult students to ascertain their well-being. Thus, it was not simply a matter of younger students needing a connection with

their teachers. Paulo, a middle school physical education teacher, was struck by how his relationships with students were suddenly overtly transactional:

There was virtually no relationship with the kids. Unfortunately, unless they emailed me and reached out with a question, there was nothing. It was very impersonal. They would log onto their Google classroom. The assignment was there. They'd complete it and they'd hand it in, and I'd mark it. And then they get their mark, and they receive an e-mail saying, "\_\_\_\_\_, saw your work. Go to your Google Classroom and there's your mark." So very impersonal, which is not like me. The kids love to hang out with [me], the gym guy. And that was all gone.

In recounting this, Paulo was clearly saddened by it. Alexandra, a grade four French immersion teacher, fought back tears as she said:

The relationship was almost over. They're little kids. It's just different when they're little. They're very physical. They're very in real time. You're communicating with them, but it's not the same thing. It's not even close. Not even close. It was a huge impact on our relationship.

It is important to point out that this depth of feeling was present for high school teachers too albeit expressed differently. When asked about how his relationships with students were affected by ERTL, Merle, a high school social science teacher said:

Deleteriously in pretty much every way. There were one or two students where it was positive. But for the vast majority, it was a disaster. And I have very close relationships with them. And I've developed a system where I can meet with them privately while the rest of them are working in the room so that, you know, I'm not alone with the kids physically, but at the same time, nobody can hear what we're saying so they feel like it's a private meeting. And this has allowed me over the years to get a lot of information about kids, of what it is they're really dealing with. To find out, for instance, that one of my smartest kids, she was in a horrible situation where her mother was sick. Her father was gone. She had to take care of three younger siblings. I would never have known that, and it would never have been able to adapt my program to her needs if I hadn't had this ability to do this. And that's all gone when you're doing this kind of work [ERTL].

Merle was describing precisely what he had lost relationally due to the loss of his physical classroom. Indeed, when I asked teachers about how

their relationships with students were affected by ERTL, the vast majority of teachers described a profound loneliness. It was not simply that it was harder to implement the curriculum. It was harder to establish or maintain rapport with individual students and be a caring adult in their lives. Still, I do not wish to give the impression that it was all negative.

With a little verbal prodding, some were able to describe some positive experiences.

### Silver Lining

As the pandemic school closures wore on, and because students and parents knew grades could not go down after ERTL began, attendance and engagement on the students' part declined precipitously. This meant that the small groups of students who did continue to engage had much more of their teachers' attention. Rhea, a high school music teacher, stands out to me because, before we spoke, she was convinced that nothing good had come out of ERTL. Toward the end of the interview, however, she said:

I built up stronger relationships with the students that were there. I just felt a lot more day-to-day communication because I was focusing on less kids. So, I feel like I got to know them a little bit better.

After recognizing these one-on-one relationships that had improved, Rhea reported feeling better about what had happened during ERTL, saying, 'I'm feeling good about my relationships with the kids that were present for sure, and it was very positive.' Morty, too, was mostly negative about how ERTL had affected his relationships with the students in an alternative high school program; however, he said:

The surprise to me was the students that chose to engage. The three that engaged were not the kids that would typically do well in a classroom setting. [They] did not read or write well and absolutely needed my help. They were the kids that I would help, that are on IEPs [individual education plans], that I would help one to one in class and have personal conversations with and personal reflections with them. [...] So, I was pretty shocked by that. And the ones, the three locally developed ones that really rocked it and called me and reflected well, were not the students that you would pick at the beginning of the semester to be the superstars.

Several teachers described the ways in which some struggling students benefited from the closer attention from their teachers. Isla, a grade four homeroom teacher, said:

I had one student, for example, who had a lot of anxiety about going to school. He had been bullied at his last school and his attendance wasn't great at our school, but he really flourished during [school closures]. He was one of my most prolific students in terms of submitting assignments. And going back and forth with his mom, we really strengthened the relationship that we had.

Marginalized students need relationships with their teachers to flourish (Barrett 2021) and, for a very small number of them, ERTL provided an opportunity for this to happen.

Thus, while it took some prodding during the interviews for me to get teachers to note the positive effects ERTL had on some of their relationships with individual students, few found it impossible to do so. Recognizing these positive outcomes did, however, highlight how things might have been with the students they were unable to reach.

The provincial curriculum documents are clear that teachers have a responsibility to adjust their approach to teaching to match their students' needs, interests, and talents. In other words, the curriculum is mandated but the method of implementation is not. Teachers are to use their professional judgment. However, that professional judgment is dependent on teachers getting to know the students and getting feedback in order to adjust as they teach. Another explicit aspect of teachers' work is caring for students by attending to their physical and emotional well-being. This, too, requires establishing rapport with students individually and in groups. The teachers I spoke to struggled to maintain relationships with their students during ERTL, which undermined their ability to fulfill these duties.

In the end, what ERTL made clear for the teachers in the study was that rapport is fundamental to student-centered pedagogy, relationships are essential, and video conferencing was a poor substitute for in-person teaching. All of this is in line with what other research in other jurisdictions has determined. Further, teachers truly missed their students and suffered emotionally due to the separation (see, for example, Karakoç et al. 2021; Tackie 2021), demonstrating the centrality of relationships between teachers and students in teaching and learning (Atak et al. 2022).

## Professional Integrity

In her study of teachers who choose to leave the profession, Doris Santoro (2018) proposed that many teachers do so because they feel they cannot maintain their integrity within the circumstances in which they teach. Professional integrity is about a responsibility teachers feel to the profession and the community. She posed questions that a teacher might ask themselves with respect to professional integrity: 'What does it mean to act in the best interests of students? How am I honoring students' needs and teaching the subject responsibly?' (p. 570).

In response to the first question, the teachers I interviewed spoke of ascertaining students' well-being, creating engaging activities, and assessing accurately and equitably. However, all teachers found it impossible to assess most students accurately and equitably. The activities they devised were, for the most part, not engaging enough for students, as the attendance dropped over the course of three months of ERTL. Further, teachers were unable to determine what students needed to re-engage. There are exceptions to this deterioration of engagement where students who had remained actively participating benefited from more attention from their teachers, did excellent work, and might have done better than they would have under normal circumstances. However, most students did worse and their teachers were unable to help them.

All of the teachers acknowledged that the school closures were necessary. However, most felt that removing the risk to grades was unhelpful for most students—although, as noted, a significant number of teachers in non-academic subjects liked the removal of grades. Also, most teachers acknowledged that, with mental health as the priority, they did not aggressively insist on assignments being handed in on time. Several also remarked that the life circumstances of some students simply did not allow them to fully participate, if at all, and to have graded them would have been unjust. Still, teachers recognized and understood the system in which they operated—an individualized conveyor belt of a system that requires students to keep up if they are going to thrive. Teachers know that a big part of their role is preparing students for the next level and, during ERTL, they were not necessarily able to do that. Clearly, teachers' relationships with their students are fundamental to maintaining professional integrity. In the absence of rapport, without

the means to monitor students' well-being and engagement, and in the face of limited ability to accurately and equitably assess academic progress, teachers found it almost impossible to do their jobs at a level that met their own professional standards.

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Study Participants Featured in this Chapter

| Name      | Race        | Experience<br>(years) | Role                                                     |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Dipa      | South Asian | 17                    | SERT, high school biology                                |
| Eloise    | White       | 5                     | Middle school French                                     |
| Eve       | White       | 16                    | kindergarten                                             |
| Isla      | White       | 10                    | Grade 4, homeroom                                        |
| Geraldine | White       | 16                    | High school mathematics                                  |
| Marco     | Latinx      | 30                    | High school mathematics                                  |
| Marva     | White       | 25                    | High school English                                      |
| Merle     | White       | 30                    | High school social sciences                              |
| Milena    | White       | 16                    | Grade 8 homeroom                                         |
| Morty     | White       | 30                    | Alternative high school                                  |
| Paulo     | White       | 26                    | Middle school physical education                         |
| Rhea      | White       | 15                    | High school music                                        |
| Stacey    | White       | 8                     | High school social science                               |
| Valerie   | Indigenous  | 14                    | Adult education—high school English and Entrepreneurship |

\*SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher



## 8. Teachers' Self Regard During the COVID-19 Pandemic<sup>1</sup>

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Because both of Chad's parents were elementary school teachers, he had decided not to become one himself.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he worked for the city in Parks and Recreation. However, during an extended leave, his father encouraged him to volunteer at his school. Chad said, 'Volunteering at the school was eye-opening. I felt like I was reborn when I walked into an elementary school.' He loved the authenticity of the children and the power of education to change lives. He said, 'Knowing that school is this equalizer and it's a safe place and all these wonderful things [...]. everything in me just sort of livened up again. And then I went straight for it and did it. Never regretted it since.'

When we spoke in 2020, Chad was teaching physical education and homeroom in a racially, culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse suburban middle school. He valued creating an inclusive, welcoming, and safe community in the classroom and liked his lessons to be fluid and experiential. Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) made maintaining that difficult. When I asked him how he felt about that, he said:

I think it makes me feel really handcuffed. I think that knowing who I am as an individual and specifically as an educator, I feel like I'm not doing my job. I feel like something's missing that I'm at a loss of how to describe but...that whole idea of what I want to create in my classroom...I try to recreate online, but I know I'll never recreate it. And as a result, as I see every kid, one by one, pull away or get disengaged or have questions that

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1 Large sections of this chapter were part of a public lecture I delivered at York University on October 29, 2024.

2 All study participants' names are pseudonyms and details may be changed to protect anonymity.

I can't connect with properly, I feel it hurts me. It hurts me as a person, hurts me as a teacher, because I know they're not getting what I feel is the best education they can. And the best education they can has nothing do with numbers and reading and writing. And I should be responsible for providing that. And unfortunately, I can't right now.

When Chad said, 'It hurts me as a person' it was a poignant indication of the depth to which he connected his role as a teacher to who he is, and the ways in which ERTL created a disconnect between the two that he was not able to reconcile. He seemed to be alluding not just to a professional but a personal failure. Many of the teachers I interviewed expressed similar sentiments about how they saw themselves. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explore how ERTL affected each individual teacher's relationship to themselves.

## The Role of Values in Teaching Practice

Values are those aspects of our lives that we deem to be important. Teachers have values that dictate how they prioritize their professional relationships and organize their time and their classrooms. When these values are reinforced and validated in their professional interactions, their experiences are positive ones. In my research I have found that, knowing how important current educational experiences are for students' futures, teachers are constantly questioning their choices, asking themselves if their actions were in line with their values and their professional responsibilities, and they are especially concerned when their values and professional responsibilities are in conflict (Barrett 2015, 2024; Campigotto & Barrett 2017; Hoeg & Barrett 2016). Doris A. Santoro's (2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2015) research on teacher burnout and teachers' demoralization explored the impacts of teachers continually being required not only to go against their values related to good teaching to fulfill institutionally mandated tasks, but also to have their confidence undermined through not being given the resources needed to serve their students to the level of their own standards. Santoro (2011b) has found that many teachers leave the profession over these internal conflicts. Given this, the stakes are high.

Every teacher I interviewed provided highly personal and value-laden reasons for why they had, in the face of the inevitable difficulties

of the job, chosen to continue teaching. This was not a surprise. As is true for many service professionals, the fundamental values of care, equity, and safety are embedded in the ethical codes of teachers' work (see, for example, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario 2014; Ontario College of Teachers 2016; Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association 2023; Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Association 2017) and these values motivate teachers in challenging moments. I also found that each teacher favored specific values related to their practice.

I note here that my method for understanding what the teachers whom I interviewed valued was not to ask them directly to list their values. Such an approach risks their listing the values they think they are supposed to have. Rather, toward the end of each interview, I relayed to them the values I thought they had expressed through their responses so far and asked if they sounded right. They then agreed, disagreed, or added to them. In what follows, I will be describing the values the teachers in this study brought to their practice, how they were or were not able to uphold them during the pandemic, and the effect this had on their relationships with themselves and their emotional well-being. I will end with a discussion of how we can think about teachers' self-regard through a theoretical lens.

## Self-Efficacy and the Alternate Timeline

As the teachers I interviewed grappled with the challenges ERTL posed to their values, an imagined alternate ERTL-free reality seemed to haunt them. For example, Blake, a high school special education resource teacher (SERT) in a rural community, said that he valued flexibility and being able to coach his students to success, but he was unable to fulfill those values during ERTL. He said:

If it was in person, I know I could have done it. I know I could have had those students be engaged and be successful in all of their courses. But as soon as we moved online, it was difficult for those values to be reached. I strive for them in numerous cases, but I would say the main reason of why I entered into teaching, in some aspects, I was not able to reach those through the online platform.

This last point is significant. Blake was spontaneously connecting his experiences with ERTL to his reasons for becoming a teacher and noting

the gap between the two. Monique, an elementary French teacher in a school designated for students with complex needs in northern Ontario, said that she valued flexibility, creativity, and community. She said:

That's pretty frustrating because I know I can push them to do better. Of course I can. I know all the little tips and tricks that you do to get the best out of a kid. [It was] very frustrating. You have to laugh. What else do you do? Or else you'll go to some bad place in your head. I can't control anything happening at the other end. Not that I could before. Life is what it is. But when they were in this setting with us, we can do things. We can go, "Hey, Sarah, are you feeling tired today?" I can tell. I can see. They're right there. Like Mary looks a little bit off today, "Mary, did you eat breakfast? I've got some apples in a bin over here. Help yourself." "Oh, yeah, Madame, I am kind of hungry." "Did you eat breakfast?" "No. No, I didn't," "Oh, well, you'd better get two." "OK." That kind of thing. We don't just teach. So the difference with the online part [is that] I'm just teaching. I'm not doing all of those thousands of other things that elementary teachers do.

The interactions Monique described were spontaneous and it is interesting that she classified them as separate from 'teaching,' which she seemed to classify as the academic aspect of her job only. Nevertheless, the community she valued was built on those spontaneous interactions. Flexibility and creativity are necessary to give the students what they need to thrive in that classroom community and beyond. I also note the emotional labor Monique put into staying motivated in the face of repeated failure to uphold her values, to avoid going to 'some bad place in [her] head'. Like Blake, Monique believed that she could have realized her values if she had been teaching in person.

Niveen, a high school French immersion science teacher in a large and ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse suburban high school, valued academic rigor, independence, broadening students' horizons, and connection. However, he did not feel he could realize any of those values through ERTL. He said:

It was terrible. That was really honestly...as a passionate teacher, as somebody who wanted and has a plan and had projects which didn't happen. That's very sad. And I feel sorry for my students very much because what I could not give them makes me feel sad.

Niveen regretted the fact that his students were not able to experience the plans he had originally made for them. He knew what his students

were missing and, when asked, said that he felt his values could not be realized in his practice during ERTL.

Kendra was a SERT in an elementary school. Her students were all autistic. She valued connection, student-centered approaches, and a high level of safety and trust built between herself and her students and parents. Kendra admitted that she was not happy with her ability to maintain those values during ERTL. She said:

I have one particular student that I'm thinking of that was making tremendous progress. Tremendous. And she requires a pretty high degree of support in our classroom. She's non-verbal. She has limited independent skills, limited life skills. So, we were working really hard with her on a lot of those things. It was a moment of being a special education teacher that I was looking at my student and thinking, "This is why I'm here. This is exactly why I'm here," because she was doing such a fantastic job with it. And then as soon as everything kind of flipped to being online, it was one of those moments where I thought, "I don't know what to do now because I don't know how to support you, because I need to be beside you. I need to show you a visual. I need to give you a verbal prompt. I need to give you a hand-over-hand support and I can't do that online."

Kendra was describing a specific situation where not only could she not provide the help and guidance that she had in the past, but she also witnessed the student regressing, losing what she had gained. Poignantly, Kendra felt she was supposed to be able to help but knew she could not.

Carol, who had been teaching high school drama in a community with a high immigrant and English Language Learner population, valued creativity, flexibility, responsiveness and community most. However, she did not feel she was able to honor that during ERTL. She said:

Everything's been a struggle. Everything just takes longer and you're only just trying to reach for those values and they're within reach, but you don't feel like you're able to embrace everything you normally can do.

For Carol, this was extremely frustrating and emotionally exhausting because she believed that, under normal circumstances, she could have fulfilled her values.

Teachers are trained to reflect on their practice and take note of what worked and what did not and what they could do differently next time. As such, the alternate timeline where they had done things in a way that

was more effective for student learning is familiar territory. However, ERTL had changed their context so dramatically and negatively that what could have been took on a sharper and brighter hue.

## Self-Doubt, Guilt, and Frustration

In the most simple terms, a K-12 teacher's job is to help students learn the curriculum to a level that will allow them to do well in the next step (whether it is the next grade or the next school), to guide students in how to learn, to monitor students' well-being, to facilitate social development, to encourage physical development, and (for younger students) to provide custodial supervision. Teachers in this study expressed immense uncertainty about their ability to do their jobs under the circumstances of ERTL and the pandemic. As a result, many teachers found themselves not so much reflecting on their practice but doubting their ability to assess the effectiveness of their teaching. For example, as Cameron, an elementary teacher in a small rural town, said:

You're constantly questioning yourself. "Am I doing this right? Am I doing enough? Is this what the parents want?"

The values he expressed during the interview were relationships, students' emotional well-being, and seeing parents as partners in facilitating their child's learning. I have talked about how relationships were affected by ERTL in previous chapters and how difficult it was for teachers to assess students' well-being. I have also talked about how parental involvement became so much more important. Cameron welcomed parental involvement, but he also knew that with cameras off and low attendance and engagement, not only had his relationships with his students deteriorated but he no longer had a good idea of his students' well-being.

Bill, a technology teacher, taught in a small high school in a small town. In his teaching, he valued community, student-centered approaches, open communication, and withholding judgement until he understood the context of his students' lives. He struggled with maintaining this approach, because he knew that his students needed to be physically in the presence of other students, with their friends, and that this was an important part of their education. Academically, Bill also worried that his students were no longer engaged but, as was the case with other

teachers, he lacked the information necessary to effectively adjust his approach to help them to re-engage:

My major concern throughout the whole thing was that: Am I doing my job? Am I putting in enough effort to get the message out there that they should be getting some work done? Am I giving them too much pressure? Am I not giving them enough pressure? Should I be talking to the parents more?

When I asked Bill if he had managed to embody the values of community, student-centered approaches, open communication, and withholding judgement during ERTL, he said, 'Partially' but only working with the few students who remained engaged.

The pervasive feeling that many teachers had that they were not providing the standard of care their students needed and deserved was described well by Claire:

There's always an element where if a kid is struggling, I think as a teacher, you still feel somewhat responsible for that struggle, even if it has nothing to do with you. Kind of the equivalent to Mom Guilt but it's Teacher Guilt. We want to do the best we can for these kids.

Claire, a middle school English teacher, said that she valued community, relationships, collaboration, flexibility, and independence and that upholding those became difficult during ERTL. She noted that because she could no longer read the room through on-going, moment-to-moment assessment of students' words and body language, recognizing how students were responding to the lesson or to each other and adjusting accordingly became impossible. Claire was teaching small classes in a private school. Her students had access to the requisite equipment, and the parents had the means to support them, but she still had the problem of not being able to do the ongoing informal assessment necessary to adjust according to students' needs. This situation made her feel guilty because she was not up to the task as defined by her own standards.

Isla, who was teaching a grade four class in a school with a high population of refugees, was explicit:

For me, there was a lot of guilt and feeling every day like I'm not doing enough for the students in my class. And like I'm not being the best teacher, feeling like I'm not being the best parent. But you sort of just have to do the best that you can.

Isla was gesturing towards the many roles teachers had to play both personally and professionally. She had four children who were also struggling with ERTL. Speaking to her, and most of the others, I got the sense that they felt they had let their students down. When I asked Karen, who taught adult students, how she felt during ERTL, she said:

I was always feeling like I wasn't doing good enough. That's what it comes down to. I was sad. I was depressed; I felt this all the time. What do I do to make it better for them? To reach them? Engage them? Make this somehow much more interesting to them.

Again, with her stated values being care, connection, and flexibility, she was missing at least two of those and unable to provide the flexibility she knew her adult learners required to succeed because of their lack of engagement. In the face of all of this, Eve, who taught kindergarten, tried to protect her mental health, saying:

There is a frustration. You can't take it personally when they don't seem to be engaged. You can't make it a value judgment on what you're providing for them, whether they're interested, whether it's relevant, whether the parents like it. You have to take your ego out of it because you have no idea what they're dealing with at home.

The participants' experiences of this guilt and frustration were built on the notion that they had an idea of the level of care they owed their students but found it impossible to meet their own standard. Several teachers noted that some students were simply lost, never logging onto the online class. These lost students haunted some teachers. Most were confident that, had school been in person, they could have reached them. Regardless of whether that would have been true, these teachers' experiences of the pandemic had a patina of teacher guilt: the nagging feeling that they could have done better, and would have if circumstances had been different.

## Self-Regard and Teachers' Job Descriptions

I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter that teachers were easily able to describe why they had chosen teaching in the first place and why they had stayed. ERTL undermined these aspects of their jobs and caused significant stress. Geraldine, a high school mathematics teacher, described it well:

It's disheartening. It's sad. The job that we have is such a social job and it made it feel just like a desk job as opposed to a job that has connections and all those interactions. And of course, I knew that some of those interactions were there and were important. But, yeah, it was very lonely and it felt very much more like a *job* for lack of a better word. It was a job sometimes before but it was a community as well. And that community wasn't there.

Like so many of the teachers in this study, Geraldine is describing how community was a fundamental aspect of her job that ERTL interrupted. Tara, a grade four French immersion teacher, felt similarly. She said:

A lot of people said, "Oh, you must have loved working from home. You just sit at your computer and teach." And I hated it. To me, this is not where I thrive as a teacher. I do so much better in the classroom with my kids.

Clearly, Tara did not believe her personality was suited to teaching online. This echoed Chad's remarks from the beginning of the chapter. Melina, a middle school teacher, also felt that the job ERTL created for her was unsuitable, saying:

Just sitting in front of a computer for X number of hours. [I tell] my friends that have office jobs, "I can never do that" and then I ended up having to do that. So that was really, really difficult—sitting down and organizing myself in front of a computer when I'm [usually] just so interactive.

Chad, Milena, Geraldine, and Tara recognized the disconnect between their personalities and ERTL, as did all of the teachers in the study. A few were explicit about the negative toll on their mental health that this disconnect wrought. When I asked Alexandra, a grade four French immersion teacher, how she felt about the job she had done during ERTL, she said:

You've got me on that one. You got a little emotion on me on that one. I hated it. I hated it. It was not the same job. It was not the job I signed up for. At the same time, I know full well that everybody else was doing all kinds of different jobs. We just all had to suck it up and do the best we could. But I hated it. I'm not a person who wants to sit at a computer. That's not the kind of job I want to do. I love people. I love working with kids. That's why I'm a teacher.

I note here that Alexandra was quite upset as she said this, only a few weeks into the summer break (school closures had continued until the end of the academic year in Ontario), having seemed quite detached throughout the interview. But now there were tears. The emotions of David, a grade seven homeroom teacher, were also palpable. He said:

I would prefer never to do it again. I found it very, very difficult myself. My mental health struggled. Struggled. I needed the contact with other people in person, even if they are a half a room away from me. It made it feel like I was not a teacher in the same way that I was before. I felt like I could have been replaced by a program, by a machine. And I have always prided myself on the ability to develop a one-to-one relationship with the parents, with my colleagues and with my students. And that was taken away from me through no one's fault. But it wasn't there anymore. There were some times when I was really, really down during this whole coronavirus and the teaching from home. And so I would go online, I would paste on the smile and I would talk to the kids as best as I could. And I would try to remain upbeat. But then, you know, afterwards you get off it, you would dwell on it, too.

This is in line with what all of the teachers I interviewed said. As I had predicted at the outset of the study, the emotional toll was high.

## Teachers' Values and Experiences

How best to understand how each of these teachers experienced their relationship to themselves?

In this chapter, I have described teachers' relationships with themselves through the lens of values and have done so because teaching is a value-laden activity and teachers, like all of us, see their values as highly personal. The value mentioned most often by the teachers I interviewed was personal connection. This was closely followed by trust and community. These two values were each expressed by twice as many participants as the next two most prevalent—which were process over product and student-centered curriculum. All of these values were under threat during ERTL. Indeed, when I spoke to these teachers throughout the summer immediately following the first months of ERTL, many of the teachers remained upset, resigned, frustrated, and guilty and not one of the 50 teachers failed to blame themselves, even a little, for the struggles of some of their students. There was a spectrum

of self-recrimination, but it was always present. This is understandable. Teachers are not only legally *in loco parentis* but also see themselves as ethically responsible for their students' academic progress and personal well-being. Teachers struggled with reconciling what could have been under normal circumstances with what actually happened during ERTL, when they questioned their ability to do their jobs and felt badly about the quality of instruction and care they were able to provide. There is a real risk that a teacher whose values are constantly undermined as they adapt their practice to their circumstances might choose to leave the profession. Indeed, as Jennifer Nias (1989) noted:

Teachers have hearts and bodies, as well as heads and hands, though the deep and unruly nature of their hearts is governed by their heads, by the sense of moral responsibility for students and the integrity of their subject matter which are at the core of their professional identity [...] Teachers are emotionally committed to many different aspects of their jobs. This is not an indulgence; it is a professional necessity. Without feeling, without the freedom to 'face themselves', to be whole persons in the classroom, they implode, explode—or walk away. (p. 305)

Generally speaking, teachers join the profession for reasons that reflect their values, and when they choose to leave, we rarely ask what values were undermined. Santoro wrote about the moral rewards that are embedded in teaching and serve to motivate teachers to keep doing a difficult job. She described these moral rewards as being 'activated when educators feel that they are doing what is right in terms of one's students, the teaching profession, and themselves.' (Santoro 2011a, p. 2). Santoro also discussed the ways in which teacher attrition is talked about in moral terms without really engaging with the teachers' reasons for leaving. Calling experienced teachers who leave the profession for ethical reasons 'principled leavers', Santoro painted a picture of teachers who chose to stop fighting a futile war. Significantly, she identified questions of personal integrity as central to teachers' struggles (Santoro 2018, p. 570). These questions include the following: 'How is who I am expressed in my role as a teacher? Is this the work that I am called to do?'

The answer to the second question—'Is this the work I am called to do?'—seemed to be what caused the teachers the most distress. Many alluded to the idea that if teaching were to continue online on a more permanent basis, they would no longer wish to continue in their

teaching career.

For the first question, some teachers explicitly said that they could not express themselves during ERTL. Others lamented what could have been, given who they normally were as teachers. Further, recognizing that our values are essential to how we relate to ourselves and that all of the teachers interviewed felt that their values were undermined by ERTL, it is no wonder that the experience negatively affected their relationships to themselves.

Having a conversation with someone about their values tells you a great deal about how they see themselves and wish to be seen. What these teachers seemed to say was the following: I am a hard worker. I am caring. I am flexible. I am a people person. I am aware of my privilege. I am dedicated. Who would not want to see themselves in these ways? And who would not eventually choose to, in Nias's (1989, p. 305) words, implode, explode, or walk away, if that conception of oneself was constantly undermined? ERTL was temporary and began dramatically but the threats to self-regard that were present in the day-to-day work of teaching during ERTL are not uncommon in normal times. The difference is that the skills and means to gather the information necessary to self-correct were so different online that none of the teachers I interviewed felt that they had fulfilled their duties as teachers to their own usual standards.

I could easily conclude that all of this boils down to bruised egos after repeated failure, but other authors might suggest that there is more to it than that. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) related her vision of engaged pedagogy, where she described the ideal classroom as a vibrant place where emotions are welcome and community is essential. But there is one other aspect of her vision: self-actualization. According to hooks, engaged pedagogy requires that teachers establish and maintain their own well-being in order to promote it in their students. Self-actualization implies alignment with one's own values and this was clearly next to impossible for the teachers in this study.

## Teachers' Professional Fulfillment

Throughout this chapter and book, I have described the various shades of misery that I observed in teachers' responses to my questions. But to understand self-actualization, we need to consider the opposite of

that misery because, through their misery—the negative space of ERTL—teachers did articulate what they need in order to stay present and energetic, innovative and curious in their careers. A concept that can encompass a positive experience of teaching practice is professional fulfillment. When a teacher is fulfilled, they are more creative, innovative, motivated, responsive, and resilient. However, this aspect of teachers' experiences is complicated. I imagine professional fulfillment to be an individual's sense of satisfaction in the work they do in their chosen profession. For teachers, I believe that this sense of satisfaction is based, in part, on the values that they bring to their work because, through the lens of those values, they assess their experiences. Further, I agree with Santoro (2011b) that the specific moral rewards that are most salient to an individual teacher depend on the values they bring to their practice. However, even combined with values, moral rewards are not sufficient for explaining professional fulfillment. We also need to look at what we mean by professionalism for teachers and how this affects how teachers experience their practice.

Public school systems tend to see teachers as conduits of the curriculum rather than active interpreters of it. Educational aims and objectives are developed by educators hired by the Ministry of Education (or its equivalent) whose choices are constrained by the will of parents and other interested parties. Classroom teachers then implement those aims and objectives through lessons that they have the knowledge and expertise to deliver efficiently, and then students' outcomes are noted, measured, and reported. In this way, the school system treats teaching as transactional: the teacher delivers a curriculum so that a student can earn a credential and move to the next stage of their schooling or career.

A great deal of energy goes into developing curriculum and monitoring students, and/or, in many jurisdictions, monitoring teachers, but the emotional and intellectual lives of teachers, through professional development activities and various forms of direct or indirect evaluation, are managed rather than nurtured. According to this idea, schooling as a politically informed and collective endeavor has essentially objectified teachers such that many of their personal motivations and experiences are irrelevant to its purpose. This means that, from the point of view of the school system, teachers with equal levels of skills and experience are interchangeable.

Gert Biesta (2012) called this the learnification of teaching, where the center of the endeavor is the objects of study and their efficient delivery to the students without really taking the teacher, as a person bringing something other than skills to the process, into account. In other words, in this learnification of teaching, there is little room for teachers' values to be considered. Indeed, a teacher who can set their personal values aside and simply do the job as prescribed might be seen as being professional.

Andy Hargreaves and Ivor Goodson (1996, p. 20) have said that, in a complex, postmodern age, professionalism is characterized by increased opportunity and responsibility to exercise discretionary judgment over the issues of teaching, curriculum and care that affect one's students; opportunities and expectations to engage with the moral and social purposes and value of what teachers teach, along with the major curriculum and assessment matters in which these purposes are embedded; commitment to working with colleagues in collaborative cultures of help and support; working authoritatively yet openly and collaboratively with other partners in the wider community (especially parents and students themselves), who have a significant stake in the students' learning; commitment to active care and not just anodyne service for students; and engagement in a self-directed search and struggle for continuous learning related to one's own expertise and standards of practice. They also argue that the high complexity of teaching needs to be rewarded with social status.

This is a lovely depiction of professionalism; however, it boils down to being a description of the ideal circumstances for a teacher to operate as a professional rather than how they might experience it, which is my interest.

There is also the question of caring for students, which remains a feature of professional teaching. Indeed, altruism is a value that we associate with helping professions like teaching—an idea that implies selfless service. However, seeing teaching solely as an altruistic profession can limit what we view as acceptable ambitions for teachers because it implies that teachers should find helping students sufficiently fulfilling that they want nothing more professionally beyond that (Higgins 2011). In his book *The Good Life of Teaching*, Christopher Higgins (2011) noted

that because teaching is seen as an altruistic profession, teachers are expected to set their own well-being aside and focus solely on their students' welfare. However, he argues that teaching should actually be 'the *expression* of one's personal ambitions and deepest motivations' (p. 2, emphasis in original). He also said that a teacher who is fulfilled inspires their students to be fulfilled.

Both Biesta and Higgins highlighted the importance of taking teachers' talents, interests, and ambitions into account when considering teaching and learning. However, their conceptualizations are fundamentally individualistic and there is not a lot of talk about emotions. From my perspective, teachers' professional fulfillment is about how they experience their practice, not just how they think about it. Thus, we must look to other scholars to begin to conceptualize the meaning of professional fulfillment as an experience.

This is where bell hooks (1994) comes in. She described a teacher's job as developing a community of learners who trust each other enough to engage in intense but loving critique. Central to this vision, according to hooks, is a teacher who is committed to self-actualization within that community. Pulling this all together, teachers' professional fulfillment is how teachers experience their practice in community, in terms of values being upheld, and self-actualization through their professional goals and ambitions. Thus, values, self-actualization, and community are essential to teachers' professional fulfillment, which, in turn, positively affects self-regard. All of this was undermined during ERTL.

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## Study Participants Featured in this Chapter

| Name      | Race        | Experience<br>(years) | Role                            |
|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Alexandra | White       | 27                    | Grade 4, Fr. Immersion homeroom |
| Blake     | White       | 8                     | High school SERT                |
| Bill      | White       | 29                    | High school, technology         |
| Cameron   | White       | 21                    | Grade 3, homeroom               |
| Carol     | White       | 17                    | High school drama               |
| Chad      | White       | 12                    | Middle school—homeroom          |
| Claire    | White       | 28                    | Middle school—homeroom teacher  |
| David     | White       | 26                    | Grade 7 homeroom                |
| Eve       | White       | 16                    | kindergarten                    |
| Isla      | White       | 10                    | Grade 4, homeroom               |
| Geraldine | White       | 16                    | High school mathematics         |
| Karen     | East Asian  | 4                     | Adult day school—English        |
| Kendra    | White       | 7                     | Elementary school SERT*         |
| Milena    | White       | 16                    | Grade 8 homeroom                |
| Monique   | White       | 30                    | Elementary school, French       |
| Niveen    | South Asian | 38                    | French                          |
| Tara      | White       | 8                     | Grade 4 homeroom                |

\*SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher



## 9. I Am Because We Are<sup>1</sup>

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My purpose in this book has been two-fold: (1) to describe the experiences of classroom teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic from their perspectives; and (2) to find their concept of good-quality education in the negative spaces of the emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) that was enacted during the pandemic. Based on the Ubuntu philosophy underlying the study, my experiences as a former teacher, and the participants' stated concerns, I have focused on their relationships; namely with the school system, their colleagues, parents, their classes, individual students, and themselves. In general, I have explored these relationships by describing teachers' history and context (through historical curriculum documents and other policies with which teachers routinely interact), then sharing teachers' words. These data were followed by a commentary based on a theory or conceptual framework chosen based on its potential to provide insight into teachers' experiences and aspirations. In this chapter, I will summarize findings and then propose a way to understand them that encompasses all of the above.

### Context

In Ontario, Canada, as in other jurisdictions, public school teachers' relationship with the school system has always been complicated by questions of autonomy. A review of teachers' historical relationship with the school system indicates a trajectory from a high level of control by the province with respect to curriculum and pedagogy to an arrangement where the province retains control of the mandated curriculum and, for the most part, teachers are in control of pedagogy.

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1 Large sections of this chapter were part of a public lecture I delivered at York University on 29 October 2024.

The shift in control of pedagogy from government to teachers can be traced through historical curriculum documents which demonstrate that, by the 1970s, teachers were largely responsible for determining the best ways to teach the mandated curriculum to students. At that time, a number of provincial-level subject- and age-group associations arose among teachers to share resources and expertise. Teachers began to collaborate more within schools and school boards, as well. It is now a given that the isolated teacher described by Lortie (1975) is much less common, with most teachers collaborating whenever possible. Still, when it sees fit, the Ministry of Education does intervene, on occasion, to impose its pedagogical philosophy. Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) did not change any of this.

What might be unique about the experience of Ontario teachers is that ERTL began during a fraught contract negotiation between the province and teacher federations. There had been a number of major cuts to education funding and secondary school teachers were protesting the provincial government's announcement that students would be required to take four online courses in order to graduate with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. In the six months leading up to the pandemic school closures, there had been protests, picketing, and one-day rotating strikes on the part of all public school teachers culminating in a province-wide one-day strike (the likes of which had not occurred in Ontario since 1997). Thus, teachers' relationship with the school system was strained before ERTL and remained so once it began, with many teachers feeling disrespected and or ignored by the Minister of Education due to a perceived lack of consultation. Some also felt inadequately supported by their employers, the school boards.<sup>2</sup>

## What Teachers Said

Teachers described the transition to ERTL as a shock at best, chaotic at worst.

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2 In Ontario, teachers are employed by local school boards, but all education funding comes from the provincial government. During contract negotiations, this necessitates teacher federations (unions) negotiating a contract framework with the province first. This framework is then the basis of the collective agreements negotiated at the local level.

Teachers' relationships with each other, at least among those that I interviewed, were mostly enhanced during ERTL. Most relied on colleagues for technical, pedagogical, and emotional support, although a few found themselves quite isolated. Thus, but for those few exceptions, collegial relationships were strengthened during the pandemic.

ERTL affected how teachers related to their students' parents in several ways. First, as online learning platforms took over as the primary pedagogical space, teachers had to provide technical support for parents even as they were learning the platforms themselves. This meant that teachers' learning curves were perhaps uncomfortably exposed. For teachers of younger students, they also took on the role of coach to the parents because these students required adult supervision on the online platforms. Here many teachers received some pushback because, whether parents had employment that allowed them to telecommute or were exempt from stay-at-home mandates or not, parents struggled both to fulfill the duties of their employment and supervise their children at the same time. Further, some resented taking on the teacher's role. Probably the most fundamental shift in the parent-teacher relationship, however, was teachers taking on the role of social worker. Social work is a highly specialized field for which most teachers felt ill equipped, and yet, at emotional, social, and economic crisis points, many parents chose to confide in teachers, asking for help at a time when many community supports were shut down or difficult to access. None of the teachers I interviewed felt qualified to provide the counseling some parents seemed to require. Thus, for teachers, taking on these roles (tech support, coach, social worker) not only fundamentally changed their relationship with many parents, but also troubled how they saw themselves.

The question of how to get the daily work of teaching done during ERTL was handled variously by the teachers in the study. The Minister of Education had drastically reduced the time allotted for each school subject, resulting in teachers reducing the content they taught to the basics—cancelling projects and other enrichment activities. Further, due to the fact that teachers could no longer be reasonably certain that the work students were submitting for evaluation was their own, assessing academic progress and assigning grades became extremely challenging.

A major factor in how teachers experienced their day-to-day work was the quality of their classroom communities before the pandemic and the

extent to which those communities deteriorated during ERTL. Generally, to facilitate learning of academic content and social skills, teachers endeavor to build positive and supportive classroom communities. This is especially important for marginalized students. ERTL undermined this endeavor and further marginalized these vulnerable students (including those who were ethnic or racial minorities, or who had mental, physical or cognitive disabilities, or who were living in poverty or learning English).<sup>3</sup> Further, with respect to most of their students, teachers found implementing the student-centered pedagogy demanded by provincial policy nearly impossible to enact because asynchronous ERTL provided none of the real-time feedback they would have used to adjust and adapt their teaching to optimize student learning during in-person teaching. Synchronous ERTL was no better because, even with video conferencing, most students left their cameras off and failed to engage in any detectable way. Teachers described this experience as ‘talking to a wall’. This situation affected teachers’ self-regard, as their guilt and frustration corroded their sense of themselves as competent teachers.

## Making Sense of It All

Wenger’s conception of communities of practice proved useful for understanding the experiences teachers had described to me. It is a social theory of learning that integrates notions of identity within a workplace environment. In this scheme, in order for a group of employees to qualify as a community of practice, employees need to demonstrate mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. The classroom teachers in this study demonstrate all of these. Specifically, they participated in mutual engagement through continual dialogue with colleagues about how they teach, how they manage their classes, and how they interpret the curriculum. They engaged in joint enterprise through helping students to successfully complete their courses. Finally, shared repertoire was enacted through vocabulary, skills, tools, and methods, along with how teachers handle disciplining students or

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3 These terms are constantly evolving. “Ethnic or racial minorities” is the APA term. Another is “global majority”. In Canada, the terms “racialized” or “BIPOC” are most commonly used.

interacting with parents, and how teachers interact with provincial policies (such as curriculum documents and school board policies).

Mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise remained intact, albeit strained, by the complications and discontinuities ERTL introduced into their practice.

I find Wenger's concept of communities of practice to be an excellent lens for understanding teaching as a profession; however, it is not adequate to understand how teachers experience the tension between their ideals and the reality of day-to-day teaching. This aspect of teaching is captured well by the work of Doris Santoro (2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2015, 2018). In her explorations of why some teachers leave the profession, she determined that many could no longer accept the daily assaults to their integrity—personal, professional, and with respect to teaching.

The integrity of teaching is borne out in the daily tasks of a teacher—planning and teaching lessons, assessing student well-being and academic progress, and assigning grades. As noted in chapter five, ERTL transformed these daily tasks in challenging ways. The difficulties with assessment, in all of its forms threatened the integrity of teaching and professional integrity. The latter was also undermined by teachers' inability to enact student-centered pedagogy in a situation where they could not ascertain the well-being of students in the moment or gain the feedback necessary to adjust their teaching approaches to suit students' individual needs. Further, personal integrity was called into question because teachers found themselves doing a job—sitting in front of a computer with little interaction with students—for which they knew they were not suited and therefore would never have chosen. Authors such as bell hooks (1994) or Chris Higgins (2011) might have suggested that, due to their circumstances, these teachers were unable to engage in activities that enhanced self-actualization (in hooks' words) or self-cultivation (in Higgins' words). Higgins was concerned with teachers being able to have ambitions within their practice that would provide the opportunity to live a good life within teaching, while hooks was bringing teachers into the realm of consideration within classroom communities. I, too, argue that, although we purport to view students as inherently important human beings, all too often, teachers are not afforded this consideration. Rather, to be seen as professional in altruistic professions, leaving the self at the door is often expected (Higgins 2011).

Self-actualization is important, but I would add that the experience of it is as emotional as it is intellectual. To take that emotion into account, I use a different term—professional fulfillment—which is a sense of accomplishment, pleasure, and satisfaction in one’s work. Indeed, the anguish many of the teachers I interviewed seemed to be experiencing implied that there was more at stake than positive feeling after a job well done. It was everything all at once—their values, ambitions, emotional connections, self-regard, and self-efficacy—that were under threat during ERTL. Indeed, their stories about their experiences made it clear to me that their professional fulfillment was tied to something quite fundamental—identity.

## Teachers’ Professional Identity

Teachers’ professional identity has been defined by various scholars (see, for example, Karousiou et al. 2019; Skeritt 2019; Wise 2021). According to James Noonan (2019, p. 527), professional identity is ‘teachers’ conceptions of self and their role’, and that identity is not fixed but socially situated, formed and reformed over time. This concept of identity reinforces the idea that teachers develop an understanding of themselves as professionals through interactions with others. Wenger (1998) proposes a theory of professional identity that is comprised of five factors—negotiated experience, community membership, the learning trajectory, the nexus of multi-membership, and relations between local and global.

Relations between local and global refers to how teachers build and maintain relationships with the school system. We explored those relationships in chapter two. The nexus of multi-membership is related to how teachers reconcile their professional identity with their other group memberships, which could be related to demographics (e.g. race, gender, social class, ethnicity) or other social groups (e.g. family, academic discipline, clubs). In analyzing the surveys, there was no correlation between demographic factors and their responses. The learning trajectory accounts for how teachers see themselves based on their pasts and imagined futures. This did represent a source of distress or optimism for some, as they imagined a future where online learning might become more common. Community membership is the aspect

of identity that is affected by their sense of the familiar and unfamiliar, which sounds vague but really refers to the aspects of our interactions with colleagues that are taken for granted (e.g. speech patterns and other behaviors) that we only notice when they change. These changes can result in a sense of alienation that clearly emerged for many teachers during ERTL, especially within the classroom communities when they moved online. Finally, negotiated experience is the aspect of identity that describes how teachers see themselves in relationship to how others see them. Certainly, teachers' experiences of the new roles expected of them by parents and the school system are relevant here. What I take from all of this is that teachers' professional identity is a community-centered project. Therefore, if we are going to understand what teachers experienced during ERTL, it is essential to see professional identity as the result of a matrix of relationships.

## Towards a Communitarian View of Professional Identity

Identity is a term that gets thrown around a lot these days, therefore I want to be clear about what I mean by it. It is a concept that can be understood differently depending on the discipline that one leans toward—psychology, sociology, or philosophy. As a social scientist in an applied field, I have the blessing (and curse) of being able to draw from several disciplines in order to understand the phenomena that I am studying. That is to say, I am blessed with the choice of seeing identity in philosophical, psychological, or sociological terms but cursed by the reality that philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists might be offended by the amalgamated conceptual frameworks that I build. Nevertheless, my goal is not to be true to an extant theory that is established out there in a particular discipline. Rather, it is to make sense of the experiences of the teachers who participated in this study in a way that makes sense to them.

I make a distinction between self and identity. I define self as the 'who' that experiences the 'what'. Consequently, while doing the study, I aimed to allow the self (the who) of each individual I interviewed, to express how they experienced ERTL (the what) and eventually I came to recognize that it had been their professional identity that had been at

stake all along. Jessica Helms (1998) posited that a teacher's sense of self can be seen as a core of values and beliefs simultaneously affecting and being affected by: (1) how they act; (2) what they believe are others' expectations of them; and (3) how they envision themselves and the world will be in the future.

Thus, there is a self who experiences the world through their values and beliefs, constantly negotiating their identity with others. One might assume that this is a sovereign and, to some extent, transcendent self who creates their identity based on these social interactions, however, this is a Western and specifically liberal notion of identity. Alastair Bonnett (2004) described the concept of the West as a category and intellectual resource. That is, it is more than a geographic region: it also represents a cluster of values that prioritizes the independent individual over the collective and is committed to capitalism and democratic governance. Thus, while the notion of a transcendent self has been problematized for more than a century by psychologists and sociologists (Holstein & Gubrium 2000), the idea of the sovereign (self-created) self remains a compelling idea. Indeed, integrity, in terms of being true to oneself, is highly prized in a Western liberal ethos that reflects this idea of a sovereign self.

The notion of a sovereign self is especially relevant when we imagine how we might behave when faced with an ethical dilemma. In the West, we assume that the ideal response will be based solely on the values and beliefs of the person making the decision about what should be done. To this end, Western philosophers tend to talk about four different ethical frameworks—virtue ethics, deontology, consequentialism, and an ethic of care—that are significant when making that decision as to how one should act in the world. Virtue ethics focuses on the character of the decision-maker and assumes that someone with good character will make good ethical decisions (Shklar 1984). Deontological ethics relies on *a priori* principles to which the actor should align if they are to behave ethically (Kant 1883). Consequentialists calculate the soundness of ethical decisions in terms of whether the results of an individual's actions are good or bad (Mill et al. 2003). Finally, an ethic of care, which is a feminist approach, bases ethical decisions on relationships, especially those between a carer and the person they are caring for (Noddings 1984). I call these four ethical frameworks the Typical Four. The Typical

Four are decidedly liberal and individualistic approaches to ethics. Even ethics of care are fundamentally based on dyads of two individuals. The philosopher, Charles Taylor (1992) noted that we, in the West, with our liberal and individualistic perspectives, have a tendency to discount considerations of community and tradition. Consequently, none of these frameworks seems to be useful for analyzing teachers' experiences of ERTL because they begin with the assumption of sovereign selves. Yet individuals are embedded in community, which means that identity is not merely developed through interactions with others but constituted by it. Therefore, in order to reflect on the findings of the previous seven chapters, I need a conceptual framework that can simultaneously incorporate the tensions that teachers experienced as they implemented ERTL and engage with the question of identity as a community project. Thus, I return to the sub-Saharan philosophy of Ubuntu.

## Ubuntu and Schooling

Many of us are familiar with the expression 'I am because we are' and may know that it is an oversimplified summary of Ubuntu. I have gone into detail about Ubuntu as a philosophy in chapter 1 and will not repeat that treatment here. Rather, I will discuss how an African philosophy is relevant to a study of teachers in a Western context who not only may never have heard of Ubuntu, but who most likely hold views of self and community that do not align with it.

Western values such as the prioritizing of the independent individual over the collective are seen by many as a colonial imposition on non-Western cultures (Bonnett 2004), an imposition that is appreciated by some and rejected by others. Further, these values are reflected in the institutions that colonizers created. Long after countries are granted independence, the colonial legacy lives on in institutions such as schools.

Reflecting on the ethos of public schooling in post-colonial Africa, joan.Osa Oviawe (2016) described public schooling as 'excellence without a soul'. She criticized this Western approach to schooling for emphasizing achievement while treating attention to the health of the learning community as a mere means to the end of students learning the prescribed curriculum. In order to decolonize African schooling, she argued, African countries need to adopt a philosophy that is indigenous

to Africa. Further, she said that Ubuntu has the potential to not only decolonize schooling in Africa but to improve education across the Western world—the solution to a soulless system.

I do not consider our Western school system to be soulless. We, in the West, put a great deal of energy into tending to students' emotional lives and social development. However, there is a way in which schooling can seem to view students in terms of their potential to be someone useful in the future rather than as being inherently important in the present. Students are measured, graded, sorted and sent on learning trajectories (e.g. academic, vocational, etc.) based on imagined futures (Ferguson 2000). When Oviawe described Western schooling as soulless, I think this is what she was critiquing. Grading and sorting might be seen as a tradition within Western schooling that is, like all traditions, an expression of society's values and beliefs—such as individualism and capitalism. And yet, even if the measuring, grading, and sorting of students is a large part of schoolteachers' jobs, twenty years of observing classroom practices has demonstrated to me that this does not reflect the vast majority of day-to-day interactions between students and teachers. Teachers seem to recognize both their responsibility to fulfill school system requirements for grades and the streaming of students based on perceived abilities, but also that community and belonging are inherently important. Thus, from kindergarten to the end of high school, there is a tension between caring for students and the grading/sorting functions of schooling precisely because society is not solely concerned with the latter. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the tensions that arise for teachers as they attempt to balance this caring with the traditional objectives of the school system. I find Ubuntu to be a philosophy that recognizes these tensions.

Specifically, an Ubuntu perspective of schooling implies several philosophical claims about teaching and learning that seem to align with teachers' experiences as conveyed to me in this study. Ontologically, Ubuntu claims that both teachers and students exist because the learning community exists and vice versa. This learning community includes students, teachers, other educational professionals, family, and other members of the wider community. Epistemologically, Ubuntu suggests that teaching and learning occur through mutually supportive interactions within the learning community. This is in line

with Drysdale et al. (2016) and Rovai (2002) who both emphasized the importance of community-building in online learning, and it certainly reflects the challenges described by the teachers I interviewed. They lamented the lack of interaction between students during ERTL and the negative impact this had on their learning while also noting the effect on their relationships with colleagues and parents and the lack of consultation they perceived between teachers and the larger school system. Axiologically, Ubuntu values a learning community in which no individual walks alone and it follows that, ethically, Ubuntu requires that all individuals are given what they need to thrive within the learning community and beyond, and that both students and teachers are responsible for the health of that community. This helps us to understand the difficulty teachers had with the threat to their integrity that ERTL imposed, specifically with respect to safeguarding students' mental health, assessment of academic progress, and grading.

In sum, I define professional identity as being constituted by the relationships a teacher has with others. This is a communitarian notion of identity that is underpinned by the sub-Saharan African philosophy of Ubuntu. I use this philosophy because it recognizes the primacy of community while embracing both individual agency and tradition. Through its recognition of tradition or societal norms, Ubuntu creates space to engage with the tensions that arise while treating tradition not as a corrupting force but simply as part of what it means to be a person within a community.

I am not suggesting that teaching, learning, and schooling must be viewed through an Ubuntu lens to be understood. Rather, I am suggesting that this philosophy could act as a useful unifying conceptual framework for reflection on the teachers' experiences of ERTL.

## Good-Quality Education in a Negative Space

What of the aesthetics of Ubuntu? No doubt, they are related to harmony, as is true in the Western tradition. And what is the role of aesthetics in a discussion of a good-quality education? Based on my observations of the interactions between teachers and students, between each other, and what teachers tell me about their interactions with students' parents, I believe that when I observe a classroom community where teachers

are fulfilled and students are sufficiently cared for and challenged, 'beautiful' is the term that comes to mind. In other words, a good-quality education is a beautiful thing. And it is not in spite of grades or because of the absence of conflict, contradictions, and tensions. It is simply inherently communal.

I return to the original purpose of this book. First, for the sake of documenting a historically significant moment, to provide a narrative of ERTL based on the words of teachers who had recently engaged in it. The second purpose is to seek to define the characteristics of a good-quality education in the negative spaces ERTL created. This visual metaphor is no accident. The beauty of a good-quality education can indeed be discerned through an Ubuntu lens.

The necessity of province-wide ERTL in the face of a global pandemic might be a once-in-a-generation event but, like any crisis, it highlighted the values underlying teachers' work—including trust and community, personal connection, and flexibility. The school system explicitly encouraged teachers to prioritize students' mental health and, in a system usually obsessed with grades and future job prospects, this recognition was refreshing. However, this concern and emphasis on care was not extended to anyone else in the system. The teachers that I interviewed indicated that parents were in desperate need of support and the teachers themselves were suffering as well. Significantly, since the entire endeavor of teaching and learning is dependent on the health of relationships, the lack of recognition of these relationships within a matrix of care that forms classroom and school communities was bound to cause the entire endeavor to fray at the edges—a liminal space that was mostly populated by the most vulnerable students, teachers, and families. This is always true, but it was impossible to deny during ERTL in the spring of 2020.

I do not believe that teachers' experiences of ERTL are an indictment of online teaching and learning, but I am skeptical that online learning can ever be as effective as learning in person (Barrett 2021) especially for the most vulnerable populations in the system. It does have its place and can be a valuable option for many students who choose it; however, these teachers' stories highlight the richness of in-person teaching and learning and the recognition that a good-quality education requires a school community that provides opportunities for all individuals

(including teachers) to thrive in relationship with each other within the classroom, school, and larger community.

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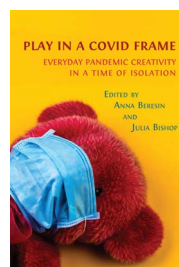
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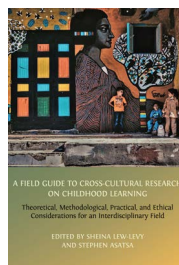


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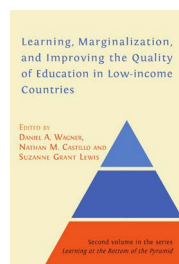
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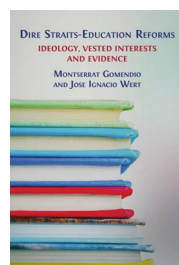


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# After the Before Times

## Teachers' Experiences of Pandemic Pedagogy

Sarah E. Barrett

In March 2020, when schools across Ontario, Canada, closed and emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) began, 160,000 teachers were abruptly separated from their students and from the relational fabric that sustains classroom life. *After the Before Times* documents how teachers experienced those early months of COVID-19 pandemic pedagogy—and what their stories reveal about the nature of teaching and learning.

Drawing on interviews with fifty primary and secondary school teachers, Sarah Barrett moves beyond questions of technology and technique to explore relationships: with government, school boards, colleagues, parents, students, and self. In the 'negative space' of pandemic pedagogy, teachers identified what was hardest to replicate at a distance: trust, community, professional integrity, and care.

Grounded in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, 'I am because we are', this book offers a timely reflection on crisis, integrity, and the relational foundations of good education.

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