

Teachers are on the front lines with students in the coronavirus pandemic

January 11 2021, by Diane R. Collier and Anne Burke



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

[Anxieties among Canadian teachers](#) are heightened. Confronted with rising second wave COVID-19 cases, [some provinces extended holiday school closures](#). Meanwhile, many teachers have had to put aside [concerns about their own health and safety](#) with in-person learning.

In Canada, teachers [aren't currently among the first in line to be vaccinated](#). [The Canadian Federation of Teachers has been calling for teachers to be considered front-line workers](#) and given priority for vaccination, citing concerns with poor ventilation and insufficient physical distancing, among other issues.

Teachers have been in a constant state of unease since schools closed in March. With little in the way of preparation or training, they were called upon to move their classrooms and [teaching](#) online. Alongside [this growing unease](#), they had to adjust their home spaces. Some had to teach online alongside supporting their own children's participation in virtual classrooms.

When teachers returned to classrooms in September, they were required to [juggle new safety protocols](#), help create socially distanced classrooms and oversee children's health practices such as handwashing. Some have had to [improvise hybrid in-class routines where they teach while some children attend virtually](#).

This past school term, we held focus group discussions with 20 teachers in one of the Atlantic provinces to ask how teachers felt about ask how teachers felt about their roles as educators and about the teaching challenges in a pandemic. This was part of a larger [research project in collaboration with teachers and researchers in Canada, Finland and the United Kingdom that promotes children's voices and digital storytelling](#).

Emotional, physical strain

Teachers we interviewed about their [classroom](#) experiences expressed fears for their own health and families, worries about the impacts of social distancing in classrooms and concerns about insufficient teaching tools and resources. Teachers relayed that there has [been no change in the tools they are provided to support children's educational and mental](#)

[health needs](#).

Caught in [the crossfire of health advisories and government or school board indecisiveness or inaction](#), teachers were often left standing ill-equipped and feeling unsupported in the front lines of this pandemic.

In interviews, teachers described their emotional and physical strain. One stated handwashing regulations had "shredded her hands to bits."

Another anguished [teacher](#) with compromised health feared for students' emotional needs. Some young students with [varying levels of physical independence and emotional maturity](#) or still learning home and school boundaries frequently touch teachers or require hands-on help. The teacher knew she needed to sharply dissuade physical proximity and this could be overwhelming for some students.

Even teachers who were well prepared and experienced in responsive teaching were not ready for a pandemic, and the resulting pivot to teaching online. The range of teaching approaches they have developed has been vast, from [homemade and interactive videos](#) to [taking learning outdoors](#).

Concerns for students

During our focus group discussions, teachers brought forth powerful metaphors.

In one of our in-person but distanced sessions, one teacher brought a Rubik's cube and explained that while she knew teaching in a pandemic could be done, she had no idea how to solve the puzzle. The cube resonated with all the teachers as an analogy for their frustrations.

Another shared a set of Matryoshka nesting dolls that represented the

layers of curriculum, protocols and the many levels and complexities of teaching. Each doll opened to reveal another problem. The teacher explained that the last doll represented the children in her classroom [who seemed to be given the smallest priority on the national stage, amidst discussions of the national economy and other priorities.](#)

Her response sparked emotion in the group. Other teachers recalled the social inequities some children face daily, and brought to mind students who they knew would be affected by the absence of school-provided breakfast and lunches during the lockdown.

New demands

During our meetings and interviews in October, teachers relayed how they navigated the new demands. By our December interviews, our conversations were dominated by teachers' experiences of constant stress and anxiety. One teacher pointed to "teacher fatigue," and how the many extra safety procedures and protocols were wearing teachers down. She likened it to "death by a thousand cuts."

All teachers had added many new elements to their front-line worker duties—extra handwashing, disinfecting desks, constant reminders to socially distance. All of these measures resulted in lost preparation time, lost class time or missed lunches.

While teacher education programs in Canada address teaching with digital tools, their focus is in-person classroom teaching. With the COVID-19 lockdown, Canadian teachers struggled. They searched for online teaching skills and approaches while creating meaningful digital engagement and learning strategies.

Teachers knew that it would not be possible for all children and families to have the means to wake up one day and go to school virtually. They

knew children from vulnerable contexts were more seriously impacted by the pandemic: for example, digital access was not universal and [parents from lower-income households particularly faced challenges managing homeschooling with their own work](#).

Growing cohesion

Discussions with teachers were also full of the optimism teachers are recognized for. Teachers mentioned instances of growing cohesion and community in the classroom, and how these vital connections were nurtured with students before and during present COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. Another teacher mentioned how, as a result of parents following provincial advisories to keep sick children at home, occasionally smaller classes prevailed.

With the rise of COVID-19 cases, teachers are taking on this front-line fight as they continue to cultivate their learning about teaching online and in hybrid contexts and their [strategies for managing risks in schools](#).

As teachers continue to teach in both physical classrooms and online, the uncertainties around the pandemic continue. If COVID-19 has any bright silver lining, it has made the public vitally aware of children's socio-emotional needs and the critical and growing role of teachers as heroes in the pandemic.

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