

Lockdown Learning: COVID-19's Learning-From-Home Impact on K-2 Teachers' Professional Practice and Wellbeing



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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has continued to impact schools and education systems worldwide. In New South Wales, Australia, schools have now, in November 2021, faced multiple learning-from-home periods and provided a continuation of learning to a majority of their students from a distance. Kindergarten-to-Year-2 students, who form the early primary years, have been impacted by this pandemic more so than their older primary counterparts—due to the unique needs and teaching methods required for their learning. Through a qualitative, constructivist framework, this study sought to understand how the COVID-19 phenomenon impacted the professional practice and wellbeing of Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers in New South Wales public schools across the 2020/2021 learning-from-home periods. Six teachers were interviewed, and five major themes were identified. The themes outlined the need for connections with others, the importance of differentiating student learning, the significant gain of technology skills and experience, the ability to flexibly adapt during times of uncertainty, and the value of experience and how it influenced future decision-making. The themes highlight crucial impacts for teachers during this time, subsequent coping skills, and unexpected gains from their lived COVID-19 experiences. The findings also explored how each teacher's identity was challenged and how the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* influenced teachers' perceived ability to meet the needs of learners during this time. The study concluded that when Kindergarten-to-Year 2 teachers were faced with a challenging ordeal, they adapted with flexibility, harnessed resilience, and learnt from their experiences for the benefit of themselves, their students, and school communities.

Keywords: teachers, COVID-19, professional practice, wellbeing, coping

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The beginning of 2020 will be marked in history as the start of COVID-19's spread across the globe (Flack et al., 2020). Within months of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) March 12, 2020, pandemic declaration (United Nations, 2020a), the world had already paid a high toll with thousands of deaths, economic ramifications, and increased poverty (Ciotti et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in government-imposed lockdowns of various durations across the globe, including in Australia, as countries worldwide set out to implement quick measures to contain the virus and slow infection rates (Willis, 2020). As early as April 2020, UNESCO had recognised that the virus was an enormous challenge to education systems and the "greatest challenge ... national education systems [had] ever faced" (Daniel, 2020, p. 91). In response, governments forced many schools and teachers to cease non-essential face-to-face teaching, instigating mass school closures and urgent modification to learning (Breslin, 2021; Giovannella et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020). Consequently, over 1.5 billion students spanning more than 160 countries were asked or required to learn from home (Sangeeta & Tandon, 2020; UNESCO, 2020), except in some jurisdictions where children of, what has been nebulously described as, "essential workers" were able to attend schools (New South Wales Government, 2021a, para. 3; Prime Minister of Australia, 2020; Trade Union Advisory Committee Secretariat Briefing to the OECD Commission, 2020, p. 8).

COVID-19 has impacted and disrupted education systems globally with immediate and long-lasting effects (Breslin, 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Schleicher, 2020). School communities have experienced unprecedented circumstances, with changes often required daily to ensure learning continuity and that the needs of students were being met (Anderson et al., 2021; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). More than eighteen months after the original school disruptions, schools in over 120 countries have now reopened. Despite this, even in October 2021, millions of students, including many in Australia, were still waiting to return to classrooms (UNESCO, 2021). For example, in the state of New South Wales (NSW) (Australia), public schools were fully operational except during times when COVID-19 infection rates were high across the State—primarily March to May 2020 and July to October 2021 (NSW Government, 2021g). The advice from the government was firm and consistent during these high infection-rate periods, and learning-from-home was mandated across the State (NSW Government, 2021e, para. 2). Under what was termed *Level 4* restrictions, the Government required that children not attend school unless their parents had "essential" employment (NSW Government, 2021b). Instead, children needed to engage in learning-from-home activities as determined by their child's school (NSW Government, 2021a).

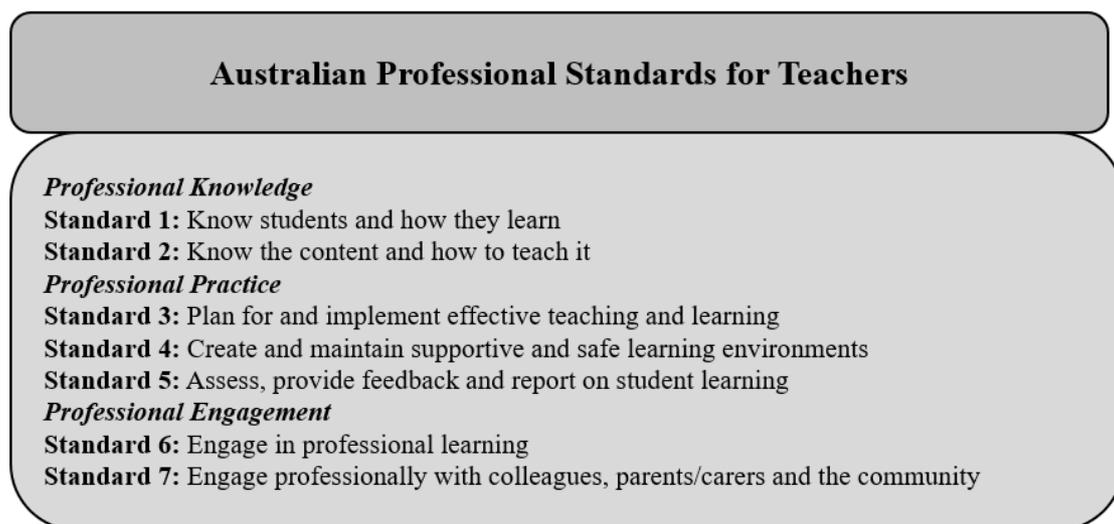
Regardless of whether children were learning-from-home or at school, the NSW Department of Education (The Department) specified that students be provided with "one unit of work" in which the learning activities were the same for those at home or school (NSW Government, 2021c). A recent OECD report, *The Current State of Education: 18 Months into the Pandemic* (2021), suggests that during future COVID-19 lockdowns, schools should ideally stay open (particularly for younger learners) and ensure school facilities remain consistent and reliable throughout. It is within the context of COVID-19, schools, and younger learners that this study is set. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to address the phenomenon of being a NSW Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teacher during the 2020/2021 COVID-19 learning-from-home periods.

Professional Practice Requirements for NSW Public School Teachers

In NSW, as in all other Australian jurisdictions, teachers' performance is determined against the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2019). The seven *Standards* (see Figure 1) articulate what effective, contemporary Australian teachers should know and be able to do within their career stage (Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished, and Lead). *The Standards* provide the core framework for teacher accreditation and best practice.

Figure 1

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers



Note. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] (2019)

Teachers in NSW are aware that their employer measures their performance, practice, and skills against *The Standards*. Further, they are required to undertake minimum mandatory professional learning every five years in line with this obligation (NESA, 2018). The lessons teachers prepare and deliver, and their professional work must encompass *The Standards* across the

domains of Professional Knowledge (Standards 1 and 2), Professional Practice (Standards 3, 4, and 5), and Professional Engagement (Standards 6 and 7).

The Early Years of Learning in NSW

The NSW Department of Education (The Department) recognises the differential and unique needs of children in Kindergarten-to-Year-2, aged five to eight years of age (NSW Government, 2021d). In NSW schools, Kindergarten-to-Year-2 are commonly referred to as the infant years and, like all schooling in the State, operate under the statutory authority of the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). NESA (2017) provides the syllabuses and outcomes for all years of schooling, including Early Stage 1 (Kindergarten) and Stage 1 (Years 1-2), and differentiated learning for each Stage according to developmental and academic readiness. These early years are crucial for children to acquire essential literacy, language, and mathematics skills (Timmons et al., 2021). They lay the foundation for the ongoing development of verbal and non-verbal communication and lifelong learning (Connor, 2012). Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers are expected to be skilled in engaging thoughtfully with students and to differentiate learning according to their learners' ability level and interests. The expectation is that students will engage in play-based learning provides hands-on opportunities for young learners to explore and consolidate fundamental literacy and numeracy skills (Timmons et al., 2021).

Review of the Literature

To gain an understanding of the body of literature that pertains to Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers' experience of the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods, and also to determine the gaps in this literature (Fraenkel et al., 2015), the researcher has reviewed five areas of research— a) COVID-19's disruption on education, b) COVID-19's implications and decision-making for education, c) Australian implications and findings, d) studies on the early primary years, and e) factors influencing teacher wellbeing (stress, coping, and identity).

COVID-19's Disruption on Education

COVID-19 has created many challenges for those in the education system (Engzell et al., 2021) and has been described by the United Nations as "the largest disruption to education in history" (United Nations, 2020b, p. 2). UNESCO (2021) maintains that the impact of the teaching and learning-disruption on students, teachers, parents, and the school community is irreversible but an issue that needs to be addressed. The disruptions have been particularly felt by teachers, who had no option but to work through multiple COVID-19 experiences. Research suggests that these additional and unique pressures have affected teachers' professional practice and wellbeing (Flack et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020). Now teachers have become the key players in the recovery of education globally (United Nations, 2021).

Given the extent of the crisis, new studies are emerging implicating the significance of the pandemic on education communities from various perspectives. Current research has explicitly looked at the impact of COVID-19 on education globally, comparing international responses, economic consequences, and overviews of systems put in place (Breslin, 2021; Flack et al., 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Schleicher, 2020). Others investigated teacher wellbeing from a primary school (Kim & Asbury, 2020), language teacher (MacIntyre et al., 2020), creative arts (Anderson et al., 2021), and diverse learning needs (Page et al., 2021) perspective. Many studies investigated the change to online learning and its impact on students and teachers in both primary and secondary schools (Anderson et al., 2021; Flack et al., 2020; Paredes et al., 2020; Sangeeta & Tandon, 2020; Tawil, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Additionally, a study in Canada identified the early primary years as a significant concern for teachers (planning for), students (fostering necessary independence), and parents (experiencing the pressures of becoming the learning facilitator) because of the remote teaching experience (Timmons et al., 2020).

COVID-19: Implications and Decision-Making for Education

The research that emerged on schooling during COVID-19 covered a broad range of schooling contexts at an international level (Engzell et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020; Sangeeta & Tandon, 2020). In the case of COVID-19, there was little to rely on due to the unparalleled global ramifications presented to schools, with principals depending on their prior experiences to guide their decision-making (Chaseling et al., 2020; Flack et al., 2021; Paredes et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020). Additionally, the advice given by government leaders was sometimes contradictory and confusing, placing additional pressure on principals to make decisions that were best for their school communities (Breslin, 2021; Chaseling et al., 2020). Ultimately, teachers—the faces of education—were forced to assess, plan, modify, and trial new and often uncharted teaching practices (Anderson et al., 2021; Schleicher, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). In this time of uncertainty and disruption, the daily reality for teachers often became a source of constant stress and ambiguity for them, with surviving and coping considered their everyday reality (Anderson et al., 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020).

Many studies focused on unpacking the harmful and disruptive aspects of COVID-19 on education. Research has highlighted teacher stress and negative emotions (MacIntyre et al., 2020) and uncertainty and worry for the vulnerable (Flack et al., 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Timmons et al., 2020). Other studies have focussed on: the inequality of the shift to digital learning to cater for all learners and the lack of social interaction it promoted (Tawil, 2020) and; gaps in teacher technology training, and the ability to deliver remote teaching (Schleicher, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Additional studies emphasised positive and beneficial factors for teachers that emerged due to improvements in feelings towards technology (Giovannella et al., 2020, Timmons et al., 2020),

finding a way forward, and strengthening professional relationships (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Another inquiry investigated the creative growth that occurred for those teachers who were open to risk-taking and vulnerability regarding distance learning (Anderson et al., 2021).

Online learning became the new norm for most, with teachers sometimes forced to implement programs and practices outside their skillset and expertise (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; Tawil, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Many systems and schools mandated new virtual classrooms that required speed of set-up, ease of delivery, and creativity in presentation (Anderson et al., 2021). Consequently, many experienced teachers were left feeling anxious, stressed, and frustrated in an environment where they would typically feel comfortable and knowledgeable (Kim & Asbury, 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Poletti, 2020). Additionally, some learners in various countries were left disadvantaged due to their lack of access to learning via technology, internet, and support at home (Paredes et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020; Tawil, 2020).

Australian Implications and Findings

March 2020 will be remembered by the education community as the time when the COVID-19 crisis first impacted Australian schools (Chaseling et al., 2020; Heffernan et al., 2021). In contrast to other countries, Australia adopted diverse guidelines for school closures according to state and federal government advice (Flack et al., 2020). Australia was one of only five countries internationally (including the United States) that decided to close schools (for children of non-essential workers) at a local level seven weeks into the 2020 school year (Paredes et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020). Now, in November 2021, in light of multiple learning-from-home periods, the ripple effect of the pandemic is still being felt at various intensities in Australia and across the globe (UNESCO, 2021).

There have been a plethora of international studies on teachers during the pandemic (Herwin et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020; Midcalf & Boatwright, 2020; Phillips, 2021; Schuck et al., 2021) though few studies have focussed on Australian teachers. One Australian study included an online survey of more than 3,500 primary and secondary teachers from Australia and New Zealand public and private schools in April 2020 (Flack et al., 2020). Though completed in the preliminary stages of COVID-19, their findings highlighted some of the critical pressures felt by teachers in the early response phase. Teachers identified issues with: distance learning (questioning the efficacy of online learning, being able to meet the needs of learners, including younger children and those in low socio-economic areas); use of educational technologies (the number of tools/platforms offered and teacher confidence in utilising digital learning); personal wellbeing (increased time and workload demand, the burden of having to simultaneously teach remote and face-to-face learners, and social isolation), and; student needs. Further, 80% of teachers were concerned that students would need additional support when they returned to the classroom. Recommendations from the

study included: prioritising models of emotional wellbeing for students transitioning back to the classroom; providing additional instructional support at school; interventions for the disproportionately disadvantaged (e.g., Indigenous and younger students); increased opportunities to build teacher and peer relationships; prioritising student feedback to assist teachers in planning and meeting student needs, and; celebrating the effort of teachers, who despite many challenges, rose to the occasion embracing innovation and change.

Another Australian inquiry examined the perceptions surrounding schooling, teachers, and education and how they were positively impacted as a result of the COVID-19 phenomenon (Heffernan et al., 2021). This found that perceptions of teachers' work improved due to COVID-19 (Heffernan et al., 2021). This research suggested that due to parents becoming the “home educators,” their views on the teaching profession were more positive than surveys conducted before the pandemic experience. The significance of students having equitable access to technology was also highlighted, along with providing a flexible approach to learning-from-home.

Studies on the Early Primary Years

The only study located that focussed on the early primary years was a Canadian study that examined the impact of the COVID-19 remote teaching in Ontario (Canada) (Timmons et al., 2020). It suggested several important themes: equity considerations, impact on parents/families, social and emotional impacts on students, and impacts on educators. The researchers also interviewed parents to gain a more comprehensive understanding and complementary perspective of the broader impact of the pandemic on Kindergarten-to-Year-2 learners. The study provided a general overview of the practical challenges faced by teachers, parents, and students, with no specific focus on psychological effects for any party. Included in the study's recommendations was the urgent need for research into teaching and learning related to COVID-19 in the early school years (Timmons et al., 2021).

Furthermore, early years teachers were also expected to cater to students with more targeted learning needs, requiring explicit, supported instruction (Flack et al., 2020; Timmons et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021). These teachers faced additional challenges on top of the many other COVID-19-related stresses and pressures that were presenting themselves (Kruszewska et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020; Timmons et al., 2020).

Factors Influencing Teacher Wellbeing (Stress, Coping, and Identity)

Teaching has long been considered a stressful profession (Anderson et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2017), and the effect of the COVID-19 crisis has only exacerbated the pressures that teachers were already feeling through juggling multiple roles and time pressures (Herman et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2017). For the purposes of this study, the adopted definitions of stress and coping have been applied to the teaching profession. The *Transactional*

Theory of Stress (Lazarus & Folman, 1984) is a widely accepted transtheoretical model that defines stress as the emotional, cognitive, and physiological experience occurring when environmental demands exceed an individual's resources to adapt. According to this model, coping is an individual's attempt to manage those demands. It can be defined as either: emotion-focused (cognitive) intending to alter the experience of stress or; problem-focused (behavioural) intending to modify the source of stress. According to Lazarus and Folman (1984), most stressors will elicit both types of coping with problem-focused utilised when people feel they can do something to alleviate the stress, and emotion-focused dominant when people think they must endure the stressor. It is likely then that during the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods, the professional challenges faced by teachers may have elicited more emotion-focused coping due to the experiences and demands being out of the control of the individual (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

The problem-based coping theory was expanded and renamed by Carver et al. (1989) as *active coping*. This expansion involved including distinctions of planning (thinking about how to cope with a stressor), suppression of competing activities (putting aside other projects), restraint (waiting until an opportunity presents itself), and seeking social support (advice, assistance, or information from others). As an active-coping strategy, the teaching profession generally joins together in challenging times through social connections (Flack et al., 2021). However, it is possible that the impact of physical distancing requirements enforced by health authorities and the strains of an already over-used medium of technology impeded the ability for teachers to connect.

Specific to the teaching profession, the *Coping-Competence-Context Theory* (Herman et al., 2020) draws on empirical research to highlight the 3Cs model of understanding and intervening in teacher stress and coping. This theory proposes clear links between teacher stress and poor outcomes for both students and teachers. It identifies critical interconnected pathways for developing teacher stress and possible interventions. This study predicted that high-stress levels alone do not predict adverse outcomes for students and teachers. However, teachers who reported higher stress and low coping levels were more likely to experience adverse professional and personal effects and relationships. The model suggests that mindset and teacher training influence an educator's ability to cope. Additionally, the school and societal context, meta-cognitions, coping skills, and student behaviours impact teacher stress levels. Consequently, if stress and coping are interconnected, it is possible all these factors were at play during the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods and played a crucial role in how individual teachers differed in their experiences and perceptions during this time.

Teacher identity has become increasingly researched in the past two decades as many try to understand the complexity of the role, the drive behind the face of education, and why now, so many are leaving the profession burned-out and unfulfilled (Hanna et al., 2019; Kim & Asbury,

2020; Ryan et al., 2017). It is a multifaceted construct that Hanna et al. (2019) outline as encompassing six components: self-image (one's view of self as a teacher), motivation (reason for becoming a teacher), commitment (dedication to teaching), self-efficacy (belief in ability to teach), task perception (what is good teaching), and job satisfaction (how teachers feel about their job).

In addition to identity and the *Standard*-related aspects of the teaching profession, Molla and Nolan (2020) suggest that agency is also at the core of teacher professionalism. Teacher agency—or having the ability to make decisions, take initiative and enable change—is often enacted in situations requiring teachers to negotiate or battle restrictions of leadership or policy (Molla & Nolan, 2020). If agency impacts a teacher's professionalism and ability to control aspects of their practice, this may have been challenged during the unpredictable and potentially stressful COVID-19 learning-from-home periods.

The COVID-19 crisis presented many opportunities for teachers to reflect on and question their professional identity. Were they really “teaching” if not in front of a room full of students (self-image)? Did they view how they were teaching as good teaching practice (task-perception)? Did they believe they had the knowledge and the skills to cater to a new environment using different modalities (self-efficacy and agency)? Ultimately, did they feel they were doing a good job (job satisfaction)? As Day (2018) suggested, this may have been a time when teaching felt like emotional labour. Being “professional” required teachers who were possibly feeling stressed and disheartened to present themselves as otherwise. Amid being faced with numerous stressors, many teachers perhaps did not have the time to reflect on how it impacted the way they felt about themselves, their role, and their job. More than eighteen months on, this study aims to reveal the intimate and reflective perspectives of what it meant for individual teachers.

Rationale and Aims

The rationale for this study is two-fold. In 2020, the researcher was a Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teacher who taught during the 2020 COVID-19 learning-from-home period. This allowed her to see the phenomenon's initial impact on colleagues, parents, and students. In 2021, the researcher is a School Counsellor in Training for The Department and required to complete a thesis. In light of this, the researcher chose an inquiry topic that allowed her to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers who taught during the 2020, and then 2021, learning-from-home periods. Gaining such insights should enable the researcher to better support Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers and students in her School Counsellor role.

Even without a global pandemic, teaching in the early primary years is a stressful and demanding position to function in optimally (Timmons et al., 2020; Timmons et al., 2021). The early years of learning lay the foundations for all future learning and require the complex and purposeful planning and delivery of developmentally engaging activities (Timmons et al., 2021).

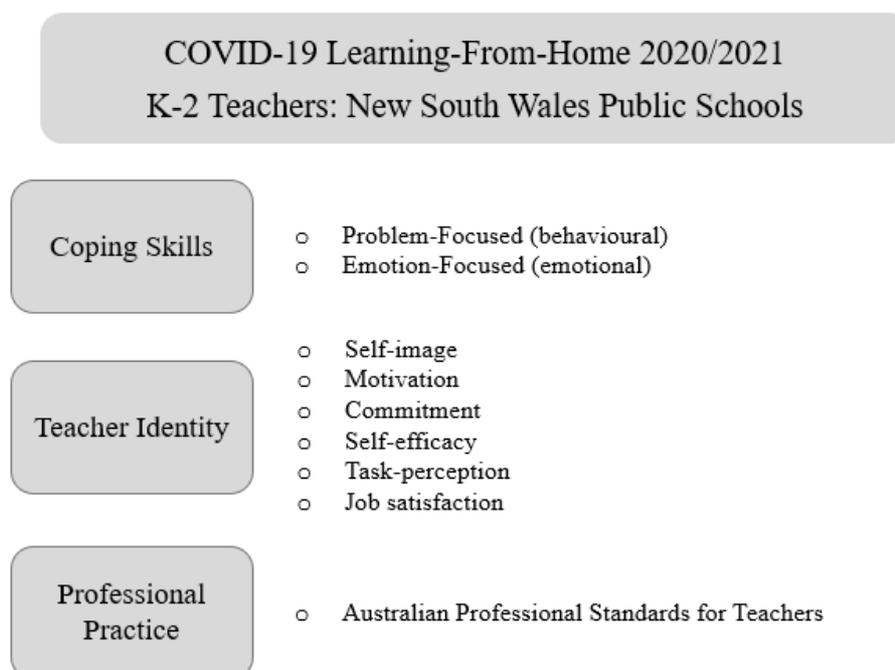
Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers have the unique and crucial task of interweaving a combination of learning styles across various mediums. This encompasses consolidating essential early literacy and numeracy skills through play-based learning, differentiating learning to meet individual student needs, and providing a gradual release of explicitly scaffolded and supported learning tasks (DEEWR, 2009).

The Current Study

The current study asked how the COVID-19 period, when most New South Wales students were learning-from-home, impacted Kindergarten-to-Year-2 public school teachers' professional practice and wellbeing. It addressed a gap in the literature—the lack of research on COVID-19 in early primary years—and offered a uniquely Australian perspective. This study's outcomes will contribute to the growing body of research emerging from the COVID-19 experience and its impact on education globally, particularly related to the early primary years. It will offer real-world teacher perspectives of the impact on their professionalism, identity, coping skills, and general wellbeing due to the 2020 and 2021 learning-from-home periods (see Figure 2). Findings from this research may influence how principals and members of the NSW Department of Education's Executive Teams manage staff wellbeing and professional practice protocols moving forward with or without a global crisis. Additionally, the study will provide an Australian, local perspective of how NSW Kindergarten-to-Year-2 public school teachers dealt with the challenges of the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods.

Figure 2

Overview of the Current Study's Research Considerations



Research Paradigm

This section explains the alignment of the researcher's worldview (ontology and epistemology) with her choice of methodology and methods. It begins by outlining the researcher's worldview for this study, followed by the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical perspectives. The methodology is discussed, followed by the method, concluding with the study's ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and reflexivity.

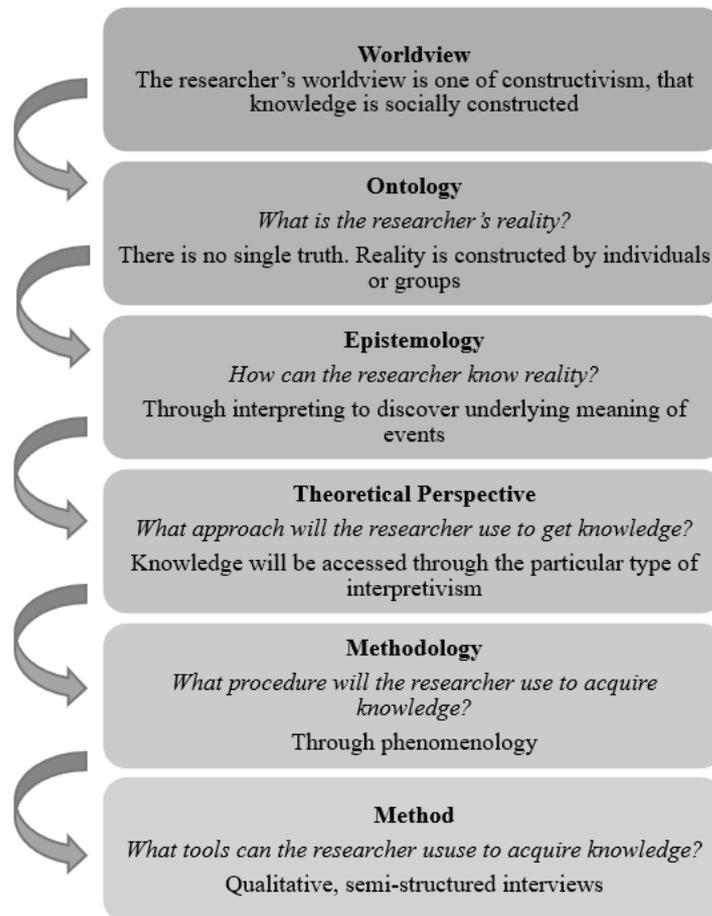
A Worldview of Constructivism

To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of being a Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teacher during the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods, the researcher chose the qualitative research approach of constructivism. Constructivists view the world as socially constructed and reconstructed by the actions and the interactions of actors, usually influential humans (Willig, 2013). Thus, for constructivists, the world is dependent on the view humans give to it (Theys, 2017). Adopting a constructivist worldview allowed the researcher to observe and analyse human thoughts, feelings, and behaviour (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, her approach was interpretative, flexible in structure, and assumed a subjective reality to discover the underlying meaning of teachers' experiences (Merriam, 2009).

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the researcher's constructivist worldview and, in alignment, her other theoretical beliefs that reality is constructed by individuals (ontology) who know reality through interpreting it (epistemology). Therefore, the approach she will use is interpretivism.

Figure 3

A Visual Representation of the Researcher's Worldview for this Study



Note. This figure, adapted from Crotty (1985) and Patel (2015), provides a visual representation of the researcher's worldview, philosophical foundations, methodology, and method.

Ontology, Epistemology and Theoretical Perspective

Ontology relates to the nature of the world and asks questions about what reality is and how truth or knowing can be identified (Willig, 2013). In this study, the researcher adopted a subjective ontology, a belief that there are multiple realities from the perspective of the researcher, participants, and reader (Creswell, 2012). Entwined with ontology is epistemology (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). In this study, an epistemological belief is that the researcher can know reality by interpreting it. In alignment, the researcher will employ the theoretical perspective of interpretivism for meaning-making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Methodology

Grounded in the theoretical perspective of interpretivism, the methodological lens (Crotty, 1985) of phenomenology was used to view the COVID-19 learning-from-home experiences of individual teachers. Phenomenology attempts to understand people's—in this case, Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers'—perceptions and perspectives relative to a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). It aims to produce knowledge regarding what it was like for participants to live through a particular phenomenon—teaching young children during the COVID-19 learning-from-home

periods (Willig, 2013). Through this choice of methodology, the researcher of the present study explored the subjective viewpoints of teachers. She collated rich knowledge around how teachers who lived and worked through this same event may have perceived it differently, individually, and any commonalities that may have emerged through the exploration of their thoughts and reflections (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Method

Data Collection to Explore Lived Experience

In alignment with phenomenology, the researcher employed semi-structured interviews as the data-collection method (Willig, 2013). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to ask pre-determined closed and open-ended questions from an interview schedule (see Appendix A) and follow-up questions to inquire more deeply into the participants' meaning (Merriam, 2009). Fraenkel et al.'s (2015) advice was taken regarding the types of questions asked—questions about the participants' background, knowledge, experience, and opinions. Asking these four types of questions allowed the researcher to understand ideas of identity (background), contextual information (knowledge), perceptions of professional difference (experience), and beliefs, attitudes, and values (opinion) (Fraenkel et al., 2015). By hearing the participants' multiple perceptions on the same phenomenon, the researcher was able to generalise on what the phenomenon was like from the participants' perspective (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

Kindergarten to Year 2 Teachers as Participants

The researcher chose Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers for interview as previous research has considered perspectives of principals (Chaseling et al., 2020; Paredes et al., 2020) and high school and primary school teachers (Anderson et al., 2021; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Sangeeta & Tandon, 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020). Few studies have explicitly explored early years (Kindergarten-to-Year-2) teachers' perceptions and perspectives (Timmons et al., 2020) of remote teaching throughout the pandemic. Indeed, the researcher could not locate any Australian studies that have investigated the experiences of this particular teaching population regarding this phenomenon.

Purposeful Sampling to Recruit Participants

As it was not feasible to interview the entire population of New South Wales Department of Education Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers, the researcher used purposive sampling to draw a sample from the population (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The characteristics of interest used to select the participants (Merriam, 2009) were i) Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers who the NSW Department of Education employed during 2020 and ii) that at least one teacher from each year level—Kindergarten, Year 1, and Year 2—were selected. At the recruitment point, the researcher

was unaware of how many participants she would need to recruit until no new information emerged from her research—data saturation (Ary et al., 2019).

To recruit participants, the researcher contacted principals of local schools via email (see Principal Letter, Appendix B) requesting Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers' participation in the study. Details of the study, and the researcher's contact details, were provided to principals to disperse to teachers who taught Kindergarten, Year 1, or Year 2 in 2020 (see Study Invitation Notification, Appendix C). Teachers who wished to participate in the study were asked to email the researcher to obtain copies of the Information Statement (Appendix D) and Consent Form (Appendix E). Participants who responded to the interview request were from public schools in the Mid and Mid North Coast (New South Wales, Australia) areas who taught full-time during the 2020 learning-from-home period.

Semi-Structured Interviews for Procedure

The original intention of this study was to interview participants in person (Appendix D, E). However, the 2021 COVID-19 state-wide lockdown meant that interviews were instead conducted via the videoconferencing software, Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, 2021). Participants and the researcher used email to set up an agreed interview date and time. The researcher used her secure Department of Education Zoom account to send a private link with log-in code for participants to access the interview.

During the interviews, the researcher asked general demographic, professional, and wellbeing questions (Appendix A). Teachers were asked questions associated with their teaching and professional practice in relation to the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers*. They were asked to reflect on: how their practice changed; what specific modifications (if any) they had made to accommodate their teaching via non-face-to-face methods; in what ways they coped with juggling face-to-face and non-face-to-face instruction, and; the ways they were supported in implementing teaching approaches that they may have felt uncomfortable undertaking. Additionally, the participants were asked problem-focused and emotion-focused coping questions. Further, they were asked to consider any positives or gains made from the pandemic experience and how this linked to aspects of their professional practice.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom to record participants' responses accurately. In line with the in-depth exploration of lived experience regarding a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), most interviews lasted between 50-60 minutes with an open time-limit allowing participants an opportunity to explore the questions and discuss their responses freely. Debriefing occurred post-interview to check-in with participants regarding any impact of their

participation. Table 1 provides an overview of this study's participant background, experience, and professional context.

Table 1

Participant's Characteristics

Teacher pseudonym	Teacher 1 Pilot**	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	Teacher 6
Years teaching	18yrs	5yrs	21yrs	6yrs	18yrs	19yrs
Age	40-50yrs	20-30	40-50	40-50	40-50	40-50
Gender	female	female	female	female	female	female
Grade level 2020	Grade 1	Grade 1	Grade 1/2	Grade 1	K/1/2	Kindergarten
Grade level 2021	N/A***	N/A***	Kindergarten	Grade 1	K/1/2	Kindergarten
*Executive	Non-Executive	Non-Executive	Executive	Non-Executive	Executive	Executive
Medium used	Online	Online	Paper	Online	Paper	Online
Learning-from-home approach	Whole school	Whole school	Whole school	Whole school	Whole school	Whole school

Note. All participants were employed by the New South Wales Department of Education, the last provider in Australia, as primary teachers. In New South Wales, primary schools educate children for seven years from Kindergarten to 6th class, which most students complete by 12 years of age.

* When a teacher is a member of the Executive, they have management responsibilities in their school. They may be an Assistant Principal or a Teaching Principal.

** Teacher 1 was the pilot study participant. She was interviewed and member checked her transcript before the remaining five teachers were interviewed.

*** These teachers did not teach full time in 2021.

After the interviews, the researcher engaged in a number of interview-related processes. Transcripts were initially transcribed using *Zoom* and then double checked with the *Otter-ai* software (Otter-ai, 2021). The researcher replayed each interview multiple times whilst reading the transcripts to check for accuracy before sending transcripts to participants for member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were given two weeks to review their interview transcripts before analysis and interpretation began. This provided them with an opportunity to offer any adjustments, corrections, or additional clarification. If participants wished to withdraw from the study, they could do so up to two weeks after receiving their interview transcript (Appendix D). All teachers who were interviewed agreed to continue participating in this research project. After this study is completed, participants can access the study's final results by contacting the researcher

directly and requesting a summary of the findings. These findings will be provided after the thesis has been examined.

Pilot Study With One Teacher

The researcher made the strategic decision to conduct a pilot study before embarking on the main study. For the pilot study, she interviewed one teacher and engaged in the transcription and initial analysis process (Teacher 1). The pilot study enabled the researcher to trial aspects of the proposed research procedure to assess its appropriateness and determine if any changes needed to be made to the main study (Aty et al., 2019). Conducting a pilot study accorded with the advice of scholars Kim (2010) and Malmqvist et al. (2019), who recommend the use of pilot studies in phenomenological research projects.

This pilot interview enabled the researcher to examine the suitability and feasibility of the recruitment procedure, research questions and to refine and adjust the interview schedule as needed (Appendix A). It also assisted her (as a novice researcher) to review and formulate her interview techniques (Kim, 2010). As a result of the pilot study, several of the intended interview questions were adjusted to align more accurately with the research question, technology tools were evaluated, and the researcher felt more comfortable moving forward with the main study's participants. It should be noted that the pilot study participant's responses (Teacher 1) are included in the data analysis, themes, and findings.

Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis for Data Analysis

The researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2021b) reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) process and analysed the transcripts by hand. Reflexive TA is commonly used in qualitative, phenomenological research and focuses on exploring the subjective experiences of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Differentiated from other forms of TA, Braun and Clarke (2019) further define and distinguish their method from different, more common approaches, positing it as a theoretical flexible informed approach, suitably adapted to the critical, constructionist frame. In TA, the researcher uses a phenomenological lens to create codes and themes to describe the research question and current literature (Kumar, 2011). Additionally, she seeks to identify recurring regularities and shared meanings across participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Merriam, 2009).

In the study, the researcher followed the six steps of reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). She: 1) familiarised herself with the data and took notes; 2) coded data systematically; 3) generated initial themes from the coded and collated data; 4) developed and reviewed themes; 5) refined, defined, and named themes; and 6) produced the findings. The researcher began with existing

research and themes around education and the COVID-19 phenomenon, teacher identity, coping skills, and professional practice to view the data through a deductive lens. This allowed for a broad view and a basis that guided the analytical process. Furthermore, in line with the recommended methodological framework, the author determined the themes would be identified at a latent level—involving descriptive interpretation and constructionist theorisation, exploring implicit and underlying shared meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2021b).

The initial part of the reflective TA process required the researcher to immerse herself in the experiences by actively listening to the interviews, reading and re-reading through the transcribed texts line-by-line, looking for patterns both within data (initial codes) and resultingly across sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, as Braun and Clark (2006) recommended, the initial codes and patterns were developed into a thematic map that helped the researcher identify possible broad themes and differences across the data. Data was then organised into meaningful groups, such as those that were data-driven (stand-alone responses that were shared across participants), as opposed to others that were theory-driven (linked to *The Standards*, identity, or coping). Consequently, the researcher generated “candidate” and sub-themes and then refined these by looking for further links and cohesion with a collection of distinctive and unique themes identified. Lastly, the researcher defined and named the themes, and the final analysis took place (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Themes are reported in the Findings section, together with verbatim quotes from the interviews to illustrate the theme.

Ethical Considerations

As this study involved the researcher interviewing human participants, ethics approval needed to be obtained in accordance with the Australian Government’s (2018) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)-Updated 2018*. In addition, the study also required approval from the NSW State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP) because all participants were employees of the New South Wales Department of Education (NSW Government, n.d.). Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approved the research (protocol number H21206) on 24/06/21. Subsequently, SERAP approved the study (protocol number 2021239) on 07/09/21. No research was undertaken until both ethics committee had given their approval.

This study required the researcher to engage with several ethical considerations. Participation in the study was voluntary, and Informed Consent was obtained from all participants (Appendix E). No compensation was offered to participate in the study, and the researcher did not interview participants with whom she had a personal relationship. Participants were assured of their anonymity and were allocated a pseudonym for any potentially identifiable information. Interview

transcripts were de-identified to ensure participants felt comfortable talking openly about their experiences, particularly if they involved other staff members or information of a personal nature. After the interviews were conducted, transcribed, and checked thoroughly for accuracy, the researcher provided each participant with a copy of their transcript to member-check (for accuracy) before data analysis began. Further, they were given an opportunity to withdraw from the study up to two weeks after this time.

The researcher did not anticipate that any participant would be harmed through their participation in this research; however, there was the potential for issues raised by participants to cause them distress. Each participant was verbally reminded before their interview commenced that they could ask to take a break or withdraw at any time. Further, they were provided with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) contact information, a free, confidential counselling service available to all New South Wales Department of Education employees (Information Statement; Appendix D).

Trustworthiness

Based on a constructivist/interpretivist form of naturalist inquiry, the researcher as the human instrument used: qualitative methods to gather data; purposive sampling to select human participants who she interviewed in their natural setting; inductive data analysis and; Lincoln and Guba's special criteria for ensuring trustworthiness—credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that qualitative research is enhanced through its trustworthiness. This can be established through a study's: credibility or confidence in the finding's truth; transferability or demonstrating the applicability of the results to other contexts; dependability or showing the study's consistency and that it is repeatable; and confirmability about whether the findings, interpretations, and recommendations are established by the data (Amankwaa, 2016). In the current study: credibility is established through member-checking and having the researcher's supervisor cross-check all analyses; transferability is enhanced through the detailed description of participant encounters that could be experienced in any other public school and across Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers and classes in other towns, cities, states, and countries; dependability is achieved by recording participant responses and member-checking of transcripts - affirmed through finding consistency within the data by way of similarities in themes across participants, and; confirmability is determined as a result of identifying the study's limitations, a clear methodological decision based on research and detailed transcripts. Further, the current study employed a well-known and respected reflexive TA model (Braun & Clarke, 2021b) to validate all trustworthiness aspects.

Reflexivity

Qualitative methodology necessitates the researcher to participate in reflexive practise as part of the inquiry process. This can be differentiated into two types: personal and epistemological reflexivity (Willig, 2013). In regard to personal reflexivity, it was crucial that the researcher first reflected on her own values, experiences, beliefs, and social and professional identity from a personal perspective. One of the anticipated challenges for the researcher was the dual-lens through which she was required to conduct this research. Notably, the researcher identified with the participants through her education, experiences, and professional capacity as a teacher. Therefore, she could share with participants particular values, beliefs, and opinions regarding specific professional components. Her professional background and personal experiences were disclosed to participants before the interviews commenced, as the researcher believed it was important for participants to know her motivations for conducting the study. The researcher did not interview anyone with whom she had a personal relationship. Ethical procedures were put in place to ensure there was no conflict of interest and teachers did not feel pressured to participate in the study.

Engaging in epistemological reflexivity required the researcher to reflect on the original research question and whether it impacted or limited what could be found in the data (Willig, 2013). Considering this, the interview questions were deliberately open and broad—not constricted to theoretical constructs such as identity or types of coping. The researcher believes that this approach allowed participants to take direction from the chosen questions but respond in a way that did not restrict their thoughts and reflections.

At times, a perceived difficulty was the researcher's experience as a teacher that required her to engage in regular moments of reflection throughout all parts of this research. She was able to detach from the data by allowing the codes and themes to be systematically identified through the six-step reflexive TA process. Following a pre-determined model ensured the data analysis was as objective and accurate as possible, and the themes and findings were ultimately free of influence and bias (Willig, 2013). Advantageously, the researcher considered this unique position allowed her to connect with participants on a deeper level, and rapport was established quickly. Some participants voiced that they were more comfortable sharing their experiences because of this sense of connectedness and mutual understanding with the researcher. Moreover, as the researcher was aware of the policies and protocols of a regular public school system, she was able to de-code professional meta-language with ease, allowing for a more meaningful and deeper insight into responses.

A pilot study was conducted prior to the main study as the researcher felt this would assist her in refining her interview techniques and questions. What emerged from the initial interview

(Teacher 1) was the importance of allowing participants time to reflect and connect with the questions. Notably, the researcher became aware that participants were being asked to reflect on a phenomenon that, when the researcher first embarked on this journey, was in the past. However, since the study's approval, schools across NSW have faced multiple learning-from-home periods in 2021. This highlighted for the researcher that it would be necessary for teachers to reflect on what is different this time and how the experience of 2020 helped them adjust and face subsequent learning-from-home periods in 2021. Consequently, the final question in the interview schedule was included to allow participants the opportunity to compare their learning-from-home experiences and the changes they made.

Additionally, it became apparent when viewing the transcript for Teacher 1 that the interview questions did not address all aspects of the research question, specifically, the seven professional *Standards* and the elements of teacher identity. The researcher consequently decided to include these concepts in an email prior to any further interviews that took place. Hence, participants were able to preview them and familiarise themselves with the concepts and language. Several questions were further revised to address constructs such as coping, agency, and professional practice.

Findings

Five broad themes emerged from an analysis of the interviews (Figure 4). These emergent themes will be addressed in order in this section.

Figure 4

Emergent Themes Derived from Interview Analysis

Theme	
1	The Need for Connection with Others
2	The Importance of Differentiation for K-2 Learners
3	Gaining Technology Skills and Experience
4	Flexible Adaptation in Times of Uncertainty
5	The Value of Experience to Influence Future Decision-Making

Theme 1: The Need for Connection with Others

All participants—the six Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers—commented that they found a need to and benefit from connecting with others—colleagues, students, and parents during the learning-from-home periods. When asked to reflect on Teaching Standard 7—engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community—a widely expressed sentiment was the support

teachers received from colleagues, including school Executives, which highlighted the importance for them of collaboration. Teacher 3 suggested that teachers should "... definitely collaborate – it's a lot of work to [prepare for learning-from-home teaching] on your own, especially if [learning-from-home] goes on for an extended period of time." Another teacher revealed that collegial support was one thing that helped her cope with the challenges of such uncertain times. She explained, "I think I coped pretty well with it. I had a really good team around me; the girls that I worked with were very supportive. If there were any technical problems, we were always helping each other" (Teacher 2). Likewise, when discussing Standard 3—plan for and implement effective teaching and learning—Teacher 5 recalled how her team connected professionally to plan for different aspects of the curriculum, "You had staff together on-site. [They would say] 'If you do English, I'll do maths.' Then we'd each do a subject and ... collaboratively built each [learning] pack." Another teacher told how she and her colleagues approached the preparation for the learning-from-home challenge in a similar way:

We had really ... strong staff collaboration and support ... in the way that we were working ... We planned for Stages ... So, in my Stage, everyone sort of chipped in and ... some people did the literacy, some people did ... the maths or the other KLAs [Key Learning Areas]. So, it really was teamwork ... I wasn't just responsible for my class. ... everyone ... across our Stage got together, and worked together, and planned together ... you knew that everyone else was in the same boat (Teacher 1).

Teacher 3 identified how, through the process of working with colleagues in teams, she realised the difference in people's coping skills and reactions to stressful events. Reflecting on her ability to cope well, she identified that while connecting with others during this stressful time, it was apparent that others were not managing as well. This teacher also commented positively on the support the school's leadership provided. She felt at ease with the school's streamlined learning-from-home approach that allowed her to effectively plan (Standard 3) and manage learning activities. As a result, she reflected that she found she had more time to connect with her family.

Conversely, when another participant, a teaching principal from a small rural school, reflected on Standard 7, she explained that she did not cope well with the 2020 stress and felt a lack of connection with others in her school. She believed this was because of the Queensland border closure, which meant that for nine weeks in 2020, she could not travel from her Queensland home to her NSW school. Rather, she managed her NSW school from her home in Queensland. This participant explained:

I did feel last year [in 2020] a lack of understanding, or ... interest from other schools of "Well, you're at home. Yeah, you'll be right." I was disappointed that a few surrounding schools didn't check in more here, knowing that three of my six staff were not here [on site]. (Teacher 5).

During both the 2020 and 2021 learning-from-home periods, five participants reported they prioritised connecting with the parents of students and their students (as per Standard 7)—given these students were in the three earliest years of school, so between five and seven years of age. The purpose of the connection (primarily with parents) was three-fold to: i) "check-in" with parents on the wellbeing of their children, ii) check on students' progress with learning, and iii) inquire regarding students' access to technology and learning. Zoom and regular phones were their communication method. Several participants commented that their continued need to ensure student safety (as per Standard 4, create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments) and connect with their learners—even when the learners were not in their care—was still relevant throughout the learning-from-home periods. When reflecting on Standard 4, Teacher 6 provided examples of the type of wellbeing questions she would ask children during the phone calls to them, for example, "Have you been outside to play?" She also explained the benefits of Zoom check-ins (in 2021), "The Zooms are really good. 'Give us a thumbs up if you've done this.'" This participant's connection with students helped her feel she was maintaining a sense of regular professional practice and achievement.

Alternatively, teachers' lack of connection with their students appeared to be a source of stress for most. A characteristic response is included below:

[Not being able to connect with my students was what] I really worried about a lot. And I think that put that level of extra stress on me because you're engaging with a number of students, and you see a number of students in your classroom. But during [the learning-from-home times], there were kids that I couldn't contact ... I couldn't access them all ... I was leaving messages left, right, and centre for quite a number of my kids at school ... that level of worry and making sure that their wellbeing and safety were being looked after (Teacher 4).

When reflecting on how adjustments made due to COVID-19 impacted Standards 1 (know students and how they learn), 2 (know the content and how to teach it), 3 (plan for and implement effective teaching and learning), and 4 (create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments), several teachers also expressed genuine concern for their students' academic learning and wellbeing due to the learning-from-home periods, particularly given the young age of their learners. For example, Teacher 6 commented on Standards 1 and 2: "Our little year ones have missed three terms of school in 18 months. I know we shouldn't be worried about the catch-up, but I am." Likewise, when discussing Standards 3 and 4, a Kindergarten teacher reported feeling worried about how the COVID-19 crisis would impact the Orientation visits for the 2022 Kindergarten students, who would typically have completed multiple on-site visits by this time of year. She noted, "I think Orientation's off at the moment ... which is going to be sad" (Teacher 6). She

explained the impact this has on young students starting school, “It's really hard ... some have never been to preschool ... don't even know really what school is ... that's definitely a scary situation.”.

Zoom was one strategy schools used to create connections with children during the 2021 learning-from-home period. Almost all participants commented that their schools did not run Zoom “check-ins” in 2020. Yet, in their reflections on the 2021 experience, all teachers mentioned using it and commented that Zoom was a positive way of ensuring previously missed connections with their students could occur in future learning-from-home periods. Regarding 2021, one participant reported, “We were able to Zoom the kids twice a week. I was able to get parents to log their kids on. We had 50% link-up ... Just a check-in, not a lesson. The kids were just bouncing ... So that really helped” (Teacher 5).

Almost all participants, when reflecting on Standard 7, also commented on the need for regular contact with the parents of their young learners. These participants explained that they were aware of the sometimes-extensive support required by parents to engage young children in learning and the assistance needed for these children to complete tasks. Acknowledging this, one participant reported, “But if you've [referring to parents] got no experience of that [Kindergarten-to-Year-2 children] are such little people who do need to be taught such specific skills before they can even access anything ... [Working with their children on their learning] was a big thing to do” (Teacher 4).

Nonetheless, while almost all the participants identified that connections with parents were vital, half reported feeling uncomfortable with some of the conversations that had to take place. One participant provided a representative comment regarding this: “I found dealing with parents quite hard at some different points ... especially when it was a little bit tricky ... You're just literally on a phone, and things can be taken the wrong way” (Teacher 4). Similarly, another participant reported, “I found some conversations with parents uncomfortable. I found that they were very overwhelmed and didn't know where they were. They were really out of their depth. Especially they're not teachers. So, they were really struggling” (Teacher 2). As part of this new connection with parents, one participant recalled taking on a new role:

I also ... when ... talking to parents, I can remember having a few counselling sessions almost. And that's not what I'd been trained for. So that was new as well. And sometimes, what the parents needed was just a friendly ear on the other side [of the phone] (Teacher 4).

In summary, when asked to reflect on the Teaching Standards, teachers reported that connection with others (Standard 7) was of paramount importance for them. Teachers' connection with others supported their ability to cope with the changes required by the pandemic and assisted them in maintaining elements of their professional practice. They explained that communication

with colleagues, students, and parents allowed them to break down barriers and maintain supportive learning environments (Standard 4) created by the learning-from-home experiences.

Theme 2: The Importance of Differentiation for K-2 Learners

All participants discussed differentiating learning to meet the individual needs of their students as a necessary component during the learning-from-home periods. This was explicitly highlighted by every teacher when discussing the impact of changes required for Standards 1, 2, and 3. Nonetheless, they reflected that differentiating was largely lacking during the 2020 learning-from-home period. Teacher 2's comment regarding 2020 reflected the ideas of the group that the learning their school's provided was not necessarily effective (Standard 3), "We just had to go for mainstream, then, if you [the children] weren't at the average, you [the children] were kind of left behind, or you [the children] weren't pushed far enough." This sentiment was shared by all other participants who identified that while they were aware of how to meet the needs of younger learners in a regular classroom context (Standard 1), integrating this into their school's chosen platform was difficult at times (Standard 3). Teacher 1's comment reflected that of the group:

[During learning-from-home, children] require so much more support, and scaffolding and explanation ... In a normal classroom context ... they have that opportunity to ask questions constantly ... [Differentiation was] definitely an aspect that I found lacking [during 2020].

Differentiation was also particularly referred to by all participants to meet the specific needs of Kindergarten-to-Year-2 learners—some of whom would not have been able to read or complete specific tasks without adult support. One participant commented how this knowledge about Kindergarten-to-Year-2 learners (Standard 1) impacted the type of work sent home in 2020 and that the work was subsequently differentiated for younger learners, "I was very concerned that there wouldn't be assistance at home. And I wanted our little people to hopefully open the bag themselves and be able to go on with something" (Teacher 5). Similarly, another participant described concerns for her Year 1 learners, "... some would have parents sitting next to them. But also, some weren't being given much support at home, which again, is very different to the classroom" (Teacher 1). When reflecting on Standard 2, Teacher 6 explained that she used a similar strategy to promote independent learning-from-home in 2020 for her Kindergarten learners, "... last year, we had a sound booklet. So that was a known for the kids. They knew how to fill that out. They knew exactly ... how to because they'd been there [at school] for the term ... They knew how to do all of the pages."

Two participants described how technology was used to supplement the lack of differentiation in the learning-from-home context (as required by Standard 3). Teacher 1's comment is representative, "There were things such as home readers, which we had to modify and just

provide online resources instead of physical readers ... I had to try and source more videos to provide examples for the younger students" (Teacher 1). Reflecting on the positive aspects of learning-from-home in 2021 (as a way to meet Standards 1 and 3), Teacher 5 discovered new online resources that allowed her to differentiate reading also, "We kept sending books home as well as electronic [ones]. We went to Wooshka [an online children's reading program] as well ... Wooshka actually has the comprehension questions linked to the levelled readers." When asked how she set about meeting the needs of her infants learners (Standard 1) in the learning-from-home context, Teacher 3 advised, "I had differentiated booklets within the class. I had three booklets, just for Year One, because I had such a range in there."

Similarly, when reflecting on changes made in 2021, another participant described how she felt more content with how work was differentiated (as per Standard1) in 2021. She explained:

I actually believe we had work sent home levelled and catered for knowing students better.... So, I'm very impressed.... And I'm so happy to know that as opposed to us last year, where we sent home lower-level work and hoped for engagement because it looked exciting and interesting (Teacher 5).

In general, all teachers recognised the distinct need for differentiation in learning content during the learning-from-home periods and how this linked to the Teaching Standards. Teacher 3's comment is representative of the views of all the teachers, "Knowing those individual kids, and what needs they have and how to differentiate their work for them during that time, definitely was key" (Teacher 3).

In summary, teachers indicated that differentiation of student activities in the learning-from-home context required modifications to reflect student ability level as would typically be catered for in the classroom. Those teachers who were able to differentiate for students found this assisted with maintaining professional standards, personal coping skills, and learning continuity. Teachers who were unable to differentiate learning during these times reported this was a change they would make in the case of future learning-from-home periods.

Theme 3: Gaining Technology Skills and Experience

All participants referred to the necessity of integrating technology into the learning-from-home activities, regardless of their school's overall approach. When reflecting on Standard 6 (engage in professional learning), four teachers tried extensive online activities (such as Google Classroom) to provide a continuation of learning. In contrast, others (Teachers 3 and 5) used technology as an additional learning mode—for fear of excluding some learners. Several teachers, when reflecting on Standard 4, expressed concerns about students not being able to access the learning-from-home content if it explicitly relied on technology. When describing how professional

changes made impacted Standards 1 and 3, one participant commented on why her school chose paper booklets (over technology) as their primary form of learning in all the learning-from-home periods:

There were some parents who said, 'We don't have a device.' Then we would give them a device, loan them a device, and they still weren't using it. They didn't have enough internet, or they were hotspotting off their phone, or it was just too hard when they might have multiple kids on one device [at home]. (Teacher 3)

Likewise, another participant shared this concern as to why a technology-based learning-from-home mode was not appropriate for Kindergarten-to-Year-2 learners:

The most challenging aspect ... was that some students didn't have access to devices, they didn't have access to internet. Or that they didn't have the skills. When you're talking about early learners and K-2 students ... most of them didn't have the ability to log onto Google Classroom themselves and read the activity that was required for the day and the instructions of how to do everything. (Teacher 1)

Equally concerned about not meeting the needs of the school's clientele, Teacher 5, when reflecting on Standards 1 and 3, commented how, for her Kindergarten-to-Year-2 learners, using technology as the sole learning platform was unrealistic. She explained, "... can you imagine trying to teach those K/1s, Zooming a lesson when I've got them hitting all the emoticons in and changing their backgrounds and just doing this [looking around]. The teacher stress-level of trying to do that, and then knowing it didn't work."

Teachers reported that their schools (as a staff) considered the differences in the technology platforms used in 2020 and 2021 in terms of what was effective for their students. This demonstrated a collective reflection on Standards 1 and 3 and if what they had done previously was working for their students. One teacher identified that her school's shift from Google Classroom to the Department of Education's 2021 *Learning from Home* resources required a more balanced approach. She suggested these resources could (in the future) be complemented with more personalised class teacher content, commenting:

If we were to do [learning-from-home] again. If we were to follow the online stuff from the Department, I think it needs to be supplemented with us {teachers} personally ... Parents were hanging for the Zoom sessions to see us for the kids' sake, not so much for them. (Teacher 6)

Teacher 6's reflection is an example of her school's engagement with Standard 7, that she recognised the importance of engaging professionally with parents.

Being able to step out of their comfort zone and use technology daily also challenged some participants who had to rely on technology to reach students and parents to do their job. When

discussing Standard 6 with its focus on engagement with professional learning, Teacher 4 described:

... one of the things that was kind of weighing on my shoulders was, here I am. I'm trying to do my best. But this [teaching online] is really unfamiliar territory for me.... my place of comfort, it's in front of those kids—being silly and engaging with them. And then to have to try and do that through a screen or a computer, or even a phone call!

Another less-experienced teacher agreed that relying on technology to communicate with learners and their parents was also relevant in her experience, commenting, "I found some conversations with parents uncomfortable" (Teacher 2). Expanding on how this impacted her self-image as a teacher, she recalled, "I felt that I had a lot of pressure on me with recorded lessons and videos." Overall, the support required by these younger learners meant that participants ultimately had more contact with parents at home, who were entrusted with overseeing and facilitating the learning-from-home process.

All participants identified the benefits of technology in both the 2020 and 2021 learning-from-home periods, whether that be through the use of electronic check-ins on Google Classroom and Seesaw (in 2020) or Zoom catch-ups (in 2021). A typical comment was, "We'd have a daily check-in, and that was really good with ... the kids. They'd send me messages or videos and ... I could reply with a video or reply with a message ... They could connect with each other as well" (Teacher 3). In a similar vein, another participant whose school chose to use minimal technology in 2020 reflected on the positives of using Zoom in 2021:

Just a check-in, not a lesson. The kids were just bouncing. They'd never been on a Zoom before. They just love looking at themselves. It was the cutest thing ever. But that was a difference as well, at least we could then talk ... through 'In your kit you will find, and who's done this?' ... and then they {the children} would show [their] work. (Teacher 5)

Teacher 4 also referred to the importance of this teacher-student visual communication tool for Kindergarten-to-Year-2 learners when discussing Standard 1:

I think the big thing [for the children] is missing friends. We've used the Zoom this time round, which we didn't last time. So that's been nice for class check-ins. And then we've had lots of positive feedback about using that. And it's been really nice to see those kids.

When teachers reflected on skills and experience they required and gained, all participants shared that they had gained something from the technology integration. While some did not regard the gain necessarily as "professional learning" (Standard 6), all teachers reported how they learnt something new. One participant pleasantly noted, "I learned new technology skills" (Teacher 2). Likewise, another teacher recalled, "... a lot of staff that weren't maybe weren't so tech-savvy, learnt a lot of skills ... I showed ... teachers how to use Google Classroom and upload things ... So

yes, it was nice" (Teacher 1). Another participant described how the learning of skills came about through collaboration with colleagues:

And I read a story and my colleague filmed me reading ... Then we were taught by another colleague how to upload that onto the Google Classroom ... There was a period of that week before lockdown last year where we had the quick 'how to' ... I went back to Kindy and taught my colleague how to upload the content. (Teacher 6)

It should be noted that three participants specifically expressed concerns about the reliance on technology as the sole platform for learning-from-home across NSW, not only because it excluded some learners and often limited opportunity for differentiation, but they also felt teachers could be replaceable (by technology). When considering effective teaching and learning (Standard 3) and the lack of feedback given by teachers (Standard 5), Teacher 6 described how she felt that, with a heavy reliance on technology and parents to oversee the home learning in 2021, teachers could become phased-out in a learning-from-home context: "... it's kind of like, okay, compared to a six-hour school day ... can we get rid of teachers, because if this is the world ... we can do school in two hours."

In summary, teachers identified that they were not given any formal training on integrating technology during the 2020 learning-from-home period. Therefore, most did not consider they were engaging in professional learning (Standard 6). The skills and experience teachers gained were through colleagues or personal exploration of technology options deemed suitable for their students. In 2020, schools either chose technology as the primary learning platform and supplemented with paper packs or designed paper packs and supplemented with technology. All teachers reported that they gained valuable technology skills but believed any technology learning (in the future) should be differentiated and personalised for their learners. In a proactive move to support teachers, students, and parents for the 2021 learning-from-home periods, The Department planned and provided online, interactive activities for learners designed explicitly for each Stage of learning. In an attempt to relieve the pressure on schools and teachers, daily resources were provided across weeks and were uploaded as the learning-from-home periods continued. This was not mandated but provided as an option for schools should they choose to use the resources. Two teachers in this study (from the same school) used these resources. Two teachers (from two different schools) continued to use the paper methods they utilised in 2020.

Theme 4: Flexible Adaption in Times of Uncertainty

In sharing their stories, participants discussed how they adapted aspects of their professional practice and personal lives when faced with the challenges and uncertainty that the COVID-19 experience presented. Four teachers made off-the-cuff comments, implying to the researcher they

had the ability to flexibly adapt in response to the required changes of uncertain times, "... okay, well let's just, just keep going, autopilot. Get out what we can" (Teacher 5). Another reflected:

... and everything would change again. So, it just kept changing every week to be a new thing ... So, you just had to keep rolling with the punches ... just keep turning up and seeing what you're faced with each day. (Teacher 3)

Likewise, when asked to give future advice to other teachers, Teacher 2 commented, "... just ride with the wave and don't beat yourself up about it. It'll be over soon."

Teacher 3, when reflecting on Standards 1, 2, and 3, described what seemed like a backward pedagogical step after her school chose paper booklets rather than online, "It was probably a massive shift back to basic skills, like pen and paper ... work that they could do independently as much as infants kids can, or something that their parents could easily follow" (Teacher 3).

Similarly, when reflecting on the variation of learning activities sent home in 2020, another teacher identified that what was provided for students went against what she knew to be "good" teaching practice. Further, it did not align with Standards 2 and 3. She recalled, "We sent home busy work! ... it was certainly not the lessons we normally prepare ... it didn't have any content. So that was different to normal teaching" (Teacher 5).

Five teachers identified that being flexible also applied to technology. This realisation appeared to be a necessity that needed to be incorporated into the learning-from-home lessons. For example, one participant recalls having to learn as she went, "I think the whole time we were learning new things. I had no idea how to use Google Classrooms [a blended online learning platform for teachers and students] before. I had no idea how to insert video into PowerPoints" (Teacher 4). Another participant commented, "... we were both very flexible ... If there were any technical problems, we were always helping each other. We would record videos" (Teacher 2).

Additionally, all teachers commented that flexibility was required across what and how lesson content was presented to students (as per Standard 2). Not knowing how long the learning-from-home periods would last in either year influenced all teachers' ability to plan effectively (Standard 3). A common theme was provided by Teacher 3:

Just trying to put in tasks that they could do [independently], that looked a bit fun as well. It's a lot of work [for teachers] putting those booklets together. Getting stuff that's not too boring and not too repetitive ... to hold their interest [and engage learners], but also be easy to follow [if students did not have adult support at home]. (Teacher 3)

Another aspect of teaching practice that half the teachers revealed required their flexibility was in terms of assessing and reporting their students' progress (as per Standard 5). Four teachers referred to The Departmental requirement to amend their Semester 1, 2020 and Semester 2, 2021 student reports to include comments only for-English and Mathematics and a General Comment for

the additional Key Learning Areas. When describing changes required for Standard 5, a typical response from this group was:

The reports have been amended. So, the same report for last year is now for this end of year as well ... a little comment, general comment, and no grades. So, I guess that reflects that they [The Department] know we don't have the assessment to know how they're [the students] going. (Teacher 5)

Half the participants also reported the need for them to be flexible and adaptable regarding their workday, which changed daily, unlike pre-learning-from-home days. One teacher's comment is typical of this group. She noted that she had additional release from face-to-face [RFF] teaching time during the learning-from-home periods. She was also required to have a combination of students from other classes under her supervision:

[On site,] I would have half a day ... on class and half a day RFF [Release from Face-to-Face] every day. So, there was more planning time. But when you were on class, I would have Kindergarten, Year 1, and Year 2 kids all in the same classroom ... we had the kids in Stages. (Teacher 3)

Five teachers explained the uncertainty surrounding students who were still attending school during the learning-from-home periods. Schools were open for essential workers' children, but teachers did not know how many students would attend on any day and therefore require supervision for learning.

In summary, teachers reported that being flexible and adaptable in times of uncertainty helped them cope and retain a sense of professionalism and identity. The 2020 experience taught them to accept daily ambiguity and implement change when necessary. Furthermore, many aspects of teachers' professional and personal lives were impacted, including switching between face-to-face teaching in their school and online platforms, supervising students in Stages rather than in year groups, integrating technology, and modifying student reports.

Theme 5: The Value of Experience to Influence Future Decision-Making

All teachers reflected on their experiences from the first learning-from-home period (in 2020) and how what they had learned influenced their future decision-making. They each referred to their professional (Standard 6) and personal learnings, what did or did not work, and the value of experience. In the interviews, there was a sense of the value taken from looking back at their successes and trials. Due to the unique timing of this study—in November 2021, after the end of the second year of learning-from-home periods—this study captured the participants' comparisons and reflections some 18 months after COVID-19 had first impacted Australian schools.

Four teachers reported a common theme that their experiences of 2020 prompted wellbeing changes in 2021. For example, when identifying her personal growth regarding her wellbeing and

self-care, one participant described the negative impact that the 2020 learning-from-home pressures placed on her:

I found I was working so many hours last time ... There were times where I would be putting work before my family ... that doesn't sit well with me. But at the same time, we still have to get the stuff done. (Teacher 4)

Consequently, she recognised the value of that experience and made positive changes in 2021, declaring:

I felt really supported this year, and less stress. I think because of last year, in the way that it did impact me quite negatively in some aspects. And that focus to change on myself, I think that's been a really positive thing. (Teacher 4)

Similarly, another participant spoke about how having been through the learning-from-home period in 2020 was a catalyst of change for her for a more positive self-image during the 2021 learning-from-home periods:

I guess for my own self-image [while working from home in the 2021 period], it was, I got up, thought, 'I'm not sitting in the car for two hours a day. I'll jump on the treadmill in the morning. I'll have a nice breakfast or sit down at 8:30, turn on the computer, take a lunch break' ... I really approached [the 2021 learning-from-home periods] differently for my own wellbeing this year. (Teacher 5)

Likewise, Teacher 3 referred to having a better work-life balance in 2021, "... leaving school earlier in the afternoon. But not staying till five or six o'clock, as usual...just leaving at a ... sensible time. So, I think my work-life balance was definitely better" (Teacher 3).

All teachers commented on how the 2020 learning-from-home experience encouraged their thoughts of future change to work practices. Prior professional experience and reflecting on *The Standards* came into play with two participants from one school reporting their school's decision to change the learning-from-home mode in 2021. When discussing how changes made impacted her ability to meet *The Standards*, one teacher explained, "I think last year, we were too keen to try and follow our own teaching programs. And ... panicked that the kids were going to miss out. So, this year, we followed The Department's learning-from-home weekly plans" (Teacher 6). One participant mentioned that her school chose to follow the same approach in 2021 as in 2020 as it was best for their students (Standards 1 and 3). Another reported the decision to differentiate and continue (current) learning programs instead of fill-in, "busy-work" that was provided in 2020.

It is notable that half the participants also felt a sense of being forgotten amongst the chaotic changes that were being implemented throughout the initial 2020 learning-from-home period. Two teachers referred to what they perceived as a lack of understanding and appreciation from parents, The Department, and the general public in 2020. One participant commented about the lack of recognition and protection for teachers during the 2020 lockdown noting, "... we weren't looked

after ... just put out into the world ... nobody cares, 'We're the teachers' kind of thing ... I felt a bit undervalued as a citizen last time" (Teacher 3). Another participant described how on days working-from-home, she was scared to go out in public for fear of being judged in the community:

... that perception in the community that if you're working from home [you should be at home]. I didn't leave the house because I was scared. If I went to Woolies or to the shops, people might say, 'Oh, what's she doing here? She's supposed to be teaching.' (Teacher 6)

She went on to relay her disappointment at how some parents (who were not considered essential workers) disregarded the Government's advice that children should be learning-from-home and continued to send their children to school, "... that was a frustration. We weren't valued, I suppose" (Teacher 6).

In summary, teachers reported feeling a sense of perspective that allowed them to take value from working through the pandemic. After the 2020 learning-from-home experience, most of the teachers (four of the six) who taught throughout 2021 identified positive changes personally and professionally. They simplified work practices and focused more on their own wellbeing and families. Additionally, the two teachers who did not teach in 2021 identified that they would modify aspects of their practice if they were faced with the experience again.

Overall, the findings from the interviews revealed five significant themes that emerged from experiences shared by Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers regarding the impact of the COVID-19 2020 and 2021 learning-from-home periods. First, teacher connection with others (colleagues, parents, and students) was necessary for teachers to maintain professionalism and learning continuity during the pandemic (linking to Standard 7). Second, the differentiation of lesson content was highlighted for appropriately leveling student activities regardless of the learning platform (linking to Standards 1, 2, and 3). Third, acquiring technology skills and experience was necessary to provide learning during times of isolation and crisis and considered a professional gain by teachers (linking to Standards 3 and 6). Fourth, teachers' ability to flexibly adapt professionally (according to Standards 1, 2, and 3) and personally in times of uncertainty was identified as a crucial skill for coping. Those teachers who did this well appeared less affected by the crisis across all experiences. Finally, when teachers reflected on their successes and challenges, they recognised the value of experience arising from the phenomenon and its impact on future experiences, work practices, and wellbeing.

Discussion

Thematic analysis identified five overarching themes from teacher reflections on the professional and personal impact of the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods: the need for connection with others, the importance of differentiated activities for Kindergarten-to-Year-2

learners, gaining technology skills and experience, flexible adaption in times of uncertainty, and the value of experience to influence future decision-making. The themes identified were not bound to any one construct or interview question and appeared organically across participants and their responses. They were interwoven between teacher reflections through what seemed to be a shared interpretivist view from their professional and personal perspectives regarding the COVID-19 phenomenon. The researcher's background as a NSW Department of Education Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teacher, her professional familiarity, and her life experience have contributed to the interpretation and creation of themes. By asking Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers to recall their experiences, this study revealed insights into their perceptions of living and teaching through the COVID-19 phenomenon. A discussion of findings and implications can be found below.

Consistent with the *3C Theory of Teacher Stress* model (Herman et al., 2020), the teachers who appeared to cope well with uncertainty had all three aspects present. They had active-coping skills, effective (work) management skills that allowed them to continue providing learning for their students, explicit knowledge of *The Standards*, and a school context in which, during heightened stress, they were able to provide administrative and learning-from-home practices that were simple and supported at an Executive level. According to the model's Coping pathway, a teacher's individual mindset, interpersonal qualities, and coping skills all impact how they respond to stress. The participants who appeared less affected by the COVID-19 experience (such as Teachers 2, 3, and 6) seemed to have a 'go-with-the-flow' mindset, sought out connections with others (family, colleagues, parents, and students), and were proactive in managing the demands of events (through exercise, changing diet and implementing self-care practices). In line with findings by Pogere et al. (2019), participants who identified they engaged in more problem-focused strategies were able to mediate the relationship between stress and emotional overload successfully and reported minor frustrations but appeared less affected generally.

As suggested by MacIntyre et al. (2020), there was an expectation on teachers during the pandemic to carry on and adapt to the changing circumstances. As this study discovered, all teachers rose to the challenge with the necessary inclusion of some critical factors. As per Standard 7, teachers found professional engagement with colleagues, parents, and students of paramount importance when faced with the difficulties and uncertainty that came with the COVID-19 experience. Additionally, almost all teachers referenced maintaining safe and supportive learning environments (Standard 4) through continuing contact with students and parents in several ways. This supports previous findings by Kim and Asbury (2020), who also identified a theme of the importance of relationships, suggesting the very social nature of the teaching profession (Flack et al., 2021). Collaborative decision-making was also a key theme highlighted in the study by

Timmons et al. (2020), who discovered the natural inclination of teachers to share, plan and adapt together. For all of the current study's participants, collaboration with colleagues and connecting with students and parents indicates teachers engaged in problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folman, 1984). By seeking to modify a lack of connection through the behavioural solution of seeking out and maintaining ties with others (Carver et al., 1989), teachers demonstrated they felt some sense of autonomy in their professional relationships. Team planning, sharing resources, check-in phone calls home, and Zoom meetings with students and colleagues exemplify teachers were proactive in finding solutions in a stressful time and felt a sense of agency (Molla & Nolan, 2020).

Probably unknowingly, some teachers identified that they used emotion-focused coping skills (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folman, 1984) throughout the 2020 learning-from-home period, intending to alter the stress experience and coping through drinking (Teacher 4), eating (Teachers 4, 5, and 6), or not exercising (Teachers 4 and 5). As research suggests, some participants felt they had to endure the stress of the pandemic—“ride the wave” (Teacher 2, p. 4) or “roll with the punches” (Teacher 3, p. 15). While these phrases appear to convey a sense of being unaffected, they also imply that teachers were employing problem- and emotion-focused skills. Knowing that they had to keep going and get through as best they could, supports the Pogere et al. (2019) suggestion that the two coping strategies—problem-focused and emotion-focused—can be complementary.

Academic differentiation was another critical factor that impacted many aspects of the teachers' professional practice during the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods. All participants mentioned how the need for, or lack of differentiation, influenced their decision-making from one experience to the next. Teachers who felt they differentiated sufficiently appeared less stressed and affected by the context (Teachers 3 and 5). When these teachers felt good about their ability to meet The Standards by differentiating student work (Standards 1, 2, and 3) and standing firm in their teacher identity, this positively impacted their wellbeing. Teacher 3 exemplified this in how, even though her school chose a non-technology mode of learning-from-home, she felt a sense of autonomy (or agency) and could still differentiate for her learners. In this case, this teacher used technology for those students who had computer access at home and students at school. Technology was a supplementary activity to what the school provided in paper booklets. Similarly, Teacher 5 also described feeling more productive and a sense of pride in how her school successfully differentiated student work in 2021 using booklets with targeted and differentiated online learning. Alternatively, several other teachers voiced concerns about how their school's use of a technology-based platform did not allow them the freedom (or agency) to provide appropriately levelled work.

A finding from this study indicated that differentiating the learning experiences for different learners was more achievable and realistic using non-online learning-from-home mediums, which were, ideally, supplemented by online resources.

In line with previous findings from Marshall et al. (2020) and Schleicher (2020), teachers described how they trained themselves and upskilled ‘on-the-go’ in various aspects of technology in 2020. Participants told how they were required to educate outside their comfort zone and not how they preferred to teach (face-to-face). This supports previous research findings suggesting the changing role of the teacher during the learning-from-home periods and the subsequent necessity to quickly adapt to new online modes (Kaden, 2020; Sangeeta & Tandon, 2020). In discussing how their on-site role became one of “supervision,” not “teaching,” the findings suggest that while technology seemed the most obvious and modern way of reaching students at home, it required skills (not always appropriate for Kindergarten-to-Year-2 learners), knowledge, and creative thinking on the educators' part (Anderson et al., 2021). Additionally, the government and hence its schools expected students to have adequate access to devices and internet (NSW Government, 2020). This did not suit some schools’ demographics, a finding noted by Paredes et al. (2020) in their research on the COVID-19 disruption from the perspective of NSW rural and disadvantaged primary principals. Challenging teacher identity (self-efficacy), this role-change impacted the participants’ belief that they were, at times, unable to do their job satisfactorily. This supports findings by Kim and Asbury (2020), who also suggested that the COVID-19 experience was a foreign concept misaligned with teachers’ core values.

All teachers learned essential lessons from the 2020 learning-from-home period that assisted their ability to cope with the 2021 experience and supports similar findings from Timmons et al. (2020). In 2020, some teachers spent hours creating and planning continuous-learning lessons on platforms such as Google Classroom, only to feel they were not adequately meeting the needs of all learners (Teachers 2 and 3). Notably, students without internet access or devices were provided with paper packs that did not always match the content of the offered online activities. Consequently, these schools chose to utilise The Department-provided resources in 2021, only to feel the same dissatisfaction. When asked to reflect on what they would change in the future, four teachers who taught through all learning-from-home periods commented that a mixed modality approach—differentiated and tailored for their school’s clientele—would be the ideal solution. This was also a recommendation from a previous study, suggesting a multi-platform approach to more effectively support learning-from-home in Australian schools (Flack et al., 2020).

Surprisingly, there were some unexpected gains for teachers due to the COVID-19 crisis. The positives surrounding the technology skills and experience gained were universal. This aligns

with the Paredes et al. (2020) study that found that NSW primary principals organised professional learning to upskill all their teachers in online learning in the first few days of the COVID-19 learning-from-home period in March 2020. All participants described integrating different technologies as valuable and worthwhile to future teaching experiences. Several participants highlighted the discovery of new resources that allowed them to engage and differentiate more appropriately for their learners. One teacher confidently indicated she had additional time to engage in technology-related professional learning due to being provided with extra release from face-to-face teaching during the learning-from-home periods. Another advantage identified by several participants were the wellbeing changes put in place throughout the learning-from-home periods. For some, this came due to negative personal impacts in 2020 that drove several teachers (Teachers 4, 5, and 6) to implement changes. For others, the benefits were immediate through less face-to-face teaching (Teachers 3 and 5), more time at home with family (Teachers 3, 4, and 6), and putting in place exercise and self-care routines (Teachers 4 and 5). This opposes current research that presents the experience as a “doom and gloom” and stress for teachers worldwide (Flack et al., 2020; Reimers & Schliecher, 2020).

Previous research suggests that a teachers’ workload and stress levels surpass many other professions (Herman et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2020; Pogere et al., 2019). With the rapid changes required and the disruption to teaching practices and daily lives forced on teachers by the crisis, it would have been reasonable to say the first learning-from-home experience (in 2020) had a significant impact on this study’s participants. By contrast, using the value of experience to guide decision-making, teachers predominately engaged in active-coping skills (Carver et al., 1989) in 2021. They were able to identify what worked or did not work in the previous learning-from-home periods, both professionally and personally, and approached the COVID-19 phenomenon with fresh and experienced insight. This supports the suggestion by Anderson et al. (2021), who proposed that teachers needed to be resilient and creative in response to the stress and ambiguity that came with the COVID-19 uncertainty. By adopting a Growth-Mindset (Dweck, 2017) to learn from mistakes and failures, teachers in this study experienced creative growth through their openness to trying new things and being vulnerable professionally (Anderson et al., 2021). Participants reported taking steps to remove stressors (by either changing or keeping the 2020 mode of learning-from-home) and using a stepped approach of ‘We have done this before. We know what does and does not work.’ This finding is in line with the stress theory by Lazarus and Folman (1984) and research by MacIntyre et al. (2020), whereby having strategies to rely on in times of stress assists people in coping. In the current study, teachers appeared to cope more successfully in subsequent learning-from-home periods because they had a bank of strategies when responding to the COVID-19 stressor.

Professionally, it was evident from participant reflections that the background knowledge of *The Standards* impacted work-related decision-making and experiences. Several teachers referred to holding back from doing what they knew they “should” be doing, particularly those still engaged in face-to-face teaching (or supervision). According to the aspects of teacher identity (Hanna et al., 2019) and in line with *The Standards*, good teachers know their students, how they learn, and plan for, and implement effective learning experiences. Teachers in this study could see that what was being asked of them during the pandemic learning-from-home periods did not always fit within the realms of what they knew to be “good teaching practice.” Supervising one mode of learning and refraining from actually teaching challenged participants' teacher identity. This supports findings by Kim and Asbury (2020), whose participants described feeling the same way. Several teachers in this study commented on wanting to sit down with kids in the classroom and teaching “normally”—with modifications and differentiation according to student needs. Half of the participants reported apprehension in sending home busy work with one-size-fits-all content, which had teachers questioning task perception and self-image aspects of identity. Additionally, regarding teacher identity, all four teachers who taught in 2021 reported feeling a greater sense of job satisfaction, having learnt from the 2020 experience. This opposes Kim and Asbury’s (2020) findings that suggested teachers were unsatisfied with what their role had become during the lockdown.

This study supports research indicating the inequity of technology and online learning platforms during learning-from-home periods for students and staff (Flack et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020; Paredes et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020; Tawil, 2020). Findings revealed that participants were concerned about students who did not have access to online platforms and the inequality of substituted work that did not reflect the content offered through online platforms (Tawil, 2020). Several participants also commented on the inability to track academic progress through online-only methods such as The Department's 2021 *Learning from Home* resources. Additionally, all teachers acknowledged they had to acquire new skills to meet the unique needs of the online learning-from-home requirements, with the traditional role of the teacher being, at times, morphed into one of an online coach or evaluator (Schleicher, 2020). However, participants in this study appeared less concerned and affected by this. Unlike the Australian findings by Flack et al. (2020), the teachers in this study did not highlight this as a significant stress for them professionally. They accepted help from colleagues and adapted quickly, demonstrating resilience.

The findings from this study support research suggesting the unique implications and challenges faced by Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers during the COVID-19 learning-from-home periods (Flack et al., 2020; Timmons et al., 2020). Results emphasise the reliance of younger learners on adults to guide them through the learning process (Tawil, 2020, Timmons et al., 2020;

Timmons et al., 2021). For teachers, this is natural in their everyday environment with planning, teaching, and assessing all based on the distinct needs of Kindergarten-to-Year-2 students. When modifying learning to an online or paper platform, teachers reported constantly reassessing and using parent feedback to guide their planning and presentation of lessons. They were mindful of keeping their learners engaged, integrating basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics, and incorporating hands-on, practical (for home) activities. As with previous research, parents played a crucial role in overseeing student access to learning and ensuring a continuation of learning occurred (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Tawil, 2020; Timmons et al., 2021). With many schools across NSW teaching according to play-based, early years programs, the transition to learning-from-home for younger students proved challenging for Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers, students, and parents. Without teacher guidance through rich, hands-on learning and utilisation of play-based activities, these younger students possibly suffered a more significant disadvantage than their older peers (Tawil, 2020; Timmons, 2021). For students learning-from-home, parents became supervisors, and home became the new learning environment, which was not an equal playing field for some students.

Limitations and Self Reflexivity

This study had a small sample of purposively selected teachers from New South Wales Mid and North Coast areas only. There is no assumption that the experiences of this study's participants are indicative of all Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers from public schools in other regions of the State, particularly areas of Sydney, who experienced additional extended periods of learning-from-home in 2021. This study did not include all primary years as the researcher's experience as a Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teacher and understanding of teaching methods drove the focus to detail only the early primary years. Further research across all primary schooling years may provide a more accurate representation of the experiences of a broader range of teachers (including males) and contexts. Additionally, after interviewing six participants, the researcher became aware that data saturation had been reached in this sample, and no further interviews were required.

While this study attempted to portray the experiences of Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers regarding the COVID-19 phenomenon, it was limited to the theoretical worldview of the researcher. As qualitative research is concerned with unquantifiable facets of reality and presents an array of meanings regarding (in this study's case) a phenomenon, the analysis provided has been constructed by the researcher (Querios et al., 2017). Additionally, as part of the selected method, semi-structured interviews resulted in guided (and at times rigid) responses that were specific only to the researcher's chosen focus and relied on participants recalling experiences from over 12 months prior (Low, 2013; Querios et al., 2017).

Overall, the researcher's reflexive journey was continuous throughout the study. She was mindful to ensure she separated her own experiences as a teacher (in 2020) and a parent who engaged in learning-from-home with her own child in 2020 and 2021. She made every effort to ensure her own beliefs, experiences, and values did not impact the research procedure. At times, it was difficult for the researcher to step out of her own teacher identity and experiences and look at the data objectively. Working with her supervisor provided the researcher with the opportunity for someone to question interpretations and meanings obtained from participant responses.

Conclusion

This research sought to understand the experiences of Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers in New South Wales public schools during the 2020/2021 COVID-19 learning-from-home periods and how this impacted their professional practice and wellbeing. Employing a phenomenological approach, the researcher used reflexive Thematic Analysis to identify patterns across teacher experiences. While this study expected that the COVID-19 phenomenon would negatively impact teachers' wellbeing and impede their ability to maintain elements of their professional practice, the findings suggested otherwise. It found both positive and negative impacts for teachers. The shock and unprecedented implications of the first learning-from-home period in 2020 saw some teachers adopt emotion-focused coping skills. Learning from this enabled teachers to refine and adapt their professional practice and coping strategies in subsequent experiences. The unexpected additional learning-from-home periods in 2021 provided teachers with a chance to reflect, revise, and implement their own lessons learned to better meet their wellbeing and students' needs.

Five main conclusions summarise the impact of the pandemic on Kindergarten-to-Year-2 teachers. First, teachers recognised a need to connect with others at various levels and adapted communication strategies from 2020 to 2021 accordingly. Second, differentiation of student learning was highlighted by teachers as crucial to meeting student needs during this time and assisting teachers in feeling they were maintaining a sense of professional practice. Third, teachers in this study identified gaining technology skills and experience as a result of working through the pandemic. Fourth, teachers reported the need to be flexible and adapt both professionally and personally during times of unknowns and stress. Finally, those who taught throughout multiple learning-from-home periods used the value of experience to make changes to their practice to increase connections with students in 2021. Participants in this study exemplified their ability to adapt flexibly, harness resilience, and adopt a growth mindset by learning from their lived COVID-19 experiences. The findings of this study indicate that while teachers faced difficulties throughout these times, they were able to identify changes they would ideally make in future learning-from-home periods for themselves and their students.

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