

# Honouring Wounds and Healing Forward: Teacher Health in Relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Positionality

As a former K-12 physical and health education specialist and current undergraduate instructor, I was compelled to explore the complexity of Alberta elementary teachers' experiences of health in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Background

Following decades of research regarding teacher burnout (Garcia-Carmona et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2017; Kyriacou, 1987; Madigan & Kim, 2021), the pandemic further challenged teachers and compounded stress (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2020; Alberta Teachers' Association, 2020; 2021a; 2021b; 2022a; 2022b; Kendrick, 2022). What was missing from the literature was in-depth experiences and nuance of teacher context, while considering teachers as individuals who may have many roles (e.g., teacher, partner, parent) that can influence their health. The research question that guided this inquiry was: *How might we understand teachers' experiences of health and wellness in relation to the pandemic?*

## Methodology

I approached this research with an interpretivist philosophical orientation (Creswell, 2023) and a complexity thinking theoretical lens. Complexity thinking refers to understanding the world in systems and the many ways that complex systems interact (Davis et al., 2015). Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) was used with data. Data were collected in the form of a researcher journal and unstructured, one-on-one interviews with eight elementary teachers recruited from a large school board in western Canada.



*"I don't need you to help me with relationships...with exercise tips...[or] nutritional tips. I need you to take things off my plate so that I can do all those things that I need to be well."*

**K-12 teachers are wounded and they need trans-systemic supports to heal.**



## Interpretations

Three overarching themes were developed and communicated through a metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) of teachers as wounded. Wounds, as wear and tear sites, constantly affected by stressors, resonated throughout the data; mental health wounds were communicated as physical wounds to emphasize the care needed.

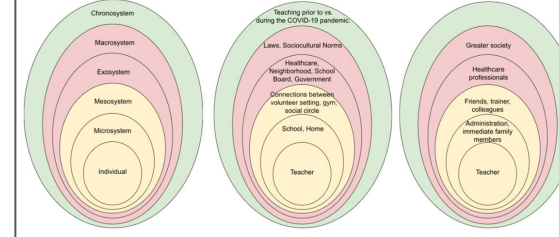
**Theme #1: The Complexity of Wounds** involves recognizing: (1) teacher health is influenced by complex systems that interact and create circumstances unique to context; (2) the many roles teachers play (e.g., partner, parent) all influence multidimensional health; (3) teacher health is worsening and stressors include unsupportive administrators, constant caregiving, feeling underappreciated, insufficient time for tasks, and inadequate school district support.

**Theme #2: Strategies Used in the Fight Against Sepsis** involves recognizing: (1) that teachers experienced a tipping point where stress became overwhelming and action was needed to care for themselves (e.g., setting boundaries, being active, and using leave and healthcare benefits); (2) caring for teacher health is a responsibility of the system, not just the teacher; (3) resources appropriate to each system level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) need to be utilized to better support teachers.

**Theme #3: Healing Forward and the Care Team** involves recognizing: (1) *trans-systemic* care is needed (i.e., support from multiple systems and system levels) to heal teachers' wounds; (2) we must listen to and honour the struggles teachers have experienced; (3) *microsystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

supports (i.e., school-level) may include meaningfully applying comprehensive school health (CSH) (JCSH, n.d.), ensuring principals build relationships with teachers, trust and respect teachers, show gratitude and recognize teachers' work, as well as dedicate assigned time to teacher health; (4) *exosystem* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) supports (i.e., school district-level) may include supporting teacher time (i.e., mandating preparation time), supporting teachers with more flexible healthcare benefits, and meaningfully leading and applying CSH (JCSH, n.d.); (5) *pre-service* teacher supports are also needed, which include applying CSH in the post-secondary context, at multiple system levels.

Figure 1  
Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1986) nested systems applied to teachers.



References  
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