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THE INTENSIFICATION OF MORAL INJURY IN TEACHERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

This mixed methods study uncovered experiences teachers described as burnout or stress during the pandemic were not simply what these two terms described. During, and shortly after, the pandemic, teachers' descriptions of their circumstances fall more in line with the definition and experiences of moral injury. This study utilized the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OBI) to assess teachers' levels of burnout, coupled with a grounded theory analysis of written experiences, focus groups, and individual interviews. Four analytical themes were identified during analysis: (1) Teachers who were already feeling burnout and stress from legislators' expectations for accountability prior to the pandemic increased as teachers' jobs became more political during the pandemic.; (2) Teachers did not feel they had much autonomy in their classrooms prior to and during the pandemic because of others' expectations of teachers' work.; (3) Teachers' workloads increased prior to and during the pandemic.; and (4) Teachers lacked supportive administrators prior to the pandemic, and these administrators centered blame on teachers during the pandemic. The central hypothesis was teachers could not change the things they described as central to their stress and burnout because they were truly experiencing moral injury.

Keywords: moral injury, stress; burnout, pandemic, teachers' work



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INTRODUCTION

“All I do is work and go home. I don’t go out. Grocery shopping every other week. I used to enjoy what I do, with the obvious exception to the bureaucratic side of it. Now I struggle to go to work, put less effort into what I teach, and feel more disillusioned than I did before the pandemic. Things that I used to find joy in—teaching particular events and engaging my students—don’t anymore.”

“I am an emotional rollercoaster now. I experience anxiety, depression, exhaustion, and a severe lack of interest in anything, including doing my job well. I have never experienced such a poor state of my own mental health.”

“I am emotionally and mentally exhausted. I spent last year in therapy just so I could get through. Due to demands of the mental health field, I was released from therapy so they could work other clients who needed more support than me. I feel like I am picking up the pieces and tending to the wounds of last year while still trying to avoid new wounds and perform at work this year.”

Based on these teachers’ reflections about teaching during the three peak years of the pandemic, the teaching profession is in trouble. Teachers are tired and worn out after two school years (2019-2020, 2020-2021) of uncertainty in a pandemic and another school year (2021-2022) that was supposed to be normal, but teachers felt beaten down even before the pandemic. The top-down hierarchy that exists in education pressures teachers to fulfill a laundry list of requirements each day. This constant push has resulted in feelings of burnout and demoralization, which contributes to low teacher morale and higher turnover in the profession. While these conditions already existed far before the pandemic, the pandemic has exacerbated teacher stress, burnout, and mental health to new levels. There is little doubt that teachers are feeling burned out or demoralized, but the term moral injury better describes what teachers are currently experiencing in their profession. In this mixed methods study using a grounded theory approach, we argue burnout and demoralization do not adequately account for teachers’ collective and individual experiences that cause stress, feelings of burnout, and mental health problems. This study addresses the following questions:

1. How are teachers experiencing high levels of burnout?
2. How are teachers defining their experiences within the bounds of moral injury?

While teachers experienced moral injury prior to the pandemic, during the three peak years of the pandemic (2020, 2021, 2022), increased stressors and additional pressures on teachers put teachers at their breaking point. What teachers described during the pandemic went far beyond understandings of burnout and demoralization. Our aim in this research is to clearly show how our participants’ cumulative experiences are not burnout but are actually continued violations that accumulate into moral injury.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Teaching has become increasingly deprofessionalized over the past 30 years as neoliberal and corporate forces have worked to try to package K-12 education into a consumable product. The 1960s and 70s equity-based reforms that saw schools push for desegregation and students with disabilities enrolled in public schools began to give way to market-based reforms. These market-based reforms focus on school choice, utilizing standards and standardized measures, and tie directly into neoliberalism, which is focused on deregulation, free markets, and individual freedoms (Apple, 2012; Rubin et al, 2019). It was also utilized to counter the equity-based reforms that provided many students with a more equitable education, which many conservative and neoliberal politicians and their supporters wanted to push back on. They were extremely angered by minoritized students gaining educational rights, along with many other civil rights after the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed in addition to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Jennings, 2012). After an influx of minoritized students finally settled into desegregated schools nationwide throughout the 1970s, politicians became more strategic in what types of educational laws were passed to continue to ensure academic harm to BIPOC students, students in poverty, and students with disabilities (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). This was seen through the use of the report *A Nation at Risk*, published in 1983 that falsely indicated public schools were largely failing. Once this false narrative was crafted, it would continue to be weaponized against teachers and school districts.

There are several different aspects as to how neoliberalism has created this deprofessionalization of teachers. The competition created by these market reforms has transformed schools and education into places where teachers' work with students has been evaluated and measured by these arbitrary outcomes on standardized tests, which limits such rich educational processes and experiences to standardized outputs (Ravitch, 2020). Because of this, district-level administrators, state boards of education, and legislators do not put much value on the important aspects of teachers' work like creating deep and meaningful relationships with students and utilizing developmentally appropriate and engaging pedagogy. Teachers are reduced to using undemocratic scripted curriculum and programs that limit the individualized decisions they need to make about students (Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020). Furthermore, teachers' evaluations are tied to their students' standardized testing scores or adequate yearly progress, while some districts also employ merit pay for teachers in order to ensure specific metrics are met each year. If teachers deviate from their scripted curriculum or don't meet the expected metrics, they risk disciplinary action and potential dismissal (Shavelson et al., 2010). The resulting effects of this are continued turnover in schools in low-income and high-minority communities, and more teachers are leaving the profession as their autonomy is reduced (Glazer, 2022).

Neoliberalism and the deprofessionalization of the teaching profession has resulted in a widescale moral injury to teachers, which is why we utilize the term to describe what our participants stated they experienced. Burnout indicates that teachers can somehow change their experience or their own selves in order to mediate what they are experiencing. Much of what teachers have been experiencing over the past 30 years that was compounded during the pandemic were not things that teachers could even begin to effectively challenge and change.

Teaching as a Moral Practice

Many teachers view their profession as a calling, so they take their work as a personal mission to educate students. Because of this, it is a moral affront to teachers to face daily "circumstances that challenge their moral conscience, vocational identity, and the values that got them into teaching in the first place" (Keefe-Perry, 2018). Santoro (2011) theorized about moral injury by asking "What happens when experienced teachers who are fueled by the moral dimension of teaching find they can no longer access the moral rewards embedded in their work?" Santoro goes on to (2011) argue the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching involve both required and prohibited practices (moral dimensions) and teachers' recognition that their work is in service to a better world (ethical dimensions). Often these are inseparable so that if a teacher is repeatedly forced to do something that they believe is harmful to their students, they may feel they are bad at their job or their job is bad for the world (Santoro, 2011). This creates a moral injury that plagues teachers daily.

Oftentimes, educators are expected to follow through with responsibilities they cannot actually carry out. This may cause teachers to push back subversively, which ultimately maintains the status quo of the school and continues the teachers' complicity– or forced complicity– in the system (Levinson, 2015). In a Finnish study, Tirri (1999) found teachers to hold the best interests of the child when faced with different moral dilemmas. Educators consistently are fraught with injustices they are required to take action on without a particular action or direction specified– they know what the right thing to do is, but they cannot do it (Levinson, 2015; Santoro, 2018). Cohen Lissman et al. (2024) found teachers during the pandemic fell into several moral traps, defined as when teachers feel the need to act in certain situations, but cannot do so because of the systemic conditions that exist. These multiple traps were between systems and attempts to enact or advocate for social justice, between the system and caring for their own families, and between the system and caring for their professional identity (Cohen Lissman et al., 2024). Moral injury in teachers largely stems from educational policy, time constraints and workload, administrators, parents, and students because these parts of their job are out of their control. Moral injury also factors into teachers' decisions to leave the profession permanently.

Burnout

To understand moral injury, burnout and demoralization must first be defined in terms of the teaching profession. Teachers work in a system notorious for burnout, despite their own efforts to mediate it. It has become so common that some feel it is just something inevitable within the profession (Santoro, 2011). Maslach and Leiter (2016) describe burnout as "a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. The three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment" (p. 103). Exhaustion has also been described as

fatigue, wearing out, and a lack of energy, and it is the highest reported characteristic of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Maslach et al., 2001). It can also cause individuals to distance themselves from their work, interfere with their effectiveness, and limit their ability to cope with external demands (Maslach et al., 2001; McCarthy et al., 2009). For the purposes of our article, exhaustion was the only key dimension of burnout we researched. There have been several shared characteristics of workers who scored high on the burnout inventory; younger adults, women, and unmarried individuals (Maslach et al., 2001; Steiner & Woo, 2021). Individuals who have an external locus of control, are overloaded at work, have a lack of social support at work, and have a lack of autonomy in the workplace are at higher risk of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Santoro, 2019/2020). Burnout also has effects on individuals' health and relationships outside the workplace, while also increasing the potential of developing poor coping behaviors like drug abuse, alcoholism, and creating a higher risk of mental health issues and suicide (Maslach, 1976; Richards et al., 2018).

Many aspects of teachers' work put them at increased risk of burnout. If teachers feel a conflict between demands and resources, they are more likely to experience burnout, along with teachers who have worked several years in their current school (McCarthy et al., 2009). Just because a teacher may be burned out, it does not mean they are disengaged; some teachers maintain involvement in the profession despite their feelings (Russell et al., 2020). Herman et al. (2018) found 93% of teachers in their study indicated they were experiencing high levels of stress. Covid created additional stresses for teachers that affected their levels of burnout. For example, 25% indicated burnout as a major concern in May 2020, but by October 2020, 57% indicated burnout as a large concern (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021a; Steiner & Woo, 2021). The pandemic, coupled with stressors teachers had already been feeling prior to this time, put increased pressure on teachers in all aspects of their professional life, and many of these stressors also overlapped into their personal well-being for the first time.

Burnout is a more familiar term regarding teachers' work; however, demoralization of teachers has also been studied more recently. While burnout and demoralization share some emotional characteristics, demoralization has a more specialized definition:

a process of continually being frustrated in one's pursuit of good teaching. In the process of demoralization, moral rewards are elusive in a practice that had previously afforded access to the satisfaction of doing good work. The failure to access moral rewards is not the result of a lack of personal fortitude or moral sensibility but a fundamental change in the rewards available through the work. (Santoro, 2011)

Burnout may lead to the belief that teachers are weak or ill-equipped for their work, when rather, the problem is not the individual teacher, but the system within which they are situated, which leads to demoralization (Bradford & Braaten, 2018; Santoro, 2019/2020). Another difference between burnout and demoralization is that demoralization cannot be relieved through self-care or time out of work; instead, it can only be resolved by resolution of the conflicts in their work (Santoro, 2019/2020). This is a problem of the profession, not an individual issue for teachers.

Demoralization

There are several larger contributors to the demoralization of teachers. Federal, state, and local policies create demoralization in teachers. Teachers' feelings of demoralization increased drastically after No Child Left Behind was passed in 2001 (Wronowski & Urick, 2021). The included accountability policies worked to strip the profession of some of the autonomy it once had. These new policies did not solely result in harm to teachers. Many teachers cited zero-tolerance policies, standardized testing, and scripted curriculum as things that were causing direct harm to students, particularly in urban schools (Levinson, 2015; Santoro, 2019/2020; Wronowski & Urick, 2021). Teachers who describe themselves as demoralized have put their energy and efforts behind drawing attention to these perceived harms to students and fighting back against the neoliberal policies central to creating such harm (Levinson, 2015; Santoro, 2019/2020). Because of their extensive educational background and experience, teachers should know what is best for students, so it is natural that many would consistently fight to do what is in the best interests of all of their students. School administrators also contribute widely to demoralization in teachers, while parents and students have also been mentioned as contributors (Garcia, 2020; Wronowski & Urick, 2021). Wronowski and Urick (2021) found the schooling environment highly contextualizes feelings of demoralization, which points to variance in the teachers' perceptions of it. Teachers who had supportive administrators, parents, and were supported by the general community

experienced less demoralization. Teacher morale dipped dangerously low during the pandemic, as many teachers felt they had little room for collaboration with colleagues and limited autonomy and decision-making capacity, particularly in terms of the content delivery methods used (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021a). These additional limits, which also sometimes went against what our participants knew to be best practices, led to increased feelings of demoralization during the pandemic. While burnout and demoralization have been defining features of the profession, moral injury contextualizes what is truly happening in the field.

Moral Injury

Educators are undoubtedly experiencing burnout and demoralization in their profession, but there is a more insidious problem facing teachers. Moral injury (MI) was initially studied in those who served in the armed forces, being defined as moral, emotional and spiritual consequences of an individual who commits or watches others commit violations of deeply held moral values during combat or other similar times committed by a person in authority (Koenig et al., 2019; Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2014). Despite its importance, moral injury has not been widely studied within military or combat contexts, primarily because there is a focus on more specific physical and mental injuries, like PTSD (Litz et al., 2009). Moral injury is not a fear of some sort. It is associated more often with other feelings, like shame (Litz et al., 2009). Because there are a variety of experiences that could be defined as morally injurious, Litz et al. (2009) clarified potential sources of moral injury to be:

Perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. This may entail participating in or witnessing inhumane or cruel actions, failing to prevent the immoral acts of others, as well as engaging in subtle acts or experiencing reactions that, upon reflection, transgress a moral code. We also consider bearing witness to the aftermath of violence and human carnage to be potentially morally injurious. (p. 700)

This also requires the person to understand that their morals have been violated by those actions, which will cause internal conflict (Litz et al., 2009), and why moral injury is so different from one person to the next.

Another profession where moral injury is being studied is in healthcare, and there are many similarities between the healthcare system and the education system. The for-profit nature of many aspects of healthcare creates moral injury in those healthcare workers (Pittman, 2021). In this neoliberal model, patient relationships are jeopardized because less time is spent with patients because of higher patient ratios and more time spent on electronic paperwork (Pittman, 2021). This is similar to the increase in class sizes in education, resulting in less individual student attention and increased time spent on testing and fulfilling accountability requirements. Many healthcare professionals shared feelings of alienation and betrayal, which correspond with feelings from individuals in the military or in combat zones (Song et al., 2021). Unlike people who work in other fields, nurses may understand the moral injury they experience, but are less likely to challenge the structures that exist because of the for-profit system (Pittman, 2021). Like teachers, many healthcare professionals fear speaking out because of retaliation. No matter the profession, moral injury destroys the capacity for trust and creates an expectation of harm, which leaves few options for the individual to act (Shay, 2014). This creates a system where workers may have to choose between staying in their profession or leaving to escape ongoing moral injury.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We reviewed literature on three key aspects of teaching that we argue contribute to moral injury: policies, increase in teacher workload, and demands from administrators and other key education stakeholders. When mandated policies prevent teachers from accessing the moral rewards of their work and force participation in immoral behaviors (through direct action or forced silence), they experience moral injury. Changes in teaching modalities that often forced teachers to provide both in-person and remote instruction not only placed unimaginable time constraints on teacher workload, but made it nearly impossible for teachers to provide quality meaningful instruction and build relationships with students. This inability to access the moral reward of teaching caused a moral injury. Pressure from administrators that often villainized teachers combined with public admonishing by some elected officials and vocal parents, exacerbated the moral injury many teachers were already experiencing.

Policy

Federal, state, and local policy can cause moral injury in teachers by prohibiting access to the moral rewards of teaching. Teachers view some policy initiatives as harmful to students or the profession of teaching because they are “inauthentic obligations” that serve no purpose (Bradford & Braaten, 2018). Much of this stems from legislators who are perceived as out of touch with the realities of the teaching profession and move to pass legislation that stifles teachers. Standardized testing and excessive content standards have left 30% of teachers unable to cover all required material during the school year (Berryhill et al., 2009). Additionally, changing mandates at each legislative level leaves teachers stressed and unsure of the requirements of their jobs (Richards et al., 2018). Curriculum is heavily affected by these policies, and most teachers do not believe that their curriculum is accessible or equitable for all students (Clark et al., 2021). These policies also brought about the evolution of teacher evaluation, which heavily relies on student test scores as an indicator of teacher effectiveness.

During the pandemic, teachers experienced a myriad of state and local policies or reactions to such policies that likely caused moral injury. Many districts announced plans for a return to 100% in-person learning without consulting teachers, and when teachers refused to return without a vaccine or proper preventative measures in places, they were often scapegoated by administrators who acted as if they were preventing the return to normal everyone desperately wanted (Asbury & Kim, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Nerlino, 2023). Policy changes in modality, and the decision by some schools to allow parents to choose online learning, while others could return in person, or do a combination of both, not only increased teacher workload, but made it impossible for many teachers to access the moral reward of teaching as they were now tasked with having to figure out to meet students need within three modalities (Jones et al., 2025; Marshall, 2022).

Time Constraints and Teacher Workload

Time and workload have increased since passing accountability reforms in the early 21st Century and are common components of moral injury in teachers. Berryhill et al. (2009) found 80% of teachers had little time to complete the tasks required in these accountability reforms or teachers had so many tasks, it was impossible to complete everything. This increase of tasks and lack of time resulted in teachers not having enough time to work with students utilizing best practices or work towards professional goals (Berryhill et al., 2009). While many teachers reported lacking proper amounts of time, the pandemic has put increased pressure on their time. Clark et al. (2021) reported 44% of teachers had more pressure on their time during the pandemic. In fall 2020, after the start to the school year, 50% of teachers indicated working over 48 hours per week, while 24% indicated they were working over 56 hours per week, both of which was a reported increase when thinking about the workload prior to Covid (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021a). Some of this increase may be because of the multiple modalities teachers were using to teach students or the use of unfamiliar modalities, like remote teaching (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021a). This lack of time also resulted in increased stress and anxiety in teachers, as 81% worried about balancing work, family, and personal lives (Clark et al., 2021).

As mentioned above, the reopening schools in multiple modalities during the pandemic increased teacher workload. In the early part of the pandemic, teachers were tasked with adapting to rapidly changing policies as schools made the decision to go fully remote and they had to be the main point of contact for students and families who were also experiencing vast changes to everyday life. This led to an increase in working hours and responsibilities to maintain contact with students (Keown et al, 2021; Kraft et al, 2020). At the end of the 19-20 school year, teachers reported an increase in exhaustion combined with uncertainty of what was in store for next year (Castrellon et al, 2021). The increase in teacher workload continued as schools transitioned back to a fully in-person modality during the 21-22 school year. Substitute shortages combined with the need to reorient students to school culture while also making up for the supposed “learning loss” of the previous years, resulted in reports of higher stress and burnout in the return to normal (Jones et al., 2025).

Administration and Educational Stakeholders

Administrators, students, and parents are another factor contributing to moral injury in teachers. Administrators have a direct effect on teachers’ work and well-being. They can help teachers feel empowered or they can usurp teachers’ power by limiting their autonomy (Richards et al., 2018). Administrators can influence morale within their district or respective schools. Tsang & Liu (2016) identified two types of schools; high morale schools which utilize open

communication between faculty and administration, and low morale schools, which exclude teachers from most communication and limited teacher autonomy. Communication issues between faculty and administrators grew during the pandemic. Only 33% of teachers reported their school administration as helpful during the pandemic (Clark et al., 2021). Teachers identified needing help with parent and student concerns, along with keeping up with changing state and district mandates and schedules. Additionally, less than half of teachers reported administrators seeking teacher input on distance learning and reopening schools (Clark et al., 2021). This led to faculty resenting and mistrusting administration.

Student challenges also contribute to educators' moral injuries. Berryhill et al. (2009) reported 40% of teachers were concerned about problems that limited students' academic abilities, including learning disabilities, low intelligence, and other such issues. Some schools do not have the staff or resources to appropriately assist students in their learning. Student behavior in the classroom is also a factor in moral injury of teachers (Herman et al., 2018). Student behavior referrals have increased over the past several years, but during the 2021-2022 school year, student behavior manifested in ways many teachers had never seen. During Covid, teachers were increasingly worried about students' needs they possibly had not considered before. Teachers struggled to engage students in remote learning and worried about students' mental health, physical needs, academic achievement, absenteeism, and passing/graduation rates (Clark et al., 2021; Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021b; Kaufman et al., 2020). The pandemic created a situation where teachers could plainly see more of their students' struggles, and the uncertainty of the situation left many teachers worried about all aspects of their students' lives.

Parents and community members also contribute to the moral injury of teachers. At the beginning of the pandemic, when schools closed and students learned at home, 80% of parents showed a great respect for teachers; however, this respect has not continued through the remainder of pandemic teaching to today (Garcia, 2020). Teachers weathered attacks from parents on all facets of teaching along with their adherence to pandemic mandates after the return to school in fall 2020. Teachers were being accused of things they never would have thought of, which led to an increased feeling of moral injury in teachers.

The pandemic has the potential to bring about a vast increase in teachers who feel they have sustained a moral injury. This study seeks to identify moral injury in teachers compounded by or developed from the pandemic; however, we argue that moral injury existed prior to the pandemic. Because of this compounding effect, this study redefined teachers' responses about stress, mental health, and burnout as moral injury.

METHODOLOGY

Our study utilized a mixed methods approach analyzed through grounded theory. The purpose of the study was to better understand teachers' experience through the pandemic. The study builds on previous research where we surveyed over 1,000 teachers in December 2020 and conducted 22 interviews in the first two months of 2022. The qualitative findings showed teachers in a difficult position with increased demands being put on them without the requisite support from administration. These findings prompted the current study focused on teacher stress, burnout, and mental health. The purpose of the first phase of this study was quantitative and surveyed 3,982 K-12 educators using various empirically validated measures to assess stress (Perceived Stress Scale), mental health (Patient Health Questionnaire) and burnout (Oldenburg Burnout Inventory). The results of the first phase of the study showed high levels of all three variables. These results coupled with our qualitative findings in our first study painted a picture of a potential contributing factor, moral injury. To explore this further, the second phase of the study involved collecting 196 qualitative survey responses, held nine focus groups, and conducted individual interviews. In this article we use data from the second phase of our study that asked:

1. How are teachers experiencing high levels of burnout?
2. How do teachers define their experiences within the bounds of moral injury?

Procedure

In this IRB-approved study, we recruited participants in various social media groups that were focused on K-12 educators utilizing a short screening survey with the informed consent document for the survey linked. We collected brief written explanations of participants' experiences with burnout and stress through this survey, which also included

a place for participants to indicate their desire to participate in focus groups and/or individual interviews. Anyone who participated in the focus groups and/or interviews signed an additional informed consent. Initially, we attempted to create the focus groups by putting participants who taught in specific grade ranges (i.e., high school, middle school, and elementary), but these compilations did not always work with participants' schedules, so a few of the focus groups were more mixed. We conducted a total of nine focus groups with 3-7 participants in each for a total of 51 people and 27 interviews with individual participants. We completed the focus groups and individual interviews via Zoom.

Grounded Theory

After gathering the data, it became clear that other influences were involved beyond burnout and stress. This led to the use of a systematic grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in order to identify emerging themes in the data from the second phase. The written responses of participants were analyzed using open coding to capture any data deemed relevant to the study. Upon completion of the focus groups and interviews, we conducted open coding on the transcripts. In our final step of analysis, we used axial coding to refine coding categories and selective coding to develop a hypothesis. Through our grounded theory analysis of the data, we identified the following four analytical themes and one hypothesis in looking at the data from a pre- and post-pandemic lens.

Measures

The survey used in the study consisted of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI), Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), and the Mental Health Questionnaire 9. This portion of the study will solely report on the OLBI, a 16-item questionnaire assessing burnout in individuals. Items were scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1- Strongly Agree to 4- Strongly Disagree. The OLBI comprises two subscales, disengagement and exhaustion, that can be summed separately or computed together for an overall burnout score where higher totals indicate higher levels of burnout. The OLBI has been validated in multiple countries across many occupations (Demerouti et al., 2003). The internal consistency of the measure is considered good ($\alpha=.873$).

In order to evaluate the level of burnout in teachers, means and standard deviations were gathered on the demographics to provide an overarching view of burnout and performed in SPSS data analytic software (Version 28). To assess the major demographic contributors of burnout, a multiple regression using the enter method entered all the independent variables (Age, Gender, Race, Education, Years of Experience, Grade Taught, Subject Taught, School Type, School Location, Population/State) together. Categorical variables were dummy coded. Overall model fit was measured, and major variables were recorded. In addition to understanding the effects of each individual variable, groups of variables were entered on three major levels: Individual (Age, Gender, Race, Education, Years of Experience), School (Grade Taught, Subject Taught, School Type) and Geographic (School Location in relation to population and in what state the school resides). These three levels were entered in a stepwise regression from most individual variables out to geographic levels, assessing the effects of the predictive nature of each level on burnout.

Written Survey Responses

At the end of the larger survey, participants were asked to indicate if they were interested in participating in focus groups and interviews. 600 participants showed their interest in the qualitative portion of the study and were sent a short questionnaire to complete in order to determine the pool of potential participants. 193 participants fully completed the questionnaire, which asked for demographic information and posed questions dedicated to teacher stress, burnout, and mental health. There were four items where participants used a four-point scale (Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Agree, Strongly Agree) to answer:

- I am experiencing stress in my position as a teacher.
- I am experiencing burnout in my position.
- I am in a good mental health state.
- My work as a teacher impacts my mental health.

The additional survey items asked participants to respond to the following statements:

- Description of stress
- Are you experiencing burnout?
- How do you experience your burnout?
- Examples of mental health and teaching.

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they would sit for a focus group, interview, or both. Respondents were also asked to provide an email address so the research team could contact them.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were split into nine different groups held and recorded on Zoom. Two of the researchers conducted the focus groups. The nine focus groups comprised between 3-7 participants, for 36 people total. The participants were asked to respond to each question unless they preferred not to answer. Each participant answered every question posed. The five questions focused on participants' experiences during the 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 school years while teaching during the pandemic, work stress and its effects on personal relationships, and participants' opinions about how the pandemic will continue to affect education and the profession of teaching. Follow-up questions were asked to participants in order to clarify a response or expand upon their responses. Participants utilized the focus group format to pose other questions to other participants and to respond more conversationally.

Interviews

Twenty eight individual interview participants were chosen from the pool of respondents from the written questionnaire and 28 individual interviews were conducted, and two participants also participated in the focus groups. Two researchers conducted the individual interviews separately, splitting the participants among them. The participants were asked to respond to the interview questions, unless they preferred not to answer. The interview questions were the same as the focus group questions, except for one question researchers added after the focus group responses. The additional question focused on the legislative and public attacks on teachers surrounding curriculum, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and banned books in order to see if the participants felt additional stress surrounding these issues. Follow-up and clarifying questions were asked. Each interview was conducted and recorded using Zoom.

Participants

3,982 participants took part in a survey on stress, burnout, and mental health between December 6th, 2021, and January 6th, 2022. Participants represented all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. The participants' average age was 46.14 years old, averaging 18.45 years of experience in the classroom. A separate written survey regarding aspects of teacher stress and burnout was sent to all survey respondents who indicated they were interested in sharing more information. For this second survey, 193 completed responses were received from participants in 44 states and Washington D.C. The average years' experience was 18.6 years for this second survey.

Focus group participants were solicited from the population of the written survey respondents, which secured 36 people who participated in 9 scheduled focus groups, ranging from 3 to 7 people per session. Participants lived in 22 states. All participants were currently teaching and had an average of 19 years of experience. Interview participants were solicited from the written survey respondents who indicated they were willing to share more about their experiences of teaching during the pandemic. 28 people participated in individual interviews. Interview participants currently taught in 17 states and averaged 14 years' experience.

Mirroring the general teacher population, most of the study participants were White (see Table 1).

Table 1
Race/Ethnicity of Participants

	White	Hispanic/ Latino	Black/ African American	Biracial	Asian American/Pacific Islander	Native American/ Indigenous	Other
Survey	86.8%	5.4%	3.9%	1.5%	0.9%	0.5%	1%
Written Responses	91%	3.6%	2.6%	1%	1%	n/a	0.5%
Focus Groups	31	1	1	1	1	n/a	1
Interviews	23	2	3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

The majority of participants in the study were women (see Table 2).

Table 2
Gender of Participants

	Women	Men	Non-Binary/Third Gender
Survey	91.4%	7.9%	0.7%
Written Response	88.1%	11.3%	0.5
Focus Groups	32	4	n/a
Interviews	24	4	n/a

The majority of participants in the study held Master's Degrees (see Table 3).

Table 3
Highest Degree Held by Participants

	Bachelor's degree	Master's degree	Ph.D./Ed. D/Specialist
Survey	29.3%	66.1%	4.6%
Written Response	20.6%	73.7	5.7%
Focus Groups	5	29	2
Interviews	5	20	2

Participants taught at various levels (see Table 4).

Table 4
Grade Level Taught

	Preschool	K-5	Middle School (6-9)	High School (9-12)	Retired in last 2 years	Resigned in last 2 years	Other
Survey	5%	39.4%	20.2%	25.3%	3.3%	2%	4.9%
Written Response	4.6%	33%	25.8%	32.5%	2.1%	2.1%	n/a
Focus Groups	5.5%	8.3%	33.3%	47.2%	n/a	n/a	5.5%
Interviews	4.2%	37.5%	16.7%	41.7%	n/a	n/a	n/a

Participants taught a variety of subjects (see Table 5).

Table 5
Subjects Taught

	Elementary/ General	English/ Language Arts	Social Studies	Math	Science	Special Education	Art/ Music	Other
Survey	28.7%	16%	6.7%	7.4%	1.2%	11%	5.6%	23.4%
Written Response	22.7%	19.1%	11.3%	6.7%	6.2%	11.3%	7.2%	15%

The majority of the participants taught at Suburban schools as categorized using the NCES Locale Designation definitions.

Table 6
School Location Type

	Urban/Large City	Suburban	Town	Rural
Survey	37.7%	38.1%	12%	12.3%
Written Response	37.7%	42.9%	8.9%	10.5%
Focus Groups	30.6%	55.6%	2.8%	11.1%
Interviews	37%	37%	11.1%	14.8%

The majority of participants taught in public schools.

Table 7
School Type

	Public	Private-Religious	Private-Secular	Charter	Magnet	Virtual
Survey	89.6%	2.3%	3%	2.9%	1.7%	0.5%
Written Response	92.7%	2.1%	n/a	5.2%	n/a	n/a
Focus Groups	97.2%	n/a	n/a	2.8%	n/a	n/a
Interviews	96.3%	3.7%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

RESULTS

The survey results provided key insight into teachers' rates of burnout, while the written responses, focus groups, and interviews provided more context that clearly connected with moral injury. The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) consists of two subscales: disengagement and exhaustion. While the scales were similar to each other with a correlation of ($r=.663, <.001$) the averages for exhaustion ($M= 25.12, SD=3.61$) and disengagement ($M= 22.1, SD=3.87$) were significantly different ($t(3013)=-53.693, p<.001$). This lends a valuable insight into teacher burnout as it delineates between disengagement and exhaustion. The first researcher to coin the term "burnout" defined the first sign of burnout to be the increase in exhaustion from working harder and longer [exhaustion] with feelings of accomplishment becoming less and less [disengagement] (Freudenberger, 1977). Upon further study, the participants who have resigned in the past two years, while significantly higher than their other teacher counterparts on both exhaustion and disengagement subscales, scored on average more disengaged than exhausted. This could indicate a potential situation where teachers become exhausted, which leads to disengagement, then burnout, then leaving the profession. Further study could be done exploring this potential relationship. As discussed above, public policies and politics could lead to higher burnout. On average, public schools, which have less autonomy and more exposure to public policies, scored 4.12 points higher on overall burnout than private religious schools and 2.93 points for private secular schools, the most impactful factor on burnout in this study. There was no difference between public and charter, magnet, or virtual schools.

Analytical Themes

Analytical Theme 1: Teachers who were already feeling burnout and stress from legislators' expectations for accountability prior to the pandemic exponentially increased these levels as educational institutions' decisions and teachers' jobs became more political during the pandemic.

Policy and Politics

Many participants discussed educational policy as one area where they had no autonomy and felt many decisions were being made without thinking about what is best for students. Participant 195 shared an example that points beyond burnout directly to some of the central components of moral injury: "I truly loved my job, but ridiculous demands from politicians and administration made me feel that I was constantly being asked to teach in ways that were not only impossible but also not in the best interest of my students." Participant 110 spoke to the standardization that has taken hold of each grade level based on federal educational policy:

"My school district, in an effort to try and raise test scores, is telling preschool teachers to teach more content and academics despite all the research saying it is not age appropriate. They are telling us to do things beyond kindergarten level. I teach at a Title I school, and these kids and families have so many things going against them that it is not appropriate to do so. Each month the preschool director adds more requirements for us to teach things that are not age appropriate."

Most participants who referenced federal policy believed No Child Left Behind put education on a trajectory which may never be altered. The yearly testing mandates that take up an inordinate amount of class time to administer and prepare for and emphasis on scripted curriculum to ensure that teachers are teaching to the required content standards, sent the message to teachers that their education did not matter because they could not be trusted as professionals in their field. Having their professionalism questioned was particularly upsetting to participants because most had earned a master's degree or higher, indicating they furthered their study of content and pedagogy during a graduate program. Participant 174 wrote: "We are not appreciated. We are demonized. We are not helped. We are not valued. We are not listened to." Overwhelmingly, participants shared the sentiment that federal lawmakers created policy that teachers were *supposed* to follow, despite teachers knowing what the students in their classrooms need on a daily basis. Participant 70 stated:

All the normal stresses of being a public school teacher have been magnified. Pressures on students to make progress on standardized tests, stresses to remediate students who have chronic absences, adhering to accommodations for those not always in attendance, dealing with finding time to complete required in-services for state-mandated 'causes...'

This constant pressure is wearing on teachers and contributes to moral injury. Educational politics exploded during the pandemic. While many participants explained policy that created moral injury before the pandemic, they indicated much more piled on during the pandemic, as new mandates led to political battles no one imagined. The initial shift the pandemic created was the need for districts to create new plans and policies that upheld state Covid regulations. This proved very challenging for participants as they shifted to new teaching modalities and classroom rules geared toward keeping everyone safe, especially when not everyone supported these changes. Participant 78 stated,

Our school district was fined several million dollars because we went against the governor's mandate of allowing students to avoid wearing masks. Our school board stepped up and said, 'Nope. In Palm Beach County you have to wear a mask.' The governor actually signed a bill that took money away from Palm Beach County School District, along with several other large school districts that had the courage to stand up to the legislature and governor and said, 'We're going to do what we need to do to protect our kids regardless of politics.'

Participants from states led by Republican governors reported many situations where mandates ended early, were never enforced, or where those who upheld mandates were ridiculed. Many participants recounted stories about parents storming school board meetings in order to overturn mask mandates and return to in-person learning.

A 'parents' rights' movement developed out of the fight over pandemic procedures that affected many of the participants in the study as parents and community members blamed or become suspicious of teachers and their efforts in the classroom. Participant 64, a teacher from New Hampshire, recounted how his state legislature passed a ban on 'divisive concepts' as part of the attack on teachers:

We went from being heroes to the pandemic unleashed. The whole battle became one of public health versus my rights and individual liberties, which extreme right-wing groups are able to use to rile up the base and attack teaching as a profession. We just narrowly defeated a parental bill of rights. That sounds good in theory, but in pertinent practice, we would have had to publish our entire curriculum by September 30th.

Participant 43, a teacher in a rural New York district stated: "We were under attack for crap that we don't do here like CRT." Many participants indicated they were also fielding parent inquiries and complaints about CRT as their states considered new legislation banning CRT, 'divisive concepts', or requiring teachers to publish their lesson plans. Policy has become systemic as multiple groups and individuals work to create carbon copy legislation and push it out nationwide. These things led to moral injury in the participants.

Analytical Theme 2: Teachers felt they did not have as much autonomy in their classrooms prior to the pandemic because of the expectations placed upon them by others, which increased greatly during and after the pandemic because teachers were required to teach in new ways and had to adapt to students' changing circumstances, needs, and behaviors.

Teacher Autonomy

The lack of autonomy teachers have experienced because of the standardization and accountability movement has grievously wounded teachers who went into the profession to help students achieve their potential. Participant 36 stated: “I don’t feel like a valued professional anymore. I feel like my experience and my voice have been completely silenced. I have no say in anything that happens at my job. It’s been made clear to me that I just show up there, go in the room, go through the curriculum, and leave.” A few teachers indicated that because they are almost ready to retire or leave the profession, they are not working as hard as they once did because so many aspects of their job lack the professional autonomy needed to make specific decisions for their students. They spoke about not being able to choose curriculum— at all, in some cases. Several Florida teachers also spoke to the movement that began prior to the pandemic to further control curricular aspects and the exploration of requiring teachers to submit lesson plans. This control goes beyond the participants into the fabric of how education has been redesigned without teacher input, lending itself to moral injury. More legislation continues to be passed in many states that seeks to reduce teacher autonomy.

Although there were some participants who reported they gained some autonomy in their classroom or curriculum during the pandemic, largely, teachers lost even more autonomy. Many times, it looked like teachers could share their voice and have autonomy in some decisions, but then the teachers’ input was not utilized at all. Several participants recounted how, during the summer of 2020, districts were trying to figure out what the return to school would look like that fall, so they surveyed parents and teachers. Despite asking for input from the teachers, most participants stated their input was not used at all. Participant 122 stated: “There was a huge emphasis on returning to normal to a time that doesn’t exist anymore. Participant 150 commented: “No respect from the school committee or central administration.” Even after the 2020-2021 school year was underway, constant changes with no teacher input continued. Participant 105 stated: “Our school district or state or county will make a plan that will last for a few days, then another entity will vote it down. Our plans change constantly, and I feel like I have no control over my environment or my classroom.” One elementary principal in our study stated the autonomy she was given was difficult to manage without further guidance.

Not every building runs the same programs, so what does Covid look like for dual immersion? What does it look like for a self-contained classroom? Down to the lunchroom? Down to checkout procedures? Down to how if we are going to allow parents to come into the building and volunteer? It was so politicized that it just made every decision up for scrutiny of how I deemed in that plan that we wanted to handle it. I’m not a doctor, so it was just me with the best that I could, making decisions that I felt like would be best for kids’ learning.

Teachers were also forced to learn new curriculum, technology, and programs during the pandemic and take on additional responsibilities they did not have before. While learning some technology and programs was to be expected when teaching remote or hybrid, many participants indicated their districts’ or states’ expectations went entirely too far. Participant 113 shared how new programs were implemented that teachers were required to learn through intensive professional development (PD). Several other participants indicated the same, including elementary teacher participants in Utah, who were required to learn an entirely new state-mandated reading program while teaching during a pandemic. Almost all our participants discussed taking on new roles and responsibilities during the pandemic they typically were not expected to do. This lack of autonomy points to increasing effects of moral injury throughout the pandemic. Participant 132 stated,

I feel like I’m tasked with climbing a mountain in a mudslide. I am working harder than I’ve ever worked. I’m monitoring progress, adjusting instruction, meeting in small groups and even one-on-one with little improvement. In every staff meeting I attend, I hear what I’m doing is not enough. More responsibilities are piled on, more shaming occurs because of test scores, and there is *very* little positive pointed out.

These things that weigh on teachers lead to moral injury, and the pandemic has piled more onto teachers who fear this avalanche of expectations may never stop getting larger.

Analytical Theme 3: Teachers' workloads were increasing prior to the pandemic, and the pandemic placed never-before-seen demands on teachers' time without a lack of separation between work and personal life during the pandemic.

Workload and Time Constraints

Prior to the pandemic, teacher workload and inordinate demands of teachers' time also contributed to moral injury in the participants. Our participants indicated how their workloads became larger over about the past 20 years. More training, new curriculum, new technology, larger class sizes, and taking on more responsibility for student safety and mental health in the classroom led to participants using the term "overworked" consistently in their written responses, focus groups, and interviews. While being overworked can factor into burnout, the fact that it is just now almost expected to be part of the profession makes it morally injurious. Participant 233 discussed how her school paid teachers for increasing student numbers in classes: "I don't want extra money for a large class. I want a smaller class. We create these band aids that then become the norm." Several special educators stated their caseloads continued to grow in addition to the number of reports and paperwork they were responsible for. They also mentioned that they felt ineffective because their paperwork load was so great that the paraprofessionals were doing more instructional work with students than the teachers. Participant 21 stated: "If we granted them [teachers] the professional courtesy of time, it would change their career trajectory."

Analytical Theme 4: Teachers tended to lack supportive administrators prior to the pandemic, but during the pandemic, many administrators were quick to blame teachers for many issues that happened.

Administrative Support

Teachers also spoke of a general lack of respect and support from administration that contributed to moral injury prior to the pandemic. Several participants discussed school administration not completely understanding what teachers were doing in their classrooms and just blindly following directives from district, state, and federal officials. Others expressed anger at having an administration openly hostile to faculty. Participant 149 stated: "I have an actively hostile administration... I don't just lack support from my admin on everyday issues; they're setting themselves up as a barrier for completing work." Teachers expressed the need for supportive administrators who work to assist teachers and students in meeting teaching and learning goals.

As discussed earlier, teacher workload and time constraints were described as unsustainable prior to the pandemic, and many participants found themselves challenged in these areas like never before. Participant 62 stated: "The demands of teachers weren't healthy before. We're fully expected to be skilled social workers, healthcare workers, teach, and maintain sanitation more than ever... My mind is on the exit strategy as I feel my health taking a huge hit and I watch colleagues leaving the profession." Participant 47 added: "All of the unsustainable expectations that we have put upon teachers and our education system has bucked under the weight of the last straw— this pandemic. I feel like I can't keep up with anything anymore— and one more responsibility put on my shoulders will take me out."

Many participants talked about the current attacks on teachers as another thing that has added to their workload and monopolized their time. Participant 10 shared:

We're dealing with attacks on teachers. We're dealing with all these questions about curriculum. The state I'm in has a very progressive LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, and we've had some very big statewide attacks on that and attacks on our governor. I think that pulls into the big picture of educators just either leaving the profession or the crisis that our future educators are in.

Participant 113 went on to say:

There's more expectations on my plate. Normal in part. But it's even things that I have absolutely no control over— angry emails about what the government chooses or doesn't choose like masks or field trip background checks. These things eat me up and are hard on my ability to take care of my family and step away, there are requirements about how soon you contact parents when they contact you and sometimes there's nothing I can do or say.

These increasing attacks on teachers from community members, parents, and legislators are continuing to harm teachers and based on many of the participants' comments, may lead to even more educators leaving the field to escape this continued moral injury.

Administrators at every level impact teachers and the jobs they do. Participants in our study named district school boards, district administration, and building-level administration as contributors to moral injury. While some administrators worked well with teachers during the pandemic, that was not what most participants described. Participant 162 stated: "Our board has called us greedy (the lowest paid district in the state) and referred to us as daycare providers." Even in situations where students' needs were clearly not being properly met, teachers found their administrators unhelpful.

I have a student with a severe disability who spends most of her day in my classroom and most of that time without an aide. I am expected to meet her needs and the needs of the rest of my students. In addition to my student with severe disabilities, I also have four other students on IEPs, and they are not getting the services they are legally supposed to be provided, and somehow it is my fault. I feel that I am drowning, and when I ask for help, I am told to stop complaining and look for the positives in my job.

Participant 195 also shared: "Ridiculous demands from politicians and administration made me feel that I was constantly being asked to reach in ways that were not only impossible but also not in the best interest of my students." Participant 48 included: "I've been here 23 years, and I've never seen the morale so low. We had six people retire early this year so far. We had five people leave for other jobs out of a staff of 100. Participant 117 discussed their district administration: "I have a deep and abiding hatred for the administration in the Central Office of our district who are taking NO STEPS to alleviate our load, but instead are piling on more and more responsibilities." When teachers feel this lack of support, their teaching can suffer as they attempt to keep their heads above water. This affects students in a variety of negative ways. For these reasons, it is imperative that which contributes to moral injury should be focused on for improvement.

Hypothesis: Despite many teachers describing high levels of burnout and stress, we see these common linkages between the analytical themes to be things that teachers cannot solely affect change on themselves. The system of education must be changed in order for teachers to find relief from these problems that increased during the pandemic and still plague the profession. This points to teachers having experienced moral injury, not just burnout or demoralization.

DISCUSSION

Overall, our analysis indicated that what many refer to as burnout or stress is actually moral injury. Teachers have experienced high rates of burnout and exhaustion during the pandemic, and their experiences prior to and during the pandemic are well within the bounds of moral injury because these are ongoing issues they face that cannot be alleviated that made many of our participants feel as if they were actively perpetuating harm in the classroom (Cohen Lissman et al., 2024; Keefe-Perry, 2018; Levinson, 2015). While the primary literature of burnout and demoralization fit the experiences of teachers well (Maslach et al., 2001; McCarthy et al., 2009; Santoro, 2011), teachers in our study identified larger concerns. Teachers who left the profession during the pandemic were still extremely high for burnout, which points more to moral injury because burnout would have been alleviated after leaving their job. Try as they might, these teachers could not self-care their way out of a system that saw them as disposable or unimportant. The difference in retired teachers versus those who quit showcases the autonomy and closure the retired teachers were able to have that the teachers who quit felt they did not have a choice in doing the job any longer. During this time, teachers were set up to fail. They were ready to come and do the job as it changed, but they were not able to do what they thought was best for students the majority of the time (Koenig et al., 2019; Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2014). There was also no time to address the horrors of the pandemic, mourn losses within education, and figure out what happened and where the profession needed to evolve moving forward.

While burnout and demoralization can be improved, moral injury cannot be reduced by teachers themselves because the affronts happening *to them*. Burnout can be reduced or eliminated by changes in schedules, self-care, administrative changes, while demoralization can be reduced by resolving conflicts in teachers' work (Garcia, 2020;

Santoro, 2019/2020; Wronowski & Urlick, 2021). Because of the hierarchical nature of education and educational policy, teachers cannot directly change some issues that are leading to moral injury, namely federal and state policy, accountability measures, lack of autonomy, and stakeholders' beliefs in education (Berryhill et al., 2009; Bradford & Braaten, 2018; Clark et al., 2021; Keefe-Perry, 2018; Levinson, 2015). Covid exacerbated moral injury in teachers as policies changed with little to no teacher input, teachers were forced to utilize a variety of teaching modalities, and challenges with administrators, students, and other stakeholders became insurmountable in many cases (Clarke et al., 2021; Garcia, 2020; Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021a; Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021b; Kaufman et al., 2020). Burnout and demoralization exist for many teachers, but moral injury is primarily leading to teachers leaving the field or begrudgingly staying in their career despite a growing resentment of their profession.

Moral injury may add to the growing teacher shortage. Prior to the pandemic, policy and issues with administration pushed many teachers to leave their profession. Sugrue's (2020) study of teachers provides evidence of a "moderate significant positive relationship between betrayal and intention to leave one's job" (p. 64). If teachers felt their administration had betrayed them, it made it easier to consider leaving the profession. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) (2022) reported over 300,000 teachers leaving the profession each year prior to 2020. While teachers began leaving the field at alarming rates before the pandemic, the pandemic made many teachers reconsider their teaching careers. The pandemic added more on teachers, resulting in 1/3 of teachers surveyed by Clark et al., (2021) stating the pandemic influenced their decision to leave the field. The effects of the pandemic on the teaching profession have also not been fully realized yet. Kaufman & Diliberti (2021a) found 17% of teachers who stated they would not leave the profession prior to the pandemic now believed they would leave, while 42% of teachers surveyed stated the stress was not worth the job anymore. Some teachers may wait for a specific point or achievement before they decide to leave in the next few years. Additionally, teachers who are experiencing moral injury are less likely to recruit young people into teaching careers, as 75% of AFT members stated they would not recommend teaching as a profession to young people, while PDK reported 54% of their survey respondents stated the same (AFT, 2022; Garcia, 2020). Current teachers are often the inspiration and mentor to bring future teachers into the profession. If current teachers are morally injured and not recruiting the next generation of teachers, the shortage of teachers will continue to grow.

CONCLUSION

Moral injury will never fully be avoided; however, there are things that can be done to improve the effects. The pandemic was a time where education changed in many ways because the environment necessitated it. Many teachers were hopeful that changes to educational institutions could continue to evolve as we found better ways to serve students. However, by the end of the 2021-2022 school year, the pressure to accommodate to pre-pandemic "normal" ways of educating overtook many of those changes. Changing aspects of education and teaching is necessary to improve moral injury. Teachers also need resources to learn how they can help eliminate the causes of moral injury and be supported in their activism and advocacy (Levinson, 2015). It needs to be up to educators to figure out how to eliminate inequitable educational systems, as legislators, think tanks, and corporations have not done so.

In order to work towards lessening moral injury in teachers, there needs to be a multifaceted framework that is created through the work of many stakeholders. At the state level, legislators need to pursue policies that seek to support the profession of teaching. Limiting or eliminating policy that seeks harsh accountability standards and reduces teachers' autonomy would be an excellent first step in reducing moral injury. State level unions could also provide more targeted support and be more responsive to the needs of teachers. Local districts can have a more targeted approach to reduce moral injury in teachers. District officials can work to dismiss these current attacks on teachers, reduce the amount of standardized curriculum used in district classrooms, and provide support teachers are asking for. In the wake of the pandemic, state entities and districts should also hold off on changing curriculum or adding to teachers' workloads while teachers are working to remediate students and reestablish a culture of learning in their classrooms again. Teachers also need more administrative support at the building level. Administrators and teachers should work in tandem on these post-pandemic issues. Ultimately, teachers' knowledge should be respected and utilized in school decision-making. Utilizing these recommendations would allow for teachers' moral injury to be reduced and would help retain teachers. The future of the profession depends on reducing moral injury.

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