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**MTE Mothers: Finding Balance
During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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MTE Mothers: Finding Balance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how MTE mothers adapted instructional practices to ensure the health and safety of their students, while caring for their families and personal wellbeing. To better understand these issues the following research questions were posed:

1. How are MTEs adapting curriculum to meet regulations associated with COVID-19?

2. What are the emotional implications of teaching during a pandemic, both for the teacher and their perceived implications for students?

3. What do MTEs need in order to feel successful, supported, or adequate with teaching in a pandemic?

A basic qualitative design was used for this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were purposively sampled to include five female music teacher educators from separate institutions across the United States. They represented choral, general, instrumental, and string disciplines. Participants met with the researchers four times between February and April 2021 using Zoom. We provided guiding questions based on initial interviews and meeting transcriptions to initiate deeper conversations.

The following themes emerged: Stressors, Changes, and Positives from Covid; Finding Balance: Teaching While Parenting, Parenting While Teaching, and Needing Spousal Support;

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Blurred Lines: Losing, Reforming, and Creating Boundaries; Impact on Students and Instruction; and Benefits of Participation: Considering Work Demands, Mental Health, and Gratitude. Mental health, maintaining work/home life balance, and concerns for students' wellbeing were among the most prominent findings. Implications for change to institutions of higher learning to better support MTE mothers are explored.

Keywords: MTE mothers, COVID-19, pandemic, higher education, music education

Introduction

COVID-19 has significantly impacted teaching and learning in every discipline. Music teacher educators (MTEs) have had to navigate new instructional practices and technologies, rethink curriculum, and ensure mandated safety protocols within classroom spaces since the pandemic began (deBruin, 2021; Krishnamoorthy & Keating, 2021; Mylnczak, 2021; Shaw, 2021). In addition, MTEs who are parents have had to learn how to be a stay-at-home parent and pseudo-homeschool teachers while maintaining their professorial obligations (Alon et al., 2020; Arnett, 2021; Augustus, 2021; Fitzpatrick-Harnish & Sweet, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020).

Issues related to faculty stress have been well researched prior to COVID-19. Researchers have indicated the most common sources of stress were workload demands, service to the university and community, work/life balance, and tenure and promotion expectations (Alves et al., 2019; Gruber et. al., 2020; Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017; Meng & Wang, 2018). In addition, Delello et al., (2014) added internal and external politics, online teaching and technology issues, economic pressure, and managing students as factors that contribute to faculty stress. As more researchers examine the effects of the pandemic on stress and academia, they have found increased burnout to be common among faculty as they adapt instruction and attempt to meet the emotional needs of their students (Alves et al., 2019; Course Hero, 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Gruber et. al., 2020; Milstein, 2021).

The pandemic has affected women differently than men (Yildirim & Eslen- Ziya, 2021). Women who are mothers coped with increased job/role stress (Kossek et al., 2012; Michailidis, 2008; Milstein, 2021) and work/life balance (Arnett, 2021; Fitzpatrick-Harnish & Sweet, 2021; Milstein, 2021) prior to COVID-19; however, these occurrences have been exacerbated because

of the pandemic (Arnett, 2021; Augustus, 2021; Fitzpatrick-Harnish & Sweet, 2021; Milstein, 2021). Fitzpatrick-Harnish and Sweet (2021) noted the work/life balance demands as if women were "living within two worlds. The worlds don't collide but affect each other. Each world has its own expectations, timelines, mental load, demands, challenges" (February 26, 2021, 2:00 P.M.). The researchers found MTEs survived academia by packing their work into every small block of time during the day so they could be home with their families in the off-work hours; this left MTEs feeling exhausted and unable to adapt if schedules changed (Fitzpatrick-Harnish & Sweet, 2021).

Researchers examining COVID-19 speculated that the demands of parenting while working from home would have the greatest impact on working women with children (Arnett, 2021; Augustus, 2021; Brown, 2010; Fitzpatrick-Harnish & Sweet, 2021). The closure of schools, move to remote learning, and lack of childcare forced parents to work from home while simultaneously providing remote school and childcare (Alon et al., 2020; Augustus, 2021; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020). The pandemic highlighted the existing inequities due to the exaggerated disparities related to home responsibilities held by working parents related to gender (Anderson et al., 2020; Augustus, 2021; Guatimosim, 2020; Inno et al., 2020; Minello, 2020; Myers et al., 2020; Viglione, 2020). A few researchers found the burden of childcare and remote learning to be greater for those who have children with special needs (Arnett, 2021; Milstein, 2021).

The pandemic also has exacerbated gender equity issues in terms of job tasks and promotion and tenure expectations (Augustus, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, women with young children were less likely than their male counterparts to achieve tenure and more likely to experience discrimination based on family status (Mason & Gould, 2002, 2004; Mason et al.,

2006; Wolfinger et al., 2008). Submissions to journals by women declined during the pandemic while submissions by male authors increased. The largest decline were submissions by female parents of multiple children, especially whose children were young (Anderson, Nielsen, & Simone, 2020; Inno, Rotundi, & Piccialli, 2020; Myers et al, 2020; Viglione, 2020). Researchers have shown a lack of time for research among female academics and significantly more time taken for service and teaching during the pandemic (Arnett, 2021; Fitzpatrick-Harnish & Sweet, 2021; Milstein, 2021). Milstein (2021) noted that faculty took on the role of therapist to their students during the pandemic, adding to both their time and mental/emotional load. In addition, women with children were more likely to pivot their careers to take care of ill family members or were still required to teach and perform service during leave or times of family emergency (Blau & DeVaro, 2007; Fitzpatrick-Harnish & Sweet, 2021).

Due to the impact Covid-19 has had on our profession, we wanted to consider how MTEs, specifically those who are mothers, have navigated teaching and parenting. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how MTE mothers have adapted instructional practices to ensure the health and safety of their students, while also caring for their families and personal wellbeing. To better understand these issues the following research questions were posed: 1. How are MTEs adapting their curriculum to meet requirements and regulations associated with COVID-19? 2. What are the emotional implications of teaching during a pandemic, both for the teacher and their perceived implications for students? 3. What do MTEs gain by participating in a learning community during a pandemic?

Design

We chose a basic qualitative study design for this study. According to Merriam and Tisdale (2016) this design is suited for researchers who wish to understand "how people interpret

their experiences [the pandemic] . . .construct their worlds [a new normal], and meaning they

attribute to their experiences [shifts in praxis]" (p. 23). As MTE mothers ourselves, we were

interested in how other MTE mothers made "sense of their lives and their worlds" through

COVID-19 (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.25). After obtaining Institutional Review Board

approval from both researcher universities, participants were purposively sampled to include five

female music teacher educators, each on faculty at separate institutions from a variety of regions

in the United States. We first recruited interest on a social media page specifically for MTE

mothers. We then emailed several of the group page members individually. Participants in this

study represent choral, general, instrumental, and string disciplines, with one participant working

as the only music education faculty member at her institution. We also served as participant-

researchers and intended the group to serve not only as a site for research, but as a learning

community to support one another during the pandemic.

Data Collection, Trustworthiness, and Analysis

Data we collected were initial interviews, transcriptions of group Zoom meetings,

Discord® discussions, exit interviews, and researcher memos. Initial and exit interviews were

semi-structured with six open-ended questions that allowed participants to guide the

conversation. A total of four group Zoom meetings followed a similar structure. Trustworthiness

of the data was ensured through multiple points of data collection, member checks, and peer

review. We invited participants to check transcriptions, codes, and the study write up to ensure

their voices were accurately represented. Only one participant suggested minor changes to

transcriptions. We coded interview and meeting transcriptions separately using Process and In

Vivo coding (Saldańa, 2016), and then compared code lists for triangulation. Additionally, to

remain aware of our own experiences and assumptions we employed reflexivity to ensure themes

emerged from the group rather than our own biases (Patton, 2015). We then used code mapping

to organize codes into categories, and pattern coding for our second cycle of coding to bring

categories into more "meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis" (Saldańa, 2016, p. 236),

from there themes emerged.

Researcher's Lens

Author One:

My first experiences as a mother in higher education were in graduate school. I did not

have the necessary support needed to balance motherhood, coursework, and assistantship

responsibilities. I completed my doctorate and began my career as a music teacher educator

during the height of the pandemic. These experiences shape the biases I have as a music teacher

educator and researcher.

Author Two:

I became a mother during the dissertation and job interviewing phase of my doctoral

program and began my first tenure-track position ABD and as a new mother. After moving to a

new university, the pandemic began during the second semester of my first year at a Research

One institution. Experiences as a mother, wife, and tenure-track professor prior to and during the

COVID-19 pandemic have shaped my biases as a music teacher educator and scholar.

Participants and Setting

Learning communities are multi-faceted (Dufor, 2004; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Some are

formally structured and center on data analysis, consider student outcomes, and plan for student

achievement. Others are informal, providing participants a space to discuss issues important to

them (Bell-Robertson, 2014, 2015; Pellegrino, et al., 2018). For this study, the learning

community was a virtual, informal space where MTEs shared their lived experience of teaching and parenting during the trauma of a pandemic.

Five individuals participated in our informal community, Eva, Sam, Janet, Poppy, and Jane. Eva works at a public university in the southern United States, is tenured, and became a mother during the pandemic. Sam works at a public university, in the Midwest, is tenured, and is the mother of two children aged 9 and 12. Janet works at a public university in the southern United States, finished her first year as a professor in Spring 2021, and is a mother of two a newborn and a three-year-old. Poppy teaches at a public university in the southwest, she also finished her first year as a professor in Spring 2021 and has one child aged three years. Jane works at a public university in the Midwest, is tenured, and has two children aged three and six. All participants were married and white and were provided consent for participation before initial interviews. Ages of participants' children reflect their age at the time of data collection.

Participants met with the participant-researchers four times between February and April through Zoom. At meetings, we employed guiding questions based on initial interviews and previous meeting transcriptions to initiate deeper conversations. Discord® was used between meetings, to allow participants to support each other and continue group discussions. Discord® is a voice over internet protocol (VoIP) platform that provides a space to message, share documents, and video chat. Due to the nature of being a mother and MTE, we never had full attendance at each meeting except our first. Jane did not participate in the final meeting or exit interview which is indicative of the themes that emerged from our data.

Findings

Through our data analysis, five themes emerged: Stressors, Changes, and Positives from COVID; Finding Balance: Teaching While Parenting, Parenting While Teaching, and Needing

Spousal Support; Blurred Lines: Losing, Reforming, and Creating Boundaries, Impact on

Students and Instruction; and Benefits of Participation: Considering Work Demands, Mental

Health, and Gratitude. We expected to see themes that centered on stress, family, and students.

Themes that emerged regarding school and work boundaries and the mental health benefits of

participation in the informal learning community were unexpected. We extracted quotes from

participants that best support each theme.

Stressors, Changes and Positives from COVID

   During initial interviews participants were asked to share their experiences after the

initial shutdown.

>   It was really a scramble when we realized that we no longer would have preschool or
>
>   daycare. So we said, 'Okay, you get mornings [with the kids], I get afternoons, and we
>
>   both work nights. . .it was so frantic, and we [her and her partner] didn't see each other.
>
>   We were not planning on having to teach and raise two small children in a 1000 sq. foot
>
>   apartment. (Jane, initial interview)

Online learning and a return to school in Fall 2020 also were areas of concern for participants.

>   My daughter only has one kidney. . .and we don't know the long-term effects [of
>
>   COVID]. I also didn't want to sit my kids on the computer all day long every day. I was
>
>   really torn, so I enrolled her online and then decided to homeschool. (Sam, meeting one)

   Most participants expressed feeling overwhelmed with preparing for the Fall 2020

semester. "I really felt like I needed to do professional development over the summer to prepare

for fall. . .and I'm not sure any of it was particularly helpful. . .we've never been Zoom teachers

before!!" (Jane, initial interview). Janet shared that she spent most of her summer in meetings

with other large ensemble directors trying to plan and prepare instruction as new information on

aerosols was released. "There was no point planning for a concert, there was no point in doing anything because I just didn't see us being able to do it" (Janet, initial interview). Janet also shared that she had to change curriculum because she couldn't lead her ensemble. "I can't make them sing at home. I changed the choir to vocal development techniques. I've never taught anything like that over Zoom" (initial interview). Eva's university divided a typical 15-week semester into two eight-week semesters to allow for fewer students on campus. "We didn't have a choice, of putting it [the semester] in eight weeks. How am I gonna fit everything into eight weeks???" (initial interview). Sam, the only participant who prepared for an in person semester still expressed concerns. "We were in person out of the gate. The difference for preparation was, how do I create an ensemble experience in conducting, in a safe way? So, we were outside, until the first test and then it began raining [she chuckles]" (Sam, initial interview). Author two felt they could do no preparation due to COVID policies changing weekly at their university. "Every time I thought I had it [Fall] figured out, I would get another call with a change. That was my entire summer. And then the week before school started, 'nope, you're not going face to face'" (Author two, meeting one).

Participants also expressed stress and frustration over little things that would not have bothered them pre-COVID. "All of my tears have come from stupid things like, the baby monitor. I cannot get it to pair [with my phone] and I should have quit trying three weeks ago but I'm still emailing customer service" (Eva, meeting one). "I would sit on the couch with my husband, watching Netflix and just cry, and I was like, 'what is happening?' I'm not a crier" (author two, meeting one).

Poppy and Janet shared having health issues due to the stress of the pandemic. "I was diagnosed with _____. I've had to change my whole diet. I think Covid has contributed to this"

(Poppy, meeting four). For Janet, it was a combination of physical and mental. "I feel more anxious and overwhelmed than normal" (meeting, three). Eva shared that she too had health issues. "I have an appointment for a _____ on Monday. If it were a normal semester, I would be pushing myself to be on campus and would not have this time to go to the doctor" (exit interview). ~~Participant feelings of parent role and work-related stressors are consistent with the literature pre/post pandemic (Anderson, Nielsen, & Simone, 2020; Brown, 2010; Kossek et al., 2012; Michailidis, 2008; Milstein, 2021).~~

A few participants did highlight positive changes due to the pandemic. Janet said the pandemic helped her finish her dissertation. "[It] helped me to get it done on time. That saved me time, money, and stress. That was one benefit" (initial interview). Sam, who admitted to being "chronically overscheduled" shared that it was "really nice to just be forced to not have a million things to do all of the time" (initial interview). Jane appreciated the added time with her children. "I never expected this time. We wouldn't be doing half of what we are doing; reading the books that we are reading and teaching the kids to read. I'm just trying to take the good things from [COVID]" (Jane, initial interview).

Finding Balance: Teaching While Parenting, Parenting While Teaching, and Needing Spousal Support

As MTEs and mothers, participants had to navigate the education and supervision of their children in addition to those they teach, and for some while they taught. Having to work at home and constantly share space with spouses and children impacted participants' roles as MTEs. Eva struggled to compartmentalize.

> I was advising a collegiate NAfME meeting and my four-month-old was on the bed
> screaming. While I'm on zoom I try to bounce to get them to calm down, but at some

point you just have to sit them down on the bed and let them scream while I try to do my

job. At the same time I'm trying to communicate with someone to get a quote on

landscaping, and then my husband comes in and saves the day. How am I supposed to be

doing three things at once? (meeting one)

Eva shared that she was jealous of her husband being able to leave the house for his job. Janet

and Sam felt similarly to Eva.

Janet: He's always here when I am in a meeting or teaching. He runs in and wants to say

high. Or He'll know that he is not supposed to be in [the room] so he will stand on the

other side of the computer just throwing shit everywhere!

Sam: My husband and I have this thing, like a ventriloquist. You're trying to look like a

normal person, like you're not screaming across the room at your children to stop what

they are doing [Sam models what she means and we all laugh].

Poppy shared that daycare was a lifesaver. "I feel fortunate to have a daycare that is small, and

we feel safe sending our daughter too. I wouldn't be able to teach otherwise" (meeting one). For

Jane, daycare and kindergarten were not options due to her health. "We have

immunocompromised people in our home and we both have to work. Trying to teach brass [her

partner] and viola in a 1000 sq foot apartment with two little kids is bananas" (meeting one).

Jane, like Sam, decided to homeschool her children which compounded her stress.

Some participants felt the impact the pandemic had on their children caused them the

most stress. "I'm not stressed because of the pandemic, I'm stressed because of what the

pandemic is doing to my kids" (Author one, meeting two). For Sam's son, schoolwork was a

constant battle.

I either do my workday and get it done or [do it] at night and go home and fight the fight

with my son. It was miserable. He got his work done, he is ready for his test tomorrow,

but it was miserable. (meeting two)

Participants with younger children expressed similar feelings. "It was rough. He was sad. He'll

say things like 'I want [child's name] to come over and play,' and he is not able to. In his world

that's stress" (Janet, meeting two). Sam shared that a lowered level of allowed social interaction

and a return to school has been difficult for her children. "To have a certain amount of social

interaction [outside only] has honestly saved my daughter because she has felt the stress of that

[lack of social interaction]. The reason we started school for our daughter was [for her] mental

health (Sam, meeting two).

A point of frustration for some participants was a lack of spousal support. "My husband

could not engage in the schooling. He struggled to dig deep and find the patience necessary to

work with the kids" (Sam, meeting one). During our third meeting, Sam and Janet had an

exchange over their absent-minded spouses.

Sam: I'm sorry but you've got to do some shit that these men don't need to do because

I'm working! [sharing an exchange between she and her husband]

Janet: You are totally right. My husband is awesome, but it is just the number of times

that I have to bring something to his attention. He knows what I'm doing, but this man

doesn't know what I'm going through or what I need. I don't think he realizes how much

time I'm not actually working because I'm doing stuff with my boobs!

Sam: I hear you, my husband is a good man, but we got into this big fight because I came

home [from school] and my daughter had not showered. I was like, you live in this house.

Also, she's not going to eat that because she's never eaten that, why are you giving. . .I'm

not endowed with special knowledge!!

Janet: Oh my gosh. We are in the same marriage! [laughter from all of us]

Despite teaching while parenting and a lack of spousal support, a few participants

mentioned positive family outcomes. "A silver lining was that I learned many things about my

son and was able to support him in learning" (Sam, meeting one). For Janet, she appreciated the

extra time with her newborn. "I'm not enjoying yellow necessarily [covid alert], but I'm

perfectly happy to just snuggle the baby and watch Netflix" (meeting two). Jane found that she

loved homeschooling. "I like figuring out how they learn and how to motivate them. My kids are

happy. [My son] is thriving and his best friend is his little sister. I can see why people do it

[home school]" (meeting three).

Blurred Lines: Losing, Reforming, and Creating New Boundaries

Most participants stated the pandemic shifted their work/home life balance. For some,

COVD improved their work/home balance.

I had complications [with pregnancy] and it [the pandemic] gave me a chance to slow

down and really focus on myself. I'm not grateful that the pandemic happened, but I'm

grateful I had that time away from school. [Pre-Covid] I know I would have pushed my

body past where healthy is. (Eva, initial interview)

Poppy shared that she "always struggled with work life balance, and work has always won"

(meeting three). When asked if that had changed, she stated, "being at home all the time has

made me care a lot more about my life at home. . .I find myself less willing to give up that time

as things start entering the calendar again" (Poppy, meeting three).

Sam, pre-pandemic, felt beholden to a certain number of work hours during the day.

I think COVID has actually emboldened me to be like, I gotta do family. I didn't feel

guilty about coming home in the middle of the day to help my son, and I don't think I

ever would have given myself permission like this if COVID hadn't happened. (meeting

two)

For Janet, the pandemic did not help her work/home balance. "I was always good at balancing. I

did work at work and home at home, and that was that. Now those lines are so blurred, it's really

hard to know the difference. I have a lot of mom guilt" (Janet, meeting three).

A few participants expressed discomfort with how boundaries between home and school

became blurred due to teaching over Zoom.

We [her and her husband] are still concerned about when our kids come into the zoom

class. I'm so embarrassed and it is so unprofessional. Or you know, if I have to let my

dog out during the middle of class. My breast pump is on the counter, and oh there's my

liquor over there. I just feel like I'm always trying to make sure that whatever is in the

background is appropriate for whomever is in the room. (Janet, meeting three)

While Sam felt uncomfortable dividing her home space into workspace, it was necessary. "It

feels weird to Zoom from my bedroom. . . but it's the quietest place in my home. I still feel weird

about it, but by God, I'm a grown ass person and this is where I am right now" (Sam, meeting

four). Eva agreed with Sam.

I have lost my give a shit factor. I have attended so many zoom meetings without a bra.

It's 8:00 pm, I wouldn't normally go to a meeting at 8:00 pm. Why am I putting on a bra

[for this]?!?!?!" (Eva, meeting four).

Author two shared she felt she had lost the balance between work and home. "The demands on

my time from work have exponentially increased. I work on weekends, late at night. I feel the

need to meet my students where they are and that means I work all the time" (meeting four).

As Sam stated, "the boundaries between work and home have just been so blurred that I do fear a

little bit that we might get to the point where we feel like we have to be available all the time"

(exit interview).

> The blurred lines between work and home also allow people to witness exchanges that,

pre-covid, would not have been public. During our third meeting Sam shared a conversation she

had with a colleague that left her feeling vulnerable.

> > A colleague was guest lecturing for a friend of mine and her class heard the guest
> >
> > lecturers' child have a pretty intense outburst. This child is a year younger than my son
> >
> > and is neurodiverse. This friend shared that she had not had this experience in her home
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> > and was shocked that a child would speak that way to a parent. Knowing that my role in
> >
> > that circumstance was supposed to also be aghast, but I was like, that sounds like every
> >
> > morning in my house. Every time I wake up my son, I have a particular set of behaviors
> >
> > that I can expect. I was just so struck by the fact that my friend would never have
> >
> > experienced that without zoom. It suddenly made me see how maybe some people view
> >
> > me and my experience as a parent and my children in a way that I had not considered.
> >
> > That separation between personal and professional that some people have really valued
> >
> > was torn away without consent on some level (meeting three).

Zoom is a window into our personal spaces, allowing colleagues and students to see us "behind

closed doors." As author one shared, "some people get it, because they live it, and other people

do not, and their response can be hurtful. Our safe spaces may no longer be safe" (meeting three).

Impact on Students and Instruction

Participants frequently discussed how the pandemic impacted those they taught and their instruction. Expectations of multiple modalities of teaching as well as designing new or condensed syllabi was overwhelming for participants. "We didn't have a choice of putting it into eight weeks [the semester]. I absolutely had to cut something. It was teaching episodes. I hate not having the kids have as many opportunities to teach" (Eva, initial interview). Janet felt compelled to design a new class rather than try to lead an ensemble online.

> It's the beginner choir. It's a lot of people who aren't primarily singers or do not consider themselves singers. It is a difficult choir to plan for normally. I wasn't going to make them sing at home in front of their families and whoever else might be around. I thought they're not going to want to do it. It is already hard *in person* to get them to come out of their shell. So, I made it a group voice class over Zoom. We did warm ups and vocal development. That took a lot of planning because I have never taught anything like that before, I had to create it from scratch. (initial interview)

Sam shared that, "teaching hybrid is the hardest because you're trying to engage people through the computer and engage people in class. How do you have [difficult] conversations when you're masked or can't all be in the room at the same time?" (meeting one). Sam also expressed frustration over not being able to read students' faces due to the masks. "You can't see anything. You don't know if the students understand, are engaged, are enjoying it, do they hate you? I'm trying to create a community and it's impossible. I [feel like] just performed into a tempurpedic

mattress" (Sam, meeting one) Poppy struggled with burnout. "I have this general decline in

energy, and so it makes everything harder" (Poppy, exit interview).

Some participants were keenly aware of the mental health of those they teach. "We have

this responsibility for our students. Seeing all that they are going through during this time, each

one of their individual difficult situations has been really hard for me" (Janet, meeting four).

Author one shared that most meetings with students were not for issues with assignments but

coping with the pandemic. "I have students I can tell they're struggling. They'll ask, 'Can I just

meet with you for a few minutes, I just need your opinion on something,' and it's usually about

managing stress" (Author one, meeting two). Sam was concerned about the health and safety of

students on a more global level. "Domestic violence and abuse in general is up" (meeting three).

A few participants felt the pandemic provided them with new teaching strategies. For

Janet, incorporating technology into teaching was new for her.

> I've never been one for the technology aspect of the classroom. Not that I don't think it is
>
> worthy of my time, I'm just not great with it. Now I'm seeing these really great uses of
>
> technology that really save time and energy. It's like the most incredible stuff that I wish
>
> I had learned about sooner. (exit interview)

Poppy shared that she completely changed the way she graded. She knew students were

struggling with online learning but still wanted to hold them accountable. "I want my students to

develop a sense of agency and I saw grading as an impediment to that because I was not giving

them any autonomy. So, I designed a complex grading system that provided it" (exit interview).

For Sam, it was less complex. "As an educator I have just gotten a shot in the arm and it's pretty

ironic that it's not some fancy new technology that I learned as a result of COVID, it's freaking

PowerPoint [we all laugh]" (meeting three).

Hybrid teaching, which for some participants began Spring 2021 caused a few participants cognitive dissonance. "My brain does not work the way it did pre-covid. I cannot focus the way I did when I'm teaching in the moment. I think it's from COVID, from being at home. When I needed to stop [at home], I could stop" (Eva, exit interview). Eva explained how the return to the classroom impacted her. "Now when I'm teaching [in person] there is no stopping. There is this big push to record live teaching. I don't feel I can be fully present in any of those spaces all at once. (exit interview) Sam also shared frustration with hybrid teaching.

> My energy teaching is not what it used to be. I'm worried about so many things I hadn't had to worry about before. Is somebody messaging in the chat? Did someone raise their hand at home? Can you hear me okay? Can you hear the comments someone [in class] said? Oh, and we have to actually read what we're responding to in the chat because if someone watches it [the video] later they're not going to see the chat. (exit interview)

Benefits of Participation: Considering Work Demands, Mental Health, and Gratitude

Participants were balanced between those with and without tenure. Eva, a tenured MTE, shared the following: "One thing I noticed was the difference between the women who had tenure and the women who didn't. I have the power to make the decision of what I want to let go instead of someone else. They don't" (exit interview). Non-tenured MTEs in the group shared they had a difficult time with work demands and taking time for themselves; however, as meetings progressed that changed. Poppy shared that, "I like to work. I like my job. I haven't wanted to slow down, and now, I don't think I'm going back to what I was doing before." Janet shared she felt she "had to say yes" (meeting two). Having a newborn and the support of the group helped her resist that pressure. "I don't have the time now that I have a baby!" (Janet, exit interview). Sam, who has tenure, suggested that the age of the children at home factors into that

need to say yes or no. "I think it makes a difference about the age of your child on the kinds of pulls on your time. It [pulls] against your work responsibilities. Not in a bigger way, but in a different way" (meeting four). Sam provided validation for the younger participants. "I'm really glad you said that. It's really good to hear that further down the road when we are mothering older kids that it can come back around [time]" (Poppy, meeting four).

Most participants expressed gratitude for the informal space and the benefits of participation on their mental health and life perspective. "I just want to say I've enjoyed this. Every time you send the reminder, I'm like oh!, that's right now and then I always enjoy when we are here talking" (Sam, meeting four). Eva felt her participation helped her to be more aware of her own needs and stressed the importance of modeling that for those we teach. "I really needed someone to say, and this study helped me a lot with that, to voice out loud, I need time to take care of my health. . .I think we need to model that behavior for our students too" (exit interview). Sam benefited from being able to connect and share experiences as MTEs.

> Being able to speak about what it's like to be a mom in academia. . .being a working mom is a huge challenge. It was beneficial to hear what people were struggling with. It helped me grow my empathy and understanding the full range of challenges working moms navigate. (exit interview)

Janet expressed that she "loved" participating in the study and found it "kind of therapeutic" (exit interview).

> Nobody really knows what you're going through except the person going through it. So, it was really nice to have a group of people who I felt could understand things I was going through. It was so good to hear other people's experiences and feel normal because

other people also do similar things as you. The [meetings] gave me a place to speak on

those things that I wasn't necessarily comfortable sharing anywhere else. (exit interview)

Discussion and Implications

MTE mothers balance those they teach, their families, and their research and service on a

daily basis often without regard to their own physical, mental, or professional needs (Fitzpatrick

& Sweet, 2021). Participants willingly gave of their time and demonstrated vulnerability as they

shared their experiences parenting and teaching during the pandemic. Each MTE mother in this

study is a passionate music educator, dedicated to their craft, partner, and children. However,

each indicated that the pandemic impacted their work home balance, their physical and mental

stress, and at times the quality of their work and parenting. While studies on the impact of the

pandemic on individual stress and work performance are limited, due to the newness of COVID,

it would seem our findings are consistent with what is found in previous literature (Arnett, 2021;

Brown, 2010; Kossek et al., 2018; Michailidis, 2008). Participants struggled to manage the

instruction of both their kids and their students (Arnett, 2021; Fitzpatrick & Sweet, 2021). For

many participants, the inability to separate home and workspaces due to quarantine increased

stress as well as negatively impacted their course content, design, and instruction. (Arnett, 2021;

Milstein, 2021). Additional stressors included what Fitzpatrick and Sweet (2021) call "invisible

and visible parenting" (February 26, 2021).

Although findings from this study cannot be generalizable to every MTE who is a

mother, our findings can provide suggestions that may influence policy or practice changes

(Patton, 2015). While this study centered the impact of the pandemic on MTE mothers, there are

implications for change to institutions of higher learning to better support MTE mothers. It

should be noted that COVID-19 has not gone away. MTE mothers are still working to accommodate their work expectations while ensuring the safety and care of their children.

The MTEs who participated in this study had teaching loads that ranged from 2x2 (two classes each semester) to 4x5. Institutions of higher learning could reconsider course loads to better assist MTE mothers with their work life balance. A consideration of tenure requirements also may alleviate MTE stress (Arnett, 2021; Kitzpatrick & Sweet, 2021; Mason & Gould, 2002; Mason & Gould, 2004; Mason, Gould, & Wolfinger, 2006; Milstein, 2021; Wolfinger, Mason, & Gould, 2008). Current tenure requirements for MTEs typically include teaching, research and creative activity, and service. While percentages of each category vary between institutions, many institutions give more weight to research and creativity than to teaching toward tenure. These requirements do not accommodate the modern MTE mother. To better accommodate MTE mothers, institutions of higher education should give more weight to teaching over research and creativity, and service for tenure-track MTEs. Institutions of higher education also could provide assistance with child-care, especially those institutions with lab schools. University lab schools that prioritize children of faculty members before enrolling children of non-faculty members, would provide a great service to MTE mothers, child-care, while also alleviating some stress of attaining child-care (cost, location, covid-safety, proximity). Additionally, institutions of higher learning may wish to consider new policies which provide MTEs flexibility in their mode of instruction. COVID has shown us that we can employ online instruction successfully. For MTE mothers and fathers to be allowed the flexibility to teach from home when they or their child is sick would alleviate the stress of finding child-care in order to maintain university obligations.

Participants in this study expressed gratitude for our informal learning community. This informal learning community provided a safe space to share concerns, stressors, seek advice, and

connect as MTE mothers. Researchers have established the benefit of learning communities in previous research (Author, 2020; Pellegrino et al., 2014; 2018). Institutions of higher learning could provide opportunities for on campus learning communities specific to mothers. While there is currently a Facebook group for MTE mothers, which is a great resource, it was not meant to provide the weekly check-ins or more intimate space that the informal learning community provided participants in this study. A benefit from participating in this informal learning community was not only did participants feel seen and supported, ideas of how to alleviate stress of teaching and parenting were discussed. Assignments, grading, course design, and how to support students' mental health also were discussed by each MTE during meetings. These conversations helped participants shift typical norms in teaching and learning, to provide less stress for them and those they teach.

While our findings are consistent with current literature, we were surprised by the engagement and selflessness of participants. Prior to the pandemic, participants were already busy balancing work and home. Despite the pandemic, the ever-changing covid regulations at their institutions, and the additional workloads to recreate courses and alternative assignments within weeks if not days, these women gave of themselves to the benefit of the group. The capacity that mothers have to give, to extend compassion and grace to others while often forgetting to do the same for themselves seems absent from the literature. While researchers have examined tenure expectations, extensive workloads, and the balancing of roles between mother and professor, these participants provided a new perspective to the literature, vulnerability and resilience. In addition, Participants left each meeting encouraged to take steps to meet their expressed needs. We believe that the informal learning community allowed participants to process and grieve their unique pandemic experience and acknowledge specific

needs. This group of MTE mothers provided one another space for increased vulnerability and unfiltered emotion. Meetings evolved organically to include parenting and teaching advice that, while not pandemic specific, offered each participant the opportunity to mentor or be mentored.

There are implications for future research. It would be beneficial to consider the perceived stress and work life balance between MTE mothers and MTE fathers. An examination of tenure expectations and successful application of tenure between institutions too would be beneficial. As we work toward a post-Covid world more information is needed regarding the recovery process and longer-lasting effects of COVID on MTE mothers, their students, families, and institutions. While studies on women in the academy have been conducted for some time, more information is necessary to better understand the demands on, and the needs of, MTE mothers in a post-pandemic world. These studies may provide further insight into the professional expectations of MTE mothers and perhaps provide the impetus for change.

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