Teachers' emotional appraisals and the reframing of student change in post-pandemic schools

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Introduction: The return to "normal" schooling after the COVID-19 pandemic reactivated many of the emotional, instructional, and moral tensions teachers experienced during emergency remote teaching. Yet, little is known about how teachers' emotional appraisals of post-pandemic classrooms intersect with deficit-oriented "learning loss" discourses. Guided by appraisal theory and Frenzel's reciprocal model of teacher emotions, this qualitative study examined how mid- and late-career teachers interpreted perceived changes in students and how these appraisals shaped their emotions, emotion regulation, and adoption of or resistance to deficit framings.

Methods: Ten K–12 teachers from the southeastern United States participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through an inductive, consensual qualitative approach and a modified phenomenographic design.

Results: Findings revealed that teachers most frequently appraised post-pandemic "changes in students" as gaps in (a) content knowledge, (b) self-regulation, and (c) social-emotional development. These appraisals were typically experienced as goal-incongruent and elicited unpleasant emotions—especially frustration, inefficacy, and stress. However, teachers who engaged in cognitive reappraisal and empathic perspective-taking maintained more pleasant emotions and resisted deficit narratives, instead interpreting students' behaviors as adaptive responses to disruption.

Discussion: The study highlights how teachers' emotional appraisals function as a mechanism linking policy discourse, classroom experience, and teacher wellbeing. Findings suggest the need for professional learning that explicitly supports teachers' emotion regulation and critical reflection on deficit narratives, alongside policy reforms that temper accountability pressures in post-crisis schooling. Theoretical contributions include linking emotion regulation strategies to the adoption or rejection of deficit perspectives and demonstrating how emotional responses vary within appraisal theory based on the type of goal that is threated.

KEYWORDS

teacher emotions, learning loss, deficit thinking, reappraisal, accountability pressure

Introduction

Teacher emotions affect numerous educational outcomes, including instructional behavior, job satisfaction, and quality of student-teacher relationships (Burić and Frenzel, 2020; Frenzel et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2023). They are also reciprocally related to student emotions and engagement, which helps explain long-established associations between teacher emotions and students' academic performance (Frenzel et al., 2021). Despite this, teacher emotions did not receive sustained attention from 20th century educational researchers, particularly in fields focused narrowly on academic achievement (Chang, 2009; Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). However, this began to change in the 2000's, with the emergence of leaders in the field including (but not limited to) Kelchtermans (2005), Sutton (2004), Winograd (2003), and Zembylas (2002, 2003, 2004); as well as important collaborations between prolific teacher emotions scholars including Frenzel, Göetz, and Pekrun (e.g., Frenzel et al., 2009a, 2009b).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic became another pivotal moment in teacher emotions research given the myriad visible ways teachers suffered emotionally and psychologically while providing emergency remote teaching. In response, a growing body of research documented the toll of COVID-19 and its associated disruptions on teachers' psychological health and emotions (Chang et al., 2022; Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik, 2021; Marshall et al., 2020; Pressley, 2021).

Scholarship on student "learning loss" also emerged almost immediately after worldwide school closures, projecting dramatic academic declines and urging schools to prepare for a looming crisis (Donnolly and Patrinos, 2021; Kuhfeld et al., 2020). For example, in May 2020, just two months into U.S. school closures, Kuhfeld et al. (2020) warned that "[teachers] and schools can benefit from knowing not only how much lower achievement might be but also how much more variable it could be in the fall" (p. 4). These early projections exemplify how concerns about students' future academic performance came to dominate discourse.

While learning loss research during the pandemic emphasized preparation and mitigation, many assumed that teachers' psychological strain would naturally resolve once schools resumed normal operations. In reality, while factors that harmed teachers' emotional and psychological health during the pandemic, such as the rapid transitions between virtual and hybrid instruction (Joshi et al., 2020), abated after schools reopened, teachers have continued to struggle with psychological and emotional health, in part because they have not been afforded necessary time and support to restore their coping resources or emotional capacity (Cavallari et al., 2025; Estrada-Araoz et al., 2023). These ongoing challenges have weakened the workforce, contributing to patterns of burnout, churn, and attrition (Barnum, 2023; Barry and Sass, 2023).

Considering links between teachers' emotions and adoption of deficit narrative about students (de Ruiter et al., 2019), alongside the proliferation of "learning loss" narratives that "[prime] educators to notice student deficiencies" (Aukerman and Aiello, 2023, p. 9), we sought to examine teachers' emotional experiences upon returning to "normal" school by documenting how they appraised changes in students in relation to their own professional goals, beliefs

about agency, and capacity for coping and emotion regulation. Specifically, we aimed to address three research questions:

During the 2022–23 school year, upon returning to "normal" schooling:

(1) How did teachers appraise post-pandemic changes in students, and what emotions accompanied these perceptions?
(2) How did teachers appraise these changes in relation to their professional goals, beliefs about agency, and coping capacities?
(3) In what ways did teachers adopt or resist deficit-framed narratives about students through these appraisal processes?

Appraisal theory

Emotion is an integral part of teaching and learning (Hargreaves, 1998). It has intrapersonal (Daniel and Van Bergen, 2023; Messineo and Tosto, 2023, Scherer, 2021) and interpersonal facets which are often influenced by social, cultural, political, and situational contexts (Chang, 2009; Fried et al., 2015; Gearhart et al., 2024; Liljestrom et al., 2007). To understand the origins and sources of emotions, we drew upon cognitive appraisal theories, which suggest that emotions are elicited by individual interpretations and appraisals of events and situations (Arnold, 1960; Smith and Lazarus, 1990; Roseman and Smith, 2001; Smith and Kirby, 2001). With this lens, teacher emotions are derived from how teachers perceive the events they encountered in the situational context of the classroom environment.

According to cognitive appraisal theory, emotional intensity depends on the way in which we evaluate the significance of events (Lazarus, 1991). Emotions are elicited and influenced by two types of cognition. Primary appraisals are "associated with the likelihood and intensity of the emotional experience, whereas secondary appraisals are associated with flavoring the specific emotion experienced" (Davis et al., 2008, p. 943). Lazarus (1991) theorized that primary appraisal "concerns the stakes one has in the outcome of an encounter" (p. 827). Particularly, primary appraisals include evaluations of goal relevance/importance, and of goal or motive (in)congruence. *Goal relevance* concerns the importance or strength of the goal. *Goal (in)congruence* concerns whether the encounter is perceived as harmful or beneficial to the achievement of said goals. Secondary appraisals concern the prospects for managing the event: agency (i.e., attribution of responsibility for the harm or benefit and the extent to which the agents are in full control of their actions), coping potential, and future expectations (Lazarus, 1991).

Classroom teachers face many pressures each day that require adeptness in dealing with and responding to stressors within the classroom. Teachers report an increased level of emotional exhaustion due to the demands of the classroom and student behavior (Doan et al., 2024). Examining patterns in the emotions teachers experience as they interpret and address student behavior helps to reveal antecedents of teachers' emotions (Chang, 2009; Chang and Davis, 2010; Corbin et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2023). Viewing emotional responses from a cognitive perspective allows for an examination of the underlying emotions aroused by events or stimuli. Consider the age-old classroom dilemma of a student

failing to turn in an assignment on time. The emotion of anger emanates from an appraisal of past experiences and judgment of a "lazy" student failing to uphold classroom expectations. The exhibited feeling of anger derives from the meanings the teacher assigns to the event (Smith and Kirby, 2001), based in part on past experiences related to a student failing to complete assigned tasks.

As illustrated in Table 1, high relevance and high incongruence are foundations of anger, frustration, anxiety, and guilt (Lazarus, 2001; Roseman and Smith, 2001). Essentially, unpleasant emotions all derive from perceived lack of harmony between one's goals in high-importance situations. Yet, differences in secondary appraisals allow for discernment between unpleasant emotions. Regarding agency, anger emerges through a sense of other-caused outcomes, guilt from self-caused outcomes, and frustration and anxiety from circumstance-caused outcomes. While anger and guilt emanate from events perceived as highly controllable (i.e., high control potential), frustration and anxiety usually stem from events perceived as uncontrollable (i.e., low control potential).

Teacher appraisals in the classroom context

Frenzel et al. (2020) proposed a reciprocal model to explain how teachers' emotions and instructional behaviors are impacted by teachers' perceptions of student behaviors and their implicit goal appraisals. Specifically, teacher emotions are derived from four types of appraisals: (a) goal attainment or goal conduciveness (i.e., congruence), (b) coping potential to goal non-attainment, (c) accountability (who is responsible), and (d) goal importance (i.e., relevance; see Figure 1).

Classroom-related events may trigger an evaluation of goal attainment or congruence as a part of the primary appraisal. The goals in the classroom are established by stakeholders (i.e., administrators, policy makers, parent-teacher organizations) and enacted by the teacher. Teachers strive to achieve goal congruence through primary appraisals of events and stimuli (Lazarus, 1991). The desire to achieve goals, and the understanding of how events relate to said goals, instigate teachers to act despite possible setbacks or roadblocks placed within the teacher's path. As burnout literature suggests, students' disruptive behaviors contribute to emotional exhaustion, thereby threatening teachers' goal fulfillment. This goal incongruence can increase the intensity of emotions (Chang, 2013; Schutz et al., 2004).

In secondary appraisal, teachers make judgments regarding the nature of the event. These judgements determine which specific emotions are felt and how intensely they are experienced (Smith and Lazarus, 1990). While the event seems incongruent and relevant only to the primary appraisal, the secondary appraisal process allows for a determination of accountability/agency, controllability, coping potential, and the future expectancy of related events (Ben-Ze've, 2000).

Accountability refers to the nature of the agency generating the emotional encounter; while the related major issues are degree of controllability, invested effort, and intent (Ben-Ze've, 2000). In other words, one may ask questions like, *who is responsible for the event? How much control do I have over it? What can I do with it? Am I capable of doing it? What might be the consequences of acting or not acting?* Evaluations from these questions influence which types of emotions are elicited. Perceived coping potential and future expectancy would further determine the intensity of emotions. Viewing one's ability to cope with the event as low or believing the event will reoccur increases emotional intensity.

In a classroom context, student–teacher relationships can serve as a thermometer for relevance appraisals. Ben-Ze've (2000) defined "emotional closeness" in terms of the time, space, effect, or degree with which teachers share a proximal space and interact with students intensively. Therefore, the more a teacher cares about students, the more they will appraise emotional encounters with students as relevant. Teachers' judgments of relevance may also be a function of their perceived psychological proximity (Muller et al., 1999; Newberry and Davis, 2008), meaning relationships may be viewed as more relevant to a teacher's goals when the teacher perceives the students to be closer. Returning to the example of a student failing to turn in an assigned task, the less a teacher cares about the student, or the less they care about the lesson's merit, the less likely the teacher is to appraise the incident as important. Thus, the emotional response to this event (or lack thereof) relies on the appraisal of the event, which is determined in part by the perceived health of the student-teacher relationship.

Learning loss and deficit perspectives

Cognitive appraisals are informed by individual, social, and contextual/structural factors (Lazarus, 2001). The proliferation of research and catastrophic media narratives about student "learning loss" have been identified as one influential source that informs teachers' meaning making in the classroom by painting "a stunningly grim picture for education" (Zhao, 2021, p. 557). The term "learning loss" has two functional definitions. It can refer to (1) the difference between a students' "assessed academic

TABLE 1 Underlying appraisals for unpleasant emotions.

| Appraisal	Anger	Frustration	Anxiety	Guilt
Relevance	High	High	High	High
Incongruence	High	High	High	High
Agency	Other	Self/circumstance	Circumstance	Self
Control potential	High	Low	Low	High
Core relational theme (Lazarus, 2001)	An unjustified demeaning offense against me and mine	Having no control over an undesired situation caused by self or circumstance	Facing uncertain, existential threat	Having transgressed a moral imperative

Adapted from Chang (2009).
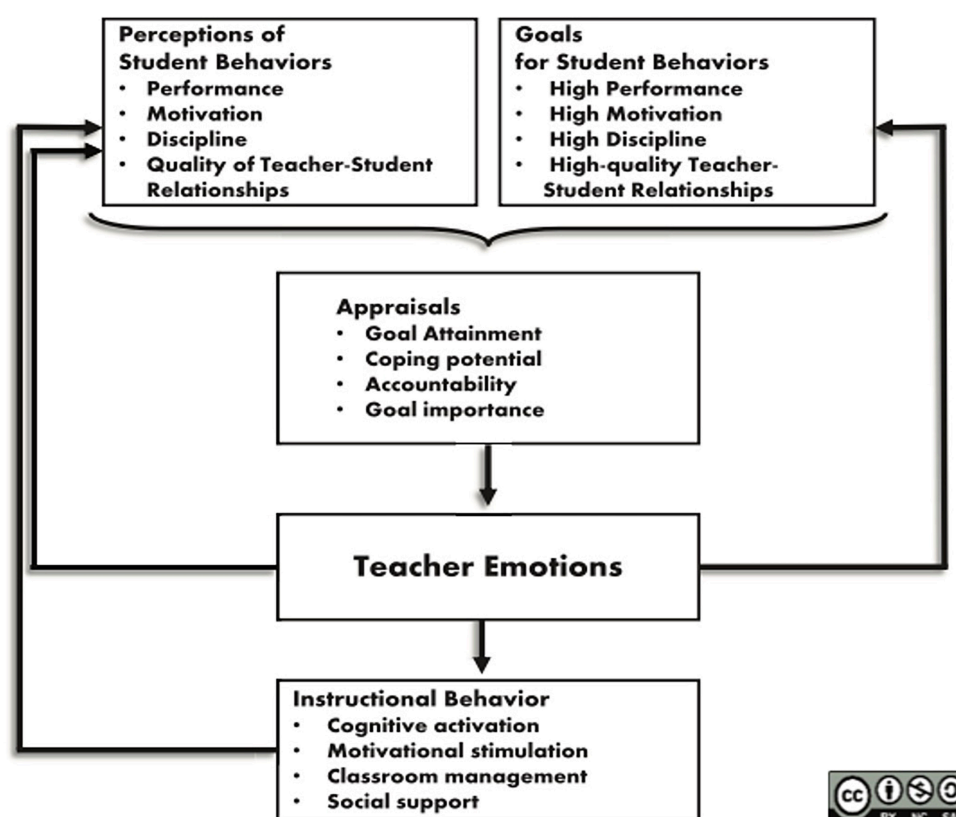
FIGURE 1
Frenzel et al. (2020) reciprocal model of teacher emotions. This Figure is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

skills and knowledge" and the established benchmark representing "on grade level" performance; or (b) the difference in outcomes on academic achievement measures between groups of students (Whitley et al., 2021, p. 1695; see also Dorn et al., 2020; Pier et al., 2021). Post-COVID, learning loss most often refers to the former.

Aukerman and Aiello (2023) argue that the idea of learning loss "represents the newest instantiation of deficit thinking, which frames students—particularly those from under-resourced communities of color—as not being enough, knowing enough, or doing enough to measure up" (p. 9). Although learning loss narratives do not *explicitly* target historically marginalized and minoritized communities of students, they do appear to feed and strengthen deficit thinking by "['blaming the victim'] for school failure instead of examining how schools are structured to prevent poor students and students of color from learning" (Valencia, 2010, n.p.). This is, in part, what makes the fixation with learning loss so pernicious.

Metanarratives that cast learning loss as a crisis affecting all students encourage teachers to engage in deficit thinking by priming them, across subjects and grade levels, to perceive student deficits as products of the pandemic that affected all students equally (Aukerman and Aiello, 2023). While there is no disputing that, on average, the circumstances of the pandemic did disrupt education in ways that reshaped what and how students learn, historically underserved and marginalized learners (e.g., racially, ethnically, and linguistically minoritized students; students from low-income households; students attending high poverty schools;

special education students; ESOL students) were disproportionately harmed (Patrinos et al., 2025; Peters et al., 2025).

Systemic and structural inequities that existed before March 2020 were exacerbated by the pandemic, such that historically underserved and marginalized learners may be perceived as "even farther behind" than they were before. Considering the emphasis put on returning all students to pre-pandemic standards of proficiency, those who were most harmed by inequity before and during the pandemic are now seen as strains on the system and a burden to teachers in the aftermath (Giroux, 1996; Patrinos et al., 2025).

Materials and methods

An inductive qualitative research design drawing primarily on phenomenography and consensual qualitative research (CQR) was used to help us understand the appraisal processes through which teachers interpreted the changes they perceived in students following the COVID-19 pandemic. We also examined their resulting emotions as well as the role and relevance of deficit framing in teachers' appraisal processes. Specifically, we drew on phenomenography through our concentration on salient categories in which teachers' perceptions (i.e., appraisals) of changes in students varied (Marton, 1981). However, we elected to analyze our data using the consensual qualitative research (CQR) process,

which offers a more structured, rigorous, iterative approach that is ideal for small research teams like ours (Hill et al., 1997).

Participants

As part of a larger study on teachers' emotional experiences, regulation, burnout, and professional intentions within the context of "post-pandemic" schools in the southeastern United States, surveys were disseminated via social media, teachers' organizations, and several district/school leaders in two waves: one during the 2021–22 school year (n = 328), and a follow-up at the beginning of the 2022–23 school year (n = 112). At the end of the follow-up survey, participants were asked to provide an email address if they were interested in participating in an interview on these topics. Fewer than 20 of the 112 respondents indicated that they were interested in participating, 10 of whom ultimately agreed to be interviewed (see Table 2).

All interview participants were mid- or late-career teachers (i.e., > 5 years of teaching experience) who closely matched the average among U.S. teachers in terms of experience (sample mean = 15; national mean = 14) and age (sample mean = 45 years old; national mean = 42; NCES, 2018). We did not exclude younger participants or those with less teaching experience. Yet, we see the experience and age of our participants as an asset. With our interest in perceptions of change, it was important to speak with teachers who had ample teaching experience prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although participants represented a variety of grade levels and content areas, as well as paths to teaching and citizenship, people of color (1 of 10) and males (2 of 10) were dramatically underrepresented in the sample. This is addressed in more detail in the limitations section, particularly as it relates to racialized and gendered emotional labor differentials in feminized occupations (Wingfield, 2021).

Data collection and analysis

Transcripts of semi-structured interviews with each participant served as our primary data source. The interview protocol was developed collaboratively among the research team, which included two university professors, a middle school English/language arts teacher and graduate student, and a district-level school evaluation coordinator. All four had served as K-12 educators. The diversity of perspectives on the team was instrumental in crafting questions that invited teachers to tell their stories in ways that felt authentic and reflected their emotional experiences across time.

All interviews (average duration = 1:06) were conducted via Zoom by the lead author between late December 2022 and late February 2023 and were recorded/transcribed using Otter.ai (2023). Semi-structured interviews were designed to prompt teachers' reflection and narration of their own experiences during the year in which schools transitioned back into normal operations (2022–23). The interview protocol included questions regarding the effects of school and policy context on teachers' instructional and emotional experiences after the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers were also asked to recall emotional experiences from earlier phases of the pandemic in which they had taught (March-May 2020, the 20–21 school year, and the 21–22 school year). They were also asked to recall and discuss phases in which they felt the most intense stress or unpleasant emotions, as well as when they felt the most pleasant emotions. Among the most relevant questions for the present study were those that asked directly about differences between their emotional and professional experiences pre-pandemic as compared to the 2022–23 school year, which was underway at the time. It is noteworthy, however, that participants were not asked explicitly about perceived changes in students or learning gaps, as that was not a focus of the larger study for which the data was originally collected.

Our multi-phase analytic approach drew on CQR (Hill et al., 1997). It is important to note that we did not use the prescribed labeling system established in CQR, where *domains* refer to broad topic areas and *core ideas* "summarize data within domains" (Hill et al., 1997, p. 7). Instead, we engaged in the CQR process but used the terms *category* and *code* instead, as they are more common in qualitative research.

To begin, transcripts were distributed amongst the research team to be reviewed and cleaned, to familiarize ourselves with the data, and to begin making initial analytical memos. Next, all four researchers independently read the same two transcripts,

TABLE 2 Participant Information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age	Experience	Grade level	Teaching field
Chris	Male	White	30	8 years	K-12	STEM coach
Fern	Female	White	32	10 years	K-5	Music
Laura	Female	White	46	23 years	2	Self-contained
Nell	Female	White	49	18 years	HS	History
Rebecca	Female	White	40	17 years	HS	English
Rita	Female	White	43	19 years	5	Small group
Rose	Female	White	51	7 years	5	Math
Tali	Female	North African	48	7 years	HS	Math
Ulysses	Male	White	50	22 years	HS	Science
Yvette	Female	White	46	20 years	MS	Math
Mean			45	15 years		

identifying all potentially relevant data and creating initial codes for each. Then, the research team met to review all initial codes and to develop a preliminary set of codes with broader categories into which the codes may fit. After, the four researchers again independently hand-coded a third transcript using the same process, but with the addition of the preliminary codebook (including working codes and categories). They met to reach consensus on an updated codebook. After applying this process to six transcripts, saturation was reached, and a final codebook was developed (see Table 3).

Next, using the consensually constructed codebook, a pair of researchers was assigned to hand-code each transcript independently. A third team member, serving as an auditor, reviewed codes applied by each person in the dyad, calculated average percent agreement, and sent back questions and feedback. Then, the original pair reviewed the auditor's feedback together and sought consensus on their finalized coding, which was then applied to the transcript in question and sent back to the auditor, who determined the overall average percent agreement to be greater than 90%.

Findings

Our findings offer an overview of consequential categories of appraisals, beginning with teachers' perceived changes in students and their perceived relevance to and (in) congruence with teachers' professional goals. We then describe how these primary appraisals, filtered through secondary appraisals of agency and coping potential, determined the emotions teachers experienced when engaging with students. Connections are also drawn to teachers' adoption (or refutation) of deficit frameworks when making meaning of perceived changes in students. Please note that all participants in the study are referred to using pseudonyms.

TABLE 3 Analytical codebook.

Category	Codes
Emotions	Anger, confidence/efficacy, dissatisfaction, distrust, enjoyment, exhaustion, fear/anxiety, frustration, gratitude, guilt, hope/optimism, indifference, inefficacy, overwhelm, sadness, stress
Coping, resources, and support	Affective suppression, attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, school-based resources, situation modification, situation selection,
Changes in students	General learning/content knowledge (GLCK) gaps, self-regulation (SR) gaps, social-emotional development (SE) gaps
Instructional goals	Learning Goals, Performance Goals, Relational Goals
Accountability	Administration/policy, circumstances of the pandemic, self, students

This table includes only those categories from the larger study that were relevant to the current study. All the original codes within each category are included. However, no data related to changes in students were coded as dissatisfaction or indifference, although these codes were relevant in the larger study.

Emotions and emotional experiences

Across the comprehensive set of transcripts including but not limited to those sections where teachers described changes in students (CiS), 16 discrete emotions were referenced (see Table 4). Sadness and stress were the only emotions invoked by all 10 participants; while the most commonly occurring emotions across the sample were frustration (9 participants; 13% of coded data), stress (10; 12%), fear/anxiety (9; 12%), and enjoyment (9; 10%). There was a steep decline in occurrences for other emotions, with the next most-common emotion, dissatisfaction, yielding 28 references from 8 participants.

However, when examining only the emotions participants connected to CiS after returning to post-pandemic school, frustration became increasingly prevalent. Approximately a quarter of all references to CiS were associated with frustration; and although it was discussed by only six of the ten participants, it arose more than twice as often as any other emotion. It also is noteworthy that when looking across the comprehensive set of transcripts for the larger study, only 13% of coded data involved frustration, whereas 23% of the data pertaining specifically to CiS included frustration. The proportion of data coded for distrust (+4%), hope/optimism (+2%), and inefficacy/doubt (+1%) also increased when examining CiS-specific data.

The second most common emotion within the CiS data, stress, was invoked by just two participants, yet accounted for approximately 9% of all references to changes in students (see Table 4). This is an approximately 3% decrease when compared to the comprehensive set of transcripts for the larger study (12%; 10 participants). On the other hand, fear and anxiety applied to a smaller proportion of the CiS data (4%; 2 participants) having equaled stress in the full dataset (12%; 9 participants).

Perceived changes in students

We organized participants' perceived Changes in Student (CiS) using three codes. Each code represents a different type of "gap" or deficit that participants believed either developed or was perpetuated because of the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) general learning/content knowledge, (2) self-regulation, and (3) social-emotional development.

General learning/content knowledge gaps

Within the category of general learning/content knowledge (GLCK), six teachers perceived gaps in students' foundational content knowledge. These included broad references to "learning gaps," which implied that students lacked the knowledge necessary to be successful at their current grade level. Math teachers across grade levels expressed the most concern about GLCK gaps. In fact, only three of the seven non-math teaching participants mentioned GLCK gaps whatsoever, with each making only one mention of it. Among the math teachers, Yvette was the most distressed about her middle school math students' GLCK gaps, which

TABLE 4 Emotional experiences in full data set and connected to changes in students.

Emotion	Full data set		CiS[1] data only		Difference
	Participants	% References[2]	Participants	% References[2]	
Frustration	9	13%	6	23%	+10%
Distrust	5	4%	2	8%	+4%
Hope/optimism	9	6%	3	8%	+2%
Inefficacy/doubt	7	6%	2	7%	+1%
Anger	4	2%	1	2%	0
Guilt	3	2%	1	2%	0
Dissatisfaction	3	1%	0	0%	-1%
Exhaustion	9	5%	1	4%	-1%
Overwhelm	9	6%	2	4%	-2%
Sadness	10	6%	2	4%	-2%
Enjoyment	9	10%	2	7%	-3%
Gratitude	6	5%	1	2%	-3%
Indifference	8	3%	0	0%	-3%
Stress	10	12%	2	9%	-3%
Confidence/ efficacy	8	7%	1	2%	-5%
Fear/anxiety	9	12%	2	4%	-8%

[1] CiS = Data coded for changes in students. [2] Proportion of coded data that represents each emotion.

she referenced eight times during her interview. She expressed frustration because,

> They [students] struggle, but I think that's [because the pandemic] started in 5th grade, 4th grade…[which] is when the vital 8th grade math information gets [taught]… And they were in online [classes], and they were in [the] pandemic…so that continuity of mathematical [learning] that builds and builds and builds was not there because they [just] had to learn it enough to take a Google form or a test online.

Yvette attributed GLCK gaps not only to the circumstances of the pandemic, but also to the system for teaching math in the elementary schools. Yet, Rose, an elementary math teacher herself, confronted her own instructional roadblocks stemming from GLCK gaps, explaining, "I've got kids that are two and three grade levels below. It's kind of hard to scaffold 3 years' worth of learning." Like Rose, various teachers across content areas and grade levels drew direct connections between the pandemic, online instruction, students' lack of necessary content knowledge, and the increasing demands in their jobs. As such, increased experiences of unpleasant emotions became part of their new "normal."

Tali, the third math teacher, made appraisals that differed in a few crucial ways. As a result, she was frustrated by her students' GLCK gaps, but she did not experience fear and stress like Rose and Yvette. First, she used reappraisal when experiencing unpleasant emotions while teaching and did so in ways that fortified her rapport and relationships with students. This allowed her to experience some frustration regarding GLCK gaps while remaining engaged and goal directed. She also assigned agency to students, who she believed had consciously decided to disengage

and withhold effort during the pandemic, and particularly during emergency remote teaching. She recalled,

> …[My] students right now, who are juniors, failed my unit one, which was a review from algebra one. And they said, "Well, Mrs. Tali, it was online [when we took it]." And I said, "Payback!" [in a playful "I told you so" voice]… And then their answer [was] "We thought we [would] never come back to school." …I kid you not…They thought that the pandemic [was] gonna be forever and…they [would] finish high school, easy breezy, no knowledge.

Consequently, she saw them as potential collaborators in working toward learning goals, as opposed to framing them as obstacles to meeting district expectations on standardized assessments.

Self-regulation gaps

Among the six middle grades and secondary teachers, perceptions of self-regulation (SR) gaps were prevalent, although none of the participants at the elementary level perceived changes in this area. Specifically, SR gaps refer to deficits in student attention (e.g., phone addiction, social media, distractibility), cognitive skills (e.g., retention, inferencing), motivation, and self-monitoring. Nell, who taught AP history, was particularly troubled by the changes she perceived in this domain. Imitating her students, she whined, "'[Mrs. Nell], this website, the answer to this isn't right here.' And I'm like, the word 'search' is in research for a reason. It *isn't* right there. You need to infer; you need to read it." Still others across content areas spanning from middle grades to high school appraised the same SR gaps in substantively different ways.

Ulysses, for one, felt deeply affected by students' lack of motivation, engagement, and attention. In particular, he saw students' fixation with smartphones and social media as interfering constantly as he fought to gain their attention and engage them in his high school science courses. As he explained, "If I make them put their devices away…they go head down, head-to-desk and have no energy or motivation to do anything. And I've had conversations with colleagues about this, and it seems to be kind of the normal situation…" When asked about the emotions he associated with these specific SR gaps, he said he experienced "More days of just feeling exhausted and tired at the end of it." However, he empathized with students as well when it came to their lack of academic motivation:

> …Like a lot of adults, they had an experience where the world changed and they suddenly saw everything externalized and maybe were able to look at what was going on with their education system… and it kind of stripped the mask off of what was happening and it wasn't meaningful or important to them and so they got to reprioritize their lives. They're not doing that as someone in a career who's able to say, hey, you know, my job isn't really worth all this stress. I'm gonna step away and try something new. They're students who don't have a career and they're just stepping away from all the stress and they're going to the things that are more fun and rewarding to them. At least in the short term, things that are more rewarding.

Although he directly connected feelings of frustration and exhaustion to the SR gaps he perceived in students, he expressed no anger toward them thanks to his ability to consider their perspectives instead of appraising their behavior as a deliberate offense against him.

Social-emotional development gaps

Social-emotional development (SE) gaps referred to teachers' perceptions that various non-achievement related behaviors (e.g., cheating, drug use, aggression, shyness/awkwardness), emerged among students once they returned to fully in-person learning, indicating that students' social-emotional development had been stunted by the pandemic. Of the six participants who discussed SE gaps, five (Laura, Nell, Rebecca, Rita, and Tali) attributed their emotions *directly* to students' SE gaps. However, the nature of perceived SE gaps and associated emotions varied according to student age groups. For example, high school teachers were more likely to report an increase in "deviant" behavior as an indication of SE gaps. Tali, a high school math teacher, noted that students started coming to class high on marijuana during the year in question. She stated,

> …most of my anxiety comes from that block, honestly, because I don't know what to do with them. Because I never had that. Honestly. I've been in that school for four years. I never had a block where they smoked this stuff ever.

Other high school teachers believed that cheating had increased among students during and following the pandemic. Nell was particularly focused on this. When asked to share some of

the common emotions she felt during the school year in question, she cited, "I'm more skeptical as a teacher than I was before…skepticism and doubt maybe of their ability and their truthfulness." As a result, she felt compelled to outsmart students by providing cheat-proof assignments and assessing their learning in unexpected ways.

At the elementary level, however, Laura (a 2nd grade teacher) perceived SE gaps as evidence of *delayed* development, which is intuitive considering the relative centrality of social-emotional development in elementary curricula. Laura recalled that when they went back to in-person instruction in 2022, "[Students] could finally touch each other, but they didn't know how, so they were being so rough." Noting that these students experienced kindergarten and first grade at home through a screen (or in disorganized hybrid classes), she found that "[in second grade], they were just missing a lot of social skills." Laura's theorizing around the specific skills that were "missing" due to the lack of socialization during the pandemic was echoed at times by elementary, middle, and even some high school teachers.

Interestingly, while many participants, like Laura, empathized with students and tried to understand the changes they perceived, only one participant spoke directly about changes in students' mental health and wellbeing. Rebecca expressed concern about "the stuff that the kids laugh about [and] the stuff that the kids kind of shrug off as normal. It's become this normalized chaos for them." As an example, she recalled,

> I had a kid the other day, they were writing a reflection from *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and I deal with generations, like Gen X in the book versus Gen Z. And one kid actually said, "I just don't think that my generation has kind of had their big, you know, *thing* that they've had to deal with yet." And it was like, kid! But that's the thing: it's become so normalized for them.

She was particularly concerned about her seniors, whose freshman spring was marked by school closures and the start of the global pandemic:

> …I think they get very frustrated, and I think there is resentment there—even though that's not the word that they use—that they ended…their freshman year of high school on that note…and that there was so much confusion and it really did become a case of the haves and the have nots.

This was a noteworthy example in Rebecca's consideration of what students had experienced *and were currently experiencing*, as opposed to focusing on how to "bridge the gap" or fix a perceived problem.

Secondary appraisals, emotion regulation, and positioning of students

Aligned with Frenzel's reciprocal model of teacher emotions (Frenzel et al., 2020), in the following section, we describe

TABLE 5 Appraisals of GLCK Gaps: Chris, Rose, and Yvette.

Appraisal	Chris (STEM Coach)	Rose (5th Grade Math Teacher)	Yvette (7th Grade Math Teacher)
Stimulus ("Gap")	GLCK	GLCK	GLCK
Goal relevance	Performance (-)	Performance (-)	Performance (-)
Accountability	Circumstances (COVID-19), students	Circumstances (COVID-19)	Circumstances (COVID-19), administration
Coping potential	High	Low	Low
Emotional reg.	Reappraisal	Response Modulation (-)	None
Framing of students	Mixed	Deficit Only	Deficit Only

GLCK, General learning/content knowledge gaps; The symbol (-) denotes something that had a negative or inhibiting effect. For example, for goal relevance, it indicates incongruence between gaps and goals. Additionally, Rose drank alcohol as a form of response modulation. Response modulation can be a healthy, adaptive form of regulation, but it can also take on unhealthy, unsustainable forms such as alcohol and drug use (Gross, 1998).

how the participants' secondary appraisals of CiS, including their use of emotion regulation strategies, informed their emotional experiences and shaped how they positioned and framed their students. Specifically, we demonstrate these patterns across the three categories of instructional goals.

Performance goals: data, testing, and accountability

It is perhaps unsurprising that the three teachers who primarily discussed goals related to top-down accountability measures (Chris, Rose, and Yvette) were more troubled by perceived general learning and content knowledge (GLCK) gaps than by self-regulation (SR) or social-emotional (SE) gaps (see Table 5 to compare appraisals). After all, the types of accountability measures and data checks at the heart of their goals (and anxieties) were designed to assess achievement of grade-level mastery using pre-pandemic benchmarks; and they consistently reported that students did not come into their classes with requisite prior knowledge to access the grade level curriculum. It is also noteworthy that all three of these teachers were accountable for math achievement, two as math teachers and one as a STEM coach.

While all three teachers focused specifically on math deficits during the 2022–23 school year, a few noteworthy differences between them may account for variations in the narratives they constructed about their students. Rose and Yvette, unlike Chris, were both math teachers with low coping potential who either did not attempt to regulate their emotions (in the case of Yvette) or attempted to regulate emotions in unhealthy ways (in the case of Rose, who reported that alcohol was her main resource for coping). Chris, conversely, was a STEM coach who was working toward a top-down district goal of getting schools STEM certified, but was not *personally* accountable for student learning in the ways Rose and Yvette were. Additionally, Chris had extremely strong coping potential, having engaged consistently in mental health counseling since early in the pandemic, while also exhibiting a strong sense of efficacy and passion about his work.

Clear differences can be seen as well in the ways these teachers focused on student deficits in their interviews. While all three participants generally attributed GLCK gaps to the circumstances of the pandemic, and none believed the students were to blame or could control their content knowledge or readiness for learning, Rose and Yvette did take up common deficit-based narratives about students' GLCK gaps. Rose was

overwhelmed by the demands of teaching "kids that are two and three grade levels below." Because her goals focused on benchmark data and top-down accountability mechanisms, this was extremely threatening. She lamented: "*It's impossible* to get [students] to recognize [the] least common multiple and multiply three digits by two digits if they can't even multiply one digit by one digit" (emphasis added). Yvette was similarly fixated on how deficits in students' prior knowledge threatened her ability to meet benchmarks established by her district. She explained, "We are tasked with filling the gaps [and] making sure they meet all the standards...and that's where they have their biggest gaps." She said it felt like she was "in a constant state of not meeting" district expectations because students "don't understand this [material]. There are major gaps...And *they are low students*" (emphasis added). In both cases, Rose and Yvette described meeting district standards and benchmarks—which were their focal goals — as "impossible" given their students' deficits. While they did not blame the students for their GLCK gaps, which were attributed instead to the circumstances of the pandemic, they did attribute their own (assumed) inability to meet performance goals to the students' deficits.

Unlike Rose and Yvette, Chris was a STEM coach and not a math teacher. This may have afforded him the space to navigate complex thoughts and feelings about the "new normal" in more nuanced ways. Specifically, his exasperation about students' GLCK gaps ("I had to explain why 9 divided by 3 was 3 [to an 8th grader]...") and SR gaps ("...and she just didn't care, didn't know.") was tempered by his sincere empathy for students who were still in the process of relearning how to be a student within a traditional school. For example, while complaining about their lack of motivation at one point, he cut himself off and said, "I don't want to call it laziness, because I really don't think they know how to motivate themselves and they really don't know how to have work ethic. *They haven't figured it out [yet]*" (emphasis added).

In fact, Chris often interrupted his own discussions of students' post-COVID deficits to point out that concerns he had framed as "post-COVID" issues were present long before the pandemic ("That's something we learned in 3rd grade, and you're in 8th grade [now], so the pandemic didn't cause this. This is something that was here and present already."). He was skeptical of oversimplified narratives that attributed students' deficits solely to the circumstances of the pandemic and instead sought a more expansive understanding of students' experiences across their educational histories.

Learning goals: student growth and development

Whereas GLCK gaps were predominantly appraised as inhibiting teachers' performance-focused goals, all three types of gaps were appraised in many cases as impeding learning goals pertaining to student growth and progress (e.g., "[You] have a lot of real world connections you have to make with them...It's so much more than just teaching your content"—Fern). Among the seven teachers whose learning goals were inhibited by changes in students, most continued to describe students in deficit-oriented ways, regardless of how they assigned agency and control for student gaps. For example, Tali loved her students deeply and was dedicated to seeing them grow as learners and as people. Still, she recalled many instances like the following, in which she put down her teaching materials to tell students, "'You guys are gonna kill me'...Because they [are] causing me stress because they just are not trying. I said, 'I cannot understand you guys for the life of me...You have to explain to me how you guys don't try.'" Her heartfelt affection for her students increased the relevance she attributed to whatever threatened her learning goals, resulting in intense emotions.

Two teachers, however, were able to regulate their emotions when student gaps interfered with their learning goals. Use of cognitive reappraisal and perspective taking supported more pleasant emotional experiences and more positive (or at least less deficit-focused) conceptions of students and their gaps. Rita, who taught 5th grade ELA and math, felt incredible pressure from her school and district to have students demonstrate grade level proficiency (a performance goal) in both subjects. As she got to know the students and observed their existing skills and potential for growth, she reappraised the goals created by her district:

> How do I do my part to help the kids bridge the gap [in math and ELA]? What's really the best way to go about that? [...] I think at the core, the hell with the math, and the hell with the reading standards. [I] kind of noticed that we just missed some of the social skills *that [students] would naturally develop by being in school and being in a group*. And then of course, after that comes how do we bridge the academics.

Rita's reappraisal set the math and ELA standards aside temporarily because they were not developmentally appropriate for the students in her classroom, nor would they allow her to build on students' existing skills and strengths. Instead, she prioritized a learning goal that she saw as developmentally appropriate, allowing her to build on students' inherent propensity for social learning.

In many instances, Rebecca also used reappraisal, empathy, and perspective taking to mitigate unpleasant emotions regarding student gaps, while simultaneously supporting a generally positive view of her students. For instance, she empathized with students affected by cell phone addiction, an SR gap that many participants appraised as threatening multiple goal-types. Rebecca explained,

> [Students] hate social media, but they're on it all the time. They will be the first ones to tell you, 'I hate it, but here I am.' And that's an interesting dynamic...And they know it's toxic...It's

an addiction...I think that's where some of my co-workers get burnt out if they take it personally. And it's frustrating. It doesn't change the fact it's a problem, but it's not personal.

Whereas other teachers used words like "zombie" to describe screen-addicted students as mindless entities with no hope of meeting their teachers' learning goals, Rebecca not only empathized with their unhealthy relationship to social media, but also acknowledged their self-awareness, desire for change, and the social and technological landscape that makes change challenging for them. This does not eliminate unpleasant emotions when her students are glued to their phones, ("And it's frustrating. It doesn't change the fact it's a problem..."), but it does alter them in ways that appear to be less emotionally exhausting ("It's an interesting dynamic...but it's not personal.") and allows Rebecca to maintain focus on students' existing strength and capabilities.

Relational goals: building community in and out of the classroom

Fortunately, only three teachers appraised post-pandemic changes in students as interfering with their goals regarding building positive relationships with students. Interestingly, all three (Nell, Rebecca, Ulysses) were veteran high school teachers, each with at least 17 years of teaching experience, who cared deeply about their respective content areas.

Considering the elevated importance of subject-specific expertise at the high school level, and the subsequent displacement of extra-curricular learning (e.g., character development, the arts), it makes sense that these veteran high school teachers would consider relationship building a priority in their classrooms and in extra-curricular contexts. For example, besides teaching high school science, Ulysses had coached soccer at his school. Relationship building was engraved in his identity as a teacher and was central to his coaching ethos. He recalled,

> And one of the things that sticks in my mind, one of the folks that I coached with early on ...always made it a point to talk to the soccer players about how life can change very quickly. You don't know what's coming. And we would always have this conversation particularly with the senior players that were there last year. Like, it's coming. You're gonna have your last soccer game and for many of you, that last game may be the last time you step on a field to play soccer. And while winning is important, and while losing gracefully is important, it's about the relationships that you build with the people that you play with. And if you can build something that's memorable, then you can always come back to that and it makes a foundation for your relationships going forward too.

Comparatively, Nell was more focused on relational dynamics in the classroom. She felt that changes in students both challenged and supported her goals regarding student-teacher relationship building, yielding both unpleasant and pleasant emotions. For example, she used situation modification to mitigate threats to her relational goals, thereby altering key elements of an emotionally unpleasant situation. Specifically, she said, "I try to use more creative assessments than maybe written and multiple choice because I am a little bit skeptical of [the students], whether it's

their skill ability or their propensity for cheating. . ." Clearly, despite wanting to enjoy a positive school year with her students, Nell had become fixated on student deficits, not only pertaining to content knowledge (GLCK), but also to ethics and propensity to cheat (SE). If she could control cheating through situation modification, she would no longer have reason to feel distrustful and could instead pursue meaningful relational goals in the classroom.

Discussion

This study examined teachers' emotional experiences during the first year of "normal" schooling following the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1991). At the time, mass media reporting on "learning loss" conjured concern among stakeholders about educators' preparedness to "close the gaps" created during pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Learning loss discourse also encouraged teachers to take up simple, deficit-framed narratives about their students which may become stressors at times (Aukerman and Aiello, 2023). For those teachers who were unable to manage their stress-related emotions, "these deficit narratives served to shift the threat" of failing to meet instructional goals away from themselves and onto their students. This "[returned] teachers' emotions to acceptable levels" (Marshall and Chen, 2025). However, those teachers who were able to cope successfully with their unpleasant emotions and resist deficit narratives about students did so primarily through cognitive reappraisals that allowed them to critically reflect on and revise their thinking about these oversimplified "learning loss" narratives.

Distinguishing between emotional foci

Several noteworthy patterns were found when comparing the prevalence and endorsement of emotions between the full data set (from the larger project of which this is a part) and from the CiS-specific data at the center of this study. Differences in prevalence (percentage of coded data) and endorsement (number of participants) of emotions speak to the complex nature of returning to in-person instruction following the COVID-19 pandemic, and the constellation of demands and challenges teachers negotiated as they reintegrated themselves and their students into "normal" classrooms.

First, these trends highlight that, for this group of teachers, certain unpleasant emotions—namely stress, fear, and anxiety—mainly originated from factors other than students. Other emotions (e.g., frustration, distrust, inefficacy) mapped more directly onto teachers' perceptions of CiS. While the unpleasant emotions associated with non-student factors likely have deleterious effects on teachers and students, those attributed to appraisals of students are particularly salient predictors of critical teacher and student outcomes. Frustration has been called an "antagonist [emotion] toward students" that shapes "teacher's belief about school, about [their] relationship with colleagues and administrators, as well as about [their] students" (Barcelos and Aragão, 2018, p. 512). Frustration also degrades teacher efficacy (Gullo et al., 2025; Morris and King, 2018), which was another common emotion teachers connected primarily to CiS. This association between teachers' efficacy beliefs and their perceptions of students suggests that

becoming overly focused on deficit-based "learning loss" narratives may reduce teachers' efficacy, which would also diminish appraisals of coping potential.

This is noteworthy given the critical role coping potential played in allowing teachers under extreme accountability pressure to reappraise deficit narratives, assign agency to students, and reduce unpleasant emotions. It is also relevant given the critical role of efficacy in supporting resilience in stressful situations (Gearhart et al., 2024) and how inefficacy reduces teacher effectiveness by altering instructional choices and behavior. Teachers with low efficacy avoid challenging situations, find tasks more difficult, interpret things more negatively, and cope poorly with failure (Hussain and Khan, 2022). These patterns encourage inefficacious teachers to adopt deficit perspectives about their students, which may produce more frustration, and further diminish teacher efficacy.

This finding also stands as an important reminder of the multifaceted nature of student-teacher relationships in the ever-changing landscape of school. Ottosen et al. (2017) identified a similar pattern in their qualitative study of Norwegian upper-secondary teachers' and administrators' views about increasing dropout rates. Specifically, they found that "teacher-student relationships over years had become more complicated since the implementation of a new educational reform." In particular, educators believed that post reform, they could not teach as effectively as they had in the past due to "[limitations] in students' knowledge, skills and academic interest" (p. 354). This suggests that these phenomena are not unique to crisis-level disruptions in education like a pandemic. If so, additional investigation is needed into teachers' emotional experiences and adoption of deficit narratives about students amid even minor disruptions, such as curricular revisions or reassignment to a different grade or course.

Certain pleasant emotions prevalent in the full data set were absent or minimized in the CiS data as well (i.e., confidence/efficacy, enjoyment, gratitude, and hope/optimism). This does not necessarily imply that teachers' enjoyment and pleasant emotions emerged exclusively from student-free elements of their work in the post-COVID context, but rather that such emotions emerged from engaging with students in ways that teachers saw as unrelated to CiS. This corroborates Frenzel et al. (2015, 2020) findings that high school teachers responsible for multiple sections of courses in a given academic year "reported systematically varying teaching enjoyment and anger when teaching each group of students" (p. 250). Applying this to our findings, we could say that the degree of CiS perceived in each class or on a given day can vary. If teachers' appraisals of CiS vary in kind, so will their emotions. Theoretically, however, CiS can only elicit emotion if it is appraised as relevant (i.e., supporting or inhibiting goal attainment). If CiS is less salient in certain classes or on certain days, teachers' pleasant emotions will stem from other sources, including the students themselves.

Relevance and incongruence of instructional goals

Although no questions about students were asked during participants' interviews, all 10 perceived CiS that were appraised as gaps or deficits in general learning/content knowledge (GLCK),

self-regulation (SR), or social-emotional development (SE). In connection with these three categories of CiS, participants experienced a range of emotions, the majority of which were unpleasant. Thus, with few exceptions, participants perceived CiS as interfering with their ability to meet at least one instructional goal (Lazarus, 1991). The goals teachers adopted, and their incongruence with CiS illustrate the "highly contextualized" nature of teacher emotions due to the "unique work of teachers" (Frenzel et al., 2021, p. 251). Participants' goals were complex and multifaceted, particularly in terms of the relevance and incongruence of CiS.

GLCK gaps and performance goals

GLCK gaps were predominantly appraised as highly relevant to and incongruent with performance goals, or goals based on district benchmarks, standardized tests, or equivalent assessment systems. Interestingly, all participants who appraised GLCK gaps as incongruent with performance goals also expressed unpleasant emotions about accountability pressure and the very assessment systems on which their goal attainment would be measured. This phenomenon is exemplified by the three math teachers who participated in our study.

All three math teachers acknowledged that district standards and assessment systems were inevitable, consequential, and inappropriate for that first year returning to "normal" instruction. All three agreed as well that, ideally, teachers would be given time to review, reteach, and support students in developing the prior knowledge necessary to succeed at their current grade level. However, doing so would have interfered with the performance goals Rose and Yvette adopted based on district assessments. Adopting performance goals that inherently conflict with other concurrent goals is a daily practice for teachers that can be highly motivating (Gorges et al., 2022), but it is also associated with psychological distress (Gray et al., 2017), inhibits goal attainment, and reduces wellbeing (Emmons and King, 1988; Brunstein, 1993; Locke et al., 1994; Boudreaux and Ozer, 2013; Kelly et al., 2015; Gray et al., 2017). Considering this, perhaps it is unsurprising that Rose and Yvette expressed plans to leave the teaching field, while Tali planned for a long career at her school.

While teachers of any grade level and subject may experience unpleasant emotions when appraising GLCK gaps as threats to performance goals, several factors likely contributed to the elevated relevance and incongruence of GLCK gaps to performance goals among math teacher participants. First, the cumulative nature and vertical progression of mathematics make prior knowledge crucial (Pratt and Kelly, 2016), and particularly prior procedural knowledge (Alreshidi, 2023). Additionally, there is evidence that failure to meet benchmarks for proficiency can be identified more clearly in math assessment than in reading (Ladd and Lauren, 2010), which may lead to greater scrutiny and pressure on math educators. COVID-related learning loss in math has also received heightened attention relative to other content areas (Fitz and Price, 2025; Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

(In)Congruence of SR and SE gaps across school levels

Similarly, the literature offers several possible explanations for why middle and high school teachers were more inclined than elementary teachers to experience unpleasant emotions based on appraisals of SR and SE gaps. At the early elementary level, teachers are accustomed to encountering students at different stages of early social-emotional development (Jones et al., 2017). Conversely, middle and high school teachers may lack the coursework and training to interpret student behavior through this type of developmental lens. For example, studies indicate that teachers often become frustrated when they misinterpret students' avoidance strategies (e.g., disengagement from a given classroom activity because of its difficulty) as laziness, lack of motivation, or resistance (Tadayyon et al., 2016). This may explain in part why agency (i.e., blame) was assigned to students more often with SR gaps than other categories of CiS. It is also apt given the "learning loss" narratives that overshadowed the 2022–23 school year in the United States.

Conflict between goals

Our findings regarding teachers' perception of conflicts between performance and learning/relational goals mirror the uncertain nature of teaching and learning interactions within scholarship on complexity in education (Sato et al., 2025). In particular, several studies indicate that conflict between a teacher's desire to use learner-focused instructional practices and the pressure they feel to meet state or district benchmarks/curricular standards forces them to decide whether to adapt or integrate their instruction to meet their competing goals (Creider, 2020; Thomas and Yoon, 2014; Zheng and Huan, 2022). These conflicts are "expressed in emotional terms" (i.e. challenging, struggling) and can often lead to demoralization. According to Santoro (2019), demoralization occurs when teachers know exactly what professional values require of them but cannot do what they believe needs to be done (p. 48).

Adopting and resisting deficit narratives of students

Narratives embedded in teachers' appraisals and discourse regarding CiS informed their meaning making while teaching in post-pandemic contexts. In line with Aukerman and Aiello (2023) contention that broader "learning loss" narratives draw teachers' attention to student deficits, all participants discussed CiS at length even though they were not asked about changes in students, learning loss, or gaps. Meaningful patterns within participants' appraisal processes help explain the contexts in which deficit perspectives and unpleasant emotions thrive; as well as how teachers interrupted and rejected deficit narratives through emotion regulation processes.

Participants who described extreme accountability pressure in their school and had low coping potential were particularly prone to adopt deficit narratives regarding CiS. Perceptions of accountability pressure and teachers' coping potential are also associated with vulnerability (Bullough, 2005; Kelchtermans, 1996; Levantino et al., 2024). When teachers feel vulnerable, they are more apt to adopt deficit perspectives about students (Marshall and Chen, 2025). Similar relationships have been identified involving teacher emotions, sustainability, and effectiveness. For instance, teachers who perceive students in more deficit-oriented ways tend to experience more unpleasant emotions than peers who focus less on what is "wrong" with their students (de Ruiter et al.,

2019). Deficit framing of students also reinforces teachers' beliefs about their inability to support students (i.e., inefficacy), escalating anxiety and stress about accountability pressure.

Variations in teachers' appraisal processes regarding CiS and student deficits help illustrate how appraisals emerge from "a mixture of objective features of workplace realities leavened with individual interpretation" (Gaines et al., 2023). For example, despite working in different schools, "learning loss" discourse (i.e., CiS) was a "feature of workplace realities" for all participants. Yet, using reappraisal to reflect on student agency allowed a small group of teachers to experience less intense unpleasant emotions and to begin connecting pleasant emotions with CiS. Enacting something like Aukerman and Aiello (2023) anti-deficit noticing framework, a few teachers in the study were able to deliberately resist deficit narratives about students by noticing and acknowledging students' emotions and action. Specifically, participants reappraised behavior originally attributed to post-pandemic "gaps" as the students attempting to exercise agency within systems that typically frame them as consumers (e.g., Ulysses' references to the transmission model of schooling) or commodities (e.g., Rebecca's consideration of their social media use).

In general, using empathy and evaluating situations from alternate perspectives like this can prevent teachers from succumbing to negative emotions (Beltman and Poulton, 2019; Sutton, 2004). Thus, assigning student agency and control through reappraisal may work similarly by helping teachers not take student behavior personally. In turn, this helps them avoid unpleasant emotional experiences (Sutton, 2004). Shifting appraisals of agency away from the complex, nebulous circumstances of the pandemic and to the students may also support teachers' efficacy by allowing control to be reappraised as well (Clará et al., 2025). If so, reappraising agency could disrupt self-perpetuating cycles of deficit narratives, vulnerability, and unpleasant emotions (Bullough, 2005; de Ruiter et al., 2019; Kelchtermans, 1996; Levantino et al., 2024; Marshall and Chen, 2025).

Limitations and future directions

Like all research, this study has limitations that call for ongoing examination through future research. Most notably, our data came from a small sample of participants that lacked racial and ethnic diversity. Racial and ethnic diversity is especially important in research on teacher emotions considering the racialized nature of emotion display rules (Wingfield, 2010) as well as the additional emotional labor that is often taken on by teachers of color (Berheide et al., 2022; Ispa-Landa and Thomas, 2019; Wingfield, 2021). Race and culture also influence appraisal processes (Forsythe et al., 2011; Weiss et al., 2022). Future research on teacher emotions must interrogate how teachers' intersectional identities shape the appraisal processes that determine how teachers feel about students who are unlikely to meet district expectations on high-stakes tests and other accountability mechanisms.

There are also limitations to using self-report data, particularly as it relates to emotion. *Recall bias* refers to the mismatch between emotions experienced when recalling an event and the emotions experienced at the time (Skowronski, 2010; Walker and

Skowronski, 2009). Appraisal theory does account for this to an extent, insofar as one's appraisals in each moment are informed by similar prior experiences (Lazarus, 1991). For the most part, participating teachers discussed "typical" day-to-day experiences or recent events, which may decrease recall bias. Regardless, additional research is needed to account for teachers' emotional experiences in real time. We concur with Frenzel et al. (2015), who call for examining individual teacher's emotions over time and *as context changes* to gain clarity about the relationships between person and situation as it relates to the origins of emotional experiences.

Conclusion and implications

In this study, we identified clear relationships between teachers' emotions, accountability pressure, and deficit thinking during the transition back to "normal" school days following the COVID-19 pandemic. The intensity of emotions, accountability pressure, and deficit thinking were clearly heightened at this time, yet not unique to it. Although the material, academic, and psychological consequences of these phenomena have long been foci of research, policy, and reform, the heightened intensity of these issues at the time of our study was analogous to a magnifying glass: patterns appeared bigger and closer to the surface, providing incredible clarity about the inextricable connections between these issues. Even if their intensity decreases in coming years, they will remain present and will continue to affect student and teacher outcomes. Hopefully, our findings can guide teachers and educational leaders in addressing these issues in those times.

This also underscores why examining systemic issues piecemeal cannot yield meaningful solutions. All three issues (teachers' unpleasant emotions, accountability pressure, and deficit thinking) must be addressed as they relate to one another for any to improve significantly. This has practical implications for schools, districts, and education legislators as well as theoretical implications for scholars in these interacting fields. For example, linking emotion regulation strategies to the adoption or rejection of deficit perspectives is a key theoretical contribution of this study. We posit that deficit-framed narratives, such as those surrounding "learning loss," can serve as emotional coping mechanisms for teachers under stress. Teachers who feel overwhelmed by accountability pressures may adopt deficit narratives to shift blame away from themselves and reduce emotional strain. Conversely, those who engage in cognitive reappraisal and perspective-taking are more likely to resist deficit thinking and maintain more positive emotional experiences.

On a practical level, this study speaks to the powerful role emotions play in fostering successful teaching and learning (Burić and Frenzel, 2020; Frenzel et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2023), as well as the importance of appraisals in shaping emotional experiences. We recognized that teachers' primary appraisals (i.e., goal relevance, goal congruence) often depended on the nature and origin of their instructional goals (performance, mastery, or relational). This is an important elaboration of appraisal theory, which acknowledges the role of context broadly in shaping appraisals, without explicitly accounting for it in practice. Teacher emotions research based on appraisal theory may have more practical

implications if ecosystems/contexts are reflected more directly in data and analysis.

To that end, supporting teachers' emotional wellbeing is foundational for both equitable and effective schooling and therefore must be a made priority (Germain, 2022). If educational leaders and media organizations do not explicitly combat deficit thinking and cease framing learning as something that can be "lost," academic growth will remain slow, at best. Fortunately, schools and districts can take meaningful action to respond. They can start by adjusting and setting realistic post-pandemic expectations for benchmarking performance and accountability measures to ease the burden on teachers and set students up for greater success. Although broad metanarratives are difficult to change, schools and districts can also adopt more relational, growth-oriented perspectives (Aukerman and Aiello, 2023) and develop local narratives and discourses that allow stakeholders to work toward learning targets in ways that are more emotionally pleasant, locally relevant, and effective.

For example, participants who engaged in cognitive reappraisal and empathized with "changed" students were able to recognize and resist deficit thinking, which helped them maintain more sustainable emotional responses. At the school level, evidence-based professional development regarding teachers' own emotion regulation should be made available to help them develop awareness of adaptive patterns and strategies for coping and regulating emotion. Explicitly investing in teachers' emotional and mental health like this may be a welcome change when compared to the ineffective and superficial gestures that are often made in the name of teacher wellbeing (Corbett et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2019). In addition, to support the relational goals and needs in the classroom, programs like SEL (social and emotional learning) should be a top priority at the district-level so that teachers do not need to be the sole frontiers addressing students' social and emotional needs. Resources and funding should be allocated to the talent pipeline, and hiring of support staff, such as counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, media specialists, social workers, paraprofessionals, etc., to address students' social and emotional needs.

We also found, as have prior studies, that adoption of deficit frames heightened teachers' frustration and inefficacy (Marshall and Chen, 2025). Teachers (and other school staff/leaders) should be offered strategies for reframing student behavior and learning differences as opportunities for growth and relational connection (Aukerman and Aiello, 2023). Once again, however, even if such strategies were integrated into the accepted school discourse, accountability pressure could interfere with teachers' ability to effectively implement such strategies. This is why any teacher, school, or district that hopes sincerely to improve academic and wellbeing outcomes for students and teachers must first address how performance-focused accountability systems amplify deficit narratives and unpleasant teacher emotions.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because we are not permitted to share the dataset per the IRB. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to RG, rgaines7@kennesaw.edu.

Ethics statement

Author contributions

RG: Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Validation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Data curation, Visualization, Software, Conceptualization. M-LC: Data curation, Validation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. MP: Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing. KM: Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis.

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Conflict of interest

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

Generative AI statement

The authors declare Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. After the manuscript was completed, Generative AI was asked to provide a list of strengths and weakness of the manuscript. We used the output from that request to make minor revisions.

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