

Emergency Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Teachers' Perspectives

Preliminary Report

Sarah Barrett, PhD, OCT

York University, Faculty of Education



“Teaching is about building relationships and these relationships cannot be formed or supported online. Delivering curriculum is all I am doing online and that is such a small part of teaching.”

(secondary school teacher – math)

Emergency Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Teachers' Perspectives

Preliminary Report

"I do believe this can't be called online learning. It's emergency remote learning. There was no time or necessary support to organise any real authentic online learning opportunities." (elementary school teacher)

On March 13, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario closed its school buildings and all K-12 teaching migrated to online/distance formats three weeks later. The situation was complicated by the fact that long term planning was undermined by repeated extensions of school closures. Also, it was mandated that grades could not fall below what students had on March 13th.

The purpose of this study is to explore and document the teachers' experiences of this unprecedented situation. Although participants expressed opinions about its appropriateness for their students, **this study is not about online learning per se**. Rather, it is about an emergency situation in which teachers had to shift to online teaching. There was no real choice on the part of teachers, students, or parents to engage in online learning and the parameters for student engagement were also unique.

This preliminary report, provided at the request of many of the participants, is based on some of survey data. A full report will be released in early 2021.

Study Design

This mixed methods study consisted of a survey and interviews. After obtaining ethical approval from York University in May, 764 teachers were surveyed in May and June – out of whom 50 participated in in-depth interviews, in July and August.

Interviews were designed to explore the teachers' approaches to (1) translating in-person lessons to online, (2) assessment, (3) professional development, and (4) their perspectives on how the situation has affected their students, professional relationships, and work life.

The survey provided context for the interviews, creating a snapshot of teachers' familiarity with online teaching before the pandemic and their circumstances, professional development, and concerns during. For each question where there was an option to add comments, 80-100 chose to do so.

This report will focus on highlighting the participants' words, with little comment.

Survey Participants (55% secondary and 45% elementary):

Figure 1: Age

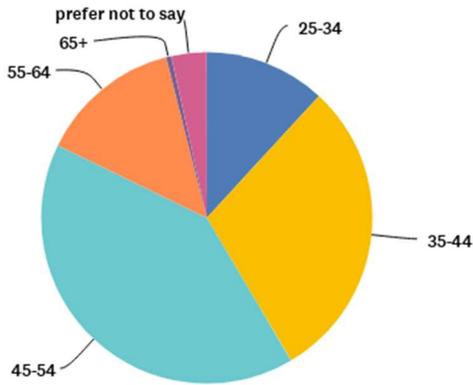


Figure 2: Gender Identity

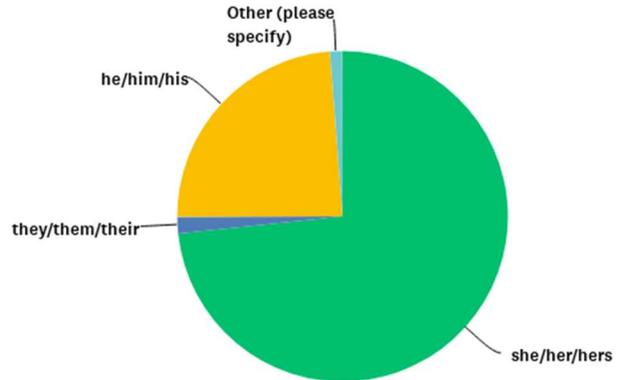


Figure 3: Degrees Earned

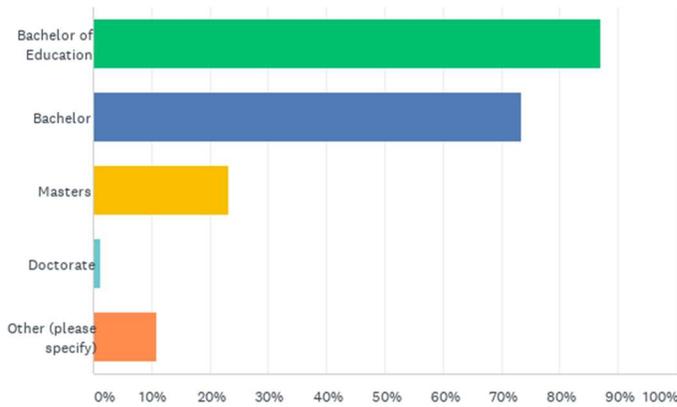


Figure 4: Teachable Subjects

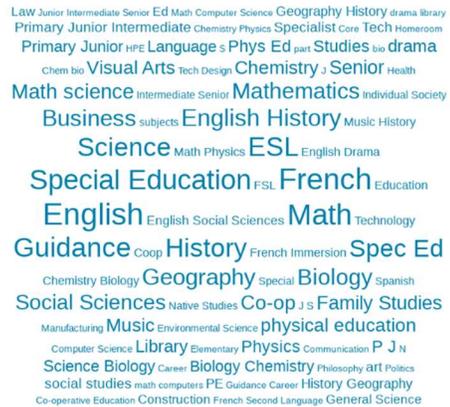


Figure 5: Courses Taught during School closures

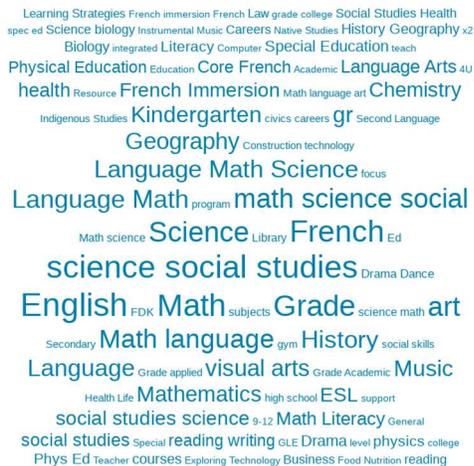
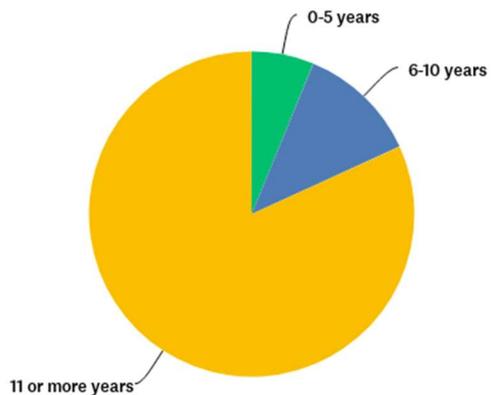


Figure 6: Years of Experience



Preliminary Findings

Age, gender identity, years of experience, and degrees earned appear to have had no significant effect on responses to questions in the survey. However, whether the participant taught in an elementary or secondary school did seem to have some effect with elementary teachers being less likely to use digital and online technologies pre-COVID-19 and less in favour of its continued use.

Comfort with online and digital tools before the closure of schools

“Before the school closure, I already had a daily calendar as well as digital copies of all notes & assignments posted online. This allowed absent students to follow along from home. I also mentored all students in how to access & use these throughout February. Without this in place, the transition to online would have been far less successful.” (secondary school teacher - science)

The majority of teachers were comfortable with using online and digital technologies for administration and supplementary resources, but this comfort decreased the more integrated the application was with teaching lessons (see Table 1). For example, 85% of teachers used digital and online technology for administration at least sometimes but only 40% used it for teacher-directed lessons.

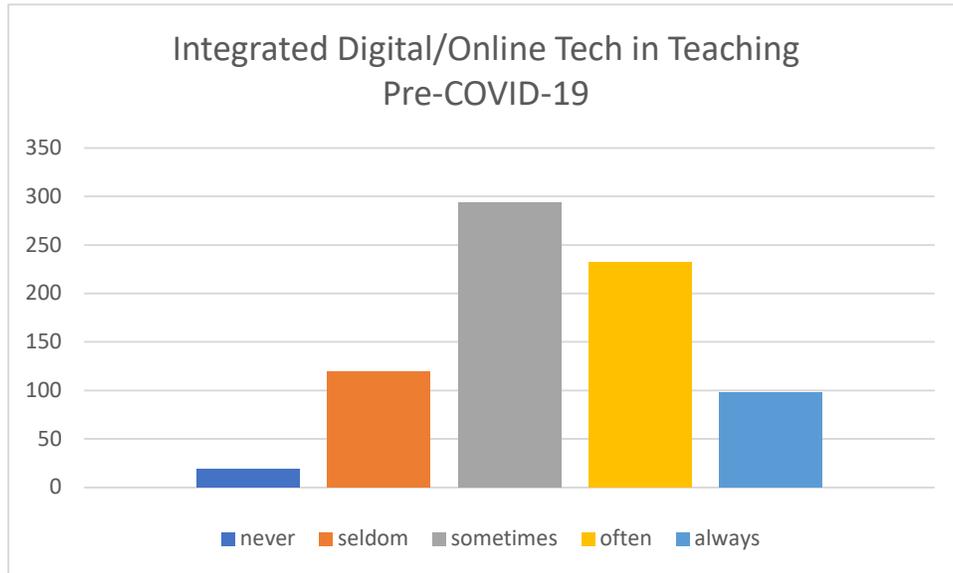
Table 1: Use of technology and online tools before school closures

	NEVER	SELDOM	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS	TOTAL
Administration (student records and communication to students and parents)	4.5% 34	10.4% 79	23.4% 178	45.9% 350	15.9% 121	762
Receiving and grading student work and/or administering tests or quizzes	26.3% 200	24.2% 184	26.9% 205	15.8% 120	6.8% 52	761
Teacher-directed Lessons	37.5% 285	22.4% 170	21.8% 166	12.4% 94	5.9% 45	760
Inquiry/Experiments/Demonstrations	29.3% 223	27.2% 207	29.8% 227	10.4% 79	3.3% 25	761
Virtual field trips	72.4% 549	19.5% 148	6.7% 51	1.1% 8	0.3% 2	758

Pre-COVID-19, generally speaking, digital and online technologies were a supplement to in-person teaching, not integral.

“I teach kindergarten French Immersion. I use technology to communicate with parents, colleagues, and administrators. I use technology perhaps weekly to show students short videos in French (e.g., songs).” (elementary school teacher – Kindergarten/French immersion)

Figure 7.



Yet, in response to the question “Do you feel you have the skills to teach online” only 13% said “no”.

Table 2: Support for limiting use of online or digital tech Pre-COVID-19

	NEVER	SELDOM	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS	TOTAL
I felt supported by my employer when I chose not to integrate digital/online technologies in my teaching or limited its use.	4.9% 12	10.2% 25	32.5% 80	32.9% 81	19.5% 48	246
I felt supported by my colleagues within my school when I chose not to integrate digital/online technologies in my teaching or limited its use.	1.2% 3	5.7% 14	25.3% 62	41.2% 101	26.5% 65	245

Table 3: Support for experimenting with using online or digital tech Pre-COVID-19

	NEVER	SELDOM	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS	TOTAL
I felt supported by my employer when I experimented with integrating digital/online technologies into my teaching.	3.1% 16	9.5% 49	26.8% 138	35.1% 181	25.4% 131	515
I felt supported by my colleagues within my school when I experimented with integrating digital/online technologies into my teaching.	2.1% 11	3.9% 20	26.1% 134	37.7% 194	30.2% 155	514

Regardless, pre-COVID-19, the decision to use digital or online technologies was an individual decision based on teachers’ professional judgement about their students, the curriculum, and their context.

Preparing for the Change

In preparing to teach online, teachers relied heavily on collaborations with colleagues – providing technical support to each other – as well as accessing various online tutorials and forums.

Figure 8.

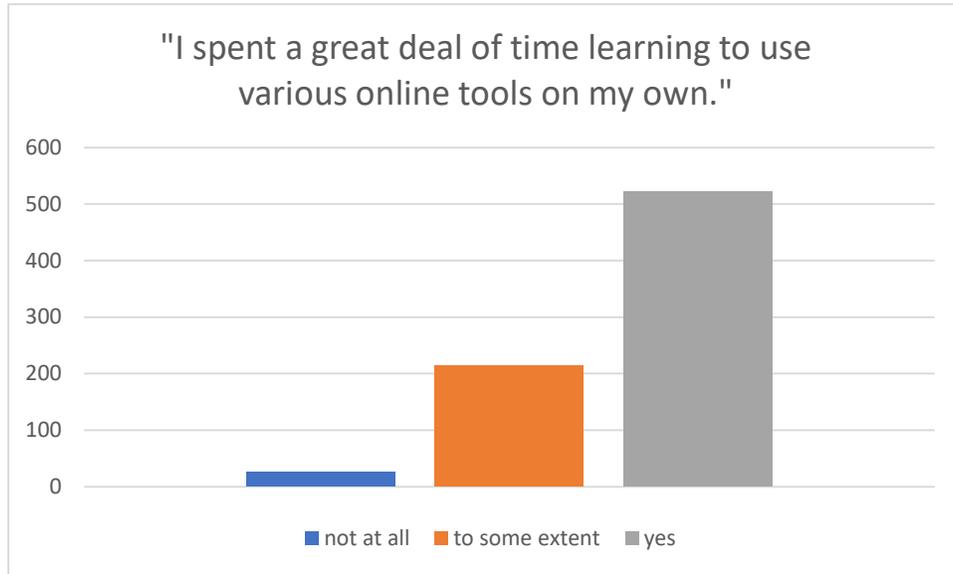
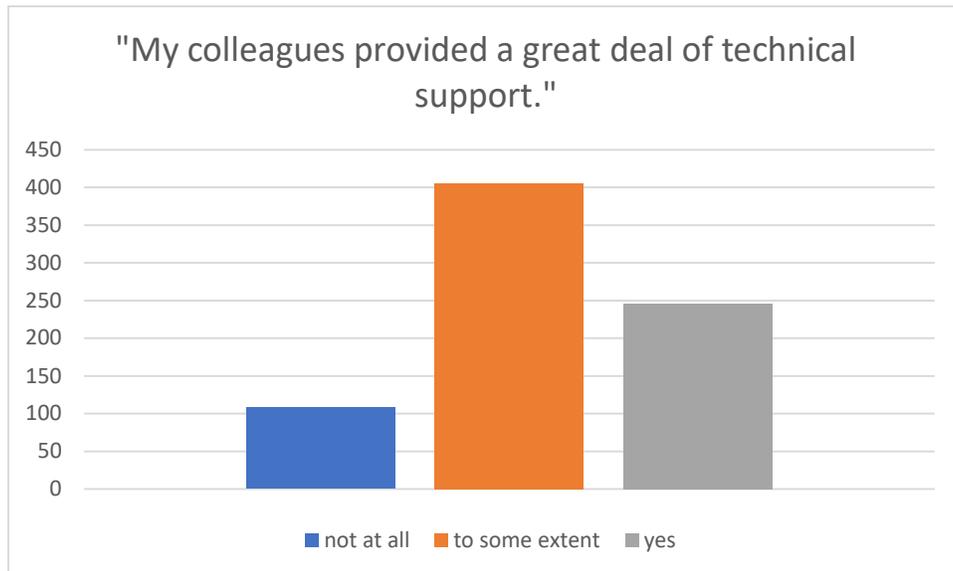
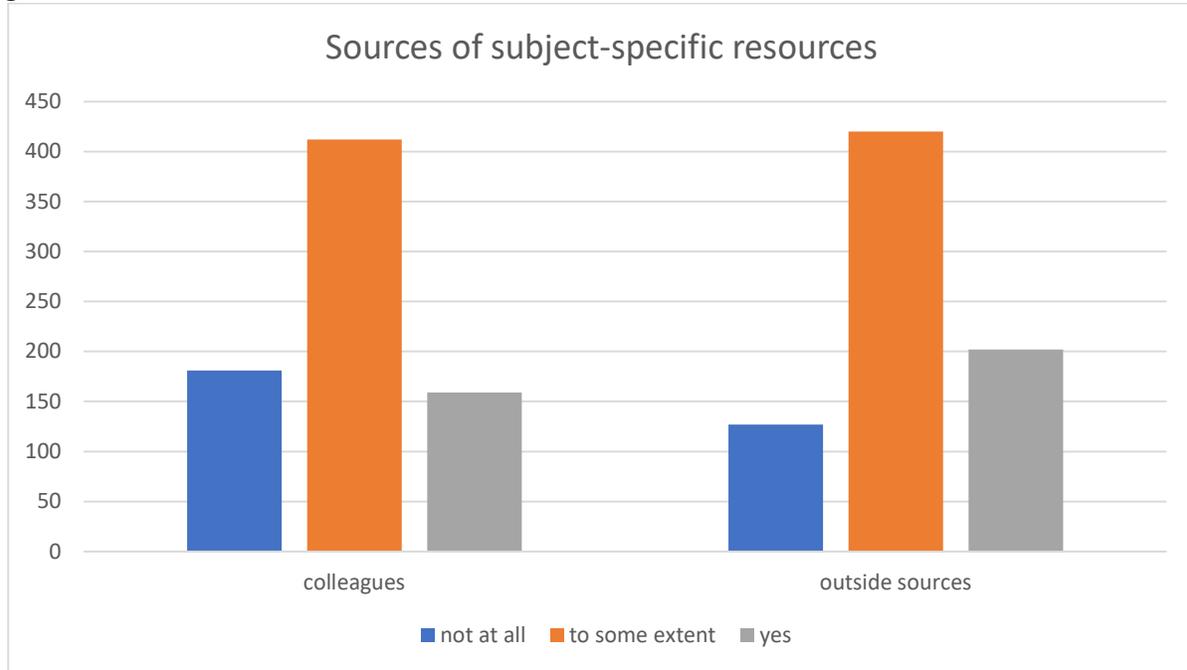


Figure 9.



Subject-specific resources also tended to come from colleagues, subject associations, and/or outside sources.

Figure 10.



However, teachers' efforts to adapt were complicated by the incremental extensions of school closure. This is because short-term lesson planning depends on long-term curriculum planning. The uncertainty made this long-term planning impossible.

"For kids in particular, predictability, stability, a purpose for doing what they are doing, these all matter. Moving forward, I sincerely hope the government lays out their plans one semester at a time." (secondary school teacher – performing arts)

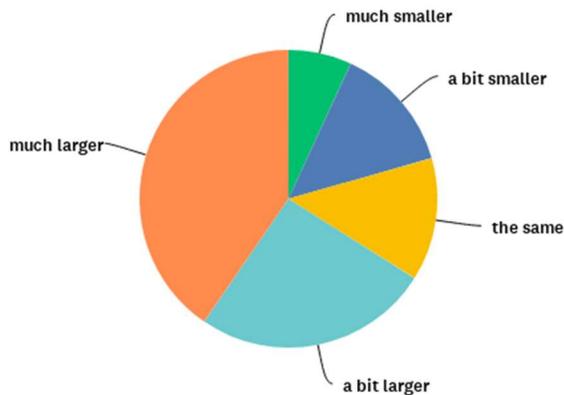
Complications with Working from Home

“I had to balance my role as a mother of 9 and 12-year-old boys who needed my support. One had ADHD and the other has anxiety, so it was difficult to manage even though they are not of a really young age.” (elementary school teacher)

During the pandemic, working parents who normally would have left their children in the care of schools and day care centres had to work from home while essentially homeschooling their children based on their children’s teachers’ instructions. Teachers who were parents were no different. Indeed, 40% of respondents reported having caregiving responsibilities that “significantly impacted” their ability to teach online. This was the strongest theme in the anecdotal responses.

“Like most people coping with the pandemic, I viewed looking after my children while attempting to work from home just “part of the deal;” even though it was not ideal.” (secondary school teacher – history)

Figure 11. Workload during COVID-19 compared to before school closures:



“We are told to be in front of our computer for the school day, yet my kids’ teachers are requiring us to be online with them at given times. I cannot do synchronous learning with my students and my kids.” (secondary school teacher - math)

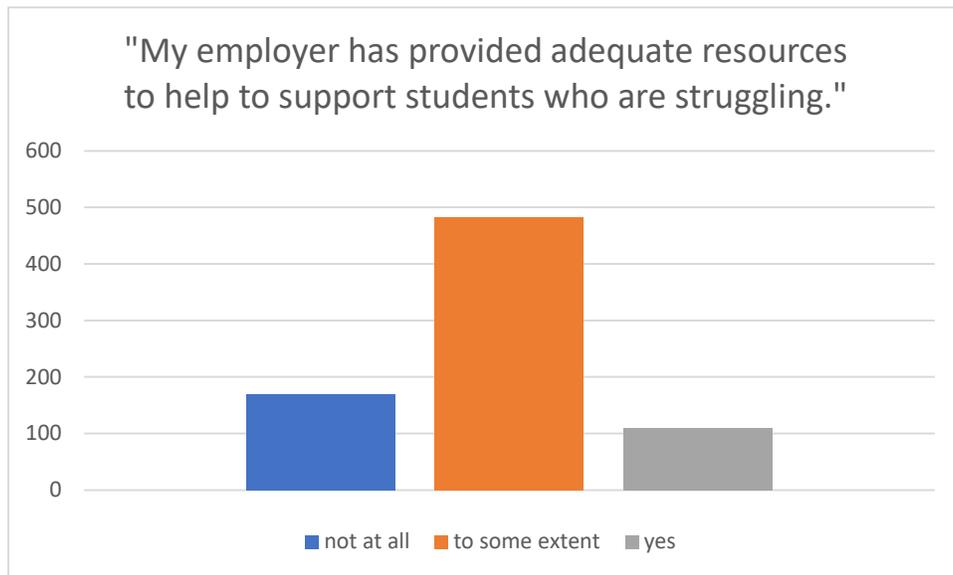
“My employer has made it clear that this is not a continuation of learning but rather emergency remote learning and so I have felt supported in trying to find a balance between my caregiving and teaching responsibilities.” (elementary school teacher – kindergarten)

It is clear from the responses that there was some inconsistency between different school boards and programs about how much synchronous teaching was mandated. Caregiving responsibilities had a major impact on teachers’ workloads.

Equity, Access, and Accommodations

“Students who are disengaged already struggled pre-pandemic. Once they were isolated at home, there was no way to keep them consistently engaged. Phone calls and emails were sent home, and sometimes the students would show up online after that, but never consistently. Also, knowing that their marks couldn't drop, there wasn't an incentive. I tried my best to reach out to parents and convince them, but even the parents struggled keeping their children academically engaged.” (secondary school teacher – languages)

Figure 12.



82% of respondents said that they had several students that they were worried would “fall through the cracks” with the new format. There were various reasons indicated in the anecdotal responses, including lack of equipment, special needs, and language difficulties.

“We are a rural school, with 100% of our students being bussed....Many students had personal physical drop offs every week to ensure they were getting the content and also had personal pickups to return work to teachers, however it has only been since the first of June when the students could return work. Many of the students have...extremely slow downloading/uploading speeds. For many to participate in online virtual interaction was impossible.” (secondary school teacher – math)

“My students don't have computers, so I have been informed by my employer that I have to make assignments "cell phone friendly". Their English is VERY weak and their parents can't help them. All of these barriers have been too much for me to overcome.” (secondary school teacher – ESL)

Most school boards made attempts to provide devices to students and some attempted to provide internet access. However, in many cases, some students' ability to participate was still delayed by weeks or months. Poverty was a major factor:

"The students that are able to get online everyday with little struggle (easy access to technology, safe home environment, well educated parents/guardians) will continue to excel while those that did not have a safe environment at home to learn will fall between the cracks even more....some students did not have crayons at home to colour, did not have dice to play math games, did not have a printer, or paper for that matter - I had one student draw a spring picture on a local flyer because the family said they did not have spare paper."(elementary school teacher)

Further to the above, there is also no doubt that school closures had a profound effect on students with severe developmental disabilities.

"Most of teaching is building positive relationships with students, especially with students with developmental disabilities. This has been a disappointing and disheartening experience. These kids cannot do online schooling. They thrive on interactions and need to be taught how to act in social situations. My fear is that they will be emotionally traumatized and there will be regression in their skills."
(secondary school teacher – family studies)

In short, vulnerable students were made more vulnerable by the situation and teachers were often frustrated trying to make sure all students' needs were met.

Inauthentic Assessment

“I am very concerned that there is no way to ensure the student is doing the work whereas in the classroom I can verify that through observation. I believe good observation is key to responsive teaching and it is not possible in this format. Kids are less able to learn from each other and internalize what they see modelled. There is little if any room for them to be coached on complex oral communication skills and human interaction.” (secondary school teacher – English)

Beyond knowing if students were handing in their own work, there were other concerns. Teachers need to assess the processes in which students engage while doing their work in order to plan next steps. This was difficult to do in online environments.

“Hard to assess and evaluate student participation effort, learning, independence via online format, Extremely challenging for younger students k-3 as it requires presence of supportive adult to fulfill learning obligations and engage with technology. Totally inadequate for students with special needs and ESL students. Online platforms supported by the Board not user friendly for young students K-3” (elementary school teacher)

This situation was further complicated by the announcement in April by the Minister of Education stating that student work could not lower the grade they had on March 13th. This announcement had a profound effect on student engagement.

“It is difficult to reach students who do not respond to emails or to the assignments posted. The admin has phoned home and had us flag students who we have not heard from. The big problem is being able to tell the difference between students who are fine and have quit engaging in lessons, students who are struggling mentally, have a difficult home life, have no technology or internet.” (secondary school teacher - music)

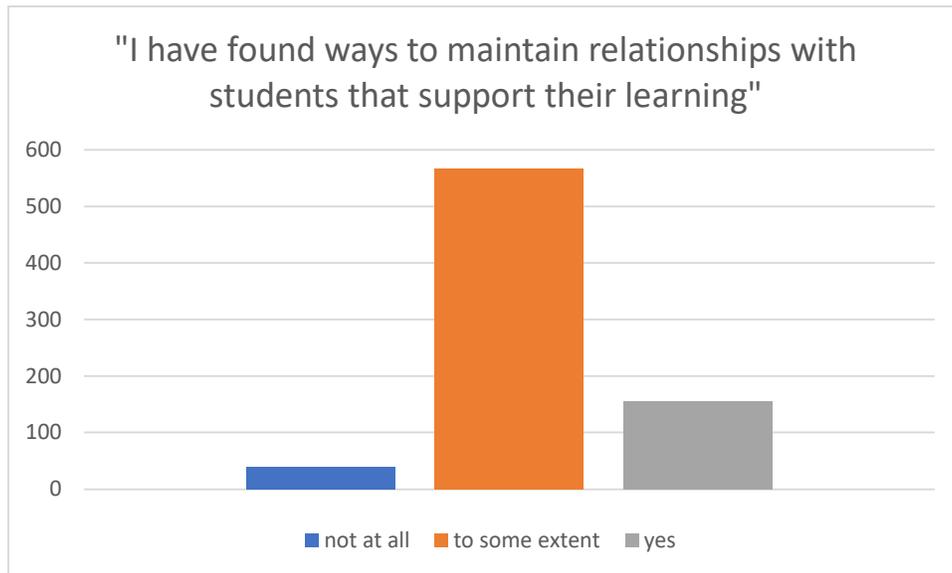
Disrupted Relationships

“My biggest concern is the lack of personal connection with and between the students. On the whole, many students don't attend scheduled meetings and so I feel this lack of connection which is not really alleviated by the occasional phone call home. If online learning continues in September, I will have to find a new way for me and my students to maintain a personal connection.” (secondary school teacher – French)

Teacher-student and student-student relationships were disrupted by school closures.

“Kindergarten is about being together and sharing and learning about relationships. The entire section of the curriculum called Belonging and Contributing is incredibly difficult to recreate online in particular, but the other three strands are also difficult.” (elementary school teacher – full day kindergarten)

Figure 13.



In the elementary panel and in non-semestered courses in secondary schools, teachers and students had the benefit of having gotten to know each other over the course of six months. In semestered courses, this time was only six weeks.

“So much of a bricks and mortar school day is informal building of culture and community. The casual conversations with students and discussions as class begins, the dropping in to guidance to check in about a student, the staying at lunch for extra help (but in reality, you're actually keeping a lonely kid company), the extracurriculars. In any given day, hours of the day aren't necessary, academically, to fulfil curriculum expectations and grant credits.” (secondary school teacher – music)

Lessons Learned

What happened in the winter/spring term of 2020 was, as described by several survey participants, an instance of emergency remote learning not online learning. Teachers made that distinction to emphasize the uniqueness of the situation which did not allow for the usual modes of long- and short-term planning. The survey respondents indicate that they were most concerned about

1. balancing caregiving and teaching responsibilities;
2. equity, access to technology, and accommodations;
3. authentic assessment; and
4. the disruption of relationships.

These concerns need to be taken into account moving forward, as we continue to run the schools in modified formats until the vaccine is developed.

The 50 interviews that were conducted during the summer months are currently being analyzed. As noted, these focus on (1) translating in-person lessons to online, (2) assessment, (3) professional development, and (4) their perspectives on how the situation has affected their students, professional relationships, and work life.

This preliminary report begins the process of documenting the unprecedented school closures in the winter and spring of 2020 from teachers' perspectives. The final comprehensive report will be released in early 2021.