

Academic Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Triarchic Analysis of Education Policy Developments across Canada

Louis Volante
Brock University

Camila Lara
Brock University

Don A. Klinger
University of Waikato

Melissa Siegel
Maastricht University / UNU-MERIT

Abstract

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of provincial policy documents, following deductive methods, to examine academic resilience and education policy developments across Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, the study explicates the nature and scope of provincial policy responses to the global pandemic that address academic issues, physical health and well-being, and mental health issues for K–12 students. The pan-Canadian analysis revealed a total of 62 documents were issued between January 2020 and December 2021 that addressed one or more of the triarchic dimensions of academic resilience. The findings suggested greater attention was devoted to academic issues and there was a general lack of policy differentiation in terms of how specific resources and supports were to be directed within provincial educational jurisdictions.

Keywords: academic resilience, educational policy, learning supports and resources

Résumé

Cette étude a employé une analyse qualitative de contenu des documents de politiques provinciales, en suivant des méthodes déductives, pour examiner la ténacité scolaire et le développement des politiques d'éducation à travers le Canada pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. Plus précisément, l'étude détaille la nature et la portée des réponses politiques provinciales à la pandémie mondiale qui traitent des questions relatives à l'éducation, à la santé physique, au bien-être, et à la santé mentale des étudiants de la maternelle à la 12^e année. L'analyse pancanadienne révèle qu'un total de 62 documents ont été publiés entre janvier 2020 et décembre 2021 qui abordaient une ou plusieurs dimensions triarchiques de la ténacité scolaire. Les conclusions mènent à penser qu'une plus grande attention est accordée aux problématiques scolaires et qu'il y a un manque général de différenciation dans les politiques quant à la façon dont les ressources et les soutiens seraient utilisés au sein des instances éducatives provinciales.

Mots-clés : ténacité scolaire, politique éducative, ressources et soutiens aux apprentissages

Acknowledgements

This research is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Introduction

The global pandemic has created monumental challenges for education systems around the world. In every industrialized country, COVID-19 led to school closures for successive weeks and a sudden shift to online instruction to help reduce the risk of transmission and keep students safe. While statistics vary across provinces, Canadian schools in general were closed for a total of 51 weeks—placing the nation in the highest bracket globally for school closures (see UNESCO, n.d.). Understandably, students, parents, educators, and policy makers are concerned about the negative impact associated with the loss of face-to-face instruction and social isolation measures. For the most part, researchers have begun to tackle this issue by examining the possibility of academic learning losses associated with school closures. Simply put, learning loss research attempts to quantify, using large-scale student assessment results, the degree of progress, or lack thereof, in core subject areas (i.e., reading, mathematics, science) that have resulted from interruptions to in-person schooling. This research suggests that learning has stalled during the pandemic, and that at-risk student populations, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have been disproportionately affected (see Bailey et al., 2021; Blazko et al., 2021; Depping et al., 2021; Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Engzell et al., 2021; Kaffenberger, 2021; Maldonato & De Witte, 2021).

Discussions of student progress, or lack thereof, are often framed in relation to the construct of academic resilience, which is used to denote those children who obtain positive achievement outcomes despite being disadvantaged (Agasisti, et al., 2018; Volante & Klinger, 2022a; Ye et al., 2021). Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharper focus the importance of considering other factors that influence the health, well-being, and future success of students, such as non-cognitive learning outcomes and the policies that support these skills. Indeed, we have argued for a broader conceptualization of academic resilience that is not confined solely to cognitive measures of academic achievement, such as those captured by traditional reading, mathematics, and science

large-scale testing measures (Volante et al., 2021; Volante & Klinger, 2022b). Although there is a tendency for public policy makers to focus on these traditional cognitive skills, the research literature is clear that consideration of both cognitive and non-cognitive domains is better positioned to inform the development of education policies and related support programs for disadvantaged students (Kautz, 2014; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018).

Further support for a broader conceptualization of academic resilience is partly evidenced by the troubling general physical wellness and mental health trends that have recently emerged during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, a pan-Canadian study of physical activity during the pandemic found less than 5% of children five to 11 years old and 0.6% of youth 12 to 17 years old were meeting required daily guidelines (Moore et al., 2020). Coupled with unhealthy behaviours such as a significant increase in screen time and the consumption of more snack foods (Carroll et al., 2020), it is fair to conclude that the physical health of Canadian children has substantially deteriorated. Similarly, a recent study in Ontario found 67 to 70% of children and adolescents experienced deterioration in at least one of six mental health domains during the pandemic, including depression, anxiety, irritability, attention, hyperactivity, and obsessions/compulsions (Cost et al., 2021).

Those findings also converge with a pan-Canadian analysis that indicated a significant worsening of mental health for families living with children under the age of 18 (Gadermann et al., 2021). It is worth noting that mental health concerns have been especially prevalent among youth with physical health concerns during the pandemic (see Hawke et al., 2020), underscoring the interconnections between these two key dimensions of student success. Collectively, these findings underscore the multifaceted and triarchic nature of the challenges Canadian families and students are facing and the need for broader notions of academic resilience that recognize the importance of cognitive learning outcomes such as academic achievement, alongside pivotal issues such as physical and mental health.

Triarchic Model of Academic Resilience

Contemporary research studies have provided the rationale for a broader conceptualization of academic resilience that recognizes important physical well-being and mental health concerns in K–12 student populations—two elements that are typically not captured by large-scale assessment results (Volante et al., 2021). However, there are a few examples within and outside of Canada where policy makers widely report on the overall physical well-being and/or mental health status of their student population. Although the Canadian government and national organizations have not avoided these important issues, as evidenced by the recently released *Physical and Health Education Canada's 2021-2024 Strategic Plan* (see Physical and Health Education Canada, 2021) or the *Guide to Student Mental Health During COVID-19* (Health Canada, 2020), relatively little is known cross-nationally about how provincial policy makers have addressed these types of concerns during the pandemic.

This study explicates the nature and scope of provincial policy responses to the global pandemic that address key dimensions of academic resilience for K–12 students. We have constructed a *Triarchic Model of Academic Resilience* that aligns with the empirical research and emerges from a detailed analysis of provincial policy developments. It is worth noting that the proposed model recognizes the interconnections among academic performance, physical well-being, and mental health, and is strongly supported by a large body of empirical research (see Benningfield & Stephan, 2015; Chernyshenko et al., 2018; Coe et al., 2012; Eide et al., 2010; Eisenberg et al., 2016; Jackson, 2015; Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Matingwina, 2018), while the proposed elements, which will be discussed further in the results section, are grounded in our pan-Canadian analysis. Thus, our research offers the broader community an overview of how resilience is both conceptualized and addressed across Canada, as well as the degree to which the proposed policy interventions converge with the available best-practice research literature.

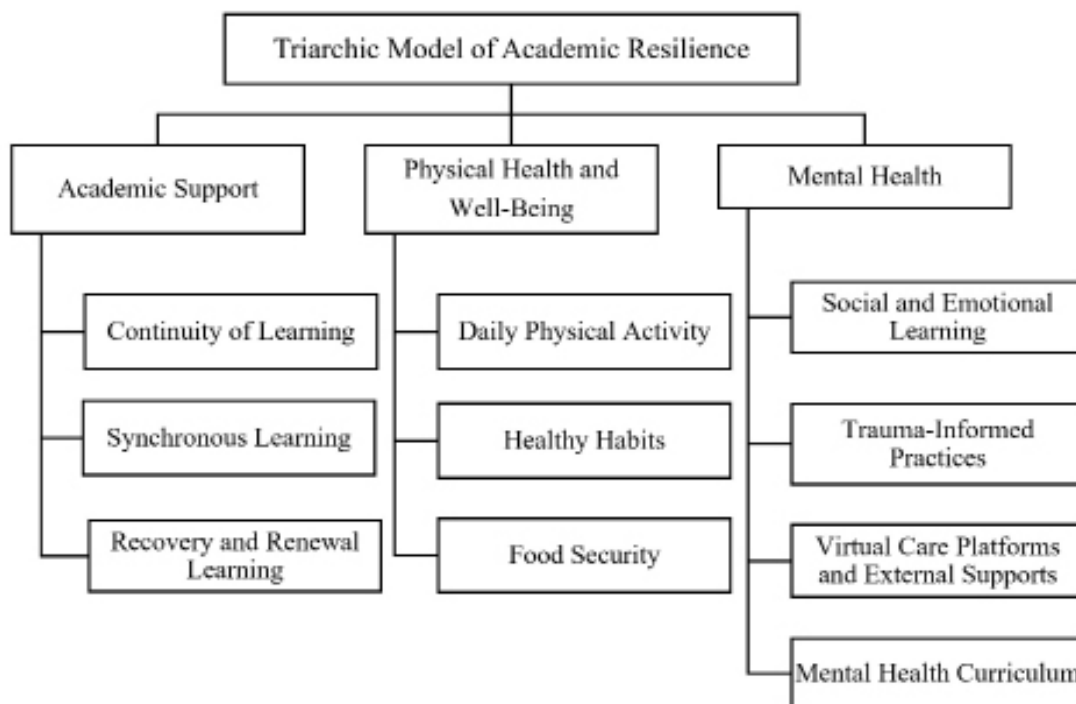
Methodology

A qualitative content analysis of provincial policy documents was performed following deductive methods (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2015; Lorelli et al., 2017). Following our triarchic model, three initial coding categories were identified to represent the general resilience dimensions noted in the empirical literature. The process

was also iterative in that sub-categories were added to specific dimensions based on an analysis and re-analysis of provincial policy documents. Overall, the development of sub-categories and the triarchic model depicted in Figure 1 represented key policy developments noted cross-nationally.

Figure 1

Triarchic Model of Academic Resilience



Document Collection and Classification

The documents that were selected for analysis represent guidelines and resources issued by provincial governments to school authorities that specifically address academic resilience in relation to the impact of COVID-19. All the policy documents that were analyzed in this study were gathered through the websites of each provincial Ministry/Department of Education. Only policy documents issued between January 2020 to December 2021 that made explicit or implicit references to *academic support*, *physical health*, *mental health* and *well-being*, and/or *resilience* were selected for inclusion in this study.

This timeframe coincides with the lead up to the school closures in Canada in March of 2020 as well as the planning and policy interventions that have occurred through successive waves of the pandemic, including the fall semester of the 2021–2022 school year.

As shown in Table 1, a total of 62 documents was analyzed. The table provides the total number of documents identified that aligned with each resilience dimension, as well as the relative percentages across all of Canada. It is worth noting that individual policy documents could be counted toward more than one dimension. For example, if a policy document provided guidance related to daily physical activity and the need to moderate the amount of time students spend using digital technology, it could be counted in two separate dimensions in Table 1. It is for this reason that the raw total of policy documents in each dimension equals more than the total number of documents for each province. This process allowed the research team to get a broad snapshot of the distribution of dimensions within a province and across Canada. More fine-grain analyses were also conducted to examine the depth of information in each dimension within and across specific provincial jurisdictions.

Table 1

Total Number of Documents Analyzed by Province and Resilience Dimension

Province	Total Number of Documents	Academic Supports	Physical Health Supports	Mental Health Supports
1. AB	4	4	1	3
2. BC	8	3	3	3
3. MB	14	10	4	6
4. NB	16	11	7	10
5. NL	3	3	2	1
6. NS	10	8	2	2
7. ON	4	4	0	3
8. PEI	1	1	0	0
9. QC	1	1	1	1
10. SK	1	0	0	1
TOTAL	62	45	20	30
% Share		73%	32%	48%

Coding and Document Analysis

As previously noted, sub-categories were created to highlight key approaches followed by provinces under each of the following general dimensions:

- *Academic Supports*: Policies, procedures, and/or guidelines that support students' academic success.
- *Physical Health Supports*: Policies, procedures, and/or guidelines that support students' physical health and well-being.
- *Mental Health Supports*: Policies, procedures, and/or guidelines that support students' mental health.

To reiterate, the categories and sub-categories noted in Figure 1 were revised based on successive provincial analyses and re-analyses. This approach aligns with general notions of grounded theory in that data collection, data analysis, and theory development are intertwined and interdependent, rather than successive steps in the research procedure (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Thus, it is fair to assert that the final model depicted in Figure 1 is firmly grounded in the Canadian policy literature and can be juxtaposed against available best-practice research to determine the rigour of contemporary Canadian policy interventions.

Findings

Following our *Triarchic Model of Academic Resilience*, our analysis indicated that while the majority of provinces developed policies or guidelines to support students' academic needs during the pandemic, jurisdictions tended to underemphasize the importance of students' physical and mental health needs. Only two provinces—New Brunswick and Manitoba—developed strong policy responses that addressed all three key resilience dimensions for their K–12 student population. These two provinces, along with British Columbia, developed a number of policy documents, guidelines, and resources to address physical health and mental health concerns.

While Nova Scotia also developed a series of responses to the pandemic, these focused heavily on addressing the academic needs of students. From the 10 policy documents that were analyzed for Nova Scotia, only two related to physical health and mental

health supports. Ontario, Alberta, and Newfoundland developed limited policy responses overall. Similar to Nova Scotia, their policy documents focused primarily on academic supports.

The remaining jurisdictions—Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Prince Edward Island—developed weak policy measures/actions to address the overall needs of students during the global pandemic. Each of these provinces developed one policy document over the course of the pandemic to address the needs of students. The next sections consider specific dimensions of our resilience model in greater detail across Canada.

Academic Supports

Out of the three academic resilience dimensions discussed in our model, provinces across the country targeted the academic needs of students the most. Provincial policy responses centred on the *continuity of learning* and adopting appropriate teaching practices for at-home learning. Additionally, provinces such as Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia emphasized the need to address the *learning loss* associated with school closures and the shift to remote learning through the development of *recovery strategies*.

Continuity of learning. The shift from in-person to remote learning required provinces across the country to implement policy responses that guaranteed students' *continuity of learning*. In order to achieve this, provinces such as Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland focused on providing students and teachers with access to appropriate digital tools, internet connection, as well as technical and instructional support as needed (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020k; Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2021c; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021a). For instance, New Brunswick launched the *Laptop Subsidy Program*, to assist low- to middle-income families with purchasing a laptop as a means to avoid interruptions during the shift from in-person learning to remote learning (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020b, 2020k).

Additionally, as a means to provide additional support to students with their academic needs, teachers from across New Brunswick prepared the *Learning at Home K-12* learning materials. These materials identified important knowledge and skills from the school curriculum for students to learn and practise every day while learning remotely. The materials contain interesting activities to support students of all ages and grades

during the pandemic (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2020g). The development of these guides was a result of the New Brunswick Ministry's mandate, which required teachers to provide support through home learning materials (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020h). Newfoundland also required teachers to acknowledge that, due to irregular attendance during 2020–2021, students may be at different levels of knowledge and skill in specific courses and grade levels (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2021b). As a means to address this, teachers were expected to develop strong relationships with students to further support their learning (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2021b).

Similarly, provinces such as British Columbia and Manitoba focused on developing learning plans that promoted equitable access to remote learning. British Columbia promoted the development of low-tech at-home learning plans that would allow students to shift quickly between in-person and remote learning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d), while Manitoba required schools to follow the *Blended Learning* guide, which established the type of material that should be instructed to students during in-person learning versus remote learning (Manitoba Education, 2020a, 2020g). Manitoba also ensured that teachers were provided specific teaching methods/models and established learning standards to promote students' success during the pandemic (Manitoba Education, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020g).

A number of jurisdictions also created *centralized curriculum support hubs*, such as Alberta's Student Learning Hub, Nova Scotia's Homework Hub, and Manitoba's Remote Learning Support Centre. These virtual hubs included materials such as FAQs, resources to help educators facilitate remote learning, and resources to support diverse student learning needs (Alberta Education, 2020, 2021g; Manitoba Education, 2020f, 2021c; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021c, 2021d).

Synchronous learning. *Synchronous learning* strategies were promoted by several provinces across Canada as a means to support students with at-home learning. Synchronous learning promotes an interactive and engaging way to learn through the use of texts, videos, or voice communication (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021a; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021a; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021e, 2021f). As

Ontario states, this learning strategy supports the well-being and academic achievement of all students by enabling educators to instruct and connect with students in real time (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020).

As part of students' schedule during remote learning, Ontario's Ministry of Education established the minimum amount of time per day that students, depending on their grade level, must be involved in synchronous learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021a). While no specific requirements were established in other provinces, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia also required teachers to use this learning strategy as much as possible to promote individual, small-group, and whole-class video conferencing, phone conversations, or conference calls (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021e).

Recovery of learning. Addressing the *learning loss* experienced by students as a result of the pandemic has been the priority for many provincial governments. As a result, the majority of provinces have put forward *recovery strategies* to address these learning gaps. While some provinces have focused on the creation of *literacy and numeracy programs*, other provinces have introduced *sufficient learning approaches and assessment* to acknowledge the learning disruptions caused by the pandemic and respond accordingly. For instance, both Alberta and Ontario developed literacy and numeracy programs for students—each with a different purpose. Ontario's programs focused on providing literacy and math programs for students to earn credits during summer school and access online tutoring services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021a, 2021c). Alberta's literacy and numeracy programs focused on measuring how classroom disruptions caused by the pandemic were affecting student learning—particularly among kindergarten to Grade 3 students (Alberta Education, 2021d, 2021e).

To account for the suspension of in-class instruction and learning standards, several jurisdictions introduced *sufficient learning approaches and assessments*. In Alberta and Manitoba, school authorities could—as deemed appropriate—reduce time spent teaching non-core subjects to allow for additional instruction time on literacy and numeracy so that sufficient learning could occur (Alberta Education, 2020; Manitoba Education, 2020e). Ontario and British Columbia introduced *sufficient learning assessments*. These assessments focus on assessing students' knowledge based on the development of key literacy and numeracy skills, rather than mastery of specific content (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021b, 2021c). In British

Columbia, teachers assessed what individual students know, understand, and are able to demonstrate to determine whether sufficient learning had taken place to enable the student to pursue further learning in the curricular and content area (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2021d). Similarly, Ontario's assessment priorities focus on identifying students' strengths and learning gaps to ensure students have fundamental building blocks to transition to their next grade or course, while acknowledging the prolonged absence of students from the classroom (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021b, 2021c). Similarly, Newfoundland required school districts to develop specific assessment practices that take into account the pandemic conditions and allow both flexibility and multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding and application of key concepts. For instance, this province's English School District developed the *Assessment and Evaluation Protocol* to assist teachers on understanding students' needs (Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2021b).

Physical Health Supports

Provinces across the country developed relatively weak policy responses to the physical health and well-being of students during the pandemic. While there were a few jurisdictions that developed policy guidelines to address these needs, the large majority of provinces centred on the establishment of public health guidelines to stop the spread of the virus as a means to promote students' safety and physical health. For instance, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Prince Edward Island did not develop any policy responses to promote students' physical health and well-being during the pandemic beyond their public health guidelines.

Daily physical activity. Overall, New Brunswick developed the strongest policy responses to address the physical health and well-being needs of students and their families. The province's Department of Education provided specific recommendations, based on students' ages, of the type of physical activity that should be performed, including information on whether it should be moderate aerobic, vigorous aerobic, or muscle and bone strengthening (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020j). For instance, their Department of Education stated that children aged five to 11 years should do at least 60 minutes of moderate- to high-energy physical activity daily, while youth aged 12 to 17 years should have a minimum of 60 minutes per day of physical

activity, including both vigorous and muscle strengthening activities three days per week (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020j).

New Brunswick also highlighted the importance for students to create routines that include daily structured exercise, spending time outside, and engaging in movement that is patterned, repetitive, or rhythmic, such as walking and dancing (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020a, 2020p). According to the New Brunswick Department of Education, this type of activity can be calming and regulating for the brain and body (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020a). British Columbia was also one of the few provinces that emphasized the need for daily participation in physical activity at moderate to vigorous intensity levels (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020b). This province required schools to promote physical activity as much as possible—while following public health guidelines—to ensure that students were achieving the required daily exercise to maintain a healthy lifestyle (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020b).

Healthy habits. Promoting the development of healthy habits during the pandemic—such as good sleeping habits and technology moderation—was evidenced in the policies of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, who explicitly addressed these issues among students. For instance, Nova Scotia developed several guidelines to support students' development of healthy sleeping habits by encouraging them to exercise more during the day and to shut off screens 60 minutes before bedtime (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021a, 2021b). Similarly, parents were encouraged to support their children to create a consistent bedtime routine by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021c). The Department also encouraged students to take care of themselves by eating well, playing outside, dancing, making time for hobbies, finding opportunities for play, learning a new skill, getting enough sleep, and relaxing (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021a, 2021b).

New Brunswick advised parents to limit children's time with media/TV and schedule a calming activity, such as taking a walk, doing yoga, etc., after they watched the news or took in information on social media (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020a). In addition, parents were advised to limit their time watching the news to avoid exposing children (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020a, 2020p).

Food security. New Brunswick and British Columbia were the only provinces that developed specific policy responses to ensure food security among students during the pandemic. In British Columbia, school districts with existing meal programs were required to continue to work with community partners to provide meal support to families in need, in alignment with current public health guidelines (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a). Additionally, the Ministry asked school authorities to be aware that students who were not considered vulnerable prior to the COVID-19 pandemic may now be vulnerable (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a). Similarly, New Brunswick also ensured that breakfast and snack programs continued to run uninterrupted to ensure food security throughout the pandemic (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020m).

Mental Health Supports

Despite the lack of policy development around mental health, all provinces—with the exception of Prince Edward Island—have acknowledged the importance of addressing the mental health needs of students during the pandemic as a means to support their academic success. However, only New Brunswick and Manitoba took a strong stance in developing prominent policy responses to support students under this dimension. For instance, Manitoba's re-opening plan for the September 2020 school year focused heavily on addressing students' mental health and well-being as core elements of the re-opening planning (Manitoba Education, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h, 2020i, 2020j, 2021a, 2021b). The Manitoba Ministry required each school division to prepare a strategy that responded to their local community needs and include it as part of their plan for 2020/2021.

Social and emotional learning. The use of social-emotional learning strategies (SEL) was widely promoted across Canada during the pandemic as a means to support resiliency, develop self-awareness, manage students' stress, achieve goals, and build positive relationships (Alberta Education, 2021b, 2021f; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020c; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021a; Manitoba Education, 2020g; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020o; Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2020, 2021a). As provinces across the country argue, SEL techniques not only promote students' well-being and positive mental health, but they also ensure that students are more likely to succeed academi-

cally by receiving increased supports (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a, 2020c; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020o). This was a positive finding and suggests a growing recognition of the importance of both cognitive and non-cognitive learning skills as key determinants of future success.

To ensure that staff were able to use SEL strategies successfully, some provinces also focused on training staff on SEL techniques. For instance, for the 2021–2022 school year, Ontario provided staff with professional learning opportunities with a focus on building students' SEL skills so that they could build resilience, manage student stress, and build positive relationships (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021a). Similarly, New Brunswick encouraged families to promote SEL at home by learning more about SEL skills and by modelling behaviours (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020o). According to their Department of Education, families could adopt practices that reinforced SEL skills at home, such as modelling emotional regulation, recognizing and praising emotional regulation, and focusing on strengths before talking about shortcomings and needed improvements (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020o).

Trauma-informed practices. British Columbia and Manitoba were the only two provinces that promoted the use of trauma-informed practice, which focused on helping students communicate their needs, as well as regulate their emotions and behaviour with compassion and understanding so that they could experience growth in personal and social competency (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020b; Manitoba Education, 2020f).

Virtual care platforms and external supports. A large number of provinces focused on the use of virtual care platforms to deliver mental health services online, as well as the development of guidelines for parents and teachers on how to navigate the pandemic with children at home. For example, Manitoba and New Brunswick released resources that parents/teachers could use to prepare them to talk about COVID with children (Alberta Education, 2021c; Manitoba Education, 2020g, 2020h; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020a, 2020p). These documents also guided parents to ensure they promoted calm and stress-free behaviours at home as a means to promote students' mental health (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2021a; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020i, 2020p; Manitoba Education, 2020g, 2020h).

For instance, Nova Scotia developed several guideline documents that supported students with self-management strategies like mindfulness, yoga, meditation, art, or relaxation techniques to manage anxious thoughts (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021b). Ontario, Alberta, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island provided students/parents with an extensive list of external resources that they could access for additional mental health services if they felt stressed or anxious about the pandemic (Alberta Education, 2020; Manitoba Education, 2021c; Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2021b; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021d; Prince Edward Island Department of Health, 2021).

Mental health curriculum. Interestingly, Alberta is the only province that required school authorities to incorporate wellness curriculum outcomes, with a focus on mental health, for K–6 students, and a focus on physical and mental health for Grade 7–9 students. While there were no requirements for students in Grades 10–12 to receive wellness supports, the Ministry argued that high school students continue to be required to take physical education and the Career and Life Management course (which includes information about mental health) as part of their graduation requirements (Alberta Education, 2020).

In addition, as a means to address mental health and provide psychosocial supports for students and staff, Alberta Education introduced the Specialized Learning Support (SLS) Grant (Alberta Education, 2021a). This grant provided funding for school authorities to offer a continuum of supports and services to students in an inclusive learning environment (Alberta Education, 2021a). SLS funding is comprised of three allocations, including a Student Wellness Program allocation. The funding allows for psychological and social-emotional support, supports for loss, access to mental health workers and behavioural consultants, and other wellness supports as needed (Alberta Education, 2021a). Within this policy document, the Ministry has also established that schools must use this grant to provide universal supports, targeted supports, and individualized supports (Alberta Education, 2021a).

Discussion

In spite of the ongoing presence of COVID-19 within our communities, provinces across Canada are removing vaccine mandates and COVID-19 restrictions in an attempt to return to “normal.” Few would have predicted that COVID-19 would disrupt our lives for

years, and the current relaxation of restrictions relates to the overall sense of exhaustion and desire to return to “normal.” Currently, in the spring of 2022, Canadian schools have universally returned to face-to-face classes, with face mask policies also being relaxed across provinces. Nevertheless, disruptions continue to occur due to community outbreaks of the more infectious, but less severe, Omicron variant. Positive COVID-19 tests result in a further, albeit reduced, period of isolation, and these can vary depending on the transmission of the virus through a household.

The policies we have surveyed and analyzed here by Ministries of Education across the country underscore the importance of academic achievement, physical wellness, and mental health, albeit to varying degrees. Collectively, the model depicted in Figure 1 aligns with the best-practice literature, but, as previously noted, is representative of the Canadian context as a whole. Indeed, no provincial jurisdiction, with the exception of New Brunswick, comes close to addressing the richness of all the subdimensions represented in our model. Therefore, our model can serve as a useful heuristic for provincial policy makers interested in attending to gaps in their policy documents and outreach activities.

Not surprisingly, provincial policies focused the majority of their efforts on the academic needs of students in order to provide *continuity of learning*. Adaptations were quickly made to support online teaching, learning and assessment, with further supports to provide more equitable access to broadband and education technology. As the impacts and presence of COVID-19 continued in our communities, even with the availability of vaccines, education policies increasingly focused on challenges likely to arise due to even further lockdowns and uncertainty. The speed at which provinces provided direction, policies, and supports is to be lauded. Many of the provinces produced substantive materials during 2020 (e.g., Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario), with some optimistically providing “return to school” plans that same year (e.g., Manitoba Education, 2020f, 2020g, 2020h, 2020i, 2020j; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020k; Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education, 2020). With the continuance of the pandemic in 2021, many provinces provided further resources and supports, with health and well-being receiving more attention in these policies.

Overall, our pan-Canadian analysis converges with the international literature. That is, while much of the international community is principally concerned with the deleterious effects of COVID-19 on cognitive skills and achievement outcomes (captu-

red via learning loss research), this preoccupation is also mirrored in the general pattern of educational policy developments across provincial jurisdictions. Although we do not discount the importance of addressing critical learning losses and associated academic outcomes in Canadian students, it was somewhat surprising that more attention was not devoted to the two other dimensions—particularly since there appears to be a growing recognition of the importance of non-cognitive skills such as social-emotional learning. Nevertheless, SEL is not synonymous with mental health, and the relative underrepresentation and even omission of mental and physical health supports in select provinces is a rather troubling finding. This is especially concerning when one considers the long-term effects of the pandemic on mental and physical health and the implications for our post-COVID world (Volante et al., 2021).

It is also worth noting that current Canadian research suggests schools will need to balance universal responses to COVID-19 with more targeted strategies to help particular groups of students to cope with heightened stress and mental health issues (Schwartz et al., 2021). Although there is evidence that teachers had increased access to professional development to support efforts to monitor and help students across these non-academic resilience dimensions, the extent of such professional development, and the prioritization of this professional development for vulnerable student groups and communities, is not clear. Our analysis also suggested that the materials and resources developed by provincial jurisdictions tended to focus on guidelines for the broader population, with little evidence of differentiated resourcing to address the specific needs of those communities most at risk. As previously noted, mental and physical health supports are crucial for disadvantaged communities and schools since they are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy makers would be wise to provide further direction to districts and schools to support equity-driven differentiation efforts.

COVID-19 has highlighted the educational inequities that exist across families and communities. As ongoing research demonstrates, there are some students who appear to have been largely unaffected by the pandemic, while others have witnessed substantial negative impacts on their education, physical and mental health, and overall well-being (Engzell et al., 2021; Kaffenberger, 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Maldonato & De Witte, 2021). There is an underlying assumption across the policy documents we analyzed that families and communities not only have equal access to, and understanding of, these supports and guidelines, but also have the resources to implement these effectively on behalf

of their children. As one example, New Brunswick and British Columbia were the only provinces to implement policies to target specific students, in relation to ensuring food security for those children on meal programs prior to the pandemic (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020a; New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2020m). In British Columbia, school authorities were also requested to identify students who may have become vulnerable as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the overwhelming evidence of the inequities that COVID-19 has created, Canadian provinces must now differentially direct time and resources to ensure all of our children can develop the academic resiliency to move forward from the COVID-19 pandemic. Without such differentiated efforts, the benefits of the policies and resources that are developed will not be fully realized, with detrimental results for a significant portion of our most vulnerable children.

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