

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
Recovery of Early Literacy and Social-Emotional Skills Post-COVID-19:
The Role of Teacher Insights
in Shaping Early Educational Policy and Practices

By:
Anapaula Silva Mandujano
August 2025



A thesis submitted for partial fulfillment of the requirements
Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences (MAPSS)

Paper presented to:
MAPSS Preceptor, Marshall Jean
Faculty Advisor, Lisa Rosen
Department of Social Sciences

Acknowledgements

I want to firstly thank my parents for asking me about my thesis every day. I couldn't have done it without your support. Thank you for engaging with topics far outside your own interests, attending every academic event with loud cheers, and reminding me what unwavering care looks like. I also want to thank my brother, Sebastian, for reminding me to take breaks and make room for play to keep the fun alive.

I am deeply grateful to my academic mentors and advisors at the University of Chicago, who not only challenged me to think critically but also modeled leadership rooted in empathy. Working in research labs led by brilliant women such as Lin Bian, Amanda Woodward, and Marissa Casillas shaped both my academic confidence and my commitment to inquiry. I was fortunate to have learned from visionary leaders like Jessyca Dudley, Emily Lansana, and Sharon Hicks-Bartlett, whose integrity and insight guided many themes in this thesis. A heartfelt thank you goes to Professor Lisa Rosen, whose steadfast encouragement and clear-eyed guidance carried me through every stage of this process. Your belief and support in my work, and in me, has opened more doors than you know.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends who reminded me that scholarship doesn't happen in isolation. Thank you to Jonathan Zeevi, my roommate and echo chamber, for your patience, curiosity, and perspective this past year. I am equally thankful for Jessica Adler, Sintra Horwitz, and Courtney McDermott, growing alongside you all has made this journey richer.

To all the teachers who participated or showed interest in my research, and to every person who asked a helpful question or shared an insightful article- thank you for reminding me that, as Rachel Carson (1962) once wrote, "*In nature, nothing exists alone.*"

Abstract

This study explores how early childhood educators experienced and responded to the challenges of pandemic recovery, particularly in relation to early literacy and social-emotional skill development. Drawing on qualitative interviews with teachers across public, private, and charter schools in Illinois and California, this research examines the conditions under which recovery strategies were implemented, and the challenges many educators face post-pandemic.

The study asks: What strategies have effectively mitigated the academic and social-emotional impacts of the pandemic on early learners? And how can schools and families better support teachers in implementing these strategies? While the initial hypothesis anticipated that greater institutional support would ease the burden of recovery, findings revealed a deeper emphasis on the need for sustained family involvement, relevant professional development, and context-specific tools, particularly regarding technology. Teachers noted that they did not expect direct support from their schools, but instead called for families to take a more active and consistent role in student learning and emotional regulation.

The analytic framework centers on two key areas: teacher burnout and relational trust between educators and families. Burnout provides insight into the emotional and professional strain teachers experienced during the pandemic, while trust highlights how varying levels of family engagement shaped their ability to support student learning and wellbeing. Both concepts emerged as central to how teachers interpreted their roles and needs in a time of prolonged crisis.

By centering teacher perspectives, this study identifies educator-informed strategies for bridging the gap between policy and practice. The findings underscore the need for recovery efforts that reflect classroom realities, prioritize teacher wellbeing, and position families as essential partners in early education.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted early childhood education at every level, forcing rapid shifts in instructional practice, family engagement, and emotional support systems. For preschool through first-grade classrooms in particular, the pandemic interrupted foundational learning and routines during a critical period for both literacy development and social-emotional growth. As schools moved to remote formats, teachers faced the dual burden of managing learning loss and addressing the emotional needs of children and families. This was often coupled with limited institutional support or clarity about their evolving role and responsibilities.

While some schools adapted quickly, others lacked the infrastructure, resources, or guidance to implement meaningful recovery strategies. Teachers were often left to bridge these gaps themselves, improvising approaches to literacy, classroom regulation, and relationship-building without sufficient support from school leadership or external stakeholders. Despite these differences, one constant emerged across settings: teachers' emotional and instructional labor was central to how recovery unfolded.

This study centers the perspectives of early childhood educators to understand how they experienced and interpreted pandemic recovery efforts, from initial school closures in March 2020 through the return to in-person learning and its ongoing aftermath. Rather than assuming top-down solutions, it draws on teacher narratives to identify what worked, what was missing, and how institutional expectations interacted with everyday classroom realities. Two key themes emerged across interviews: burnout, which captured the emotional and professional toll placed on educators, and trust, which referred to the relational dynamics between teachers and families that either supported or strained recovery efforts.

This study finds that teacher burnout was not only a result of increased workload or emotional labor, but was deeply shaped by teachers' perceptions of family engagement. When parents were responsive and communicative, teachers felt more effective and supported. But when family engagement was limited, educators described greater emotional strain and feelings of futility. This unevenness led some teachers to express frustration, as their ability to support students became closely tied to parental responsiveness. Trust between teachers and families emerged as a key variable shaping teacher morale and perceived success. These findings highlight the need for recovery efforts that reflect classroom realities by supporting teacher wellbeing, strengthening family partnerships, and aligning with educators' needs.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshaped the practice of early childhood education. Teachers were not only tasked with preserving academic continuity during remote instruction, but also with navigating an expanded set of emotional and relational demands. These expectations, often unaccompanied by institutional guidance or material support, left many educators overwhelmed and emotionally depleted. To understand the post-pandemic recovery process in early education, it is essential to examine the dual pressures of teacher burnout and shifting expectations of teacher-parent relationships, alongside broader inequities in student learning.

Early childhood education has long involved high levels of emotional and relational labor. Educators in this field are responsible not only for foundational literacy development, but also for managing children's emotional needs, maintaining classroom routines, and cultivating trust with families (Purper et al., 2023; Crawford et al., 2021). These responsibilities intensified

during the pandemic as early childhood educators were asked to manage new technologies, health protocols, and emotional caregiving, often without adequate support (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). Although frequently overlooked in policy, this labor plays a central role in teacher wellbeing and professional identity (Hochschild, 1983; Purper et al., 2023). This burden was further complicated by the shift to virtual learning, especially given evidence that very young children learn less effectively from screens than from in-person interactions. Studies by Kuhl (2003) and Barr and Hayne (1999) demonstrate that young children have limited capacity to retain new language or imitate behaviors from video, underscoring the developmental mismatch between early learners and remote instruction.

These cumulative demands and limitations contributed to widespread teacher burnout. Burnout is defined as a chronic condition resulting from prolonged stress: it encompasses emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In early childhood contexts, burnout is especially common due to under-compensation, limited recognition, and the emotional intensity of working with very young children (Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015). During the pandemic, these conditions worsened. Steed et al. (2022) report that over 90% of early childhood educators experienced elevated stress during COVID-19, citing increased workload, inconsistent communication from leadership, and lack of personal protective equipment. Educators often found themselves stretched beyond sustainable limits, juggling their own caregiving responsibilities while trying to meet student needs.

As institutional support faltered, early educators increasingly turned to families as partners in recovery. The success of pandemic-era learning, particularly in early childhood, depended heavily on sustained family engagement: young children lacked the independence to

navigate remote platforms on their own (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). The dynamics of these relationships can be further understood through the concept of relational trust, which emphasizes how daily interactions grounded in respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard shape the social fabric of school communities (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Yet educators encountered wide variation in parental involvement, with some families stepping in as consistent collaborators and others being unable or unwilling to meet new expectations (Bigras et al., 2021; Steed et al., 2022).

Research suggests that when parent-teacher relationships are characterized by mutual trust and clear communication, teachers are more likely to feel supported and professionally fulfilled (Crawford et al., 2021; Eadie et al., 2021). In contrast, a perceived lack of parent follow-through or recognition often exacerbated feelings of burnout. Teachers described themselves as feeling emotionally overdrawn, especially when expected to initiate all forms of communication or bridge gaps in student learning without shared responsibility from families. These experiences underscore the importance of considering trust not as a static measure, but as a dynamic factor that either cushions or compounds professional stress.

In parallel, large-scale research has documented the academic costs of pandemic-era disruption. A nationwide study by Lewis and Kuhfeld (2023), which analyzed test scores from over six million public school students, revealed significant and persistent learning losses in both math and reading, particularly among Black and Hispanic students who were more likely to attend schools that remained remote. These gaps were not just widespread; they were also unequal, and recovery timelines remain much longer for historically marginalized students. The authors argue that current efforts to mitigate loss, such as generalized federal funding, are insufficient and lack the intensity and targeting required to address educational debt and systemic

inequities. Similarly, Downey (2009) reminds us that schools, while essential, represent only a small portion of a child's developmental environment. Inequality is largely shaped outside of school, but its consequences become most visible within the classroom. Effective recovery, therefore, requires investment in both school-based capacity and the broader systems that influence children's lives. This broader structural perspective is echoed by Gross (2023), who warns that behavioral challenges, chronic absenteeism, and weakened trust in public education will persist unless policies move beyond funding alone and prioritize targeted, long-term accountability.

Together, the literature on burnout and relational trust underscores the emotional intensity of teaching during COVID-19 and the expanded roles educators were expected to fill. Recovery efforts in early education must account for student needs and the conditions under which teachers are expected to deliver care, instruction, and support. By examining how burnout and family engagement shaped teacher perspectives, this study contributes to a broader understanding of the interpersonal dimensions of pandemic recovery and the structural shifts necessary to sustain the early education workforce.

Data and Methods

To explore how early childhood educators made sense of and implemented recovery strategies in the wake of COVID-19, this study used a qualitative research design guided by an interpretivist paradigm. This approach emphasizes how individuals construct meaning from experience, especially relevant in understanding how teachers navigated evolving roles, shifting expectations, and emotionally demanding working conditions. The central aim was to foreground teacher insights as a form of practical expertise capable of informing more responsive education

policy and practice. At the heart of this approach is the belief that educators are not passive recipients of policy but active interpreters of institutional demands, community relationships, and student needs.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and community outreach, including flyers at teacher union meetings (e.g., Chicago Teachers Union events) and posts in online forums like Facebook groups for early childhood educators. Eligible participants were current or former teachers with at least six years of classroom experience, including time both before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. All fourteen participants worked with students under the age of seven, primarily in preschool and early elementary classrooms. The sample included seven women and seven men, providing a gender-balanced set of perspectives. Teachers represented a range of institutional settings, including public, private, and charter schools in Illinois and California, which allowed for comparison across different school contexts. Because all participants were current or recent teachers who remained in the profession through the pandemic, this study does not capture the perspectives of those who chose to leave. Their absence represents an important limitation, as their reasons for exiting may differ from the reflections of those who persisted.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Questions focused on three primary domains: (1) the academic and emotional effects of the pandemic on young learners, (2) the strategies teachers employed to support student recovery, and (3) the forms of support, both institutional and familial, that educators found either helpful or insufficient. Open-ended prompts encouraged participants to reflect critically on their own decision-making processes, priorities, and definitions of effective practice. To preserve anonymity, participants are identified by a randomly assigned number, such as P174.

All interviews were transcribed using Amazon Web Services Artificial Intelligence (AWS AI) Transcription services and manually reviewed for accuracy. A hybrid coding process was used to analyze the transcripts: deductive codes were drawn initially from the five competencies outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which served as a useful entry point for categorizing teacher discourse around student support. However, the primary analytic lens was inductive and interpretive, with themes emerging from how teachers described their experiences, perceptions, and sense-making in relation to school expectations and family involvement.

To better understand the dynamics shaping teacher responses, this analysis draws on Bryk and Schneider's (2002) concept of relational trust, developed through an in-depth study of 12 Chicago schools undergoing major reform. They define relational trust as a core social resource built through daily interactions and sustained by mutual respect, personal regard, integrity, and competence. Their research shows that schools with strong relational trust saw greater collaboration, innovation, and gains in student achievement, while those with weaker ties experienced stagnation. This framework offers a valuable lens to understand how relational dynamics shaped teachers' emotional responses, sense of professional efficacy, and perceived recovery outcomes.

This methodological approach enabled a layered understanding of how teachers interpreted their roles and responded to institutional conditions during a time of profound disruption. The study does not aim to produce broad generalizations but instead centers teacher perspectives as a form of expertise often excluded from top-down policy conversations.

Findings

Teachers described the pandemic as a profound disruption to academic learning and students' emotional development. While all students experienced setbacks, educators stressed that these were far from equal. Students from low-income backgrounds, English language learners, and those with learning disabilities faced compounding disadvantages, lacking the consistency, resources, or support needed to keep up. Alongside academic losses, teachers noted a troubling erosion of students' social-emotional skills and classroom habits. Students returned withdrawn, dysregulated, and unsure how to rebuild peer and adult relationships. Teachers recognized these struggles not as temporary misbehavior, but as signs of ongoing trauma and disorientation. For many, supporting students meant going beyond teaching content. They became emotional first responders, bridging the gaps left by unstable homes, absent caregivers, and mental health challenges schools were unequipped to address.

The following section traces how educators made sense of these challenges and responded in real time. The first section explores teachers' early perceptions of academic and emotional disruption, including patterns of disengagement and disrupted habits. The second turns to social-emotional learning (SEL), highlighting how educators used SEL strategies to re-engage students and rebuild classroom relationships. The third examines how technology shaped the recovery process, functioning as both a support and a source of inequity. The fourth focuses on the complex role of families, capturing teachers' experiences of varied collaboration. The final sections examine teacher burnout and emotional labor, portraying teaching as an act of care and commitment that sustained classrooms through crisis.

Initial Teacher Perceptions of Pandemic Disruption

To understand recovery, we must first examine how teachers initially perceived the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their students. Educators were tasked with navigating disruptions while interpreting their effects without clear guidance. This section sets the groundwork for the broader study by presenting teachers' firsthand observations of the academic and emotional toll the pandemic had on young learners. Teachers reported widespread academic setbacks alongside shifts in motivation, focus, attendance, and homework completion. Emotional consequences were equally significant: teachers reported challenges with self-regulations, strained peer relationships, and the difficulty of rebuilding trust with adults. Together, these insights begin to map the depth and complexity of the recovery that followed.

Perceived Academic Setbacks and Instructional Disruption

Academic Losses. All fourteen teachers observed academic setbacks among their students following the COVID-19 pandemic. These losses were especially pronounced in foundational areas such as early literacy, mathematics, and critical thinking skills. Teachers specifically cited struggles with phonetic awareness, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and writing mechanics, including spelling, grammar, and composition (P174, P122, P95, P172, P135). While literacy was the dominant concern, math also emerged as an area where students fell behind. One teacher reported visible setbacks in “some mathematical skills, especially in some solving and critical thinking,” (P174), while another described how students struggled with abstract math concepts that relied heavily on online practices (P122). This implies that some remote practices were ultimately ineffective.

Teachers saw challenges as more than content gaps, but as signs of deeper disruption in students' developmental processes. Teachers observed unexpected regression even among students who had previously demonstrated academic strength. One educator reflected that students who could read a 750-word book in 15 minutes were now taking twice as long, sounding out words instead of reading fluently like before (P69). Others described how students' vocabulary and phonetic skills had noticeably declined (P95, P172). As one teacher explained, "students have actually experienced delays in developing essential skills" (P122). Collectively, these observations painted a picture of stalled progress, suggesting that students were now struggling to relearn skills they had once mastered before the pandemic.

Teachers' Theories. Faced with these regressions, teachers often developed their own interpretations to make sense of what they were witnessing in the classroom. With no formal guidance on how to interpret post-pandemic learning loss, educators relied on their own experience to construct informal theories about what was happening. Several teachers linked their observations to broader cognitive declines. One teacher explained "With the pandemic disruption, it impacted their working memory and made it hard for them to follow instructions, remember assignments, or complete tasks" (P135). These reflections suggest that teachers were diagnosing root causes, not just identifying symptoms of academic struggle.

Another informal theory that emerged among teachers attributed student regression to widespread instability during the pandemic. One teacher firmly stated, "my students have actually experienced some learning gaps due to disrupted instructions and lack of access to resources" (P122). Others identified broader structural factors such as school closures, shifting routines, and inconsistent learning environments as key contributors (P172, P97). One teacher reflected more broadly, noting the difficulty in identifying a single cause among

several overlapping issues: school closures, restrictions on social gatherings, and inconsistency among both students and teachers (P179). These accounts suggest that many educators viewed learning loss as the result of a broader breakdown in educational structures rather than individual student behavior.

Unequal Impact of Learning Loss. While all students experienced some level of academic setback, teachers consistently stressed that the severity of setbacks were unequal. Irregular remote attendance led to the greatest setbacks. One teacher shared that while most students “lost most of the things they learned while they were in school,” it was those who “had refused to attend remote classes” that showed the greatest regression (P67). As a result, they reported both “gaps in knowledge” and an overall “reduced academic achievement” (P67). They recalled a specific example of regression in phonemic awareness and decoding, noticing that certain students struggled to pronounce words they had previously mastered.

For some students, learning losses compounded pre-existing disparities in access and support. One teacher astutely noted “we have issues like equity gaps where children from low-income families, English language learners, and those without access to technology, or parental support face deeper learning losses” (P171). Students with less support entering the pandemic fell even further behind.

These inequities were especially pronounced for students with learning disabilities, who often went undiagnosed and missed out on early intervention services (P171). Several educators emphasized that these students were among the most acutely affected. One teacher explains that “children with learning disabilities need consistency in teaching and academic exercises. Sometimes [I] practicalize some activities so that they can easily understand. But during the pandemic, there wasn't close engagement” with students, which led to a drop in

academic progress (P180). Another teacher echoed that online learning environments limited how teachers could demonstrate key concepts, leaving students with learning disabilities even further behind in their development (P179).

Taken together, these reflections reveal that the pandemic did not create new learning disparities so much as it amplified existing inequalities. Students already behind were hit hardest by the shift to remote learning. For these students, recovery will require not only time, but a deliberate and sustained effort to address the structural gaps that persist today.

Shifting Dispositions Toward School

While academic setbacks were most visible, teachers also observed deeper shifts in students' attitudes and behaviors toward school. Beyond falling behind in literacy or math, students returned to classrooms with noticeably diminished motivation, interest, and overall investment in learning. According to teachers, the pandemic disrupted not only academic progress but also the underlying attitudes needed to engage with school.

Motivation, Attitude, and Interest. Many teachers described a steep drop in students' motivation and overall willingness to engage with schoolwork after the pandemic (P64, P180). One teacher noted that students had grown "reluctant over academic activities," including class participation and assignments (P95). Another teacher reflected that students "lack interest in most things" and seem eager to leave school, "always wanting to go home before the dismissal time" (P171). These patterns reflected how school no longer felt meaningful to many students.

Some teachers offered their own interpretation for this shift in student motivation, pointing to the long period of social isolation as a major factor. One educator explained that "because of social isolation for a very long time, not every student is interested in coming to class anymore" (P67). Another teacher emphasized that "most of the children have been

motivated by relationships with their peers and adults” (P174). Without regular social connections, the social fabric that supports relational trust and made school engaging was weakened. This suggests that diminished motivation may not be purely academic, but tied to a broader breakdown in the social fabric of school life.

Focus, Attention, and Concentration. Alongside declining motivation, many teachers also reported significant drops in students’ ability to concentrate during lessons. Some students appeared physically present but mentally disengaged, requiring constant redirection (P64, P69). One teacher explained, “I am facing a lot of difficulties with trying to enlighten the kids [...] they were just so bright, brilliant, and very focused” before the pandemic, but now need to relearn how to sustain attention in class (P48). Another teacher similarly claimed that “they lack more focus now than before” (P180).

Many teachers went beyond traditional instruction to regain students’ attention. One teacher highlighted the lingering effect of pandemic-era routines, sharing that many students were still accustomed to waking up late. When they arrived at school, they would “tend to doze off at times,” requiring reminders that “you are in school already, you are not at home anymore” (P60). Others spoke about the necessity of energizing or interactive class activities to retain student attention (P179, P97). For students with learning disabilities, maintaining focus was even harder, prompting one teacher to share, “Now I have to go the extra mile, do some mindful activities in the class, to get their concentration” (P95). These efforts reveal that regaining student focus is an active process that requires targeted and sustained creativity from teachers.

Homework Habits. In addition to challenges with student attention and focus, teachers also noted a breakdown in previously routine behaviors such as homework completion. This was overwhelmingly reported as a major struggle in the post-pandemic classroom, even among

students who had consistently submitted assignments in the past (P97, P180). As one teacher observed, “most of them don't even take it seriously” reflecting broader loss academic habits and irregular student behaviors (P171). One teacher estimated that nearly half of their students now fail to complete their homework at all (P97). Some started their homework only when it was being collected (P95); meanwhile, others would finish it but failed to turn it in (P180). Teachers also reported that many students said they had forgotten their homework at home (P179, P172). For many educators, students’ struggles with homework were not isolated lapses but part of a larger pattern of classroom disengagement and lost academic habits.

Attendance, Truancy, and Tardiness. Earlier, teachers reported students who seemed eager to leave school before dismissal; but just as striking were reports of students who no longer showed up at all. Teachers across multiple schools described widespread absenteeism and chronic lateness as becoming increasingly common post-pandemic (P48, P95, P171). Students who had struggled with remote learning or faced disruptions like illness and family obligations were more likely to miss school (P135, P179). One teacher estimated that attendance dropped from over 80% pre-pandemic to just 43% the following years (P174). Even among those who returned to school, patterns of tardiness remained. Teachers observed that some students were “used to staying at home” (P48), while others still carried pandemic-related fears that made it difficult to re-enter the school routine (P67, P177).

Yet many teachers emphasize that attendance challenges weren’t solely about student disengagement; at an early childhood level, the real issue often lies with caregivers. Young children rely entirely on caregivers to get to school, and several teachers described how parental attitudes and behaviors contributed to truancy. Teachers described parental attitudes that appeared indifferent to punctuality, with one teacher stating that students “now come to school

late” and that “the parents are OK with it” (P48). Others suggested that student truancy and chronic lateness were closely tied to caregiver hesitation: “coming to school now has become a problem... it is actually not [the students’] fault but also the reluctance I observe in the parents too” (P172). These accounts reflect teachers’ concerns about effective family involvement.

At the same time, all teachers received frequent parent complaints about their children's growing resistance to school. Many caregivers expressed frustration with their child’s daily reluctance to come to school (P95, P87, P179). One teacher shared that sometimes parents “must force them to come to school” (P180). These reports suggest that many caregivers were not indifferent, but instead felt overwhelmed or uncertain about how to support their children’s return to normalcy. These diverse perspectives underscore how trust between families and schools was strained, making shared educational responsibility more difficult.

Teacher Observations of Students’ Social and Emotional Skills

Across interviews, teachers described how the pandemic altered students’ social-emotional development. Many saw lingering challenges in students’ self-awareness, peer relationships, trust in adults, and emotional stability. These reflections fall into four areas; struggles with emotional regulation, social relearning, rebuilding teacher-student relationships, and ongoing responses to COVID-19 emotional effects.

Lingering Disruptions. Many teachers described students as emotionally disoriented, caught between the routines of pandemic life and the expectations of in-person school. One teacher posited that students were not necessarily behind academically, but were struggling with “difficulties of being their normal self” (P48). Teachers saw social hesitancy as a sign that some students remained psychologically anchored to virtual learning. One teacher noted that many kids still “don’t know the reason why we were having the class virtually”,

underscoring how confusing the pandemic was for young children (P69). Another teacher expressed hope that this lingering fear would fade: “I just wish they would know that there is no other pandemic” (P48). For many students, the pandemic never truly felt over. Its emotional effects remained with them in new, subtler forms.

Strained Peer Relationships and Social Relearning. In addition to emotional disorientation, many teachers observed that the pandemic disrupted students’ peer relationships and weakened social skills. Students returning to school withdrawn, anxious, and “struggling to understand some social cues, like body language” (P174). One teacher attributed this to students having “limited opportunities for some socialization, which have actually affected their ability to interact with peers and develop healthy relationships” (P122). Another teacher explained that students will likely need to relearn social skills (P60). The early return to school was described as a period marked by distance and unfamiliarity (P97). One teacher suggested that the prolonged time apart left students emotionally detached or fearful of reconnecting, making it so they struggle to reconnect (P177).

The impact of these social disruptions was especially visible in group work. Several teachers noted that the students’ desire to collaborate had dramatically decreased (P95). Most students now “prefer to do things on their own, not working in teams” (P179). One teacher explained that “social distance became a norm among them,” and when asked to participate in group activities, “they hardly come together to perform the activity” (P67). In group settings, students no longer worked well together (P180) and often struggled to complete basic shared tasks without further arguments (P172). Yet, even among students, dysfunction varied. One teacher observed that students with siblings had continued to play and interact during

lockdown, making the return to social settings easier. In contrast, those without siblings, used to playing alone, often found it harder to reconnect with their peers (P69).

Rebuilding Trust and Connection with Teachers. Just as students struggled to reconnect with peers, many teachers faced similar challenges in rebuilding trust and emotional connection with their students. Several teachers noted that students were more withdrawn and less communicative than before, observing that students who had once been very close to them now kept their distance (P97, P179). Another teacher shared that students had struggled to express themselves during the pandemic without being able to see a teacher's face or gestures (P64). For some teachers, this shift felt deeply personal. One explained, "I was like a parent to them," and described the post-pandemic disconnection as if students had "forgotten me," prompting creative efforts to "draw them closer" and reignite their interest in school (P171). This blurring of boundaries exemplifies the deep personal regard Bryk and Schneider identify as a dimension of relational trust (2002). Collectively, teachers responded with empathy and patience, recognizing that rebuilding connections would take time and consistent emotional investment.

The Emotional and Traumatic Effects of COVID. As teachers worked to rebuild classroom routine, many saw deeper struggles that reconnection alone couldn't fix. Several teachers described students as burdened by long-term stress, anxiety, and depression (P60, P122). Teachers reported visible emotional shifts in students, such as mood swings, avoidance behavior, and general exhaustion (P122, P174, P177). Some educators linked these struggles to specific experiences of trauma, including the loss of loved ones, financial hardship, and the instability of the pandemic-era (P135). Although many teachers tried to offer emotional

support, they struggled to meet emotional needs within limited school hours. These challenges led to a shift in priorities, paving the way for more investment in social-emotional learning.

Responding to Recovery Demands: The Role of SEL

Building on their early post-pandemic observations, teachers began to integrate SEL more deliberately into their daily practice. This section explores how SEL became central to rebuilding classroom community, supporting emotional wellbeing, and re-engaging students in learning. Drawing from educator accounts, the following section outlines the strategies educators used to embed SEL across five key domains, based on their reflections and post-pandemic adaptations.

Connecting First, Teaching Second

The first thing you need to do as a teacher, it's not just about teaching. Especially when you teach kids, you need to connect to them [...] even without them talking, even with their facial expressions [...] if you connect with them, the social and emotional learning actually comes after it. (P60)

For many teachers, the return to in-person school meant watching students more closely, listening more deeply, and finding new ways to understand their students' emotional needs. As one teacher explained, "you need to be very, very sensitive. You need to pay attention to them [and] be a good listener" (P69). Teachers knew that before academic progress could happen, students needed to feel emotionally understood. This attunement was described as a foundational aspect of post-pandemic teaching.

Once students felt seen, connection came next. Teachers described bonding with students as central to re-engagement and emotional recovery "It's not just all about teaching,

teaching, teaching. You need to bond with your students,” one teacher shared (P69). This bond helped students feel safe enough to open up, sometimes even more than they did with their families. “They will tell you what they can't tell their parents,” one teacher observed (P60). That trust motivated students to come to school, even when they weren't feeling well or attendance wasn't required. As one teacher explained, “you need to let them know that you love them,” or else “they tend to not show any interest in learning” (P60). In this context, love became a strategy for bridging distance and rekindling motivation. Some teachers felt no special interventions were needed: “Just be real with them,” one said simply (P48). Others echoed this, focusing on making students feel welcome, loved, and emotionally invested (P171). For most teachers, connection was the foundation for everything else.

Embedding SEL in Daily Routines: Teacher Practices Across Competencies

Increased Use of SEL Practices. Every teacher interviewed reported using social and emotional learning more intentionally and frequently after the pandemic. Before COVID-19, SEL was often treated as an informal supplement rather than a central component of teaching. One teacher explained that while they had always used some SEL strategies, these practices were not consistently implemented until the post-pandemic return (P172). Students came back with visible behavioral and attitudinal shifts that made traditional teaching less effective. In response, schools began to prioritize SEL more formally. As one teacher noted, leadership put SEL “much more in effect than before” to meet students' evolving needs (P95). Another added that the classroom now required “more discipline and also social emotional learning skills” due to decreased academic motivation and self-regulation (P180).

Teachers responded by creating intentional opportunities for emotional support and social development. One set aside “special time” for mental health check-ins and team-based

activities to rebuild students' engagement and collaboration (P172). Others used structured play, group games, and extracurricular projects to support peer connection (P67). Rather than expecting students to relearn social skills naturally, teachers began directly teaching empathy, kindness, and conflict resolution (P135). While no one referenced the CASEL framework by name, many daily routines aligned with its core competencies. Practices such as morning meetings, emotional vocabulary building, mindfulness, journaling, and role-playing supported self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making (P97, P135).

Teaching SEL Through Core Competencies. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning outlines five core competencies that underlie effective SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Casel, 2020). To understand how SEL was woven into daily teaching post-pandemic, the following section organizes teacher practices using this framework.

According to CASEL, **self-awareness** involves recognizing “one’s emotions, thoughts, and values and understanding how they influence behavior” (CASEL, 2020). Teachers promote this competency by incorporating reflection into students’ daily routines. Several use journal prompts like “what makes you happy” or “how do you feel when you are scared” to encourage students to explore their emotions (P135, P122). Others begin the school day with emotion check-ins, helping students identify and label their emotional states (P64). A few teachers also organize group discussions about various emotions and often model their own reflections to invite student expression (P174, P177).

Self-management refers to the ability to regulate one’s emotions, controlling impulses, and working toward personal and academic goals (CASEL, 2020). Teachers support this skill by helping students develop both emotional regulation and goal-setting skills.

Several use mindfulness exercises, deep breathing, and meditative techniques to help students calm down and refocus during the school day (P174, P180). Others create “calm spaces” or encourage physical activities as coping tools (P122, P180). Teachers also help students set realistic goals, reflect on their progress, and celebrate accomplishment through praise and positive reinforcement (P67, P122). These strategies foster students’ confidence and equip them with tools to manage their emotions and behaviors more independently.

CASEL defines **relationship skills** as the ability “to establish and maintain healthy relationships” through clear communication, active listening, and conflict resolution (CASEL, 2020). Although many students now prefer to work alone, teachers made collaboration a consistent part of the classroom environment. Some introduced pair games and partner-based activities to help students build comfort and connection with their peers (P48). Other emphasized group work and restorative practices to “foster teamwork, communication, and problem solving among students” (P179, P64). To deepen these skills, teachers encourage students to express their feelings openly and listen without judgment. One teacher explains that they use role play, games, and small-group exercise to help students share, respond to conflict, and forgive one another (P135).

According to CASEL, **social awareness** refers to the ability to empathize with others, understand diverse perspectives, and recognize social norms across settings (CASEL, 2020). Teachers encouraged this skill in subtle ways, often weaving it into academic content and home-based activities. One teacher used literature, history, and science lessons to spark conversations about emotions and reinforce prosocial behaviors like kindness and cooperation (P179). Another assigned family engagement projects that encouraged students to practice gratitude at home and learn from their caregivers (P135). The relative scarcity of social

awareness examples may reflect age-related limitations. All of the students discussed in this study were under the age of seven, a stage in which children often exhibit egocentric thinking and are only beginning to grasp others' perspective (Piaget, 1952). Teachers may have therefore emphasized foundational relationships as a development stepping stone.

Responsible decision-making involves making “caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations” (CASEL, 2020). Teachers cultivated this skill by guiding students to think through their actions and make thoughtful choices. Some used restorative conversations in place of punishment, encouraging students to listen to each other and evaluate how to resolve issues fairly (P122, P174, P180). Others encouraged students to pause and reflect before responding, fostering self-control and accountability (P97). Another teacher used role-playing examples that presented multiple options, helping them weigh outcomes and reason through decisions together (P135). These practices contributed to a positive, student-centered classroom environment where thoughtful decision-making became a shared norm.

Effects of SEL Use. Teachers consistently described SEL as a necessary part of post-pandemic teaching. One teacher explained, “it’s something that we had to integrate,” highlighting SEL’s role in promoting mental health, well-being, and a safe learning environment (P135). SEL implementation produced visible, effective results. Teachers observed improved relationships, more collaboration among students and staff, and a greater sense of connection across the school community (P174). As one teacher put it, “the strategies have actually been working perfectly well with bringing the students together” and improving their relationships with teachers as well (P172).

These reflections show that SEL was not just a temporary response to the challenges of COVID-19. Instead, it became a lasting framework for reshaping how teachers approached their classrooms. By prioritizing emotional awareness, relationship-building, and thoughtful decision-making, educators found new ways to foster student engagement and rebuild trust after a period of deep disruption. SEL became a mindset that reshaped how teachers approached student learning, emotional growth, and recovery.

Technology as a Double-Edged Sword in the Classroom

While technology served as a critical bridge during school closures, allowing instruction and connection to continue, it also introduced new strains. Teachers described it as both a lifeline that enabled educational continuity and a liability that exposed and deepened existing inequities. This section explores the multifaceted role of technology during and after the pandemic, examining how it functioned as a temporary support, introduced pedagogical tradeoffs, widened access gaps, and reshaped how teachers relate to students and deliver instruction. Educators' experiences reflect the paradox: technology maintained learning on the surface yet deepened inequalities and left a lasting mark on classrooms.

Technology as a Temporary Support

During the height of the pandemic, digital tools and online platforms became a lifeline for continuing instruction and reaching students. Teachers expressed gratitude for the ability to keep learning. "Thank God for technology," one said, "so that at least the pandemic will not be a barrier for us to not learn" (P69). Multiple teachers cited internet use as the most effective tool during the pandemic (P95, P180, P177).

Online instruction was also the only way for teachers to stay connected with students due to restrictions on in-person interaction (P180, P177). One teacher explained that frequent online contact helped students “cope with the season” and remain engaged in school activities (P177). Without virtual connection, one teacher said, students would have suffered even more emotionally and behaviorally (P179).

In some cases, remote learning offered unexpected benefits. One teacher noted that online class flexibility reduced tardiness since students could avoid traffic and commuting delays (P135). Others observed that students were more engaged in virtual settings, showing stronger active listening, increased participation, and improved communication skills (P67). For shy students, virtual learning created a less intimidating space to participate, leading to lasting changes in their classroom behavior. The transformation was palpable: “After the pandemic, I observe that [shy students] have come out of their shells and now they can say things openly with courage, without fear or any intimidation” (P64). In these moments, virtual formats offered new pathways to rebuild trust between students and teachers.

Moreover, e-learning platforms such as Khan Academy, ABC Mouse, and National Geographic Kids kept students engaged outside of class time (P60). Teachers recommended these tools to families as a way to maintain academic continuity and minimize learning losses. As one teacher explained, “if they are engaged in educational programs while they are at home [...] the gap won’t be as much” (P60). Even as technology served as a temporary buffer during the pandemic, it also revealed limits in access and highlighted persistent inequalities.

When Remote Learning Falls Short

Pedagogical Tradeoffs in Virtual Instruction. Despite providing necessary continuity during school closures, remote learning could not match the benefits of in-person teaching.

“There is nothing like seeing your student physically,” one teacher said, noting it allowed for real-time observation of student behavior and more responsive instruction (P69). Another emphasized that in-person teaching allowed clearer explanations and deeper discussions (P171). Several teachers also stressed that face-to-face interaction was especially important for young students learning social-emotional and non-verbal cues (P174, P97).

In contrast, the shift to online platforms made individualized, dynamic instruction more challenging (P69). Motivational strategies like prizes or rewards didn’t translate well remotely. Many teachers found that virtual instruction struggled to hold students’ attention. “The concentration of students wasn’t enough as it used to be in person” (P95), one noted, while another explained that students focused more during in-person lessons (P180). This was especially concerning for early learners, whose developmental needs often required direct interaction. As one teacher explained, “remote learning lacked the interactive and the hands-on components for crucial early literacy development” (P97). These accounts show that while technology sustained instruction, it lacked the developmental and relational support young students needed.

Uneven Access and Limited Caregiver Support. In addition to instructional challenges, teachers highlighted remote learning magnified home-based disparities. Virtual instruction assumed that students had both the tools and support needed to participate. Yet several teachers observed that some students lacked working devices, internet, or adult support (P135, P48). For younger children, these barriers were especially difficult, since many couldn’t log in or navigate platforms alone. One teacher estimated that fewer than half of their students joined class regularly, and nearly a third never connected at all during the pandemic (P95). These overlapping challenges left many students to learn alone or miss lessons entirely.

Even with devices, many lacked the skills or support to use them effectively. One teacher shared, “Some students didn't have access to the devices. Most of them had access but didn't know how to use them” (P95). Others described recurring connectivity issues that disrupted learning. One teacher pointed to “connectivity issues and network connection” as the most difficult aspect of the pandemic (P174). To accommodate these challenges, some teachers held multiple daily sessions “just so that everyone will be able to learn” (P69). Still, tech issues undermined these efforts. “Most times the challenges we face with this is that most parents do not have a reliable internet connection... sometimes everything just cuts,” one teacher noted (P48).

The absence of reliable caregiver support further compounded these issues. Several teachers described students left alone while parents were at work, without anyone to help them log in or troubleshoot (P95, P172). “They require the assistance of their parents and guardians, but most times they are not there to help them. So it's always a problem” (P97). As one teacher summarized, “Many students struggled to adapt to the online learning setting,” particularly those without supervision or help troubleshooting technology (P135, P172). Others noted that some families lacked both reliable connectivity and the time to support their children's learning (P135). These gaps led to a fragmented and unequal learning experience.

The Effects of Excessive Screen Time. Teachers theorized that screen time was a major factor in students' behavioral changes post-pandemic. One explained that the “increased screen time [...] definitely had a negative impact on motivation and engagement,” adding that students had gotten “carried away with all the distance and social isolation” (P135). One teacher warned that excessive screen time “can be linked to behavioral problems, delays in developmental milestones at times, and social skill deficits” (P60). As digital platforms became a primary

source of both instruction and entertainment, students grew accustomed to their flexibility and instant gratification.

Altogether, these reflections suggest that though technology was essential for maintaining educational continuity, its overuse introduced new behavioral and engagement challenges. The shift back to in-person learning made the limits of remote instruction especially apparent. Digital tools could not replicate the emotional, interpersonal dimensions of learning that are critical for young children, nor could they close pre-existing gaps in access and support. This experience revealed that despite its ability to supplement instruction, technology cannot replace the relational, human-centered educational experience.

Evolving Uses of Technology Post-Pandemic

While pandemic instruction relied on digital platforms, all teachers continued using technology after returning to in-person school. Several teachers noted that they still use Zoom and similar platforms to demonstrate concepts, clarify material, or support absent students (P48, P97, P171, P177). Follow-up sessions helped teachers revisit topics they couldn't cover fully in class (P172, P179). Some held virtual check-ins on weekends and holidays to stay in touch (P135, P69). As one teacher explained, being able to “pass urgent information without us waiting for the next school session” made virtual tools worth retaining (P69).

Beyond student use of technology, many teachers reported growing more digitally fluent. The pandemic prompted educators to adopt new tools and teaching strategies (P122). Multiple teachers reported gaining these skills independently, through online courses and self-directed research (P67, P177). One teacher reflected, “The only positive effect [of the pandemic] was that I learned how to use a Zoom and Live Feed. And I still use that each and every day like I am talking to you right now” (P48).

This growing comfort with digital platforms led some educators to rethink technology's role in education. One teacher said the growth of technology pushed them to invest more in online tools (P135). Others described a forward-looking mindset, emphasizing the need to evolve alongside technological changes. "I feel the need to try to make sure that my students adapt to new ways of learning technology and new tools," one teacher shared, stressing the importance of "using the technology to make sure that [my students] are not left behind" (P64). Another teacher summarized this shift by reflecting on how teaching has changed:

Teaching is not just classroom work. You can teach anywhere, you can learn anywhere. Especially on social media. Teaching is something you can do at any time and learning is something you can do anytime. It's not just it's not just based on the classroom. (P177)

This quote shows how some teachers came to see learning as no longer limited to a physical classroom. It highlights a mindset shaped by the pandemic where teaching and learning are flexible, ongoing, and embedded in everyday digital life. For many educators, this meant rethinking their role and embracing new ways to reach students beyond traditional spaces.

Trust, Frustration, and the Complex Role of Families

Teachers widely acknowledged that families played a central role in shaping students' educational experiences during and after the pandemic. Their reflections revealed strained communication, uneven support, and shifting responsibility. This section explores the difficulties of engaging families during remote learning, including caregiver reluctance, limited availability, and concerns about safety. It also highlights when parents became

valuable partners in learning. Relational trust emerged as a critical mediator between family involvement and educational recovery. Across interviews, teachers expressed frustration and hope about the need for stronger family engagement.

Challenges in Engaging Families Remotely

When the pandemic hit, teachers hoped parents would step in as key partners in supporting children's learning at home. Instead, they faced a breakdown in family engagement due to health concerns and logistics. These conditions made collaboration difficult, unpredictable, and deeply frustrating.

The most immediate challenges arose from safety concerns and restrictions on social gatherings. Families declined any form of physical contact due to fear of COVID exposure and mistrust of school protocols. One teacher explained that most parents "wouldn't want their kids to get in contact with anybody due to the virus," adding that most parents declined in-person meetings (P97). Others described families avoiding any program requiring physical contact (P179). Many also refused home learning kits and printed assignments. "Even giving them homework to take home became a serious issue," one teacher recalled (P171). Another estimated that only 20 percent of families accepted these resources, while the vast majority "didn't welcome the idea at all" (P95).

In other cases, barriers were logistical, not fear-based. Teachers noted that many caregivers were unavailable during school hours and unable to adjust their routines to meet the demands of remote learning (P177, P172). Even willing families had limited time and capacity. As one teacher explained, "not all parents were free enough to let their kids come for lectures" (P48). Coordinating virtual learning meant frustrating negotiations over timing and content. "Some were complaining about the time frame being long. Others [said it was too]

short. Others were complaining about their children not actually understanding what is really happening in online class,” one teacher recalled (P64). Teachers found it harder to stay in touch over time. As one noted, “I had to constantly try to keep up with the parents. And you know, some parents do have engagements and other things” (P135). These scheduling issues and communication gaps prevented consistent collaboration.

Ultimately, these challenging, daily interactions eroded trust between families and teachers. Several teachers observed that family involvement dropped after the pandemic. “Since [the pandemic] most parents were really reluctant over their children’s academic journey” (P172), one teacher reflected. Some families still doubted school safety and limited participation. “[Parents] don’t know who to trust,” one teacher explained, “so they don’t want anybody to meet their kids in person” (P172). Another shared that parents are “still scared to let their children out after the pandemic” (P135). Caregivers felt safer returning once the vaccine was widely available (P60). Teachers saw this hesitation as a sign that the pandemic shook parents’ trust in school stability. These lingering fears reflected a fractured relationship still in need of repair.

Examples of Effective Collaboration

Despite widespread challenges, several teachers described moments when families became strong partners in student learning. These accounts contrast earlier frustrations and illustrate the potential for meaningful collaboration, even under pandemic conditions.

Some parents actively supported remote lessons, helping children stay engaged and focused. “Family involvement was really good to me,” one teacher shared, “parents were right beside [students] and making sure everything was going smoothly” (P64). Others emphasized that this support went beyond supervision. “When you’re having technical issues and

connectivity problems, [guardians] are the ones helping. They gave us a helping hand to make sure that that class was successful,” one teacher noted (P67). As one teacher reflected, this cooperation often stemmed from trust: “Due to the relationship I had with the kids, [parents] believed in me” (P97). Trust, therefore, also functioned as a resource that buffered against institutional gaps.

Support often continued after virtual learning as families stayed engaged after schools reopened. One teacher said that families had been “supportive because they know what we’re currently facing” (P179). Others noted that parent check-ins helped students navigate early challenges. One teacher highlighted the role of the parent-teacher-association, explaining that families were “really helping us. They ensure that their children do their homework” (P67). This collaboration improved homework completion and helped restore routine. Another teacher observed that when families stepped in to support learning, academic gaps were less noticeable: “If the parents were a bit of help, you cannot really notice the gap” (P60).

Some teachers also found that communication with families had improved. One teacher reported more frequent check-ins with parents and felt “bonded more compared to before the pandemic” (P135). Whether through calls or emails, these interactions helped maintain a sense of trust, connection, and accountability. For some, this renewed communication was one of the rare positive outcomes of the pandemic.

Teacher Perspectives on Shared Responsibility

Many teachers viewed the pandemic as a time for families to take a more active role in student learning. “The best way we can continue learning during the pandemic lies between the teacher and the parent,” one teacher emphasized, explaining that students are “far from us [but] close to their parents” (P60). Another teacher reiterated that once kids spend half the day

at home, parents should “also help by educating their kids too at home; to do the right thing [and] how to behave themselves” (P48). These reflections align with research showing students spend only 15% of their time in school (Kraft & Novicoff, 2024).

Still, many teachers felt parents underestimated their role. One teacher shared that “some parents don’t believe in the process,” and expect instant, positive results (P69). Many teachers were frustrated by carrying too much of the learning burden (P135, P171). “I feel that inasmuch as we teachers [can help] we really see that parents should also do the work in terms of encouraging their children” (P177). Others noted that home struggles made it harder to motivate students without family support. “It’s not only my job to give them this positive reinforcement,” one teacher explained, “but also the job of their parents” (P64). Teachers believed parents and educators must “both work together” to support learning (P171).

Teachers shared many ways parents could meaningfully support student learning. Some recommended establishing structured routines, promoting self-directed learning, and continuing to use educational platforms at home. One teacher emphasized that home-based learning should continue: “Parents shouldn’t stop because COVID-19 has ended [...] having lectures with their parents will actually also boost their learning” (P50). Across the board, teachers encouraged parents to stay active in their child’s academic progress by asking questions, collaborating with teachers, and helping their students regain interest in school (P171, P172). Some teachers advocated for emotional support from families, noting that encouragement, warmth, and family-organized support groups could benefit both students and teachers (P64, P122).

For many teachers, the imbalances in responsibilities was not just frustrating but unsustainable. As one teacher put it, “The parents also need to play a role [because] if you

leave it just for the teachers, it makes the work much more bulky for the teacher” (P172). This mirrors Bryk and Schneider’s finding that trust enables shared responsibility; without it, roles become unbalanced (2002). Unequal overload set the stage for a deeper challenge: burnout.

Teacher Burnout and Emotional Labor

In the wake of COVID-19, many teachers encountered a profound shift in their professional experience. Faced with growing academic and emotional demands, emotionally affected students, and uneven parental participation, many educators felt overburdened and unsupported. This section explores how teachers made sense of burnout, the toll it took on their well-being, and the resourceful strategies they adopted to cope with it.

A Harder Job: Navigating New Post-Pandemic Demands

Post-pandemic, teaching became more complex, emotionally draining, and harder to sustain. Teachers’ responsibilities extended far beyond instruction; they now managed academic recovery, hybrid lessons, re-engaged families, and supported students emotionally. Many noticed that the return to in-person learning came with heightened expectations from administrators and families, yet little added support.

Teachers often spoke of being pulled in multiple directions at once. During virtual learning, they struggled to maintain communication across various platforms. One teacher described the difficulty of “trying to check on the children and also trying to to keep up with parents” while juggling calls, emails, and video conferences (P135). These challenges compounded once schools reopened. “There were significant learning losses, which made my workload double. It has been challenging to just get them back on track,” one teacher explained, adding that they also had to “adjust the curriculum to meet the needs of students who have fallen

behind, [and address] the fact that most students went through some trauma or emotional challenges” (P135). The increased workload was further exacerbated by widespread staffing shortages that continue to affect the academic field. “The workload is too much because there is a shortage of staff members. Many schools, not only my school, experience this shortage” (P67).

Teachers emphasized that their responsibilities went beyond academics, as they were now also tasked with tending to students’ emotional wounds (P174, P135). As one teacher explained, “it’s not just working in the classroom, but also working with the minds of the students (P172). Students returned with signs of anxiety, trauma, and emotional dysregulation, but teachers lacked the formal training to help. Despite this, teachers assumed responsibility for students’ emotional well-being. “As a teacher, I need to provide them with emotional support and accommodations,” one shared (P60). One teacher admitted “It was a little bit frustrating for me because I wanted to really impact that learning experience for such students, but it was kind of difficult for me to deal with as a teacher” (P64), highlighting the emotional strain and professional limitations many educators faced.

The cumulative effect of these pressures left many teachers emotionally and physically depleted. One teacher defined burnout as “an emotional exhaustion caused by prolonged stress” pointing to the remote learning period as especially overwhelming and ineffective (P67). This exhaustion persisted into the post-pandemic classroom, where teachers felt they were “starting afresh again,” working harder just to reestablish basic routines and reignite student interest (P95, P179). One voice captured the overall sentiment: “My experience before the pandemic was much more lovely” (P171).

Resigned but Resourceful

Even as they faced exhaustion, teachers continued to invest more time, emotional energy, and personal resources to meet students' evolving needs. Through the adaptive use of technology, many extended class hours, hosted one-on-one tutoring sessions, and restructured lessons to be more accessible for students struggling to re-engage (P97, P171, P180). They also modified their classroom approach by introducing mindfulness games, relationship-building activities, and responsive teaching methods to capture fragmented attention spans (P172, P135). These were not changes mandated by schools or required by parents. Rather, they reflected teachers' own sense of duty and hope, grounded in a personal commitment to help students recover.

Teachers also sought support and growth opportunities outside their formal responsibilities. Some joined mentorship programs to learn from more experienced colleagues and refine their approach (P135). Others turned to independent research, exploring new ways to integrate technology more effectively into their lessons (P67). One even dedicated their own funds and personal time to attend SEL training and participate in professional learning communities (P122). Although it may seem contradictory to take on more responsibilities while already overwhelmed, many teachers described these intentional efforts as a way to regain control and reaffirm their purpose.

To cope with the emotional toll of this expanded role, teachers developed their own survival strategies. One teacher emphasized the importance of setting clear work-life boundaries, maintaining peer connections, and practicing time management as essential coping mechanisms (P67). Support from family and colleagues was another crucial source of

relief during periods of high stress. For many, burnout was not a passing reaction to disruption. It became an enduring reality that required continuous effort and care.

Teaching as a Calling: Love, Purpose, and the Blurring of Boundaries

Despite burnout, many teachers show up each day driven by more than obligation. For them, teaching was not merely a profession but a practice of love, patience, and service. Amid exhaustion and uncertainty, they found meaning in student relationships and a sense of responsibility that often blurred boundaries. This section explores how teachers reimagined their roles through a lasting emotional commitment to connection, compassion, and purpose.

Emotional Labor and Love

In response to students' emotional struggles, teachers stepped in to provide missing care and consistency. Many perceived formal support as limited, and families were stretched too thin to provide consistent care. Faced with this gap, teachers assumed expanded roles as caregivers and emotional guides. "I am their parent in school," one teacher explained, "so I make myself available for all students at any time" (P67). This reflected a personal decision to meet students where they were and offer the stability they believed essential to recovery.

Many teachers also emphasized the importance of integrating social-emotional learning into their everyday practice. As discussed earlier, this often meant building trust and connection through consistent, caring interactions. Several teachers focused on making students feel welcome, loved, and emotionally reconnected to school (P48, P60, P171). Others stressed the importance of modeling the behaviors they hoped to nurture. One teacher described a deliberate effort to promote kindness, saying students can "get what [they] want by being kind and not out of selfishness," adding, "so I try to do that too" (P135).

Across interviews, patience was key to rebuilding post-pandemic emotional connections and trust between students, families, and teachers. “It has really been a moment where patience is really required,” one reflected, noting that emotional healing did not happen quickly (P171). Another teacher warned that without patience, struggling students may be overlooked. “If you are not patient, you might miss them out,” they explained, emphasizing the need to look beyond behavior and attend to students’ emotions (P97). These reflections suggest that emotional labor became a lasting feature of teaching.

A Calling, Not Just a Job: Hope Rooted in Purpose and Persistence

Even as the challenges of teaching deepened, many educators expressed an unwavering dedication to their profession. Several openly acknowledged the work had become more difficult. “I used to find teaching much easier, much more loving than now,” one teacher shared, reflecting on the loss of connection and focus in post-pandemic classrooms (P95). Another added they had to “dedicate all of [their] time” to both instruction and managing students’ emotional states (P97). Yet their commitment remained unchanged. “I still want to be a teacher. I still love my work,” one teacher affirmed. When asked if their career goals had changed, another replied without hesitation: “No, they haven’t” (P97).

This enduring commitment came from seeing teaching as a lifelong journey of growth. “I feel like I have more things to learn and more things to grow on,” one teacher shared, driven by a desire to “play a vital role” in students’ lives (P64). Even without reliable support, they held themselves to high standards. One teacher explained, “I actually believe in what I can do, so I don’t expect anything, really.” Instead of relying on external resources, they remained driven by a sense of duty: “I still should be able to pass the knowledge to the students without any resources” (P69).

These stories reveal a quiet resilience and deep conviction to teaching. Their efforts to adapt and grow as educators stemmed from a core belief: “I had that one obligation, making sure that every student in my class had that right to be taught and had the right to have that experience of learning” (P64). Together, these reflections shift the narrative from crisis management to reaffirming teaching as a hopeful calling.

Discussion

Teachers acknowledged that some schools responded constructively to post-pandemic challenges, particularly through increased attention to social-emotional learning, training opportunities, and peer collaboration. These efforts were seen as steps in the right direction, yet they often fell short of meeting the realities inside classrooms. Many educators found that formal supports addressed surface-level needs while overlooking deeper structural issues such as trauma, inequity, and long-term disengagement. As a result, teachers interpreted their role not just as implementers of school policies, but as the primary architects of recovery. They were expected to adapt instruction, rebuild trust with students, and re-engage families, frequently without the tools, time, or staffing needed to do so effectively.

Across interviews, teachers described how recovery required them to stretch beyond their professional training and take on additional responsibilities. Even when schools provided SEL materials or professional development, it was up to teachers to translate these into meaningful, day-to-day practices. Teachers did not reject institutional support outright; rather, they recognized its limitations and supplemented it with their own insight and labor. Their experiences suggest that any serious effort to address post-pandemic recovery must begin with

listening to educators, resourcing them adequately, and treating their interpretive work as essential to school transformation.

Perceptions of Institutional Support

While some schools responded to post-pandemic challenges by investing in SEL and professional development, teachers felt these efforts only went so far. Educators appreciated new training, shared resources, and encouragement from school leaders. At the same time, they noted that these efforts did not fully meet their needs. Gaps remained in mental health services, staffing, and access to SEL materials. Many teachers felt they had to take on extra responsibilities such as adapting teaching methods, building peer networks, and finding additional resources on their own. This section highlights how teachers balanced appreciation for school support with the ongoing need to adjust and supplement those efforts themselves.

What Schools Got Right

SEL Integration and Encouragement. Following the pandemic, many schools began placing a strong emphasis on social-emotional learning (SEL), which had previously been underutilized. Teachers reported that school management became more aware of students' behavioral changes and responded by formally integrating SEL into the curriculum (P172). "After the pandemic, the school management actually saw reasons to put it much more in effect than before," one teacher shared, "due to recent behaviors of kids post-pandemic" (P95). In these cases, administrators, not teachers, initiated and directed these changes to address post-pandemic needs.

Some schools also encouraged teachers to deepen their SEL knowledge and engagement through targeted incentives and professional development opportunities. One

teacher noted that school leaders “motivate teachers to put [SEL] into effect more than before” by offering promotions and public recognition (P95). Others described a cultural change in which SEL training and continued study became more actively supported (P179). “They motivated most teachers to go and study SEL,” one teacher explained, viewing the new encouragement as “an advantage [of the pandemic]” (P180). These changes suggested that SEL emerged as a school-wide recovery effort, actively supported at both the administrative and instructional levels.

Professional Resources and Peer Support. Besides SEL-specific efforts, several teachers shared that their schools offered meaningful professional development support. This included financial backing for workshops, flexible scheduling, and encouragement to pursue further study (P172, P177). Online platforms and professional learning communities became important spaces for emotional and instructional support. One teacher described these networks as “an accessible way of having emotional and social support” (P64). Another praised administrators for creating spaces where staff could “collaborate with peers, share resources, and engage in quality professional growth” (P67). In some schools, teachers were even asked to help shape future offerings: “What should this conference be like?” one recalled, calling their school “highly supportive” of staff needs (P135).

What Is Still Missing

Teacher-Led Adaptation and Growth. While schools addressed some needs, the support was often incomplete, leaving teachers to fill in the gaps. For instance, to overcome disrupted homework habits one teacher used small-group instruction (P174), while another used discipline and structure to ensure completion (P180). Additionally, many teachers adopted more flexible, student-centered approaches like extending deadlines, offering more

class time, and breaking down complex content into more digestible lessons to make learning accessible for all students (P135, P180, P64, P97). These actions reveal how meaningful classroom recovery oftentimes relied on teachers' initiatives, not systemic support.

Gaps in Mental Health and Wellness Support. Teachers repeatedly called for systemic investment in mental health, for both themselves and students. Many teachers felt the lingering emotional effects of the pandemic remained largely unaddressed by their schools. "I feel like in every school there should be trauma-informed care for both teachers and the students," one advocated, "Because they're still healing and there's still much to be done. Without proper healing, it's just going to have a long-term effect, and to counter that is through mental health and wellness" (P135).

A recurring theme across interviews was the lack of professional development focused on mental health and emotional support. "There needs to be more professional development based on mental health and wellness for teachers [to] be able to help and support their students" one teacher urged (P135). Another advocated for additional trauma-informed care training "to understand kids' emotions better" and manage their "psychological health" (P60). Without meaningful opportunities for growth, one teacher warned, educators would struggle to meet their students' needs: "We have to be a better version of ourselves to make the children a better version of themselves too, so without proper development or resources, it hinders teacher growth and development" (P135).

Several teachers also hoped for additional mental health professionals on-site to support students in ways classroom teachers could not. While many were doing their best to provide emotional support, they acknowledged the limits of their training and capacity. One teacher explained that having mental health professionals dedicated to staff and students

would be a valuable addition to their school (P64). Another stated that counseling could “provide some emotional and social support for children,” especially those dealing with post-pandemic trauma (P177). Together, these requests point to a vision of school recovery that centers emotional well-being alongside academic support.

Calls for Comprehensive SEL Curriculum. Although some schools initiated school-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) efforts, many teachers expressed a desire for a more structured, integrated approach to SEL. Several advocated for SEL-specific training and a more developed, relevant curriculum that could be integrated into daily instruction (P174, P95). One teacher envisioned “a comprehensive SEL curriculum [that] could be very flexible and adaptable to meet the needs of different students” (P135). They highlighted the importance of aligning SEL with academic subjects and incorporating assessment tools to monitor students’ skill progress over time (P135). Another teacher simply wished for SEL programs “for each and every student” (P67). Others requested access to journals, books, micro-credentials, and graduate-level courses to deepen their understanding and strengthen their practice (P95, P97). This underscores the administrative responsibility of embedding SEL in both classroom practice and professional development pipelines.

Technology and Learning tools. Educators additionally emphasized the need for modern teaching resources that reflect both the diversity of student learners and the rapid evolution of technology. One teacher advocated for “AI-powered learning tools to help students with their learning needs, abilities and learning styles,” suggesting that these tools could support “competency-based progression” and allow students to move through materials at their own pace (P135). Others called for expanded access to online platforms, educational software, devices, and internet connectivity to better support remote and hybrid learning

environments (P67). Another teacher noted that access to online courses and educational programs would not only improve their technological fluency but also strengthen their overall teaching effectiveness (P177). Teachers presented a compelling picture of technology as a means to make classrooms more equitable, responsive, and sustainable.

Staffing and Resource Needs. Teachers ultimately stressed that meaningful recovery demanded broader structural support and responsive school leadership. Alongside calls for additional mental health staff, many emphasized the need for classroom assistance. “I wish I could have an assistant,” one teacher shared, reflecting on the difficulty of managing in-person students while simultaneously teaching over Zoom (P48). Without help, routine tasks like distributing materials or keeping students on task became overwhelming. Teachers stressed that support staff could ease these pressures and create more responsive learning environments, particularly for students with diverse needs (P67).

Moreover, educators called for deeper collaboration with school leaders on decisions that shape classroom conditions and student engagement. Some teachers described feeling cut off from professional development opportunities that would strengthen their ability to support students emotionally. One noted that many colleagues had not been able to mental health, and believed that “if all the teachers can also have such experiences, it would go a long way” in improving student outcomes (P179). Others called for protected time within the school day to participate in workshops and reflect on their practice (P180). Echoing this sentiment, one teacher urged leadership to stay in dialogue with educators and “know what is actually going to be important” for relevant professional development (P171). According to Bryk and Schneider, such visible investments in care can rebuild school-wide trust (2002).

Alternative Pathways to Student Recovery

While much of the recovery conversation focused on academics and social-emotional learning, many teachers turned to something more intuitive: joy. Across classrooms, educators described using play, movement, creativity, and positive reinforcement to re-engage students and rebuild a sense of connection. These informal efforts emerged from teachers' own instincts about what students needed most. This section highlights how healing sometimes happens through creative, responsive teaching grounded in trust, play, and joy.

Joy, Play, and Structured Fun as Healing Practices

Play, Autonomy, and Creative Engagement. Teachers emphasized that embedding fun in the classroom was essential to bringing students back into learning after the pandemic. One teacher astutely stated, “the sole purpose of engaging students is to make learning fun for them,” describing how games, simulations, and technology can shift students' focus away from frustration and toward enjoyment. The same teacher also highlighted that student autonomy is “the main thing that promotes motivation and engagement” (P135). This meant listening to students' ideas, allowing them to make decisions, and giving them opportunities to lead. This approach gave students more control over their learning and reframed the teacher's role as someone who supports learning by guiding and correcting students when needed.

Teachers also stressed that effectively teaching young students required regular breaks for fun. One teacher explained, “you should also create time for them to play, because if you have them learn throughout the day, you'll see the next day they won't respond to you at all” (P60). To counter this, teachers integrated games, mindfulness, and group activities into their instruction (P95, P97). Others turned to educational play, blending learning with fun to sustain focus and interest (P69). Teachers also found that role play and interactive activities made classrooms feel

more lively and welcoming (P135). These were intentional strategies designed to make school feel like a place students wanted to return to (P171). Overall, these practices supported relational warmth, key to trust development in early learners (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

One teacher developed a scavenger hunt that effectively fostered engagement and helped rebuild classroom connection. To address student's withdrawn behaviors, they created a list of items and challenges for students to complete around the classroom or school, intentionally designed for peer collaboration. "If you and I are partners in a game, after the game we can connect and talk more about different things," the teacher reflected. "That is how they come together [...] this game brings the students back to us" (P67). Others used similar creative strategies to help students feel more connected and ready to learn. One described beginning the day with rhymes and games to build morale and ease students into daily routines (P60). Other activities included virtual field trips, online learning games, and hands-on projects to promote active, joyful learning. These informal efforts reflected teachers' intuitive responses to students' needs, using creativity and joy to rebuild connection.

Movement and Wellbeing as Recovery Tools. Teachers also pointed to movement and mindfulness as essential components of post-pandemic recovery. Activities like group sports, mindfulness, and creative play were used to spark interest and reduce stress (P172). One teacher described using physical exercises to help students manage negative emotions and feel more settled (P177). These strategies reflected a broader shift away from rigid classroom discipline. As one teacher put it, "I used to rely more on traditional classroom management strategies," but after the pandemic, "I have shifted my focus to more holistic approaches," which included fitness routines, nutrition, and basic meal planning to support student well-being (P122).

Motivation Through Positive Reinforcement. Positive reinforcement also became a core part of how teachers helped students rebuild motivation after the pandemic. Recognizing that many children needed encouragement to stay engaged, teachers leaned on praise and rewards to affirm their efforts (P64). One teacher explained that behavior strategies “like providing them with awards or incentives for achieving the goals” had become more important in keeping students on track (P174). Teachers agreed that younger students, in particular, responded well to simple rewards like small gifts, stickers, or recognition (P69, P174). “Children love gifts [...] If they are doing well in class today and you offer a gift, they would like to do it more,” one teacher reflected (P67). Though informal, these practices played a significant role in supporting students’ early recovery.

Recovery as a Shared Effort: A Synthesis of Teacher Calls for Collective Action

While teachers led recovery efforts inside the classroom, they emphasized that lasting progress would require shared responsibility across schools, families, and communities. Several pointed to the role of school leadership in sustaining student interest, stressing the importance of collaboration with teachers to identify what students need and to create activities that make school feel exciting and welcoming again (P171). Others identified community organizations, family networks, and faith-based institutions as important partners in academic recovery. This includes parent-teacher associations, faith-based organizations, and community groups to provide shared resources for students (P67). Additional suggestions included tutoring, summer school, and other programs designed to help students catch up on lost learning and re-engage at their own pace (P177). These ideas reflected a shared belief that communities need to take an active, coordinated role in student recovery.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the complex challenges teachers faced in supporting students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators were responsible for addressing academic setbacks, emotional difficulties, and social disconnection, all while navigating inconsistent institutional support. Many found themselves rebuilding classroom routines from the ground up, working to reestablish both learning structures and a sense of emotional safety. The pandemic disrupted more than academics; it strained relationships and demanded new forms of care in classrooms across the country.

One of the most significant challenges involved the unequal impact of the pandemic across student populations. Teachers described how disparities in access to technology and inconsistent family engagement made it harder for some students to participate in remote learning and later reintegrate into the classroom. These gaps did not simply disappear once in-person instruction resumed. Instead, they influenced how quickly students reconnected with school, how much academic progress had been lost, and how difficult it was for some families to resume meaningful collaboration with educators.

Even in the face of these challenges, teachers responded with creativity and persistence. They introduced playful activities, physical movement, and positive reinforcement to make learning feel more welcoming. At the same time, many described signs of burnout and emotional strain, often feeling that the burden of recovery fell solely on them. Their efforts reflect a powerful commitment, but one that cannot stand alone. The work of supporting students must extend beyond the classroom. It calls for a shared responsibility across schools, families, and communities to ensure that recovery is not only possible, but lasting.

Policy Recommendations. To support a more equitable and sustainable recovery, schools and districts must invest in strategies that reflect what teachers have already been doing on the ground. This includes prioritizing play-based learning and integrating social-emotional development into everyday instruction, not as an add-on but as a core component of post-pandemic education. Resources should be directed toward family engagement efforts, such as technology literacy workshops and caregiver outreach, especially in communities most affected by digital and social disconnect. Just as importantly, schools must attend to teacher well-being by increasing staffing for SEL implementation and reducing the burdens that contribute to burnout. Embedding frameworks like CASEL into long-term recovery planning will demand ongoing collaboration with the educators tasked with carrying it out. Similarly, applying Bryk and Schneider's relational trust lens can guide how institutions strengthen community ties. Incorporating teacher voices into policymaking not only improves relevance and implementation but also rebuilds trust and retention in the early childhood workforce

Suggestions for Future Research. Future studies should explore the long-term impact of pandemic-related disruptions on early childhood development, particularly in the areas of emotional regulation and socialization. Longitudinal studies would be best to fully capture the effects the pandemic had on early learners. Additional research is also needed on how school systems can meaningfully support teacher well-being, not only through professional development but through structural changes that reduce chronic overload and emotional labor. Analyzing the effectiveness of different techniques could guide more effective funding usage. Finally, more work should examine how partnerships between schools, families, and community organizations can be strengthened to create sustainable recovery models. The effectiveness of a community can be felt and should be coupled with strong evidence.

Appendices

Appendix A - Interview Guide

Recovery of Early Literacy and Non-cognitive Skills Post-COVID-19: The Role of Teacher Insights in Shaping Educational Policy and Practices

This study aims to understand the most effective teaching strategies, particularly Social Emotional Learning or SEL, that have been most successful at mitigating the social and academic effects that Covid-19 had on young students. I also seek to understand the best ways schools, families, and communities can best support early education teachers such as yourself. I want to reassure you that all information shared during this interview will remain confidential and secure. You have the freedom to skip any questions you prefer not to answer or to end the interview at any time. As previously agreed upon, this interview will be recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing your responses. Knowing this information and reading over the consent form, do you agree to participate in this study?

Thank you for meeting with me today. My name is Anapaula Silva, and I'm a graduate student at the University of Chicago, researching the impacts of COVID-19 on educational practices. I also work in a second grade classroom at Kozminski Elementary, a K-8 CPS. I appreciate you sharing your insights with me today.

1. To begin, please tell me about your teaching experience before the pandemic.
2. What adaptations did you make during the pandemic to maintain learning?
3. Which changes, if any, have you continued using since the pandemic?

Next, let's discuss the effects the pandemic has had on student's social, emotional, and academic skills.

4. Tell me about any changes you've observed in children's behaviors from before to after the pandemic.
5. Research indicates that students may have experienced learning setbacks during the pandemic. In what ways have you noticed learning setbacks among your students, If any?
6. Share an example of how children's motivation has changed since the pandemic.

Thank you. Now I would like to learn about the effectiveness of social-emotional learning strategies in the classroom

7. Describe how you integrate SEL strategies into your daily activities.
8. Which strategies have you found effective in managing children's behaviors?

Great. I would like to hear about the opportunities you may have had for professional development.

9. What kind of professional development have you received, if any?
10. In what ways, if any, does your school support professional development?
11. What kind of SEL resources do you wish for?

As we reach the end of our interview, I would like to hear some concluding experiences since the pandemic.

12. Please share any challenges that you are currently facing with teaching post-pandemic.
13. How do you think the pandemic has influenced your own teaching philosophy and practices?
14. If there were no constraints, what kind of resources would you wish for to help students recover from the effects of the pandemic?
15. To end our discussion, I would like to know, If you were in my position, doing this research, what question would you have asked that I didn't?

Well, that's the end of our interview. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I had a great time hearing about your experience. Feel free to email me if you have any questions at any time. Have a great rest of your day!

Appendix B -Participant Demographics.

Participant	Sex	Age	School	Type	SEL Insights Summary
P122	F	39	Lincoln Park High School	Public	Holistic, trauma-informed recovery
P48	M	28	Brickell International Academy	Private	Implicit, behavior-focused recovery
P64	F	49	Sunshine Elementary	Public	Structured, confidence and engagement
P97	F	35	Private	Private	Multisensory, motivational repair
P69	M	35	Private	Private	Relational, confidence rebuilding
P60	M	30	Public	Public	Relational, emotional health focus
P171	M	30	Alliance College Ready	Charter	Emotional, recovery through connection
P172	M	35	Summit Public Schools	Private	Trust-building, emotional recovery
P174	F	42	Amundsen High School	Public	Routine, academic + emotional needs
P135	F	32	Toland Way Elementary School	Private	Integrated, time-based recovery
P67	M	30	Public	Public	Play-based, social reconnection
P179	M	30	Granada Hills Charter	Public	Behavioral, student motivation rebuild
P180	M	35	Private	Private	Restorative, consistent engagement
P177	F	32	Aspira Charter School	Charter	Consistent, social-emotional recovery

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