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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine music educators' stress and stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this multiple case study (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we examined practicing music educators' stress and stressors pertaining to teaching and life experiences. Participants all self-identified as females and were practicing music educators (N = 16) from various geographical locations in the United States, representing K-12 general music, ensemble conducting, applied lessons, and university instruction. All participants participated in weekly focus groups over a 12-week period during the spring of 2021. We analyzed data through open coding (Gibbs, 2007), yielding four themes: logistics, student engagement and disengagement, helplessness, and curriculum changes. Based upon the results, we suggest the need for an increase in support systems for music educator stress through professional organizations and professional learning communities. Future research may warrant examining the long-term effects of music educators' stress from teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

music teacher stress; teacher wellness; stress management; COVID-19 pandemic teaching

Stress can be defined as “the physical, or emotional reaction resulting from an individual's response to environmental factors, conflicts, pressures, and other stimuli” (Greenberg, 1984, p. 2), and can have significant impacts on K-12 educat-

ors. Work stress has led to 40-50% of new teachers leaving the profession after only three years (Perda, 2013). Furthermore, the rate of turnover for K-12 teachers in the United States appears to be higher than in many other occupations (Ingersoll, 2001). This is particularly alarming as the number of teachers has increased in the United States over the years (United States Department of Education, 2017); therefore, each percentage increase signifies a larger number of educators leaving the profession.

For music educators, stressors often include the behaviors and attitudes of colleagues, parents and administrators, and feelings of inadequacy in terms of preparedness for a career teaching music (Gordon, 2000). Other stressors may include students' negative attitudes, students' inappropriate behaviors, heavy teaching loads (Heston et al., 1996), students' discipline and motivation (Hedden, 2005), and teacher accountability reforms (Shaw, 2016). Bernhard (2016) found that stress among elementary and secondary music teachers needs great attention due to links to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization.

Increased stress for music educators can be a catalyst towards teacher burnout, low job satisfaction, and teacher attrition. High levels of stress for music educators can lead to mental or physical illnesses, negatively impact relationships with students, and reduce energy levels (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Music teachers between the ages of 30 to 39 years are more likely to be at a higher attrition risk than their older colleagues. Researchers have found increased risk for attrition or migration in female music teachers over male music teachers and minority music teachers over White, non-Hispanic music teachers (Hancock, 2009; Matthews & Koner, 2017).

Compounding these stressors, the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth additional, different stressors for educators throughout the world. Educators were suddenly required to navigate teaching in virtual formats while simultaneously discovering innovative methods to reach students they could not see on a day-to-day basis, all while trying to keep themselves and their loved ones safe and healthy. According to Francom et al. (2021), the transition to distance learning presented K-12 teachers with issues pertaining to internet and computer access, student participation and motivation, communication with students, parent involvement, online resources for teaching, time management, instructional support for students, and student readiness for distance learning. Additionally, Gupta et al. (2021) reported teachers' frustration with low attendance in online classes and how those environments were not ideal for personal interaction with students.

Stress directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted teachers around the world. In Germany, 380 secondary teachers responded to a questionnaire pertaining to increased stress levels and working additional hours, and the findings showed that the teachers experienced medium-to-high levels of stress during lockdown (Klapproth et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom, 24 elementary and secondary teachers discussed the stress of the uncertainty of the time and being extremely concerned about their students (Kim & Asbury, 2020). In Chile, the pandemic negatively affected teachers' quality of

life, especially among women and younger teachers (Lizana et al., 2021). In China, researchers found that 35.1% of teachers and students presented moderate symptoms of anxiety and 21% moderate symptoms of depression (Huang & Zhao, 2020). Educators in Denmark experienced high amounts of stress and anxiety related to teaching and fear of infection (Nabe-Nielsen et al., 2021).

In a study of 366 teachers from Italy and other European countries, Rabaglietti et al. (2021) found that increased self-efficacy might aid teachers' perceived stress levels. Hidalgo-Andrade et al. (2021) studied 394 teachers' mental health and self-reported coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador and found that female educators presented greater levels of perceived stress than males, and those having greater caregiving responsibilities presented greater levels of psychological distress and perceived stress than those without such responsibilities. Coping strategies included maintaining relationships with other people, maintaining physical health, creating time for leisure activities, promoting self-care and emotional well-being, focusing on one's professional and/or academic growth, enjoying spiritual activities, and practicing avoidance such as keeping busy.

For those in higher education, faculty in Italy reported impairments in their sleep and loss of energy (Casacchia et al., 2021), while those in Wuhan experienced posttraumatic stress symptoms such as anxiety and panic (Fan et al., 2020). Faculty in India reported stress due to conducting online classes during lockdown (Gupta et al., 2021). Female educators have reported experiencing significantly more stress (Klapproth et al., 2020) and greater difficulty concentrating (Casacchia et al., 2021) than their male colleagues throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of music education during the COVID-19 pandemic, Shaw and Mayo (2021) surveyed music educators ($N = 1,368$) in the National Association for Music Education and found that music teachers were concerned about student engagement, felt undervalued, unsupported, and overworked due to changing workloads during the COVID-19 pandemic. For ensemble directors, the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges related to sustainability and planning appropriate online instruction (Hash, 2021). Those teaching applied lessons appeared to adapt their teaching methods with virtual tools, experimenting with new pedagogical approaches, expanded curricula and goals, and utilization of different assessment criteria. However, some teachers viewed teaching online as disastrous (Shaw & Mayo, 2021). Furthermore, Parkes et al. (2021) surveyed music teachers ($N = 1,325$) regarding their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding that participants reported experiencing mild-to-severe depression and extreme levels of stress.

Philippe et al. (2020) studied interpersonal relationships between music teachers and their students during lockdown and found that communication was a critical factor for a healthy relationship, which included listening and supportiveness. In a study of music education students in Germany, Rosset et al. (2021) found decreased hours of practicing and increased thoughts of stress and fear.

Through our review of literature, we found that many researchers have explored the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the stress and relative well-being of educators in K-12 settings and higher education. We seek to contribute to the existing body of literature as it specifically relates to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on music educators, as teaching music is a unique field with distinct challenges both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the purpose of the study was to examine music educators' stress and stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, we examined practicing music educators' stress and stressors pertaining to teaching and life experiences, with the following research questions guiding the study:

1. What are music educators' greatest stressors while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have stressors associated with COVID-19 impacted the self-reported mental and physical health of music educators?
3. What physical and mental health strategies do music educators self-report as implementing, at home and within their teaching, to manage stress during the COVID-19 pandemic?

METHOD

In this study, we utilized a multiple case study (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to examine the stress and stressors of practicing music teachers as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To examine the first stage of analysis for a multiple case study of within-case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell), we gathered and examined data for each individual participant, through written Google Form responses and individual input during focus group discussions. For the second stage of a cross-case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell), we compared individual responses for explanations regarding stressors of music educators during this unprecedented time. Cases were bound by the participants' involvement in a weekly focus group over a timeline of 12 weeks. Participants were part of a larger study examining the impact of yoga on music educators (Koner et al., in review). In this current article, we discuss and explore the stress discussions from the sixteen focus group participants.

Participants

The host university's human subjects committee granted us permission to conduct this investigation. Through convenience sampling, we recruited potential participants to investigate the impact of a consistent weekly yoga practice on music educators' stress management. We distributed recruitment emails through 18 professional organizations, in which we are members or are associated. Those organizations included the *California Music Educators Association*, the *Orff-Schulwerk Associations* of San Diego and Las Vegas, and the *International Women's Brass Conference*.

The only requirement for eligibility to join the study was for participants to be teaching music as part of their income or in a fulltime student-teaching placement during the spring 2021 semester. This teaching could be in any setting (e.g., K-12 teaching, applied teaching) and at any grade level (e.g., K-12, university/college). Our initial email invitation yielded 161 responses from prospective participants expressing interest. After sending a follow-up email with additional details, 62 participants confirmed their participation as members of the study for 12 weeks (Lin et al., 2015) from April to June of 2021. After placing participants in one of the six teaching areas, via purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we randomly selected three participants from each area using the tool *Research Randomizer* (2021) to participate in a focus group.

An outcome of the focus groups was that, as we continued on our 12 weeks together, participants began to discuss their specific stresses and challenges as a direct impact of COVID-19. Similar to people throughout the world experiencing feelings of isolation and disconnection during the shutdown, focus group participants began to view these weekly discussions as a chance to connect with other music educators, to have a safe space to discuss difficulties with administrators, the personal stress of balancing work and home life during a pandemic, and as an opportunity to share ideas about virtual teaching. The participants in this study are the sixteen music educators who were randomly selected and participated in weekly focus group discussions.

Procedure

Participants attended a weekly yoga class for 45-minutes and following the class, each of us led a 15-minute focus group discussion with the randomly assigned participants, all of whom self-identified as female. The focus groups were held via *Zoom*, in separate breakout rooms, immediately following each weekly yoga session.

We asked participants to complete a demographic questionnaire based upon previous literature (Matthews & Koner, 2017), in which they self-identified their current teaching area. Then, to create the focus groups, we divided the participants into six teaching area categories: (a) applied music instruction, (b) K-12 general music, (c) K-12 ensemble conducting, (d) K-12 general music and ensemble teaching, (e) K-12 ensemble conducting and applied teaching, and (f) college/university instruction. Finally, using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we randomly selected participants from each teaching area using *Research Randomizer* (2021) to determine three focus groups. Only female participants were selected by *Research Randomizer* and we decided to keep the focus groups of all female participants to ensure validity of the instrument and methodology. See Table 1 for focus group participant characteristics.

We created weekly focus group prompts based on elements of the *Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire* (Baer et. al, 2006) and the *Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale* (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Participants responded with yes or no, and then had the

opportunity to elaborate and discuss their answer in an open-ended response. Some of those prompts included: *Do you currently practice a mindfulness technique, and discuss the current stressors in your teaching; I find it difficult to stay focused on what is happening in the present with respect to my teaching/ classroom; When teaching, I pay attention to how my emotions affect my thoughts and behavior; and I do not pay attention to classroom management because I am daydreaming, worrying, or otherwise distracted.*

Data Analysis

We recorded all the focus group discussions, using those features in *Zoom*, which produced secure recordings. We transcribed focus group discussions weekly, which we each placed in a secure Google Drive for the duration of the study. We coded the data independently, utilizing open coding (Gibbs, 2007) and then compared with each other for themes and patterns to support investigator triangulation. Finally, we sent the paper to four participants to complete member checking to support validity (Merriam, 2016; Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). We asked participants to carefully review the material and elaborate and/or clarify any information, and all of the participants gave their approval.

RESULTS

In this study, we aimed to examine participants' stress and stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. We uncovered four themes, which are as follows: (a) logistics, (b) student engagement, (c) helplessness, and (d) curriculum changes. Results are presented with participant pseudonyms (see Table 1).

Logistics

Teaching students during the COVID-19 pandemic meant educators were concerned with their students' safety and health. The first theme that emerged encompassed the stress from the logistics of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, participants teaching in-person were required to keep students socially distanced, wear gloves to tune instruments, consistently sanitize items in the classroom, and students to perform in masks or with bell covers. Participants discussed the constantly changing guidelines set forth by local, state, and national organizations for guidance about safety requirements, as Adrienne stated in relating the safety protocols for her music classroom:

I would say a lot of the logistics of being in a specific space. We have to let the aerosol be for 30 minutes before going to another space. How do we do that at the end of semester for performance finals if we have to put 30 minutes in between each student? I'll be here for like [sic] six days. Those kinds of logistical things are really frustrating.

These logistical changes led to a ripple effect of additional stressors for music educators. For instance, Kathy, an elementary general music educator, was not permitted to have students in her classroom as students were only allowed to stay in their

Table 1*Participant Characteristics*

Pseudonym	Age Range	State	Teaching Modality	Number of Years Teaching	Teaching Setting
Adrienne	30-34	MI	Hybrid	10	University/College Instruction
Brandi	35-39	MA	Hybrid	10	General Music
Camille	35-39	NY	In-Person	13	General Music & Ensemble Conducting
Crystal	40-44	IN	In-Person	2	General Music
Denise	18-24	NH	Hybrid	2	General Music & Ensemble Conducting
Eileen	50-54	GA	In-Person	30	University/College Instruction
Erika	30-34	PA	Hybrid	8	General Music
Garcelle	25-29	VT	In-Person	2	General Music & Ensemble Conducting
Kathy	30-34	IL	Hybrid	10	General Music
Kim	40-44	IL	In-Person	18	General Music
Kyle	25-29	PA	Virtual	8	Applied Lessons & Ensemble
Lisa	35-39	CA	Virtual	11	Ensemble Conducting
Sutton	30-34	IL	Hybrid	3	Applied Lessons
Taylor	18-24	NV	In-Person	1	General Music & Ensemble Conducting
Teddi	35-39	VA	Hybrid	15	General Music & Ensemble Conducting
Yolanda	35-39	NY	Hybrid & Virtual	16	General Music

elementary general classroom throughout the day. Thus, instead of students coming to her music classroom, she traveled between 38 classrooms to teach with 38 various technology and sound systems, not knowing if the SmartBoards would be working when she arrived to teach her class. Also, because she was traveling between classrooms, orchestrating her movements throughout the building brought about stress and tension with some of the classroom teachers:

I know it's their plan time, but I don't have any transition time to go from one side of the building to the other. My school is very 'by the minute' and I get my 30 minutes, and I don't blame them and it's their plan time. But I can't physically get from one place to the other if the teacher didn't show up on time because I can't just leave the kids by themselves...but they're not understanding of that, because I'm just taking up their time that they're losing because I have another class to get to. It's really the physicality of where I need to be and what is there when I get there.

Notably, that which plagued these educators the most was, in fact, technology. Participants discussed how technology failures became huge distractions for students. For example, Brandi explained the stress of utilizing multiple modes of technology:

I am back in the building, and I have my phone for this week or whatever device that I am using. I have been teaching outside, so I have them on *Zoom*, on my phone, and then the other kids [in person], and it's them all the time and all of their needs. I feel really exhausted on Friday afternoon and I was completely toasted [*sic*] and done and I think it's because I'm super focused on what is happening all the time. But it is very demanding. When I'm focused, I'm fine, but when I come home, I crash.

Student Engagement

Throughout the focus groups, the idea of student engagement, or lack thereof, became a common point of discussion. Clearly, teaching in a virtual setting, within a subject area that is often highly kinesthetic, presented many challenges for these educators. In the secondary setting, the traditional ensemble models were not possible to replicate in a virtual setting and, in the elementary setting, students often did not have access to classroom instruments and other materials typically utilized for active engagement.

Additionally, a majority of educators were unable to require students to turn their cameras on in a *Zoom* class meeting. This presented difficulties in knowing whether the student is there and engaged, such as listening to the teacher or simply conversing. This lack of engagement, or the unknown factors surrounding students' level of engagement, was a major stress factor for the participants. Lisa described this in the second week of focus groups:

My stressor has been that my kids have completely disconnected; they are not turning on their cameras anymore. They're not even talking; they're just typing into the chat box. So, we've been working on songwriting for my high school class, because I teach choir and try to sing with them... I try to do that with them but they don't have

cameras on so I can't see their faces. I was just getting frustrated with it, so we kind of just went into general music projects.

Challenges with student engagement were not solely limited to virtual teaching. Educators who returned to in-person teaching or hybrid teaching also experienced difficulties associated with masks, social distancing, and smaller class sizes. Yolanda shared some of her frustrations on this topic:

I teach mostly seventh grade general music and they are so hesitant to talk, because I have anywhere from 5-8, sometimes 10 in a class, and they're spread out. With their masks on, I think they feel like they can hide and not participate, so it's really hard to get them engaged. I see them only once a week, too, so it feels like a new year every time they walk in the room. I have no classroom discipline because I can't get them to talk to me.

Helplessness

Participants discussed feelings of helplessness in working with students in a virtual modality, affecting sound production and musicianship, rehearsals of specific pieces of music, and technical assistance in a one-on-one setting. Eileen, a music teacher educator, who was instructing a string techniques course, discussed students breaking strings at home and not being able to assist them, the challenge of not being on campus, and not having extra strings for her preservice teachers. Additionally, when students did not turn their cameras on, assisting students was next to impossible. Furthermore, Eileen discussed how her students and student teachers were missing out on field experiences in K-12 classrooms:

I also am feeling really bad for those student teachers because, of course, we're not allowed to go into the schools right now. So, I'm in the *Zoom* with their kids and giving feedback that way; it's just different in person. But I think one thing that I'm feeling pretty badly for is our juniors who are not getting to do the experience of going into the schools, which normally I would tie into with [*sic*] my pedagogy classes.

In addition, these challenges prompted feelings of helplessness with respect to providing appropriate feedback for students. For instance, Sutton and Kyle taught brass applied lessons over *Zoom* and discussed how, when students had cameras on, they could not view the entire instrument within the frame or see what the student was doing on the instrument. Kyle discussed her feelings:

For me, I would say the biggest stressor is the fear that I am missing something about the way my students are playing. Like [*sic*] a bad habit, because I can't see 360 degrees of them, and I can't really hear them that well and what they're doing and I can't—If they have their bell in front of the camera I can't even see the way the lips are touching the mouthpiece.

Curriculum Changes

Lastly, participants discussed the stress of constantly changing their curriculum. This not only impacted the K-12 educators but the applied teachers. For example, Kyle

discussed how typically, while teaching private brass lessons, she spends time working with each student on their school ensemble music. She stated that she would typically leave blocks of time in applied lessons to work on band music; however, because ensembles were not meeting and performing in the pre-pandemic sense, she had to create additional exercises and plans for her applied lesson students.

Participants in K-12 settings explained the stress of reorienting their approach to teaching. Taylor, a first-year teacher in elementary general music, mentioned rethinking her approach while balancing her expectations with the demands of administrators:

One of my biggest stressors is that, during my degree program, I was always taught that elementary general music should be a totally immersive experience and kids should be playing. It's like bacon-wrapped vegetables, they're almost learning in secret. I teach at a school with a high percentage of English Language Learner(s) students. My administration wants me to talk about metacognition and I still don't understand metacognition and I don't know how a ten-year-old will understand it. So that's where my stress is coming from.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to examine music educators' stress and stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of stress, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to be a trigger point for music educators, causing them to think outside of the box and restructure curriculum. During this time, the community's expectations of educators came to the forefront via conversations with parents, guardians, administrators, and the media.

One main stressor that participants continued to discuss throughout the focus groups was concern for their students. At the point of publication of this article, it is unknown what the long-term impact could be on students; however, discussions of students being "behind" have already begun. In the Netherlands, Engezell et al. (2021) surveyed national examination scores of primary school students, aged 8 to 11 years, from before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and after the lockdown. Results showed a loss of learning that was equivalent to one-fifth of a school year, with losses being 60% larger amongst students from less-educated homes. This concern of learning loss was prevalent throughout dialogue with our participants. Given the kinesthetic nature of music, it was impossible during the lockdown to administer equivalent instruction and experiences within a virtual format. Similar to previous literature (Casacchia et al., 2021; Francom et al., 2021; Rosset et al., 2021), throughout our discussions, participants noted high levels of concern for students pertaining to issues such as learning poor instrument habits and lacking interest or engagement.

Being a music educator during a worldwide pandemic prompted physical and mental health concerns and high levels of stress (Parkes et al., 2021). As high stress levels can be linked to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Bernhard, 2016), it is important that educators take time to manage their stress levels and look

after their health. For example, in relation to our second research question regarding the impacts these stressors might have on participants, Denise discussed her autoimmune disease and being “forced” into going back to teaching in-person, while Brandi and Teddi both discussed feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and “not always being okay.” This is not only important for teachers’ personal health, but also to support and engage with students, as high stress levels can impact relationships with students and reduce energy levels (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Going forward, national and state music education organizations may consider exploring stress management and mental health as part of in-service conferences to allow music educators to gain access to new ideas by connecting with other professionals with similar difficulties.

Though this study was not intentionally designed to create a professional learning community for the music educators, as we continued throughout our 12 weeks together, a natural result of the investigation was the educators connected as a type of support group, which connected with our third research question. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, and human beings in general, felt isolated in their struggles of navigating many unknowns. The participants in this study thanked us profusely, as this study provided a platform to connect with other music educators who were experiencing many similar challenges and struggles and a safe space to openly discuss these difficulties. This idea of community support is not isolated to a pandemic, as music educators have experienced isolation as a novice teacher (Conway & Christensen, 2006) or via their geographic location (Sindberg, 2014). As a music education community, it would be beneficial to create this kind of support through professional development or organizations. Music educators have found informal interactions to be a beneficial type of professional development (Brewer & Rickels, 2014; Koner & Eros, 2019); therefore, more structured community building through national and state in-service conferences or social media accounts would allow music educators to connect with each other and develop additional professional learning communities.

One limitation of the study was that it involved all female participants. In recruiting participants for the study, it was available to any person teaching music in the spring of 2021, and of the 62 registered participants, 55, or 88.7%, self-identified as female (Koner et al., in review). With this high percentage of female responses, and using randomly selected participants (Research Randomizer, 2021), it was no surprise that this was the gender composition of the focus groups. Throughout previous literature, we have seen that the pandemic has greatly impacted female educators worldwide. In Ecuador and Germany, female educators presented greater levels of perceived stress (Hidalgo-Andrade et al., 2021; Klapproth et al., 2020), in Chile the pandemic has negatively impacted female educators’ quality of life (Lizana et al., 2021), and in Italy, female educators have had greater difficulty concentrating than their male colleagues (Casacchia et al., 2021). Since yoga can be seen as a stress management technique, and female educators have seemingly felt highly impacted by COVID-19 and

may seek more coping strategies than their male colleagues (Klapproth et al., 2020), this may account for the imbalance of gender amongst the participants.

Future research may warrant examining the long-term effects of stress due to the pandemic. At the time of submission of this paper in the fall of 2021, the music teaching community was starting to return to in-person teaching; however, this seemingly brought about an entirely new variety of stressors such as keeping students healthy and safe with social distancing and masks while facilitating meaningful musical experiences. Additionally, future research and professional organizations may want to continue to examine, create, and discuss ways in which to support the music education community throughout the stress associated with music teaching and learning.

Though the participants in this investigation represented various grade levels, music classroom settings, and geographical locations, it appeared that all experienced stress due to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the music education profession at-large, it could be beneficial to continue supporting and encouraging positive self-care strategies and techniques for the benefit of both music educators and their students.

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