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"I Just Feel Worn Out": Constraints to Teacher Agency throughout COVID-19

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Introduction

In the United States and throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic created medical and social challenges, and in response, state governments implemented compulsory mandates (e.g., mask mandates, social distancing, shifts to online education, etc.). Public school districts contributed local reform efforts (e.g., professional development for online learning, new technologies and materials for remote teaching and learning, mechanisms for support and outreach, etc.) to overcome unprecedented educational dilemmas (Daniel, 2020). Consequently, teachers and other stakeholders navigated these new institutional changes and their unintended consequences to meet professional goals and needs. Teachers during COVID-19, for example, had to redesign curriculum and instruction for online and hybrid learning environments, participate in and enforce COVID-19 mitigation practices, overcome peer isolation, support student mental health issues that would impact student concentration, engagement, perceived learning, and self-worth, and listen to public criticisms (Asare et al., 2021; Daniel, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Schwartz et al., 2021; Thorsteinsen et al., 2021). The persistence of the COVID-19 disruptions, barriers, and challenges upon teachers led to an uptick in teacher attrition in the U.S. as the pandemic lingered on that we must address (Bacher-Hicks, 2023).

Literature Review

A review of the literature reveals the consequences associated with teacher attrition and the factors that motivate teacher attrition. Teacher attrition is detrimental to schools. Teacher attrition results in negative outcomes such as larger class sizes, the elimination of courses, inexperienced or underqualified teachers taking vacant positions, and harm to student achievement and school improvement efforts (Amitai & Houtte, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ornstein et al., 2015). Moreover, the hiring process consumes finite financial and temporal resources that could otherwise be allocated to ongoing school improvement endeavors (Amitai & Houtte, 2022).

Prior to the pandemic, researchers knew that difficult teaching assignments for beginning teachers, limited classroom resources, little to no supports for teacher development, peer isolation, little to no pedagogical feedback, low pay, large workload, low teacher identity, lack of mentoring programs, competing demands, poor working conditions, fewer outlets for networking, poor school culture, lack of cooperation, successive waves of reform (e.g., assessment, accountability, curriculum), and high levels of stress may result in teacher attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Cobb 2022; Podolsky et al., 2019; Toropova et al., 2021; Towers et al., 2022; Zavelevsky et al., 2022). Institutional supports that mitigate these challenges may help promote teacher retention (See et al., 2020). During the pandemic, researchers built upon the teacher attrition literature with observations that longer workdays, technological issues, and stress with the transition to a remote workplace motivated teacher attrition (Klapproth et al., 2020; Obrad, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Education continues to respond with new practices and policies in a post-pandemic world. For example, House Bill 4545 in Texas is a new statewide policy that aims to reverse the decline in student achievement. This bill requires Texas schools to establish an accelerated learning committee and organize individual action plans for students who are failing to meet state standards (House Research Organization, 2023). However, we still do not know how these

practices or policies influence teacher attrition, nor do we know the long-term toll that the pandemic has had on our teachers. Additional studies need to address these research gaps.

Recent findings report that teacher attrition is a dynamic process between the teacher and their school; the decision to resign involves the perceived identity of the teacher within this context (Trent, 2017). Therefore, studies in teacher attrition necessitate a more nuanced approach to capture the teacher's personal identity within the dynamic school setting. The concept of teacher agency uniquely captures this phenomenon (Heikonen et al., 2017; Smith & Ulvik, 2017; Trent, 2017). We discuss and explore teacher agency and its associated theoretical framework, ecological agency, in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

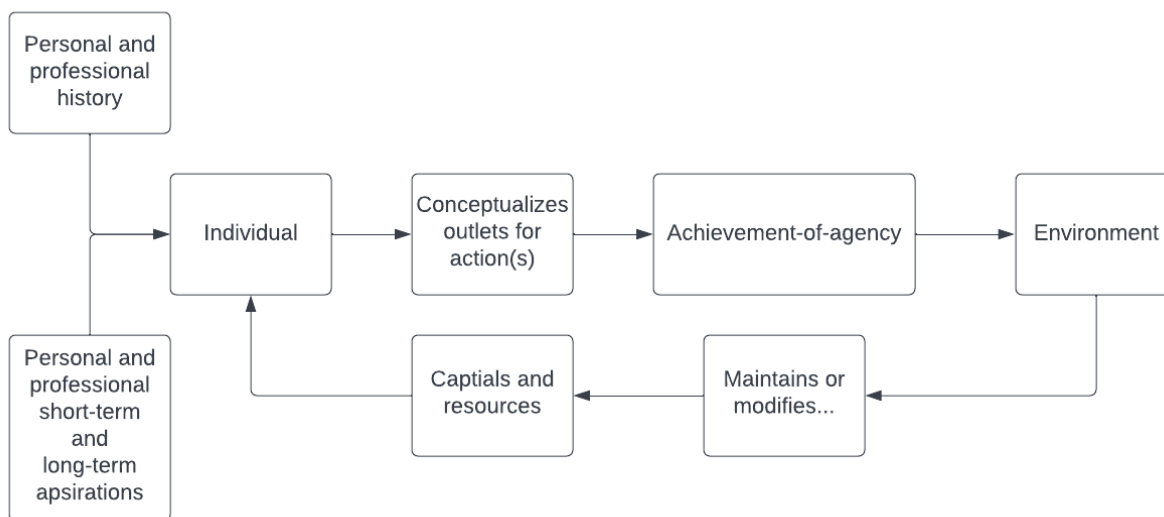
Ecological Agency

We define agency as the person's opportunity for action within a context, and the ecological agency theoretical framework conceptualizes the concept of agency in practice (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In an autonomous world, a person is an agent of change and acts according to their personal history and goals (Biesta et al., 2015). However, the agentic theory asserts that the environment introduces capitals to afford or constrain behaviors (Biesta et al., 2015). We define capitals as the influence of social networks upon individuals, and examples of capitals include power dynamics, discourses, beliefs, ideas, professional practices, and materials (Biesta et al., 2015). To initiate action through the theory's interpretation, a person considers their history, goals, and environmental capitals, identifies different opportunities, and acts to create their vision (Biesta et al., 2015). The action resulting from this deliberation between personal and environmental conditions is rigorously called the "achievement-of-agency."

The ecological agency theoretical framework considers the environment a living organization. Within the organization, people act knowingly and unknowingly together to create the capitals, which respond favorably or unfavorably (i.e., the environmental capitals) to an individual person's action (Biesta et al., 2015). For example, a teacher may decide to teach their course through lecture-based instruction. However, the individuals in the environment may shift their capitals to constrain the teacher's behavior such as an administrator suggesting a different type of instruction (i.e., power dynamics), peer teachers using project-based learning (i.e., collective practices), and students and parents criticizing the lecture-based instruction (i.e., beliefs, discourse, language). The teacher may feel constrained to continue to teach using lecture-based instruction and look for alternative opportunities to resolve the tension between the environment and their own beliefs. In summary, agency is a continuous negotiation of the perceived opportunities for action because the environment preserves or revises its capitals to maintain or modify the person's actions, and the person views and acts based on their understanding of the environment's capitals (see Figure 1) (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Figure 1.

Ecological agency's actor-environment feedback loop (Biesta & Tedder, 2007)



Teacher agency situates the concept of agency within the school context to understand the actions of teachers (Biesta et al., 2015). The teacher brings their history and aspirations into the workplace, and the school presents capitals to afford or constrain the teacher's actions. School capitals can include collective beliefs, values, ideas, language, knowledge, trust, practices, power structures, available resources, policies, and curriculum (Biesta et al., 2015). Teacher agency research continues to be indispensable in understanding critical or problematic teacher actions because the ecological agency framework unravels the effects of environmental capitals upon the actions of teachers and explains their decisions as a form of conformity or resistance to the capital(s) (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Trent, 2017). One problematic issue studied through an agentic perspective is teacher attrition. We demonstrate this relationship.

Teacher agency is interrelated with teacher attrition because it conceptualizes the constraints that ultimately lead to resignation (Trent, 2017). Theoretically, teachers bring their history and goals into the school's constraints, experience tensions and conflicts between their personal attributes and school capitals, feel disempowerment to resolve these tensions, conclude the lack of opportunity to overcome the challenge(s), and achieve the agency that they have been lacking through resignation (Heikonen et al., 2017; Smith & Ulvik, 2017; Trent, 2017). Therefore, the teacher's tensions and conflicts in the background of the school's capitals provide a research opportunity to identify the agentic constraints and the attritional motivators.

Using the ecological agency theoretical framework, we aim to understand the constraints that lead to resignation with the context of COVID-19 related effects. Additionally, the tenure of the teachers is an important component to the link between teacher agency and attrition. We argue that veteran teachers are the best population to understand how the COVID-19 dynamics influenced agency and attrition. Before COVID-19, one of out every two early-career teachers (i.e., five or fewer years) resigned as they were unable to navigate their school's challenges (Guthery & Bailes, 2019). Whereas, prior to the pandemic, veteran teachers (i.e., six or more years in the profession) had a strong sense of agency by negotiating through their yearly barriers to achieve their professional intentions; this strong sense of agency promoted the decision to remain in education (Day & Gu, 2009; Snyder, 2017). We assert that veteran teachers, who resigned during the pandemic, offer the best possibility to understand the constraints during

COVID-19 because they successfully traversed the school capitals before COVID-19 but felt constrained and resolved these feelings of constraint through resignation during the pandemic. An agentic understanding of the problematic institutional parameters can guide schools in their reconstruction efforts as we move into a post-pandemic environment.

Thus, we aim to address the research gap by studying three veteran high school teachers who resigned in May 2022 to learn what constraints from March 2020 to May 2022 minimized their agency and how the constraints minimized their agency and motivated attrition. We organize the research questions to address the research gap. The research questions are:

- What environmental factors constrained teacher agency from March 2020 to May 2022 for three veteran high school teachers?
- How do these factors constrain teacher agency and motivate attrition for three veteran high school teachers?

Methodology

Settings

We conducted the study in a U.S. high school from March 2020 – May 2022. The site contains approximately 1,600 students. We selected the high school context due to our ability to access the participants and the surrounding campus during COVID-19. During the pandemic, each teacher taught in a remote learning environment from March 2020 to the first week of February 2021. During the second and third weeks of February 2021, students were in a hybrid learning model with half the students in an asynchronous remote setting and the other half in an in-person learning setting. Students alternated learning environments every other day until the final week of February 2021 when learning shifted to an entirely in-person learning environment. The 2021-2022 school year had exclusively in-person learning. The in-person learning environment adopted and maintained COVID-19 mitigation practices (i.e., social distancing, wearing masks properly, wiping down desks after use, and contact tracing) throughout the duration of the study.

Participants

Three high school veteran teachers participated in the study, and we provided pseudonyms to each participant (Heather, Joanne, and Kevin). The study used purposeful selection, specifically the homogeneity technique (i.e., a delimitation technique that bounds a specific subgroup), to capture the constraints. Using Creswell's and Poth's (2018) four aspects (people, actions, events, and/or processes to understand the phenomenon) to answer the research questions, we selected high school teachers who taught throughout the pandemic but resigned at the end of the 2021-2022 school year to ensure that the action of resignation occurred. Further, we sought veteran teachers to best understand the phenomenon as previously argued.

Consistent with the ecological agency theoretical framework, it is important to briefly present each teacher's history and aspirations to better understand the personal factors that instigated their actions (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Heather was a biology teacher with over twenty years of experience. She previously taught at another school in the same state where her district recognized her as an award-winning secondary teacher. At her previous school, her principal promoted action research and consistently fought for instructional funds to encourage alternative methods of instruction. Heather's administration supported her as she started implementing inquiry-based instruction into her classroom and framed any failures as learning opportunities. Heather moved to the site

of the study and began teaching there during the 2017-2018 school year. Prior to COVID-19, she felt that she had adequate institutional and physical resources to continue her preferred pedagogy. However, her beliefs shifted during the pandemic, and she resigned at the conclusion of the 2021-2022 school year to take at least a year off. Her future in education remains uncertain.

Joanne was a math teacher who had spent over twenty years at the study's site and received building-level recognition for her teaching efforts. She started her career at a nearby school but left to pursue her master's and doctoral degrees. After the completion of her terminal degree, she started teaching math at the study's site in the late 1990s because it paid better than a professorship. Before the start of the pandemic, she believed that her administration teams aligned with her disciplinary beliefs. Specifically, she strongly believed that problematic actions needed to be addressed based on policy. Further, before COVID-19, she had never been micromanaged at any point during her tenure. These critical components shifted during the pandemic. She previously planned to remain at the study's site for two more years to obtain her retirement pension prior to COVID-19 but decided instead to leave at the end of the 2021-2022 school year.

Kevin was a science teacher who had taught for over thirty-five years. During this tenure, he obtained various state-level awards. He retired from another state and moved to the study's site to earn additional income. He started the same year as Heather. He previously taught at a series of smaller schools but had total autonomy with his classroom actions. Kevin thought he would teach at the site of study for ten years upon hire but decided to retire again after only five years at the conclusion of the 2021-2022 school year.

During the duration of the participants' careers, their districts valued their expertise, put them on leadership committees (which became inactive during COVID-19), and promoted the visibility of their instruction to the wider community. Individually, they had the agency to transform their classrooms and broader school environments for the betterment of their students. Each shared that they did not intend to leave education as early as they did, but the pandemic accelerated their plans for leaving education.

Research design

The study utilizes a case study design, which endeavors to learn from the three participants' context-dependent experiences (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Reflections of the person's history, environment, and aspirations result in the construction of agency; a case study methodology best presents the structure to learn from the bounded case (Biesta et al., 2017; Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015). The construction of a person's agency can change with the passage of time; thus, the study should be approached with a constructivist paradigm (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Yazan, 2015).

The data collection activities elicited each teacher's professional history, perception of their school environment, and goals (Biesta et al., 2017; Leijen et al., 2019). The three teachers participated in two one-hour semi-structured interviews (Leijen et al., 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018) and constructed three concept maps (Copeland & Agosto, 2012). The interviews concentrated on the teachers' past and contemporary experiences and future aspirations consistent with the ecological agency framework (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The first two concept maps aimed to illustrate an understanding of the influential dynamics upon the participant's agency before and during COVID-19. The final concept map had the participants identify the most problematic constraints that led to their resignation and problem-solve how to resolve these

issues. We share two handwritten concept maps in the themes (see Figures 2 and 3) because they were particularly helpful in unraveling the complexities of their agentic constraints (Copeland & Agosto, 2012).

The study used prolonged observations at the site of the study to ensure data triangulation. Specifically, prolonged observations included informal observations within the learning environments, one-hour interviews with two school administrators individually, and three thirty-minute interviews with a focus group of three students. The prolonged observations helped us better comprehend the school's capitals, which is vital to the interpretation of the participant's agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

The study used Creswell's and Poth's (2018) thematic analysis procedure to examine the data and conceptualize themes. The themes and the narratives connected to the themes provide the answers to the research questions. Steps for data analysis included transcribing audio data, coding the data, condensing and/ or expanding codes into categories, and conceptualizing themes from the categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2021; Xu & Storr, 2012). The data analysis incorporated the concept maps and analytical memos throughout data analysis to help conceptualize the codes, categories, and themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Houghton et al., 2013). The themes are:

- reduced instructional time
- optional student cameras
- the 70-30 grading policy
- common assessments
- emerging student behaviors during COVID-19
- policy enforcement.

Additional strategies to promote rigor and trustworthiness during data collection and analysis included peer debriefing and member checking with the three participants, two administrations, and three students following critical benchmarks (e.g., transcription, data analysis, drafts) to review the study's activities and materials, and thick descriptions in the findings (Houghton et al., 2013). The Institutional Review Board approved the research.

Finally, there were limitations present during data collection and analysis. The participants' time constraints limited the frequency and length of the interviews and observations. Our assumptions, perspectives, and privileges are present in the data collection and analysis, which limit our ability to capture the lived experience and how the participants are represented. Finally, we were unable to connect with district and state leaders, which may have further built an understanding of the participants' environment.

Findings

The "Findings" section represents the themes from the three educators during data collection and analysis. Each theme identifies and illustrates the environmental factors constraining their individual agency during COVID-19. We organize the findings into two distinct narrative sections: remote learning and hybrid/ in-person learning.

Remote learning (March 2020 – February 2021)

When COVID-19 became a national emergency, the research site's state implemented a mandate that prohibited schools from in-person teaching. The statewide mandate took agency away from all local school practitioners. In response, the local school district pivoted and implemented a policy called "optional remote learning." In this format, teachers made weekly

optional remote learning opportunities, but the policy disallowed the teachers to teach new content. Teachers met with their students for daily one-hour office hours to support student learning. The learning opportunities could be used as extra credit to elevate students' current grades, but once the pandemic started, district policy forbade the reduction of student grades. Thus, teachers believed that district leadership designed the new policy to ensure that all students would pass their classes rather than build their content knowledge and skills.

The school district maintained optional learning for the remaining 2019-2020 school year. However, there was hope that it was only temporary, and teachers could handle any learning losses the following year. As one administrator put it, "We were just trying to get by and wait for [COVID-19] to be over."

However, COVID-19 persisted and worsened. The district's state required compulsory schooling for the following school year, and the districts had the option of going to in-person learning with mitigation protocols or online learning starting in August 2020. The district selected the latter to protect students and their families. The three teachers had never taught remotely, so it was a difficult transition. Certain parameters installed by district personnel made remote learning even more challenging. We analyze the following three most restrictive parameters in the remote setting from the participants' viewpoint to understand their influence on the teacher's individual agency:

- teachers only had 60 of their 83 instructional minutes to teach the same yearly state curriculum
- optional student web cameras during online teaching
- new grading mandates.

Reduced instructional time

Before COVID-19, teachers taught in 83-minute periods. However, during COVID-19, campus administration led, with overwhelming support from district leaders, a policy that reduced teacher instruction time to address screen time concerns from parents. The policy only allotted 60 minutes of online classroom instruction. Students used the remaining 23 minutes as a break from online instruction before their next class. Kevin commented on the 60-minute lesson, "They expected less from the students, and that was a problem for me." Kevin resisted the policy by still teaching the entire 83-minute period without providing the mandated break to the students. If students left early, then he penalized their participation grades. It led to contention with students and parents that demoralized Kevin, but Kevin did not receive any reprimands from his administration.

More disconcerting, Joanne noted that some of her colleagues took advantage of the reduced class periods. Her colleagues taught far less than the 60-minute period, which diluted the students' learning experience further. She also noted a colleague who only taught online for 10 minutes per class period. Joanne expanded upon the topic:

I am very frustrated finding out that my colleagues did not do their jobs during remote learning by not even teaching [60 minutes.] The students weren't learning a thing, and they were still getting passing grades.

Joanne observed the lack of effort by her peers, which she believed motivated student apathy and made her job more difficult. While she did align with the 60-minute policy, she felt like she was not able to teach the way she wanted to.

When the teachers shared their concerns about the policy, they were directed by the administration to "consider the amount of screen time students had and have grace," as Joanne

noted. While it was a fair assessment in the teachers' eyes, they had to contend with the tension of meeting curricular expectations in a shorter timeframe or ignore the protocol altogether and endure the discontent from students and parents.

Optional student cameras

The district leaders did not require students to have their web cameras on during synchronous remote sessions, which led to student disengagement. Kevin criticized the optional student cameras during remote learning by sharing:

[We tried] to get students to pay attention during COVID. [Students] could turn off their screen and climb back into bed and kind of listen, but they're not really paying attention. And so, that was a lot harder at that point to get kids to understand.

Heather reinforced Kevin's disdain for optional cameras stating, "You really don't know who is on or not. And the vast majority of time, we all knew most [students] weren't there." The student group agreed that they were not present during some classes and the total amount of screentime throughout the day exhausted them.

The lack of student engagement and inability to improve student accountability motivated instructional changes. The teachers explored avenues to increase student engagement. For example, Kevin reduced the rigor of his classes to improve student engagement in his lessons:

When [remote learning] started, we kind of planned to do a little bit less just because we knew the process was going to take a little bit longer. But over time, probably that first nine weeks, it shifted from, "Hey, we can maybe cover four topics and do some practice in class and then give them an assignment afterwards," to, "Hey, maybe we'll only do three, and we'll just do everything together in class." Still, probably twenty percent of the kids didn't do anything, even if all they had to do was put down an attempt on one problem and submit it.

Individually, the teachers approached their administrative team during remote learning and argued that requiring students' video cameras to be on would increase student engagement. The administration team understood the problem but knew that district leadership would not budge on the issue because they believed that the district leaders did not want to get into any legal trouble. Nothing changed, and the teachers felt hapless and frustrated as they knew students were falling through the cracks.

The 70-30 grading policy

The 70-30 district level grading policy (referred to as "70-30" by the participants) mandated that 70% of the total grade had to come from formative assessments. The remaining 30% of the total grade came from summative assessments. Heather illustrated the problems with the grading guidelines:

What made [70-30] terrible is it wasn't an accurate representation of what they knew. [Students] come in, do stuff, not pass a single exam, leave with a B in your class and not know one darn thing. And kids figured that out really quickly. Of course, they did. And so, they didn't have to study. They could bomb exams and didn't matter as long as they would turn something in this little piddly stuff that we did. . . I had a conversation with our principal about "Do I have to follow that?" [I] was told that if I did not, and if a parent was upset, they would not have my back. Which I read as yes; you [must] do it.

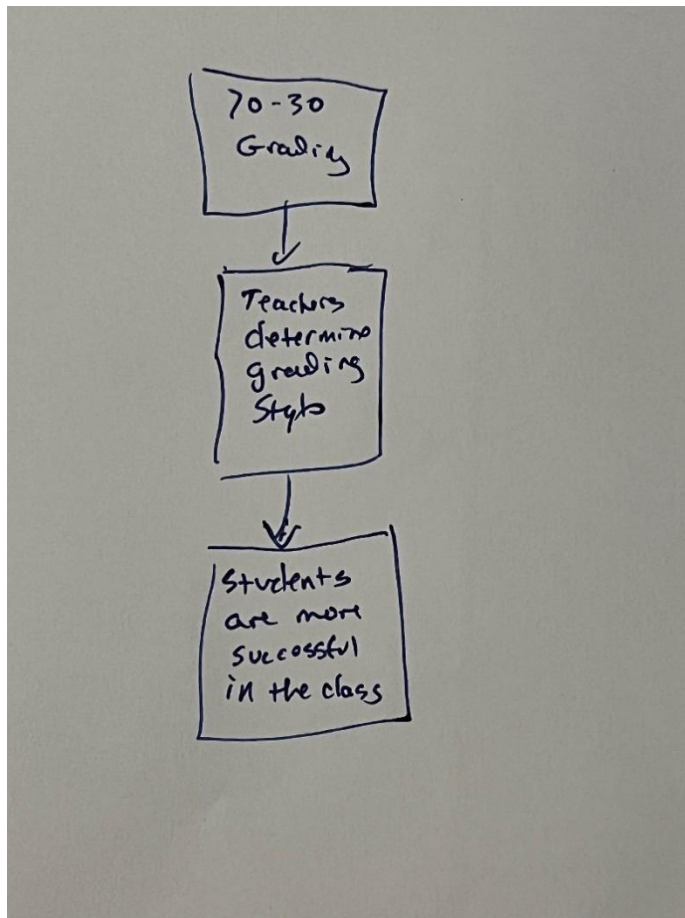
Some negative ramifications from the grading policy included increased cheating habits, lack of preparation and effort on summative assessments, and lower overall grades due to

students failing to complete homework assignments, which required the teachers either to change their practices or increase their oversight. The teachers used temporal resources to reimagine summative activities, though it was typically unsuccessful as students still cheated, failed, or never participated in them. Assessments became a constant battle and stressor.

The 70-30 policy still remained at the conclusion of the study, which led Kevin to illustrate his recommendation for the elimination of the policy in his concept map (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Removal of the 70-30 grading policy



Hybrid and in-person learning (February 2021 – May 2022)

Despite all the challenges from remote learning, Heather shared, “We just needed to get through [remote learning.] Then, we could teach normally again without so many new restrictions.” The veteran teachers understood that these remote parameters were temporary and would be gone once they were back to in-person learning. The administration echoed this belief, and these barriers would be resolved once in-person returned. This belief helped the teachers navigate the tensions between their constraints, the draining of temporal resources, and their selection of best practices.

When the district decided to return to hybrid learning, some, but not all, of the parameters from online school were lifted. The allotment of instructional time went back to 83 minutes, and

blank screens on Zoom were a thing of the past. The teachers felt joy and excitement to overcome the constraints, despite new mitigation practices that made hands-on and laboratory learning experiences more difficult. Hybrid felt like a reprieve, but the shift to full in-person learning led to new challenges.

Additional concerns emerged from the district and administrative leaders: the learning loss from remote learning and the fear of enrollment reduction that would result in the loss of funds. District personnel retained parameters like the 70-30 grading policy, despite both teacher and campus administrator pushback, to “bolster graduation rates and make the school look better,” reported one administrator involved in the district level conversations. Further, the additional directive of common assessments from district personnel and the manifestation of new problematic student behaviors led to new, unforeseen constraints for the teachers.

Common assessments

In the 2021-2022 school year, district leaders directed administrators to include common assessments to boost student achievement through data-driven decision-making, who agreed with the value of these structures. “We *had* to make up for the loss of learning,” commented one administrator. Now, teachers had to submit their summative assessments for review, so administration could analyze student performance. The teachers felt that these tasks were not an effective use of their professional development time because it did not serve their needs. Heather criticized the assessment activities during professional development:

There’s zero teacher buy-in, and it wasn’t ever explained to us why we’re doing these things. Personally, I think [common assessments] are a good thing, but it was never explained to us. It [was] just, “You’re going to do this thing, and here’s your requirement.”

The common assessments further limited the agency of the teachers because the common assessments consumed their time. To gain back this time, teachers pooled their assessments together to complete the activities during professional development without consideration as to how the assessments would fit into their classrooms. Critically, the lack of buy-in resulted in teachers, including the three participants, not implementing their common assessments in the classroom. Rather, the teachers believed it did not meet their professional needs and grew the narrative of leadership restricting control of their classroom instruction. Critically, Kevin shared:

But I do think teachers, for the most part, should be given control over their classroom decisions because I think teachers are going to pick what’s best for kids. Really, of all the things that I’ve had here at [the school,] I think that the most annoying ones were where they told me how I had teach in different ways because it made me feel like they didn’t trust me to do the right thing. . . These frustrations, right now, made it a good time to retire.

Emerging student behaviors during COVID-19 and policy enforcement

Problematic student behaviors (e.g., apathy, tardiness, absenteeism, vandalism, loitering in bathrooms, outbursts, meltdowns, poor academic performance blamed on teachers, refusal to comply with teacher requests) were a nonissue during hybrid learning but manifested rapidly once students returned to full-time in-person learning. One student commented upon the student behaviors sharing, “I think [the problematic behaviors] just wore down teachers because [the students were not] punished for [the] bad things they did at home.” Another student noted, “There’s like a big teacher disconnection [starting] at the beginning of the [in-person learning]

because you couldn't see their face due to masks. You had to figure out what the teacher is thinking [and] doing.”

The teachers encountered these negative student behaviors frequently and endeavored to stop them. With certain behaviors (e.g., telling students to pull up their masks, intervening with bathroom vandalism, stopping student loitering in hallways during class time, absenteeism), the teachers felt that they needed administrative interventions, which historically were helpful.

However, they had negative experiences with administrative interventions. Heather explained:

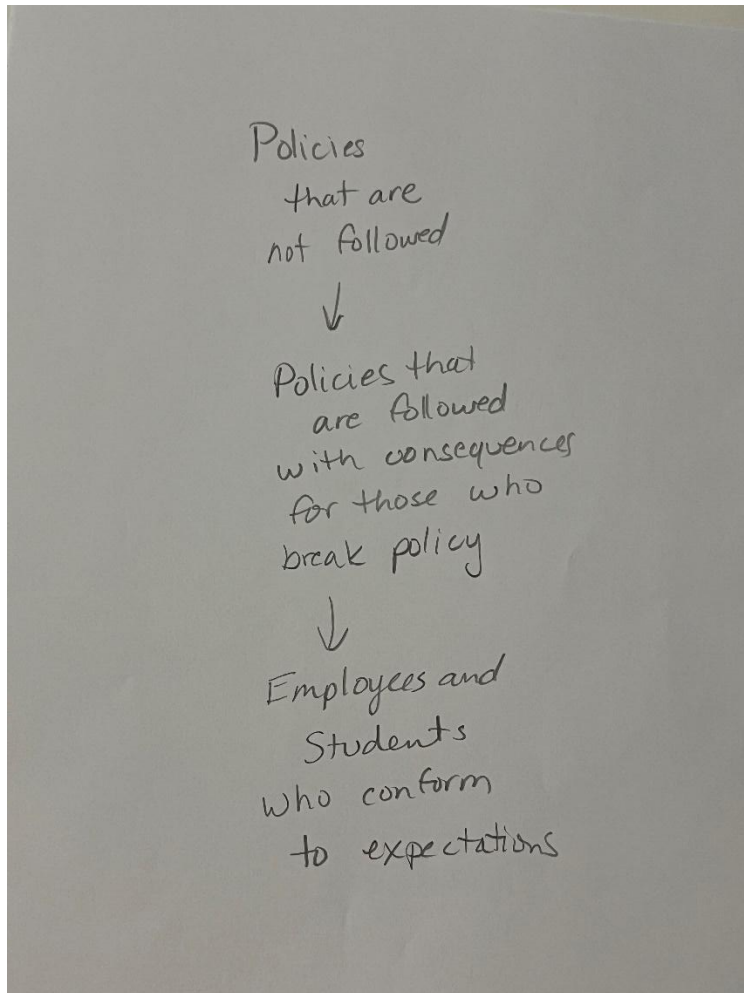
Different assistant principals handle things differently and with different degrees of strictness. And so, it doesn't appear that they're on the same page about that. [Teachers are] not feeling supported. You feel like you're banging your head against the wall, and it also [makes] you feel constrained because, if I have a student who's acting out and to a spot where I might need to send them out, and then ten minutes later to get sent back. . . That changes how I feel about my teaching. I've got to do it myself. . . I feel a little like, you know, those nail files where you can just file your nails down. I feel like I've been filed pretty short. I just feel *worn out* (emphasis added).

The perceived inaction, or inconsistent actions, upon negative student behaviors was “exhausting,” as Heather reported. It shifted the onus of discipline solely upon the educator and further drained the teachers of their temporal resources. With problematic behaviors and absenteeism persisting, the teachers felt handicapped to resolve these issues. Joanne recounted the story that led her to disillusionment with her administrative team:

I've complained [to our administration team] about groups of students in bathrooms, particularly the girls' bathroom across the hall from my room. I've been complaining about it since August [2022] that I go in [the bathroom, and] there's a group of girls. I asked them to leave. I kicked them out. Then the next class or even the same class, they're back. [There are] still groups of girls in the bathroom in January, and it started in August. I don't feel like the administrator we have in charge is capable of enforcing a policy. I call it, “schools without rules.” I will not stay [at these schools.]

Joanne designed a concept map (Figure 3) emphasizing the need for policy follow-through and clear consequences or outcomes.

Figure 3.
Policy follow-through



The administration shared their perspective upon the perceived lack of action on student behavior. One administrator remarked, “I would say we gave a lot of grace at the start of the pandemic, and that grace now hurts us now because [students] were not expected to be held accountable.” The administrators collaborated with a neighboring district, who shared their success during COVID-19 was from providing “grace” or a case-by-case flexibility with student discipline. The district policies reinforced this belief of grace through support of their initiatives like the 60-minute remote class to meet student needs. Both district and state personnel used terms like empathy, which the administrators aimed to implement in their practices. This led to a shift of philosophy from the administrators. However, they started to revert to previous practices when problematic behaviors became rampant. Another administrator commented, “We’ve tried [discipline,] but there is an overwhelming number of kids who need attention. There’s not enough of us. We’ve also tried punishments. We’ve tried restorative justice. Sometimes, nothing works. . . We just couldn’t do anything” The administration’s dialogue complicated the situation. They introduced elements of grace and flexibility during the pandemic, which were not previously observed or understood prior to COVID-19.

The perceived grace differed between each administrator and led to a gap in expectations with student behavior management between the administration and teachers. The administrators tried to reduce the behaviors but deemed that their approaches failed. The teachers interpreted

this lack of behavior modification as administrative inaction. The administration implementation of subjective grace misaligned with the teachers' expectations of behavior management, which was a breaking point for Joanne:

So, there's rules that should be in place, like something to prevent tardies or classroom behavior. . . If those things aren't being addressed and changed. . . [then] I'm going to change schools. And if I have to leave education altogether, I will.

As demonstrated in the last two themes, the constraints during in-person learning led to vital language linking them to their resignation (e.g., “felt worn out,” “time to retire,” “if I have to leave the school, I will”), which aligns to the previous theoretical discourse on how agency and attrition are connected. We further unpack these findings to better understand the constraints to teacher agency, so we can learn how to modify the constraints and improve agency and retention.

Discussion

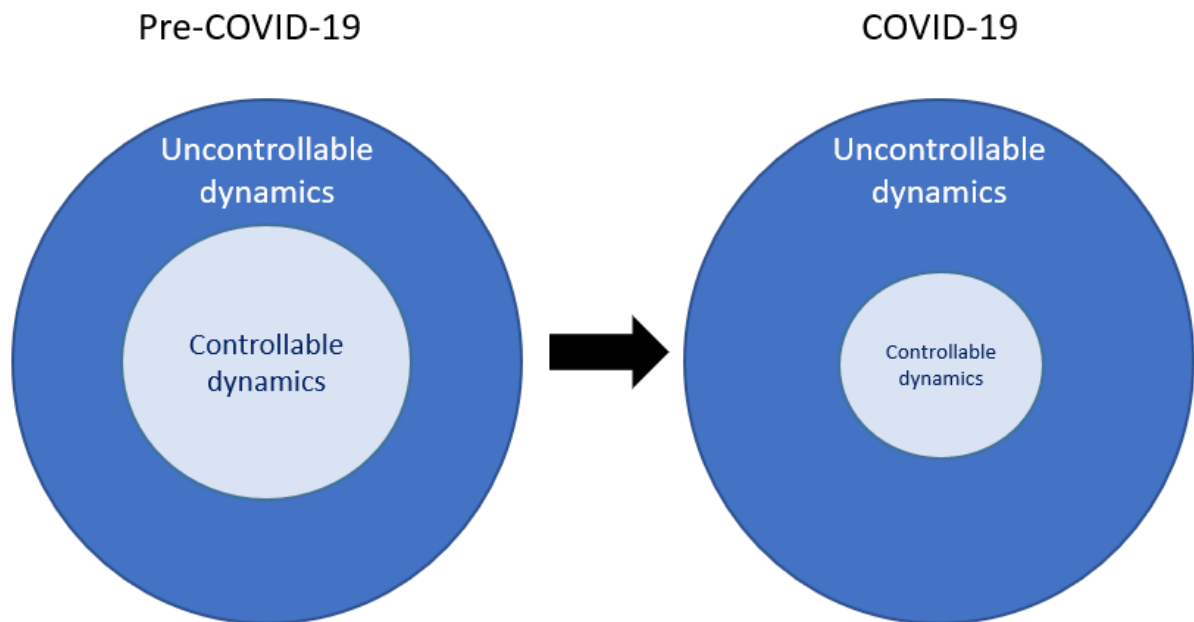
The findings, viewed through the ecological agency theoretical framework, unravel the tensions found in both the in-person and remote learning environments during COVID-19. Before the pandemic, the teachers' schools celebrated their successes, did not add any barriers of note to the participants' classrooms (beside guidelines like curriculum), and gave them agency through leadership committees. The teachers, further, each shared their desire and passion for student learning. The shift to remote learning added many new parameters to instruction that contrasted their history and required changes by the teachers to meet their teaching outcomes. Interestingly, the veteran teachers did not consider resignation at the conclusion of the 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 school years despite all the new constraints from remote learning. Rather, they persevered with the remote constraints because the collective belief was that the barriers would be gone once in-person learning returned and the pandemic concluded. Their prediction was partially correct as some of the problematic barriers, such as blank screens and reduced instructional time, were removed when in-person learning returned. However, one notable barrier remained (the 70-30 policy), and new constraints materialized during the 2021-2022 school year.

The addition of persistent problematic student behaviors and continued infringement upon instruction and assessment undermined the teacher's agency. The constraints felt perpetual and drained the teachers' temporal resources, which hampered opportunities for actions in other vital areas. Tangible feelings such as hopelessness, frustration, and disenfranchisement appeared in the participant's dialogue during the 2021-2022 school year that exclusively had in-person learning.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the environment directly and indirectly captured control from the teachers as demonstrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4.

Controllable and uncontrollable dynamics, pre-COVID-19 to COVID-19



Interpreting the dialogue of the teachers, they understood that the consequences and dynamics caused by state mandates were beyond school district control, which gave them hope that the mandates were not going to be forever. The return to in-person learning shifted the agency back to the districts in many capacities excluding mitigation practices. The teachers did not actively note the mitigation practices as a constraint, rather it was the assessment policies to improve student achievement and problematic student behaviors. These led to a more pronounced loss of agency due to the continued loss of temporal resources or disruption to student learning; both are barriers to their intentions. With the removal of teacher leadership committees at the start of the pandemic, they held minimal power to change institutionalized policies. To renegotiate their individual agency, the teachers repeatedly pleaded to their administration, but the issues remained at an impasse because the administration was unable to resolve the issues.

Interestingly, the teachers went to the administration every time they lost agency throughout the pandemic. In a sense, the teachers knew the capitals that the administration had in maneuvering or eliminating agentic barriers. In the teachers' history, for example, the administrators were the liaison to disrupt barriers. In their perception, administrators used clear disciplinary flowcharts to combat poor behaviors rather than the concept of "grace" (perceived as best practice and reinforced by district and state directives during COVID-19) that materialized during the pandemic. The administration recognized how the grace was problematic, but the school climate had become overwhelmingly problematic for the administration team. The inconsistency frustrated teachers and led to a loss of their agency.

Additionally, the implementation of state and district mandates reduced the agency of the campus administrations to help their teachers. The administrations did act to try to improve emergent campus problems within their control (i.e., shifting disciplinary measures, eliminating

60-minute classes), but prevailing expectations from district leadership and state mandates impeded progress in the other areas. In a sense, they felt helpless to advocate for their teachers as the campus administrators believed their voice had no say in these district- or state-level decisions. Therefore, the campus administration's agency, due to the dependence on district policy, had limited social capital to enable or constrain teacher agency. Teacher agency was consequently lost when repeated iterations of help seeking behavior resulted in failed environmental changes.

This study's findings are similar to other studies about teacher agency because we know that top-down policy and reform and the responses associated with these implementations can lead to constraints in agency (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Tinn & Ümarik, 2021). We, too, are aware that administrators need to be responsive to teachers in combating the constraints against teacher agency, or administrations will have to navigate new issues that result from the lack of teacher agency (Meyer et al., 2022).

Our case study contributes to literature in three novel ways. First, while the lack of agency during remote learning frustrated the teachers, they persevered because they believed it to be temporary despite growing feelings of fatigue and frustration. However, the introduction of unforeseen constraints both within and outside of the district and campus administrators' control, continued to constrain their agency in some capacity after remote learning and led to new or continued feelings of disenfranchisement and fatigue. The constraints upon agency lasted for years. Despite the resilience displayed by veteran teachers throughout their tenure to stay in education, their intrinsic agency withered from the iterations of reform (and failed reform) as demonstrated by teachers' language in their final year of teaching.

Our case study also illustrates how the problematic and persistent student behaviors constrained teacher agency as the teachers lost the opportunity to work with campus administration to resolve the student issues. The administration's inconsistencies (e.g., concept of grace, ineffective results, varying responses to student issues) led to feelings of disenfranchisement without the hope for an alternative to mitigate the behaviors.

Finally, campus administrators are a critical outlet for disrupting teacher's agentic barriers. Campus administrators need agency in transforming problematic structures for teachers, but this must be afforded or allowed at the district level. The lack of administration agency at the campus level can lead to disempowerment for teachers who regularly refer to administrators for help.

Implications and Recommendations

As we move into a post-pandemic world in U.S. schools, the study offers valuable insight into practices that afford teacher agency, and to that end, teacher retention. We are still navigating learning loss, and we need to consider the top-down reform efforts that are occurring since they, inherently, take agency away from local personnel, especially local teachers and administrators. Rather, the use of a bottom-up approach may offer the agency to empower teachers and administration to be agents of productive, contextual change (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015).

Administration shifted leadership styles to meet the multiple needs of different parties during COVID-19 (Brion & Kiral, 2021). This shift was jarring to the study's teachers and resulted in a loss of agency after the new and inconsistent leadership style (i.e., concept of "grace") removed the administration referral as an option for teachers to improve student behavior. Thus, we suggest that administrations need to support their teachers by taking a

transparent, active, and consistent role and approach in supporting student discipline, so teachers can rely on their administrative team to assist in disciplinary endeavors.

As we navigate the learning trajectories of the pandemic (Daniel, 2020), leadership needs to actively support teachers through the inclusion or representation of their voice and break trends of de-professionalization practices (e.g., 70-30 policy) because de-professionalization harms higher-level learning, creativity, flexibility, and breath of learning (Milner, 2013).

Therefore, we recommend that district and state leadership review practices that limit the influence of campus administrators to assist local teachers, and campus administrators create leadership opportunities for teachers to enact their vision of change, revise disciplinary measures with the inclusion of teacher voice, remove school-/ district-level classroom restrictions, and advocate for the removal of systemic classroom restrictions.

Limitations and Future Research

Case studies are useful for generalizing bounded cases, but they are unable to extend their results to larger, unbounded populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, teachers' histories, experiences, aspirations, school context, and location limit the extent of this study.

Future research should explore different teachers (e.g., subject areas, school contexts, environmental capitals, past experiences, future aspirations, etc.) and their support systems to capture how the school environment affords or constrains their agency especially as we emerge from the pandemic. Novel frameworks, perspectives, or approaches are necessary to better understand how and why teachers are leaving the profession.

Conclusion

Teachers encountered several challenges during the pandemic, which led to growing attrition rates and a loss of agency. Our agentic perspective explained several barriers to teacher agency, which disenfranchised our teachers and motivated their resignations. To boost teacher retention and agency, we need to consider these teachers' experiences and expectations and the experiences and responses from local and state institutions as we traverse the new challenges of a post-pandemic world.

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