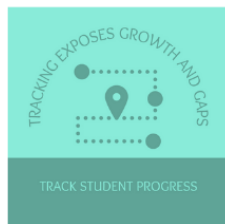


The Sticky Bits!

What we learned from Teaching in the Pandemic

June 2021



A report for Southwest Horizon School Division prepared by Jacqueline Kirk, Ph.D., and Natasha Ofwono

A Message from the Researchers

Jacqueline Kirk, Ph.D., and graduate student, Natasha Ofwono, are researchers who work with Brandon University CARES, a research center, in the Faculty of Education at Brandon University.



"This was a great opportunity for me to talk with teachers who found themselves working on the frontlines in the Covid-19 pandemic. I learned so much about their experiences and I was sincerely thankful for the time that the volunteer participants spent talking with me."

- Jacqueline Kirk, Ph.D.

When the project was first introduced to us, they told me that the school division was interested in finding the "Sticky Bits." I wasn't really sure what they were referring to so I started out by renaming the project. As the work progressed, I became more and more comfortable with thinking about the practices that would stick after the pandemic was over. Eventually, I started calling those practices the "Sticky Bits!" ~Jackie

I am a graduate student in the Educational Administration stream. This project allowed me to participate in all parts of the research process from transcribing to presenting! ~Natasha

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This project developed as a result of a partnership between Southwest Horizon School Division, Brandon University CARES, and Brandon University.



What we learned from teaching during the pandemic...

These are the takeaways, the sticky bits, or the lessons learned that teacher participants described as successful parts of their teaching practice during the pandemic. They hoped to maintain these practices, when they moved back into regular practice at the end of the pandemic.



Teacher Collaboration

During the pandemic, teachers reached out to each other for support and guidance. They got to know their colleagues better and they learned from each other.



Home-School Communication and Support

Especially during remote learning, teachers understood the value of strong home-school relationships. They valued the communication and support that they received from parents and found ways to work together.



Be more concise.

Remote teaching left teachers with a reduction in teaching time and several of the teachers in the study noted that although it was a challenge, they found ways to make instruction brief and effective.



Speak in language that students understand.

In short periods online or on the phone, teachers found that they increased their effectiveness when they focused on making sure that their language was at a level that students easily understood.



Focus Instruction

When working online or group instruction before students needed to disperse to ensure appropriate distancing, teachers noted increased student growth due to shorter more focused instructional sessions.

What we learned from teaching during the pandemic...



Daily feedback provides good information for teachers.

During remote learning, teachers missed the opportunity to gather informal feedback. They turned to tech tools to allow students to self-check and they appreciated the ongoing record of student progress on a daily basis.



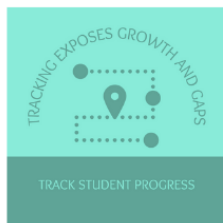
Increase the use of technology for learning.

Teachers found that technology helped them to allow students to be independent in accessing information about their assignments and helped students to have a platform for asking questions and for collaborating.



Make learning materials available for students and families.

Many teachers made materials available through different mediums for students and parents. As a result, they found that students preferred to access materials in different formats and at different times of the day.



Record student progress to show growth and expose challenges.

Many teachers noted that they had become more organized and more focused on recording student progress. As a result, they reported that they had greater awareness of student achievements and struggles.



Face to face, hands-on, and in groups is better!

No matter how much teachers learned about using technology, they shared the joy that they felt in the classroom with their students and they confirmed their commitment to hands-on learning and group work.



Pay attention to the social-emotional wellness of students.

Teachers understood that the pandemic was difficult for their students. They took time to do mental health check-ins and to focus on making sure that their expectations were not overwhelming.

What we learned from teaching during the pandemic...



Teacher mental health needs to be a priority!

The pandemic challenged everyone. Many of the teachers shared that the pandemic had made clear the importance of ensuring personal wellness to build the capacity to help others!

Introduction

When we went remote in spring last year, we just thought there was a lot to be learned from that because it was just such an unprecedented experience. So, the Superintendent thought maybe there would be something we could do to formalize the learning. We were looking for a way to document what teachers had gone through and to capture what they had learned.

~Strategic Initiatives Learning Consultant

In May of 2020, the Superintendent of Southwest Horizon School Division contacted the Director of Brandon University CARES, a research center located in the Faculty of Education, and asked for assistance in collecting and analyzing data regarding online grade groups that the School Division operated in the period of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020.



Southwest Horizon School Division

The central offices of Southwest Horizon School Division are located in the southwestern Manitoba town of Souris. The school division comprises seven 'town' schools and six 'colony' schools. This research included interviews with six teachers, who worked in town schools and two teachers, who worked in colony schools. All eight teachers participated in the online grade groups that were organized by the Strategic Initiatives Coordinator. Although the idea for the research emerged in May of 2020, by June it was apparent that teachers were exhausted from their experiences so data collection was suspended until fall. At the time, we

anticipated that the pandemic would be at bay by September and life in school would have snapped back to some sort of normal. As fall start-up drew nearer, it was clear that the 2020-2021 school year would not look like any other. Yet, it was impossible to predict how much the pandemic would affect education.

Eventually, a period of remote learning in January provided an opportunity to make connections with teachers and to get started with the interviews for this project. In total 8 teachers plus the Strategic Initiatives Coordinator and the Superintendent were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy, and analyzed using Nvivo software. The analysis was done by two separate researchers who compared and compiled results to ensure fidelity to the teachers' perspectives. Additionally, the researchers analyzed the notes from the online grade groups and the results of a survey of online grade group participants.

The results of the research include teachers' perspectives about teaching during the pandemic - the challenges and the triumphs - as well as a list of the 'sticky bits' or successful teaching practices that they would like to continue using in their classrooms. We have compiled the results into the following report, a video that highlights some of the sticky bits, videos and graphics that could be used for School Division social media posts, and a poster that can be displayed in staff rooms and on public bulletin boards.

The Pandemic in Manitoba

The first probable case of the COVID-19 virus in Manitoba was announced on March 12th, 2020 (CBC News, September 25, 2020). The very next day, the government announced that following the Spring break in the final week of March schools would be placed on one week of remote learning (CBC News, September 25, 2020). Teachers had from March 13th until the beginning of Spring break to prepare their students for a week of learning from home. In some cases, they prepared printed packages of learning resources and assignments to be sent home but in most cases they prepared to meet their students online and hoped that parents would assist with learning support, with encouragement, and with classroom management. On March 23, at the beginning of Spring break the government of Manitoba announced that students would be out of school until the end of the year and that marks would be paused at the point they were at prior to Spring break (CBC News, September 25, 2020). If students wanted to boost their grades, it would be possible but a student's average would not be reduced by challenges faced during remote learning.

At the end of May, the Manitoba government shifted directions slightly and reopened schools so that teachers could work with specific groups of students and complete assessments to prepare for recovery learning in the fall (CBC News, May 21, 2020). However, most students and teachers continued to work remotely throughout the month of June. During the months of June, July, and August schools across Canada prepared to follow the ever changing health restrictions, cleaning protocols, and safety standards to ensure the safe reopening of schools.

Through the summer, COVID-19 case numbers in Manitoba remained low and it felt to many that the fall in school might be manageable. The teachers did not enjoy the period of remote learning and they reported that they were relieved to return to the classroom despite the guidelines for social distancing, the cleaning protocols, and the need to enforce mask wearing. Manitoba made

the decision to open schools and require students, who did not have a personal vulnerability to the virus, or a person in their home who had a vulnerability to the virus, to attend class in person (CBC News, September 25, 2020). Parents could also make the decision to homeschool their children. For those who supplied a medical reason to learn remotely, the school division would take responsibility for providing remote learning. In the case of Southwest Horizon School Division and several school divisions in south western Manitoba, a remote learning consortium was formed and students from all divisions could join together to learn online. Teachers were hired specifically to teach this group of online learners. However, the need to self-isolate each time a student or family member felt symptoms that were indicative of the COVID-19 virus, or each time a student or family member had a possible exposure, meant that classroom teachers often were faced with managing students in the classroom and additional students who were joining the class remotely on a temporary basis. One teacher in the study explained that there was usually at least one student joining remotely and sometimes up to six! The teacher went on to explain the necessity of planning separately for those remote learners.

In the fall, Manitoba experienced a second wave of higher case counts and the government adjusted the health restrictions based on new scientific information regarding the COVID-19 virus. Increased social distancing meant that fewer students fit into each classroom and initiated the need for classes to move to gymnasiums, multi-purpose rooms, and libraries. In some cases, teachers in this study indicated that they were required to teach one class in two rooms at one time. The guidelines allowed them to have a short period for teaching the lesson before part of the class would need to move to a different space. In some cases, an educational assistant supervised in the second classroom but in other cases teachers tried to move between the rooms or tried to meet the needs by communicating with students in the alternate space through Zoom video conferencing. No matter the circumstances, teaching students in two spaces at the same time is not ideal. During the second wave,

the province of Manitoba was moved to the highest level of alert; many citizens were asked to work from home; and most businesses were closed again. Schools remained open except for two weeks of remote learning after the December break. The hope was that new infections spread by holiday gatherings would have time to be identified before students and teachers returned to indoor face to face classes. Eventually, the second wave subsided and the province began the process of reopening again.

In March, epidemiologists predicted a third wave (CBC News, March 15, 2021). Several variants to the original COVID-19 virus were present in Manitoban communities and were being reported each day as “variants of concern.” The number of cases started to climb quickly. During the third wave, the government attempted to close schools based on outbreak locations rather than announcing general school closures as they had during the first two waves of the virus but eventually many schools in Manitoba were placed on remote learning once again.

By June 2021, the third wave was beginning to subside and the number of vaccinations in the province was reaching a critical level. Both on the street and in the media, Manitobans were hopeful that this was the end of critical case counts and the beginning of a return to a level of normalcy where students could learn face to face safely, where businesses could be open, and where we could feel free to move throughout the community and pursue relationships in person rather than online.

Reflecting on teaching experiences during the pandemic several teachers explained that they were always aware of how much was unknown. The guidelines that seemed safe in September needed to be adjusted by November. The belief that youth would not get sick was challenged significantly with many cases during the third wave. And finally, we know that the pandemic has affected teaching and learning, social engagement, and mental health (CBC News, May 17, 2021) but we do not know how long lasting those effects will be or how they will affect students who were already at risk. Teachers in the Southwest Horizon study explained that teaching during the pandemic was

“emergency teaching.” They were making decisions on the fly and changing their practices to comply with health guidelines to keep themselves and their students physically safe even when it conflicted with their beliefs about good teaching.

One participant used a swimming analogy and explained that educators and the school division were working hard to keep each other afloat but no one was swimming.

The moral of the story is everyone is floating along just to keep everyone afloat without getting the opportunity to teach anyone to swim. So we're kind of holding these kids where we can and trying to keep them floating along. But for them to get the actual support they need to do anything is tough. The spring did not prepare me for this year.

No one knew enough about how the future would unfold to be able to make predictions so no one was able to provide the swimming lessons. As the pandemic has progressed, scientists have learned more and more about the formidable virus but for the most part teachers have remained unsure about how to get back to normal while the threat to physical safety for both them and their students remains.

The Findings

Overall, teachers were appreciative of the support that they received from Southwest Horizon School Division. They indicated that they could see how the division was trying to provide support through the online grade groups, through support from the School Division consultants, and support from the School Division technology team. One teacher said, "I think there were efforts made by the division to make things as easy as possible and to help us to feel as supported as possible." Another one confirmed, "For all that we as teachers were being asked to do...[the administration was] also doing that and I would say I have felt incredibly supported. They are asking us to make these changes, but they are also supporting us."

One teacher spoke specifically about the School Division's foresight to offer two professional development sessions (spring and fall) about crisis intervention to help teachers understand and identify when students were struggling with mental wellness.

I do feel very lucky that our division has put importance on providing resources for teachers, on discussing student mental health and on being really encouraging about what sorts of things to look out for in students. We did a couple of PDs about crisis intervention that were really helpful.

In a CBC interview, regarding a study conducted by CBC News, Dr. Todd Cunningham (2021), from the University of Toronto suggested that one need he felt had been identified during the pandemic was for educators to have more training on how to recognize the signs of student mental health needs

One point that emerged as a possible area of concern in the School Division response to the pan-

demie was that several participants suggested that the Division did not seem to understand how difficult the pandemic was for educators. "I found everything about the pandemic at the beginning to be awful. Everything." Although each of the participants explained the steps they had taken to maintain their own balance, address their needs for self-care, and tackle stress, they still felt somewhat misunderstood. The pandemic required changes to teaching practice and an unprecedented investment from teachers during a time when they were worried about the health and safety of their students, themselves, and their loved ones. This led many of them to report that they felt "close to a nervous breakdown", "burned out", or "overwhelmed." Varying requirements for those in different roles exacerbated feelings of anxiety and feelings that they might not be able to cope with the mounting expectations.

Probably the most important part was when my internet cut out at home and I had to come to school to use the internet to connect with my students. The grade six teacher across the hallway, was here because she needed the internet connectivity, too. We have taught together for well over a decade but we didn't really know each other until we were here everyday. Having that collegial support was fantastic! "I just tried this and I'm frustrated with that." "Oh here, I think I can help you!" We've known each other for a lifetime, really. She grew up in the same community. That was a huge one....It made us a stronger team!

-Teacher Participant

The Online Grade Groups

The Strategic Initiatives Coordinator explained the grade groups like this:

During the Spring we organized grade group meetings. We have a lot of small schools and so we had the teachers kind of collaborate across the division with their grade level and talk about what they were doing in their classrooms - what challenges they were facing and what successes they were having.

The Division organized groups for Kindergarten, Grade One and Two, Grade Three and Four, Grade Five and Six, Grade Seven and Eight, and a few different subject groups for High School teachers. Primarily the groups were used to provide a medium for teachers to share experiences and ideas during remote teaching but some of the meetings were more structured and used for sharing information, as well.

When teachers reflected on their experiences in the online grade groups, they shared both positive and negative perspectives. Some teachers deeply appreciated the opportunity to talk to other teachers, “What I did find beneficial from those grade group meetings was just hearing other teacher voices in terms of not feeling so isolated and so alone.” Several of the interviewees confirmed this perspective and described how important it was to have an opportunity to talk to other teachers because, “we were all in the same boat!”

Depending on which grade group the teacher attended, their experience was somewhat different. Some people described how the grade group meetings were supportive and helped them to be more confident moving forward.

I gained confidence because I knew I wasn't the only one....I learned a lot

from them and I also was able to share....when we got on to it, we were our own little family. The first meeting was pretty quiet but once we got comfortable with each other they were pretty neat. It was a highlight of my week—the silver lining in the pandemic cloud!

Other teachers felt overwhelmed with trying to address the needs of their students during this period and felt like the online grade groups were somewhat of a distraction. “I did not actually enjoy my grade group meetings. I often felt that they were a waste of my time. I did initially like logging on to have a little chit chat with people who were logged in.” Still others, like the teachers from the colonies, found that their grade group peers did not have the same needs as they did but they appreciated the support of the group. “As a colony teacher and not having access to the Internet, I didn't find the meetings beneficial from a practice perspective just because a lot of what other teachers were doing, I wasn't able to do.”

For those who found their niche within their grade group meetings, the process worked well.

The grade group meetings with the division were great...for the camaraderie and how we would talk with kindergarten teachers and figure out how to get these kids to still learn their letters and their numbers without being able to be there with them and have all of the tools that we have in our classrooms.

Several teachers noted that they appreciated the intent of the grade group meetings and the notion that the division was organizing a way to connect with teachers and to connect teachers with each other.

Connection with the school Division was important. I was at home but just to know that the organization is still there and it's still stable. And, sharing with other teachers and other schools - without the pandemic that never would have happened. Like the only time we saw each other was when we were at an in service...but [in the grade group meetings] we actually made a connection, which was nice.

The grade group meetings formed a foundation for learning, thinking and sharing that happened between the teachers in Southwest Horizon School Division. Overall, the teachers experienced these online groups as a good way to connect with others that were in the “same boat.”

Spring and Fall

Many teachers in the study reflected that in March when remote learning was implemented, they were unaware of how the pandemic would affect schools, they felt like it would not last long, and they were unsure about how to approach planning. One teacher explained that it was not “distance learning but emergency teaching,” the priority was physical health over academic growth, and there was so much that was unknown. Several teachers shared how concerned they were when not all of their students checked in to the online class or chose not to participate in the dialogue. At school, teachers were familiar with being able to informally keep track of students’ mental wellness and take anecdotal notes about students’ academic progress as they were working on assignments but acquiring this knowledge became more of a challenge in remote learning. In spring teachers had guidelines to follow to establish how much time they should spend online with their classes

but once school started in the fall there were even more unknowns. In fall, teachers experienced a mixture of face to face, distanced, and remote learning. Sometimes they had to plan for all three of those characteristics at one time. The uncertainty increased and they found themselves working even harder to adjust to the shifting environment to meet the learning needs of their students. Teaching during the first period of remote learning in the spring of 2020 felt like a response to a crisis but by fall teachers' experiences suggested that it had turned into more of a grind. To illustrate the differences and to show how teachers had identified different lessons from the two periods of time, the findings are divided into spring and fall. Within each of those sections, there is an annotated list of themes that emerged from the transcripts of the interviews.

Spring

One teacher described teaching in the spring as a “massive energy sucking experience” and went on to explain that even though fewer than 50% of students were attending class on a daily basis, it felt like teachers were working harder than ever before. There was a hope that Manitoba’s relative isolation and small population would keep people in rural Manitoba communities safe from the virus. At the same time the news media was sharing stories of how countries like Italy were being ravaged by the virus and stories about how cases were creeping into the province and increasing the likelihood that it would affect people within the school division. As a result, the period of time from March to June 2020 was characterized by uncertainty and even fear. “So much was unknown.”

When the provincial government announced that remote learning would continue to the end of June, they published a document entitled, “Response Planning for Kindergarten to Grade 12

(K–12) Learning During COVID-19 Suspension of Classes” (Manitoba Education, 2020). It established a guideline that would be used across the province to ensure common experiences for students in the public school system. Within the data in this study, it was clear that teachers' experiences in South-west Horizon School Division were affected by the details of the provincial plan. The document included the following statements among others:

- No student will be held back due to the pandemic. Students on track to graduate will graduate.
- Students are expected to continue remote learning and complete assigned work.
- Teachers will continue to direct learning and will continue to work a full school day each day.
- Teachers will facilitate at-home learning to support students with online platforms, printed materials, and outreach for students who are at risk.
- Beyond delivering daily instructional materials and preparing for assessments, teachers will have regular, personal communication with students, parents, caregivers, and other partners in support of student achievement. This connection will occur by phone, online platforms, and email, as well as by mail for those without phones and computers.
- Teachers will use their professional judgment to determine the appropriate amount of learning time and the format of student assessments.
- Teachers will continue to set goals for students and assess progress.
- All students will receive final grades and a

report card in June.

- Students in K–Grade 8 will proceed to the next grade in September.
- Teacher-directed learning will focus on literacy and numeracy, with opportunities for science and social studies, physical education and health education, and the arts through cross-curricular planning.
- Teachers will plan a minimum average of five hours per week of curriculum-based learning for students in K–Grade 4, and 10 hours per week for students in Grades 5–8.
- Grades 9–12 teachers should plan for a minimum of three hours of curriculum-based learning per course per week for semestered courses.
- Students in Grades 9–12 will receive, at minimum, the grades they achieved at the time of suspension of classes, but they will be required to engage in remote learning. Students will have the opportunity to increase marks.
- Teachers will make special efforts for Grades 11 and 12 students to ensure they have the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for their post-graduation goals.

(Manitoba Education, 2021)

While there was an intent to balance time online for students, the document was clear to outline that teachers should invest a full workday each day and try to maintain the status quo within their courses as much as possible. One participant reflected on those expectations this way: “I felt like we were being told you have less to cover - just the core outcomes - but you still need to do assessments. You still need to do this, but you're only

allowed three hours a week.” Most teachers in the study shared a similar experience that they were expected to focus on essential outcomes but maintain the status quo, to set goals and assess progress but ensure success for all learners, and to continue whole group and individual student communication but reduce student contact time. Some participants felt like this was mixed messaging and all participants indicated that spring teaching increased their anxiety and decreased their self-efficacy. The following points outline some of the common understandings that emerged from an analysis of the data in this study:

Marks

High school teachers in the study indicated that they found it very difficult to ensure a high level of participation without the use of marks as an external reward and/or punishment. While the provincial document (Manitoba Education, 2021) was clear that students were required to participate, teachers no longer could use marks as a way to ensure student compliance. One teacher described it as feeling like the government had “cut teachers off at the knees” and explained how removing teachers’ autonomy to evaluate student work as it was completed took away both “the carrot and the stick.” While most teachers understood that ensuring success was a way to protect students from being adversely affected by remote learning, high school teachers especially felt that this part of the provincial directive made it difficult for teachers to have influence over student participation and engagement.

Reduced Expectations

The government guidelines outlined suggestions for how much time students and teachers should spend online in class (Tartavulea, et al., 2020). To mitigate the concern that teachers would overload

students and families with too much time online, the government spelled out appropriate numbers of hours for grades K-4, 5-8, and 9-12. In Southwest Horizon School Division teachers in the online grade groups talked through essential outcomes and possible extensions of learning or as one teacher described it the “must-dos and the could-dos.” Teachers described how they focused on managing their expectations so as not to overwhelm students. One teacher described how they tried to compare remote learning expectations to their regular classroom expectations: “...one or two posts a day is usually what I do in the classroom, but if you think on a weekly basis there's ten and then you think on a monthly basis and that's 40 and that's minimal. And I just felt like it was such an information overload.” Additionally, teachers considered whether their communication was overwhelming for families. One teacher described the possible experience of a parent with more than one child.

I am getting two emails a day from each teacher...but I have three kids at school and my junior high kids have five teachers. That is overwhelming for parents. So then, ok, [teachers] are not just looking after the kids, we are looking after families too.

Teachers understood how important it was to make sure that their communications and expectations did not overwhelm their students or their students' families (see Tartavulea, et al., 2020). As a result, the School Division suggested a guideline for an acceptable number of emails and teachers collaborated with colleagues in their school to ensure that the number of emails sent out to families did not become overwhelming.

Many of the teachers in the study shared different strategies that they used to reduce expectations to

ensure that students could learn independently and to ensure that students could successfully complete the assignments. One teacher explained the need to allow families to have some flexibility:

So it was no longer okay to say, I need to see home reading five out of seven days which has been my standard schtick. [I told them,] you need to do what keeps your family healthy. Just giving parents permission...to just do what they could handle— because they were stressed.

Thus, teachers' reduced their expectations to meet the guidelines distributed by the province (see Manitoba Education, 2021), the suggestions made by the school division, and the needs of their students and families .

Motivation and Engagement

As teachers and students maintained distance quite literally during the pandemic, many students were unable to cope with the imposed narrative of online classes. Teachers struggled to actively draw out participation to assess whether, or if, the students were learning at all. During an interview one teacher said, "I faced [low] student motivation. [Motivation to] show up in class, be engaged, ask questions, or do the work and submit it. I taught 60 students [and in] some classes it looked like 50 percent or more were logged in, but I guarantee you that probably only 10 percent were paying attention or actually taking it seriously."

It seemed many students were unable to stay engaged in light of the facet of new technology as an added hindrance in remote learning. Some teachers tried to reach out to those students that seemed to disconnect as lessons continued remotely. One teacher reflected on why that would happen in their class, "For some of my younger kids, the struggle wasn't necessarily about the

mark. It was the motivation to do the work. I teach math, primarily. That is not an easy subject for most students. It's hard for [students] sometimes to understand the concepts [doing it] over Zoom."

Mental Health Concerns

When asked about the biggest challenge of the period from March to June 2020, one teacher participant responded, "I think the biggest challenge was the mental health challenge. A few students just ended up dropping school and focusing on other things because at that point, school was optional." Results from a survey conducted by CBC News indicated that of the 1000 plus respondents (873 teachers), 92% felt that the pandemic would have a psychological effect on some students (CBC News Manitoba, May 17, 2021). Southwest Horizon School Division teachers in this study confirmed those findings. Many of the participants noted concerns for the mental health of their students, their colleagues, and themselves (Santamaria, et al., 2021). When addressing the mental health concerns for their students the participants mentioned several strategies they were using to support students. Five of the eight participants explained that they believed it was important to maintain a sense of predictable routines whether they were in the classroom, learning remotely, or practicing some type of blended learning. For one teacher routine started off with a morning meeting every day at 9 am.

We had our morning meeting every single day at 9:00 am. That was our time....We had a different topic every single morning. Everyone had the chance to talk about it. There was a lot that came with that one morning meeting that kind of piqued everyone's interest.

Another teacher explained that their English Language Arts classes usually begin with silent read-

ing. “I was able to continue a lot of the general practices like our silent reading and journal problems and those kinds of things.” A third teacher explained that they tried to keep the expectations in their classes the same when they moved to remote learning.

I still pretty much tried to teach my lessons the same. I do notes in math, as well, because I think they need to read it, hear it, see it, and then do it. So, I still tried to catch all those senses.

Continuing well established routines was one strategy that teachers used to build predictability in this uncertain time.



Someone in my class said we should have a fort building contest. So we did. They built their forts all week and on Friday we showed each other our forts. So many things came from that morning meeting just because they were still part of their classroom community. They still felt like they belonged together.

~Teacher Participant



One teacher, who became concerned for the “social-emotional wellbeing” of the students, focused on finding ways to build community and to help students find a sense of belonging with their peers online (see also, Santamaria, et al., 2021). This teacher explained that students were often attending class for the social connections. “They weren’t waking up to talk about word problems, they were waking up to talk about what’s going on [with the pandemic] or what we could do in the future.” Another teacher explained a routine of checking in with students to make sure that they

were ok.

Remote learning definitely emphasized the need for checking in with kids and their mental health. I think that was a huge thing. Although I had checked in with kids in the past, I had never made it a priority to do the whole class....[during remote learning,] I put it out to the whole class and sometimes it would bring up things that I didn’t expect.

Teachers understood that their students were struggling with mental wellness, as well, and used different tools to address their students’ mental health needs (Fawaz & Samaha, 2020; Santamaria, et al., 2021).

For many teachers, the emotional weight of the pandemic came as a bit of a surprise. One teacher who confessed that “initially, I had no wellness” explained that “it took a while to realize how stressed I was.” Most of the interview participants shared a reflection on how they found teaching during the pandemic to be somewhat overwhelming.

And my work life balance just kind of went down the tube and I realized that it was OK to set the boundary of I-still-need-time-to-be-without-my-teacher-hat and just to be, you know, a wife and a friend and a daughter and do the things that are also important in my life.

Or,

I think the other thing was just trying to remember that I’m not a bad teacher because of what’s happening. I think that really weighed on a lot of teachers. Students aren’t learning as well as they were before, they’re not getting this like they used to and I think that took a toll on a lot of teachers.

Many teachers shared that strategies that they had formerly depended on to reduce stress, like massage or workouts in gyms, were off limits within the provincial health restrictions. “My biggest struggle from a wellness perspective has been the closure of fitness facilities and I've realized more on a personal level how important that aspect is in my life for maintaining my mental sanity in the face of all of this.” Teachers shared that they found ways to work out at home, spent time with partners and families, added new pets, indulged in food and drinks, and purposely scheduled time for themselves. One teacher shared:

For the first time in my life, I actually reached out to counseling services just to help manage. The counsellor helped me with some of the stress and things that were going on and helped me to find tools to deal with those sorts of things.

Individuals had different experiences but they all shared the need to be purposeful about measures they were taking for self-care and stress reduction. They recognized signs of stress and sought strategies for addressing the issues (Liu, 2020; Stringer & Hourani, 2013).

Attendance

As teaching took to remote learning, the numbers of students attending class reduced considerably. Prior to school closures, the classroom was a structure that articulated learning without other commitments or barriers. However with remote learning as the new norm, it became apparent that students had, for example, responsibilities that kept them away. And so teachers found that they had to plan around those barriers.

I sort of timetabled it. I worked with the parents [on] what would be better. Of course being a farm commu-

nity once seeding started then it became important to get it done in the morning...because in the afternoon [they were] out in the field...I tried to figure out a way that we could make it work.

Similarly, another teacher explained how students, some in junior high, took on childcare responsibilities when their parents were away at work,

I probably [had] a few [students], not initially, but later [that] babysat or [had] other childcare responsibilities [some] not even [for] their own family. Babysitting for the neighbor because the [they] needed to go to work and their kids [were] now at home.

But it seems that even when they were not taking on the roles to support the household a number of students were still absent from class. One teacher observed, “It was hard to keep everybody engaged so my attendance was low, like fifty percent at best....not even that on some days.”

Learning New Technology

When teachers were asked to teach remotely, they experienced a significant shift in the amount of technology they were using on a daily basis (Noor, et al., 2020). For many, they had to learn how to use Zoom or Google Hangouts to meet with their students online. Additionally, teachers used Google Classroom to organize online learning materials for their classes, to post assignments, and to share resources. Some teachers reported that recent experiences taking university classes by distance had added to their repertoire of technology tools and helped them to adapt more easily. They explained that teaching Math and English Language Arts (ELA) online included very different challenges but both were challenging (Pryal, 2020; Noor, et al., 2020). For ELA teachers, in the class-

room they had relied on deeply engaging discussion prompted by reading and writing activities that served as the provocation for engagement and motivation. “I do a lot of talk in my classroom and conversations and those kinds of things. And often that wasn't as strong when it was over the computer. And they didn't engage as much.” Online, students were hesitant to speak, felt uncomfortable with their cameras turned on, and often appeared to be disengaged. “If the kids don't have their cameras on, you have no idea whether they're paying attention.” As a result, discussion activities did not work as well as they had in a face to face environment.



So, I did have a student that wasn't comfortable with zoom. He didn't like to be on it and especially didn't like to be seen on it. Through emailing and talking with his parents, he agreed to just Zoom one on one with me - no cameras, Then we eventually worked our way into it....He was a very strong student so I wasn't really worried about the academics but I just felt he needed the visual component—not knowing how long it was gonna last—more for his mental health and wellness. At the morning meeting just because they were still part of their classroom community, they still felt like they belonged together. - Teacher Participant



For Mathematics teachers, who relied on their ability to illustrate complicated problems using a whiteboard in the classroom, they needed to learn how to use an alternative medium online. Some used an iPad to act as the whiteboard. “I had to learn how to use an iPad hooked up to my comput-

er as a whiteboard....It was much slower than teaching in class because there's always a delay.” Others employed the use of a document camera. One teacher, when asked to talk about something that needed to be reinvented to teach online replied,

Yes, how to teach angles on Google Classroom! I guess there is a way that you can actually draw and manipulate different programs. We made it through with a lot of whiteboard work. Moving forward that was one of my goals - How do you set up interactive programs on a computer so the kids can manipulate for geometry and stuff?

Many participants shared the experiences they had accessing support from the School Division Technology Team.

Our tech person was very helpful to me. He always has been. I know I had a meltdown at some point because I didn't have the files I needed because, of course, they were at school on my computer! He uploaded them or he started an upload to OneDrive, which I had never used....He would remotely calm me down. And I'm like, “I don't know how many people you are doing this for but thank God you are my direct line of support.” I think our division, as far as technology goes, had a lot of support.

All of the teachers in the study shared that they also accessed support from their colleagues and one or two reported that they had used their own technical skills to support other educators. The teachers shared examples of how they had used Kahoot, Google Forms, Pear Deck, Flipgrid, and Jamboard among other tools to enhance classroom assessment and to spur greater engagement.

Teachers in the study reported that they struggled with the reduction in non-verbal feedback they were able to gather from students when teaching online. Students did not want to turn their cameras on and when they did they sometimes put tape over the lens to obscure their faces.

I've got kids that will put tape over their camera for privacy reasons so I can kind of see a fuzzy outline. So I guess after my spring experience I felt more embolden to say that is not acceptable you need to be present.

In the face-to-face classroom, teachers were accustomed to a wide variety of information that they could use to assess whether students were understanding the lesson, whether they were engaged, and whether they were on track.

When you're in the classroom, you can really read a kid's body language or facial expressions as to whether or not they're getting it. It's a heck of a lot harder to do that through a computer screen! And, I was having a hard time knowing when kids, who wouldn't necessarily speak up, needed some extra support. Whereas if I'm in the room with them, it's a lot easier to kind of feel that or feel that out.

This challenge in being able to informally assess how students were progressing pushed teachers to use more formal assessment like exit slips, hand-in assignments, and online tools that were set up for students to self-evaluate but that also provided information for teachers about student understandings (Lee, et al., 2021).

I had to find tools that gave them instant feedback and established the accountability. So for reading, there's a Google form or something they can fill out afterwards, whether it be multiple choice or short an-

swer. I had to find as many things that kids could do to get feedback and feel involved. That way I tried to replicate those conversations we would have in the classroom when I was walking around.

Teachers learn to use a wide variety of tech-tools during remote learning that assisted students to be engaged and independent (Noor, et al., 2020).

Although some of the teachers in the study reported that students in their classrooms had access to devices and online connections, some explained that there were still issues with connectivity, with many siblings sharing devices and/or Wi-Fi, and with knowledge about how to use the technology (Noor, et al., 2020). One teacher shared, "I had a lot of rural kids who had very poor internet connectivity, and it was a very windy spring and the winds made it worse." Another teacher was concerned about the inequity that developed with a lack of connectivity.

Probably one of our biggest challenges was connectivity with students. We have some students where internet is not reliable at home or non-existent, even in this day and age. There are some parts of Manitoba that are not served by internet. So, how do you stay connected when everything else is moving online? We are zooming and they can see what I am doing with my document camera, but not everybody can. Well, that presents inequity. So that's a hard one to manage for teachers.

Despite the challenges with technology teachers persevered in utilizing online platforms and a variety of technical tools to support remote learning (Aday & Maeots, 2021).

Changing Pedagogy for Remote

The participants in the study confirmed that they needed to adjust their pedagogical practices when they switched to remote learning (Aday & Maeots, 2021; Noor, et al., 2020). For example, one of the teachers explained that to make learning more independent and more accessible, they adjusted an activity that would normally be taught the following year rather than choosing something that would require more discussion in the online format.

I actually took something that [my students] normally do in grade 12 and put it in grade 11. And so I just kind of moved things around to make them easier to access and more engaging. So the [activity] that I'm thinking of, that grade eleven [activity] was...the podcast, "Serial."

Another teacher shared that it was difficult to get students to the same level of discussion and understanding with online learning (Aday & Maeots, 2021).

So with my grade sevens I did a novel. I would never do a novel that way if they were sitting in my classroom. We would have much more conversation. There would be much more dialogue and there would be all those sticky parts or the good parts of the novel.

This teacher went on to explain that this more traditional method led to lower levels of engagement and a flatter response from students. Usually, "Some kids [say] that and some kids [say] this, [but] those conversations didn't happen....If [you] take a novel and it's a rainbow of color, doing it online in April, was like black and white." Although learning continued online, teachers found that they needed to make adjustments to work within

the limitations of the medium (Aday & Maeots, 2021; Noor, et al., 2020).

Changing Relationships with Parents and Caregivers

When schools closed and students were sent home to learn online, the role of parents in education shifted dramatically (Stringer & Hourani, 2013). They became part of the classroom process. After explaining the self-discipline that was required to teach students in an online environment, one teacher shared this:

I would also say that we have had amazing support from parents. I know I talked earlier about anxiety and about how overwhelmed some families were. It is also true that we've had amazing support from families.

Teachers worried about how much communication with parents was appropriate. They understood that parents were overwhelmed with their added responsibilities for classroom support and were concerned that they needed to strike a healthy balance in communication (Stringer & Hourani, 2013).

Communication - so the sharing with parents - How often do we want to share with them? How much is too much? How much is not enough? And what's your mode of sharing? I'm an email person. I have a kind of group made within my email, so I did it that way.

Overall the data in this study illustrated the important role that parents played during remote learning.

What I found was that home-school relationships became the most important indicator for student success. And honestly, I do not know what we would have done without

parent cooperation...It's been a very challenging task to maintain the importance of school and the drive to complete school work.

Parents played a vital role in remote learning during school closures (see Manitoba Education, 2021). Through joint collaborations, parents took on an important role in their children's learning as teachers facilitated classroom learning from a remote location. This was especially important so that students were constantly motivated and engaged. Needless to say, it became apparent over time that parents also needed support. One teacher noticed, "It was a team effort and the students that toughed it out until the end [succeeded largely] as a result of that group effort with parents."

Fall

Decisions about fall start-up in schools needed to be made while there were still many unknowns about the virus. Although the provincial government followed the information that was available, new information necessitated shifting guidelines (see Manitoba Education, 2021). One participant explained that it took time to adjust to the required protocols:

The adjustment took a while and then as soon as we got adjusted, the government would come out and change the goal posts and the period of adjustment seemed to be happening over and over again.

The participants agreed that the responsibility for overseeing compliance with the protocols for distancing, for cleaning, and for masking felt like a heavy weight in their fall teaching experiences:

Another big thing when it came to fall/winter is we have these different tasks just because of protocols

for cleaning desks, electronics, making sure the groups are only at the lockers for a certain time. All that extra stuff, the managing of time and students became a whole big thing and all of a sudden we were out there for every single duty. It's just different.

Another teacher explained the detailed planning that went into making sure that the protocols were followed precisely.

I think the first month of school for most teachers probably looked exponentially different than any other year they'd ever had. You're not just talking about classroom routines, now. Now you're talking about routines for how we enter the school and routines for how we hang up our stuff and routines for how we put our masks on. And when we change our masks, and when we're not allowed to wear them, and when we have to wear them, and when we can take them off.

One teacher described how the protocols became another classroom management task.

When I came into the room, they understood I was part of a different cohort. So they always wore their masks with me. But it was often a struggle and not proper use. So below the chin or below the nose.

When teachers accepted responsibility for maintaining the protocols, they understood that the level of integrity with which the rules were followed was directly related to the strength of the barrier that they formed against the virus (Delgado-Gallegos, et al., 2021). Still it was hard to struggle with students who were not complying with the same protocols outside of school (Kirk & Lam, 2020).

In fall, teachers were also tasked with recovery learning for students who struggled with remote learning or who had not engaged in or attended the online classes. Many teachers in the study shared their concerns about the effect that the pandemic had on student achievement.

The students who did not engage in the spring “are just more behind. The world doesn't stop. They are still asking us to do assessments.... They are still moving forward. [Everyone] was saying, “Oh, the kids are fine, they'll be fine.” They are not fine....everybody needs a kid with a skill. If you haven't done anything for six months, this is going to be a challenge. In the big picture it's probably a small blip but in a school year or a couple of school years, it's definitely noticeable.

The pressure of trying to help students catch up to where they would have been if they had not been subjected to pandemic style learning, left teachers feeling anxious (Delgado-Gallegos, et al., 2021; Lee, et al., 2021; Pryal, 2020) .

I think coming back in the fall, worrying about the gap in learning because of remote teaching in the spring and worrying about catching them up rather than just saying, “No, I've got to start wherever they are at.”...and I think teachers put greater than usual expectations on themselves to sort of have students at the same level by [a certain time] but it was sort of a moving bar.

Fall weighed heavily on the teaching staff. They were tasked with the responsibility to keep everyone safe by ensuring that students complied with the protocols. They were expected to ensure that students would succeed and were required to make up for lost learning time. They developed systems and rules to respond to the health re-

strictions only to find out that the rules were changed just when there students were starting to adjust. Additionally, teachers, like other front-line workers, carried the weight of being required to interact with individuals from a number of different households in the middle of a pandemic. One participant shared that between their teaching spouse and themselves they were in contact with 110 households on a daily basis. “We counted. Mine was less. On some days, I had 40 or more contacts and on every day my spouse had over 70.” This same person went on to explain that the number of contacts that they shared at work meant they were unable to visit with their families and that was really hard. The combination of these factors left teachers feeling anxious and overwhelmed (Delgado-Gallegos, et al., 2021). Spring was hard but fall had even larger challenges.

Teaching on the Colonies

The colony teachers seemed to have very different experiences teaching during the pandemic and it is important to consider how that diverse context affected the roles of educators. Several factors affected how colony teachers experienced teaching during the pandemic: First, students and teachers working in colony schools did not have the same access to technology.

We couldn't change the rules and regulations that have been set out, so we all just adapted together, I think, even in the spring. So when I was teaching remotely in the spring, it was even different than it was in September for us. In the spring, we didn't have zoom conferences. There were no supervisors. So my principal and I actually would go to the school every two weeks and give out like packages of work for the students. And we would do guided reading over the phone. So the guided read-

ing in itself was a huge challenge. Just trying to speak to kids over the phone is hard. Sometimes when you think about little five year olds, six year olds on the phone trying to read is, it's a challenge.

Second, at some points in the year, some colonies opened schools, and the German teachers, who were community members, supervised while the teacher from the School Division offered whole group instruction online via Zoom.

So the first week we did home packages so that the community could get things together and then we went to in school but remote over Zoom and so once we were there, not a lot of things changed. I really relied on Google Classroom for giving assignments. We were lucky that we had the support of the German teachers. They were assisting where and when they could and the nice thing about that was if we needed something printed, they were able to do that for us. We were also able to maintain having one of our educational assistants so that they could meet individually with some of our higher needs students on a one to one basis. And so we were really lucky to have that...

Third, different philosophies and beliefs about the pandemic led to disputes about cleaning and compliance with public health restrictions on some colonies resulting in a sharp increase in the number of weeks of remote teaching undertaken by colony teachers compared to other teachers in the School Division. "Public health made the decision to keep the community and school closed for a while....We were kept out until January, and then we were back for one day." Eventually, once teachers were allowed to resume face to face teaching, they found that that disagreements had eroded some of their relationships with students and families.

These are the Sticky Bits!

After sifting through the data that was collected from the interviews and reflecting deeply in an attempt to understand teachers' experiences during the pandemic, several ideas have emerged that teachers in the study considered important. These are the take-aways – the sticky bits. These are the lessons learned that teachers hoped could be packaged up and taken along to a time after the pandemic. These are the things that teaching during the pandemic made clear and that teachers hoped not to forget.

Increased Collaboration

With students at home and so much that was unknown about the virus, teachers in Southwest Horizon School Division sought connection with their colleagues. Through the online grade groups, through collaborations with other teachers in their schools, on social media, and usually online, teachers reached out to each other for support during the pandemic. Every teacher that was interviewed spoke of the value of collegial support.

Sometimes you hear through the grapevine of something a teacher's done and you think, "Why didn't I think of that?" But, you know, if we're communicating with one another, we could maybe bring the level up...right across the division.

They articulated the value of working together but also understood the importance of the human connection that emerged from informal conversations that took place while they were getting things done.

It's those informal conversations, I think. That's the collegial sup-

port....You needed to talk about this stuff and you needed to get answers. We just realized that it's a lot easier when more people are involved.

Their experiences in the pandemic pushed teachers to realize how important it is to be connected to other teachers. The participants shared stories of other critical connections, as well, but they found grounding when they communicated with other educators and realized that they “were all in the same boat.”

Increased Communication and Support between Home and School

The shift to remote learning, necessitated more communication with parents and care givers and required them to take a more active role in the education of their children (Stringer & Hourani, 2013). Not only did teachers appreciate the support but they came to understand how valuable those connections were for their students. “I found that the more I was connected with the families, the better it was.” One teacher explained,

I think having that open line of communication is vital for all teachers.... [However,] I found myself at first, being available to parents and students all the time. [Teachers need] to put some protocols in place for themselves when they're starting a new year to really set the right boundaries with parents.

This teacher explained both the importance of communication and the importance of mutual respect. Planning protocols for increased communication between parents and teachers would be valuable for everyone.

Changes to Instructional Practices

When forced to constrict a week of instruction to a few hours in a Zoom room or a 15 minute phone call, teachers needed to ensure that their lessons were concise and delivered in language that students could understand.

It was important that they understood the language because they were getting written instructions. And it really forced me to confront the language that I was using simply because I tend to use more elevated language - words that they maybe have never encountered before.

Most teachers that participated in the interviews found that they were forced to confront the number of words they were using. This teacher, although self-deprecating, described effectively how it felt to reach that understanding.

I realized how much I ramble. I'm a talker, I'm introverted, but I'm a talker. I couldn't believe how much I rambled. I had to learn how to shut up, to say what I needed to say.

Interestingly, when they started to use more concise language that was easily understood by students, teachers realized that students had better understanding and were able to move forward independently. When students gained more independence, teachers started to see value in the short, focused lessons (see Thomas, 2010).

I think it kind of brings me back to that point about trying to catch them up versus just taking them from where they're at and just seeing how far we can get them. In the beginning of the school year, when we were able to go back into the classroom, I tried to keep a lot of the same routines that I had before, be-

fore we had left in March. And I realized very quickly that it wasn't going to work. So now I've restructured a lot of things to try and maximize the information that I give to the students, not overload them, and they're thriving with that.

One teacher explained the value of more focused instruction with students,

When we were in remote learning it was like, 'We have 20 minutes. We gotta get down to business.' I should try and incorporate into my classroom that hardcore focus for 20 minutes. It allowed me to say, 'OK this is what we need to work on.'

Overall, the teachers agreed that there was value in being focused and concise (see Hughes, et al., 2016). "My routines and expectations evolved because I wanted to make sure I was as concise as possible....Time is precious." Although it was difficult to constrict the important concepts in their curricula to a very short window of time, they learned that there was value in concise language and focused instruction.

Changes to Assessment Practices

When we got to the final question of the interview and started to talk about what teachers had learned from their experiences during the pandemic, many of the participants mentioned that they had reflected on and changed their assessment practices. Yet, in that final question very few of them expanded to describe what they had encountered or what they had changed about their assessments as a result of the pandemic. When we revisited the data one more time to search specifically for more information about assessment, this is what we found: During remote learning, teachers found it hard to maintain the informal classroom assessment that they usually did by "walking

around” their face to face classrooms, by interacting with students, and by “reading facial expressions and body language.” Online, they were frustrated with the lack of information that was available to make decisions about student learning and next-step-planning. As a result, they found tech tools that would provide immediate, more formal feedback for them and that would act as an accountability tool for their students. “I had to find stuff that gave them instant feedback and kind of established the accountability.” It worked for two reasons: 1. For students, it provided an opportunity for self-checking that made them accountable and it fed their motivation, 2. For teachers, it provided information and tangible records of student progress. Teachers reported that they were more aware of how students were doing. “My assessment tools have changed....My record keeping is a lot more focused and organized than what it ever used to be.”

Ubiquitous Learning Opportunities

Teachers in the study shared how they were using technology to make learning much more accessible than it had been in the past. The pandemic forced the adoption of multiple technological tools (Adoy & Maeots, 2021; Tartavulea, et al., 2020). Teachers realized how these tools helped with assessment, helped with sharing resources, and even made personal instruction more easily accessible (Tartavulea, et al., 2020). This teacher spoke passionately about the value of using technology to provide one on one instruction on a need-to-know basis.

I say to the kids, ‘Well, snap me.’ So, I have a lot of my older kids. They’ll snap me a math question and text it to me and say, I’m having trouble with this. It’s so easy. I’ll do it on paper, take a picture of it, and send it back.

I think that many of us have embraced the, ‘I can help you right now. Do you know how to hook up with Zoom? Let’s do a face to face!’

Another teacher shared knowledge of making resources more accessible by putting them in digital format.

I found that I started to digitize as many resources as possible. And it’s been invaluable because I basically have everything at my fingertips now. But then I realized very, very quickly that PDFs, for example, are not user friendly. So as much as I want to digitize something, I had to make them student friendly.

One teacher made an effort to record lessons so that students could go back to replay the lesson or could watch the recording on days when they were missing from class.

I’m just recording the lesson for you to view at a later date. I’m still going to do the lesson in class when you show up.

Making components of lessons available online opens up other possibilities (Tartavulea, et al., 2020). Students and parents have free access to materials to support student work outside of class, and perhaps, in some circumstances there are opportunities for even more independent learning like in this example.

I’ve kind of kept some of the online components front and center. I’ve moved a second course to Google classroom, which has allowed kids to work at home. Some of them now take a different class during my class time. It’s online. ‘You need help? Come see me on Zoom!’

Another teacher reflected on how the accessibility

to information led to greater student independence. “The independence they developed doing remote, I've tried to continue on with that and to help it grow especially at grade five/six level. Taking a little more responsibility for their education is something that I try and encourage.” Most of the teachers in the study found value in using technological tools to make education more accessible and students more independent.

More Attention to Student Social-Emotional Wellness

In addition to understanding that the pandemic was emotionally challenging for some students, teachers worried about the lasting effects of pandemic education and mental health (Delgado-Gallegos, et al., 2021; Tartavulea, et al., 2020). After a description of fear about how the pandemic was affecting teachers' abilities to meet the needs of students, one teacher revealed that their underlying concern was for student wellness. “But at the end of the day. I want to see them have successes because they internalize their failures, as well.” Most teachers in the study referred to some aspect of student wellness and shared their worries about how their students were coping with the pandemic from an academic perspective but also from a social-emotional and mental wellness perspective.

I've become softer when it comes to social-emotional. I just felt for students and I felt like it was a very trying time and I was very fortunate to still be working and be a teacher. And I didn't know of what their situations were one hundred percent of the time. So, I became softer and it's one of those things that I think will not go away. I think I will become even more engaged with the social emotional piece.

The pandemic has exposed our humanity and


made us more aware of the social-emotional needs of those around us. For teachers, who are in a care-taking role with their students, this knowledge has helped them to identify the importance of “checking in on the kids' mental health and engagement” to ensure that students are finding the support that they need to cope with the challenges in their lives.

Balance

Teaching during the pandemic was an “overwhelming” experience for many teachers (Aday & Maeots, 2021; Delgado-Gallegos, et al., 2021). In the spring, they were asked to make a fast pivot and move their classrooms online, to reduce their contact time with students, to increase their communication with parents, to change their pedagogy, to reconsider the outcomes, and to engage students, who were often absent from class. In fall, they faced the responsibility of managing health protocols in a face to face classroom with the knowledge that the virus could threaten the well-being of their students, themselves, and their loved ones. Additionally, they were tasked with recovery learning and felt the pressure of trying to close the gap that was left as a result of remote learning and missed classes in the spring. Moreover, health protocols required that they needed to accomplish that feat without the use of many face to face strategies that teachers had utilized successfully in the past and sometimes when their students were spread across two rooms in the school. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has presented difficult circumstances for teachers (Aday & Maeots, 2021).

In times of challenge, we find stories of strength and resilience and the stories shared by the teachers in this study definitely illustrated those characteristics. Teachers in this study indicated that they needed to learn to create “boundaries” and need-

ed to invest in “self-care routines”. They “cemented” the routine of a regular massage and sought opportunities for “exercise” because they “realized that exercise was about more than just being physically fit, but also about being mentally fit.” They turned off their devices to spend time with family and friends and to “go outside for fresh air.” They pushed themselves to find balance because balance helped them to build the strength and resilience that they needed to accomplish all that they had been asked to do (see Delgado-Gallegos, et al., 2021).



One thing that did come of our time at home - and it's kind of a nice thing! Our kids have never really had bikes on the farm. So we had to go into Brandon, my daughter and I, for feed one day and just on a whim we pulled into a cycle shop and her and I both walked out with a bike! It's one of the best things that we did during the pandemic....We were both stuck at home—both doing our work. When we were both done at the end of the day we would hop on our bikes and go for a ride. So then when teachers were allowed to come back to school and my daughter was still at home, we still faithfully did that as soon as I got home from school. It was a routine and I think it was a blessing for both of us!

~Teacher Participant



Face to face, hands-on, group work

Despite the lessons that they learned from teaching remotely, online teaching confirmed for each of the interview participants that they enjoyed be-

ing in their classrooms teaching their students in a face to face environment.

September was not as bad as I thought it was going to be. I was worried about the lack of provisions and stuff from the government but once I got in front of my class, everything else kind of melted away. I haven't heard one teacher say, 'I hate in-person teaching. I'd much rather do remote.' because none of us would rather do remote! We would rather be in person.

While they appreciated the independence that they learned to foster in their students through the use of technology, they gained a new appreciation for the value of hands-on learning. “I want to change back to as much hands-on as possible because I realized how much the manipulatives added to my lessons.” Teachers also expressed a commitment to returning to a more social learning style, “I really believe in collaboration and in kids working together. And I think that's honestly when they produce their best work.” Although the pandemic forced changes to teaching and learning that helped teachers to see how they could change their practice in valuable ways (Noor, et al., 2020), it also pushed teachers to consider their past practices and to reflect on the sticky bits from before the pandemic that they look forward revisiting with sweet success when it is safe to add more collaborative techniques to their teaching practices again.

Conclusion

This study in Southwest Horizon School Division focused on the experiential reflections of 8 classroom teachers. The participants shared their knowledge, gained from their experiences, of teaching in a pandemic. They related their stories from the moment that remote learning was announced by the Manitoba Provincial Government in March of 2020 through to the time that the data was collected in January and February of 2021. At the point of data collection, the pandemic was still in a critical phase and the transcripts illustrated the full emotional toil of the responsibilities that teachers as frontline workers experienced. The wisdom that they shared helped to document their experiences and to create a record of their growth that was born of teaching through the challenges that were posed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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