

**FRESH AIR, FRESH PERSPECTIVES: TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES, COVID-19,
OUTDOOR LEARNING, AND HOLISTIC HEALTH**

by

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Abstract

This phenomenological study aims to explore elementary teachers' experiences with outdoor learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on how student mental health, wellbeing, physical and health literacy were incorporated. The pandemic disrupted traditional teaching methods, prompting educators to adapt to approaches like outdoor learning. This research study adopts an interpretivist epistemology to uncover the perspectives and strategies implemented by teachers. Through semi-structured phenomenological interviews with elementary teachers in British Columbia, the study gathers rich data on the lived realities of facilitating outdoor learning experiences. Thematic analysis is used to inductively identify patterns and themes emerging from the interview transcripts. By examining teachers' reflections on their pedagogical approaches during this unprecedented time of a global pandemic, the study seeks to capture positive pedagogical transitions to further support student wellbeing in a post-pandemic era. Findings reveal insights into diverse approaches to teaching and learning, promote social-emotional development that centers students' and teachers' mental health and wellbeing, and captures the values and necessities of outdoor learning, along with highlighting the need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to education. The study has the potential to contribute valuable perspectives on sustaining positive changes from the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and holistically addressing students' diverse needs through innovative teaching and learning practices.

Lay Summary

This study examines how elementary school teachers in British Columbia adapted to outdoor learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on supporting students' mental health, well-being, and physical and health literacy. When traditional classrooms were disrupted, many teachers embraced outdoor learning as an alternative approach. Through interviews and analysis of teachers' experiences, this research identifies strategies used and insights for current and future practices. The study highlights how outdoor learning helped students cope, particularly in mental health and social-emotional development, while promoting inclusive and equitable education. Findings revealed effective ways to utilize outdoor environments to meet diverse student needs. The researcher, with a background in physical and health education and as a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, prioritized ethical standards and participant confidentiality. This study contributes ideas for sustaining the positive changes in education from the pandemic, encouraging innovative methods to support students' holistic development.

Preface

Research Contributions

With the guidance of Dr. Petherick, I identified the need to interview elementary and middle school teachers in British Columbia about their positive post-COVID-19 realizations. I conducted all the interviews and independently analyzed the data. Dr. Petherick provided ongoing feedback and guidance throughout the research process.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB). The project title and ethics certificate information are detailed below:

- Project Title: Fresh air, fresh perspectives: teachers' experiences, COVID-19, outdoor learning, and holistic health
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Dr. Petherick offered supervisory support, including feedback on research design, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. All interviews and majority of the research and writing were conducted by me, Julia Nord-Leth.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. It rapidly spread worldwide, leading to widespread illness, significant mortality, and major disruptions to daily life, economics, and healthcare systems. On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020)

When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in Canada, in March 2020, the entire country turned upside down, and the education system was not spared. Who could imagine classrooms and playgrounds, buzzing with activity, suddenly replaced by the pixels of virtual spaces? No more packed classrooms, no more face-to-face banter between students, and definitely no more in-person high-fives from your favourite teacher. Teachers and students found themselves in uncharted territory, trying to make sense of this new ‘normal’. Teachers had to become tech-wizards overnight while desperately missing the real-time reactions they were used to during in person teaching. Meanwhile students found themselves in a digital maze, battling against constant distractions from learning from home. However, amongst this chaos, something quite extraordinary was happening. Both educators and students worldwide were experimenting with new ways to teach and to learn. COVID-19 was the catalyst for a completely different picture of education, full of challenges, resilience and a touch of innovation and adaptation. So, not only did COVID-19 disrupt our health, but it also flipped present day norms of education, which compelled us question everything we thought we knew about teaching and learning. It was a wild ride, full of ups, downs, and Zoom fatigue.

However, perhaps the future of education became brighter thanks to this unexpected detour. During the 2020-2021 school year in BC, data from the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) revealed that most COVID-19 cases among students and staff were contracted outside of school settings, emphasizing the influence of community transmission. Notably, unvaccinated individuals aged 12-17 were found to be significantly more susceptible to the virus compared to vaccinated individuals, as reported by the BCCDC. Despite the relatively low rates of severe outcomes among 5–17-year-olds, with 94 hospitalizations and ten critical care admissions reported from January 2020 to October 2021, the October 2021 K-12 Situation Report highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by schools due to the pandemic (Care, 2021). The report emphasized the importance of vigilance in maintaining a safe learning environment, particularly within the realm of physical and health education (PHE).

As children continued to contribute a notable proportion of COVID-19 cases, there was an urgent need to integrate COVID-19 prevention measures into PHE curricula, promoting health literacy, physical activity, and overall well-being while adhering to public health guidelines. Furthermore, with vaccination campaigns happening at that time, there was a critical emphasis from federal and provincial governments and school districts on increasing vaccination rates among eligible school-aged children to mitigate virus transmission within school settings. By prioritizing health and safety measures, educational institutions played a pivotal role in supporting the resilience and overall health of students amidst the dynamic landscape of the pandemic.

Why am I interested in this area?

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the education system, presenting a unique opportunity to explore the challenges and innovations that emerged during this unprecedented time. As an educator and researcher, I am particularly interested in understanding the creative and innovative strategies teachers developed to navigate these unfamiliar circumstances. By examining these inventive approaches, I was keen to uncover insights that could shape the future of education beyond COVID-19, ensuring that we learn from this experience to build a more resilient and adaptive educational landscape.

My Context: Health, Wellness and Education

My passion for physical and health education (PHE) was inspired through an international teaching experience in Antigua, West Indies called the *Champions for Health Promoting Schools Program* where I worked with the primary school PHE classes on the island. This experience highlighted the significance of experiential learning through life-skill teaching and Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). This experience sparked my passion for PHE teaching and highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to education that prioritizes both physical and mental well-being. What has become really interesting for me, is the impact of COVID-19 on the *Champions for Health* project, but more locally the impact of the pandemic for teaching and learning in elementary schools here in British Columbia. By examining my international teaching experience, passion for PHE and mental health and the impacts of COVID-19 on education through this MA research, I hope to contribute valuable insights to the field and advocate for effective strategies that address the diverse needs of students in British Columbia and beyond.

The Champions for Health Promoting Schools program emphasized the development of life skills, however self-esteem, body confidence and self-efficacy were some of the more challenging topics for students to discuss, and many learners were very hesitant to share personal experiences, in comparison to other areas such as conflict resolution. However, when students did share, most of their contributions were connected to a similar theme of body image insecurities/appearance, and not believing they were smart enough. Given the challenges of remote learning and being isolated at home, I wondered whether British Columbian students faced similar challenges with these insecurities. Moreover, I was really curious to learn how teachers adapted to the learning context of COVID-19 in ways that supported the needs of their students, adapted teaching in PHE, and what benefits they learned from having to pivot into a new teaching and learning context. Hence, I was inspired to pursue this study of teachers' experiences and outdoor education during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

My Context: Mental Health Education

Furthermore, in June 2021 my family faced an unforeseen tragedy when my younger cousin Adam took his own life at the age of 22, due to his struggle with mental health. We are not certain what his personal thoughts were that led him to this decision. However, we know he did not have the tools or skills necessary to find an alternative escape other than suicide. This experience provoked my interest and deepened my passion for why mental health education and resources need to be more accessible and available to students in every aspect of the school system. Adam's struggles were not known to us, but it was clear that one of his challenges was his personal perception of his body image, physical appearance, and overall lack of confidence. By studying teachers who engaged in what they believed were health enhancing practices, my

hope is that research which supports the promotion of mental health strategies can reduce tragedies like this one.

Given the profound impacts these experiences have had on my life surrounding body insecurities, mental health challenges, passion for physical and health education and sport, and physical literacy, my research focuses on teachers' experiences and their reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic. There were many challenging narratives during this time, but I targeted key areas for improvement such as support for teachers addressing the significance of outdoor learning. Through focusing on the positive aspects that resulted from Covid-19, such as increased awareness and prioritization of mental health, newfound appreciation for outdoor learning environments, idea shifts in physical and health education (PHE), this study uncovers valuable insights that may inform future educational practices. Through this lens, my research emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of the education system in the face of adversity and identifies strategies to sustain the positive changes beyond the pandemic era.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the adaptive strategies employed by teachers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify best practices that can be carried forward into post-pandemic learning contexts. There two focal areas are foundational to the purpose of this study. First, how did teachers incorporate outdoor learning into their curriculum and pedagogical practice and how do they perceive outdoor learning to have impacted students' mental health and well-being, in general? Second, how did teachers incorporate physical literacy and health literacy into their practice with a focus on students' mental health? The following sub-questions helped me answer these two overarching focal areas of the study.

1. Did teachers pivot to incorporate more outdoor learning and if so, what impact did outdoor learning have on their students' learning, mental health and wellbeing? What impacts did outdoor learning have for teachers as well (i.e., pedagogical impacts, personal health and wellbeing)?
2. How have teachers modified their teaching of health education based on what they might have learned from COVID-19 pandemic?
 1. What are they doing?
 2. Are there barriers in maintaining these changes?
3. Within the current context of schools and education, what did COVID-19 offer us in terms of prioritizing mental health and well-being within the classroom?
4. Is the health and wellbeing of students still prioritized in teaching, in your practice? If so, how? If not, what happened to shift this impact (if there was an impact at all)?
5. In your experience, what were the silver linings for teachers working in elementary and middle school during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - 5.1) What resources, supports, materials are needed to continue to support these adaptations?
 - 5.2) How did COVID-19 assist in development of pedagogical practices, particularly in relation to topics of outdoor learning, mental health, and wellbeing in schools?

These research questions were designed to uncover the positive experiences, growth, and innovations that teachers may have encountered and experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring these ideas can provide valuable insights for ongoing development of effective teaching practices and support in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

Definitions

The following section overviews key terms that are central to the proposed research. I have sought to define the terms history in a particular context, either health or education, and offered key insights into the term's application to my study

COVID-19 Pandemic Definition

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Originating in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, it rapidly spread worldwide, leading to widespread illness, significant mortality, and major disruptions to daily life, economies, and healthcare systems. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020). The pandemic prompted extensive public health measures, including lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the expedited development and distribution of vaccines (CDC, 2021; Johns Hopkins University, 2020).

Physical Literacy Definition

Physical literacy (PL) encompasses various definitions, sharing common elements. Introduced by Margaret Whitehead in 1993, PL emphasizes the development of motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to engage in physical activities across a lifespan. The concept gained prominence in the late 2000s within physical and health education (PHE). The International Physical Literacy Association (IPLA), established in 2014, defines PL as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding necessary to value and engage in physical activities throughout one's life (Nesdoly, Gleddie, Tara-Leigh, McHugh et al., 2021). PL is seen as a continuum of learning that empowers

individuals to achieve their goals, deepen their knowledge, and actively participate in their communities (Roetert & Jefferies, 2014). Whitehead refined her definition, describing PL as a disposition to use our human-embodied capability, developing the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to engage in physical activities (Whitehead, 2016; Physical literacy: PHE Canada, 2024).

Health Literacy Definition

The term “health literacy” (HL) was first used in 1974 at a health education and social policy conference (Health Literacy, 2023). Initially, HL focused on an individual’s ability to access and understand basic health information and services necessary for making informed health decisions. Over time, HL has evolved to include the ability to interpret personal health information and make informed choices about health and well-being (Epstein, 2023). HL is connected to health promotion, enhancing individuals’ knowledge of health issues and improving their decision-making abilities (Kilgour, Matthews, Christian & Shire, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of HL due to the increased reliance on healthcare organizations (Cipolletta et al, 2023). Currently, HL is defined as the knowledge, motivation, and competencies to access, understand, appraise, and apply health information to make informed decisions regarding healthcare, disease prevention, and health promotion (Cipolletta et al., 2023).

A seminal British Australian public health scientist and scholar in this area, Don Nutbeam, has significantly contributed to the understanding of HL by proposing two key approaches: the clinical approach, focusing on individual patient education, and the public health approach, emphasizing the empowerment of individuals and communities. Nutbeam (2008) advocates for an asset-based perspective on HL, viewing it as a resource that can be developed to

enhance personal and community health outcomes. This perspective aligns with the WHO's definition of HL and highlights the importance of leveraging existing strengths and capacities to promote health, a concept that gained even more relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outdoor Learning Definition

Outdoor learning (OL) refers to an educational approach where teaching and learning activities take place outside of the traditional indoor classroom setting. It involves utilizing outdoor spaces and natural environments as platforms for facilitating learning experiences across various subjects and grade levels. OL can encompass a wide range of activities from nature walks and gardening, to reading books outside, conducting science experiences, engaging in physical education activities, or any learning experience that occurs in an outdoor setting (Creative Star Learning Company, 2020). This approach emphasizes the importance of providing regular, frequent, and progressive outdoor learning experiences throughout a student's education, rather than treating it as an occasional field trip or special event. The primary goal is to enhance learning by using the unique opportunities and resources available in outdoor settings, fostering engagement, exploration and experiential learning (Kiviranta, et al., 2024).

The benefits of OL are multifaceted and well-documented. Studies have consistently shown that OL environments can improve academic performance, focus, and attention span, as students are naturally more engaged and motivated when coupled with physical activity, sensory stimulation, and real-world application (Kiviranta, Lindfors, Rönkkö, & Luukka, 2024). Additionally, OL has been found to enhance the mental and social well-being, fostering resilience, self-confidence, and a deeper appreciation for the natural environment (Kiviranta, et al., 2024). Moreover, OL provides a unique opportunity to incorporate diverse cultural

perspectives and traditional ecological knowledge, particularly those of Indigenous communities, who have long recognized the profound interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. By embracing these perspectives, OL can foster a deeper understanding of sustainability, environmental stewardship, and importance of preserving and respecting our land.

While OL can certainly incorporate elements of environmental education, Indigenous perspectives, or adventure activities, its core focus is on facilitating meaningful and engaging learning experiences outside of the traditional classroom walls, regardless of the specific subject matter or cultural context (Kiviranta, et al., 2024[L3] ; Priest & Asfeldt, 2022). It is a holistic approach that recognizes the transformative power of natural environments in shaping curious, resilient, and environmentally conscious learners (Priest & Asfeldt, 2022). In essence, OL is a dynamic and multifaceted educational approach that harnesses the boundless potential of the natural world, fostering a deeper connection between students, their learning, and the environment that sustains us all.

History of Outdoor Learning in Canada

The history of outdoor learning in Canada spans over a century. Outdoor learning in Canada has deep roots in Indigenous practices; Indigenous peoples thrived in harmony with nature before European arrival. Land-based learning in Indigenous education is intertwined with cultural teachings, traditional knowledge, and holistic understandings of the world. Dwayne Donald (2021) highlights the intimate relationship between movement and thought with a focus from the simple act of walking with the land. Donald mentions the traditional assumption that serious thinking only occurs in the most common object of the classroom, a chair. However, humans are called to be connected to all things through the Métis teaching of wâhkôhtowin.

Donald (2021) describes wâhkôhtowin as, “human beings are called to repeatedly acknowledge and honour the sun, the moon, the land, the wind, the water, the animals, and the trees as, quite literally, our kinship relations because we carry parts of each of them inside our own bodies” (p. 59). Many educators highlight the spiritual connection Indigenous peoples had with the land, which they strive to replicate with their students (Priest & Asfeldt, 2022). Land is not merely a physical space but a teacher, a relative, and a source of identity and belonging. Land-based learning emphasizes the interconnectedness between people, the environment, and all living beings (Learning the Land, 2020). Outdoor learning from an Indigenous perspective emphasizes a reciprocal relationship with the land and stewardship responsibilities (Learning the Land, 2020).

What is Unique about Outdoor Learning in Canada?

Outdoor learning in Canada not only offers a unique blend of Indigenous practices, adventure, and environmental approaches but also holds immense potential for addressing contemporary challenges (Priest & Asfeldt, 2022). By integrating OL into educational curricula, promoting environmental stewardship, and fostering a deep connection with nature, Canada can play a pivotal role in addressing climate change, reforming education, and promoting mental health and well-being. Recognizing that Canadian outdoors can offer solutions to the search for healthful restoration, innovative teaching and learning methods in schools and universities, as well as the nation’s need for environmental understanding and reconciliation, is crucial. Using the First Peoples Principles of Learning (2024) specifically the principle of “learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors” supports reconciliation as it respects Indigenous knowledge and integrates traditional practices into learning environments. Thus, embracing OL not only enriches educational

experiences but also offers a pathway towards a more sustainable and resilient future for all (Priest & Asfeldt, 2022).

Mental Health Definitions

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown had widespread psychological effects on the population, including depression, anxiety and deteriorating mental well-being (Verma & Mandala, 2023). Students of all ages, including students from K-8 were particularly vulnerable, experiencing heightened levels of anxiety and depression (Verma et al., 2023).

1. Anxiety

Anxiety is a complex and distressing condition characterized by feelings of worry, nervousness, or fear in response to stress or perceived threats (Rachman, et al., 2019). It affects cognitive processes and can manifest in physical symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, sweating and trembling. Anxiety disorders, which represent the largest health problem in many countries, significantly impact thoughts, emotions and behaviours (Rachman et al., 2019). During the pandemic, anxiety levels in children increased significantly, with prevalence rates of 18.9%-23.87% in children and 15.4-39.9% in adolescents (Walsh, Furey & Malhi, 2021).

2. Mental Well-being

Mental well-being for elementary school kids refers to a state of overall psychological and emotional health, characterized by contentment, happiness, and the ability to cope with stress. For children, this includes having a positive outlook, maintaining friendships, and possessing emotional resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose (Tennant et al., 2008). The

pandemic disrupted their normal routines and social interactions, leading to increased anxiety, stress, and feelings of isolation among both children and their teachers (SickKids, 2021).

3. Depression

Depression is characterized by persistent sadness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in activities (WHO, 2024). It affects children as well as adults, impacting academic performance, social relationships, and overall well-being. According to Caring for Kids New to Canada (2023) approximately 2% of children and 8% of adolescents are impacted by major depressive disorders in Canada. Children may exhibit symptoms such as irritability, changes in appetite or sleep patterns, difficulty concentrating, and physical complaints such as stomach aches or headaches (WHO, 2024). Early detection and intervention are crucial for addressing depression in this vulnerable population (WHO, 2024). Therefore, fostering environments that promote emotional resilience and providing support systems within schools are crucial for addressing depression in this vulnerable population. (WHO, 2024).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the study, outlining the context, rationale, and guiding research questions. This chapter established the foundation for understanding the importance of exploring post-COVID-19 learnings in schools, with a particular focus on outdoor learning, physical and health education, and mental health. The purpose of this study is to examine these realizations from the perspectives of teachers who experienced this time, with the aim of contributing to teaching practices that promote holistic health and well-being in the post-pandemic world.

Recognizing the value of outdoor learning, this study seeks to identify and understand the strategies teachers developed during the COVID-19 pandemic to adapt outdoor learning to post-pandemic contexts. The goal is to enhance students' mental health and well-being while supporting their physical and health literacy. By examining these approaches, this research offers valuable insights into effective strategies for creating healthier, more resilient learning environments.

With this groundwork laid, Chapter 2 will explore the existing literature, providing a comprehensive review of relevant studies and theoretical frameworks that inform this research.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

This literature review examines the influence of COVID-19 on the education system in British Columbia, drawing from recent publications that document the pandemic's impact on various aspects of education. After establishing the dramatic impact of the pandemic, the literature review is organized around the following three key themes: (1) the integration of outdoor learning; (2) mental health and well-being; and (3) physical and health education (PHE). Finally, the literature review uncovers the transitions teachers made, and best practices and lessons learned in our post-pandemic context.

COVID-19 Impact on Education

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniable, affecting communities worldwide, including the education system in British Columbia (Lindinger-Sternart, Kaur, Widyaningsih, & Patel, 2021). While the pandemic presented significant challenges, it also offered silver linings, opportunities, advantages, and insights for educators navigating these extraordinary circumstances. Despite disruptions to daily practices and habits within schools, teachers demonstrated resilience by reinventing their pedagogical approaches to accommodate variables such as distance teaching, hygiene demands, and social distancing requirements (Qvourtrup et al., 2023).

Larsen (2022) investigated the repercussions of COVID-19 school closures on students and their social isolation in Norway. Analyzing a cohort of 442 children, significant associations emerged between COVID-19 variables and emotional, somatic/cognitive, and worry reactions among students (Larsen et al., 2022). Family stress, instability, and lack of social interaction

proved particularly impactful, highlighting the broader implications of the pandemic on children's well-being (Larsen et al., 2022). Although school closures and restrictions affected a large portion of the student population, comprehensive research is still needed on the mental health impacts experienced by students during this period (Qvourtrup et al., 2023).

The pandemic prompted a shift from traditional face-to-face education to remote online or adapted learning styles (Marshall, Shannon, & Love, 2020), challenging educators to adapt quickly to new methods of instruction. While some schools successfully transitioned, others faced obstacles due to infrastructure limitations and lack of experience (Marshall et al., 2020). As we move beyond the pandemic, there is an opportunity to leverage these learnings as new tools for physical and health education classes.

Kim and Asbury (2020) highlight the challenges teachers in the United Kingdom (UK) faced during the online shift to teaching caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. When the online shift occurred teachers experienced, “a powerful shared sense of not knowing what is going on” (p. 1070) as teaching turned remote thus creating a highly stressful environment. The authors found that many teachers “had a harder time in the initial phases of remote teaching because pupils did not engage with the activities they had created, leading them to rethink their approach” (p. 1071). Another added stress to the online shift was the clear systemic inequities, such as limited home access to technology, home safety, and food poverty (Kim and Asbury, 2020). The disruptive online shift that teachers in the UK had can be seen in many education systems, including the one in British Columbia. These experiences show the significant impact that teaching online had for teachers' professional and emotional well-being.

Outdoor Learning

Amongst the challenges presented by COVID-19, educators worldwide were compelled, and in some instances mandated, to adapt their teaching methods, including transitioning to outdoor learning (OL). OL refers to educational activities and experiences that take place in natural environments outside of the traditional classroom setting. It involves intentionally utilizing outdoor spaces, such as schoolyards, parks, gardens, or forests, as dynamic and immersive learning environments. Rather than being confined to indoor spaces, OL provides opportunities for students to directly interact with and learn from nature. This hands-on approach facilitates experiential and inquiry-based learning, enabling students to explore, observe, and make connections with the world around them in a more tangible way (Wurm, 2024). By spending time in nature during the learning process, students can benefit from the cognitive, emotional, and physical advantages associated with being outdoors (Green Schoolyards America, 2024).

Richard Louv (2005) argues that excessive screen time and urban living have confined children indoors, leading to what he terms ‘nature-deficit disorder,’ a phenomenon that COVID-19 exacerbated (Hargreaves, 2021). Hargreaves (2021) notes that changes teachers made during COVID-19 resulted in losses, gains, and transformations, with some advocating for their continuation into the post-pandemic era. These realizations stem from concerns such as global warming and the potential for climate change to disrupt traditional schooling, prompting the need for a more adaptable system (Hargreaves, 2021). Among the longer-term opportunities identified is the increased utilization of outdoor learning spaces, both on and off school premises. Spending time in nature has been found to enhance students' spiritual connections with their environments, improve their physical and mental health, and foster confidence and social development (Hargreaves, 2021).

Studies in the UK have shown that COVID-19 negatively impacted children's overall well-being, a concern echoed by teachers, caregivers, families, and professionals upon the return to school (Marsh & Blackwell, 2023). In response, researchers have explored the potential impact of outdoor learning on student well-being (Marsh & Blackwell, 2023). A common adaptation among educators during the pandemic was the development of outdoor learning lessons. Studies have documented the benefits of outdoor learning, including positive impacts on student behavior, enjoyment of learning, intrapersonal skills, and overall well-being (Marsh & Blackwell, 2023). For instance, a study by Barfod et al. (2023) examined the attitudes of Danish educators toward outdoor learning during the reopening of public schools in Spring 2020. Despite initial challenges such as cumbersome preparation and curriculum alignment, teachers expressed a newfound appreciation for outdoor learning and planned to incorporate it more extensively post-pandemic (Barfod et al., 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers and schools embraced OL in various innovative ways to maintain educational activities while adhering to health guidelines to mitigate virus transmission risks while providing in-person instruction. Several research studies highlight how OL was implemented during this time. A study conducted by the University of Miami found that teachers utilized outdoor spaces like school gardens, playgrounds, and nearby parks across various subjects (Green Schoolyards America, 2024). For example, math lessons involved measuring trees or calculating the area of outdoor spaces. Science classes conducted experiments and observations in nature. A study highlighted by The Guardian discussed how Scotland considered OL as a model for reopening schools. The Scottish approach was part of a broader strategy to use outdoor spaces for education, which was seen as a safer alternative to traditional indoor classrooms during the pandemic. This initiative was part of a national discussion on how

to safely conduct schooling in the context of COVID-19 (Wattchow, Jeanes, Brown, Cutter-Mackenzie, O'Connor & Rousell, 2020).

Research published in the Australian Educational Researcher explored the inconsistencies in the implementation of outdoor learning across Australian early years' education. The study noted that while early childhood education services in Australia provided daily outdoor learning opportunities as required by national policy, primary schools faced challenges in regular implementation. The research advocated for the benefits of outdoor learning and recommended its regular inclusion in the first year of schooling to promote continuity as children transition from early childhood education to primary schools. The "Take Me Outside" initiative in Canada provided resources and support for outdoor education during the pandemic (Take Me Outside, 2019). This included educational resources curated by diverse groups and aimed at promoting outdoor learning as a safe and effective way to continue education during the pandemic. The initiative emphasized the health and well-being benefits of outdoor education, particularly in the context of COVID-19.

According to research conducted by the University of Melbourne, outdoor education provided crucial grounding for young people during the pandemic. It helped in managing anxiety and depression, which were prevalent due to increased isolation and stress from the pandemic. The natural settings of outdoor learning contributed to a sense of normalcy and emotional stability (Lyssiotis, 2024). The shift to outdoor learning also fostered better social interactions among students. The relaxed and open environment made it easier for students to interact and connect with each other, which is vital for mental health, especially when social interactions were limited due to health safety measures (Lyssiotis, 2024).

Research from PubMed Central highlighted that outdoor activities and exposure to nature supported adolescents' mental health during the pandemic. Being outdoors provided opportunities for physical activity, stress relief, and a sense of normalcy, which helped mitigate the negative mental health impacts of isolation and disruptions caused by COVID-19 (Wurm, 2024). A study conducted by Jang et al. (2022) found that adolescents who maintained their participation in outdoor activities and nature-based pursuits during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced smaller declines in mental health and subjective well-being compared to those who reduced their outdoor activity levels. Frequent engagement in outdoor play and time in nature before the pandemic seemed to provide lasting resilience that helped buffer the negative mental health impacts of the pandemic for these youth. The study highlighted how outdoor activities, particularly those in natural settings, can promote subjective well-being and act as a protective factor against issues like anxiety and depression in adolescents. Notably, nature-based outdoor activities saw the largest declines in participation rates during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. Overall, these findings underscore the critical importance of ensuring equitable access to outdoor learning opportunities and time in nature for supporting and bolstering youth mental health resilience, especially during crises (Jang, Stevens, Lim, Poole & Seekamp, 2022).

Mental Health Education

The onset of COVID-19 has sparked concerns regarding its potential impact on mental health around the world (Malmquist, Bredenberg, Melin, Wurm, & Gato, 2023). Factors such as social distancing measures and quarantine protocols are believed to exacerbate mental health issues due to associated fears of illness, feelings of frustration and boredom, financial hardships, and a lack of adequate information (Malmquist et al., 2023). The long-term ramifications of these effects remain uncertain as the pandemic continues to evolve (Malmquist et al., 2023).

The mental health of students and youth has been extensively studied by researchers during the pandemic. The introduction of distance learning has coincided with a notable increase in issues such as loneliness, anxiety, and stress among students (Malmquist et al., 2023). A study conducted in Ireland examined how primary school children and their families coped with the rapid and significant changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (McMahon, Gallagher, Walsh, & O'Connor, 2021). This study found that gender and family support played a significant role in coping mechanisms. Specifically, the study revealed that girls experienced higher levels of anxiety and stress compared to boys during the pandemic. Girls were more likely to report feeling overwhelmed, worried about academic performance, and concerned with the health implications of COVID-19 (SickKids, 2021). McMahon et al. (2021) also established links between the quality of school relationships, resilience, pro-social behavior, and academic outcomes in terms of mental health. The study highlights the importance of considering individual differences and family contexts when addressing the mental health needs of primary school children during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is also crucial to examine the experiences of teachers, who play a vital role in supporting students' well-being. The sudden shift to remote learning and the disruption of traditional classroom environments posed significant challenges for teachers, potentially affecting their own mental health and ability to effectively support their students. Research has shown that teachers faced increased workloads, technological challenges, and stress due to the rapid transition to online teaching (Marshall, Shannon, & Love, 2020). Addressing the mental health of teachers is essential, as their well-being directly influences their capacity to provide effective education and emotional support to students.

Overall, the mental health implications of the COVID-19 pandemic are multifaceted, impacting both students and educators. By understanding these challenges, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to support the well-being of both groups during and after such crises.

COVID-19's Impact: Physical and Health Education

The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is undeniable, significantly affecting various sectors, including the education system in British Columbia (Lindinger-Sternart, Kaur, Widyaningsih, & Patel, 2021). The pandemic presented substantial challenges but also unveiled opportunities, advantages, and insights for educators. Despite disruptions to daily practices and habits within schools, teachers demonstrated resilience by reinventing their pedagogical approaches to accommodate variables such as distance teaching, hygiene demands, and social distancing requirements (Qvourtrup et al., 2023).

Physical and Health Education (PHE) in British Columbia underwent significant changes during the pandemic, with a heightened focus on physical health and well-being (Blain, Standage & Curran, 2022). The crisis highlighted the importance of physical activity for disease prevention and overall wellness, presenting challenges in maintaining engagement with PHE amidst lockdowns. The promotion of physical activity, a core priority in PHE, became imperative, requiring educators to address uncertainties surrounding its delivery during this time. As we transition beyond the peak of the pandemic, reflecting on the lessons learned from teaching PHE during these unprecedented times and in alternative contexts is crucial for preparing for future shifts and continually improving the educational experience (Varea et al., 2023).

COVID-19 underscored the need for PHE to adopt a collaborative and reflective approach, emphasizing the importance of physical literacy skills that enable students to integrate physical activity into diverse circumstances (Cloes, 2022). Students with a strong understanding of physical literacy were better able to adapt their behaviors to incorporate physical activity into their lives, regardless of the challenges posed by the pandemic. Recognizing the diversity of experiences among students during the pandemic is essential for PHE teachers (Physical and Health Education Canada, 2024). Each student navigated their own challenges differently, with varying access to resources and support systems. By adopting a student-centered approach that embraces diversity and inclusivity, teachers can create a more supportive learning environment that fosters the physical and mental well-being of all students.

PHE teachers play a pivotal role in promoting health and active lifestyles among students (Cloes, 2022). A study in Jamaica highlighted the perceived impact of PHE educators on students' physical literacy lifestyles in the post-COVID world, emphasizing their role in motivating students towards lifelong physical literacy (Rowe, 2022). However, despite efforts to understand the importance of physical activity, sustainable solutions remain limited (Houser & Kriellaars, 2023). Misconceptions persist about PHE as merely a discipline for health outcomes, hindering its recognition as a critical component of education (Fitzpatrick, 2023). The pandemic served as a reminder of the importance of prioritizing health and well-being within PHE and addressing these misconceptions.

The implementation of a flipped classroom model emerged as an innovative approach during the pandemic to ensure the safety and continuity of PHE learning. This model, outlined by PHE Canada's COVID-19 Pandemic: Return to School Guidelines, involves students

engaging with instructional content at home through online resources, followed by hands-on activities and discussions in the classroom. By leveraging technology and interactive methods, educators can effectively deliver the PHE curriculum while fostering critical thinking, problem-solving, and physical literacy skills.

Recognizing the diverse experiences of students during the pandemic is essential for PHE educators. By acknowledging and validating these differences, educators can create a more inclusive learning environment that supports the holistic well-being of all students, embracing diversity and inclusion to ensure students feel valued, supported, and empowered in their physical and mental well-being journey (PHE Canada, 2024).

The field of PHE often struggles with its perceived status as an unimportant, non-academic discipline primarily focused on health outcomes rather than enabling students to prioritize their own health and well-being (Fitzpatrick, 2023). COVID-19 served as a significant reminder of the true importance of PHE and the necessity to redefine its objectives to better serve students' holistic development.

Autonomy

COVID-19 emphasized the value of choice in education (Passantino, 2021). We already understand that autonomy can be a powerful tool for engaging and motivating students. However, the pandemic demonstrated that effective learning doesn't require uniformity or even physical gathering in a classroom setting (Passantino, 2021). Classrooms became virtual, outdoors, and community-based, presenting challenges but also allowing educators and students to gain new insights into pedagogical styles, communication, and learning.

This post-pandemic period presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for significant changes within the education system (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). This change can provide opportunities for students and teachers to collaborate and rethink the education structure rather than merely adapting the current model. Traditional models, such as examinations and high-stakes tests, were cancelled during the pandemic, allowing space to adapt to the circumstances. Physical education has demonstrated a degree of autonomy regarding the content taught (Varea et al., 2023). By embracing this flexibility and the lessons learned during the pandemic, educators can better prepare for future challenges and continue to enhance the educational experience for all students.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

As educators reflect on their experiences during and post the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes increasingly evident that the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are integral to shaping the future of teaching practices. The pandemic has not only highlighted existing disparities within society but has also magnified the impact of social factors on the mental health of young people.

During the pandemic, marginalized groups such as racial and ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, economically disadvantaged communities, and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community faced heightened mental health challenges (Passantino et al., 2021). For instance, racial minorities experienced heightened levels of anxiety and stress due to both the health impacts of the virus and the social unrest related to racial injustice (Gonzales, Mola, Robertson, Gavulic & McKay, 2023). Similarly, individuals with disabilities encountered

additional barriers to accessing necessary healthcare and support services, further impacting their mental well-being (Malmquist et al., 2023).

Moreover, the pandemic's political climate may have contributed to the proliferation of various human rights issues, leading to a greater awareness of systemic inequities and the need for inclusive policies and practices. Educators are realizing the importance of addressing EDI considerations in their teaching practices to create supportive and inclusive learning environments for all students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds (Duke University School of Medicine, 2020).

In the post-COVID-19 era, educators are recognizing the interconnectedness of mental health and EDI and are prioritizing strategies to address these challenges. This includes implementing trauma-informed approaches to teaching, promoting social-emotional learning, and providing access to mental health resources and support services. By prioritizing equity, diversity, and inclusion in their teaching practices, educators can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments that support the well-being and success of all students in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Conclusion

Chapter two provided a comprehensive review of literature exploring the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education system in British Columbia. It was organized into three key themes: outdoor learning, mental health and well-being, and physical and health education (PHE). The review highlighted the challenges faced by teachers and students, as well as some of the adaptations that were made during this time period, such as the integration of outdoor learning and the shift to online teaching. Additionally, it highlighted the

heightened awareness surrounding mental health topics and issues and the critical role of PHE in promoting overall well-being, especially in response to the pandemic's impact on students' physical and emotional health. While the crisis revealed systemic inequities and created a variety of challenges, it also fostered innovative teaching strategies and a shift toward more resilient, adaptable educational practices. Moving forward, these lessons can guide the continued development of education practices, particularly in the areas of outdoor learning and health education, as we transition into a post-pandemic context.

Chapter three, the focus shifts to the methodologies employed to explore the themes outlined in the literature, providing a detailed look into the qualitative approach that guided this research. This chapter will further expand on the research design, the participants involved, and the process of data collection and analysis, paving the way for a deeper understanding of how these educational shifts have impacted teachers' practices and perspectives post COVID-19.

Chapter 3:

Theoretical Framework and Methods

This chapter highlights the theoretical framework and methods that allowed me to plan the research study, carry out data collection and analyze the data gathered.

Theoretical Approach

Why a Qualitative Study?

Qualitative research approaches can offer profound insights into the nuanced contexts and subjective meanings individuals attribute to their lived experiences. Within the field of education, qualitative inquiry provides a rich foundation for understanding the intricate fabric of educational settings, pedagogical practices, and the multifaceted work of educators inside and outside the classroom. Through open-ended questioning and observational methods, qualitative research facilitates a nuanced exploration of the challenges, successes, and complexities that educators navigate within their teaching and learning responsibilities. Creswell's (2013) comprehensive overview of qualitative methodologies underscores the paramount importance of rigorous data analysis, validity, and trustworthiness. These critical elements guide researchers in effectively navigating the complexities inherent to qualitative inquiry, enabling them to communicate findings with integrity, depth, and authenticity that honors the lived realities of participants.

My Epistemological Perspective

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. It is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature, scope and limits of knowledge (Lemos, 2007). It investigates questions such as:

What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? What are the criteria for knowledge?

Epistemology explores the ways in which beliefs, perceptions, evidence and reasoning contribute to our understanding of the world and how we can justify our claims to knowledge.

Interpretivism emphasizes the subjective nature of knowledge and underscores the importance of understanding meanings within specific social and cultural contexts (Schwandt, 1994). This perspective highlights that reality is socially constructed and that individuals interpret their experiences based on their own unique perspectives and lived experiences and cultural backgrounds. Within this framework, I can as the researcher serve as an active interpreter and uncover the multiple layers that are embedded within post-pandemic teaching and education. This research proposal adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance to be able to explore subjective experiences and strategies that educators implemented throughout COVID-19.

Grounded in the qualitative tradition, this study allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants', in this case, elementary and middle school teachers, own lived experience and perspectives. This study highlights specific pedagogical transitions, in particular outdoor learning, in the hopes that the positive transitions and experiences can be captured to then further support similar learning possibilities in the post-pandemic era.

Theoretical Perspective

In my study, I adopt a salutogenic perspective, which emphasizes the factors that contribute to health and well-being. This approach is particularly relevant in exploring positive post-COVID-19 realizations in schools, as it focuses on identifying and enhancing resources that support resilience and positive outcomes in educational settings.

The salutogenic model, with its emphasis on resources that promote health and well-being, will serve as the theoretical foundation for this study. By examining comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness in the context of outdoor learning, PHE, and mental health, we aim to identify the factors that have contributed to positive outcomes in schools during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study employs a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of elementary and middle school teachers who have graduated from a Bachelor of Education program within the last 10 years. Using the salutogenic model as a theoretical lens, the study aims to identify and understand the resources and strategies that have contributed to positive outcomes in schools during the post-COVID-19 period (Fekete, Kinn, Larsen, & Langeland, 2020). The phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions and experiences, shedding light on the factors that enhance their sense of coherence and overall well-being.

The salutogenic model, developed by Aaron Antonovsky, shifts the focus from factors that cause disease to those that promote health and well-being (Fekete, et al., 2020). Central to this model is the concept of the Sense of Coherence (SOC), which includes the three main components of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. These components work alongside each other to help individuals perceive life as structured, manageable and meaningful which contributes to their overall health and resilience. Research has demonstrated the applicability of the salutogenic model in educational contexts. For example, studies have shown that fostering a strong SOC among students and teachers can lead to better stress management, higher levels of engagement, and improved academic outcomes (Fekete, et al., 2020). By promoting comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, educators can create learning

environments that support both the mental and physical well-being of students and their staff members.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted educational systems worldwide, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Research has highlighted the increased stress and anxiety among students and teachers, as well as the need for innovative approaches to education (you can include some citations here to support this statement). The pandemic has also provided the opportunity to re-evaluate and enhance educational practices, with a particular emphasis on outdoor learning, PHE and mental health support.

The post-COVID-19 educational landscape offers a unique opportunity to apply the salutogenic model. Outdoor learning, for instance, has gained prominence as a safe and effective way to engage students while promoting physical activity and mental well-being (reference to support). Similarly, PHE programs have been recognized for their role in fostering a holistic approach to health (reference to support). The emphasis on mental health has also increased, with schools adopting strategies to support students' emotional resilience. These positive realizations align with the salutogenic principles of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, highlighting the model's relevance in guiding post-pandemic educational practices.

Methodology

I explored my research questions drawing upon phenomenology as my research methodology. The focus is on how student mental health, wellbeing, physical and health literacy were considered or taught through outdoor learning experiences. Phenomenology, with its philosophical roots and aim to delve into the essence of phenomena from first-hand experience (Mapp, 2008), is well-suited for this educational research.

By emphasizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and external environment, phenomenology recognizes that a phenomenon like outdoor learning is not merely an external occurrence but an integral part of the subjective experiences of teachers and students (McNarry et al., 2019). This methodology is particularly valuable for educational work as it allows researchers to gain deep insights into the lived experiences of teachers, students, and other stakeholders, uncovering the underlying meanings, emotions, and perceptions that shape the teaching and learning process. It captures the complexity of educational phenomena, acknowledging the interplay between subjective experiences, pedagogical practices, and the broader environment. Notable phenomenological studies have explored teacher-student relationships (Giles et al., 2012), teacher leadership experiences (Raffanti, 2008), and the unique needs of advanced learners (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015), demonstrating the methodology's ability to inform pedagogical practices and amplify diverse perspectives. With its focus on first-hand accounts and interpretive epistemology, phenomenology should shed light on both the events surrounding outdoor learning during COVID-19 and how educators interpreted and made sense of this experience.

This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which aligns with the traditions of Heidegger and Gadamer (McManus et al., 2007). Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes prior experiences and understandings inevitably shape the interpretation of phenomena. Rather than attempting to bracket or set aside these preconceptions, as suggested by Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology embraces the researcher's embeddedness within the world and acknowledges the co-constitutive relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon under investigation (McManus et al., 2007).

Importance of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected education systems globally, presenting unique challenges and opportunities for educators. My study on teachers' experiences during the pandemic, focusing on positive outcomes in mental health, outdoor learning, equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), and Physical and Health Education (PHE), is critically significance for several reasons.

First, the study documents and celebrates the resilience and adaptability of teachers during this unprecedented period. By exploring the successful strategies and techniques that emerged, my study offers five valuable insights into innovative educational approaches that can be replicated and refined in future contexts.

Second, focusing on mental health addresses a pressing issue that has become increasingly prominent in both education and society. Understanding how teachers prioritized mental health and implemented supportive strategies contributes to developing comprehensive support systems, fostering positive working environments, and enhancing student well-being.

Third, the study highlights the transformative potential of outdoor learning. By documenting teachers' experiences with outdoor learning during the pandemic, my research advocates for its integration into mainstream education, promoting holistic student development.

Fourth, the emphasis on equity, diversity, and inclusion underscores the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that cater to all students, particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented communities. By highlighting successful EDI initiatives implemented during COVID-19, my study informs efforts to promote social justice and equity in

education, identifying the work that transpired during a challenging time for teachers and students. Thus, the overall study aims to identify and share pedagogical experiences that contribute to more equitable outcomes for all students.

And lastly, including Physical and Health Education in the study provides insights into the role of PHE in promoting holistic student well-being and fostering lifelong healthy habits. This research has the potential to inform educational policy and practice, supporting the continuous improvement of teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era while prioritizing the well-being and inclusion of all students and educators.

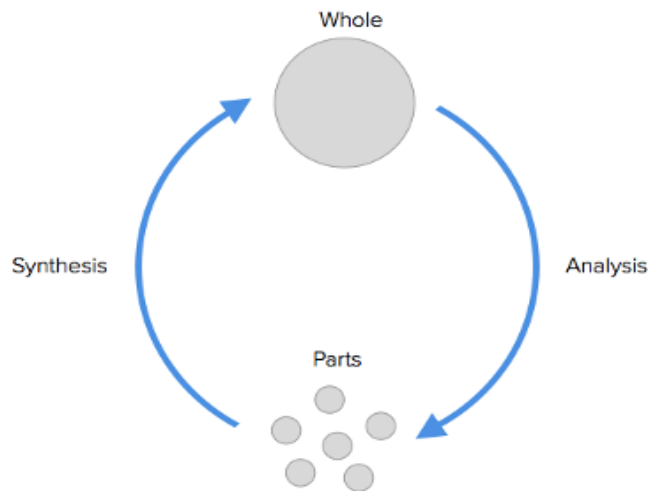
Research Setting

Validity and Trustworthiness

Consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, I engaged in a continuous process of reflexivity to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. Reflexivity involves critically examining my own positionality, assumptions and preconceptions throughout the research process and how these may influence the interpretation of the data (Laverty, 2003).

The hermeneutic circle is a fundamental concept in hermeneutics, the theory and methodology of interpretation. While traditionally applied to textual material, the principles are broadly applicable to various forms of qualitative research, including interview data. This approach involves an ongoing movement between understanding the whole and examining its individual parts, which helps in constantly refining and deepening interpretations (Laverty,

2003). Essentially, one cannot understand the whole without considering its parts, and conversely, the parts can only be understood within the context of the whole.



Applied to the data analysis process, this means repeatedly moving back and forth between a comprehensive understanding of the entire dataset and a detailed examination of its individual components. By doing so, interpretations are continuously revisited and refined, leading to a more nuanced and thorough understanding of teachers' experiences with outdoor learning (OL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This iterative process invites a deeper connection and interplay between the broader context of the pandemic's impact on education and the specific strategies and experiences of individual teachers, creating a rich and dynamic analysis.

Initially, I engaged myself in the entire set of interview transcripts to form a holistic understanding of the teachers' experiences. Following this, I identified key themes and patterns, focusing on specific segments of the data related to mental health, wellbeing, physical and health literacy. Using open coding, I labeled these segments to capture different concepts and ideas. By continually revisiting and contextualizing these parts in relation to the whole, I was able to refine the themes through an iterative process. This dynamic interplay enhances the credibility of the

findings as it aligns with the principles of thematic analysis, allowing for the emergence of themes directly from the data (Braun et al., 2016; Clarke 2017). Additionally, participants were invited to be involved in reviewing the identified themes to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflect their perspectives, thus validating the findings and contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Data Collection

In this section, I will provide a detailed description of the data collection process for this study. I will outline the ethical approval procedures, and explain the strategies used to recruit participants, specifying the criteria for selection and the methods used to invite them to participate in this research opportunity. A description of the participants I interviewed will follow, including their professional backgrounds and relevance to the study. Finally, I will describe the interview process itself, including the format, duration and meaningful conversations.

Research Setting

I conducted my research provincially among teachers who were active in British Columbia during the pandemic. Each participant was invited to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting between 30 to 60 minutes. This style of interviewing involved using a preplanned guide to ask participants relatively focused but open-ended questions about their experiences during the pandemic (Marshall & Rossman, 2007). I adopted a phenomenological interviewing approach to explore teachers' experiences with outdoor learning, mental and physical health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the potentially sensitive nature that pandemic-related topics may have on participants, individual phenomenological interviews

provided a safe space for participants to share their experiences anonymously. To keep in line with Marshall and Rossman's recommendations, I took field notes immediately after each interview to document contextual details, non-verbal cues, and any other components that could influence data interpretation.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom which allowed flexibility and accessibility, particularly for participants that are in various geographical locations. I found This virtual interview style to be convenient, and accessible as this approach also eliminates travel barriers.

Types and Sources of Data

The primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. Study participants were teachers who were teaching before the onset of the pandemic (March 2020), during the pandemic (March 2020- 2022) and after the pandemic (March 2022 – present) in British Columbia.

Time Frame for Data Collection

The data collection time allotted was 2-3 months, which allowed sufficient time for me to recruit participants, schedule and conduct interviews. This time frame balanced the need for comprehensive data collection with practical considerations such as participant availability.

Ethical Approval Procedures

My study was approved by UBC's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB), see Appendix I.

The UBC BREB number associated with my study is: H24-01885.

Recruitment

During the months of August and September 2024, I reached out to teachers within Chilliwack, Langley, Surrey, Squamish and Metro Vancouver, as well as throughout all of BC via the BC Early Career Teachers Association and the BC PHE Teachers Facebook Group. I aimed to gather participants from different locations in British Columbia, to gain understanding from different perspectives based on different locations. I did this through sharing my recruitment poster. When contacting groups, I asked if they could share my recruitment poster (Appendix III) on their organization's social media platforms, or to their members. They agreed to share the poster with their members, and on their Facebook pages. When sharing the recruitment poster, I asked whomever I was in contact with to include the following information along with the poster: APA guidelines – double spacing throughout the doc

“Are you an elementary or middle school teacher in British Columbia?”

“Did you teach during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?”

“Do you remember your ‘pivot’? Are you interested in sharing how you shifted to outdoor learning, the impacts of COVID-19 on teaching physical and health education, and the importance of mental health in both your teaching as well as your own well-being?”

Researchers are inviting teachers to participate in a 30-60 minute zoom interview discussing these topics!

Contact: jnordlet@student.ubc.ca for details about how to be involved!

Please note that if you choose to interact with this post (“like” or “follow” it), you will be publicly identified with the study.

Principal Investigator of the study: Dr. LeAnne Petherick, leanne.petherick@ubc.ca

Participants

Among the 11 teachers who contacted me, I scheduled and conducted interviews with seven participants. The seven interviews were with elementary and middle school teachers who worked within the Fraser Valley and Metro Vancouver. I chose to interview elementary and middle school teachers as they are often generalist teachers in BC and would potentially have more experience transitioning their pedagogy across various subject areas and were faced with shifting their teaching to outdoor learning spaces.

My initial inclusion criteria were elementary and middle school teachers in British Columbia who had graduated from their Bachelor of Education within the last 10 years. However, during the recruitment process, I adjusted this to allow teachers with all levels of experience because the COVID-19 pandemic occurred four years ago, limiting my participants to those with only 5-10 years of experience became challenging. I also recognized that the value in gaining perspectives from more experienced teachers, which could provide additional insights into the long-term impacts of the pandemic on education. Therefore, I adjusted the inclusion criteria to allow teachers of all experience levels, broadening the range of perspectives I could capture. Teachers who did not teach grades K-8, or outside of British Columbia were excluded from my study.

When selecting a sample size for qualitative research, particularly through interviewing, the goal was to achieve saturation and depth of understanding rather than numerical quantities (Edwards, 2023). Thus, conducting seven interviews aligns with the recommended amount for a phenomenological approach, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, without it becoming unmanageable for the data analysis process (Creswell, 2013). Unlike quantitative research, where larger samples are necessary for validity, qualitative research focuses on the depth, the context and the lived experiences of the participants involved in the

research. Phenomenological studies allow the researcher to capture more of the complexity of participants' experiences, which are the most important when understanding the research questions (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, I had the goal of completing my master's thesis on a specific timeline, and because the qualitative analysis is a long process, I decided that seven interviews would provide sufficient data to gather the necessary themes and provide the required context.

Sampling

To capture a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, I chose to use purposive sampling in my study. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling method where participants are selected based on specific characteristics or experiences that are relevant to the study's goals (Tongco, 2007). Purposive sampling allowed me to recruit participants that had direct experience with teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and navigating the transitions that it brought up. This strategy was chosen to confirm that participants had insights that were relevant to the study's themes such as classroom adaptations, physical and health education, outdoor learning, mental health and social equity considerations during this time.

Individual Interviews

My research included individual semi-structured zoom interviews that lasted between 30 – 60 minutes long. This style of interviewing consists of using a preplanned interview guide (Appendix V) which ensures that the researcher (myself) stays focused on the main topics while allowing the participants flexibility in exploring their answers and responses in depth (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, Kangasniemi, 2016). I decided to conduct individual rather than group interviews because this style of interviewing allowed for teachers from the same school or district to be recruited, which allowed for participants to share and focus on their own individual

experiences and perspectives. In addition to this, semi-structured interviews allow for participants to avoid situations that may make them feel uncomfortable if other participants were involved in a group setting.

The interviews were conducted virtually using UBC's secure Zoom platform, which is a technology-based communication tool. Although online interviews can experience technical difficulties, I was fortunate to experience very minimal connection issues, none in which interrupted the flow or understanding of the interview conversation happening. However, the disadvantage of online interviewing is the potential to miss certain social cues or body language as I was limited to their upper body and facial expressions. To address this, I ensured to rewatch recordings, and take field notes throughout the interview process.

Field Notes

Field notes are used to document contextual information throughout the interviews, and are an essential tool for qualitative research, that allow researchers to capture observations and reflections that complement the data retrieved from the interviews. I took notes during and after conducting my interviews to document information about the interview process to help provide additional context, focusing on non-verbal elements such as observations I had, emotional responses, body language, and my own reflections (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). These notes provide an extra layer of meaning, helping to deepen the interpretations and analysis of the data that may not be obvious in the written transcript alone (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

The reason that I chose to collect field notes was to enhance my memory throughout the data analysis phase and to support credibility in my findings. My field notes included information about each participant, such as their pseudonym, the grade they were teaching, the geographical area they taught in, and their years of teaching experience; details about the

interview setting, including where I was sitting and the time of day the interviews happened; and observations on emotions throughout the interview, including moments when I sensed participants may not have understood the question, or any noticeable body mannerisms that stood out to me.

For instance, during one conversation with a participant about incorporating social justice or Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) topics in their classroom, I noticed they began to avoid eye contact and fidget with their hands. These non-verbal cues suggested discomfort, adding an additional layer of depth to my understanding of their perspective. Such observations are invaluable, as they provide insights beyond verbal responses. By integrating field notes into the analysis phase, I can enrich my interpretations and draw meaningful connections between participants' spoken words and their non-verbal communication. Overall, the inclusion of field notes enhanced the richness and depth of my data collection.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Throughout the research process, I engaged in reflexivity to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. This involved examining my own preconceptions and assumptions and how they might influence the data (Laverty, 2003). I used the hermeneutic circle approach, moving back and forth between the whole and its individual parts to refine my interpretations (Laverty, 2003). This iterative process deepened my understanding of teachers' experiences teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, I invited participants to review the identified themes through member checking, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their perspectives (Braun et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

In the following section, I will describe how I analysed the interviews. The data analysis process employed a thematic analysis framework to systematically identify and interpret patterns within the dataset (Clarke, 2017). This involved organizing that data into meaningful units, coding these units based on recurrent themes, and interactively refining and defining these themes through constant comparison (Clarke, 2017). An inductive approach was used within thematic analysis, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being predefined (Braun et al., 2016). This approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the experiences and perspectives of participants, fostering exploration of novel insights and unexpected findings.

The initial phase of analysis involved open coding, examining data segments line-by-line to identify preliminary codes representing various concepts, ideas, or experiences (Braun et al., 2016). These codes were then grouped into broader categories forming the foundation for developing overarching themes. Once the themes were finalized, I interpreted them in relation to the study's research questions, relevant theoretical frameworks, and broader social-cultural contexts. This process included exploring the significance of identified themes and drawing connections to existing literature and perspectives (Clarke, 2017). To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, participants were invited to provide feedback on the identified themes through a member-checking process, validating the interpretations and ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives and experiences (Braun et al., 2016).

I conducted the analysis using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software available to me through UBC student access. NVivo facilitated the organization of quotes and data segments, streamlining phases 3 through 5 of the analysis as outlined by Braun et al. (2016): organizing coded data into candidate themes, reviewing and revising those themes, and developing a

detailed analysis of the finalized themes (p. 198). After completing these steps, I identified overarching themes, themes, and subthemes, which I subsequently organized and defined in a table format for clarity. This thematic analysis approach provided a structured yet flexible method for extracting meaningful insights from the qualitative data collected in this study (Clarke, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Maintaining ethical standards was essential throughout the study to protect the rights and well-being of participants. Prior to initiating the research, ethical approval was obtained from the University of British Columbia (UBC) Human Ethics Committee. Both recruitment materials and informed consent documents were reviewed by my supervisor and subsequently approved by the committee, ensuring that all aspects of the study met UBC's ethical guidelines.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were provided with clear and comprehensive information on the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. This process ensured that participation was fully voluntary and informed

To uphold participants' privacy, all identifying information was kept strictly confidential. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to safeguard their identities, and identifying information was stored separately from the data collected and analyzed. Data was anonymized to the greatest extent possible, ensuring that personal details could not be linked to specific individuals in the final analysis.

Upon completion of data collection, I employed an ethical exit strategy to conclude the interviews. This involved expressing gratitude to participants for their contributions and providing them with a summary of the research objectives and anticipated outcomes. This approach helped ensure a respectful and transparent closure to their involvement in the study (Marshall et al., 2007).

I also reflected on my positionality as a researcher, recognizing my background in education and personal connections within the education field. Although I did not have close relationships with participants, I acknowledged the way in which I was connected to the participants and ensured to keep their anonymity throughout the research process.

Risks and Mitigation

There are minimal risks involved in participating in this study. If interview questions seemed to be too personal or sensitive, participants were told they did not need to answer. They were also reminded that their participation in this project is entirely voluntary and could withdraw from the study at any point, without consequences.

Reflexivity and Positionality

Thinking about my positionality in relation to the study, I thought it was important to reflect on my own personal experiences, values, beliefs, and how these reflections may interact with my research. I am also committed to social justice issue and value the relational accountability we all share for one another *all* the time but reflecting on the COVID-19 context many topics were brought to light.

As the researcher who conducted this study, it is important to acknowledge my positionality and how it may influence the research process and outcomes. In the opening of this

proposal, I described who I am as a person. Here, I want to acknowledge my white privilege and other privileges that I have. I would like to share some information about myself as an emerging researcher and second-year graduate student at the University British Columbia within the Health, Outdoor, Physical Education program. To start, my academic passions are rooted within the field of Physical and Health Education (PHE). I self-identify as a female, white settler and member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. I am committed to fostering inclusive and equitable research practices that address the diverse needs of all individuals. My dad's parents were both born in Germany and moved to Canada when they were 18 and 20 years old. When my Opa [grandfather] was in the first grade, World War II was happening, and his entire class first grade class was taken and sent to live with a new family in Austria for safety. When they arrived in Austria, all the kids were lined up along the wall and families chose them one by one to take home with them. He was unable to say goodbye to his family and was required to stay there until he turned 19 years old, and once he did, he was able to move back to Germany. However, to receive a passport, he was needed to provide a connection to Austria. The family that he lived with did not want to adopt him, or give him their last name, so he took the mother's maiden name of Leth, and attached it to his born last name Nord, creating our last name Nord-Leth, now there are only 7 Nord-Leth's in the world. I cannot imagine the trauma that this would have caused for a 6-year-old to be taken from your family is such a terrible way. Later in his life, he immigrated to Canada where he met my Oma, who also moved to Canada from Germany (with only \$18.00 in her pocket). My mom's parents were also born in Canada, but my grandpa's family is from Italy, and my Grammie's parents were from Denmark. I do not know much history about my Grammie's family, but I do know that my Great Grandpa travelled from Italy to

Kelowna with his six brothers and one sister, and settled in Kelowna, British Columbia and still has a section of town named after them “Casorzo”.

When my parents met, they built a home in Chilliwack, British Columbia. My dad pursued many different career paths such as being a wedding DJ and worked on a radio station, before settling on being a realtor. My mom works as a unit clerk at the Chilliwack hospital. With my parents' careers I was able to grow up in a middle-class family in a home with a backyard, surrounded by nature. However, with my dad working on commission as a realtor I have seen the realities of socio-economic status. Growing up in the lower mainland of British Columbia, despite the constant rain, the temperature was always mild enough to enjoy being outside. The physical environment and nature of British Columbia started my love for nature and deepened my passion for physical activity.

My positionality shapes not only my worldview and the lens through which I approach this research but also the way I interpret and make sense of the data. As a Caucasian settler, I recognize the privileges I hold and the need to confront systems of oppression and colonialism that have marginalized Indigenous peoples and communities. To mitigate the potential biases, I aim to conduct this research with humility, respect and commitment to decolonizing practices.

Furthermore, my identity as a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community informs my understanding of marginalization and the importance of inclusive spaces. However, I acknowledge the privilege that comes with being white, even within marginalized spaces that are meant to be inclusive. Despite facing discrimination based on my sexuality, I am aware that white 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals still benefit from white supremacy and can unintentionally perpetuate racism against other minority groups.

While upholding ethical and professional standards, I acknowledge that my positionality inevitably shapes my perspective and interpretations. I commit to ongoing reflexivity, recognizing my biases and limitations, and remaining open to diverse viewpoints and ways of knowing.

My academic background and research interests lie in the field of physical and health education, outdoor learning, mental health, equity diversity and inclusion (EDI), sustainability, and more. While I have minimal prior experience conducting qualitative research and data analysis, this study represents a new endeavor for me in terms of exploring the post-COVID realizations in schools, specifically in outdoor learning, physical and health education (PHE) and mental health. Throughout this section, I will reflect on my own beliefs, attitudes, and ideas toward my field of research. One of the criteria I will use to ensure my qualitative research is of quality is *sincerity* (Tracy, 2010). Sincerity includes self-reflexivity regarding subjective values, perspectives, and inclinations of myself as the researcher (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). I recognize my own experiences regarding education, outdoor learning, PHE, and mental health education.

What was COVID-19 like for me?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced a whirlwind of emotions. Losing the opportunity to travel to teach in Antigua, having my graduation canceled, missing birthday parties, and sitting 6 feet apart on my best friend's deck in the middle of winter with masks on just to spend time together were just a few of the adjustments I faced. Much of the pandemic was marked by feelings of upset and frustration at how much was taken away. The isolation and negative atmosphere weighed heavily, with constant concerns about not getting anyone sick, feelings of guilt if you were unwell, and routines like washing groceries becoming the norm. My

mom, who worked in a hospital, would change clothes in the garage and often isolate herself further whenever there were outbreaks at work. These experiences underscored the pervasive anxiety and strain that defined much of this period.

However, it also brought me new perspectives. As much as I felt my social connection was being lost, I realized that the most important things in my life aren't parties or events but my relationships with friends and family. The lockdown emphasized the value of these connections. The world adapted in creative and unexpected ways! I remember spending hours on FaceTime parties with adapted games like virtual charades and virtual Pictionary or making presentations to share with our friends and family. I remember doing car hide and go seek (a made-up game where you would drive somewhere in town hiding in your car, giving hints to the other driver to come find you), all sorts of unique activities and games we would create that we never would have without the COVID-19 restrictions. I think that during this time, I spent more quality time with my family and friends, than I ever have.

The pandemic also offered opportunities to try new things. I explored individual sports like running, kayaking, and outdoor yoga—activities I might never have considered before. These experiences reinforced my passion for health and wellness and made me curious about the unique ways teachers in British Columbia modified their teaching to adapt to the pandemic. As physical and health education often takes a back seat in schools, I'm particularly interested in whether teachers promoted health more actively during and after the pandemic, given the heightened awareness of health's central importance to our lives.

Connecting My Positionality to My Research

Growing up, I loved being active, engaging in sports like basketball, skiing, field hockey, gymnastics, surfing, swimming, and dance. Because of this, I was one of the students who loved PHE class. However, most of my closest friends did not feel this way and often described negative experiences in PE settings. These friends also seemed to struggle the most with staying active throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, my passion for PHE grew through an international teaching experience in Antigua, West Indies called the Champions for Health Promoting Schools program working within primary schools teaching PHE and life skills throughout the island. I have continued to participate in this program since 2017 and this experience has sparked my passion for PHE teaching and highlighted the importance of a holistic approach to education that prioritizes both physical and mental well-being. What has become really interesting for me, is the impact of COVID-19 on the Champions for Health project, but rather more locally the impact of the pandemic for teaching and learning in elementary and middle schools here in British Columbia.

My personal connection to the importance of mental health comes from a deeply impactful family experience that I mentioned earlier. Adam's story illustrates the true need for accessible mental health education and open conversations in schools, especially in fostering self-esteem and resilience among students. This connection continues to shape my approach as a researcher, driving my commitment to advocating for meaningful and actionable strategies that empower teachers to support their students. Recognizing the complexities of mental health, I position myself as both a scholar and a family member who has witnessed its critical importance firsthand.

Given the profound impacts these experiences have had on my life surrounding body insecurities, mental health challenges, passion for physical and health education and sport, and physical literacy, my research focuses on the reflections in education from the COVID-19 pandemic. There are many challenging narratives during this time, but I aim to learn more to be able to target key areas for improvement such as support for teachers addressing the significance of learning outside traditional settings. By understanding the pandemic's impact on education and prioritizing young people's mental health within an educational context, my research seeks to highlight the role of teachers in fostering resilience and holistic well-being.

This research stems from personal experiences, including the tragic loss of Adam, whose struggles brought to light the urgent need for accessible mental health education and resources within schools, and my passion for physical activity and health. Through focusing on these positive aspects, such as increased awareness and prioritization of mental health, newfound appreciation for outdoor learning environments, idea shifts in physical and health education, I aim to uncover valuable insights that can inform future educational practices. Through this lens, my research seeks to emphasize the resilience and adaptability of the education system in the face of adversity and identify strategies to sustain these positive changes beyond the pandemic era.

Ensuring Ethical Reflexivity

Through examining my experiences, passion for PHE and mental health, and the impacts of COVID-19 on education, I hope to contribute valuable insights to the field and advocate for effective strategies that address the diverse needs of students in British Columbia and beyond. However, I recognize the potential power dynamics and ethical considerations that may arise due

to my positionality in relation to my research participants (e.g., teachers). To mitigate these concerns, I will prioritize building trust and rapport, ensuring informed consent, and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Through acknowledging my own perspectives and preconceptions, I can approach the research with greater fairness and a commitment to authenticity.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 of this study outlined the theoretical framework and research methods that guided the exploration of teachers' experiences with outdoor learning, physical and health education, and mental health during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. By adopting a salutogenic perspective, this chapter highlighted the focus on factors that promote resilience and well-being, drawing on the concepts of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. The study utilized a phenomenological methodology, specifically a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, to explore the lived experiences of teachers and gain insight into the subjective meanings they attached to their teaching practices. The recruitment process, interview techniques, and strategies for ensuring validity and trustworthiness through reflexivity and member checking were also detailed. This methodological foundation paves the way for Chapter 4, where the results and discussion of the study's findings will be presented, offering a deeper understanding of the positive post-pandemic realizations and the impact of these experiences on the future of education.

Chapter 4:

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the key themes identified from interviews with elementary and middle school teachers working within British Columbia schools. The research focus explored teachers' experiences during and post-COVID-19, with an emphasis on learning more about their experiences teaching outdoor learning, mental health, physical and health education. The overall impact of the pandemic on teaching was also documented. Given the diversity of experiences during and post-COVID-19, a phenomenological lens guided this study to better understand the essence of teachers' lived experiences during and after the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, leading to a complete lockdown for all schools in BC and a transition to online learning. When schools reopened for in-person learning in 2020, students faced numerous restrictions, including 2-meter physical distancing, cohort grouping, and mask mandates. These measures remained in place until the spring of 2022, when restrictions were fully lifted. This study's findings reflect different points within this timeframe, capturing teachers' varied experiences and the adaptations they made as conditions evolved.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2016) approach to qualitative analysis, which allows for flexible and in-depth exploration of complex data, this study identified four core themes that highlight the patterns in how teachers adapted their teaching and learning environments: (1) Teaching Adaptations during COVID-19, (2) Impacts of PHE and Outdoor Learning, (3) Mental Health and (4) Equity in the Classroom. To provide greater context for the findings, I first outline participants' backgrounds to offer insight into their individual and collective lived experiences before discussing each of the key themes in depth.

Participant Contexts

In this study, I interviewed seven elementary and middle school teachers. Each participant brought unique perspectives shaped by their individual experiences. In this section, I introduce each participant using the information they shared with me throughout their interviews. Their identities are protected with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Zayn

Zayn is an experienced educator with a strong passion for working with at-risk youth. His teaching journey spans across 15 years. Covid was a time of change for Zayn as he started the pandemic teaching PE daily at an Alternative Education program in a challenging neighborhood in Metro Vancouver. He worked primarily with at-risk youth, between the grades of 7-9. These students often came from broken homes, were involved in street life, or suffered from mental health challenges. Midway through the pandemic, Zayn transitioned to a more traditional Grade 7 classroom in the Fraser Valley. Zayn is deeply committed to reaching students who face significant life challenges, and he viewed education as a lifeline for those with limited support.

While many found the health mandates during COVID-19 challenging, Zayn maintained a pragmatic stance. He expressed that the pandemic did not significantly alter the fundamentals of his teaching, and noted he continued to focus on community, teamwork, and keeping students engaged, despite new protocols like masking and distancing. Zayn described COVID-19's effect on education as "overstated", noting that the essence of his practice—centering on students' connections with each other and their teacher—remained strong. For Zayn, keeping schools open was vital, and the adaptations he made, such as modifying activities for mask-wearing, were practical for him rather than transformative.

Ella

Ella began her career teaching Grade 1 in an urban community in the Fraser Valley. Ella was at the start of her now 6-year teaching career when the pandemic struck and COVID-19 quickly reshaped her approach to teaching. Everything she was taught in her practicum had to be “thrown out the window” and flexibility became her new key term. The restrictions were pushing her to find creative ways to teach reading and social skills while ensuring health safety. Ella navigated this with empathy as she was aware of the impact on young students who had never experienced school without masks and distancing. Especially with her teaching Grade 1, she was molding the minds of children who had barely begun the journey of education. She adjusted her classroom setup to maximize safety while maintaining a sense of normalcy and connection between her students. Ella’s interview highlights the emotional depth of teaching during a pandemic, as she prioritized her students’ emotional development alongside academic goals.

Katie

Katie, a PHE specialist with nearly two decades of experience, faced a unique set of challenges as she taught at a private elementary school in Metro Vancouver. Parental expectations remained consistently high throughout the pandemic, requiring Katie to adapt rapidly to shifting educational and parental demands.

She handled the transition to online learning with a blend of structure and flexibility, remaining acutely aware of the importance of physical activity for students’ mental health. Her approach often involved communicating with parents to meet their expectations while finding innovative ways to keep students active and engaged at home. Katie’s extensive background in PHE and outdoor learning helped her manage the added stress of teaching through COVID-19 by offering support to not only her students but to her colleagues. In her interview, she reflected on this period as one that strengthened her adaptability and resilience as a teacher.

Rebecca

Rebecca is an elementary school teacher who has 10 years of teaching experience. During the pandemic she taught Grade 3 in a multicultural community of Metro Vancouver. The diversity within her class brought unique perspectives and different needs as many of her students were English Language Learners (ELL). Rebecca had an Educational Assistant (EA) to support her diverse class during the unfamiliar times of COVID-19. She describes her experience during the pandemic as a continuous balancing act, managing various learning modes—from online to hybrid to fully in person—and adapting lessons to maintain engagement across different learning needs. Rebecca faced the unique challenge of keeping her multicultural and multilingual classroom connected. To keep up with the needs of her students, Rebecca found innovative ways to use technology and visual aids to bridge the gaps caused by remote learning. In her interview, she reflected on the value of adaptability and collaboration, skills she believes have become even more critical in her teaching approach post-pandemic.

4.1.5) Rose

With 30 years of teaching experience, Rose is a dedicated educator from the Fraser Valley who has seen the evolution of teaching. She stated that one shift she never imagined would occur in her lifetime was the worldwide shutdown which halted in person learning caused by COVID-19. Teaching a diverse group of grade 3 students, some with unique functions, Rose noted that her empathetic approach was tested as she quickly adapted to online instruction. The loss of in-person connections weighed heavily on her, as some students became increasingly difficult to reach during the pandemic. Despite these challenges, Rose continued to dedicate her time in maintaining student engagement and accessibility. In her interview, Rose reflected on the

importance of connection and continuity. She recognized the pandemic as a period of intense but necessary adjustment to meet students' varied needs.

Stephen

Stephen, a grade 5 teacher with a total of 23 years of teaching experience in the Fraser Valley, brings a reflective, team-oriented approach to his classroom. During COVID-19 he taught in a conservative community and had the responsibility of mentoring a student-teacher which adds a unique layer to his experience. Stephen described the initial transition to online learning as chaotic but ultimately led to an opportunity for growth and teamwork. He emphasized the adaptability required to manage uncertainty to support his students all while mentoring a new teacher. Stephen's teaching philosophy centers on the idea of education as a shared journey, where both students and teachers learn together to navigate challenges, a perspective he continues to value in his post-pandemic teaching.

Natalie

Natalie taught a grade 6/7 class during the pandemic and after over 20 years of classroom teaching experience has since transitioned to a vice principal role in Metro Vancouver. She reflected on her teaching experience as one that highlights the importance of leadership and community support, both for her students and her colleagues. Natalie saw COVID-19 as an eye-opener regarding the mental health needs of students, recognizing the need for a supportive and structured environment in times of crisis. Her new leadership role involves guiding other educators through similar challenges, using insights gained from her frontline teaching experience during the pandemic. She views her time as a classroom teacher during COVID-19 as pivotal in shaping her leadership philosophy, which emphasizes resilience, adaptability, and the critical role of mental health support.

Theme 1: Teaching Adaptations During COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, teachers were suddenly thrown into a completely changed world. Most schools focus on building connections, collaboration, teamwork, and community, but with the pandemic, everything was disrupted. Familiar routines went “out the window”, classroom layouts were reorganized to ensure physical distancing. Hands on experiential lessons that infused classrooms with energy, were now relegated to lectures delivered on computer screens. On the return to the classroom, content delivery had to be readjusted to maintain health guidelines. Every day brought new challenges – social distancing, masks, hybrid schedules – but instead of giving up, many teachers found creative ways to make pandemic education work while staying connected, and reconnecting with their students. Teachers had to rethink and reconceptualize their teaching, adapting in ways many had never considered before with the goal to keep their students engaged in a time when connection mattered the most.

Schools are traditionally spaces of connection and community, embodying Dewey’s (1916) concept of ‘democratic engagement,’ where collaboration and shared experiences shape learning. However, during COVID-19, these foundational elements were profoundly impacted. Teachers modified their practices to accommodate a new reality where physical distancing and virtual interaction replaced traditional learning spaces.

Shift to Online

One of the first responses to COVID 19 in schools was the sudden shift to online teaching in early 2020. The ‘pivot’ was a rollercoaster for teachers, students, and families. Almost overnight, teachers had to reimagine their classrooms, moving from in-person lessons to virtual connections. Katie recalls how quickly her school transitioned, “Basically, they spun up super

quickly to have all classes online in place by one day after the 2020 March break”. But the sudden change brought challenges, as Katie explains, “The feedback from the parents was very quick, saying that it was just too much”. Teachers had to adjust, scaling back on schedules and revisiting expectations to create balance that could support students, without overwhelming them.

Katie’s narrative aligns to the struggles that Kim and Asbury (2020) discovered when teachers shifted online. In this research study teachers recounted a profound shift in not knowing Kim and Asbury's (2020) research highlighted that teachers faced significant uncertainties during the shift to online teaching. Many struggled with technology, expressing a lack of familiarity with the platforms and tools necessary for effective online instruction. Additionally, teachers were unsure how to maintain student engagement in a virtual environment and how to assess learning effectively without traditional, in-person methods. The sudden shift also left teachers questioning how to balance academic content with students' emotional well-being during a time of unprecedented stress and isolation. These uncertainties compounded the challenge of adjusting their teaching strategies, further emphasizing the magnitude of the "pivot" Katie described.

Each teacher’s journey through online learning was distinct but connected by a shared resilience. The immediate shift provided little time for preparation of lessons and understanding of these new expectations, Rachel shared her experience with the initial online expectation: “our school started with the expectation that students had to have interactions through Zoom with their teacher at least once a week, if not more, and then daily messaging on some sort of platform”. Stephan noted that the “online year was kind of new for everybody” and “it was a little fun to do online meetings and stuff with students online” but acknowledged that “it was not like we were actually accomplishing anything”. For others, like Rose, the online shift created

barriers that could not always be bridged. She stated, “I had two students that once we went online, I almost lost full contact with them”. Rose’s experience is similar to what MacDonald and Hill (2022) found in their study. Teachers “also felt that they were holding relationships in a very tentative way, noting difficulty connecting with their students” (p. 632). Similarly, Kim and Asbury (2020) found that many teachers “had a harder time in the initial phases of remote teaching because pupils did not engage with the activities they had created, leading them to rethink their approach” (p. 1071).

The quick transition to online learning was a challenge, but it also highlighted the flexibility and resourcefulness of teachers. MacDonald and Hill (2022) identified similar challenges during British Columbia’s rapid educational response to the pandemic. Teachers reported immense stress due to the sudden change and the need to support not only their students, but their own families while adapting to remote instruction. As mentioned, many teachers lacked the technological readiness or time to meaningfully connect with all their students, specifically those most vulnerable or disengaged, such as those with learning disabilities or inconsistent internet access (MacDonald & Hill, 2022).

Another added stress to the online shift was the clear systemic inequities, such as limited home access to technology, home safety, and food insecurity (Kim and Asbury, 2020). This shift revealed gaps in technological access, professional development and preparedness, but also fostered unprecedented innovation and digital competency in the teaching community (Anderson et al., 2020). This shift to online teaching stretched teachers in new ways, expanding their skill sets and requiring them to find inventive methods to connect with students. Rebecca reflects on how this period reshaped her teaching approach:

I think that previously, we were very isolated to the people I knew about, or teaching practices and ideas came from people like actually in my school, or you know in real life. I think being at home, and having to learn online, all of a sudden there were really great resources out there, like leading read alouds, or different activities. It just made me realize there is a lot more out there... I am now connected with teachers in different countries, and this pushed me to look at pedagogy on a more global scale and looking how we can learn in different ways and reach out to other educators is so much easier now.

This perspective allowed Rebecca to look beyond her local community and consider additional perspectives of teaching and learning from all around the world. MacDonald and Hill (2022) similarly emphasized how many teachers discovered new opportunities for professional growth, leveraging online webinars and collaboration tools to improve their practice. Such adjustments broadened their pedagogical expertise but also encouraged greater emphasis on holistic approaches to education, supporting both emotional and academic needs (MacDonald and Hill, 2022).

Rose and Katie also incorporated creative ways to keep students engaged from a distance. Rose encouraged students to explore nearby parks:

All we could do is encourage, so many companies and places rose to the challenge, right? So online there were all kinds of incredible resources and ideas, so in our weekly plans I would always, you know, give ideas for them to do, like find a park or do this or visit here.

Meanwhile, Katie organized an online sports day, an event designed to bring joy and physical activity to students despite the distance. Teachers did not just adjust to using new tools, they also

found fresh perspectives on where learning could happen. Rose's experience captures this blend of technology and nature nicely:

I personally, as a teacher, loved that spring because I could take my computer on the porch. I had meetings with my kids outside, meetings with my staff, my schoolwork, I did it all from my porch, so I got to watch the trees change.

For her, teaching from her porch with a view of nature was a reminder that learning environments can extend beyond walls. These stories show us that lessons and units can be reimagined to create new exciting experiences. Rebecca found herself connecting with educators from around the world to examine a new global perspective of learning, Rose used online resources to help students familiarize themselves with the environment around them, and Katie managed to execute an online sports day that aimed to bring joy to her students.

These experiences reveal how the shift to online learning opened the door of endless opportunities in technology. Rose said, "I think as a teacher I became a lot more proficient at different types of technology, so I'm able to use a lot more in my lessons now." For some, like Natalie, the transition was smoother thanks to resources already in place, "Our online experience, like teaching COVID online was, really easy for me because our class had such a big push on technology, and luckily had one-to-one laptops that had just been introduced." [L7] But for others, it was more of a struggle, as Ella expressed, "Once they shut everything down around spring break. It was, we were online and had to navigate that which was challenging".

Together, these stories reveal the flexibility and adaptability that teachers found at the start, highlighting how they not only coped with the pandemic's impact, but also found new ways to teach, connect and grow alongside their students. Despite the emotional and logistical difficulties, as MacDonald and Hill (2033) emphasize in their article, the resilience of the

teaching community, and the lessons learned about supporting diverse learners during such unprecedented times.

Physical Classroom Space

The physical layout of classrooms was one of the first tangible changes implemented during the return to school process. Physical distancing and sanitation requirements forced teachers to reimagine their learning environments as they adhered to the provincial health guidelines while maintaining a sense of community, connection and collaboration. One major guideline mandated by the government was requiring six feet of separation between each other, which presented significant challenges. Teachers had to reorganize their classrooms to create this distance while ensuring an environment still beneficial for learning.

Ella, a grade 1 teacher in the Fraser Valley, shared how her classroom setup shifted from clusters of desks to rows side by side one another:

We had to kind of restructure just how we would normally set up a classroom. So usually, it would be groups or rows of like side by side kids and they're right next to a buddy. But then we had to kind of switch and be flexible and say, okay everybody's going to be at least a meter away from each other and really make sure that happened when they opened things up to be back at school.

This enforced separation disrupted traditional setups that foster collaboration and student interaction. Rebecca also found the new classroom guidelines difficult when she stated, “We couldn’t do group work or let students sit together, which affected their communication and collaboration skills”. This shift to isolation in the classroom was crucial for safety but hindered opportunities for group learning and community building.

Research by Gislason et al. (2010) supports the notion that classroom layouts significantly influence student collaboration and engagement levels in the classroom. When students are physically distanced, their ability to engage with peers diminishes. This was especially challenging for students already struggling with connection. Zayn, who taught Alternative Education in Metro Vancouver, observed how mask mandates and strict seating arrangements created further barriers:

For kids who are already struggling with connection and focus, masks added just another barrier for them. We had to be flexible, finding ways for them to feel engaged even though they were isolated at their desks.

Teachers were not the only ones navigating these changes. Students, parents, and administrators also faced heightened anxiousness around spreading illnesses. Natalie, a grade 6/7 teacher from Metro Vancouver, reflected on the increased caution during this time,

Any slight cough, and a student would be sent home. My class was an anxious group, and they preferred individual desks and a more traditional set up during the pandemic.

Teaching became a lot more about lecturing and individual work, rather than interactive group work or hands-on activities.

Natalie added that this preference for separation from each other stemmed from her students' fear of catching illnesses from one another, "A lot of [my students] were coming to school with anxiety. They wanted desks separated from one another because they didn't like how someone else was unclean or not wearing their mask properly... kids carried a lot of that burden".

Teachers also noted the strain of navigating health protocols alongside their professional responsibilities. Natalie shared her own fears, "I remember being so scared at that time, and I would leave all the windows and doors open, and the kids would bring blankets. It seems so silly

to look back on now, but it was a real fear”. This reflection highlights a combination of factors beyond logistics and classroom organization.

At its core, the school is a public setting designed to invite learners, both teachers and students, into a space of support, collaboration and community. Yet during COVID-19, this community was redefined under circumstances of heightened fear, anxiety, and isolation. This overlay of fear and anxiety further complicated the school environment (Stone, Witzig, & McIntosh, 2022). Both students and teachers navigated their heightened concerns for spreading illness transmission, leading to the preference for separation and more traditional, lecture-based instruction at the beginning (Stone et al., 2022). This anxiety-driven approach to education was very different from the pre-pandemic emphasis on teacher and peer interactions and hands-on learning experiences (Stone et al., 2022).

Teachers therefore had to think creatively on how to use their available space, which often led to favouring individual based tasks to maintain safe workspaces. The strict hygiene requirements caused the traditional classroom layout to be pushed to the side. Despite this challenge, teachers continued to create classrooms that provided optimal learning space to make their students feel safe at school (Casimir, Blake, Klosky & Gazmararian, 2023). These adaptations showcase the resilience of schools as democratic spaces of learning and community, even under the most challenging circumstances (Dewey, 1916). By rethinking physical layouts and pedagogical practices, teachers ensured that the essence of education (connection, growth and support) remained intact.

Theme 2: Impacts of Physical and Health Education (PHE)

Changes in PHE Curriculum

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant shifts in the delivery and content of Physical and Health Education (PHE), driven by the urgent need for health and safety measures. As schools adapted to the new guidelines and restrictions, teachers were required to rethink how they could engage students in physical activities while maintaining safety protocols. Because PHE often has students participating in activities using their bodies, where they may be breathing heavily and close to one another, this was a specifically tricky subject to navigate. This led to a greater emphasis on health education, which became more prominent during COVID-19. Teachers, who had traditionally focused heavily on physical activity, found themselves incorporating more health-related topics such as hygiene, mental health, and overall well-being into their lessons.

Initially some generalist teachers were directed to prioritize core academic subjects such as literacy and numeracy over PHE topics. Rose recalls, "They asked us to focus on literacy and numeracy, and then basically their social emotional... Like how is their mental health doing, how are they doing?" Similarly, Ella noted, "I teach grade 1, so a lot of it is literacy-based, and that is what they wanted us to focus on." Despite these early priorities, teachers adapted to incorporate health education more consistently within PHE, recognizing its importance during a time of heightened health concerns.

The pandemic also brought to light the longstanding perceptions that PHE holds limited educational value in comparison to academic subjects, a critique that is often shared in literature (Kirk, 2013). However, the disruptions of COVID-19 highlighted the essential role of physical activity in supporting students' mental wellbeing.

Although PHE often takes a back burner in schools due to academic pressures and having “limited educational value” (Kirk, 2013, p. 974), the pandemic makes it clear that physical activity is essential, not only for students’ physical health, but for their mental health and emotional well-being. Teachers expressed the need to incorporate physical movement into students’ lives more frequently, recognizing the positive effects it has on students. Stephen provided an example of how structured breaks, specifically movement breaks, became an essential part of his school day. He noted, “So everybody, not just me, but everybody, at least in the elementary level, has some sort of break in the mornings... because kids can’t go 3 hours without having a snack or some type of movement break.”

Similarly, Natalie shared, “I think the emphasis on taking brain and body breaks has really stuck,” pointing to how the pandemic reshaped classroom norms around movement. Ella reinforces this perspective, stating, “Any opportunity that I can get my students to move only supplements their learning in the classroom”. These reflections demonstrate how the integration of physical activity became more intentionally linked to cognitive and emotional benefits throughout the pandemic, further embedding it into the broader educational experience.

Expanding Health Education Focus

The pandemic amplified the importance of the health education piece within PHE. In British Columbia, a 2016 curriculum shifted to integrate health education within Physical and Health Education (PHE), moving away from its earlier placement within Career and Personal Planning (CAPP). This change aimed to combine health content with physical education to promote a more holistic understanding of student well-being. Despite this integration, physical education often remained the dominant focus for many teachers. However, COVID-19 exposed gaps in the delivery of health education, prompting a shift toward more inclusion.

Katie reflected on this change, "Health education has also become more of a focus. I realized there was a gap in our program, and we weren't delivering the health curriculum as much as we should have been". In response, she began blending traditional PHE lessons with classroom time to teach topics more thoroughly such as nutrition, mental health, and healthy lifestyles. "That has been a big change" she noted, adding that she has joined a working group on nutrition guidelines and is actively contributing to building a whole-school approach to health, "So COVID really changed everything for us, but in a good way".

Rebecca, who did not teach physical education specifically because her school has a PE specialist, shared that she does teach Health and observed how the pandemic broadened health education discussions in her classroom. She shared:

I think previously we had a common understanding of what healthy was. And now, it was like, when we are trying to honour family decisions, we had kids in our classes on very different sides of what was healthy during COVID and that was really interesting to navigate, and I just think it allowed for better and deeper conversations about health, beyond the physical aspect.

Rebecca's statement implies a recognition of the political and ideological divides that emerged during the pandemic, particularly regarding issues like vaccinations, mask-wearing, and other COVID related guidelines. The debates surrounding these topics brought health education into a more controversial territory, where students and families had varying perspectives on what constitutes a healthy lifestyle or even what was considered "safe".

Rebecca also noted a shift in the frequency and depth of health-related lessons:

Previously, when I was teaching health, it would kind of be okay for this one week we're going to focus on our health, right? Usually, I did it the week before Christmas or the

week before spring break, and we'll talk about healthy living. Then I think COVID made it, so it was just a conversation, and like just so much a part of their worlds. The topic came up a whole lot more. And so, we talked about healthy living and healthy habits way more frequently, and that would still be something where I think I embed it a little bit more still through different lessons than just these standalone health lessons.

This integration of health education throughout the year signified a move away from isolated lessons to an ongoing conversation about health and wellness. Rebecca emphasized the importance of understanding the “why” behind health practices, rather than just explaining what they are. “I think I focus more on the why behind things now. Before I would teach healthy habits, but now we talk more about why things like washing our hands is so important, or why we do certain things and how it impacts our daily lives”. This continuous engagement helps reinforce the importance of healthy behaviors and encourages students to apply these concepts in their daily lives (Human Kinetics, n.d.).

Navigating Safety and Logistics in PHE

The fear of contagiousness during the pandemic era led to shifts in how PHE was delivered. Teachers were particularly concerned about the safety of shared materials and spaces. Stephan, for instance, recalled how, initially, even simple physical activities became entangled with concerns about cleanliness and sanitation. He shared, “I had a basketball for everybody and a skipping rope” and “I remember feeling the need to go to spray them with disinfectant spray and wipe them down at the end of every day, which seems so silly now.” This overemphasis on sanitation reflects the extreme caution teachers felt during the pandemic driven by the fear of spreading illness. Interestingly, this fear led to behaviours that now seem excessive, possibly due to the early uncertainty surrounding the virus and the heightened anxiousness about student

safety. Stephan's reflection on this experience highlights how perceptions of safety measures evolved as knowledge and public health guidelines improved.

The shifts in PHE brought about by the pandemic represent more than temporary adjustments, they signify a lasting transformation in how health and physical activity are integrated into education. By embedding health education into daily conversations and linking physical activity to mental and emotional benefits, teachers have embraced a more holistic approach to student well-being. As Rebecca noted, "I think we were actually way healthier in our schools. We had far fewer staff or students sick with the flu or colds or any other illnesses"

The pandemic fostered a deeper understanding of health as multidimensional, encompassing physical, mental and social elements. It encouraged integrated more holistic approaches to physical education, acknowledging the interconnectedness of mental and physical health. These changes signal a broader recognition of PHE's role in shaping resilient, well-rounded individuals in a post-pandemic world, as highlighted by Cloes (2022) and Varea et al. (2023), who stress the evolving understanding of PHE as not only promoting physical activity but also supporting students emotional and social well-being.

Physical Literacy Adaptations

As the education system adjusted to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of physical literacy, defined as the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life, (Whitehead, 2016; Physical literacy: PHE Canada, 2024) became even more crucial, particularly as physical activity opportunities in the community were no longer accessible. The pandemic revealed the essential role of physical literacy, as it enabled students to adapt their activity levels, even when traditional community-based activities were limited (Cloes, 2022).

Teachers recognized that physical activity was not merely beneficial for physical health but could also play a central role in mental health. As Varea et al. (2023) mentioned, the global health crisis aligned with a heightened awareness of the role that physical activity plays in overall wellness, which by extension led to reinforcing the importance of physical literacy. The heightened awareness of health and wellness during COVID-19 was strategically used by teachers to foster lifelong physical literacy among students.

Ella shared how she purposefully considered physical literacy opportunities to keep her students physically active as much as possible while adhering to safety protocols. She explained, “I looked at physical literacy options...using the playground as a way to do it like a circuit. Any opportunity that I could get my students to move only supplements their learning in the classroom, especially during this time”. COVID-19 disrupted or completely halted access to many student resources, such as extracurricular sports and recreational centers; it became essential to place greater emphasis on physical activity within the school setting. These teachers' experiences highlight the need to prioritize physical activity during this time to ensure students remained active and engaged, despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic. These findings reflect results from Reena and Mumu (2024), who indicated the pandemic led to decreased participation in physical activity, making it essential for schools to find alternative ways to keep their students active and passionate about physical activity.

Research emerging from the pandemic indicates that young people who had strong physical literacy skills prior to the onset of COVID-19 were more likely to maintain physical activity levels during restrictions and beyond (Houser, Humbert, Kreillaars & Erlandson, 2022). As highlighted by Rowe (2022), the role of PHE teachers became even more crucial during this time in fostering lifelong physical literacy and motivating students to stay physically active

amidst the limited resources. This result shows the importance of developing strong physical literacy skills in young people, as these skills can be translated and applied even in unforeseen circumstances.

Natalie's experience was different from Ella's. Her class faced additional challenges, as their gymnasium was undergoing seismic upgrades, and they did not have access to the gymnasium. Consequently, PHE classes were almost entirely relocated outdoors. Reflecting on this transition, Natalie shared:

Even once we got access to the gym again, we still prefer to take PE outdoors and give our designated gymnasium times to other classes because we barely get any time anyways.

For Natalie, outdoor teaching evolved from being a necessity during the pandemic to a preferred practice, reflecting the adaptability and resilience of teachers. She also described how her school supported the integration of more frequent physical activity breaks throughout the day, a practice that began during the pandemic and has since become a staple. During the pandemic, there were more body breaks in teaching. This has carried over into the school day where even a few minutes are used for body and brain breaks and a 15-minute ultimate frisbee game is incorporated into teaching time as well. For Natalie, this shift led to more physical activity and not just the typical two 30-minute PE blocks per week. The pandemic taught Natalie and her colleagues that PE does not have to be limited to set time or location. The impetus behind this change arose from students being mindful or even afraid to take off their masks.

Natalie states:

We can't really do PE with masks on, so just being outside and not using the gym space was our option and realizing okay, well we know that brain breaks, and body breaks help

kids learn. So, if we are not going to have specific gym times, why do we need it only twice a week?” We can extend it further throughout the week in more different areas.

Natalie described how the pandemic led to a reimagining of PHE schedules and spaces. She embraced a fluid approach to physical activity, integrating movement throughout the day in ways that transcended beyond traditional gym-based instruction. This resonates with findings from Fitzpatrick (2023), who noted that redefining PHE’s objectives during the pandemic revealed its potential for promoting students’ holistic development. This strategy promoted not only the physical aspect but also cognitive and emotional well-being, reinforcing the interconnectedness of these domains.

Some teachers adapted to the shifts of the pandemic while others adhered to pandemic requirements and used these to promote existing beliefs and practices in physical education. For instance, Zayn maintained his pre-pandemic approach to PHE demonstrating the diverse responses among teachers. He shared, “I didn’t change how I taught PE. I kept my team sports approach and didn’t shift into individual activities; I kept teaching the curriculum as I always did”. Zayn’s approach reflects his commitment to team sports highlighted in his belief in the social and interpersonal benefits of physical education through teamwork and connection. Despite challenges of mask-wearing and safety measures, he prioritized his opportunities for connection and movement stating: “I knew they had to move”.

For Zayn, the pandemic did not cause the need for reinvention of PHE but rather, affirmed the value of traditional approaches for him and his students. His focus on teamwork, resilience, and interpersonal skills highlights the role of PHE in fostering community and social development, even amidst the heightened restrictions and fear. His experience was more about maintaining existing beliefs and using the structural changes to emphasize the value and

importance of movement, and for Zayn this meant ensuring team sports were part of the sociality of physical education.

Across these varied experiences, a common thread emerged: the intentionality of outdoor engagement. Whether adapting to pandemic requirements or reinforcing existing beliefs, teachers repeatedly emphasized the benefits of outdoor physical activity. As noted in the literature, this shift not only responded to safety concerns but also acknowledged the broader value of outdoor settings in supporting physical, mental, and emotional health (Houser & Kriellaars, 2023).

Outdoor Learning Lessons

Outdoor learning involves taking lessons beyond the traditional classroom setting and bringing students outside in nature to create engaging, hands-on learning experiences. This approach spans a wide range of subjects, including science, physical education, literacy, art, math, and social studies. Outdoor learning can take many forms, from structured activities and experiential learning opportunities to field trips and unstructured play. Even a simple transition of an indoor lesson to an outdoor setting can transform the educational experience. By encouraging interaction with the natural world, outdoor learning fosters inquiry-based and experiential learning, making lessons more dynamic and relevant (Wurm, 2024).

Rooted in traditions such as Canadian summer camps of the early 20th century and the environmental movements of the 1950's and 1960's outdoor learning emphasizes personal growth, environment stewardship and holistic education (Asfeldt, Purc-Stephenson & Zimmerman, 2022). This model integrates a hands-on, interdisciplinary approach that connects students to their communities and surroundings while still addressing goals such as sustainability and environmental consciousness (Asfeldt et al., 2022).

Richard Louv's (2005) concept of "nature-deficit disorder" highlights the growing disconnect between children and nature in an era of urbanization and increasing screen use. The urgency for outdoor learning intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic when teachers adapted health restrictions by utilizing outdoor spaces like schoolyards, parks and community gardens for safe and effective instruction (Green Schoolyards America, 2023). These adaptations revealed significant benefits, including improved mental well-being, social development and mental health resilience among students (Green Schoolyards America, 2023; Jang et al., 2022; Marsh & Blackwell, 2023).

In Canada, the pandemic served as a springboard for expanding outdoor learning opportunities. Schools reimaged their curricula to adapt to the health measures by incorporating outdoor activities such as measuring tree heights for math lessons or conducting science experiences in local parks (Asfeldt et al., 2022). These efforts were not merely reactive but also revealed long-term advantages of outdoor learning. Research has consistently shown that outdoor learning supports physical and mental health, builds resilience, and addresses the social-emotional needs of students (Asfeldt et al., 2022).

During the pandemic, the necessity of well-ventilated, safer spaces prompted many teachers to move lessons outdoors, aligning with health measures while also reinforcing connections between students, promoting physical literacy and enhancing social-emotional well-being. The experience brought to light the value of outdoor learning as more than a temporary solution - it has become a vital component of modern education. By blending environmental, academic and developmental objectives, outdoor learning allows students to gain the skills and perspectives that they need to navigate 21st century challenges and foster lifelong connections to the natural world.

Outdoor Learning Lessons: Frequency of Outdoor Learning During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, many teachers significantly increased their use of outdoor spaces for teaching, discovering that it offered students a sense of normalcy and relief from the constrained and often tense indoor environments. Natalie reflected that “Being outside as much as possible” allowed her students to escape the anxious atmosphere of indoor settings, adding that fresh air “made the students feel normal”. This connects to how spending time in nature has been found to enhance students' spiritual connections with their environments, improve their physical and mental health, and foster confidence and social development (Hargreaves, 2021). The connection with nature could be seen in how much Natalie’s students craved to be outdoors to improve their mental health. The outdoors was a way for them to temporarily forget about their anxieties that occurred inside the classroom. Similarly, Zayn shared how outdoor teaching provided a sense of safety and ease, “Whenever it wasn’t raining, we were outside, and it felt completely safe”. The open spaces created opportunities for group activities and interactive learning that were challenging to replicate indoors under pandemic restrictions. Rebecca shared her students’ enthusiasm for outdoor learning, noting that they “loved it and always wanted to go outside”. This enthusiasm inspired her to step beyond her comfort zone and adopt new teaching methods:

I think we have always known that outdoor learning is a good thing and helpful for students and teachers, but then to be forced to do it meant I had to adapt and push myself out of comfort zone, which really helped me try something new... and I think I am willing to adapt in all of my areas now.

Ella echoed this sentiment, observing how the pandemic had a lasting influence on her teaching approach, “The pandemic definitely pushed me in the direction to be outside more and to learn outdoors, and I have kept doing that moving forwards now”. She appreciated how outdoor spaces

introduced new opportunities for student engagement, such as “kids could be reading under a tree is a shady spot when the weather is nice, and they could have their masks off”. This aligns with Barford et al. (2023) who found that teachers expressed a newfound appreciation for outdoor learning and planned to incorporate it more extensively post-pandemic.

Stephen adapted his teaching to include a broader range of outdoor activities, even beyond physical education. He explained, “being outside more for not necessarily PE, but just to do things outside, walks, play games, or get fresh air”. Stephen found being outdoors to be engaging for his students, specifically the ones who don’t usually thrive indoors, as well as helped his students feel much calmer throughout the day. Natalie similarly embraced the integration of physical activity into the week, sharing, “It’s not about having designated PHE blocks anymore, but incorporating physical activity more throughout the week”. Rebecca found this freedom transformative for her students, who moved more, breathed fresh air, and even focused better, “It helped wake them up in the morning, and helped them to focus better than I expected”. Natalie added, “I really noticed that students are much calmer and perform better outdoors”.

These reflections align with findings from Marsh and Blackwell’s (2023) study, which documented a wide shift toward outdoor teaching during the pandemic. Teachers adapted their practices to prioritize student well-being in a challenging and uncertain time. This adaptation emphasizes the potential for outdoor learning to support not only academic outcomes but also mental, emotional, social and physical well-being of students (Marsh & Blackwell, 2023).

Each point made by the participants also aligns with Lyssiotis (2024) because the natural settings of outdoor learning contributed to a sense of normalcy and emotional stability. The participants found that sense of normalcy and emotional stability outdoors with their classes.

Thus, the relaxed and open environment made it easier for students to interact and connect with each other, which is vital for mental health, especially when social interactions were limited due to health safety measures (Lyssiotis, 2024).

Outdoor Lessons: Support for Outdoor Lessons

During the pandemic, outdoor learning transitioned from being an optional teaching approach to a central piece of teaching in some schools. Katie shared that once her school returned to in-person learning, they required “one lesson per week to be an outdoor learning physical education lesson”, ensuring students had regular access to movement and fresh air upon returning to in-person classes. To support teachers who were unsure, unfamiliar and/or resistant about outdoor teaching, her school organized a workshop at Camp Summit, a private overnight camp facility and outdoor education center in Squamish British Columbia. Here, the instructors demonstrated adaptable strategies for outdoor lessons that teachers could use. Katie noted that this initiative led to long-term impacts, such as the establishment of a garden program, “Because of this we have someone on staff who has been spearheading a garden program now, a member that was not teaching outdoors at all prior”. Katie and her colleagues can be like many other teachers that utilize outdoor spaces like school gardens, playgrounds, and nearby parks across various subjects (Green Schoolyards America, 2024).

This adaptation highlights how without the push from the pandemic, many teachers may not have embraced, or even attempted, outdoor learning. Post pandemic it has become a valuable part of some of those teachers' daily lives. Depending on the context as all school settings are different, the impact of the pandemic provided evidence that schools can become supportive of outdoor learning, and that fostering environments where being outside to learn does not take away from learning. In fact, outdoor education offers hands-on, tangible direct experiences that

can be integrated into everyday settings and is extremely valuable to both student and teacher engagement.

Integration Across Subjects

Teachers found creative ways to use outdoor learning for a variety of subjects, transforming outdoor spaces into dynamic and multifunctional classrooms. Natalie described incorporating science experiments into the outdoors, “We were doing science outside and trying to find more things to look at in our environment with nature, and we were lucky to have that kind of natural aspect right outside our steps.” Zayn shared:

Outdoor learning works when it’s an extension of learning in the classroom. The goals are set, priorities are made and then we can go outside. We do one out of five science units outside. Something we studied was electricity, and they are going to study certain things outside that conduct electricity, like a chain fence, does electricity pass through it? And they’ll have to go and find 10 things that do or don’t and confirm their hypothesis.

Rose took a place-based approach to science education, bringing textbooks to a nearby ravine to explore local plants:

The kids could get to know the plants that are here so that I could connect that with place-based learning with Indigenous ways of Knowing. What is the Indigenous knowledge of those plants? By the end of the year the kids can identify 10-20 of the trees and plants that are in the ravine. So, I have been doing that more and more so now we can take threads of our science throughout the whole year outside and ask questions like ‘How does the forest change throughout the year. It’s a long-winded way to say, the outdoor learning is sometimes just what we traditionally do inside and take outside instead.

She also noted how outdoor lessons helped contextualize scientific concepts throughout the year,

A grade 3 unit is landforms - erosion, deposition, weathering. From where we are, we have a view of Golden Ears, so it is very easy to tie in the land we're on and where we are with the scientific concepts of what we're doing, even solid liquids, gas, all those kinds of things it's easy to do... Then you can turn that into language arts and thematically work it through everything as well.

Rose's approach demonstrated how outdoor learning could be woven into yearlong science lessons, sparking curiosity and creating opportunities for thematic, cross-curricular connections. Stephen shared how outdoor learning fostered interdisciplinary engagement, recounting a bike scavenger hunt he organized, "We had kids bring their bikes to school. We did bike ride scavenger hunts in the middle of the day, just to get everybody outside and to get fresh air".

Similarly, Ella shared that she used outdoor spaces for creative projects such as collecting materials for art projects, aligning her activities with the First People's Principles of Learning. This emphasized how outdoor learning encouraged mindfulness, creativity, and connections to the land while fostering a deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives. Ella also incorporated outdoor spaces for physical education, reimagining traditional gym-based activities, "Instead of doing tag games or learning spatial awareness in the gymnasium, we would go onto the field and do it there." This shift to outdoor physical education offered students a new context developing physical literacy and spatial awareness, which gymnasiums with walls and boundaries could not provide.

Natalie shared "Even now, when we have access to the gym, we still prefer to take PE outside when we can." She explained how outdoor spaces became versatile settings for subjects like math, reading and journaling:

I would use the bleachers outside because they were in four tiers, and the students would sit there. I could do a math lesson or anything. They could always work outside if they wanted to, and most of them chose to work and eat outdoors whenever they could.

This creative use of space allowed students to work outside while continuing their academic work, making outdoor time feel like a natural extension of the classroom. Her willingness to use available outdoor spaces for any lesson – whether science, math or reading – shows the fluidity with which teachers adapted to and embraced new teaching environments. Rose echoed this, sharing how outdoor learning created lasting memories for her students, “We would take our traditional learning and take it outside... we would do our reading, math lessons and bring everything and take it outside. Those are the memories that kids love the most. They would ask, ‘When do we get to go to the ravine again?’ or ‘Can we journal outside?’” She shared that outdoor learning became a meaningful and almost sacred experience for her and her students.

Ella further adapted to outdoor settings by using practical tools like sit squares and clipboards to create comfortable and engaging learning environments. Sit squares are designated personal spaces for students, typically marked or outlined on the ground. In Ella’s case, these were physical mats that provided students with a personal place to sit during outdoor activities. She often embraced spontaneous opportunities to take learning outdoors saying, “Grab your clipboard and take your pencil case and let’s go work outside, or let’s do our journal on the playground,” making outdoor learning part of her regular routines.

Stephen reflected how the forced shift to outdoor learning revitalized his teaching practice, “Year after year, ideas become stale, and you’re less enthusiastic about teaching them. I am better when I’m inspired by a new idea. Being forced to go outdoors gave me a lot of inspiration”. He added that outdoor learning now inspires him to innovate and adapt, “Now I

plan to have something outside, when I wouldn't have before, and use the outdoors to challenge myself to think of a new idea or think of ways to turn something I've done indoors into something I can do outdoors". For many teachers, outdoor learning served as a catalyst for renewed enthusiasm, creativity, and innovative teaching strategies. The experience benefited both teachers and students, offering new ways to connect with the curriculum and the world.

Challenges in Outdoor Settings

While outdoor learning brought new energy and inspiration, it also presented challenges for teachers. Managing students in an open-air environment can be difficult, especially for older students, as Zayn explained, "It's especially challenging with older students" who may be prone to distractions in unconfined spaces. Practical challenges, such as inadequate outdoor gear, also surfaced. Katie observed "Some students did not have proper gear like rain jackets or rain pants". These issues emphasized the need to balance the benefits of outdoor settings with logistical considerations, especially with varying weather conditions.

To address such challenges, some teachers adapted strategies to align indoor and outdoor learning. Zayn found success by using outdoor activities to reinforce lessons introduced indoors, "The lesson happens in the classroom, and the outdoor activity is just to reinforce it". This approach maintained the structure and focus on an indoor environment, while bringing the experiential benefits of outdoor learning into play.

Rose shared that some districts have also recently started working on solutions, "our district now aims to build every school an outdoor classroom". Having a designated outdoor space has helped her with classroom management because her students have established routines for outdoor learning. However, limitations still exist, as Rose noted, "Without a roof, it's often either too hot or too wet". Despite these challenges, teachers continue to adapt and find creative

ways to overcome obstacles, ensuring that outdoor learning remains an engaging and valuable experience for their students.

Outdoor Benefits

Teachers observed, through their lived experiences, that the increased time spent outdoors brought significant benefits to students' physical and mental well-being. Natalie noticed that these positive effects have inspired her school to continue using outdoor spaces beyond the immediate need for distancing. "We saw the positive impact on students' mental and physical health, and that's why we have continued to use the outdoors for PE." Rebecca highlighted that outdoor learning not only helped students focus better, but also improved their mood, fostering a more holistic sense of well-being that indoor classrooms did not always achieve.

Natalie further noted how outdoor settings had a calming effect on her students, "They felt a lot calmer when they were outdoors and even after COVID-19 restrictions eased, we kept using outdoor spaces". She also incorporated more outdoor body breaks into her teaching, discovering that students were "A lot calmer when they are outside with fresh legs. A lot of them do better sitting outside than they do sitting inside". The phrase "fresh legs" is meant to describe the feeling of being refreshed after physical movement or change in activity. When learning outdoors, students have the opportunity to walk or move more freely, which can help them feel less constrained and restless. These strategies adopted by Natalie during the pandemic have not only remained in place but have also become embodied in her teaching approach.

Theme 3: Mental Health

Mental Health of Students

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened teachers' awareness of the importance of mental health in schools (Kush, Badillo-Goicoechea, Musci & Stuart, 2022). Teachers shared that the

pandemic not only intensified existing mental health challenges within students but also prompted reflections on how to support students' emotional wellbeing. This shift led to more integrated mental health education and a broader focus on strategies within daily teaching lessons.

For some teachers, the early days of the pandemic were challenging because typical forms of emotional connection, like physical comfort, were restricted. Ella reflected, "some kids need a hug in the morning, and you couldn't do that right... it took away that little piece of connection." This disruption highlighted for Ella how essential daily emotional support can be for young students, and herself as a teacher. Rebecca also described that students were struggling with processing their emotions by themselves. She pointed out, "if they didn't have an adult to help them process their feelings, they would come to their own conclusions which wasn't helpful". This observation led Rebecca to the realization of the importance of having conversations with students about the big, and often complex, ideas. She added, "This made me realize how important it is to talk to kids about big ideas because they are often more aware than we think." Ella also mentions:

I think that initiating those tricky and deep conversations is definitely something that I am better at doing now, and just kind of saying, what do we know about this topic and picking on things they are discussing at snack and recess time and bringing a little more like truth or other perspectives to them[L35].

Similarly, Natalie reflected on the deeper emotional needs of her students. She observed, "it really heightened that every student is dealing with something, whether they show it or not." This led Natalie to reflect on the importance of creating a supportive environment where students felt comfortable sharing their feelings after recognizing that the pandemic really brought to light

that every student was facing their own personal stories, whether it was visible or not. Rebecca's responses align with Natalie's experiences as she mentions, "I always knew this, but I think it really highlighted the fact that these kids are coming to school with such big weights and big anxieties, and so to just like jump into a lesson or learning cannot always be helpful, they are not just blank slates when they arrive at school."

Impact of Pre-Existing Youth Mental Health Crisis

Mental health struggles were not created by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the experience of living in a slower-paced pandemic world offered a rare pause for people to consider both their own mental health and that of others, along with the systematic barriers that contribute to these challenges. COVID-19 gave the world a chance to reflect deeply, raising awareness and fostering a new seriousness around mental health.

Zayn highlighted the fact that mental health issues among youth were prevalent long before the pandemic, "we were in a youth mental health crisis before COVID. COVID-19 might have accelerated issues for some kids, but it didn't start the crisis...the rise in anxiety among students mirrors societal stressors beyond the pandemic". His insight emphasizes that while COVID-19 intensified these struggles for people, the crisis was already deeply embedded and required attention from the school system, and society overall.

The 2018 British Columbia Adolescent Health Survey reflected this, revealing that 17% of students had seriously considered suicide in the past year, 40% of students had felt hopeless in the past week and 25% experienced moderate to severe psychological distress, highlighting a significant and systemic challenge even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues were particularly pronounced among gender-diverse youth, further highlighting the need for comprehensive mental health support in schools (McCreary Centre Society, 2018). As

Vaillancourt et al. (2022) noted, “Even before the pandemic, Canada’s children and youth were not faring well relative to other economically advanced countries in terms of mental health and unhappiness.” Canada ranked 31st out of 38 high-income countries on measures of well-being, and the nations ranking on teen suicide rates - 35th out of 38 countries - “highlights our systemic failure”. This stark reality calls attention to how long-standing mental health concerns were already a pressing issue, as the pandemic only magnified this crisis (Vaillancourt et al., 2022).

Katie agreed, acknowledging that COVID-19 revealed social and emotional gaps in students’ lives that teachers could no longer ignore, saying, “COVID’s changed everything, really, but in a good way”. This period of reflection not only brought to light the critical mental health needs of students, but also led to a shift in how teachers approach physical and health education. Katie explains, “We’re still doing a good job of delivering a really high-quality physical education program,” emphasizing that despite challenges, the focus remained on quality. Additionally, the pandemic created an opportunity to integrate more health education into their curriculum, an area previously overlooked. Katie noted, "We weren't delivering the health curriculum as much as we should have been," but now, with a more balanced approach, health topics are woven into both physical education and classroom lessons. This shift, she believes, has strengthened their ability to address students' needs in a more holistic and interconnected manner, ultimately improving the overall educational experience.

As Zayn observed, “mental health isn’t a new trend anymore...five years ago, not everyone was teaching mental health all the time, but now they are. It’s embedded in everyone’s practice.” This shift reflects a growing understanding that mental health support is integral to effective teaching and students’ overall success. Vaillancourt et al. (2021) assert that mental health challenges are the primary cause of health-related issues and burdens among youth and the

leading cause of disability worldwide in adults. In addition, poor mental health contributes to significant difficulties with schoolwork and behaviours like paying attention and self-regulation, further emphasizing the need for systemic and educational responses to mental health concerns (Vaillancourt et al. 2021).

Ella, who witnessed increased anxiety and worries among her students, remarked, “I’m seeing a little bit more worries from them, a little bit more anxiousness.” She also reflected on the personal toll of the pandemic, saying, “now, since COVID, taking care of my mental health is something I’ve realized is so important for the work that I do”. This reflection shows that for teachers, too, prioritizing mental health has become a necessary realization for maintaining effectiveness in their work. This sentiment was shared by other teachers who felt that mental health often came “last on the list.” One teacher shared that during the pandemic one strategy they focused on was, “controlling the controllables,” a message they passed on to their colleagues and students to foster resilience amid uncertainty to help ease everyone’s anxiousness. This is consistent with bell hooks’ concept of engaged pedagogy, where the teachers’ self-actualization and commitment to their own mental health are integral to creating empowering and transformative learning environments.

In engaged pedagogy, the teachers’ mental and emotional health is seen as deeply intertwined with the quality of teaching and the space created for students’ own growth and development (hooks, 1994). Teachers’ realizations in this study resonate with this idea, as they recognize that their own mental health directly impacts their ability to engage and support their students.

Shift Toward Mental Health as a part of Health Education

Before the pandemic, health lessons in British Columbia schools focused primarily on the physical dimension of health, often overlooking the importance of mental health education. This conversation around mental health was limited and not in as much depth (Short, Bullock, Crooks & Geogiades, 2022).

However, as mentioned above, society has faced a health crisis for a long time. Then, COVID-19 arrived, forcing the world to pause and reshape the way in which teachers' and students' viewed health overall. Rebecca noticed this shift firsthand, explaining how "mental health has become a much bigger focus, before, health lessons were mainly about physical health, but now we talk a lot more about mental health and strategies for managing it." Now, mental health strategies are not just occasional additions but have become a part of daily routines, seamlessly integrated into the curriculum to normalize discussions about emotional well-being alongside physical health.

As teachers embraced this expanded view of health, families also began to reframe how they approached their children's wellbeing. Stephen, observed a shift in how mental health needs, recounting how he now hears parents saying, "Oh this is a mental health day," rather than only excusing their children from school for physical sicknesses or injuries. This simple, yet powerful change in language reflects a new, more holistic understanding of what it means to be, 'well'. Mental health days seem as though they are no longer seen as indulgences or unnecessary breaks, but as legitimate needs, acknowledging that a students' capacity to learn and to grow depends more than on their physical health alone. This transformation signifies a new era for health education, one that values the full spectrum of wellness and prepares students to navigate

their lives with resilience and self-awareness, but also compassion for themselves and what they are experiencing.

Many teachers adapted their health curriculum to address students' emotional needs more directly. Ella explains that she now asks her students, "How do we deal with our worries? Who can we turn to? How can we handle it when we're feeling like we want to shut down or not understand something?" She emphasizes the importance of developing tools for students in handling their stresses and anxieties. Similarly, Natalie has adjusted her approach to create "an environment where students feel safe enough to share and then provide them with the tools to cope." These changes reflect a greater emphasis on fostering mental health and emotional resilience within students. Emotional resilience is the ability to cope with and recover from life's challenges, stress or adversity while maintaining mental well-being. It involves managing emotions, staying positive in tough situations, and having the skills to be able to bounce back from setbacks (Pahwa & Khan, 2022).

Zayn brought a balanced approach to teaching mental health in class, cautioning that, "you don't want to raise so much awareness that kids start becoming anxious just because they have learned about anxiety." Instead, by making a discussion about mental health a more normalized practice, he made the topic "part of his daily routine," rather than an isolated topic or a response to some sort of crisis in the school or among the students. That is not to say that Zayn would not address mental health topics or issues. However, a regular and balanced approach to conversations about mental health helps young people talk about topics without overwhelming students, making it a natural part of their school experience.

Research with youth post-COVID-19 shows that institutions with rapid response systems focused on youth mental health are more likely to support and assist young people facing anxiety

and stress. While this research did not specifically examine schools or the role of teachers, participants in the study emphasized a student-centered approach and made efforts to respond quickly to young people's mental health needs, offering valuable insights for educational contexts (Alleman, Cullen, Schraeder, Pintson & Dimitropoulos, 2021). Many teachers intentionally promoted an environment where mental well-being was both supported and acknowledged.

Teachers Personal Well-Being and Self-Care Strategies

In a whirlwind of teaching, the pandemic became a wake-up call for teachers to finally begin to put their own personal well-being on the to-do list, highlighting that a balanced, cared-for teacher is the best gift to their students. Teachers shared ways in which they had the opportunity to take care of their minds during this timeframe, and how they are continuing to do this. Zayn shares that he has “a routine that works for me, and I’ve always felt strong in that regard”, he did admit that “balancing work with a young family can be stressful”, but overall does not find mental health to be something he needs to work on. Natalie reflected that, “I still don’t do enough to prioritize my mental health, and that is something I need to work on,”. A sentiment shared by Katie, who noted, “mental health is always the last thing on the list, isn’t it?”. Stephen explained that he relies on meditation or short naps to recharge after work and keeps his classroom tidy to prevent anxiety from affecting his sleep. Preparing for the following day, with tasks like “having my lunch ready or water bottles filled the night before”, also help him to manage his wellbeing.

The pandemic prompted Ella to realize that if she was not putting her needs first, she “cannot give [her] full potential as a student to [her] students, which aligns with Stephan as he notes, “I’m not doing anyone any favours by pushing through and being in a worse mental state”.

Rebecca found that having more time during the pandemic led to a transformative health journey through CrossFit, and she became “more comfortable with not getting everything right and giving [herself] more grace”. In a broader response to these needs, Katie shared that her school established a teacher wellness space after the pandemic, a “calm, quiet place for teachers to go and recharge, which has been a huge positive thing”. Collectively, these reflections show how the pandemic influenced teachers to develop self-care routines and priorities for mental and physical health.

Sick Days

The pandemic shifted how many teachers, students and families view self-care, sick days and mental health, prompting a shift toward prioritizing personal well-being alongside professional responsibilities. The Mind Share Partners’ 2021 Mental Health at Work Report discusses how the pandemic normalized practices like mental health days and emphasized the importance of well-being for both personal and professional productivity (Greenwood & Anas, 2021). They state that one of the silver linings that came from all of the disruption and trauma the pandemic created, is the normalization of mental health challenges at work. Reflecting on his own experiences, Stephen shared:

I have almost 200 sick days banked because I didn’t use many, but now, I definitely will take a mental health day if I’m on the verge of feeling mentally exhausted... I’ll take a day and literally do nothing. I’m not doing anybody any favours by pushing through and being in a worse mental state than if I just took that day.

Ella shares a similar perspective, acknowledging that she now takes a mental health day if overwhelmed, realizing that “If I’m not taking care of myself, then I can’t give my full potential to my students ... So that is definitely something that I have adapted since COVID and

overlooked that area before COVID. I would often overlook my own self-care... I would skip soccer here and there or not go for that walk, or skip breakfast, and not do the things that fill my cup". Teachers have also learned to balance these days thoughtfully, accepting that students adapt well to temporary substitutes or changes. Ella explained, "Kids are so adaptable... they're so excited to share what they did with the TOC when you were gone", which eases the hesitation to step away when she needs to put herself first, "Knowing that has definitely eased my mind and take the extra day if you're sick, and use those extra days, not push yourself to go back too early".

For Rose, this shift meant actively setting boundaries saying, "I'm trying to put more limits now ... to actually take time for myself". Rose reflects, "We've learned through COVID that it's really okay to take time for yourself, and for your students to take the time they need when they are sick". Natalie emphasized that COVID-19 normalized taking sick days, which should remain a priority, yet she observed that the stigma around taking time off is slowly starting to re-emerge, noting "I feel like somehow this year, it is beginning to get lost again". Finally, Rebecca shares a realization about self-acceptance that the pandemic instilled, "I think COVID-19 was helpful in teaching me that I can't be everything to everyone".

These reflections collectively highlight how the pandemic heightened the importance of self-care, both for teachers' health and for sustaining their dedication to their students. However, while the term "sick day" has become synonymous with mental health days, there is an underlying implication that mental health must be pathologized to be acknowledged, which risks perpetuating stigma (Moseley, (n.d.). If mental health and wellness are to be fully supported, the language surrounding mental health days may need to evolve. Rather than framing these days in the context of illness or sickness, perhaps they could be reframed as "wellness days", to

destigmatize the need for mental health breaks and reflect a more holistic approach to overall well-being.

Theme 4: Equity in the Classroom

The pandemic, while deeply disruptive, created opportunities for teachers to reevaluate equity in their classrooms by focusing more on students' social and emotional needs alongside traditional academic content. This shift opened space for meaningful conversations about pressing societal issues such as racism, truth and reconciliation, and socio-economic disparities. These dialogues ultimately influenced teaching practices and school environments, emphasizing inclusion and equity. Ladson-Billings (2021) describes the pandemic as a “hard re-set” in education, arguing that it exposed the limitations of traditional schooling models, and created space to center cultural responsiveness, social justice and equity. This perspective highlights how teachers in this study embraced new approaches to foster belonging and inclusion.

Addressing Racism and Truth and Reconciliation

Many teachers integrated conversations about racism and reconciliation into their classrooms, inspired by both current events and initiatives like the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs), which aim to address historical injustices and foster healing (Government of Canada, 2024). Natalie reflected on how truth and reconciliation became a central focus in her teaching, particularly after the discovery of the unmarked burial sites at former residential schools, “Truth and Reconciliation became a high focus, especially when the burial sites were found”. Her students participated in district-wide projects, such as creating videos about belonging and inclusion, which stemmed from Black students sharing their experiences, “We participated in district-wide projects promoting equity and inclusion, such as creating videos about belonging and inclusion”. Natalie also shared that other projects emerging from the Black

Lives Matter campaign were later expanded to include any minority group, helping students to reflect on their feelings of belonging and community in their schools. Outdoor activities, such as silent walks and drumming ceremonies, reinforced these lessons. Natalie described, “We had events like Orange Shirt Day, where students gathered outside for silent walks and drumming. A silent walk is so powerful when you watch 600 kids do it together”

Rebecca also emphasized the importance of giving marginalized voices a platform in her classroom, she shared “We focused on giving everyone a voice and understanding how the past has affected people”. Her efforts included organizing cultural days and creating bulletin boards that celebrated diversity, allowing students to engage with the histories and identities of others in meaningful ways. These practices align with Ladson-Billings’ (2021) emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy, which integrates students’ lived experiences and historical realities into the curriculum.

Inclusive Teaching Techniques

The pandemic times revealed further the importance of adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of diverse learners. For example, Ella noted the challenges of teaching with mask mandates, as they obstructed critical visual cues like facial expressions and lip movements. She adjusted by using clear face shields, allowing her students to be able to see her mouth while teaching reading and letter sounds:

Certain things we had to navigate, and maybe it was putting a shield, a face shield, a clear face shield versus a mask, so that they could see us teaching the reading sounds and the letter sounds and see how our mouth is moving. Because when you have a mask, you can’t do that where some kids need to be able to see.

Such adaptations highlighted the need for accessible teaching techniques that address the sensory aspects of learning, ensuring that all students could fully participate. However, she also noted how the lack of physical contact disrupted critical emotional connections with her students “Some kids need a hug in the morning, and you couldn't do that. It kind of took away that little piece of connection”. These lived experiences highlighted how both sensory and emotional connections are so important for fostering inclusive classrooms, requiring educators to creatively balance health protocols with student needs. Ladson-Billings (2021) highlights the need for culturally relevant pedagogy to address not just the academic goals but also the relational aspects of teaching, which are foundational to student engagement and equity.

Socio-Economic Disparities and Equity

The pandemic also exposed and exacerbated socio-economic disparities, highlighting the critical role of supporting vulnerable students. Zayn reflected on how schools functioned as lifelines for their communities. Zayn observed:

Schools are crucial lifelines to public wellness. They're a crucial lifeline. They are not just about education. They're about community service, and they're one of the last institutions really holding communities together.

He noted the impact of the pandemic on marginalized students:

The real impact of COVID was on social justice and socioeconomic issues. Poor kids got poorer, and kids who didn't have social interaction just stayed home on screens all day while their parents ignored them.

For many students, schools provided essential social interaction, meals and care. Zayn emphasized, “Schools needed to stay open. The kids come in. This is sometimes their most social interaction they get fed, they get cared for, they get listened to, they get respected”. Ladson-

Billings (2021) critiques how systemic inequities manifest in schooling, particularly for economically disadvantaged and racially minoritized students. The pandemic brought these disparities to the forefront, forcing teachers to adapt their practices to reimagine the role of schools as both educational and social institutions. Rebecca echoed these concerns, recognizing how isolation had affected her students, “Kids aren’t meant to learn by themselves at home. I try to create more opportunities for students to work and learn together”.

Integration of Social Justice

For some teachers, social justice themes became topics that were more included within their curriculum during and after the pandemic. Katie highlighted her school’s efforts to further embed equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) topics into their lessons, often through an Indigenous lens, “From an EDI perspective, we have integrated some of these topics into our lessons”. Katie also acknowledged the balance required when teaching younger students, “Our job is not to make our students social justice warriors” but rather, to offer perspectives on diversity and respect. Not all teachers had the same capacity to address social justice issues deeply. Stephen shared the challenges of balancing these topics with curriculum demands, “I just don’t know how anyone would have time to talk about this, when your main focus is if the kids can do math and read and write. These things are so far down [the priority list]”. Ladson-Billings (2021) argues that integrating social justice into education requires reimagining the way curriculum is designed and taught, highlighting the importance of student-centered, critical pedagogies that reflect the realities of marginalized communities.

Equity Beyond the Classroom

The pandemic provided opportunities to engage with equity issues beyond the traditional classroom setting. Outdoor learning spaces became powerful venues for conversations about

inclusion and reconciliation. Natalie described how events like Orange Shirt Day helped students connect with these issues in meaningful ways, “A silent walk is so powerful when you watch 600 kids do it together”. Ella integrated discussions on family diversity and 2SLGBTQ+ topics into her first-grade classroom, “We introduce topics like 2SLGBTQ and how families can all be different and how we can respect that. They understand and retain a lot”. These examples align with Ladson-Billings’ (2021) call for equity-focused education that equips students to engage critically with diverse perspectives.

These efforts demonstrated how even younger learners could engage with complex social justice topics when presented through age-appropriate means such as storytelling, visual aids, class discussions, and activities focused on empathy and inclusion, tailored to their developmental understanding.

For some teachers, inclusion and diversity intersected with systemic issues like racism, classism, and sexism, which remain embedded in educational structures. Drawing on Freire’s work, the pandemic highlighted the impacts of students’ socio-economic backgrounds on their ability to learn within a standardized, Euro-Western system. While pandemic-era education aimed to promote inclusion, it also revealed inequities that students bring to the classroom.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 explored the real stories and reflections of teachers who navigated the challenges of teaching during COVID-19. The chapter highlighted how outdoor learning, mental health education, and equity-informed practices became central to their teaching. Participants shared creative strategies they employed during the pandemic, such as adapting to new learning

spaces, prioritizing students' well-being, and addressing social justice topics in meaningful ways. Their experiences painted a vivid picture of resilience, adaptability, and a deep care for their students.

In Chapter 5, I will reflect on these participants' experiences and discuss their implications for the future of education. I will examine the study's contributions and limitations, offering recommendations for sustaining the positive momentum gained during the pandemic as we transition into post-pandemic classrooms

Chapter 5:

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter is divided into four sections. I begin by answering my research questions. I then discuss the study's contributions and limitations. I conclude with an overview of implications, next steps, and future research.

Concluding Thoughts

This study captures the voices and emotions of seven teachers who experienced the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic. The timeframe examined (2020-2022) represents a pivotal and challenging period in the history of education in British Columbia. These teachers' stories provide first-hand insights into how schools adapted, how curriculum and pedagogy shifted, and how inclusion, diversity and equity were addressed in response to the pandemic's demands. Through their narratives, the significant yet often unrecognized roles teachers played during this time are brought to light; not just as teachers but as pillars for holistic student well-being.

Teachers reflecting on their experiences reveals pathways for the future of education, with an emphasis on outdoor learning, physical education, mental health awareness and social equity. Study findings revealed that these areas, once considered supplementary, have taken on greater importance due to the challenges faced and mitigations employed by teachers during the pandemic. While I would not wish for a repeat of such a disruptive event, the pandemic acted as a motivator for positive transformation, encouraging teachers to step out of their comfort zones, take risks, and adapt to rapidly evolving needs.

Research Question 1: Did teachers pivot to incorporate more outdoor learning, and if so, what impact did outdoor learning have on their students' learning, mental health and wellbeing?

This study revealed two focal points central to teachers' practices during the pandemic. First, teachers found innovative ways to incorporate outdoor learning into their curriculum and pedagogical practice. They noted how outdoor education not only supported curriculum delivery but also positively impacted their students' mental health and well-being, as well as diverse student needs. Second, teachers integrated physical literacy and health literacy into their teaching more frequently, prioritizing students' mental health through creative and adaptive strategies. These findings suggest that integrating outdoor and health-focused education has long-term benefits for student engagement and holistic development, specifically in terms of calmness and reduced stress, particularly for students struggling in traditional classroom settings. The findings demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic inspires shifts in educational environments with lasting potential. By examining these changes, the study highlights how the challenges of the pandemic created opportunities to reimagine education.

The pandemic amplified the need for mental health support in schools, reinforcing the critical role of teachers in addressing students' emotional well-being. Many teachers noted these practices not only supported students during the pandemic, but also improved classroom behaviour and focus levels. This implies that mental health discussions must remain a priority. Outdoor learning became a key strategy to maintain the required physical distancing, while still ensuring student engagement and connection. Teachers introduced activities like outdoor science experiences, nature walks, physical education, or simply reading outdoors. Several teachers observed an improved sense of calmness and reduced stress among students, particularly those who struggled in traditional confined classroom settings. Expanding outdoor learning opportunities could provide more equitable access to quality educational experiences. One of the main barriers that teachers face with implementing PHE into their schedules is the lack of time

and gym space, outdoor learning provides them with a space to include physical activity into their curriculum without the restriction of needing the gymnasium.

Research Question 2: How did teachers adapt their physical and health education (PHE) practices during the pandemic, and what lessons were learned about the role of PHE in holistic student development?

During the pandemic, teachers adapted PHE practices to emphasize physical literacy, mental health, and social connections. Movement breaks, mindfulness exercises, and cooperative activities became crucial. With the gym equipment no longer available due to health protocols, teachers relied on alternative spaces such as outdoor areas for PHE lessons. Natalie's example (Section 4.2e) illustrates how she taught spatial awareness and cooperative games in outdoor settings. Teachers noted the improvements in students' emotional regulation and readiness to learn after outdoor lessons and activities. These adaptations reflect the need to integrate outdoor and health-focused education long-term to benefit both academic and personal growth. Additionally, PHE relied on the H (Health) component of the subject, and many teachers reflected that they were not spending enough time on this section in the past.

Research Question 3: Within the current context of schools and education, what did COVID-19 offer us in terms of prioritizing mental health and well-being within the classroom?

COVID-19 highlighted the urgency of prioritizing mental health and well-being in schools. Teachers demonstrated a shift toward acknowledging mental health as a fundamental aspect of education, providing lessons that integrate emotional, social and physical well-being. The pandemic exposed gaps in traditional educational frameworks and emphasized a need for a more comprehensive approach to student health and well-being. This research illustrates a shift of how mental health became a cornerstone of health education, helping to prioritize both students and teachers effectively.

Research Question 4: Is the health and wellbeing of students still prioritized in teaching? If so, how? If not, what happened to shift this impact (if there was an impact at all)?

Teachers continue to prioritize health and well-being, with increased attention to personal hygiene, mental health, and social-emotional learning. Health is being incorporated more consistently as a separate subject rather than being confined to physical movement lessons. For instance, as detailed in Section 4.3.1, one teacher described daily check-ins that supported students' emotional and social needs, emphasizing a shift toward comprehensive well-being practices.

Research Question 5: In your experience, what were the silver linings for teachers working in elementary and middle school during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The pandemic presented several silver linings for teachers, including an increased focus on mental health, outdoor learning, and holistic approaches to education. Teachers discovered new ways to engage students and support their well-being, with outdoor learning becoming a key strategy. They also observed that the shift toward more flexible and adaptive teaching methods enhanced collaboration and creativity. Despite the challenges, many teachers expressed feeling a sense of resilience and professional growth, which strengthened their teaching practices.

5.1) What resources, supports, materials are needed to continue to support these adaptations?

Teachers emphasized the need for resources such as outdoor learning tools, mental health support materials, and professional development in holistic teaching strategies. Continued investment in teacher well-being and pedagogical training is essential to sustain the positive adaptations made during the pandemic.

5.2) How did COVID-19 assist in development of pedagogical practices, particularly in relation to topics of outdoor learning, mental health, and wellbeing in schools?

The pandemic encouraged teachers to rethink and adapt their pedagogical practices. Outdoor learning and mental health integration became central components of teaching. The need for flexibility, adaptability, and creativity led to the development of new strategies that continue to benefit both teachers and students. These shifts represent a significant opportunity to embed these practices in post-pandemic education. Teachers mentioned that the pandemic shifted to prioritizing their own wellbeing in school. For example, teachers and students are encouraged to take more sick days to take care of themselves. Teachers specifically take more sick days because if they cannot give their best on one day, it does not benefit themselves or their students.

The pandemic further highlighted disparities in access to resources like technology and support services. Many teachers found themselves navigating these inequities by adapting their practices to ensure that all students, regardless of their circumstances, had access to learning opportunities. While these disparities primarily centered on access to digital tools and resources, they also highlighted the broader, diverse circumstances shaping young people's lives. While more overt discussions of social justice movements were not always central in teachers' practices during this time, the pandemic certainly created an awareness of the broader inequalities students faced, many of which were shaped by systemic forces beyond the classroom. For some teachers, this awareness prompted them to take on greater advocacy roles, such as addressing mental health concerns or ensuring that marginalized students received the extra support they needed. Though these efforts were often more reactive and focused on immediate needs, they created a space for teachers to consider how systemic inequalities might be addressed moving forward.

Contributions and Limitations

The contributions of this work are twofold. First, this study made a significant contribution to physical and health education (PHE) and outdoor learning research by exploring

the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on PHE practices. It focused on the shift towards outdoor learning and how physical activity was integrated across disciplines. Teachers used outdoor spaces not only for physical education but also to enhance subjects like science, math, and art, fostering a transdisciplinary approach and promoting cross-curricular activities. This engagement highlights how movement and outdoor experiences bridged physical activity with broader educational goals, providing deeper learning, collaboration, and student engagement during challenging times.

Second, this research contributes methodologically and theoretically through the use of oral life/phenomenology. This approach, which has been under-utilized in similar studies, enabled a deep exploration of teachers' lived experiences during and after the pandemic. Participants' willingness to reflect on both the challenges and rewards of their teaching during this period allowed for rich insights into how they created community, centered students, and maintained a sense of normalcy in an uncertain time. These reflections offer invaluable perspectives on resilience, adaptability, and the emotional and professional toll of navigating this crisis.

In addition to furthering the conversation in PHE, my research contributes to the broader discussion on the role of outdoor learning in supporting student well-being and fostering the ongoing push for more holistic health orientated teaching practices. By examining the lived experiences of the teachers in my study, I was able to shed a light on how educational frameworks adapted in response to the global crisis of COVID-19.

Potential Impact on the Definition of Physical Literacy

Through my research, I have come to realize that physical literacy is more than just motivation, confidence, physical competence, and understanding—it must also include elements

like adaptability, emotional regulation, and the integration of outdoor learning and mental health. My findings demonstrate that outdoor learning played a significant role in helping students not only stay physically active but also manage their mental health. Teachers shared how outdoor activities reduced students' stress, improved focus, and supported social cooperation (as highlighted in Sections 4.2.5e and 4.3.2).

I believe these insights point to an opportunity to broaden the definition of physical literacy. By incorporating the role of natural environments and their impact on emotional well-being, physical literacy can better reflect the multidimensional nature of how we engage with movement across our lives. For example, outdoor learning fosters skills like spatial awareness and teamwork while also addressing mental health needs.

My thesis highlights the need to see physical literacy as dynamic and context-sensitive, recognizing that physical activity is not just about individual competence but also about creating opportunities for connection—with others, with the environment, and with oneself. I hope this research inspires educators, policymakers, and researchers to rethink how physical literacy is defined and applied, emphasizing its potential to support resilience and holistic well-being in educational settings

However, my study did not come without limitations. One limitation is the focus on a single interview with each of my participants, which may not have captured the fullness of their experiences or allowed for follow-up reflections on their earlier comments. Additionally, since not all of the participants taught PHE specifically, the study was unable to explore shifts in PHE curriculum or teaching strategies in depth. These limitations notwithstanding, the depth of participants' reflections and the use of phenomenology are strengths that allowed for rich insights into how teachers navigated and adapted during the pandemic. These findings have

potential implications for future curriculum design, teacher professional development, and policy decisions related to health and education, particularly as they relate to the need for more holistic, inclusive approaches.

Finally, although my research reflects the experiences of teachers from a range of career stages and from various geographical settings and diverse community contexts, the impact of personal experiences of the pandemic and specific school environments are varied. Thus, the overall generalizations from this study are limited but nonetheless speak to the importance of phenomenological research. Learning from others' experiences offers us much in terms of pedagogical practice and indicates how we each took different positive experiences away from the uncertain times of COVID-19.

Next Steps

Further research could explore how schools and teachers can sustain the positive changes prompted by the pandemic, such as prioritizing mental health, outdoor learning and social equity. Questions remain about how to better support teachers' mental health, recognize their contributions during crises, and develop policies that emphasize holistic health in education. One promising area for exploration is the shift in language and practice from "sick days" to "wellness days", acknowledging that maintaining mental health is as critical as addressing physical illnesses. This reframing can help normalize taking proactive measures for mental well-being and reduce the stigma around seeking support.

By remembering the valuable work of teachers during the pandemic - how they shifted their teaching methods and fostered community amidst uncertainty - the education system can learn and benefit from their efforts and voices. For example, the pandemic encouraged the use of outdoor spaces as a practical solution for maintaining physical distance, especially in physical

and health education (PHE). Teachers observed that outdoor spaces alleviated one of their long-standing challenges - the lack of access to the gymnasium in elementary schools - usually only allowing them 45-60 minutes per week to participate in PHE. By taking PHE classes outdoors, teachers were able to integrate physical activity more seamlessly into their schedules, supporting both curriculum goals and student well-being. Expanding the use of outdoor spaces presents an opportunity to sustain these practices while addressing the barriers to quality PHE. Investing in professional development that focuses on outdoor and holistic learning strategies and offering mental health support that is specific to teachers' needs, will be crucial in sustaining these positive shifts.

Further Research Could Examine:

- How wellness days and other mental health policies impact teachers' satisfaction, and overall well-being
- Long term effects of outdoor learning on student engagement, academic performance and mental health across diverse school settings (would morning outdoor walks or activities benefit students throughout the day)
- Role of parents, schools and policymakers in supporting the shifts initiated by teachers during the pandemic
- Ways to integrate social equity into everyday curricula beyond crisis-driven changes, ensuring that discussions about diversity, inclusion and justice become permanent pieces in education

As we move forward, the focus must be on looking after one another, students, teachers, administrators, etc. By fostering environments of empathy, collaboration and innovation, education can continue to evolve as a space for well-being, resilience and hope.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Letter of Initial Contact

Dear [Principal's Name, or person of contact]

I hope this email finds you well,

My name is Julia Nord-Leth, a graduate student researcher at the University of British Columbia. I am currently pursuing my Master of Arts in Health, Outdoor, and Physical Education at the University of British Columbia. As a part of my degree requirements, I am conducting a qualitative study involving interviews with elementary and middle school teachers from British Columbia who taught throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

You are receiving this email in hopes that you will be able to circulate the attached recruitment poster to your teachers. This poster will help me find research participants for my study. I am specifically seeking elementary and middle school teachers.

The purpose of this study is to explore the positive realizations that have emerged in schools following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on outdoor learning, physical and health education (PHE), and mental health. This study aims to gather insights from teachers (grades K-8) who have graduated from a Bachelor of Education program within the last 10 years.

Given that they are teachers in the British Columbia school system, I am hoping they can share their experiences and ideas. I would like to learn more about what happened in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and contribute to a better understanding of how these post-pandemic realizations can be effectively integrated into the educational system to enhance student well-being and learning outcomes.

If they are interested in sharing their experiences during this time, specifically with a focus on outdoor learning, PHE, and mental health, please consider participating in this qualitative study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out. If you are able to share this poster, I would sincerely appreciate your support.

Sincerely,

Julia Nord-Leth

Appendix II: Recruitment Poster

POST COVID-19 REALIZATIONS IN SCHOOLS

Faculty of Education/Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Are you an elementary or middle school teacher?

Do you remember your 'pivot'? Are you interested in sharing how you shifted to outdoor learning, the impacts of Covid -19 on teaching physical and health education and the importance of mental health in both your teaching as well as your own wellbeing?

How do I participate?

Participation involves:

Up to 90 minute Zoom interview at a time that is convenient to you



Who can participate?

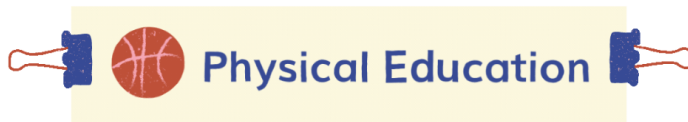
- 1. Participants: Taught elementary or middle school in British Columbia during the COVID-19 pandemic**

How do I get involved?

Participants can contact:

Julia Nord-Leth

**Principal Investigator
Dr. LeAnne Petherick**



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Appendix III: Letter of Initial Contact to Participants

Dear [insert name of participant interested],

Thank you for contacting me regarding your interest in participating in this study. I am seeking elementary and middle school teachers from British Columbia who taught throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and graduated with a Bachelor of Education within the last 10 years, specifically those involved in outdoor learning, physical and health education and mental health education. If you meet these criteria and are still interested in the study here are the next steps:

1. Please read, sign and send back the consent form (attached in this email is both Word and PDF formats, depending on your preference)
2. Please provide 3 times and dates that would accommodate your schedule for a 30 to 60-minute-long interview. I will then send you a zoom link, or we can arrange an in-person meeting, based on the time and date that works for both of us.

Please note that your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential, and there will be no adverse consequences if you decide not to participate.

Do not hesitate to contact me via email or phone if you have any questions before signing the consent form. If you could let me know within 5 days whether you decide to take part in this study, that would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Julia Nord-Leth

Appendix IV: Interview Guide

To Begin:

Can you describe the context of your teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (grade, demographic area, subjects, etc.)?

Experience During the Pandemic

1. The COVID-19 pandemic was a very memorable time. Can you tell me about your experiences as a teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular your ‘pivot’ in teaching? Given that your teaching had to change during that time, how have those changes influenced your teaching practices moving forward?

Incorporating Outdoor Learning

2. To adhere to guidelines, there was a push for more outdoor learning within schools. How did your practice incorporate outdoor learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. What impact did these outdoor learning experiences have on your students’ learning, mental health, and well-being?
 - b. How did outdoor learning impact you as a teacher, both pedagogically and personally?
 - c. Were there any topics that you approached or approach now in relation to outdoor learning (i.e. climate change, Indigenous Education, environmental ed.)?

Health and Physical Education

3. I have a Physical Education and Health Education background. How did your approach to health and physical education change during the pandemic?
 - a. Can you share any memorable experiences from teaching PHE at this time?
 - b. What things might you do differently now in PHE that you did not do prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Prioritizing Mental Health

4. Within the current educational context, what meanings or significance did the COVID-19 pandemic reveal for you in terms of prioritizing student mental health and well-being in the classroom, both before and after the pandemic?
5. Mental health has become something the educational system is more aware of as a result of the pandemic. If you are comfortable sharing, how do you now approach your own mental health as a professional working in a demanding field?

Silver Linings and Positive Moments

6. What meaningful moments stand out as you've now recalled those days of COVID-19 teaching? Is there anything in particular that has continued to influence your current teaching practice?

Back Pocket Probes: What resources, supports or materials did you experience as helpful or necessary to continue adapting your practices?

- a. *Can you describe any experiences or moments that contributed to the development of your pedagogical practices, particularly in relation to outdoor learning and mental health?*

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI)

1. Many social justice topics were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Do you recall incorporating or addressing any topics related to social justice or social movements as part of your teaching?
 - a. How did a heightened awareness of social justice issues during the pandemic influence your teaching?
 - b. Can you describe any changes in your pedagogical practices related to social justice and equity?

Post-Pandemic Realizations:

1. What positive practices from the pandemic do you believe should be integrated into the education system moving forward?
2. How has your perspective on teaching changed because of the pandemic?
3. What long-term changes have you made in your teaching approach due to your experiences during the pandemic?

Final Thoughts:

1. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How do you envision the future of education in light of the lessons learned during the pandemic?

Appendix V: Consent Form for Participants

What are the post COVID-19 realizations in schools specifically outdoor learning, physical and health education (PHE), and mental health?

I. STUDY TEAM

Principal Investigator: Dr. LeAnne Petherick, Faculty of Education, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, University of British Columbia

Primary Contact: Julia Nord-Leth, Graduate Student, Health Outdoor Physical Education, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy

II. INVITATION AND STUDY PURPOSE

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Julia Nord-Leth, a graduate student researcher at the University of British Columbia. This study contributes to the primary contact, Julia Nord-Leth's Master of Arts thesis. The purpose of this study is to explore the realizations that have emerged in schools following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on outdoor learning, physical and health education (PHE), and mental health.

Why These Areas?

Outdoor Learning was widely used during the COVID-19 pandemic as schools sought safe and effective ways to continue education while adhering to health guidelines. In addition, Physical and Health Education (PHE) was an important area where the pivot in learning greatly affected students and teachers, in particular how physical literacy became a prominent topic in schools. Mental Health was and is now a topic that we as a society are talking more about and integrating either intentionally or as a response to context into our classrooms and schools more readily. These three areas remain important topics that I'd like to learn more about in terms of what we learned from the pandemic and what is happening now in our BC schools.

Purpose

This study aims to gather insights about the topics of outdoor learning, mental health and physical and health education, from elementary and middle school teachers (grades K-8) who have graduated from a Bachelor of Education program within the last 10 years. Given that you are teaching in the British Columbia public school system and were teaching during the pandemic, I am interested in learning your experiences with all three

areas of the study: outdoor learning, mental health and physical and health literacy or just one area. Schools underwent a major transformation during COVID-19 and learning more about teaching and teachers' experiences is needed if we are to support important educational transformations now that we transition into regular teaching practices. I hope that the research can be used to support effective teaching and learning, enhance student well-being and learning outcomes and learn about teachers' wellbeing. If you have an interest in sharing your experiences this is a qualitative study asking you to participate in a semi-structured interview with me, Julia.

III. STUDY PROCEDURES

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be involved in the following:

1. Interview: At a time that is both convenient for the participant and the researcher, a one on one, semi-structured interview, which will be conducted via Zoom. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. During the interview, you will be asked to share your experiences and insights related to your experiences teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on outdoor learning, physical and health education (PHE), and mental health initiatives implemented during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Interview Content: The interview will include questions about your experiences and observations as an elementary or middle school teacher, focusing on changes and realizations that have occurred post-COVID-19.
3. Confidentiality: Your participation and all the information you provide will be kept confidential. The interview will be recorded with your permission for transcription purposes only, and all data will be anonymized to ensure your identity is not disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from this study.
4. Zoom Privacy Options: To protect your identity during the Zoom interview, you may:
 - o Log in using a nickname, substitute name, or a research code provided ahead of time by the researcher.
 - o Turn off your camera if you would prefer not to be visually identified.

These options are provided to ensure your comfort and privacy during the study.

In summary, if you say “Yes”, here is how we will do the study:

1. A 30–60-minute interview with the researcher Julia Nord-Leth
2. Interview will be audio recorded for accuracy in data collection.
3. Once the interview is complete, the researcher will analyze the data using a thematic analysis to identify key themes and insights related to outdoor learning, physical and

- health education (PHE), and mental health initiatives implemented during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Participants will have the option to review their interview transcript, and 30 minutes will be allotted for this review.

IV. STUDY RESULTS

The results of the study will be provided in a report and shared with the participants.

Each participant will receive the results of the study in the form of a formal report. Towards the end of this document, on the consent form, you can share your address (email, work or home) to receive a copy of the final report.

V. POTENTIAL RISKS OF THE STUDY

There are minimal risks involved in this study. If interview questions seem to be too personal or sensitive, participants do not need to answer. Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any point. Data collected from participants who withdraw from the study, will be removed and not included in the research project.

VI. POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

There are no explicit benefits to you by taking part in this study. However, by sharing your experiences and insights, you contribute valuable knowledge that could enhance the understanding of effective strategies in outdoor learning, PHE, and mental health initiatives following the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging in reflective discussions may provide opportunities for personal and professional growth, allowing you to gain new perspectives on your teaching practices and their impact on student well-being.

Additionally, your participation can raise awareness about the importance of these areas in education, advocating for positive changes in school environments. Furthermore, you may connect with researchers and educators with similar interests, fostering potential collaborations and expanding your professional network. Ultimately, this study aims to empower educators to enhance their teaching practices and contribute to the broader conversation on promoting student health.

VII. CONFIDENTIALITY

The research team will work hard to protect your confidentiality. To achieve confidentiality the following steps will be taken:

- Informed consent documents will be kept separately from data collected in the project in the secure UBC OneDrive.
- Data collected will be kept on a password protected computer hard drive.
- Personal information will be securely stored on the UBC OneDrive in a separate folder from any data collected during the study.
- Audio files will also be stored on the secure UBC OneDrive in their own folder.
- Transcriptions will not include identifiable personal information as pseudonyms will be provided either by participants or the primary contact. Transcripts will be stored on the secure UBC OneDrive in their own folder.
- The primary contact and the principal researcher will only have access to secure UBC OneDrive files.
- Data from the study will be destroyed after five years by the principal researcher, Dr. LeAnne Petherick using the UBC IT services.

VIII. CONTACT FOR INFORMATION ABOUT THE STUDY

If you have any questions or concerns about the research project or what is being asked of you, please do not hesitate to contact me. My contact information is listed at the top of this form.

IX. CONTACT FOR COMPLAINTS

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598. The study number is H24-01885.

X. PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND SIGNATURE PAGE

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may also choose to leave the study at any time. You are free to do so without giving a reason and without any negative impact on your employment. If you withdraw from this study, all material you shared during the project will be excluded from the study. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Participant signing above

Please check the boxes below that apply to you:

Confidentiality

- I would like the research team to keep my name and identity hidden.
- I agree to my name and identifying information being used in this **study**.

Please indicate how you would like to receive a copy of the research report below:

- Email:
- Home or Work Address: