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The benefits and burdens of care: A gendered analysis of American elementary school teachers navigating uncertainty at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic

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This paper brings together anthropology of uncertainty and gender and education to examine the gendered daily experiences of elementary level teachers in the United States at the onset of the COVID-19 emergency. We found that teachers responded to ongoing uncertainty through various forms of care both at work and home: care for students and their families, their colleagues, their school community, their own families, and when possible, themselves. We argue that this care work served as a key mechanism that teachers used to navigate the uncertainty posed by the pandemic while simultaneously serving as a weight that exacerbated their stress, anxiety, and workload, and ultimately limited their capacity to care for themselves. Additionally, we argue that the care-laden responses of elementary school teachers to this crisis both reflect and reify the particularly gendered ways that women are tasked with the necessary work of nurturing in schools as well as in families. This work makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on education in emergencies by framing the concept of emergency through the lenses of uncertainty and gender. We show how providing education in emergency settings can be a productive process functioning along relational and temporal axes. Furthermore, we shed light on the day-to-day work of teachers in a global health emergency and provide a framework for understanding the immense and often gendered care work they do. Finally, by situating this article in the United States, we seek to highlight the presence of emergencies across the Global North, thereby making a case for extending the concept of emergency within the field of education in emergencies beyond the Global South. By examining early

pandemic patterns of intensive care work conducted by teachers, this paper helps to explain the global crisis of teacher burnout and attrition 2 years after the pandemic began and offers insight for those seeking to prevent teacher burnout in the next emergency.

KEYWORDS

education in emergencies, gender, teachers, distance learning, uncertainty, anthropology of education

Introduction

In late March of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States, Kara–a veteran kindergarten teacher in a small school district in the suburban Midwest–was struggling with a challenge faced by many teachers around the world: Needing to quickly figure out how to teach online while sheltering at home with her own family. In our first interview with Kara, conducted on her second day of distance learning, she fought back tears of frustration as she discussed the technological and pedagogical challenges she faced in the transition. She explained that although she had a couple of weeks to prepare to teach online, "it kills me as a teacher" to provide so much screen time for her 5-year-old students. "They need time with peers to learn how to interact, communicate and learn with each other. We suddenly took away that community and replaced it with a screen. . ..it's just heart wrenching." Kara's deep care and concern for her students was apparent, and echoed that of her colleagues we interviewed. As the interview went on, Kara described how the kindergarten team at her school "has been super helpful" as they rallied around each other, divided up their extensive workload, and shared resources as a way to show their care and support for each other as they navigated this new terrain. In worrying about her students and colleagues, Kara also expressed concern for the future of the school community as a whole. She noted educators are worried about how the pandemic will impact students, particularly those "in homes that aren't kind and loving and supportive." During our interview, she wondered "we're so concerned in schools right now about mental health, but what does that look like now? And how much clean up are we gonna have to do when this is all over?"

While Kara and her predominantly female colleagues poured their energy into caring for students and their families, the school community and each other, they were also tasked with caring for their own families. For Kara, this meant navigating working from home while sheltering with her two children, ages two and four. Although simultaneously caring for her children and students proved challenging, she had identified juggling strategies: "I have to get my kids on a schedule and get them to understand that if the phone rings, I need to take it." Even as Kara's caring responsibilities piled on, she noted she wasn't sure how she would care for herself, lamenting that the gym, her primary outlet for self-care, was closed. She further explained that while she wanted to try online yoga, "It's really hard-the timing hasn't really worked out" due to her many other responsibilities. As if on cue, Kara's younger daughter came into view of the camera requesting Kara's assistance. This is how we ended our interview.

Kara's story of managing care work for her students, their families, colleagues, the school community, her own family and, whenever possible, herself echoed that of most elementary school teachers we spoke with during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic unfolded in the United States and around the world, we followed the experiences of Kara and eleven other elementary school teachers in the public school district of Westenburg, located in the suburban Midwestern United States, as they provided emergency education to their students. Through interviews, focus groups, email exchanges, and text messages, we have watched these teachers navigate the ongoing uncertainty of an emergency and shoulder enormous burdens with commitment, courage, creativity and, above all else, care.

Our initial aim for this study was to understand teachers' strategies for supporting students during distance learning. However, as Kara's interview underscored, the emergency made it impossible to separate the professional from the personal. Parents working from home during the lockdown phase were forced to navigate daily conundrums around providing time, space, and care to their children and their careers simultaneously. As whatever separation between work and home that existed prior to the pandemic became porous to non-existent, we realized our examination of teachers' practices during distance learning would necessarily incorporate their experiences of teaching while parenting, particularly given that ten of the twelve teachers in our study are mothers. Thus while this study remains primarily focused on the care work that teachers have taken up within their professional lives, teachers' expressions of professional care can only be understood within the context of the intensive care work demanded by families during the initial phase of the crisis.

This paper brings together anthropology of uncertainty and gender and education to examine the daily experiences of elementary level teachers during the onset of the COVID-19 emergency (from March through June of 2020). Through

this research, we found that teachers navigated and responded to ongoing uncertainty by taking up various forms of care, both at work and at home: care for students and their families, their colleagues, their school community, their own families, and when possible, themselves. We argue that this care work served as a key mechanism that enabled teachers to navigate the uncertainty of the present and the future posed by the pandemic, while simultaneously serving as a weight that exacerbated their stress, anxiety, and workload, and limited their capacity to care for themselves. Additionally, we argue that the care-laden responses of elementary school teachers to this crisis both reflect and reify the particularly gendered ways that women are tasked with the necessary work of nurturing in schools as well as in families.

This work is significant for three key reasons: First, we make a theoretical contribution to the literature on education in emergencies (EiE) by framing the concept of emergency through the theoretical lenses of uncertainty and gender. We show how providing education in emergency settings can be a productive process functioning along relational and temporal axes (Cooper and Pratten, 2015) while simultaneously illuminating the unique gendered dynamics of care work in the field of EiE. Second, we shed light on the day-to-day work of teachers in a global health emergency and provide a framework for understanding the immense care work they do. Finally, by situating this article in the United States, we bring attention to one way that emergencies can manifest in the Global North. In doing so, we seek to highlight the pervasive nature of emergencies around the world and make a case for extending concepts of emergency within the field of EiE beyond the Global South, into the Global North as well.

We begin the paper by providing an overview of the EiE literature with a focus on the scholarship of education in health crises, followed by an introduction to our theoretical framework. Next, we explain the context of the study as well as the methods used for this research. We then turn to our findings, which we share in four sections. We first highlight three ways that teachers undertook immense care work at school during the onset of the pandemic: care for students and their families, care for their colleagues, and care for the school community. We then illustrate the care work they did in their personal lives and how this, combined with their professional caregiving, limited their efforts toward self care. We conclude with a discussion of our findings followed by implications for practice.

Literature review: Education in emergency settings

This study is situated within the field of EiE, which typically focuses on education in low and middle income countries in the Global South, across the various stages of a humanitarian emergency, from its onset through reconstruction and rehabilitation (Kagawa, 2005; Burde et al., 2017). This literature primarily centers on education in areas experiencing conflict and natural disaster, although the literature defines emergency more broadly as political, environmental, or health-related circumstances that adversely impact education (Pigozzi, 1999; Burde, 2005). While there is some literature that explores education during health-related emergencies such as the AIDS epidemic across parts of Africa and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa (e.g., Bennell, 2005; Bhana et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2015), scholarship on educational experiences of teachers during a pandemic remains limited.

Global research on education at a time of widespread health crises has found that while school closures can mitigate the spread of disease (Jackson et al., 2013; Minardi et al., 2020), there are significant secondary impacts on teachers and students (ACAPS, 2016). Teachers around the world face intense pressure during disease outbreaks, and female teachers in particular bear multiple burdens of caring for their families while continuing to teach and support students (Bhana et al., 2006; Cohen and Wangsness Willemsen, 2020; Fry and Lei, 2020). Research in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone reveals that teachers often take on the role of educating the community about a disease, and then face stigma, isolation, and even termination due to their presumed connection to the disease (ACAPS, 2016). School closures similarly disrupt children's daily routines and their social support systems, which can negatively impact their physical and mental health (Fisher et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2020). Children's learning during a health crisis often suffers, frequently disproportionately affecting already marginalized populations (Fry and Lei, 2020; Hallgarten, 2020). School closures have led to significant learning loss, and even when schools are open, children in quarantine may miss significant amounts of instructional time (ACAPS, 2016). Yet, while studies have demonstrated the broad impacts of health crises on students and teachers, very few have examined the daily experiences of teachers in such situations.

There exists a range of normative policy and guidance documents that outline teachers' roles and responsibilities in crisis settings, including several new guidance documents from EiE policy makers and practitioners around supporting education during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., INEE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Together, these documents assert that teachers should provide safe, caring environments for students that support their physical and emotional well-being and growth. By maintaining the routine of schooling, education in emergency settings is meant to normalize environments of uncertainty; in this context, teachers are tasked with supporting the psychosocial development of students and fostering relationships with students and among students. Teachers are simultaneously expected to support the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills and develop students' academic content knowledge, in some cases using new technology while adopting no and low-technological approaches in others. Policies call on teachers to do this while simultaneously fostering values and skills that promote sustainable development and

global citizenship (INEE, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In short, teachers are expected to provide academic, social, and emotional guidance and support to students in emergency settings, all while taking care of themselves and their families.

Additionally, a small body of research has emerged exploring teachers' experiences through the pandemic. A study of teachers in Indonesia found that teachers were largely dissatisfied with online learning and that they faced a wide range of challenges including limited access to the internet and difficulty planning and implementing online learning (Fauzi and Khusuma, 2020). Research has shown that teachers around the world dealt with increased stress and anxiety during the online learning period of the pandemic (Klapproth et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2020). In response, teachers drew on a range of coping mechanisms including developing a hobby and spending time with family (Talidong and Toquero, 2020), seeking support from colleagues (Klapproth et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021) and exercise and meditation (Kim and Asbury, 2020). A study of the mental health and wellbeing (MHWS) of British teachers during the pandemic found six job demands that contributed negatively to teacher MHWB (Kim et al., 2021), including: (1) the prevailing sense of uncertainty in terms of the pandemic itself as well as government guidelines for education during the pandemic; (2) the extra workload due to online teaching; (3) the negative perceptions of teachers that pervaded public discourse and the associated feelings of being undervalued; (4) concern for the wellbeing of their colleagues and the stress this placed on them to support them while balancing the increased demands on their time; (5) health struggles, including mental health; and (6) navigating multiple roles as parents and teachers and the competing demands on their time. Kim and Asbury (2020) found that in the first six weeks of online learning, teachers worried a great deal about vulnerable students and relied on their relationships and collaborations with colleagues for support.

Conceptual framework: Gender and care in the context of uncertainty

To understand the experiences of elementary level teachers through the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we bring together a gendered approach to analyzing care with the anthropology of uncertainty. This framework allows us to examine the ways in which care work gets taken up in particularly gendered ways in a context of extreme uncertainty.

Anthropology of uncertainty

We draw on the anthropology of uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten, 2015; Calkins, 2016; Vavrus, 2021) to frame and analyze our data. Uncertainty is recognized as a universal phenomenon, yet the ways individuals and communities think and act in relation to uncertainty vary. Uncertainty "refers to the limited ability to predict even the immediate future—that is, to engage it prudently and with foresight in a more calculative mode and to enact certain visions of what will happen" (Calkins, 2016, p. 3). Anthropologists of uncertainty are interested in the lived experience of uncertainty and the related sense of "vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility. . .that underpin, saturate, and sustain everyday life" (Cooper and Pratten, 2015, p. 1). Uncertainty can be experienced as a negative feeling that constrains one's daily actions and experiences; at the same time, uncertainty can also be a productive force that "imbu[es] the future with possibility and hope" enabling people to imagine new opportunities and a different future (Kleist and Jansen, 2016; Stambach, 2017).

To analyze teachers' experiences through the ongoing uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic, we draw on two axes of uncertainty outlined by Cooper and Pratten (2015): relational and temporal. Through the relational axis, Cooper and Pratten assert that uncertainty is deeply entangled with our social relations, both positively and negatively. That is, while social relations "underlie all aspects of life," (Bledsoe, 2002, as cited by Cooper and Pratten, 2015, p. 2) the unpredictability of our social circumstances and relations can further uncertainty and lead to suspicion, mistrust, and conflict. Conversely, social relations can also alleviate uncertainty and open up new and creative collaborations and solutions. They explain that "uncertainty can encourage an ethos of thick sociality; that is, uncertainty and insecurity prompt people to extend and deepen their social relations and engagements" (p. 8). Viewed in this way, uncertainty may push people to extend, deepen, and even seek out new relationships, opening their "social capital to broader and more diverse configurations of solidarity," thereby generating new possibilities (p. 4).

Along the temporal axis, Cooper and Pratten (2015) highlight the ways that uncertainty shapes people's relationship between the present and future. Uncertainty can generate anxiety and stress, yet it can also generate a future-looking orientation with a focus on "aspiration, anticipation and imagination" (p. 8). Cooper and Pratten note that by bringing future-thinking into the present, many seek to understand, address, and reimagine current inequities for the future. In this orientation to the future, where uncertainty cultivates a new sense of unpredictability, we see how present actions are creatively shaped and reshaped, imagined and feared, in relation to short- and long-term futures.

Care work, teaching and gender

There is extensive scholarship on care in educational settings that seeks to define care and caring relations whereby, for

example, care can be understood as relational (Noddings, 1984), emotional (Isenbarger and Zembylas, 2006; Walls, 2017), organizational (Tronto, 2010), and/or hidden (Bhana et al., 2006). Yet our purpose here is not to (re)define care, but rather to examine how care work is taken up by – and expected from – female teachers in crisis situations in which ongoing uncertainty reveals, and perhaps reifies, unequal, gendered social relations. We wish to note that in examining the intersection of gender and care, our intention is not to devalue care. Rather, we aim to highlight that care is work (Zembylas, 2013) which encompasses "*everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*" (Fisher and Tronto, 1990, as cited by Tronto, 2013, p. 19, emphasis in the original); this work has necessarily expanded during the upheaval brought on by the global pandemic. Indeed, pandemic-era research has highlighted how the emergency has led to an increase in the "mental load"-defined by Dean et al. (2022) as being both cognitive and emotional labor that is invisible, boundaryless, and enduring–placed upon caregivers, particularly female caregivers, at home and beyond.

Within institutions such as schools, as well as other non-educational organizations, scholars have long noted that care work is frequently uncompensated and left to females (Lynch et al., 2020). In fact, some conceptualizations of care work in schools are themselves rooted in normative notions of femininity. For example, Noddings's (1984) early work advanced the notion of family-like caring, and particularly mothering, as a model for caring relations between teachers and students. Yet in advocating for a "feminine approach to ethics and moral education" (1984), her work reflects, and some may argue reinscribes, the taken-for-granted notion that women are innately suited for the care work required by the teaching profession.

Among the critical scholars who have connected the feminization of teaching to the undervaluing and deprofessionalization of teaching is Campbell Galman (2012), who notes that teaching is viewed as "the work of love, meaning that as affective work it is neither intellectual nor professional" (p. 12). Connecting notions of women as biologically suited caregivers to the fact that the majority of elementary school teachers in the United States are women, while the majority of principals and administrators have traditionally been and continue to be men, Galman goes on to note that primary schools often have a "harem-like power structure" (p. 13) in which females are tasked with enacting gendered notions of relational-intensive nurturing work with children under the leadership and direction of men. This notion of gendered hierarchies of care work echoes the work of Lynch et al. (2009) who describe organizations with care foot soldiers (frequently women) who are tasked with the more intense "love laboring" work, under the direction of care commanders (frequently men). Thus the role of elementary school teaching itself is often gendered as female.

Gendered uncertainty

This study uses both gender and the anthropology of uncertainty to examine teachers' care work during a crisis. Scant literature currently exists at the intersection of these frameworks, with some notable exceptions. In Calkins's (2016) study of uncertainty in everyday life in Sudan, she observes how"[i]ndividuals experience uncertainties differently, but there are still patterns in how unknowns are commonly experienced. Exploring uncertainty through gender, we can learn what enables/limits agency in existential situations" (p. 256). Turning toward education, Johnson-Hanks (2004) has argued that uncertainty around reproduction is experienced more acutely by educated Cameroonian women than their less educated peers as they must contend with competing demands and aspirations. Vavrus's (2021) recent memoir offers a longitudinal account of how schooling has been used to mitigate uncertainty, including gendered uncertainty, by both young Tanzanian students and herself. Her analysis of certain aspects of her own life (schooling, marriage, motherhood, career), as well as those of her interlocutors, reveals how the relational and temporal axes of uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten, 2015) are understood and lived within the context of gendered expectations. Similar to Vavrus' examination, we find the teachers in this study attempted to alleviate the uncertainties posed by the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic relationally and temporally in gendered ways. More specifically, teachers extended their relationships by intensive caring in ways consistent with gendered norms of elementary school teachers and mothers. Teachers further responded to uncertainty in relation to its temporal axis by considering how the current uncertainty may shape education and student opportunities in the future, all within a context of gendered expectations.

Context and methodology

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020) and only 2 days later, the president of the United States declared COVID-19 a national emergency (AJMC, 2020). Shortly after, states around the country shuttered schools and shifted learning to online platforms (Education Week, 2021).

This study, which began mid-March of 2020, seeks to understand teachers' experiences of and educational responses to the pandemic (Cohen and Wangsness Willemsen, 2020; Wangsness Willemsen and Cohen, 2020). The study is situated in Westenburg, a small, blue-collar suburb in the Midwest that has recently experienced economic decline. The area's

affordability, combined with its proximity to various areas of industry, has resulted in an increasingly racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse population that well represents the changing demographics of the US. The school district includes two elementary schools, a middle school and a high school. Students in these schools are increasingly diverse, including many newly arrived immigrants, yet a significant number of their teachers are white women who graduated from Westenberg's high school.

Data for this article come from a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) study, which ran from March 2020 to the present (April 2022), examining the caring practices of elementary-level teachers at both elementary schools. QLR brings together longitudinal and qualitative methodological traditions (Neale, 2018), enabling us to follow select teachers over time to understand the dynamic processes of education during this current crisis. The longitudinal component of the study illuminates ways that schooling is shaped and practiced over time, and the ways that meanings attached to teaching and learning shift. The qualitative element of the study reveals daily educational processes and the ways they are narrated, understood, and shaped by educators. This article focuses on the first three rounds of interviews, which took place from March 2020 through June 2020, in order to examine the acute stage of the crisis.

Teachers were recruited using purposive (Bernard, 2006) and snowball (Noy, 2008) sampling. Our sample includes a total of 12 teachers spread across the district's two elementary schools. Ten teachers are classroom teachers including grade level teachers representing kindergarten through fifth grades, as well as two English language teachers, and one special education teacher who works with a range of ages. Two other teachers serve as curriculum specialists supporting classroom teachers at each building. Eleven participants are female and one is male, a fairly representative sample given the gender imbalance within the elementary school teaching workforce in this district and beyond. Eleven participants are white, one is a person of color. Eleven participants are straight, one is queer. As previously stated, 10 participants are mothers with children living at home during the lockdown. Finally, though administrators are not in our sample, it is worth noting that all senior level administrators at both the school (principals) and district (superintendent) levels are male.

To ensure safety and maximize flexibility for teachers, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews over Zoom. Between March 2020 and October 2021, we conducted eight rounds of interviews, although not all participants were available to participate in each round of interviews. In October of 2021, when teachers and interviewers were vaccinated and the rate of infection had decreased, we conducted two in-person focus groups with six participants. These focus groups served as a form of member checking where we shared, discussed, and verified our findings with the participants. We have also collected data through email, text, and phone communication with participants. To protect our participants, we have kept their identities confidential and all names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Data analysis for this study is an ongoing and iterative process including both inductive and deductive approaches (Miles et al., 2014). We coded data inductively after each round of interviews as well as deductively in accordance with emerging themes from the literature and larger field. Moreover, coded and analyzed data shaped the foci of subsequent rounds of interviews. As previously stated, the focus in this paper is specifically on the acute phase of the pandemic and the interview data herein are from the first three rounds of interviews only (mid-March and early June of 2020). Although subsequent interview data undoubtedly shapes our interpretation of this data, we chose to focus here on the acute phase of the pandemic as it is known to be particularly disruptive to the lives of students (Nicolai, 2003) and therefore requires the greater effort on the part of teachers and administrators who support them. The acute phase of a crisis impacts educators' lives considerably and in ways not well understood in the literature. Moreover, a close examination of the earliest days of this educational emergency may offer insights that are likely to be useful for considering how best to attend to future educational emergencies, particularly at their onsets.

Findings

In this section, we illustrate how teachers provided care in their professional lives–for their students, their colleagues, and their school community – as well as in their personal lives, for their families and themselves. Findings reveal how teachers' personal and professional care was a response to and an attempt at mitigating the uncertainty of this deeply ambiguous, highly disruptive time, when many systems of support were altered or unavailable. Teachers viewed their care work as critical for their students', colleagues', and families' abilities to navigate the initial phase of the pandemic. Yet this surge of intensive care work was largely unsupported by existing educational and social structures, which had been frayed by the emergency. We reveal how, paradoxically, the care work that enabled the quick transition to distance education and sheltering in place became a burden that ultimately impeded teachers' wellbeing and their abilities to care for themselves.

By strengthening the caring connections between themselves and others both at work and at home, teachers demonstrated a response characteristic of what Cooper and Pratten (2015) call "thick sociality." As they navigated the acute crisis in which routines and practices were reinvented almost daily, teachers imagined new possibilities for how schooling could better serve all students in the future, revealing the productivity and future-orientation of uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten, 2015). We argue that teachers' intensive care work at the relational and temporal axes was an attempt to prevent and

mitigate harm at school and at home during a difficult time. Moreover, we demonstrate how this care work reflected and reified gendered expectations of women. We have organized the following findings according to the locations (school or home) and subjects (students, families, etc.) of teachers' care work. These categorizations arose directly from our discussions with teachers and are reflected in the headings.

Caring at school: Teachers' care for students, families, colleagues, and community

Caring for students and their families

As schools closed and learning shifted online, teachers poured their energy into caring for their students and students' families in myriad ways, including maintaining connection with students and families, providing emotional support, and continuing to support students' academic learning. As professionals who were already engaged in various forms of care, thickening care not only helped students and their families navigate the emergency, but it gave teachers a meaningful way to take action in an uncertain time. Throughout our first two rounds of interviews in the earliest days of the pandemic, teachers made clear that their focus was on maintaining relationships with students and providing students with emotional support. As one fifth grade teacher explained, "my primary goal, and it will continue to be this way, is to connect with my students and maintain strong relationships." Another teacher noted her goal was "just to make sure that my students are emotionally ok. I will help them with their academic content as much as I can, but the academic piece, I don't think that matters right now. I just care more about how they are doing as little people navigating their world." Another teacher framed this goal through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. She explained that "we can't really get to students if they're not healthy and safe and secure, so making connections with students and families is our number one main focus. I think for the next couple of weeks that's going to be where we are. And then later on we can say hey, if you're feeling, safe, secure, cared for, and loved, here's a letter of the day." Yet another teacher was so committed to showing her support for students that she went to the home of each student in her class and wrote encouraging chalk messages for her students. Teachers were particularly concerned about students who they knew had complicated family situations and difficult home lives. Kara's worries, shared in the introduction, about students sheltering in homes that aren't "kind and loving and supportive" were echoed by many teachers who similarly predicted that there would be long-term ramifications for students.

Teachers maintained relationships with students and families through multiple modalities, including messages on the learning management system (LMS), phone calls to families, and video conference calls. As students, parents, and teachers were growing accustomed to having school on the LMS, teachers intentionally used this system not just for instruction, but to connect emotionally with students. For instance, in one of her first daily messages to her class, a teacher said to her students, "I miss you and I would so much rather be at school with you." This system also allowed for personalized messages between families and teachers, as when a parent reached out to a kindergarten teacher to say their child was refusing to do any of the schoolwork and would break into tears every time the parent tried to get them online for their schoolwork. The teacher, who had an inside joke with her class about Raz from the movie Monsters Inc., sent the student a video clip of Raz. The parent later reported back that the moment the student received the clip, they immediately agreed to get online and do the required work of the day. This teacher described feeling grateful for being able to motivate that one student but lamented that she would likely not be able to do that for each student each time things became difficult.

Teachers noted that caring for students also meant caring for parents and entire families. Teachers made regular phone calls to parents to check in on academics, determine what materials or technology families needed, and problem-solving any difficulties in adjusting to online learning. Moreover, these calls served the larger relational goal of maintaining connections across distance and provided opportunities to check in on the well-being of students and their families. Several teachers expressed concern for parents struggling with the weight of keeping their children safe in a pandemic while balancing their own work with the new responsibilities of facilitating their children's schooling. One teacher told us about a parent with four special needs children. She described needing to "talk the parent off the ledge" as she was completely overwhelmed trying to care for and educate her four children without the additional in-person support typically provided by the school. As the teacher explained, "I feel so bad, you know, how do we support that? In a school setting, it's super easy. I'll get the counselor involved, the case manager, and we can start working on it," but in the home environment, there was much less the school could do. Teachers' problem solving to support families in ways that exceeded their typical duties was not uncommon and underscores how, in the absence of the wrap-around support systems which are accessible in school buildings, teachers were individually burdened with ensuring the wellbeing of children and parents alike at the outset of the pandemic.

Even as teachers placed strong emphasis on strengthening personal connections, they also demonstrated care through efforts at supporting students' academic learning. Teachers were concerned about students who were not checking in online regularly and expressed worry about how this might exacerbate learning inequities in both the near and long term, revealing an attention to the temporal axis of uncertainty and the ways that uncertainty can cultivate a future-looking orientation (Cooper and Pratten, 2015). One fifth grade teacher stated directly, "I'm really concerned about their academics, I want them to learn

as much as they can." She was concerned about her students' transition to middle school in the following year, where there were more rigorous academic expectations. A first-grade teacher expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that "we were at such a good spot, you know. March is so much fun because they're just learning and taking off. I had a few kids who were really right at that point of becoming readers, really good readers. And I don't know how to continue to support that [now]."

Several teachers expressed concern for students' learning given parents' new roles in their children's education. Some noticed that student work suddenly "had a lot of parent input." For instance, one special education teacher explained the following about one student: "He's not doing a lot of his work independently. Like, his number of the day today was seven. He's supposed to write [the number] seven. And they were crossed, you know, like a fancy seven. And I was like 'hmm, yeah, that's not you[r work]!'." While some parents were overly contributing to student work, teachers noticed that other parents were allowing lower standards of work. For example, a kindergarten teacher who has her students write or draw in a journal multiple times a day reported that "skills have slipped" because parents were just "helping their children coast." She stated she has high expectations and confidence in students' abilities to rise to these expectations, something not all parents either shared or could support.

The disparities between families' abilities to support the children's academics during distance learning raised early questions for teachers about how the pandemic might create or exacerbate inequities. Teachers acknowledged that, for many children, their ability, willingness, and even motivation to log into their learning management system and complete their assignments relied significantly on parental encouragement and guidance, which, for many reasons, was not even across students. As one teacher noted, "some students have a parent sitting right next to them, walking them through things and other kids are doing it on their own." One teacher stated, "I'm concerned about inequity and education. You know, part of my class is participating in learning and part of them are doing a few things but not learning much. . .I worry that there's going to be more of an achievement gap after this." Some teachers noted that their older students were helping younger siblings at the expense of attending to their own learning, and teachers of English language learners expressed particular concerns about their students' abilities to access distance learning. One teacher explained that "you know, many of them are in marginalized groups where large inequities in our educational system and society already exist. So [we are] try[ing] not to exacerbate that or add to that." This data reveal that, even as they struggled with the initial shift to online teaching, teachers were mindful that the present disruptions would likely have negative impacts not just on children's immediate experiences of schooling, but on their longer-term futures; teachers' caring responses were attempts to mitigate these potential impacts.

Caring for each other

The second way that teachers practiced care was in the care work they did for each other. We saw this in two ways: first, teachers expanded their collaborative work with colleagues, particularly within grade-level teams, and second, teachers illustrated care through intentional efforts to provide grace and flexibility to their colleagues. Similar to their care work with students and families, teachers' extensions of their social relationships with colleagues can be understood as an increased attention to the relational axis in a time of uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten, 2015), although in this case with more reciprocity and mutuality.

Teachers highlighted the critical role that collaboration within teams played in the shift to online learning. One noted that "grade level teams have really come together and. . .I think that has given a sense of calm to people." Another explained that her team "seems to have each other's back and collaborated really nicely. Everyone asks for help, which is wonderful. . .It's a really safe place to ask for help." Beyond supporting each other professionally, teachers recognized that colleagues were dealing with personal challenges including supporting young children at home, spousal job loss, uncertainty around how to safely care for ailing parents, and other life circumstances made more difficult by a global pandemic. One teacher described how the only teacher on her team without young children had stepped in to do more work initially while the teachers with young kids got settled. Another told us that her colleagues "have been very flexible to work around [my son's] nap schedule. They know that I'm usually more available after lunchtime until about dinner time, so I can usually get a good two hours of child-free time." Team collaborations therefore became an avenue through which teachers supported each other personally and professionally, recognizing the need for flexibility and support at an intense time of uncertainty.

A group of fifth-grade teachers provided an illustrative example of the care and collaboration taking place within teams. In preparing for the shift online, these teachers began holding daily meetings to plan their approach to distance learning and support each other through the transitions. They then redistributed responsibilities across their team to create daily slideshows, and write and distribute a weekly newsletter for parents with information on how they can support their children during distance learning. One explained:

> It was an undertaking and I feel very fortunate to be a part of a really strong team. There are six of us on the fifth-grade team and we all have different strengths, different attributes. As a team, we've divided the workload. For example, I have been doing the reading instruction for the past couple of weeks. Someone else provides the math content. Um, so at least for the core instruction, every kid's getting the same thing. . .And then [each teacher] is doing some level of face-to-face connection with their kids. And so that made it

> feel less overwhelming than I think it would have if I wasn't a part of a strong team.

By dividing their labor, this team was able to create robust online content for the entire grade while reserving time and energy for each teacher to attend to their own students in synchronous class sessions, grade student work, and check in on students and families. While doing so, these teachers remained attentive to each other's needs and supported one another when challenges arose. If someone was unable to complete their task because of their own family obligations–a challenge that fell heavily among female teachers with young children at home, including all but two of our participants–other teachers on the team stepped up. While working together and distributing responsibilities helped assuage overwhelm, it also provided an important outlet for teachers' emotions. As one teacher noted:

> Our team meetings are always very positive. When somebody starts feeling overwhelmed, I feel like we are in a place where we can say that, you know, everyone has their strengths and we reach out to help each other. . .[our team meetings] are a good social part of our day. . . We decided we'd start or end each meeting with a question that didn't have to do with school, you know, like, what will you do when this is over? What are you looking forward to? So I feel like for sure our meetings are productive, but there's also a bit of a social piece for all of us.

The quote above underscores how team meetings became spaces for teachers to attend to both instructional needs as well as their own and each other's wellbeing. This team's approach to easing the heavy workload of online teaching while simultaneously demonstrating care, patience, and support for each other is illustrative of the care work other teachers in our study described undertaking for their colleagues. In contrast to the more unidirectional care work done with families and students, teachers' collaborative care work with each other also allowed them opportunities to express difficult emotions, including airing frustrations, struggles, and fears. Teachers shared aspirations and celebrations, and they extended and received practical support and emotional encouragement from each other. Moreover, these examples reveal how teachers intentionally cultivated hope for the future while attending to the emotional needs of the day through care work with colleagues, revealing how teachers managed acute uncertainty *via* an ongoing attention to the future, or temporal axis, supported by thickened sociality, or relational axis (Cooper and Pratten, 2015).

Caring for the school community

A third way that teachers undertook care work was in the care they showed for their school community as a whole. Despite overwhelming daily challenges, many teachers were already reimagining their educational practices and thinking about ways the disruption might transform schooling. As teachers looked for silver linings that emerged from the pandemic, they found that it gave them the opportunity to "expand our ideas." Many teachers hoped the innovative distribution of responsibilities across teams would continue into the future, with one teacher suggesting restructuring the school week: "If we had, maybe, a four day school week and one day where it was online learning for the kids and teachers had more time to collaborate, that might be a really good thing that could come out of this." Another teacher talked enthusiastically about how online learning is pushing teachers to rethink assessment in creative ways. He said, "I think when people hear assessment, they think it's synonymous with a quiz or a test. . .[but] I think we're backing off some of those more formal structured assessments and starting to expand what we think about as assessment." He saw this as a necessary advancement for the teaching field.

While the uncertainty of the situation enabled some teachers to imagine new possibilities for the teaching profession, other teachers expressed concerns about the future. As previously described, teachers worried that students' uneven access and experiences would further exacerbate the already unequal systems and structures within education and the wider society. Tied to concerns about equity, some teachers sought to elevate racial justice in their schools and across the district. Our second round of interviews occurred shortly after the murder of George Floyd, a Black man killed by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and subsequent civil unrest that occurred across the country, including in this school district. During these interviews, we asked teachers if and how they, their school, and/or their district were responding to these events. Some teachers described taking extra efforts to support students of color and their families during this time, and many expressed frustration with administration's lack of responsiveness or direction. Angela, an English language teacher of color who taught the youngest grades, explained:

> We just feel like nothing was coming from our district administration. I know an email went out to our students and families like a week and a half after everything was happening, but this is really late in the game! You know, where were you within the first couple of days? It's really seriously scary for people!

In response to this lack of institutional support or guidance for how to address difficult racial issues in their classrooms, Angela collaborated with another teacher to organize a conversation with other teachers to process the ongoing events and determine together how they might respond. Angela and the other conversation participants hoped to bring changes in attitude and practice to their school. Her goal was to help "others to see the barriers that our students [of color] come

up against" so they can incorporate more equitable and anti-racist practices into their classrooms and school communities. She explained: "We are trying to keep the discussions going throughout the summer so that people don't lose the feeling of the impact that they've had at the beginning of this." Despite these teacher-led efforts, Angela and other teachers connected the dearth of administrative guidance to teachers' constrained abilities to directly address the acute racialized crisis. Thus, as teachers worked together to find ways to advocate for racial justice long-term, they also wondered what support systems they would have in this work.

In the face of uncertainty and great disruption, some teachers were able to look to the future with creativity and imagination. Whether they were experimenting with new pedagogies, attending to unequal educational access, or finding ways to address racism, teachers found ways to do intensive care work for their profession during the most difficult pandemic days. Teachers, too, saw what was taking place at the moment and feared for how it would carry forward into the future and how it would impact their roles as teachers and the profession as a whole. Together, this reveals how the temporal nature of uncertainty simultaneously generates anxiety and affords hope for the future (Cooper and Pratten, 2015). Yet, as the next sections reveal, the many areas and ways in which teachers were doing care work was so intensive as to ultimately constrain their abilities to fully care for their own families and themselves.

Caring at home: Families, self, and survival

While teachers were working long hours in difficult conditions to care for others within their professional context, they were also caring at home. Most teachers in our study took a primary role in caring for their own families. Moreover, while they also recognized the need to care for themselves, they did so to varying degrees of success. As we will elaborate below, teachers had limited capacity to care for themselves as they often felt the need to prioritize care for others, including not only their students and colleagues, but their own families as well. These findings highlight how teachers' practices of caring for themselves were at times constrained in gendered ways.

Caring for families

From the moment Westenburg teachers began preparing to shift to distance learning, they recognized that their roles as teachers and as family members–especially as mothers–would collide in difficult ways, especially because their children would be schooling from home while they would be teaching. Despite this, in the first weeks of distance learning, district administrators required that teachers report to school during the hours of 7:30–3:30 and teach virtually from their classrooms. One teacher explained that when this was announced, "I could sense within that expectation that teachers were so overwhelmed because all of their own kids were at home. It was like, how do we balance our own kids being at home and then having this expectation that we would clock into an empty building?" She went on to highlight the gendered dynamics in this policy, explaining that the principal had four children at home being cared for by his wife, allowing him to carry on with his work without taking others' childcare needs during an acute emergency into account.

Eventually district leaders retreated from the policy of requiring teaching from school, and teachers shifted to working from home. While this alleviated some stress, the teachers we spoke with found the resulting conflation of work and home challenging nonetheless. For example, in an interview with Megan, she outlined her abundance of concern for her students as well as her own children. She explained:

> Prior to pandemic life, I would drive to work, hang out with my [students] all day in the classroom, and then close that door and come home. Now, with the blurred lines of work and home, I could never shut off school if I wanted because it's all the same place. At least when I physically go to the location and then come home, I'd like take off my badge, stick it in the drawer, and then I was done being Mrs. Brown for the day.

As a result of this conflation between work and home, Megan's mind was working overtime to care for her students and her children at the same time. She stated:

> I am so much more exhausted in this pandemic world. I focus a lot on my job because I love it and take it seriously and it's important to me. But, at the end of the day, I sit down and realize, oh, I've also been stressed about my family's health. . .did my children wash their hands? Did the kids get too close to the neighbors? What's my child doing now? Are they just sleeping or are they sick? I am like, carrying all the burdens of society, too.

As evidenced above, the nature of double caring–caring in the professional and personal spheres–exhausted teachers. In order to ensure sufficient time to care for their families and jobs, most teachers in our study explained that they were cutting back on sleep to get everything done. One teacher, a mom of two, explained:

> I realized, if I'm going to get this all done, I have to not fall asleep in my daughter's bed every night. Instead, I do more work in the evenings from about 9:00 pm to 11 or 12. And then I'm still up, you know, at the normal time to get things ready and get the kids ready and everything else for the day.

Other teachers told us about waking up early, before their children and husbands woke, so they could finish responding

to assignments, prepare their digital platform for the day, or catch up on email.

Even when teachers had spouses available to support children and the home, female teachers still assumed greater responsibility for childcare and bore the main responsibility for caring for the house. One teacher noted that her husband "is not a morning person" so she woke up early to prepare her class and then took care of her children while her husband ate breakfast. She explained that her husband had a "big time job" with limited flexibility, requiring him to go to the office while she worked from home while caring for their children. Another teacher's husband had more flexibility in his work and was able to watch their two and four year old children in the morning. Yet, as she described, the appeal of mom was just too great. She said, "my kids are just a ticking time bomb of like, we need mom! She's here! I know she's upstairs!" She explained that most mornings, her daughter would "pop in on my meetings" rather than staying with her dad. Another teacher noted the added burden she faced of meal planning for her family while trying to limit trips outside the home. Before the pandemic, there was a routine of meals and her daughter would get school lunch. But now, in addition to worrying about her children's learning and their health, "I find myself thinking, did we get enough groceries? Are we going to have enough choice for all three meals a day?" The concern about food, which was shared by many teachers in our study, was exacerbated by the risks associated with going to the grocery store in the early days of the pandemic.

Caring for self

As teachers poured their energy into caring for students and their families, their colleagues, their school community, and their own families, they tried to care for themselves, too. This section examines teachers' three primary strategies for self-care as well as how their efforts often fell short. First, they strived to show themselves the same kindness and flexibility they gave their colleagues; second, they advocated for themselves and pushed back against policies and demands they thought were unreasonable; and third, they drew on individual-level coping strategies (Falk et al., 2019) such as exercise.

Just as teachers showed their colleagues flexibility and grace, they made efforts to do the same for themselves. One teacher told us: "I'm just taking it day by day. Like, Monday was a complete train wreck and that's ok. I'm not going to win it every freakin' day. Some days might not work. Yesterday's schedule was awesome, but is it going to work today? I'm not sure." Another teacher similarly explained that it's important for teachers to acknowledge that "we are just people trying to balance a lot right now." She stated that teachers need "the permission to take time to figure it out and to learn and grow as we go." These statements illustrate teachers' understanding that they were facing unprecedented professional and personal challenges and would need to have patience with themselves as they figured things out.

When things became too overwhelming, teachers gave themselves and each other the grace and permission to pause and regroup. One teacher with three young children at home described a moment of utter exhaustion, requiring her to cancel one of her synchronous class meetings:

> There was one day, I just kept crying and had not texted or emailed families. It was a Thursday, we were supposed to have a synchronous class session. I emailed [my class's] families. I was like, 'Hey, today was a tough distance learning day for my kids. I have to cancel our class today.' And one parent who is also a teacher and another parent who is our building sub both texted me and they're like, 'Oh, sorry! Is your daughter having a hard time?'. I was like, 'It's not the kids, it's me today.'

This quote is illustrative of the stress felt by female teachers tasked with caring for children at home and supporting their distance learning while also teaching their own students, a situation ripe for overload (Dean et al., 2022). For this teacher, there was simply too much care work to be done, and she had worked herself to exhaustion.

While teachers strived to extend to themselves the same compassion they showed their colleagues, they were not always successful. In some cases, they judged themselves harshly in their struggle to find a new work-life balance. A teacher with two young children at home explained:

> Ever since becoming a mother, I've struggled with finding that balance between home and work. So now working from home and trying to stay balanced is an even greater challenge for me...am I failing as a parent or is there something wrong with me?

Another teacher felt she was not able to give her three children enough time and support, noting that "I feel like I'm working all day and not accomplishing anything." Many teachers shared that because they were working early mornings and late hours, even when they took breaks for their families, they were too exhausted to care for themselves.

There were some instances in which teachers demonstrated care for themselves by resisting restrictive school and district policies in order to make remote teaching feasible for them. As previously stated, the administration initially called for all teachers to maintain typical school hours, first from school and then from their homes, whereby teachers were expected to work without interruption from 7:30 am to 3:30 pm each day. Many teachers, however, found this an unnecessary and unrealistic expectation of family life in quarantine, and we heard how some quietly rebuffed this policy to create their own schedules that

worked for them and their families. For example, Dorie, the special ed teacher, reported:

> They say that you should work [at home from] 7:30 to 3:30, it's your duty day. Are you kidding me? I can't. No. So I wake up early. . . at 6:30 I get everything on my computer loaded up. [My husband] gets the children ready for breakfast and I come up when I'm ready, it's usually about 8:30, and then I take care of the kids because my husband has a full-time job and is very busy right now. So I just try my best. Like, yesterday, I got my morning work done, then we [my children and I] went out to a park for a couple hours. I do my work during nap time and I'm constantly checking in [on my phone].

Dorie was clear that the set hours imposed by the school district were not feasible when she was also tasked with simultaneously caring for two young children whose daycare was closed. She demonstrated that she could fulfill job expectations *via* an alternative schedule by setting up lessons early and then working flexibly throughout the day around her children's and spouse's schedules. Despite this, Dorie described a sense of urgency around creating a more reliable structure for students as well as her staff of paraprofessionals as soon as possible, explaining: "I'm trying to figure out the structure and schedule that will work for everyone."

Dorie's experiences at home were also representative of other teachers in our sample insofar as heterosexual couples with children in which both spouses worked during the shutdown tended to rely disproportionately on mothers to provide childcare, mirroring the experiences of mothers across the United States and other parts of the Global North (Calarco et al., 2021; Lynch et al., 2020). Dorie's description of her husband having a full-time job and being "very busy right now" could be seen as applying equally, if not more, to her own circumstance. Moreover, her interview was full of specific examples of care for her students and their families, her staff and colleagues, and her husband and children, all in addition to–or at the expense of–herself.

While Dorie was successful in finding a temporary workable solution for herself and her family, there were instances when other teachers' navigation of policies and efforts at self-advocacy were unsuccessful, including along gendered lines, resulting in their constrained abilities to care for themselves and their families. As initial plans were being made for the upcoming school year, Megan, a classroom teacher who was pregnant at the time, described frustration with not being allowed to teach from home while her male colleagues were offered distance learning options:

> There's about 10 males that work in the building and only two are [classroom] teachers. They both got a distance learning job and didn't even request it! And I was the pregnant female who requested distance learning and didn't get it. So I don't know if gender played a role in that, but everyone was very concerned and confused and like, 'Megan is pregnant and didn't get it, but like so and so, he got it by default.' So [I imagine that the principal] is like, 'Hey buddy, do you want to work from home?' and [the male teacher] was like, 'Oh sure!'. At least that's what the third grade team has told me. I was like, 'Wait a second! I'm growing a fetus and the CDC says it might not be good if I get COVID, so please can I work from home?!' 'Nope.'

Megan's critique of what she perceived to be a gendered distribution of comparatively safer teaching positions echoes many other participants' frustration with the predominantly male administration not taking their needs into consideration when creating expectations and policy during distance learning. Echoing Campbell Galman's (2012) critique of oppressively gendered power systems in elementary schools, many teachers felt their male administrators were removed from and unsympathetic with female teachers' professional and personal realities alike.

Even though teachers struggled to shoulder their increased care work, some were able to draw on individual-level coping mechanisms to offer care for themselves (Falk et al., 2019). In particular, many teachers relied on physical activity to maintain their own well-being. One explained that "to keep my spirits up, I go on lots of walks and I run every day. . . being physically active is what keeps me moving forward." Similarly, Kara described that although the gym was closed, she and her family would walk together after dinner every evening.

Yet teachers' attempts to care for themselves *via* individual coping mechanisms such as exercise were at times thwarted by administrative action. After a memo went out from the district asking teachers to watch what they shared on Facebook, this teacher, who lived quite close to the school with her three young children, described a feeling of surveillance akin to what she called "big brother" from both the administration and surrounding community:

> We have been told by the principal, 'Remember you are not on vacation.' And for many teachers who are working like 10 hours a day and working on the weekends, that's really hurtful. When he says that on a Google Hangout with 90 people, you just kind of wonder what is making him say that. I'm living so close to the school, I'm like, I can't go out for a walk even if it's my lunch time or whatever?!

This teacher attributed the principal's lack of understanding of teachers' work from home conditions to his ability to work from school while his wife provided childcare at home. Her critique echoed other teachers' frustrations as well as Lynch et al.'s (2009) notion of "care commanders" issuing directives to "care foot soldiers." Later, during subsequent rounds of

interviews, several teachers mentioned this principal had grown a better understanding of the realities of work from home conditions when a more restrictive shut down forced him to work from home and his children began appearing in, and occasionally interrupting, staff meetings.

As outlined above, teachers in our study made efforts to care for themselves; however, given the weight of their responsibilities in this time, self-care was often the first form of care to fall to the wayside. Thus while teachers attempted to give themselves the same grace and flexibility they offered to their colleagues, self-advocate for and navigate policies in ways that worked for them, and engage in individual coping mechanisms like exercise, they often found they had little support, time, or energy for themselves in the midst of massive upheaval and uncertainty. What often resulted was the bare minimum of self-care to ensure their survival.

Discussion

In March of 2020, community-wide lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that teachers and students shelter at home, shifting schools around the world to online learning. As the 12 teachers in our study moved their classrooms into the virtual space, they did not know how long they would be teaching online or when they would see their students or colleagues again. They were concerned about their loved ones' safety as well as their own health, and in our initial interviews, their anxiety was palpable. With the abrupt absence of many support systems alongside a sudden increase in student needs due to the acute emergency, teachers soon began to take up additional care work. Interview data reveal that the question for these teachers in this crisis state was not whether they would take up the care work necessary to navigate the uncertainty, but rather how. This article examines how teachers responded to this uncertainty through substantive care work, which paradoxically both assuaged and added to teachers' stress, and revealed and reified gendered inequalities within education and the larger society.

Our analysis of this uncertain time along the relational and temporal axes outlined by Cooper and Pratten (2015) show that this uncertainty was productive for elementary school teachers insofar as it spurred them to expand their care work in creative, collaborative, and future-focused ways. While responses to emergencies may focus on detriment, destruction, and harm, and educational responses are associated with a wide range of stressors that negatively impact teacher wellbeing (Falk et al., 2019), this research also highlights ways in which uncertainty can produce new social and professional landscapes. Along the relational axis, teachers' responses to the crisis were collaborative, resulting in thickened sociality (Cooper and Pratten, 2015) with students, families, and colleagues. As they worked to provide emotional encouragement and material support to students and their families, teachers collaborated directly with parents when, for example, they worked with a concerned mother to motivate an unresponsive student. Teachers turned to collaboration with colleagues to get them through the upheaval: they divided lesson planning and provided support for each other when they were struggling, as when grade level teams altered meeting agendas to include space to process the grief and frustration. Thus, teachers managed uncertainty by attending to, and strengthening, their ties with each other, their students, and their students' families despite and across the distance. In these ways, teachers' efforts at providing much-needed care in a time of crisis alleviated some of their initial stress of this uncertain time.

Along the temporal axis, teachers' caring responses to uncertainty evidenced an attention toward the future, which is perhaps unexpected given the intensity of the crisis. As they worked to provide instruction across distance during the emergency, teachers noted new possibilities for increasing the quality of schooling longer term and ensuring that all learners are better supported going forward. Whether through rethinking their assessment practices, developing more robust pedagogies and practices around social and emotional learning, or supporting each other's anti-racist work, teachers took the opportunity provided by the upheaval to be intentionally future-focused. Teachers' ongoing attention to the future as well as the deepened relationships, all characterized by care, mirror the notion of productive uncertainty (Kleist and Jansen, 2016; Stambach, 2017).

While teachers responded to the onset of the pandemic with care, and that care work productively helped them navigate the crisis, it also weighed heavily upon them. As teachers took up intensive care work necessary to ensure the needs of others at school and home were met, they were left with little time, energy, or resources to care for themselves. Schooling systems at building and district levels, largely unprepared for such a radical disruption, relied on teachers' relationships with students and colleagues to ensure students and their families received access to online instruction and that students succeeded in this new learning environment. As illustrated above, this often meant giving extra time to meet with students and their families, working late into the night on new teaching and learning materials, and shouldering family responsibilities while teaching. As teachers provided additional social, emotional, and even material support for students and families in this time of crisis, they were themselves isolated from many professional and personal support systems and were often unable to care for themselves in the ways that they needed. Indeed, some participants' efforts at caring for themselves such as walking through the day or modifying their work schedules to accommodate their current living/working conditions were done against administrations' requests. Teachers described how their acts of resistance in pursuit of self-care, however,

modest, entailed risk given the realities of surveillance from administration, parents, and the greater community. Indeed, teachers ended the year careworn, exhausted, frustrated, and concerned for their students and the future. Thus, the same robust care work that had carried their classrooms from in person to distance education – while attending to the expanding needs of students, families, colleagues, the school community, and their own families – eventually and paradoxically became the burden that limited teachers' abilities to sufficiently care for themselves.

This study brings together anthropology of uncertainty with gender and education to illuminate the gendered nature of educational response at the onset of an emergency. The two elementary schools in our study, like many in the United States and around the world, are highly gendered professional contexts comprised primarily of female teachers (nearly 90%) led by male administrators. Although the stereotypes of female nurturers working with children under the leadership of male administrators were already similar to their daily experiences, our findings reveal how the pandemic served to exacerbate these gendered dynamics. As the emergency unfolded and the extensive care work required by caring "foot soldier" teachers increased, participants described feeling demoralized by experiences with "care commanding" (Lynch et al., 2009) administrators who, they felt, were not only ineffective at offering needed support, but lacked an understanding of the realities of teaching from home during a lockdown. This was particularly true for female teachers who were tasked with meeting the extensive care needs of their own families while reinventing their profession in a time of crisis. Because 10 of the 12 participants in this study are mothers, our interviews often vividly illustrated how school was but one arena in which teachers were expending significant energy on care: children would interrupt our conversations with requests for snacks, and participants described taking their children to the park so their husbands could complete their work uninterrupted. In these ways, the care work required by teachers in this time of emergency and the limited support they received reflected and reinscribed gendered dynamics at school and home alike.

Conclusion and implications for practice

Teaching is a demanding occupation in the best of times and conditions. In emergency settings in the Global North and South alike, work-related challenges are exacerbated and compounded by stressors beyond the workplace (Wolf et al., 2015; Falk et al., 2019; Fernanda et al., 2021). Teachers in this study were navigating the anxiety and uncertainty posed by the COVID-19 health emergency and its multiple impacts on education, including the need to recreate their instructional practices for distance learning with limited support and guidance. They were also contending with racism and civil unrest, gendered inequalities at school and beyond, decades of divestment from public education, and growing political polarization combined with a looming, contentious election. They did all this while working from home and–for most participants–simultaneously caring for their own families. Our findings show how teachers met these significant challenges with care: care for students, families, each other, their school communities, and their own families. Moreover, in a time of radical uncertainty and little systemic support, teachers nevertheless strengthened their bonds with others and imagined ways to improve their profession going forward. In these ways, this uncertain time, while stressful, was productive.

This study also reveals how teachers, particularly female teachers, have borne the weighty burden of care required in an educational emergency and how that weight truncated their ability to care for themselves. Because systems and individuals were unable or unwilling to step in to provide sufficient care for teachers in this emergency, the cost of teachers' care work has been steep, leading to high levels of stress and limited capacity for self-care. Indeed, at the time of writing, 2 years after these interviews, several teachers from this study have expressed a desire to leave the profession, some are ill, and others have already taken new jobs out of the Westenberg district, and others outside of the classroom. This reflects the state of educators across the country, where job satisfaction is low, levels of burnout are high, and more than half the teachers are considering leaving the profession (NEA, 2022; Will, 2022). This state of affairs begs the question: How might we ensure the next educational emergency does not deplete teachers in the same way?

While findings from this study point to teachers' extensive, weighty, gendered, and often unsupported care-work as one culprit of their burnout, we maintain that care can also be a solution (Wangsness Willemsen and Cohen, 2020). As teachers continue to care for those around them, educational administrators at the school and district level, as well as policy-makers at state and national levels, must provide more extensive and practical care for teachers. They must do so in ways that attend to the gendered dynamics of schools so policies do not further marginalize female teachers. This can be done by listening to teachers and valuing their expertise when developing policy and practice. More specifically, leaders urgently need to put diverse support systems in place to promote and maintain teacher wellbeing in emergency and non-emergency situations alike. For example, administrators need to provide sufficient time for collaboration with colleagues as well as place clear guardrails on work time so teachers are not expected to be on call at all times. Leaders should develop strong referral systems so teachers can allocate care work to appropriate

professionals rather than taking it all on themselves. Finally, school leaders can normalize conversations about mental and emotional health to create more supportive school cultures while also offering teachers easy and affordable access to mental health and psychosocial support. With these sorts of measures in place, school leaders and local and national policy-makers can demonstrate their care for teachers and ensure that they are well supported in times of uncertainty.

As the field of EiE increases its attention to teacher wellbeing, this paper highlights the daily practices of teachers in a global health crisis and how their experiences of care act as both benefit and burden. Although the EiE literature has heretofore focused primarily on the Global South, this study reveals that the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 may challenge the rigidity of this binary (Cohen and Willemsen, 2021). The challenging conditions, caring responses, and slow-to-change systems experienced by our participants are likely to have similarities to those faced by teachers, particularly female teachers, all over the world. This paper, then, offers theoretical and practical implications for the field of EiE, and serves as a call to better prepare for educational emergencies everywhere.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Indiana University. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

Both authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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