

## **Mentally Healthy Schools – A Vision for the Future**

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This paper explores teacher mental health within an Ontario context and utilizes UNESCO's 2050 initiative: *Learning to Become*, to envision and provide solutions to school boards, policymakers and governments on how mentally healthy schools can become a reality. Mental health issues are significant within the education system and as a society, we have an opportunity and responsibility to create mentally healthy schools in Ontario to ensure success on all levels.

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, approximately 50% of the population will have experienced a form of mental illness by the age of 40 in Canada (2013). For educators, this statistic rises to 73% according to a recent study that surveyed the Ontario Secondary School Teacher Federation and Physical and Health Education members (Marko, 2015, p. ii). According to the World Health Organization, "*mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community*" (WHO, 2017). Mental health in Ontario schools has been a major focus pertaining to students and their needs. In addition, the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services mental health framework - *A Shared Responsibility* (2016), clearly states that teachers are integral to supporting the needs of students' mental health.

The pandemic has been a catalyst in shining light on teacher mental health as schools transitioned online or to hybrid models later in the pandemic. There has been a surge in literature in regards to teacher mental health and coping strategies for all educators. Prior to COVID-19, this issue garnered little attention and the literature was primarily from an international context

rather than a Canadian, or even an Ontario context. The hope is that the pandemic has created a niche where more researchers will attend to this field to contribute their knowledge and resources to aid in creating mentally healthy schools.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers had been found to be more vulnerable to work-related stress and burnout from the occupation when compared to other professions (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2015), while prevailing mental health issues negatively affect relationships with students (Dibbon, 2004). During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators have been resilient in learning new technologies, transitioning to online learning in a short period of time, overcoming barriers to technology, while managing increased workloads (Turner et al., 2020). Although teachers have continued to persevere with online education in 2021, a gap in literature persists regarding the mental health of teachers, particularly on new teachers to the profession.

### **UNESCO 2050 – Learning to Become**

UNESCO's 2050 initiative: *Learning to Become* invites us to reimagine and reinvent education for 2050. Combining a graduate school course with the Summer Institute, OISE doctoral students were able to create their visions for the future, which aligned with UNESCO's vision for education in 2050, while utilizing the tools of futures studies (UNESCO, 2019). The initiative put forth by UNESCO offers a multitude of researchers and knowledge from around the globe to provide insights on the field of education for a variety of futures (UNESCO, 2019). The concept of Learning to Become conveys the notion that learning is a continuous process, which then should force individuals to consider the question: "what are we trying to become?" What problems are we going to try to eradicate from this world? (UNESCO, 2019).

## **A Foresight Tool: The *Thing from the Future***

Futures studies is defined as “the systematic study of possible, probable and preferable futures including the worldviews and myths that underlie each future” (Inayatullah, 37, 2012). The field of futures studies aims to impact the world with achievable futures scenarios that are plausible in the long-term future from 5 years to 1000 years (Inayatullah, 40, 2012). Futures studies creates well-thought out and researched futures scenarios while using a participatory and action-oriented approach (Inayatullah, 40, 2012). Using the knowledge of key stakeholders and a variety of tools, methodologies and frameworks, futures studies does not make simple predictions and should not be confused as such as it aspires to “design and define alternative futures” (Inayatullah, 11, 2012). Through the various frameworks and tools introduced in this multidisciplinary field, this paper will apply *Thing from the Future* to provide context, expectations, and potential outcomes for mentally healthy schools in 2050. This particular tool is broken down in the following manner:

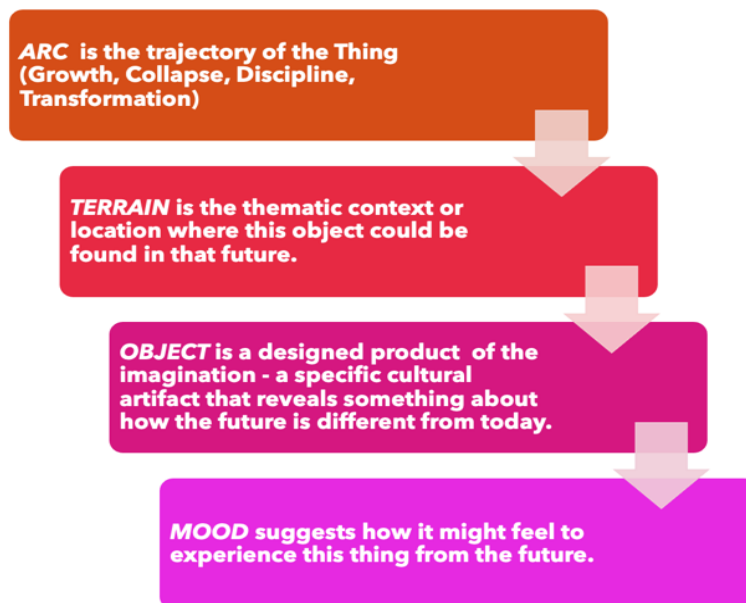


Figure 1: Framework adapted from Stuart Candy (2015) Situation Lab.

Created by Stuart Candy (2015) in his design-lab, this tool emerges from a card game created where players are motivated to engage in creating theoretical objects for the future. When faced with a futures problem, players are able to thoughtfully create an object that will aim to solve the problem being examined (Miller, 2018). When applied to an academic context, this tool encompasses three aspects which includes the ideas from three different disciplines - futures studies, politics and designs to frame any educational concept and reimagine it to create a feasible future (Candy, 2010). When redesigning the futures, researchers must examine the present and the past to then create alternative and preferred futures.

Applying the *Thing from the Future* tool from futures studies to the notion of creating mentally healthy schools in an Ontario context, this project will explore new teachers in the profession (two years or less) and their mental health challenges in creating mentally healthy schools. The ARC will consist of pre-existing literature on the mental health of educators in Canada and internationally. Supports and resources currently available will be re-evaluated and re-assessed and changes will be made accordingly, where the province of Ontario has not provided enough assistance. The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario provides a detailed overview of the expenditures in relation to school boards each year. For the 2019-2020 school year, with a budget in the billions and many departments where the funds must be allocated, approximately \$271 million dollars (which has decreased to \$152 million in 2020) has been allocated to other educational staff such as outreach, tutors, and mental health workers (The Financial Accountability Office, 2019). With decreased expenditures and a lack of accountability, teachers are unable to request additional resources and support for themselves. This can be an indication then, as to why the province may be reluctant or limited in providing

teachers the individual help that they require. A shrinking budget may create limitations in schools for resources and funds for other needs, in turn, creating further stress on educators.

## **ARC**

Using the foresight tool *Thing from the Future* the first element – ARC, which is further broken down into four categories: Growth, Collapse, Discipline and Transformation. From an international context, the research, and findings on the mental health of teachers have proven to be significant. In Kota Bharu, Malaysia, researchers found that 49.1% of teachers suffered from depression and 21% suffered from mild depression in the 20 secondary schools in this district (Hadi, Naing, Daud, & Nordin, 2008). Similar numbers like this were found in other nations as well. Research demonstrates educators may experience high levels of stress due to the emotional aspects of the job, being responsive to students, parents, administrative staff, and the government, inclusive of a large workload (Tang, Leka, & MacLennan, 2013).

For new special education teachers, the overwhelming desire to meet students' needs, cover curriculum requirements, while also managing individualized education plans (IEP's) for each student can amount to a considerable workload (Brownell, 2006). Hence, the pre-existing data conveys the notion that new teachers are at risk of burnout or may leave the profession without any mental health issues being present. When a teacher is adding a pre-existing mental health condition or battling the onset of one due to the teaching profession along with a large workload, the numbers for burnout and stress increase considerably.

New teachers seem to be experiencing burnout within the first 5 years of beginning their teaching careers. Many factors affect the high rates of teachers leaving the profession and the most common are workload, lack of autonomy and voice, micro-management and low salary as many teachers are not paid fairly throughout the world. The weight now placed on standardized

testing and using the test scores for ranking schools and hiring are other stressors that cause undue hardship on educators world-wide (Brown, 2020). Burnout can be described as having an undesirable perspective towards one's career, oneself, or the individuals in one's life. Burnout can take a toll on an individual's mental health, emotions, and even cause physical issues (Akbaba, 2014). Individuals may feel endlessly fatigued, hopeless, experience low self-esteem and see a decrease in productivity in their work (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980). With many educators experiencing these devastating effects, particularly as new teachers, the urgency, and promptness are required to create feasible solutions to counter these problems.

The current main resource available and accessible to Ontario teachers, is a plan in place for teachers that are employed under a public-school board. Note, this does not then apply to teachers working for independent schools, unless the independent school(s) provides their own resources and supports for their teachers. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides support for a variety of issues for people employed by a school board in Ontario (OSSTF, 2018). However, due to a lack of orientation for new teachers, many educators hired by school boards are left scrambling for support when they are in need of it. Only having access to a telephone line which may shuffle an individual from one department to the next can be tedious. Individuals may only have access to these resources for a limited amount of time, once again due to insufficient funds and budget cuts. The *Thing from the Future* created for this paper then does not propose a tool that will not require a significant amount of funding, instead it will work to organize and enhance the programs already put into place by the province of Ontario.

## **TERRAIN**

The terrain will encompass aid for new teachers in the profession (two years or less) with tools and policy implementation, which will offer new educators instant help with mental health

issues in a workplace context. Data shows that the first three to four years after a teacher is hired determines their decision in staying with the profession. Numerous studies conducted have shown that there must be a focus on teacher retention as well as teacher development to not only retain the teachers, but to sustain them throughout their careers (Kutsyuruba, Walker, Makhamreh, & Stasel, (2018).

If an educator requires help with an issue that they are experiencing in regards to their mental health, they are able to use this tool to receive help immediately. The tool will provide ease of access to proper and adequate help without an individual having to call multiple numbers or individuals for help or support. Research demonstrates new teachers experience higher levels of stress and burnout, while transitioning into the profession, and with prior or the onset of mental health issues occurring during the start of their profession, it is crucial to provide this help immediately and effectively.

The implications of teacher mental health should be a call to urgency for this issue. These implications can include job dissatisfaction, teacher burnout and early retirement. Continued job stress with prevailing mental health issues can potentially affect students by proxy (Dibbon, 2004). In addition, a teacher experiencing such issues may not be able to properly conduct themselves on the job and complete all applicable responsibilities, which in turn can lead to further stress. When comparing the teaching profession with other professions, teachers have been found to be more vulnerable to work-related stress and burnout when compared to other professions (Van Droogenbroeck & Spruyt, 2015). An earlier survey conducted by the Ontario College of Teachers found that 13% of teachers in Ontario had indicated they felt stressed all the time. When this statistic was compared to other occupations, the number dropped to only 7% (Rodger, Psych, Hibbert, Leschied, Psych, & Pickel, 2014).



## **OBJECT**

The *Thing from the Future* being proposed is a 24/7 call line dedicated to serving teachers in their first two years of practice. This idea was inspired by the “Teacherline” explored in Hadi et al’s paper (2008). One school board in Ontario will be chosen to pilot this project, which will utilize retired psychologists who are licensed in connecting teachers with the appropriate help that they require. The pilot project will also employ a few retired principals from this board to work with the psychologists to provide a better understanding of the educational system. Principals of this school district will oversee orientation for new teacher candidates in the profession and work with them throughout the year on a bi-weekly basis to ease the transition into their new school.

The province will implement a newly created pilot project within a school board to ensure funds are distributed at minimum costs for this trial. This will work to destigmatize the concept of mental health in society and an issue that many educators feel is difficult to disclose within a workplace setting. In addition, new educators will be able to work with their administrative staff collaboratively and proactively to discuss workload and deadlines, while being supported by the additional board staff hired whom are experts in proper mental health care. Within orientation for new teachers in this school board, retired principals will offer stress management and classroom management courses that must be completed by all new teachers to be better equipped in handling the stressors related to teaching. A two-year study conducted in Canada followed two groups – one which examined stress and the other classroom management. Teachers in the stress management group showed a betterment in sleep, and wellbeing as well as demonstrated lower levels of emotional exhaustion and rumination, however, the levels

increased even more in the classroom management group (Sanford, 2017, pp. 20-21). This study demonstrates the need for new teachers in the profession to be provided courses to mitigate stressors that will heighten or create mental health problems later in their careers.

## **MOOD**

New teachers in all schools will feel comfort and security knowing that there are supports available to them, which exist in their own schools. While educators may be content knowing that there is help available, administrative staff might in turn, feel the burden of more teacher-related issues as well as a workload increase. In addition, some educators may not feel comfortable sharing their personal information to receive the help they need, and thus this issue may still persist with some educators who are uncomfortable seeking help. These are some issues the school board may proactively want to investigate further by conducting exit surveys once the pilot project comes to a close or another form of data collection.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined the urgency for help for teacher mental health, particularly after the devastating effects of COVID-19. By encouraging policy makers and school administrative staff to redesign the programs already put into place and explore new ideologies where mentally healthy teachers create mentally healthy schools, we will achieve UNESCO's vision for the future. The need for reimagining teacher workload, stress, and burnout, especially for new teachers is crucial. With the small increases of new teachers leaving the profession, schools must ensure that they are actively training and keeping up with teacher mental health to create mentally healthy schools for 2050.

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