

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

Final Report (March 2021)

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Not all kids are built for online learning. A lot of them [said], "I can't do this." "I'm sick and tired of looking at my screen." "I just don't want to be on a computer anymore." "I just want to come back to school." "I just want to see my friends." And it was really hard. You couldn't do anything about it.

(Isobel, high school English teacher)

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the hundreds of teachers who took part in this study. Special thanks to the 50 teachers who participated in interviews and continue to provide updates on the situation as it unfolds.

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

Final Report

This is not online learning. This is emergency learning. Which is totally different. I wouldn't wish this upon any educator because if you don't have a relationship with a student before you go to switch to online, you're not going to have it. You can't build a relationship online. (Magnus)

On March 13, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario closed its school buildings. All K-12 teaching in publicly funded schools migrated to online/distance learning formats three weeks later. This closure continued to the end of the 2019-20 school year.

The purpose of this study is to explore and document the teachers' experiences of teaching online and at a distance during this time. 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 pivot to online/distance teaching and learning. There was no real choice on the part of teachers, students, or parents to engage in online/distance learning and the parameters for student engagement were also unique.

Study Design

This mixed methods study consisted of a survey and interviews. After obtaining ethical approval from York University in May 2020, 764 teachers were surveyed in May and June 2020 – out of whom 50 participated in 30-75-minute in-depth interviews, in July and August 2020.

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 affected their students, professional relationships, and work life.

The survey provided context for the interviews, creating a snapshot of (1) teachers' familiarity with online teaching before the pandemic and (2) their circumstances, professional development, and concerns during school closures. Findings for the survey are found in the Preliminary Report (Appendix A).

The final question in the survey was a request for volunteers for interviews; 300 of the 764 respondents volunteered. Interviewees were chosen based on matching proportions of the larger group by gender, panel (elementary or secondary), age, and location.

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

Interview Participants

Figure 1: Age

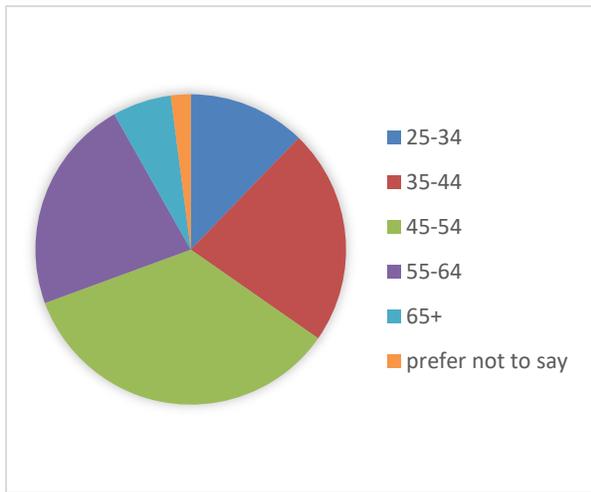


Figure 2: Gender Identity

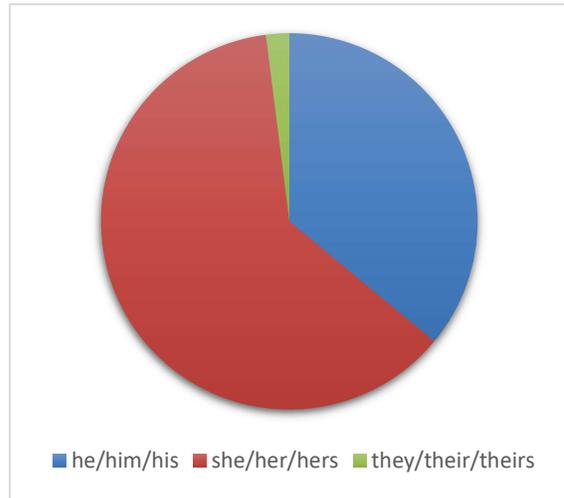


Figure 3: Degrees Earned

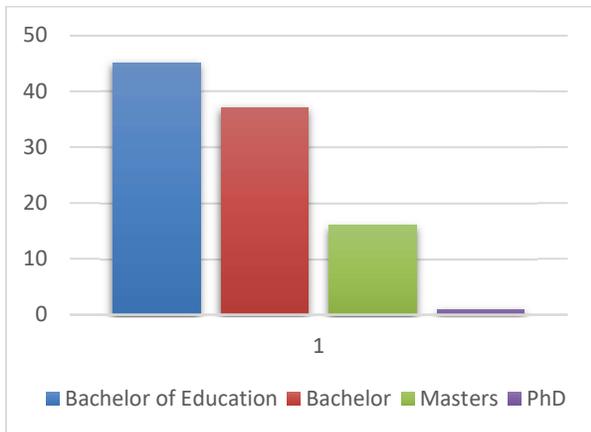


Figure 4: Years of Experience

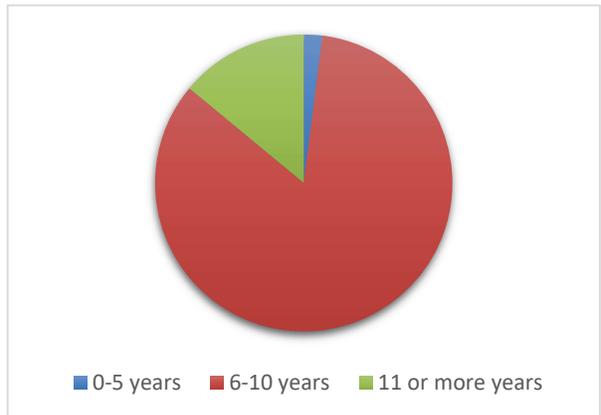


Figure 5: Grades Taught during School closures

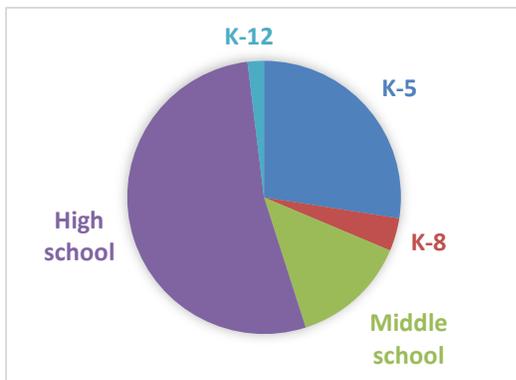
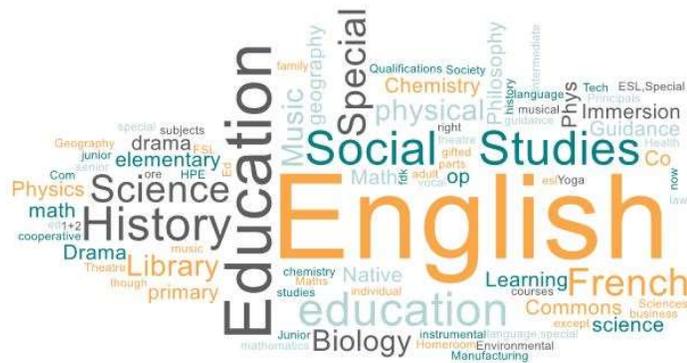


Figure 6: Courses Taught during School closures



Context

As of the 2018-2019 school year, Ontario, the most populous province in Canada, had a total of 2,040,432 students attending publicly funded schools in 72 school boards.¹ Normally, the Ministry of Education, as part of the provincial government, mandates curriculum while the Education Act stipulates parameters for the school year and length of school days. However, day-to-day scheduling and pedagogical choices are left to school boards, schools and teachers.

The school year had already been disrupted by picketing and work-to-rule throughout the province as the teacher federations and school boards worked through the provincial-level process mandated by the *School Boards Collective Bargaining Act* to establish the contractual frameworks on which collective agreements with local school boards would depend.²

The school closure was announced on the Thursday before March Break and was initially just a two-week extension of the Break. During this time, the Ministry of Education provided online resources for students called “Learn at Home”³ and parents were asked to help their children to take advantage of this opportunity.



Photo courtesy of Noun Project

¹ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/educationFacts.html> (accessed on January 29, 2021).

² <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/14s05> (accessed on February 3, 2021).

³ <https://www.ontario.ca/page/learn-at-home> (accessed on February 1, 2021).

The Transition

We were told on the Thursday through Twitter that we were not going to be back for two weeks after March break.... So this was a surprise. And then the next day, it was chaos. Everyone [said], "What are we going to do?" ... And people [were] desperately putting together packages of homework to go home.... And someone said, "You know, we're not going to be back this school year." And [I said], "That's ridiculous. Of course we'll [be back]. Maybe [we'll be away until] Easter. But we'll be back."As things evolved or devolved, it made sense not to go back. (Kate, English teacher – all grades – private school)

As of March 12, 2020, some, but not all, of the interviewees had already guessed that schools would not re-open after the extended March Break and began to prepare. Some schools allowed individual teachers to return to school buildings for a brief period (15-30 minutes) in order to gather resources from their classrooms. Meanwhile, school boards surveyed families about whether they were equipped for online learning. All of this activity coincided with a province-wide state of emergency, which was declared on March 17, 2020.

I didn't really prepare. How could you? No one knew that it was going to be so long and extended. I just tried to be flexible and do the best that I could with what I was given. We were all thrown into it and we just did the best we could. (Laurence, middle school teacher)

On March 31st, two days before the end of the initial closure, it was announced that school buildings would remain closed until at least May 4th, all instruction would migrate online, and individual teachers would take over providing programming beginning on April 6, 2020.

I felt like I had to rethink my whole teaching practice because I'm so much more of the mindset of learning together, group work, discovering ideas in math, collaborating, sharing....And I'm big into movement and the kids getting around. So I think about my classroom and flexible seating and all the great learning spaces. [Now] it's, "OK, we're on a computer." So it definitely really challenged me. (Tara, elementary school teacher)

Interviewees described the change from in-person to online/distance learning as necessary but profoundly disruptive. Play-based learning became next to impossible and the individualized and highly idiosyncratic education provided to students with special needs was extremely challenging to adapt to an online environment.

*That was difficult to sort of move the instruction from in-person - which I would characterize as very individualized, adapting in the moment based on the students' needs, and rights...students on the autism spectrum...It was very flexible. And then when we went to online learning, I found it difficult to translate that type of feedback loop (of provide instruction, get the feedback, adapt the instruction, get more feedback from the students) to an online platform that was still meaningful for them.
(Erin, special education teacher - elementary)*

Very experienced teachers found themselves having to change from an organic, flexible, and responsive pedagogy to a much more rigid approach.

Knowing that every single class would be in this format [is] very different than me standing in front of the class or getting into groups. I normally favour group activities and so on and so forth where that wasn't possible. So I had to change it up a little bit. I like to tell stories in front of the class and [my students see me as] fun. I can't sit here doing that. We had to get to work and we can't get group activities going. So I had to find a balance between entertaining them, keeping them engaged, giving them some work [but] not so much work so that they are frustrated or lost and have nowhere to go until they're getting help. (Paulo, middle school teacher)

The added complication was that teachers did not really know when the schools would re-open and this made long-term planning impossible.

The way that all of it went, you're thinking, "Oh, the next announcement's coming around this time and they'll maybe say we can be back in May." And then that announcement comes and said, "Now we're extending it a couple more weeks and now we're extending it a couple more weeks"....So that kind of perpetual postponement. (Gemini, middle school teacher – private school)

Professional Development and Supports

*So luckily, very quickly, within a week, our primary curriculum consultant had basically put together three or four different templates of "Here's what it could look like." They set up a Google classroom for primary teachers. They were doing daily video meetings and so on. So all of a sudden we were getting a lot of support.
(Cameron, elementary school teacher)*

Although most of the interviewees were comfortable with digital and online technologies, some were not confident they could learn what they needed to learn in order to do a good job. In these cases, colleagues stepped in to help:

I had great support from the staff at my school. I called different staff members from different grades to help me set up my Google Classroom and help me figure out how to create assignments. Because everybody was stressed out, I didn't want to burden one person. And the staff at my school are so incredible and supportive. If I did not have them, I would have floundered. (Marcella, elementary school teacher)



Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project

Collegial support was one of the strongest themes in the interviews. A sub-theme here highlighted the type of Professional development which they saw as most useful. Although all the teachers noted that their school boards had provided professional development opportunities, videos, and courses to orient teachers to online platforms and tools, what they appreciated most was specific and targeted help in the form of ad-hoc collegial conversations and instructional coaches. Most did not have time to take workshops (before or during the school closures).

Believe it or not, it was my teaching partner - another grade four or five teacher who was a student teacher of mine in previous years. She was awesome. She was a great resource to get to narrowing down the answers to an individual question rather than having to sort through a bunch of information to try to figure out which it was. So between looking at what the board had offered for training and my expert partner, I learned quite quickly. But it was daunting, it was very daunting in the beginning.
(Chris, elementary school teacher)

Indeed, many schools had already been organized to always provide for team teaching and this made things easier:

What we did was we shared our Google Classrooms with each other, and we used to meet every second day to say, "OK, for a grade levels, this is what we are planning for this week". And then we divided the workload as well. So what we would say is if A did the lesson plan, B would do the supplementary material and the C would do the quiz because it's impossible for one person to do all things for all courses. (Dipa, high school science teacher)

Others noted that their departments and schools divided up the subjects so that they ended up teaching students who were not necessarily in their classes:

And because we were all planning together for the same subjects, we were also able to take turns doing the planning. So we weren't having to plan for multiple subjects each week. You might have a week where you were planning for two subjects and then you might have a week that you were planning for nothing. (Lexie, middle school French teacher)

In one instance, the principal arranged for a Help Desk of sorts:

With our entire grade 7-8 team we set up office hours where one of us was always being able to be reached live during school hours. So from 8:30 to 3, there was always someone who they could reach live, one of their teachers. (Chad, middle school teacher)

It was the case that there were many teachers who did not have anyone in their schools who taught the same subject. Some were running entire programs on their own. For these teachers, the pivot to online/distance learning was often more frustrating.

Assessment

Since assessment is a process, rather than asking about it in the survey, it was reserved for the in-depth interviews. Still, assessment was a major theme in the anecdotal responses in the survey. Interviewees had a lot to say about it as well:

After March break, there was no way for us to ensure that any assessment was actually done with integrity. As much as we wanted to trust the student, it's not possible for us to verify....And we were very concerned about, about how to assess and whether those marks that were generated were fair....And the problem is that those students who were honest were getting the marks that aren't always great because they tried their best....Whereas you've got the students where you're surprised by how well they did. And then you wonder about the integrity of those assessments (Annabelle, high school science teacher)

Annabelle's points about fairness were echoed by many of the other interviewees. In fact, even traditional methods of ensuring academic integrity were undermined by technology:

With math, right now, there are so many technologies out there that will do the work for them. And there is ... an amazing technology. And when a friend of mine told me about it about five years ago, she said this is going to destroy your career. So, with your phone or your tablet, you take a picture of your question and provided that it's typed this app will do the question and not just give the student the answer but show them every step. (Jay Jay, high school math teacher)

Assessment was especially difficult when observation was the most appropriate approach to evaluating student progress:

Because all of my kids' academics are based on an IEP, which are heavily modified expectations for them....In the community class, it's more, "OK. How many times did I see you do that? Did you do it independently? What level of prompt did you require? I'm going to take that. I'm going to turn that in a percentage. I'm going to compare to your IEP." I can't do that online. (Kendra, special education teacher - elementary)

Interviewees reported that they did not feel that they could assess students work in a way that was true to the assessment policy in Ontario⁴, however, most did not see assigning grades as a priority given the situation. Their main concern was that students were safe and well.

⁴ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/GrowSuccess.pdf>

Student Engagement

I really feel that the ministry shot us in the foot when they said marks will stay the same as they were when you left the building. They couldn't go down. They could go up. So we became quite frustrated. We're reading their logs, we're marking the logs, we're providing feedback on them. But in the end. It really didn't matter if they did the work or not. (Petra, high school health and physical education teacher)



Photo by Alia Youssef from Noun Project

In April 2020, the Ministry stated that grades would not drop below where they stood on March 13th. According to the teachers interviewed, this had a profound effect on student engagement.

A few [students] were online initially and then they double checked about the mark. And I also have a mark-free classroom. I don't give them mark feedback except when I have to. I want them to care about their thinking. But even there, I had to tell them, "Yes. Of course. Your mark won't go below that," and so a lot of them said "Sir, I have other things to do". And I said, "That's fine. I understand." (Aphraxas, high school English teacher)

Many of the students were coming back to me saying, "I'm not available. I have this to do. I have work. I have other teachers doing other quizzes." And it was very hard for them, very, very hard for them. (Franc, high school French teacher)

Elective courses were especially hard hit:

But then as the months went on, [attendance] quickly dropped off. By the end of April, it was down to less than half. By the beginning of June, I started getting emails: "You know what? I'm done. I'm happy with my mark. I'm not coming back. Thanks for everything. Have a nice summer." (Rhea, high school music teacher)

Teachers responsible for special education courses designed to help students develop their learning skills found that most of their students disengaged completely.

[In the] Learning Strategies [course], there were kids I lost right away even though I called or I spoke to their parents....There was no motivation for learning strategy skills. If they had a 52, they were happy. (Dipa, high school science teacher)

Still, the students the grades announcement was meant to serve, did benefit:

I had one kid who was out collecting bottles with mom because she [had] immigrated here [and] the husband left her and refused to keep sponsoring her. She is awaiting her immigration hearing for compassionate stay but those all got stalled. But in the meantime, she couldn't get served. And so they were completely out of money. So that kid's [was] not showing up to class [online]. I had another one who dropped out because both parents were front line workers and they lived rural and the Internet's spotty at best. And she's just isolated and scared for her parents all the time. Clearly the midterm mark thing. Thank God that existed because those kids shouldn't be penalized for that. (Jenny, high school musical theatre teacher)



Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project

Synchronous Learning

Several interviewees indicated that they were not comfortable with online synchronous learning because of privacy both for themselves (and their children) and their students. Many reported that their students often preferred not to have their cameras on. It was not possible to determine if these students were at their computer or not:

But there is one thing that I was surprised about is that they put their cameras on very rarely. It was always just their initials – you know, the thing that comes on, if you don't put your camera on – and they didn't seem to ever want to show themselves to each other. So if I met with them online to discuss a certain issue or to help them with something in particular, they would put their camera on. But if it was the whole class, they didn't. So that was surprising to me. But the first time that we were all on, I said, "Why don't you put your cameras on? You can say bye to each other." And they did. But then they turned them off again. So that part was surprising. I always had my camera on because I felt they needed to see me. (Elsa, high school ESL teacher – adult education)

This had a profound effect on group dynamics:

And I went from a really chatty grade 8 class that was always interactive, always answering questions, to...it went mute. No one would talk. I had maybe the one kid that would answer questions and the rest of them wouldn't talk at all. (Milena, elementary school teacher)

Such a lack of participation made it difficult to determine what individual students needed in order to be successful:

We always end up at some point talking about observation and how observation is absolute. For me, I think it's the cornerstone of teaching and that's everything from watching the body language of the student, how the student interacts with other kids, and then making decisions about how to help with that. And sometimes that means placing limits on a kid. Sometimes that means giving them a poke. Sometimes that means having a conversation. You know, none of that is going to happen [online]. (Marva, high school English teacher)

As time went on, interviewees stated that they were not always certain of what the Ministry of Education was expecting from them in terms of grades, and mode of instruction (asynchronous vs. synchronous):

We were told that it should be asynchronous 100 percent and that they were really pushing on that until the Ministry came forward with their recommendations, saying that "No, we want it to be a blend, partial synchronous, partial, asynchronous" And then it got changed again. And then they said, "well, no, we really want it to be synchronous". And then it got changed again. And so I really placed no blame on the inconsistencies when it comes to that with our school board or our school. (Blake, high school special education teacher)

Although the Ministry of Education mandated the number of hours of instruction each grade and subject should have per week, teachers found it challenging balancing the difficulty, depth, and amount of work:

And you've got parents to complaining, "This is too much." And others with the same lesson saying, "This is not enough. My child needs more." And so I can differentiate in the classroom. I can provide the extension activities. But unfortunately, I was just trying to find activities online during the digital transition and I couldn't do that. And so I know that there are people who are out there who are very unhappy with how things were for different reasons with the same teacher. So someone will complain, "That teacher made my kid do too much" and others will say, "That teacher didn't give my kid anywhere near enough work to do." You can't please them all. (David, middle school teacher)

Circumstances at Home

They come to school early in the day and they eat breakfast at our school. They're fed lunch at our school. And so we knew that they weren't getting fed at home. So our principal and our vice principal also took it upon themselves. And they made a list of those students as well. And they were dropping off food at these homes. (Bill, high school tech teacher)



Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project

When schooling migrated online, many students did not have devices or had inadequate or non-existent internet access. Schools and school boards distributed internet hubs and devices to students but, according to some of the interviewees, it took weeks for some of their students to receive them. Some students didn't receive devices until May.

That was a severe challenge because we kept thinking: what do the families have in their homes? What materials do they have in their homes that we can turn into inquiry- or play-based and so honour their interests. So that was always in the back of our mind (Hershey, full-day kindergarten)

Younger students needed their parents to help them get online and do activities, but this was not always possible:

You've got kids with families with multiple kids and one device and the parents working, single parents. [But] to be able to offer that kind of virtual learning for small children requires that their parents be available. (Alexandra, elementary school teacher)

So there was a huge difference between those who had a lot and those who had almost nothing with technology. So I had to design my home teaching with the idea that I have the perspective, "I'm assuming you don't have technology and do it on a paper and you can do with paper and pencil. But if you do there are ways you can go further. (Cameron, elementary school teacher)

Many interviewees emphasized that students' mental health took priority over academic work and their school boards encouraged this:

I mean, I had one student [where]... there was a home crisis going on. Is she going to be doing math and am I going to push it? Not a chance. They've got way more important things to deal with. They need to feel safe first. And I know that there were kids who are suffering some mental health crises. One of my boys, his mom worked in long term....And she worked a night shift and it's just the two of them living at home. And so he altered his schedule so that when she was at work at night, he was up all night.... So they were on the same schedule. But then there was an outbreak at one of the homes. And so this kid is up, you know, all night long with nobody to talk to.... Am I going to push him to make sure the language assignment's done? No ...He needs somebody to talk to more than he needs the teacher to say, "Why haven't you finished that chapter of our digital novel?" (David, elementary school teacher)



Photo by Carina König from Noun Project

Good for Some

I have some of my kids that have IEPs. Children who find the whole school thing very distracting. They need the focus control to be successful, I think. They kind of excelled because now we get rid of all the social bits and we get all the distractions and "Wow, I guess I'll actually do some work. Okay. Sure." And it was nice. It was fantastic actually. Some of those kids did very, very well academically. (Monique, elementary school French teacher)

Although, according to the interviewees, most students dislike learning at a distance, some students responded well to the online environment.

I had a great class, but some kids even did better....especially, I'd say, in things like writing. If I gave them a story prompt, I think because the time and the ability to work in private and not be worried so much about whatever peer pressure there might be about their stories. So I was asking for a paragraph and getting 17 pages and they were excellent. (Kurt, elementary school teacher)

A parent or guardian had said that being at home was actually one of the best things for this one particular child of theirs because they weren't worried about the social aspect of school. They weren't worried about having to fit in. They weren't worried about any of that. So they were able to focus on their work and show and really, truly think about the work that was being asked of them instead of worrying about what's going on around them and not really listening to what was being asked of them in the classroom (Stacey, high school social sciences teacher)

Parents Under Pressure

If you've got the parent who wants your help and doesn't know what to do and is trying their best and their business is failing because they own a fishing lodge and there's no Americans that can come up here...So how do they afford food for their kids where they used to have that? So it makes it tough, makes it challenging, so you kind of strengthen your relationships with the community and those ties.
(Phoenix, middle school teacher)



Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project

Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project

During the spring province-wide shut-down, travel was restricted and businesses were closed or required to switch to online or curbside pick-up only. In the Spring of 2020, The Financial Accountability Office of Ontario predicted a 9.0% drop in Ontario's GDP⁵. Along with all this, childcare facilities were closed, leaving some parents working from home while trying to help their children with their schoolwork.

It was a very stressful period for the parents with young children and trying to manage all their responsibilities and their child's education. We had to offer them a lot of encouragement so that they wouldn't feel guilty and to let them know that we understood when [their children] wouldn't participate....And if their children didn't want to do [school work], then they didn't fight because it was too many battles. They would be honest with us and say they couldn't handle it or they couldn't do it. ... The Board wants mental health and checking up on our families and making sure that they're doing well mentally, even if they're not able to fulfill the academic activity.
(Joseph, elementary school teacher – French Immersion)

For parents with children with special needs, a lot of the supports they had before the shutdown, were no longer available:

A lot of parents that have kids with special needs really don't know where to go and they don't know what to do and they don't know what supports are out there. And they really feel very lost. Part of my job, my responsibility is to help guide them.... I think they really felt left out in the wind.... Therapy was gone. They couldn't go to their community groups anymore. They couldn't even take their kids to the park.
(Kendra, special education teacher - elementary)

Thus, teachers and staff members were told to continually call home if students were not logging on or handing in assignments. But these calls were not always welcome:

And in fact, we've had situations where the teachers actually came back to us and said, "Well, you know, we were directed to call the parents and the parents are actually telling us to stop calling because, "Yes, we know that my child isn't working and isn't doing the schoolwork. We know that they're not going to do it. Just stop calling." So we were making a good effort at doing that. And the parents were frustrated, too. (Saunders, guidance counsellor – high school)

⁵ Financial Accountability Office of Ontario. (2020). *Economic and budget outlook: Assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic*. Retrieved from [https://www.fao-on.org/web/default/files/publications/EC2002%202020%20Spring%20EBO/2020%20Spring%20EBO-EN.pdf](https://www.fao.on.org/web/default/files/publications/EC2002%202020%20Spring%20EBO/2020%20Spring%20EBO-EN.pdf)

Teachers' Work and Home Lives

Some teachers were parents, too, juggling childcare with work with some principals being supportive and flexible and others refusing to accommodate the teachers in any way.

I'm trying to work from home and my wife's trying to work from home with kids running around... I don't understand how a lot of parents did it. It was a giant ask. And the last thing they needed from me was to be bombarded by "Your kid's not doing this. Your kid's not doing that." (Chad, middle school teacher)

There were also problems with internet connections especially in northern communities:

So I was having to leave here and drive back to my original community because my house was still there and my daughter was living in it and she had better Internet. So I would have to leave here on Wednesday and I'd come back here on Saturday....And then the school board did allow me to go into the school, but the problem was I got a letter saying that I could not tell anybody I was allowed in the school. So the problem became I couldn't do [be on camera] because of the kids seeing the background behind me. And I couldn't make phone calls because the bells would go off still during the day. (Phoenix, middle school teacher)

The scope of work changed, as well, with teachers acting as tech support for students and parents and basic tasks like attendance becoming onerous:

You had to fill out these forms every week; these long Google forms. And you had to report to the guidance department. You had to report to Student Success. You had to check this chat line for each student. A whole couple of days a week could be spent on attendance. And that's without the expectation of everybody coming. (Carol, high school drama teacher)

Disrupted Relationships

Because of circumstances, I did lose some students. Some disappeared and I really do not know what happened with them. Which, you know, pains me a little bit. I wish I knew if there was something extraneous (Marco, high school math teacher and board level facilitator)

Although the disruption to relationships has been alluded to above, it makes sense to focus on that aspect of things here because it was the biggest theme in the interviews aside from the lack of student engagement, which was arguably related. Across the board, the interviewees missed face-to-face interactions with both colleagues and students and all believed the majority of their students missed it, too. Students in alternative programs became more vulnerable:

There's no way that I can do what I do or achieve the results that I've achieved with the digital format. The connection is severed for many of them completely and for others we can't engage in the same way.... And so much of what I do is reading body language and understanding where there's issues....and it's easier for them to hide what's going on in their life in a digital format. Because again, I can't read the situation. I can't read the body language. They're not having peer-to-peer conversations that I can overhear, say, "Hey, I notice you're talking to so-and-so about this. Let's dig into this a little bit. Let's see if we can figure some of this out, because it sounds like you're struggling." That doesn't happen.A holistic approach for me is key. And you cannot have a holistic approach when it's online. (Smokey, high school teacher – alternative education)

Further, the teachers of younger students soon realized that their relationships with the children were essentially severed. Having said that, the disruption to relationship was felt from JK to grade 12.

You cannot replicate the same level of emotional connectedness because they're not spending time with you. They have... the littlest ones our JK students found it very difficult and odd to be online....They don't have the same level of interest. They can't show you whatever they wanted to show you. They can't grab me by the hand and pull [me] over. And so they don't engage in the same way. (Diana, elementary school teacher)



Photo courtesy of the Noun Project

Well, community building among the staff, it was still there. The children? No. It just seemed to stop. (Sparky, elementary school teacher)

I'm sure the kids are going to be glad to be back. I think for a lot of our kids, it really is probably one of the more stable things in their lives. Teenagers, they hate everything till they love it; love everything till they hate it. So I think it's going to be nice for them to get back the social aspect. I can't stress enough to you that when you live in a catchment area of, let's say, ten thousand square miles and when your nearest neighbor's five miles away, you don't see a whole lot of people. And so school is a great social activity for them. (Anon, high school tech teacher)

As has been noted, teachers did their best to maintain relationships and face-to-face availability. It helped that, for full-year courses or elementary teachers, relationships with student were already well established. Other teachers lived in the communities where they taught and therefore saw their students in passing during their daily lives. Having been at a school for a long time also helped.

It's really hard. I think the biggest thing is the students. I know how hard it was for them. I know how isolating it was for them. It was really heartbreaking to hear from them in their journal responses, how many of them just missed their friends and they were just feeling lonely. (Isla, elementary school teacher)

They didn't get the interaction, they didn't get the deep learning, they didn't get to ask the questions [about what] that they read. Most of them didn't get to ask the questions they really wanted to ask. (Gandalf, high school social sciences teacher)

And yet, several teachers commented that teaching the small number of students who did continue to participate was very rewarding.

What [who continued to participate] surprised me in a good way, was that [with] this group of five kids I feel like we built a really great little community where probably for them we were able to share more and discuss more than they would have had an opportunity to do otherwise. So that was a pleasant surprise. And with that small group of students, I feel like we had a tighter bond than I would have had in a regular classroom setting. (Elle, high school social sciences teacher)

For the students that were participating on a daily basis. It actually enhanced the relationship because there was this one-on-one communication without all the noise of the classroom. That part was nice....Even though the parents were mediating in the conversation, there was a chance to have that personal connection and add a bit of humor to it...which I would have in the classroom anyways but in the classroom it would be more with the group rather than with each individual. (Joseph, elementary teacher – French immersion)

Adult Learners

It is important here to note the unique situation for adult learners in the K-12 system.

They took pictures of their work with their cell phones, as of course, some of them don't know how to use the computer. They do have internet. Some don't have money for anything. Some have no jobs. Most of them have families to look after and once COVID started or the lockdown occurred, well, I guess it wasn't a high priority because the students are adult learners and also have children at home. (Myrtle, high school teacher – adult day school)

Being adult students with so many responsibilities made it difficult to make the adjustment:

I managed to speak to some students that had left the course and they just told me, "Miss, I just can't. I can't do it. I need you in-person." They told me these things: "This is too hard for me. This is too much for me." With my students, I am not worried about relationships in that sense because I was still able to talk to them and have that trust and that connection, but I know that I lost them because they were just overwhelmed. And they felt like it was just too much for them. (Karen, high school teacher – adult day school)

Even when they committed to still attending, many adult learners were out of their depth with digital technologies:

A lot of my students were new to online learning. I was teaching them how to use Microsoft Word. I did a whole two classes just on how to use the online learning platform we were using after just learning it myself. I [would say], "Okay, here's how you turn the microphone on." [or] "There's a little green icon. An icon is a little picture is a little symbol." You know I was telling them what an icon was because I [thought], "Oh yeah, they probably don't know what that is." So very slow. (Valerie, high school teacher – adult education)

All of the interviewees who taught adult learners stated that adult learners in K-12 seemed to be treated as an afterthought as the pandemic lockdown continued.



Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project

Upon Reflection

The number one message I got from the students was that they missed their teachers and they miss their friends because they weren't allowed to see their friends and they weren't allowed to go out of the house. All their corresponding was on their cell phones, which they're used to, but after the first two or three weeks, they actually did miss being in school. (Bill, high school tech teacher)

Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on how their relationships with students, parents and colleagues were affected.

Some suggested that relationships with parents improved because they had to be in touch with them so much more often. Others said that, although they missed face-to-face interactions with colleagues, those relationships were also strengthened. With students, it was complicated:

I had built up stronger relationships with the students that were there. I just felt a lot more day-to-day communication because I was focusing on less kids. So I feel like I got to know them a little bit better. But the ones that were not responding, that was tough. I kind of lost touch with a lot of the ones that were just not responding. And we called a lot of parents and we called regularly, not just me, but a lot of the administration and the teachers trying to get them back. (Marsha, high school business teacher)

Our principal has chatted with us a few times about that, and one of the things we did is we did a parking lot, grade 8 graduation. The parents were so appreciative... And we've gotten lots of feedback, too, from parents thanking us for the activities and for the relationship building and all that kind of thing. Our principal's thinking that maybe this may strengthen our parent-teacher relationships just in general through the community because teachers just didn't check out and we still stayed involved (Marie, elementary school teacher)

When asked about the future, many of the interviewees stated that although online learning was not going away and would probably be more frequent and normal, all wanted to get back to teaching face-to-face classes because they missed their students.

Recommendations

Based on the surveys and interviews, I provide here some recommendations on what should be kept in mind moving forward.

Emergency plans

We now have the experience to anticipate what needs to be done to ensure that all students have equitable access to quality education should school buildings have to be shut down again. Emergency planning would allow for logistics already having been worked out with plans for dealing with vulnerable students. We now know that when emergency responses are not enacted smoothly, vulnerable students (e.g. having special needs, living in poverty, racialized, Indigenous) and non-traditional students (e.g. adult) tend to be disproportionately and negatively affected. Also, English language learners (ELL) will need accommodation that does not undermine their academic progress in relation to their peers.

Communication

As frontline workers, classroom teachers need to be consulted at every step because they are the ones within the education system who know their students best. During a crisis, it is imperative that there is two-way communication between the Ministry of Education and school boards and teacher federations, between school boards and schools, and between schools and teachers. Communications from the Ministry of Education need to be timely so that school boards, schools, and teachers can make adequate plans and gather the necessary resources to ensure that all students are well-served.

Infrastructure

It is probably not possible for School Boards to solve the problem of inadequate or non-existent internet connections on their own. However, they can work out procedures for ascertaining which students will need devices or internet should schools have to close again, and plan what can be done.

Flexibility

Once schooling is exported to teachers' and students' homes, there is a myriad of possible situations that need to be accommodated including workspaces, infrastructure, and childcare. In an emergency distance/online learning situation, it is unrealistic to expect that a one-size-fits-all plan (such as mandating all classes must be synchronous) will be equitable or fair to either students or teachers. Flexibility is a must.

Professional Development through Coaching rather than Courses

This is part of flexibility. Courses and workshops are useful but in an emergency situation, teachers are unlikely to have the time to attend workshops. Further, unanticipated technical problems and pedagogical issues that arise need to be handled in the moment. Teachers need both technical support and pedagogical support. Therefore, technically savvy teachers acting as coaches will probably serve teachers and students best.

Conclusion

At the time of this writing, we are in the midst of a second wave of COVID-19. The Province of Ontario is once more in a state of emergency and, as of January 4, 2021 school buildings across the province were shut down once more. Since then, school boards have been returning to in-person teaching region by region. In spite of the fact that we have been through this before, follow-up surveying of the interviewees indicates that school boards, schools, teachers, students, and parents have been facing similar logistical challenges to those they faced in the spring of 2020.

Although everyone is doing their best, the education system at the local, regional, and provincial levels would do well to ensure that all stakeholders, including teachers, be consulted about current and future approaches to managing schooling during a pandemic. This is the only way to ensure that all students are well served.

There is no doubt that there will be many studies done on what happened in the education sector during this pandemic, with different stakeholders being interviewed and/or studied. This report focuses solely on the teachers' perspectives because, as front-line workers, their perspectives can provide important insight about what educators need to keep in mind into the future about online/distance teaching and learning, equity, and community in schooling.



Photo by Jacob Lund from Noun Project

Appendix A: Preliminary Report

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

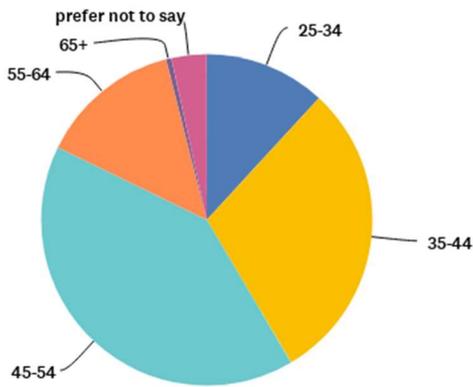


Figure 2: Gender Identity

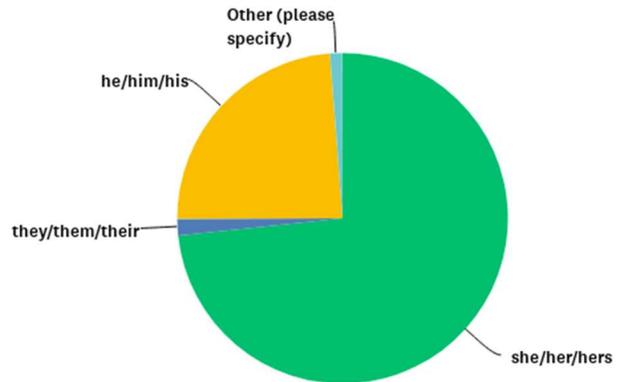


Figure 3: Degrees Earned

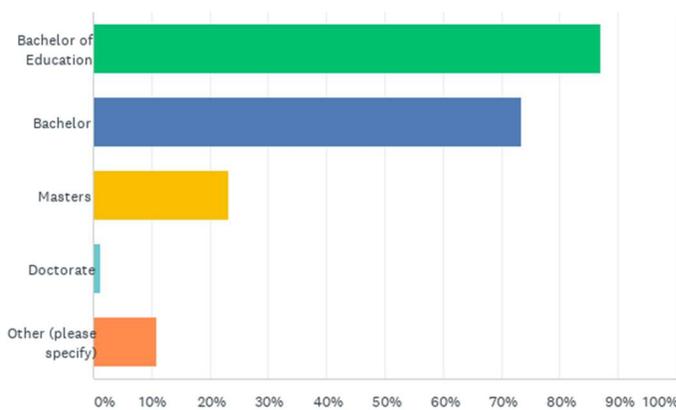


Figure 4: Teachable Subjects

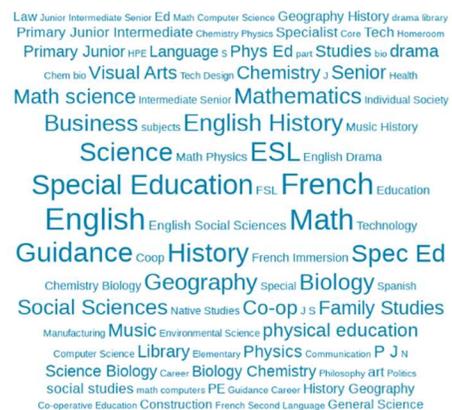


Figure 5: Courses Taught during School closures

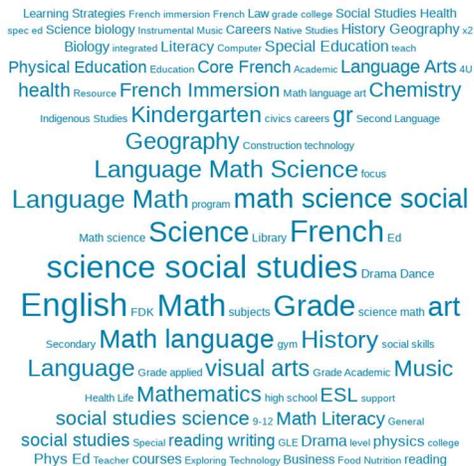
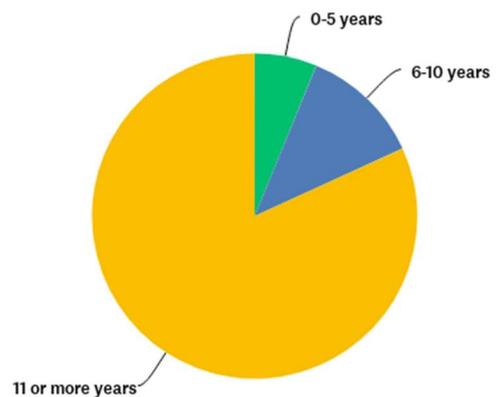


Figure 6: Years of Experience



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.

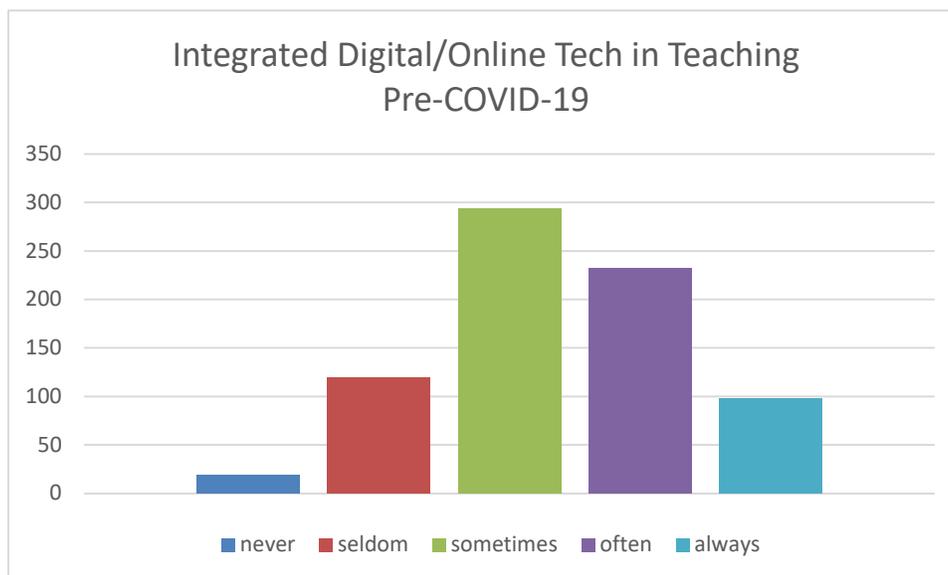
Table 1: Use of technology and online tools before school closures

	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.

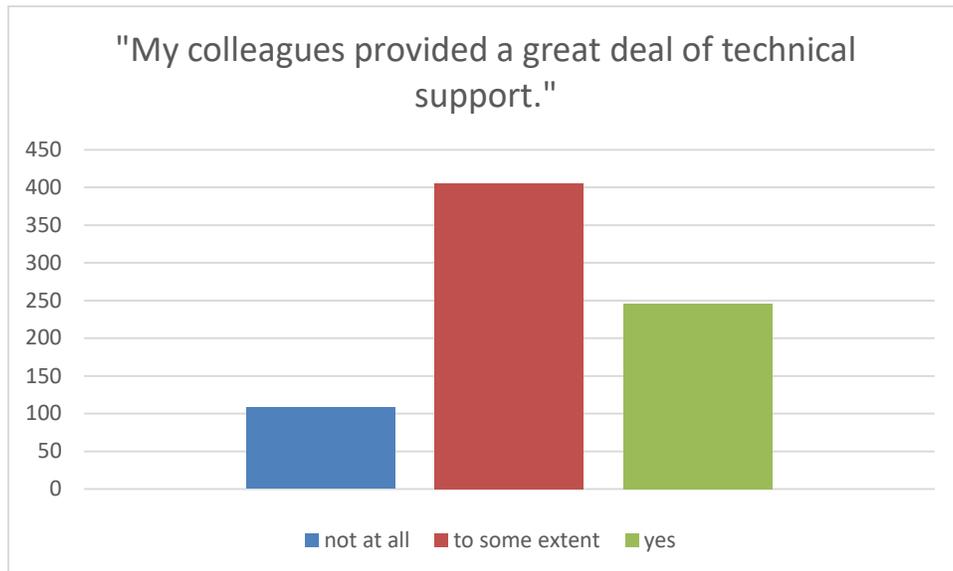
Preparing for the Change

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.

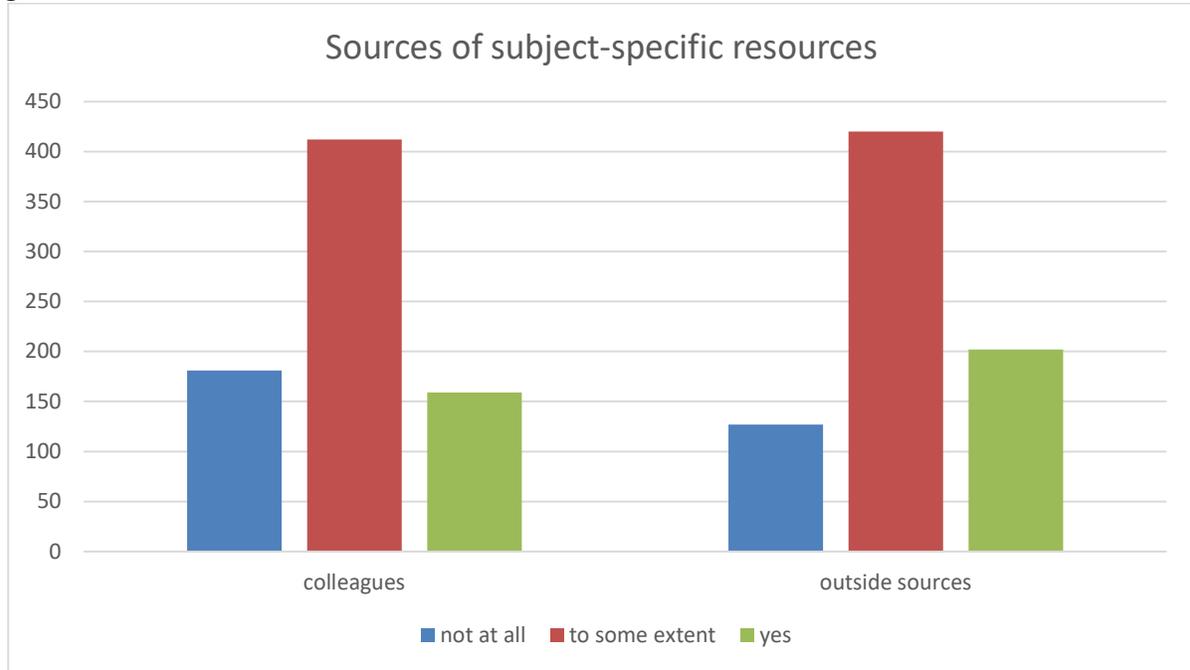


Figure 9.



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)

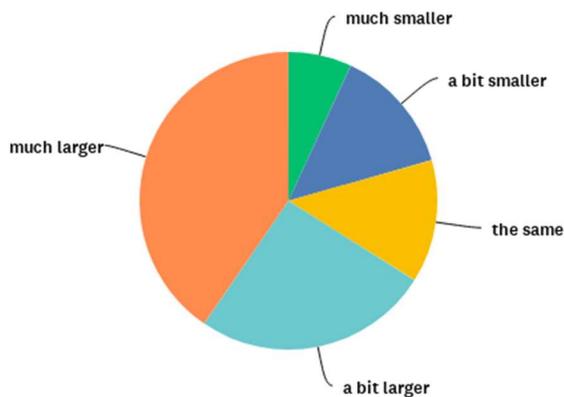
Complications with Working from Home

“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)

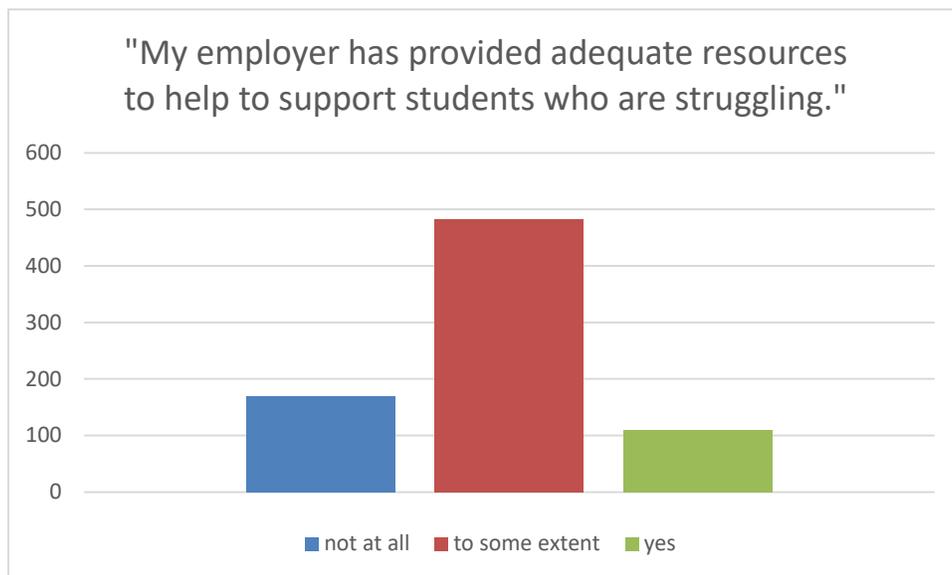
“My employer has made it clear that this is not a continuation of learning but rather emergency remote learning and so I have felt supported in trying to find a balance between my caregiving and teaching responsibilities.” (elementary school teacher – kindergarten)

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)

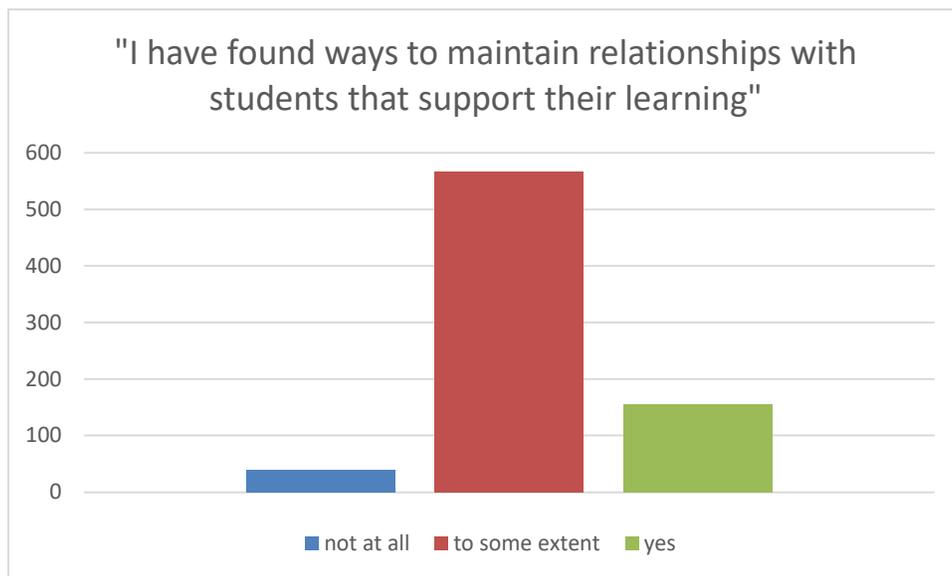
Disrupted Relationships

“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.