

DESCRIPTIVE
REPORT

HIDDEN FUTURE FRONT LINE: EDUCATORS'
PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-
19 PANDEMIC ON KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN
(HIFLEC)



Magdalena Janus

Offord Centre for Child Studies, McMaster
University

8/27/2020

HIDDEN FUTURE FRONT LINE: EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN (HiFLEC) A DESCRIPTIVE REPORT

PI: Magdalena Janus, Offord Centre for Child Studies, McMaster University
With support from: Molly Pottruff and Caroline Reid-Westoby
August 27th, 2020

For most young school-age children, school closures, a common feature of society's fight against pandemics, is the change most likely to have both short- and long-term effects on physical and mental health, as well as educational attainment. School-based learning is a source of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as physical abilities, self-regulation, perseverance, and self-confidence. When schools are closed, these safety, health, and learning resources are no longer equitably available, widening the gap along the socioeconomic spectrum, which will make the impact of COVID-19 reverberate in long-term health and economic outcomes for years to come. Reopening of schools and ensuring optimal opportunities for students cannot be done effectively or successfully without addressing the needs of both children and their educators.

Even with alternative education measures in place, prolonged school closures may disproportionately hurt the youngest school children: those in the kindergarten years. Interacting with peers at school allows kindergartners to develop social and emotional skills which are predictive of future development and educational achievement. Young children, and those with special needs, require supervision that may be difficult to manage during pandemics, both for parents working from home and those who still go to work.

In this study, using an online survey, we asked kindergarten educators about the realities of distance learning, their concerns for the return to school, as well as about their own health. The overarching aim of this study is to establish a scope of challenges and facilitators of psychosocial adjustment during the transition back to school-based learning for the youngest students, their families, and their educators.

The survey was open from May 21st to July 17th, 2020. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Association des enseignantes et enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO), the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO), and the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) in promoting the study. In total, over 3,000 kindergarten educators provided responses.

This document is a descriptive report of overall findings and does not provide any analytical exploration of the responses.

Suggested citation: Janus, M., Pottruff, M. & Reid-Westoby, C. 2020. Hidden future front line: Educators' perspective on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on kindergarten children (HiFLEC study): Descriptive report. Offord Centre for Child Studies, McMaster University, Hamilton ON

Any questions related to the content of this report should be directed to:

Magdalena Janus, PhD
Offord Centre for Child Studies
Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences
McMaster University
Hamilton

janusm@mcmaster.ca

©Offord Centre for Child Studies, 2020



Who were the respondents?

Of the 3,028 valid responses, 74% (2234) were kindergarten teachers and 26% (794) early childhood educators.

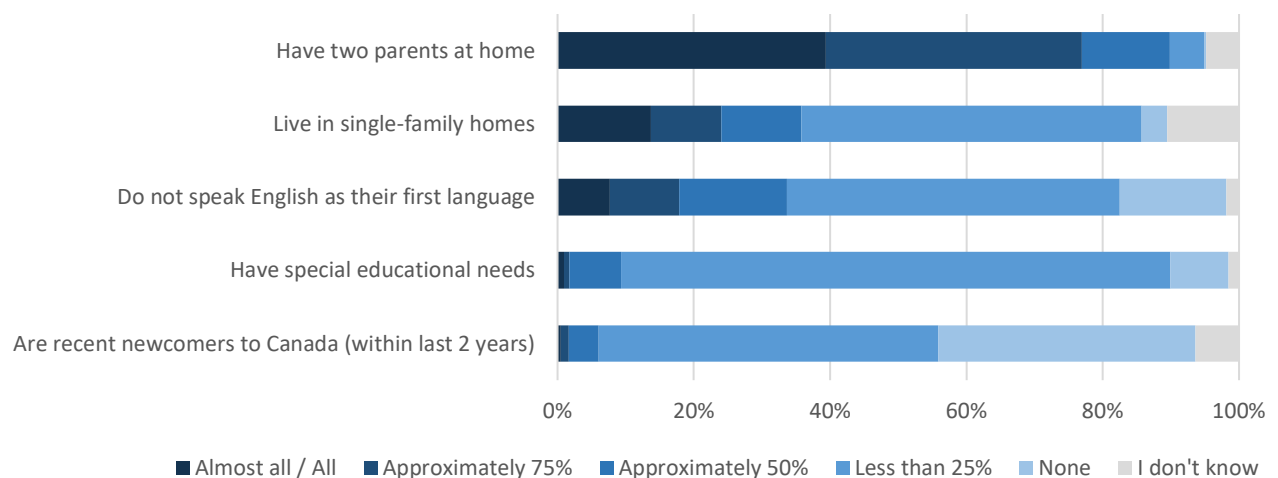
The majority of educators (about 70%) have been in their professions for more than 10 years.

Students in the class

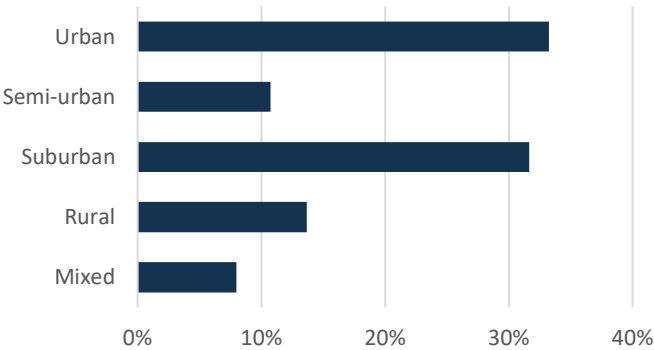
It is important to state that, in the survey, we were not asking questions about *individual students*, but rather about the *composition* of the educators' class. Thus, we asked educators what *proportion of students* in their classroom were, for example, *newcomers to Canada* – and they could choose the following options: Almost all/All, Approximately 75%, Approximately 50%, Less than 25%, None, I don't know.

In the graph below, we report the percentage of educators who reported the percentages of students in each category for each question.

Overall, while between 1 and 10% of responses per question were “I don't know,” of the remainder, the most frequent answers were: 39.4% said that almost all children in their class have two parents at home; half said that less than 25% of children in their class live in single family homes; almost half (48.8%) said that less than 25% did not have English or French as their first language; 80% of respondents said that fewer than 25% of children in their classes had special needs; and almost half had fewer than 25% of newcomers to Canada in their classes.

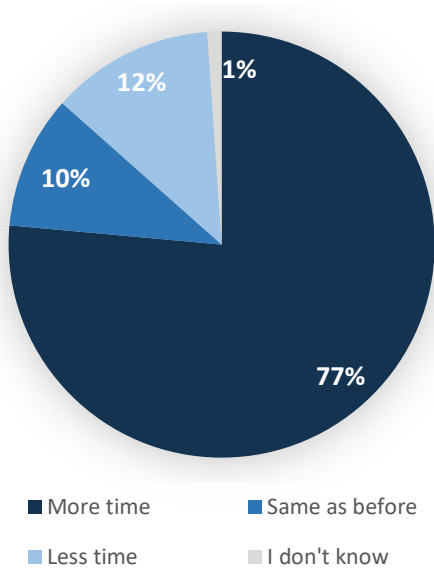


13.7% of responses came from respondents teaching in schools in rural areas – the majority came from schools located in urban, semi-urban and suburban areas.



How did the distance teaching go in the Spring?

Almost all educators (over 90%) started distance teaching by the first week of April. Over three-quarters of educators (77%) reported that preparation time took longer than before the lockdown.



Just over half of the respondents (51.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had access to all the resources they needed to support their students’ learning.

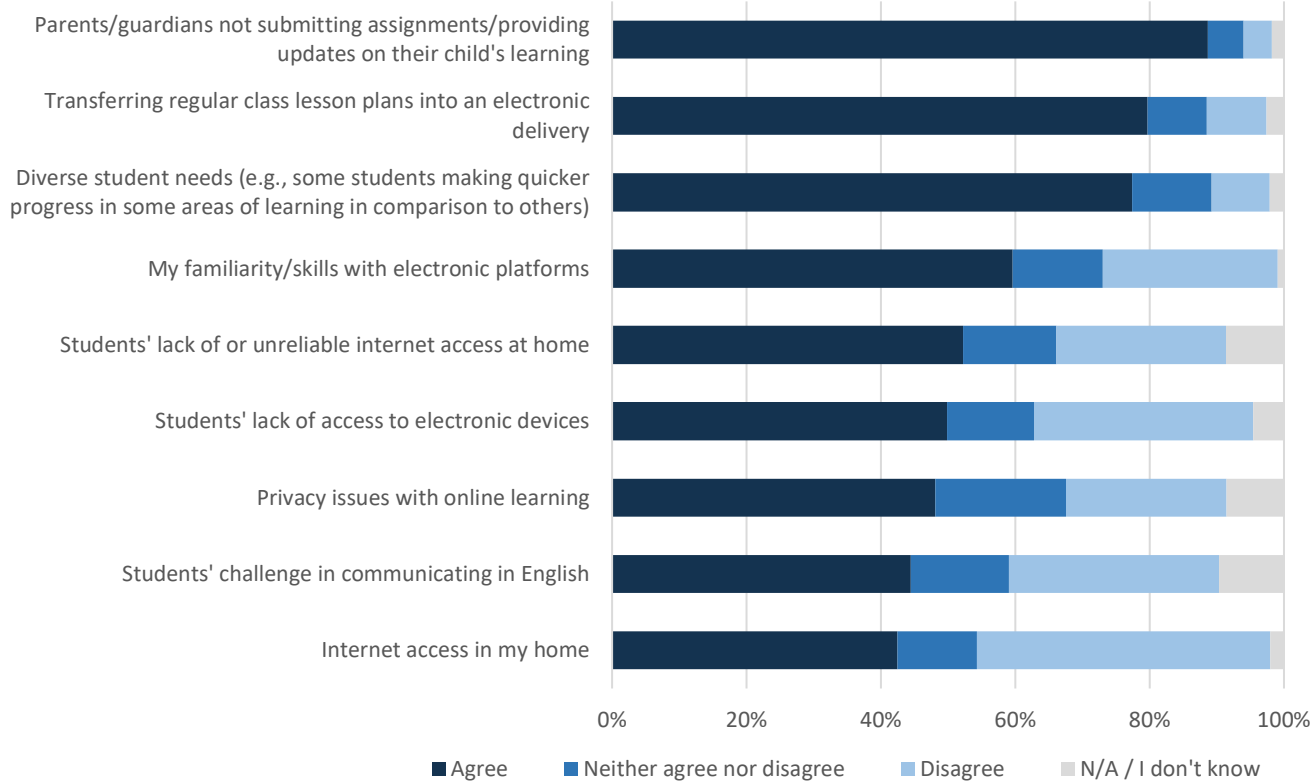
Almost equal percentages of respondents felt they were able (39.3%) and not able (41%) to provide students with individualized learning opportunities based on their level.

The majority of educators interacted with individual families once a week (28.1%) or a few times a week (27.4%).

Most of the online interactions with classes (56.4%) lasted 30 minutes or less.

Were there any barriers?

When asked whether they could identify any barriers in distance learning, the respondents agreed that these were the barriers:



Using resources

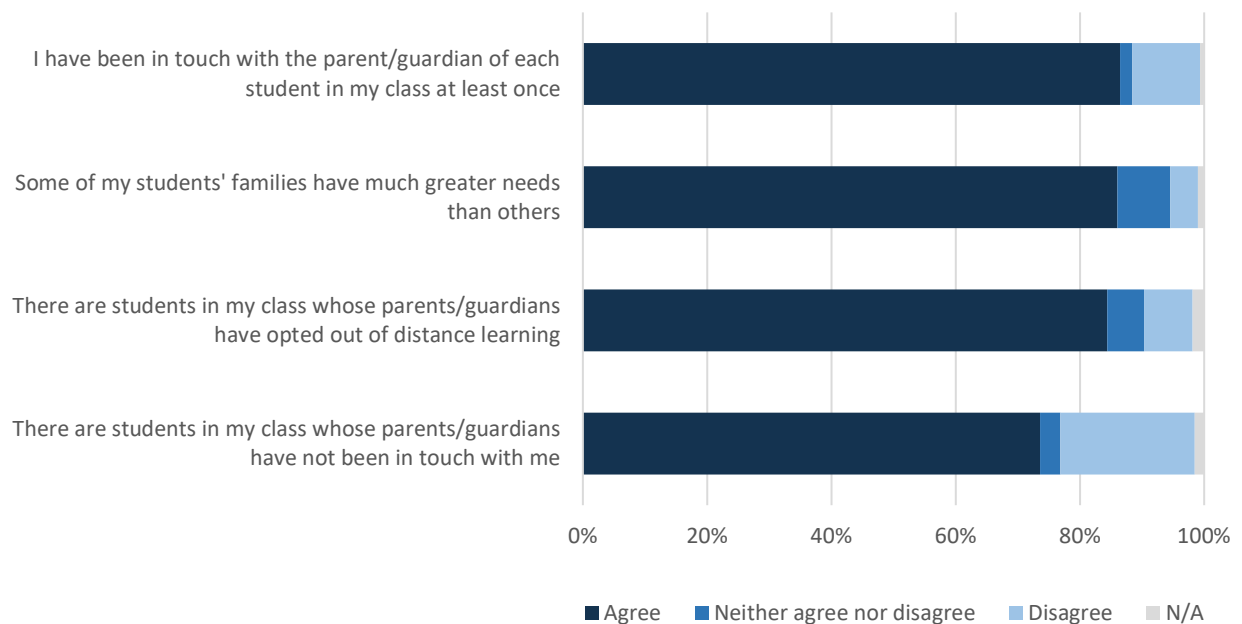
In addition to using resources and guidelines provided by schools and school boards, unions, and peer support, almost all educators reported using resources that they found themselves (97.5%).

Communicating with parents/guardians

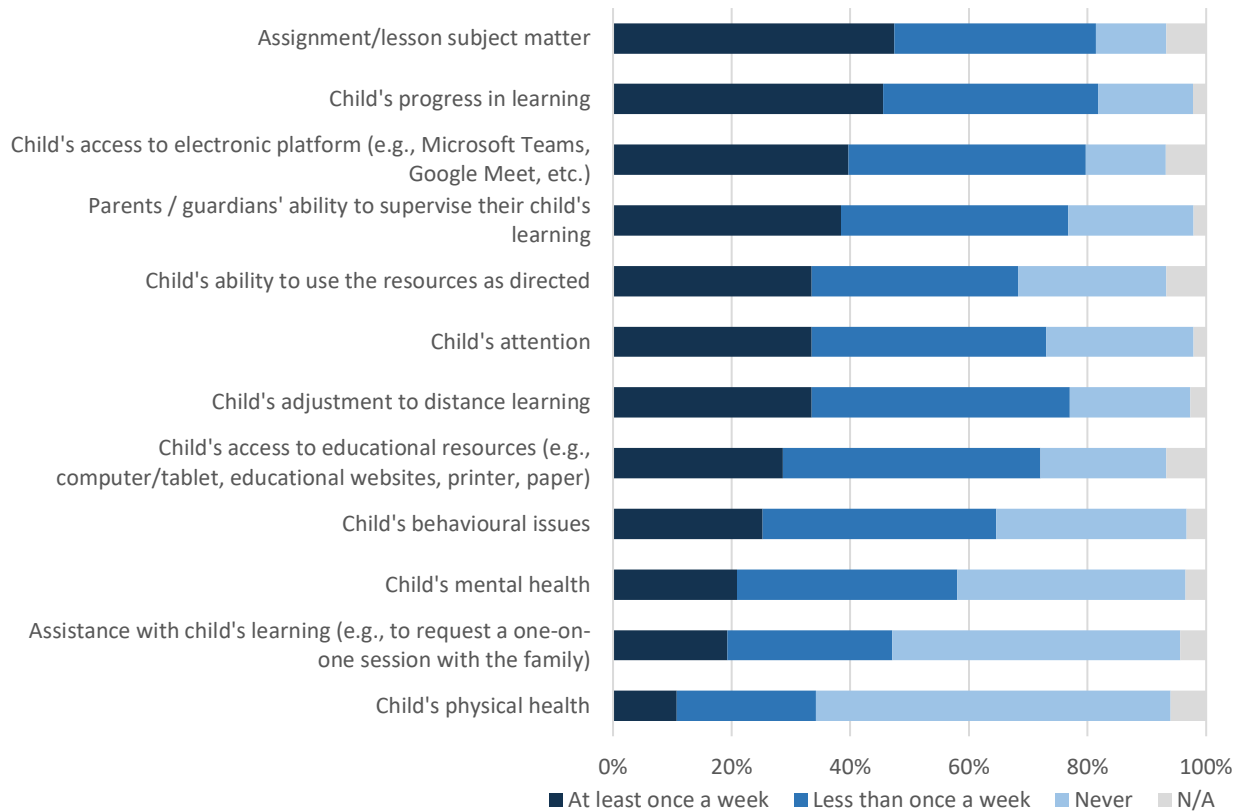
Even though 86.5% of respondents said they were in contact with parents/guardians at least once since the lockdown started, 11% reported not being able to communicate with some of the parents of children in their class.

84.4% of educators reported having children in their class whose parents opted out of distance learning.

Educators recognized that children in their classrooms have diverse needs: 86% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that some of the students' families had much greater needs than others.



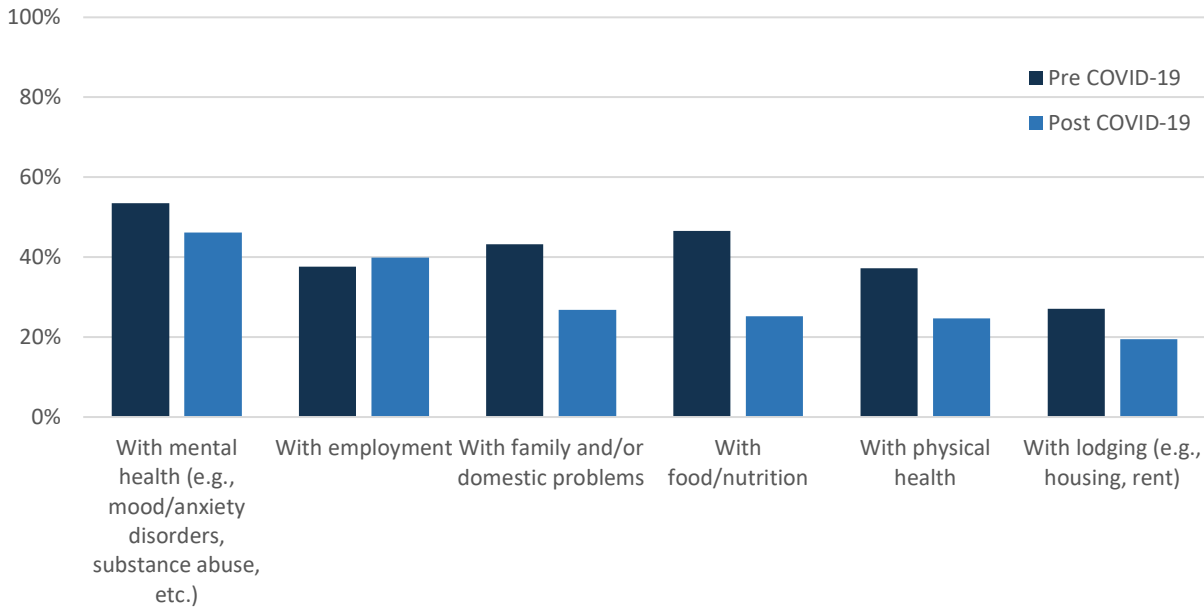
Educators noted that many parents reached out to them for the following reasons:



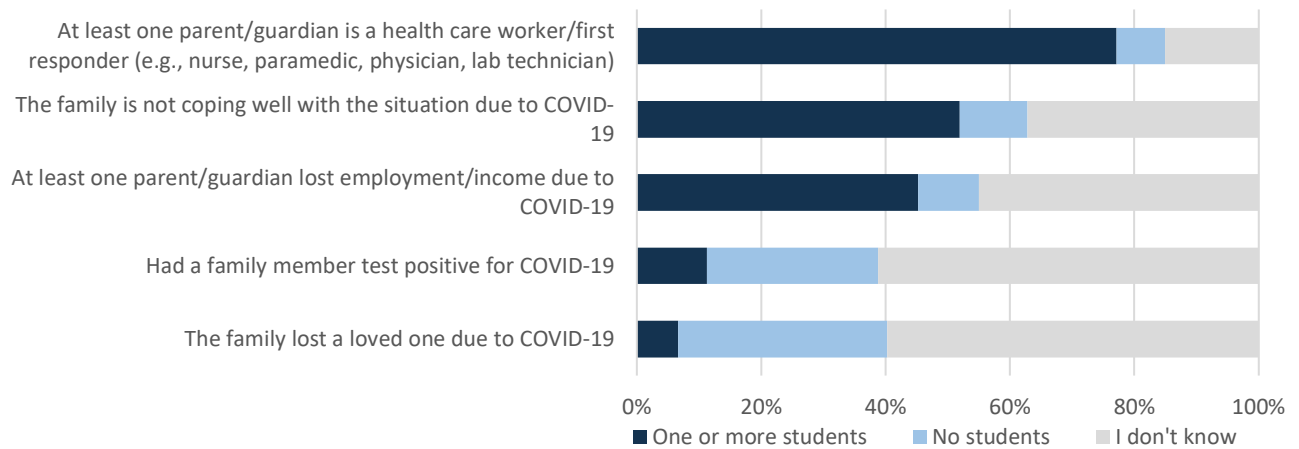
Based on what they have seen or heard, educators reported that there were children in their class experiencing some family problems. As a reminder, the survey did not ask questions about *individual students*, but rather about the *composition* of the educators' classes. Thus, we asked educators *how many* students in their class experienced different events. Response options for this question were: none, 1-2 students, 3-5 students, 6 or more students, I don't know.

In the graph below, we report the percentages of educators who reported having *one or more children in their classroom* experiencing the problems. It appears that there were fewer problems as of March 12th (post-COVID-19) than pre-COVID-19. However, as we asked the educators to use only the knowledge reported to them, it may be that lack of personal contact with families reduced their awareness of these issues.

Educators reported they had one or more children in their class experiencing the following family problems (37%-61% of the responses were "don't know"):



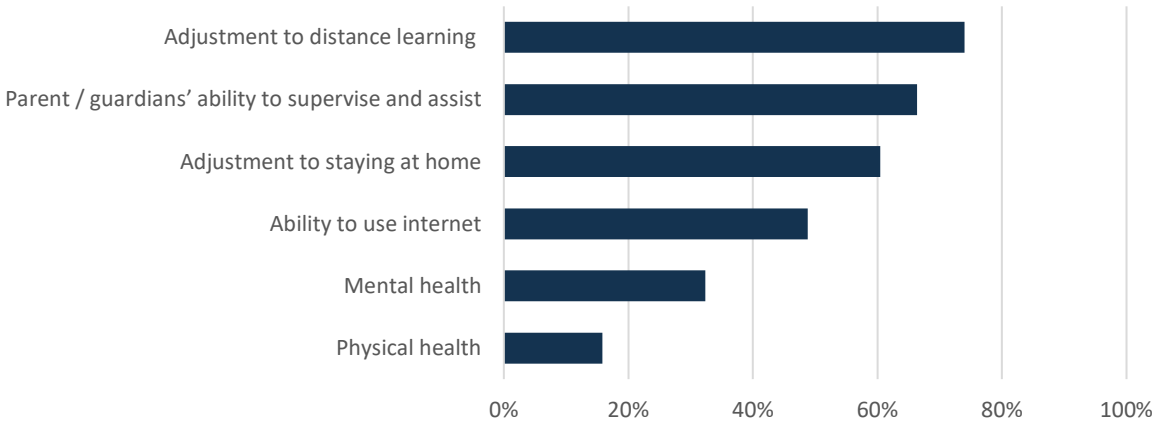
The graph below shows percentages of educators who reported at least one child in their class experiencing the following issues related specifically to COVID-19:



Students with Special Needs

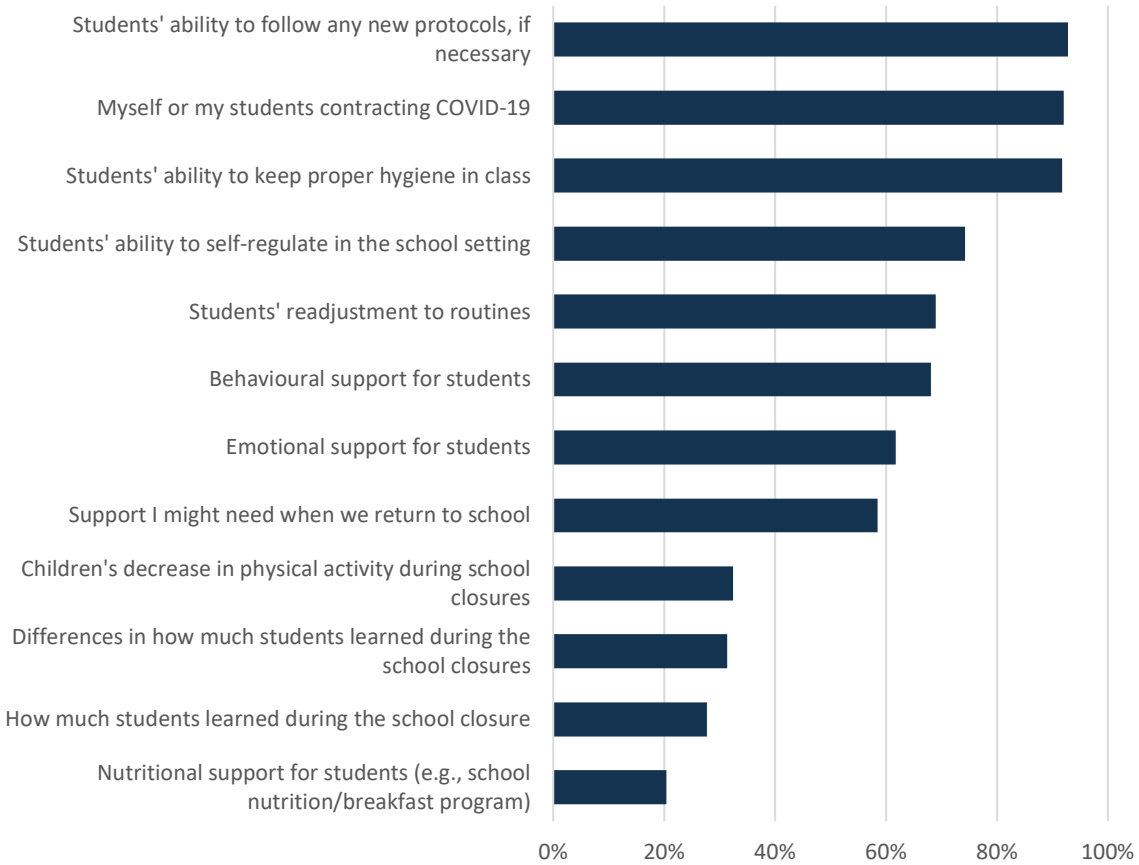
83.3% of educators reported having at least 1 child with special needs in their classroom. The majority (55.6%) had between 1 and 3 children with special needs.

They reported these particular difficulties experienced by one or more students with special needs (18.8%-48.7% of the responses were “don’t know”):



Concerns about the return to school

The majority (90%) of educators expressed concern about the return to school. Their specific concerns in response to given options were as follows. They also provided comments, summarized on Page 13.



More about the respondents' context

60.8% of respondents had children under 18 years of age, and thus the situation of distance learning was a reality for them from the perspective of both an educator and a parent. Of those, 63.6% were primarily responsible for teaching their children (31.6% shared this responsibility with another adult).

32.5% were responsible for the care of older adults; of those 24.6% lived in the same household, 68.3% lived in another household, and 9% lived in an assisted care setting.

General well-being and mental health

We also asked educators about how they were doing. Among the questions we asked were two standardized short questionnaires that address symptoms of depression and anxiety. Using the thresholds established in the literature for moderate levels of each condition in the general population, we found that 50.5% of respondents met criteria for moderate depression, and 24.5% for moderate anxiety.

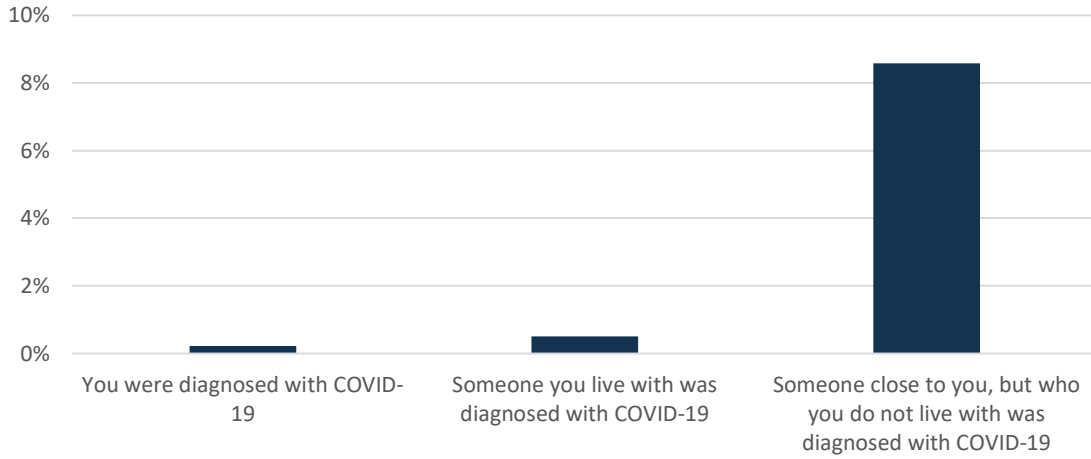
The majority of respondents did not feel that the pandemic affected their well-being greatly.

	About the same	More or much more than before pandemic
I feel rested	32.9%	32.1%
I have time to take care of myself	32.0%	41.3%
I have time to prepare healthy meals	33.8%	57.7%
I feel comfortable supporting my child(ren)'s play	47.6%	28.4%
I feel connected to my friends/family	31.0%	22.5%

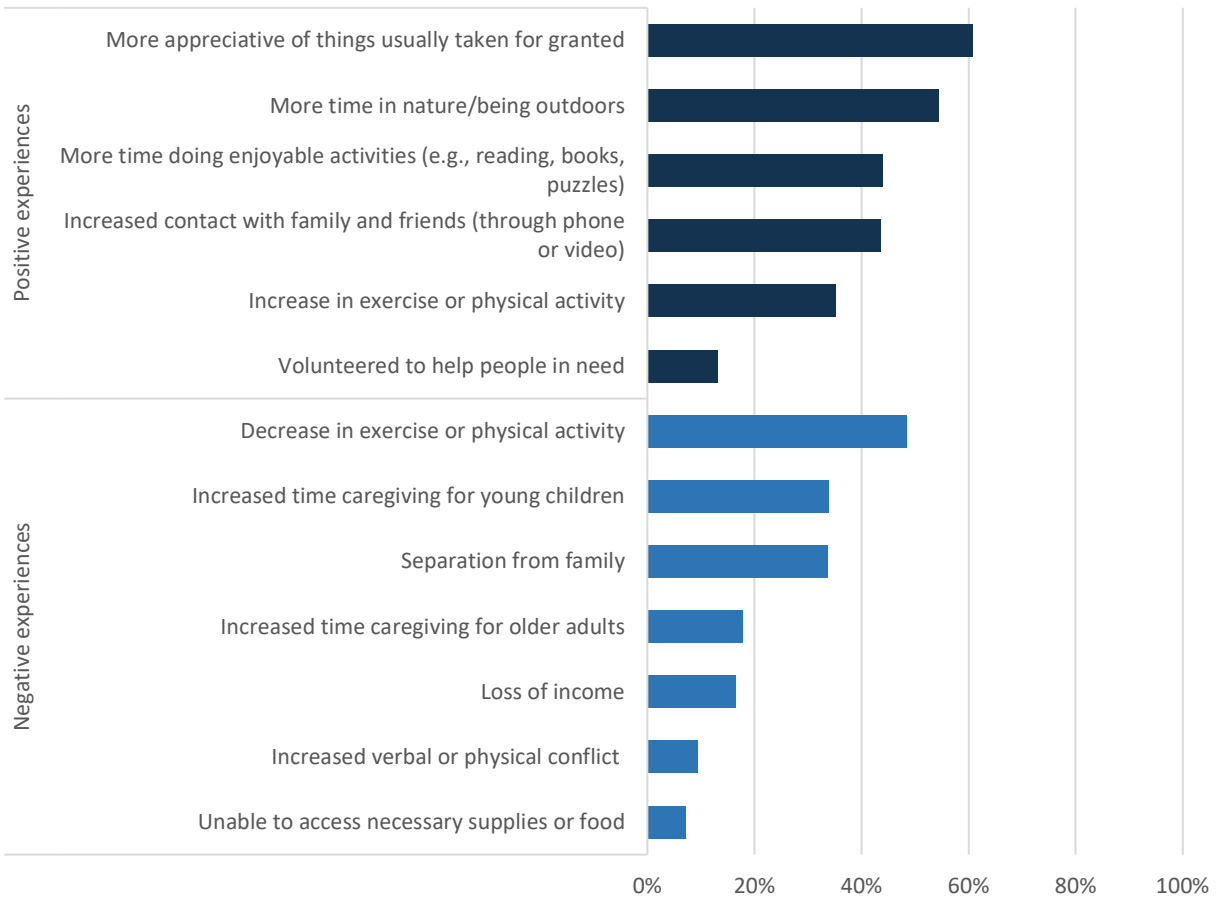
Experiences since the start of the pandemic

Educators reported that they experienced a number of negative and positive events since the pandemic started.

Few were diagnosed with COVID-19 themselves or had people close to them diagnosed.



They reported a range of positive and negative experiences due to COVID-19.

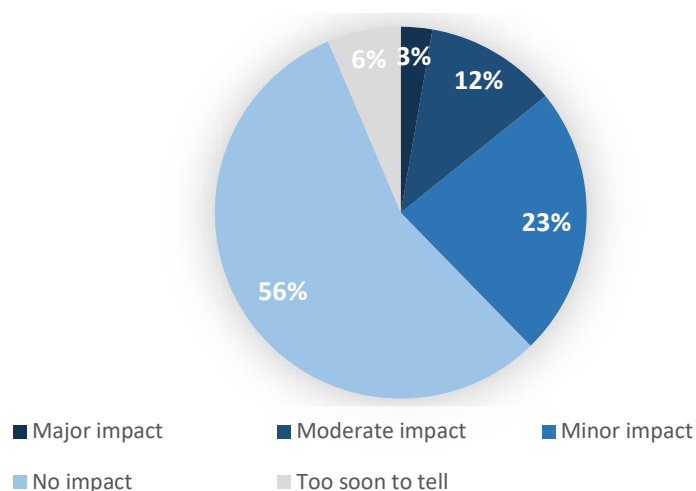


Educators are parents too

Educators were asked to tell us how much COVID-19 affected their lives with their own children. Below are percentages of respondents who said that it affected them at least “somewhat”:

At least one of my children is bored because of restrictions due to COVID-19	78.2%
I am concerned about managing screen time at home.	73.6%
At least one my children is upset by restrictions due to COVID-19.	67.9%
I am concerned about managing my child(ren)’s remote learning.	64.3%
I find it hard to entertain at least one of my children because of restrictions due to COVID-19.	63.9%
I have had difficulty balancing work and caring for children since restrictions started.	63.0%
I am concerned about addressing my child’s anxiety and stress.	60.0%
At least one of my children worries that someone they love will catch COVID-19.	52.7%
At least one of my children worries that they will catch COVID-19.	46.8%
I am concerned about the amount of sleep my child is getting.	38.0%
I am concerned about managing my child’s behavior.	37.5%
My child(ren) and I argue more because of COVID-19 restrictions.	30%

More than half of respondents said that COVID-19 had no impact on their ability to meet financial obligations or essential needs such as rent or mortgage payments, utilities, and/or groceries.



Educators were also concerned...

Many educators provided responses in the comment sections. Here, we provide an overview (though not a full systematic analysis) of open-field comments written in the space directly following the questions on concerns about the return to school. One in three educators provided some information in that space (868, 33%).

Nine themes (in no particular order) were mentioned more often than others. These include: the ability to provide emotional support in the changed context, the ability to implement the Full Day Kindergarten curriculum, cleanliness and hygiene issues, feasibility of new classroom routines, health and safety of educators themselves and their families, concerns about combining teaching in class with online format, concerns about special groups of children, partnerships with parents and government – including communication (and/or lack of it), and protocols to prevent illness and in case of infection.

In addition, several single points were brought up more frequently than others and these were: the reality of social distancing with young children in mostly small, ill-equipped classroom spaces, the lack of feasibility of the combined or hybrid model of teaching, availability of custodial staff for cleaning, fears for own and family health, and parent cooperation in not sending to school children who might be sick – as it has been a frequent occurrence before.

Our preliminary overview has shown that majority of concerns reflected health and safety in the context of return to school as over half of responses came in after June 30th, after the intention – but no specific plans - to return was announced by the Ministry of Education. We also found that many comments seemed to reflect an insufficient level of information on the risks of infection. It is possible that ensuring educators are informed of the most current state of knowledge on the risks of children spreading infection with COVID-19, the rates of community spread deemed safe for re-opening of schools, and the advances in COVID-19 care might mitigate the anxiety somewhat.

In conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted children's education by forcing the closure of schools and the implementation of distance learning. Based on 3,028 responses by kindergarten educators in Ontario, our survey provides a timely snapshot of the realities of emergency distance learning, and perceptions of student well-being. The educators also shared their concerns about the return to school, which were predominantly related to health and safety. By including a special focus on educators' well-being and mental health, and their own life context in which they had to deliver the distance learning, our survey contributes to understanding of our next – so far, hidden – front line workers.

It is important to note that results from our survey may not be representative of all kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators across Ontario, but they do provide some insight into the views and perspectives of kindergarten educators, a group thus far neglected from most information-seeking surveys and research on COVID-19. More in-depth results of this study will be forthcoming.