

“Everything Works Better in Person”:
Kindergarten Educators’ Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education worldwide, leading to school closures and radically different classroom practices when schools opened back up. This study looked at the effect on five Kindergarten educators of shifting to an online delivery model for Kindergarten students in Southern Ontario, Canada. Participants reported on struggles with engaging their students on a computer screen, the inequities between students that surfaced during this time, and the lack of support throughout the process of pivoting from online teaching to in-class teaching and vice versa. The study findings indicated that more research is needed to fully understand the impact of teaching virtual Kindergarten on both educators and students, but a lack of support from school boards and administrators is an issue that negatively impacted the kindergarten educators in this study.

Acknowledgements

This paper was a long and arduous process – ironically, due, in part, to the very phenomenon I chose to examine. At the time of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as largely “over,” but the virus keeps wreaking havoc in various new iterations. In a sense, this paper was similar. At times, I wondered if it would ever be completed, and more than once, I vowed to abandon the entire project and walk away. In the end, though, I was too curious about the results of my research, and that is what kept me going.

There were several people who have supported me through this process, and I would like to thank them. My supervisor, Dr. Monique Somma, showed unwavering support and an enduring – and admittedly, at times baffling – confidence in my work from the start right through to the very end. Dr. Sheila Bennett, who graciously agreed to be my second reader, was generous enough to give me her time and her feedback, both of which were invaluable. My participants, who will be known only by the pseudonyms used in the study, shared their stories freely and openly with me, and I appreciate their candour and trust tremendously. Dr. Susan Tilley taught me everything I know about doing qualitative research in an ethical manner, and I will take her teachings with me going forward. My colleagues Erica Anderson and Esther Wainaina were my sounding board and my support, and I am so blessed to have met them both through the Master of Education program at Brock University.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On March 10, 2020, school boards across Ontario announced the closure of all schools for two weeks following the annual week-long March Break holiday. School closures were motivated by concerns regarding the transmission of a novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, which had been spreading rapidly across the globe. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11 (2020), and for schools in many parts of the world, including Ontario, closures far past the initial two weeks were imminent. During this time, the Ontario provincial government mandated online learning at home – with few guidelines and expectations for school boards to follow. There were inconsistencies in the delivery of programming for students who were suddenly learning from home under the supervision of primary caregivers and caretakers, and access to technology and the internet proved to be challenging for many students (Abuhammad, 2020; Viner et al., 2020). It was not until September that in-class education tentatively resumed, with virtual learning options for all Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) students across Ontario – and the threat of both partial *and* full re-closures a looming reality. The impact of the prolonged school closure in the spring of 2020 was severe, and the return to face-to-face learning in September was fraught with new challenges for staff and student safety (Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020). For instance, Kindergarten educators needed to find ways to practice social distancing in their classrooms and to sanitize classroom materials in between uses, where prior to COVID-19, students had been able to move freely from one area to another, share materials, and take turns without interruptions (Government of Canada, 2020).

Once schools had some time to adjust to the new circumstances and construct a new approach to learning, students commenced with online learning programs. As the pandemic wore on, it became clear that online learning would be at least a semi-permanent component of teaching for the foreseeable future. As an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) with a keen interest in Kindergarten learning, I realized that this newly evolving situation could have far-reaching implications for *preliterate children*, children who are not yet able to read and write.

Moreover, this situation could have equally impactful consequences for Kindergarten educators, who had to transition their pedagogy from teaching in-person to teaching remotely, using a computer screen and a microphone. Early learning professionals tend to choose their profession because they enjoy the hands-on practice with young children (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017). I wondered: do the necessary pedagogical changes that accompany an online teaching format impact Kindergarten educators' perceptions of their teaching practice and their own identities as educators?

Background of the Problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented global society with unprecedented challenges. In Canada, lives have been impacted in ways that could not have been foreseen. Where possible, employees began working from home, which required various adaptations and compromises between what was feasible and what was necessary to facilitate virtual work environments. Various restrictions, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) like facemasks, social distancing practices, and limited contact with others (where possible), were put in place in most work environments. The

implementation of these measures aimed to guarantee safety for staff and consumers, and reduce the risk of infectious spread (Government of Canada, 2020).

Worldwide, school closures led to 1.37 billion students staying at home and needing some form of distance learning (UNESCO, 2020a). As mandated in most regions, including Ontario, remote learning became the alternative when face-to-face education was no longer a safe option. Educators were tasked with reimagining teaching and learning through the use of technology, and developing and delivering the curriculum to children while they were at home. The need to adjust teaching methods to offer remote learning opportunities has resulted in a myriad of novel demands placed upon educators. These demands include, among others, the need to master remote teaching technology, create ways to provide disadvantaged students with the devices necessary for remote learning, and develop strategies to engage students through an online video platform. This adaptation process has troubled educators' approaches to teaching, and has given rise to new methods to engage students and deliver curriculum (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The current study looked specifically at how Kindergarten educators experienced adapting to an online delivery.

The focus of the Ontario Kindergarten curriculum is a *play-based learning* approach, in which play is recognized as both a right and an essential aspect of every child's optimal development (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2016). When one considers what constitutes *play* in this case, Ballantyne et al. (2007) suggest that: "Play is how children make sense of the world and is an effective method of learning for young children. Ideas and skills become meaningful; tools for learning are practiced; and concepts are understood (p. 15). It is upon this premise of play that the essential

pedagogy of *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016) is practiced across the province. Kindergarten classrooms are purposely structured with centers that provide students with activities for hands-on, experiential learning which combine problem-solving skills with fine and gross motor skill activity, hand-eye coordination, and beginning literacy and numeracy development (OME, 2016).

Another large proponent of *The Kindergarten Program* is a focus on social-emotional learning (SEL), which is embedded throughout the OME's guiding documentation and is a central component of the curriculum (2016). Learning how to be a part of a group, turn-taking, and working together are essential aspects of the Kindergarten classroom. According to the Kindergarten curriculum (2016), being a part of the classroom community is vital for developing relationships that support children's personal, social, and emotional development, particularly as it pertains to the development of self-confidence and a strong, positive sense of self. Developmental theorist Joe Kincheloe (2008) posed that the *self* is constructed not in a vacuum, but in relation to other people – which implies that the community aspect of a Kindergarten class is essential. Both play and the fostering of social behaviour and relationships are central to *The Kindergarten Program* – each of which are affected by the online classroom environment.

The Problem Context

For early learning educators, the new teaching practice that resulted from the pandemic's school closures took the form of an online delivery model. While online learning is arguably a useful tool for many, it is not a universal solution to the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. For students of lower socioeconomic status or those who live in

rural areas, being able to be online for any substantial amount of time with a reliable internet connection may not be feasible on a regular basis, if at all (Abuhammad, 2020). To further complicate matters, the technology needed for this new approach to schooling is costly. Additionally, it was often hard for primary caregivers to find the time to support their children's learning while they themselves are also working from home. Although these challenges similarly affected families with more disposable income, the smaller dwellings typically lived in by lower-income families allowed for fewer physical spaces where separate centers could be set up, where each family member had their own devices for learning and working (Abuhammad, 2020). Children from lower-income families were at a significant and disproportionate disadvantage (Calarco, 2020).

Many primary caregivers expressed the concern that their children would fall behind while learning remotely, and for primary caregivers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, this concern was much larger than for primary caregivers from more affluent backgrounds (Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020). Although the responsibility to provide technology to students falls on the individual schools, educators may still feel responsible for finding equitable ways to engage all students to participate in online learning.

One example of a challenge faced specifically by educators who teach the youngest students in our education system involves adapting practices, such as movement and hands-on learning. Kindergarten students require a specific approach to learning that includes ample time for hands-on, experiential engagement and time with classmates for social and emotional learning opportunities (Ballantyne et al., 2007). It can be argued that the aforementioned learning experiences are difficult to facilitate in an online format. Confounded by the previously identified challenges of virtual teaching, educators of

young learners were challenged to provide meaningful and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for their students that align with their beliefs about early learning.

Having to shift to an online learning environment presented Kindergarten educators with a set of unique challenges because their students are, for the most part, still sensorial learners who depend on hands-on activities and the proximity of their educator (Ballantyne et al., 2007). Kindergarten students in Ontario vary in age from 3 to 6 years old, which is a substantial gap in terms of child development. Accordingly, there are significant variances in developmental levels among these students (Kail & Zolner, 2012). Within in-person school, educators change and adapt the curriculum to meet the specific needs of their students, both individually and as a group. For example, an educator may implement more opportunities within the classroom for gross motor play if the children in the group require more gross motor play opportunities compared to another group of Kindergarteners. As such, at any given time, Kindergarten educators modify and tailor their programs based on the curriculum and the needs of the children.

In questioning how Kindergarten educators were translating key aspects of *The Kindergarten Program* into an online format, I wondered: how did Kindergarten educators translate these socioemotional aspects of Kindergarten learning into an online format? If these translated efforts turned out to be remiss in meeting every student's individual needs, how did this affect the Kindergarten teacher's confidence and perceived efficacy as an educator? Furthermore, how did this experience of moving a Kindergarten program online impact the way that Kindergarten teachers view themselves as educators, and how might this experience have impacted their identity as an educator?

Educator identity is an amply researched concept (for instance, Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Flores & Day, 2006; Mockler, 2011; Zembylas, 2003). Educator identity seems to defy a simplistic definition, and yet the importance of identity is undeniable. Zembylas (2003) suggested that educator identity is a complex construct rather than an archetype, and Mockler (2011) stated that educators' work "is framed by and constituted through their understanding and positioning of themselves as a product of their professional identity" (p. 517). Therefore, one might conclude that if an educator's work changes, this may impact their professional identity, or how they make sense of themselves in their role as an educator. The concepts of identity and educator identity will be addressed in depth in Chapter Two of this study.

Purpose of the Study

This study used an emergent, inductive, interpretive, and naturalistic approach to interrogate the meanings that Kindergarten educators attach to their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yilmaz, 2013). The study sought to examine the lived experiences of these educators, as well as explore whether and how pedagogies shifted, adapted, and transformed when teaching online. The study built on the work of Kim and Asbury (2020), who examined the experiences of primary and secondary educators in the United Kingdom (UK) during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kim and Asbury (2020) documented the experiences of 24 primary and secondary educators in the UK during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers identified six major themes, "(1) uncertainty, (2) finding a way, (3) worry for the vulnerable, (4) importance of relationships, (5) educator identity, and (6) reflections" (Kim & Asbury, 2020, p. 1070).

The current study focused specifically on Kindergarten educators in Ontario, Canada, and aimed to gain an understanding of how educators made sense of their experiences during a societal disruption (Camillus et al., 2020) and how educators adapted to a new way to deliver education. Additionally, it provided insight into how abrupt change in one's daily practice impacts one's professional identity.

Drawing on the work of Kim and Asbury (2020), the intent of the proposed study was to explore Kindergarten educators' experiences teaching during the pandemic (from March 2020 to June 2021), both virtually and in class, based on the directive of the OME. The objective of the study was to gain insight into the experiences of Kindergarten educators, and the meanings they ascribed to their experiences as it pertains to their purpose as an educator. Additionally, the study aimed to contribute to the ongoing discussion of what it means to be an educator (for example, Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2021) by examining educators' perceptions of the process of adaptation during a global pandemic and the distinctive challenges that result from this type of disaster.

The average number of students in a Kindergarten class in Ontario is 29 students (*Education Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2*, 2014). Facilitating learning experiences for 29 Kindergarten students with various levels of cognitive and physical ability is challenging in and of itself. If translated into an online format, these learning experiences leave far fewer options for differentiated instruction than in-person instruction. Having to lead an online meeting requires technical know-how as well as moderator abilities, which is arguably more complicated if the audience members range in age from not-quite-4 to 6 years old. Some students will have little issue adapting, but others may require more time and more assistance. Educators are likely unable to provide the amount of assistance and

one-on-one instruction in this type of online environment. For these reasons, an examination of Kindergarten educators' experiences over the past 18 months, as well as how these experiences have impacted their view of themselves as educators, was warranted.

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Kindergarten educators describe their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has teaching during a global pandemic impacted Kindergarten educators' sense of professional identity?
3. What critical incidents do Kindergarten educators identify, and how do these impact their overall experience?

Rationale

The pandemic has presented a relatively new situation for all involved: educators, primary caregivers, children, schools, and governments. New research is emerging almost daily on how educators and learners were *and* are affected, as well as insights into the methods of curriculum delivery that are successful, and which require improvement. It has become clear that the pandemic has impacted everyone, including educators at all levels. Current studies have focused on, for instance, creating remote learning guidelines and best practices to support students with disabilities (Ahn, 2020), the impact of school closures on academic achievement (Kuhfeld et al., 2020), and the impact of distance learning on parental mental health (Davis et al., 2021).

However, not much is known about how this abrupt shift to an entirely different teaching method has affected Kindergarten educators. The proposed study built on the

work of Kim and Asbury (2020), who explored the experiences of primary and secondary school educators in England during the first few weeks of the pandemic. Unlike Kim and Asbury (2020), however, this study focused specifically on Kindergarten educators in an attempt to understand how this particular educator population described their experiences over the past 18 months, and shed light on the realities of teaching Kindergarten during a pandemic.

Gaining a better understanding of how teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted – and may continue to impact – Kindergarten educators' professional identities and perceptions of their practice may contribute to the development of appropriate educator support. Educator support might include professional development (PD) and supports for mental wellness for future similar circumstances. Additionally, this study contributes to the body of developing research regarding teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically on how Kindergarten educators' identities and pedagogies are impacted by teaching during a pandemic.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study that must be considered when examining the data and results. This study focused exclusively on the experiences of Kindergarten educators. The age group of Kindergarten students aligned with the researcher's areas of interest and expertise as an early childhood professional. Due to the focal point of the study and the positioning of the researcher, the experiences of educators of higher grades, however valid and salient, were not included in the study.

Secondly, the participants were Kindergarten educators who volunteered their experiences and perceptions, and for whom teaching during the pandemic had been

remarkable in one way or another. For that reason, it cannot be assumed that the participants' experiences are shared by all, or even most, Kindergarten educators during a pandemic.

In addition, the described experiences were situational to a developed nation with a relatively high standard of living. They cannot be compared to the experiences of educators in, for instance, developing nations or war-torn areas.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the subject of the present study and discussed the background of the problem and the rationale for the study. Additionally, the chapter introduced the theoretical framework, and outlined the limitations of the proposed study.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature pertaining to identity, disaster and education, early learning, and online teaching and learning. It highlights the singular needs of Kindergarten students in more detail, and considers the implications for crisis on education. As well, it will discuss the theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter Three contains a detailed discussion of the chosen methodology for this qualitative study and the methods that were selected. Furthermore, it provides a rationale for the choice to use a generic qualitative research methodology and to conduct semi-structured interviews with six Kindergarten educators. Moreover, Chapter Three details the recruitment of the participants, the data collection, and the data analysis procedures that were utilized. Lastly, it describes the participants in detail, and examines the ethical implications of the proposed study.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study and the themes that were identified in the data, and in Chapter Five, these findings will be discussed in greater detail.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter situates the current research study within the existing scholarly knowledge that frames its foundational ideas, including educator identity, Kindergarten learning, online teaching and learning, and disaster and education. This literature review aims to provide an understanding of the key factors that impact Kindergarten educators' perceptions of their profession during a large-scale societal disruption like a pandemic. These factors include the particularities of Kindergarten learning, teaching during a disaster, and the effect of disaster on identity.

Currently, a dearth of literature exists that explicitly addresses how large-scale societal disruptions, such as natural disasters or pandemics, impact educators, for instance, with regard to teaching practices, professional identity, or coping strategies. This chapter first presents a thorough review of the concept of *educator identity* as it is situated within identity theory. Additionally, the literature in this chapter shows how the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are changing the way educators view their practice. Lastly, the effects of school closures and a move to remote learning on educators, students, and communities are explored.

Terminology

In Ontario, *Kindergarten* refers to the full-day early learning Kindergarten program. Children in Ontario start school in September of the calendar year they turn 4 years old. This is not mandatory, however; the legal age that children must be in school is six. Kindergarten was originally a part-time program, with children participating either during mornings or afternoons; however, in 2010, the province shifted to a full-day program model in order to build a stronger school system (OME, 2010).

The Kindergarten curriculum discussed in this major research paper is the Ontario Kindergarten Program. This curriculum was devised in 2016 by the OME, and superseded The Full-Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program (OME, 2011).

In this study, *societal disruption* is considered as any event that “change[s] the way in which society thinks, acts and functions, and significantly alter[s] the processes for individuals, firms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government organizations” (Camillus et al., 2020, p. 3).

Exploring how certain circumstances or events influence a person’s professional identity necessitates establishing a working definition of both identity in a general sense and identity in a profession-specific context – in this case, the teaching profession. The next section examines various theoretical perspectives on identity and educator identity. In addition, this proceeding section provides an overview of the literature on the impact of crisis on identity more specifically, and explores the literature on educator coping strategies and resilience.

Identity

Identity can be viewed as “an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one’s own values and experiences” (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220). According to identity researchers, identity development is far from a linear process, and identities are both individual and social in nature (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Zembylas, 2003). McAdams (2011) suggested that one’s identity may be conceived as an internal story that evolves and changes over time. This internal story is personally, rather than socially, constructed – but is heavily influenced by cultural and societal conventions. McAdams’s view corroborates with narrative identity theory.

Postmodern approaches consider identity to be fragmented and affected by the various social environments people participate in (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008; Zembylas, 2003). This postmodern view is in stark contrast with earlier understandings of identity formation and the workings of the human mind, which viewed identity as a unified, overarching construct. The concept of identity as an entity that transforms with time and context – rather than as a static entity that remains largely unchanged throughout one's life – represented a fundamental shift in the definition of identity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). This shift has opened up an entirely new research area, namely the effect of changing circumstances on identity and identity formation.

In his postmodern take on identity as a lens for educational research, Gee (2000) stated, “researchers in a variety of areas have come to see identity as an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society” (p. 99). Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al. (2008) posited that identity has two crucial elements. The first element is the fact that there is sameness and continuity within a process of change, and this sameness has a future orientation. A person aims to become something in the future – to choose a specific career, for instance – while simultaneously remaining the same person (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). The second element is the need to be identifiable for oneself, as well as for others, throughout this process of change. This element denotes the tension between self-determination and being determined by others' expectancies (Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008). The aspect of sameness is akin to Gee's (2000) concept of the *N-identity*, the core identity that remains throughout one's life regardless of changing circumstances or roles in life. Based on the discussion of the identity

literature, *identity* can be considered a fluid construct that changes and develops over time (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Gee, 2000; Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008; Zembylas, 2003). This concept is important when considering the identity of educators, and specifically the impact of external factors on identity development – such as a change in career or relationship status, for example, and even a global pandemic.

Educator Identity

Kröger (2020) considered a *professional identity*, such as educator identity, a facet of social identity that relates in-group values, beliefs, and motives to a particular profession” (p. 156). Similarly, Hanna et al. (2020) asserted that educator identity is a *role identity*, “a socially shared and coherent set of meanings that define the particular professional role of educators” (p. 2). Both of these definitions emphasize the social nature of educator identity, and are in line with Zembylas’ (2003) assertion that identity has both a social and an individual aspect.

In a literature review on educator identity, Bukor (2011) found that researchers tended to provide vague generalizations of educator identity. For example, the majority of studies surveyed offered no explicit definition of educator identity at all. The results of Bukor’s (2011) research indicate that the concept of educator identity appeared to be taken for granted. Similarly, in their review of research on educators’ professional identity, Beijaard et al. (2004) surmised that the concept of professional identity was defined differently across most of the studies, and similar to Bukor (2011), they found that some studies did not define the concept at all.

Educator identity is conceptualized from various perspectives, including Akkerman and Meijer’s (2011) dialogical approach to defining educator identity.

Akkerman and Meijer (2011) stated that “in order to conceptualize educator identity we need to consider carefully what the multiplicity, discontinuity and social nature of identity entails, as well as [...] the unity, continuity and individual nature of identity” (p. 309). In this context, *multiplicity* refers to the notion that educator identity consists of sub-identities. *Discontinuity*, as viewed by Akkerman and Meijer (2011), denotes that, rather than a static entity, educator identity is an ongoing process of construction. Lastly, educator identity has a distinctly social nature, in that it is directly influenced by a variety of social relationships and contexts (Palmer, 2007).

Similar to Akkerman and Meijer (2011), Beijaard et al. (2004) asserted that educator identity consists of many sub-identities that more or less coexist in harmony. In a similar vein, Hanna et al. (2020) posited that educator identity is understood as a socially shared and coherent set of meanings that define the particular professional role of educators. Finally, Mockler (2011) argued that educator identity is formed and reformed constantly over the course of a teaching career.

Similar to Mockler (2011), Zembylas (2003) posited that educator identity formation is a process of continually becoming. The latter cautioned against the simplistic notion of an archetypal “educator identity” and emphasized the importance of identifying the heterogeneity, multiplicity, and contingency that underlie the so-called “standard” educator identity. *Heterogeneity*, in this context, refers to the diverse makeup of educator populations. *Multiplicity* was defined by Beijaard et al. (2004) as the existence of a myriad of sub-identities that make up the educator identity, which is the norm, rather than the exception (McAdams, 2011). Lastly, in this context, *contingency*

denotes the social nature of identity, as described by Zembylas (2003), in that identity shifts depending on the environment.

According to Beijaard et al. (2004), educator identity is not something one has, but something one *uses* to make sense of oneself as an educator – thus being a tool, rather than a characteristic or a set of characteristics. Zembylas (2003) asserted that before postmodern conceptualization, educators were assumed to have a consistent teaching identity that served as a cache of classroom and school experiences and the attitudes, emotions, and beliefs that resulted from these experiences. The environment where the educator worked, then, played an integral part in the formation of this construct (Zembylas, 2003). Postmodern, however, views acknowledge the fluid, shifting nature of identity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000; Lichtwarck-Aschhoff et al., 2008).

As previously mentioned, the environment plays a key role in educator identity's complex social construct (Gee, 2000). Without the school environment's immediate and physical nearness and the emotion discourses that are prominently present in the educator's daily practice, what happens to the educator's sense of identity?

Kim and Asbury (2020) asserted that a need for routine, structure, and the capacity to plan are core facets of educator identity. Suddenly, the potential implications of an abrupt change in environment for one's identity and the unexpected distance between the educator and the physical school environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic become essential considerations for one's perception of teaching. There is also the question of whether and how these lived experiences give rise to a permanent change to the educator's perception of teaching and, in the context of this study, specifically

teaching Kindergarten. Do the lived experiences of teaching through a pandemic lead to a permanent shift in one's perception of one's identity as an educator?

Another consideration is that an educator's beliefs about self-efficacy are critical for improving student learning (Takahashi, 2011). In other words, if an educator believes they can positively affect student learning, they are far more likely to put forth the extra effort needed to help students achieve their learning goals. Conversely, a negative perception of self-efficacy leads to less effort in this regard. If one's identity as an educator is negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, does this affect one's self-efficacy beliefs?

Identity and Crisis

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational researchers have focused on the impacts of the pandemic's disruption to school for students, families, administrators, and educators alike. According to a recent study, a societal disruption such as a pandemic can severely affect the various aspects of one's identity (Godinic et al., 2020). Effects vary in severity from one individual to another: what one person deems merely a temporary inconvenience may cause another person to experience an existential crisis. The severity of the effects depends on psychological variables such as political trust and fear of COVID-19, which determine how people react to a newly emerging reality (Jaspal & Nerlich, 2020). Andrews (2016) defined *existential crisis* as "an internalized by-product of societal problems" (p. 104). The COVID-19 pandemic is a cause of societal problems such as job loss, food uncertainty, and fear, both for one's personal health and safety and family and friends' well-being. Existential crises are part of the human condition, and signify that one is working through important life tasks to avoid negative

consequences (Jacobsen, 2006). However, the anxiety that may be a by-product of this crisis can be debilitating and hinder one in the process of adjusting to a “new normal.”

According to Godinic et al. (2020), job loss and an inability to associate with relevant others, such as colleagues, pose a risk to one's psychological well-being. The pandemic has caused a reality that clashes with “individuals' prototypical and subjectively perceived identities” (Godinic et al., 2020, p. 62), which leads to identity disturbances. Similarly, healthcare workers have indicated that working during the pandemic has led to ethical dilemmas and moral injuries, which resulted in shattered social identities and inner moral conflict (Kröger, 2020).

Similar to Andrew's (2016) description of the link between societal disruption and existential crisis, Papa and Maitoza (2013) posited that any event that results in a chronic disruption in meaningful engagement with one's environment could cause grief. Being confronted with an adverse event that results in broad, long-term changes in one's social environment may cause a sense of bereavement similar to that which occurs after the loss of a loved one.

In this light, it is conceivable that Kindergarten educators – who have seen their practice turn from a personal, in-class experience to a more isolated online environment, and consequently back to a classroom, but in vastly different circumstances – experience a sense of grief. The world as they knew it was, and is, no longer. Godinic et al. (2020) studied the effect of economic uncertainty on mental health in the COVID-19 pandemic context. The researchers found that job loss and the inability to engage in meaningful conversation with relevant others led to identity disturbances, where an individual faces a

newly emerging reality that no longer resembles the reality they knew. In this new reality, then, they no longer recognize themselves (Godinic et al., 2020).

Educator Support During Crisis

Kim and Asbury (2020) identified fellowship between educators within their school and within the profession as a possible resource that educators can use on an ongoing basis as they navigate the affective changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples of fellowship between educators would be banter in the staffroom, discussing the day's specifics with one another, or catching up at the end of the day when students have left the building. In Kim and Asbury's (2020) study, the educators indicated that being at the school's physical location reduced their feelings of isolation and their sense that they had gone from being an educator to being an administrator of sorts. Specifically, being unable to teach in a physical classroom had left many educators feeling like a provider of resources rather than an educator. Some of the participants reported "not feeling like a teacher" (Kim & Asbury, 2020, p. 1077). Even remote interaction with colleagues served to lessen the social isolation reported by the educators (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

As well, when educators find themselves in uncharted territory, reflexivity can be a valuable tool to identify successful and less successful strategies in one's teaching practice. Bauer et al. (2005) showed that reflecting on difficult experiences and emphasizing agency and exploration in self-stories are linked to a sense of well-being as well as adaptation on a psychological level. Reflecting on one's experiences with colleagues may be helpful, since they are generally in a similar situation and are likely dealing with the same issues (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

According to Foxman (2020), one strategy used by educators to stay connected and cope with the challenging circumstances during the pandemic is PD. Activities mentioned are keeping up with (or catching up to) relevant literature pertaining to the teaching profession and pursuing additional qualifications (Foxman, 2020). In order to further understand how educator identity is impacted by COVID-19 and how to best support their needs, an examination of what constitutes online teaching and learning, and the challenges associated with these concepts, is needed.

Online Teaching and Learning

This section explores the literature pertaining to online teaching and learning, neither of which is a new concept. As early as the mid-1990s, earning a degree online became a viable option for those who had the technology at their disposal. There are several factors to consider when examining online learning formats for K-12 students, including access, technology, and educator training.

K-12 Online Education

Historically, the online learning environment was reserved for white, middle- and upper-class niche populations who were provided with extensive resources to help both caregivers and students (Tawfik et al., 2021). Toppin and Toppin (2016) found that the largest online education provider in the United States, K-12 Inc., enrolls significantly larger numbers of white students than the public schools in the states in which it operates.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there has been a worldwide shift to online education. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided researchers with a unique opportunity to examine the various supports and barriers that educators face as they facilitate an online learning environment which meets the needs of diverse learners

who did not volunteer for remote education (Tawfik et al., 2021). When in-person learning is no longer possible, engaging digital materials are especially important (Rice & Ortiz, 2021).

Before the pandemic, the growth in remote learning came from traditional public schools who had the funds at their disposal to start up technology integration initiatives (Tawfik et al., 2021). Basham et al. (2013) defined online K-12 education as “an educational model where the student learns at least partially through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace” (p. 52).

Toppin and Toppin (2016) categorized the providers of online education as follows: for-profit companies, non-profit companies, the state departments of education, and individual school districts.

Online education can generally be classified into six major categories: (1) state-run virtual schools; (2) multi-district virtual schools; (3) single-district virtual schools; (4) consortium programs; (5) university programs; and (6) private and parochial virtual schools. Some virtual schools are fully online, while others are fully online with restrictions, and then, there are those which are supplementary (Toppin & Toppin, 2016).

The majority of K-12 students in online educational programs take part in a blended model. Christensen et al. (2013) have identified four primary blended models: the rotation model, the enriched virtual model, the flex model, and the a la carte model. The first of these models, the *rotation model*, identifies four current approaches: station rotation, lab rotation, flipped classroom, and individual rotation. All of these approaches involve students moving back and forth between online learning and in-class, educator-

facilitated learning. The differences between the models primarily pertain to the amount of personalization of the approach and the online learning stations' locations. The *enriched virtual model* is a model in which the student spends most of their time online, and only visits the school's physical location on occasion: for instance, to participate in group activities or to attend workshops. The *flex model* resembles the enriched virtual model in that students spend most of their time online; however, in the flex model, this online time is completed at the school's physical location. Students are free to move through the content at their own pace, and they are allowed to schedule their own learning. The fourth model, the *a la carte model*, involves students who supplement their learning at the brick-and-mortar school location with online learning of their choosing. In this model, the online supplemental learning may or may not be facilitated by the school where the students spend most of their time; for instance, it may be a course that is offered through another institution (Christensen et al., 2013).

Rice and Ortiz (2021) emphasized the importance of using engaging digital materials, specifically in situations where in-person learning contact is reduced or eliminated. This is commonly the case in fully online education as well as in blended-learning environments. Inclusive instructional materials promote engagement, particularly among students from marginalized and racialized backgrounds, whose perspectives are frequently mischaracterized or even erased in traditional school spaces (Rice & Ortiz, 2021).

Distance Learning and Student Needs

Historically, children who were unable to attend school – for example, if they were hospitalized for a prolonged amount of time or were travelling outside of the

country – had limited schooling options. They received worksheets to fill out by themselves, or they had to go without any schooling for the duration of their absence. Research has shown that the more extended the absence, the more significant the long-term effects. *Chronic absenteeism*, meaning missing 10% or more of school days for any reason, puts children at risk for poor academic performance and school dropout (Bruner et al., 2011). According to Bruner et al.'s data, this statement holds true regardless of the socioeconomic status of the student. Bruner et al.'s findings emphasize the importance of supplying students with the appropriate distance learning tools during school closures. However, not only students need support through these turbulent times. Abuhammad (2020) reported that primary caregivers in Jordan identified a variety of obstacles in the process of helping their children adapt to online learning during the COVID-19 school closures. Chief among these obstacles was the primary caregivers' lack of training in handling distance learning technology and the absence of trained personnel who could help them acquire the necessary skills to do so (Abuhammad, 2020). In a survey among 2,561 primary caregivers of children under the age of 18, two-thirds of the participants indicated that they had to provide additional instruction and resources beyond what was provided by the school (Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020).

Interestingly, Bubb and Jones (2020) found that the switch to learning from home led to an unexpected benefit, namely a sharp increase in students' autonomy concerning their learning. The students Bubb and Jones surveyed reported experiencing a sense of ownership and an increase in motivation. These students demonstrated that education does not need to be confined to a traditional classroom within a physical school building to be successful.

In 2016, Toppin and Toppin recognized that the fast growth of online learning institutions was outpacing the ability of researchers to study the phenomenon, leading to a lack of data on best practices. It can reasonably be assumed, then, that the sharp worldwide increase in online learning over the past two years has exacerbated this issue.

Educator Training

The school closures and subsequent move to online education meant that many educators have had to acquire an entirely new set of skills to add to their traditional teaching practices. Technical know-how and experience with platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams are imperative for online teaching. Many educators expressed concern about their ability to deliver high-quality teaching online without the immediate feedback that the traditional classroom offers (Bubb & Jones, 2020). Having to rely solely on technology to deliver a curriculum, understandably, posed an initial challenge for many. The educators in Kim and Asbury's study (2020) indicated that they felt inundated with resources at the beginning of the remote learning process. Participants in a study performed in Norway by Bubb and Jones (2020) echoed this sentiment. The Norwegian educators reported feeling overwhelmed and fearful that they were "not doing anything well enough and that everyone else was doing something much better and more modern" (p. 213).

Since the start of the pandemic, education systems worldwide have come to recognize the significant importance of online learning, which continues to provide education access to millions of children and adults. However, aside from the previously discussed challenges in elementary systems, moving to online learning has also exposed issues concerning the youngest learners and their educators. Educators feel that

supporting the socio-emotional component of learning in an online environment is a challenge (Tawfik et al., 2021). Research suggests that in an online environment, students experience less connectedness, and their sense of camaraderie is diminished (Tawfik et al., 2021).

It is clear, then, that the move to online learning has profoundly impacted educators, their pedagogies, and their personal views of their role as educators. Educators redefining their roles in online learning during COVID-19 cannot be examined without considering how disasters impact education systems and education stakeholders.

Disaster and Education

This section covers the literature on teaching during a disaster, and gives a comprehensive overview of how school closures affect students, educators, and communities. Disaster, such as a pandemic, affects different populations in different ways. Generally, however, already vulnerable groups tend to be impacted more severely. Research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception to this rule (Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020).

The Effect of School Closures

Canada-wide, school closures were instituted in March 2020 when the COVID-19 viral outbreak was declared a pandemic by the WHO; these national closures lasted until the end of the school year in June 2020. In January 2021 and April 2021, another two rounds of school closures saw education move back online in many areas, including Ontario. The Center for Disease Control (CDC), the primary authority when it comes to protecting public health in the United States, advocated for school closures as a means to curb the spread of a virus during a threatening pandemic. The CDC considered children

to be disproportionately large contributors to disease transmission (Berkman, 2008). However, Berkman cautioned that the efficacy of school closures as a preventative measure had not been firmly established.

Berkman (2008) asserted that school closures present potential ethical challenges due to the fact that they disproportionately affected vulnerable populations. Families face the quandary of having to supply children with the accoutrements needed to convert to online learning, such as laptops and reliable internet access. In addition, when schools are closed, a lack of appropriate childcare may force working primary caregivers to rely on *self-care*, which is defined as leaving a child in their own care or the care of a sibling who is younger than 13 years old. Although self-care is not inherently problematic, research has found connections between self-care and risky behaviours like underage drinking and drug use (Berkman, 2008). Additionally, Marques de Miranda et al. (2020) found that adolescents who are left by themselves during the day are more prone to depression and anxiety.

UNESCO (2020b) and TFA Editorial Team (2021) discovered that school closures negatively impact learning and deprive students of opportunities for growth and development, as well as peer-driven social interaction. These adverse effects disproportionately affect students of lower socioeconomic status. For instance, Entwisle and Alexander (1992) found that less-privileged populations experience far more significant test-score declines during what is known as the “summer setback” phenomenon – which is the loss of literacy and numeracy skills that occurs during the summer vacation months when children are home from school – than their more affluent peers. Based on recent studies, school closures as a result of COVID-19 have generated

similar effects. According to Horowitz and Igielnik (2020), primary caregivers of K-12 students with lower incomes are 70% more likely to express concern about their child falling behind in school due to the COVID-19 school closures than primary caregivers in the middle- and higher-income tiers.

In addition to the aforementioned effects on students, school closures negatively impact educators, as well. The sudden and unexpected nature of school closures caused stress and confusion for educators (UNESCO, 2020b). Initially, educators were unsure how to maintain contact with their students and what their obligations entailed. Transferring to online teaching platforms also tends to be frustrating and fraught with complications (UNESCO, 2020b).

Moreover, school closures limit educators' contact with their colleagues as well as their students. Kim and Asbury (2020) highlighted the inherently social nature of teaching. The researchers found that educators put a high value on the relationships with students and their families. The switch to online learning severely impacted these relationships. Additionally, according to Godinic et al. (2020) and akin to Gee's (2000) notion of the affinity identity, individuals gain a social identity from the groups they are a part of, such as colleagues. This social identity is especially relevant in the current pandemic; the need for social support is amplified when one experiences a sense of loss of control while dealing with stressful situations and prolonged periods of uncertainty (Godinic et al., 2020).

School closures also negatively affect communities. Viner et al. (2020) noted that a school closure lowers parental productivity, which puts undue pressure on the economy in a community and leads to financial strain. As well, school closures pose a significant

problem for families who experience food scarcity and whose children receive the majority of their nutrition in the form of free school meals. Additionally, according to Price (2011), communities tend to view education as a key to a better, more fulfilling life for their children, and schools are often at the heart of the community. School closures, especially prolonged ones, eliminate a vital part of the communities that the schools serve. The social isolation that follows from the school closure brings the risk of substantial psychological harm, such as depression and anxiety disorders (Marques de Miranda et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2020).

In the case of COVID-19, school closures negatively affect the community because of their impact on the healthcare workforce. Healthcare workers with young children cannot provide sorely needed patient care because they need to be at home with their children (Viner et al., 2020). Understaffed hospitals due to a lack of healthcare workers, concurrent with intensive care units (ICUs) that are rapidly filling up with COVID-19 patients, present a significant problem.

Education During Crisis

During a large-scale societal disruption, attending school provides children with a much-needed sense of normalcy (Price, 2011). Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected children. Insecurity regarding income, fear of disease, both for themselves and for their primary caregivers, and a general sense of dread are all factors that impact children's lives. According to Marques de Miranda et al. (2020), the increased screen time that resulted from the school closures presents severe risks to youth. Exposure to fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 causes anxiety in children because they lack the ability to assess the accuracy of the information (Marques

de Miranda et al., 2020). COVID-19 has presented a grim reality for young people, and one that appears to be changing daily.

Attending school offers children a much-needed constant factor that enables them to continue their individual and social growth (Nicolai et al., 2015). The individual and social development skills that children learn in school should not be underestimated in situations where children are exposed to prolonged periods of significant psychological stress, such as a global pandemic (Price, 2011).

As well, education plays an essential part in the reconstruction of a society post-disaster. Zhao (2020) posed that COVID-19 could catalyze much-needed change in education worldwide and a chance to reassess the what, how, and where of learning. Education no longer looks the way it did pre-pandemic, and it has become evident that tremendous change is indeed possible in a short time if the circumstances are dire enough. To complicate matters, according to Camillus et al. (2020), a societal disruption like a pandemic is generally accompanied by a shift in society's perception of *who* is responsible for coping with the change. This responsibility may be too large for any one government or governmental agency to carry on their own, and so systems such as health care and education may take a large role in enacting needed change (Camillus et al., 2020).

The overall implications for restructuring learning due to disaster, one such as the COVID-19 pandemic, are great and will be longitudinal. In considering the youngest members of our school systems, the long-term outcomes of the school disruption over the past two years on Kindergarten students is largely unknown. A discussion regarding how this cohort of students has been, and will continue to be impacted, is thus warranted.

Kindergarten Learning

This section highlights the literature pertaining to Kindergarten learning. To understand how distance learning impacts a Kindergarten educator's practice, one must be familiar with the singularities of Kindergarten teaching. Kindergarten learning in Ontario is based on a curriculum document that emphasizes play and inquiry as foundations for early learning. The child is at the centre of this learning approach, where the educator, family, and environment are the essential relationships necessary to foster and support this learning (OME, 2016). The following section gives a brief overview of *The Kindergarten Program* in Ontario, and highlights key research on early years learning. The section also includes research on social-emotional learning (SEL) in Kindergarten-age children, the importance of the learning environment, and the unique challenges Kindergarten educators face due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Kindergarten Curriculum

In Ontario, the Kindergarten curriculum is entitled *The Kindergarten Program*. It centers on a play-based, hands-on, and interactive approach to learning and is founded on the following principles:

- Play is a child's right and is essential to the child's optimal development.
- All children are viewed as competent, curious, capable of complex thinking, and rich in potential and experience.
- A natural curiosity and a desire to explore, play, and inquire are the primary drivers of learning among young children.
- The learning environment plays a crucial role in what and how a child learns.

- In play-based learning programs, assessment supports the child's learning and autonomy as a learner. (OME, 2016, pp. 12-13)

The fourth point mentions the learning environment, which is of the essence in the context of this research. Kindergarten educators carefully set up their classrooms to facilitate learning in a way that is tailored to the Kindergarten student. Most of the learning opportunities involve hands-on activities designed to foster brain development. A few examples of learning opportunities are developmentally appropriate puzzles, playdough, and magnetic letters and numbers that children can arrange and rearrange on a metal surface like a baking sheet. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (n.d.), in the first few years of life, the human brain forms new neural pathways and connections at the rate of over a million new neural connections every second: "Early experiences affect the development of brain architecture, which provides the foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health" (para. 1) This quote exemplifies why Kindergarten learning is vitally important for the development of every child. In addition to beginning numeracy and literacy, Kindergarten students learn social rules such as raising their hand to ask questions, lining up to go outside, and not pushing their classmates during play. Simply put, the Kindergarten years cover the basics of how to go to school, follow routines, and get along with others (Sharp, 2020).

Learning in the Early Years

A seminal work on early learning, *Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings* (Ballantyne et al., 2007), posited that children develop learning strategies from hands-on interaction with objects in their environment, as well as from exchanging points of view with the peers and adults with

whom they interact. A study performed by Casey et al. (2008) illustrated the importance of hands-on learning activities for young children. The researchers found a connection between spatial reasoning skills and storytelling. When an educator presented a block-building activity within a story context, Kindergarten students' spatial reasoning skills increased to a greater degree than when they performed that same activity without the story context (Casey et al., 2008). This result indicates that brain development increased when a story component accompanied independent block play – in other words, when language was introduced into the activity.

Early years education, specifically Ontario's full-day Kindergarten curriculum, maintain a considerable focus on hands-on, exploratory activities (OME, 2016). The OME developed the curriculum from Charles Pascal's (2010) research on play-based learning. Pascal's research posited imaginative play as the foundation upon which learning occurs for young children. Rather than giving direct instruction, educators in Kindergarten programs across Ontario act as facilitators of learning. They set up learning opportunities through play that are primarily hands-on and kinesthetic (OME, 2016). Pascal (2010) asserted that the key to engaging young learners is offering tactile opportunities for rich exploration with the environment. Pascal's view aligns with the earlier findings of Ballantyne et al. (2007) and Casey et al. (2008).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is the process through which children “acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, n.d., para.1). *The*

Kindergarten Program (2016) acknowledges the importance of SEL for developing social competence and emotional well-being.

Social competence and emotional well-being, which are both foci of *The Kindergarten Program* (OME, 2016), are two fundamental aspects of a solid foundation for cognitive abilities. The social skills, cognitive-linguistic capacities, and emotional and physical health that develop throughout the early years form a strong basis for future academic success and success in the workplace (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.). Additionally, Pascal (2010) reiterated that quality early learning is a key determinant of overall health. According to CASEL (n.d.), SEL empowers children and adults to create thriving schools and foster a safe, healthy, and just environment for all.

Unique Aspects of Kindergarten Students

Given that Kindergarten students are typically between 3 and 6 years old, it stands to reason that they require more support to learn academic skills. For instance, young learners have considerably shorter attention spans than older children (Ballantyne et al., 2007). In the case of older students, one could argue that it is relatively easy to provide them with materials that will help them remain at grade level. Older elementary students can read online, perform tasks such as creating a Google Slides presentation, and conduct research on topics for papers or video presentations. Additionally, while it is by no means a sufficient surrogate for spending time face-to-face at school, older elementary students can interact with their peers in online formats such as Google Hangouts, Skype, and other social media platforms (Government of Canada, 2020).

Kindergarten students, on the other hand, are more limited in this regard. They are largely *preliterate*: some may be able to recognize letters and produce the appropriate sound, but Kindergarten students cannot read instructions, and they cannot follow written directions. Even with the help of a parent or guardian, Kindergarten students are limited in their online learning capabilities. Primary caregivers and guardians can provide the directions for a project and help their child type out answers, and they can scan and upload drawings and writing exercises. However, primary caregivers and guardians are, generally speaking, not equipped to foster the type of SEL that takes place in Kindergarten classrooms. As discussed previously, social and emotional development are two of the four foci of the Kindergarten curriculum in Ontario (OME, 2016). According to Denham et al. (2014), *SEL* is defined as “effectiveness in interaction, the result of organized behaviours that meet short-term and long-term” (pp. 427-428). SEL is comprised of four key components: self-regulation, responsible decision-making, social skills, and social awareness (Denham et al., 2014). Kindergarten classrooms facilitate the development of these skills (OME, 2016). Most children do not have a sufficient number of siblings to allow for a school-like environment during snack- and lunchtime at home, or for creating circle time – two of the critical mechanisms for SEL in Kindergarten classrooms.

Circle time provides the optimal environment for the development of empathy, self-expression, and understanding for others. Studies have shown that students who engage in circle time exhibit fewer behaviour issues (Cefai et al., 2014; Mary, 2014). Small circles are beneficial for improving self-concept and behaviour; however, whole-class circle time is more effective (Kelly, 1999). Circle time presents a prime opportunity

for students to take an active part in their learning process. For the educator, circle time creates a space to become more of a facilitator and less of an instructor. Circle time supports social and emotional development, while simultaneously promoting academic learning (Cefai et al., 2014). Activities during circle time often include songs with movement, counting games, and exercises in turn-taking.

In addition to supporting SEL, the Kindergarten curriculum emphasizes inquiry-based learning. The addendum to the curriculum (OME, 2019) states, “both children and educators are observers and inquirers” (p. 1). One example of this inquiry-based approach is an educator’s decision to invite a police officer into the classroom after having recorded several safety-related ideas and questions from the students. Inviting community helpers into the physical learning environment enables the students to develop a sense of community (OME, 2019). This type of learning opportunity, however, is difficult to provide in an online format.

Kindergarten Online

Since the start of online Kindergarten learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Kindergarten enrollment has dropped significantly (Sharp, 2020). Transitioning traditional Kindergarten classes to an online format has created questions and uncertainty for primary caregivers and educators worldwide. Primary caregivers are uncertain of the benefit of online learning for their young children, and many have opted out of registering for Kindergarten (Sharp, 2020). Educators are experiencing a different set of uncertainties related to teaching Kindergarten online. One educator emphasized the need for hands-on teaching as it pertains to, for instance, helping a child learn correct pencil grip. She questioned whether this aspect of teaching would be transferable to an online

format (Fink, 2020). Despite educators' best intentions and efforts, the online format poses many challenges for educators and their Kindergarten students. Challenges range from children being able to navigate the online learning classroom to attention and engagement (Calkin, 2020; Fink, 2020; Sharp, 2020).

According to Calkin (2020), the main problem that Kindergarten educators encountered when switching to an online teaching format was keeping the young learners engaged. Kindergarten students tended to be curious and enthusiastic for the first few weeks of online learning. However, once the novelty of the approach wore off, many children lost focus and interest. In a study conducted in Norway by Bubb and Jones (2020), educators used digital escape rooms, science experiments, and migratory bird photography to engage young students.

Similarly, Calkin (2020) used various tools and strategies in her practice, including mindfulness brain breaks and personalized lessons that featured students' names, for example, in math problems. Calkin encouraged parent involvement by emailing a weekly checklist and asking primary caregivers to track their child's school assignments. However, the downside to virtually all of these tools was that both educator and primary caregivers experienced them as time-consuming (Calkin, 2020).

In a case study performed by Vu et al. (2020), the Kindergarten educator hosted weekly meetings on Zoom, an online meeting platform, during which she read stories to the children, had them play scavenger hunts around the house, and take part in show-and-tell sessions. She took care not to let the sessions take longer than an hour. Additionally, this educator recorded videos in which she read for the children and shared what was happening in her life to maintain a personal connection. She posted these videos on

YouTube so that children and primary caregivers could watch the material (Vu et al., 2020). The teaching strategies used by this particular educator require at least a working knowledge of the technology involved. Not all Kindergarten educators may have the technological know-how required to create these activities and resources. With the overall pressure of learning the technology themselves, many educators felt the additional tasks were copious (Calkin, 2020; Sharp, 2020).

In addition to the challenge of keeping young learners engaged via a computer screen, it is difficult to mimic the social aspects of the Kindergarten classroom in a home environment. At school, children can interact with their peers through pretend play, a form of communication that encourages the development of self-regulation, social competence, and the ability to communicate with others (Shanker, 2012). These skills are foundational to all types of learning (Ballantyne et al., 2007). Pretend play interaction is not as easily facilitated at home, and fostering pretend play for children who do not have siblings can be challenging. In a survey performed among 2,561 primary caregivers in the United States, 60% of the respondents expressed concern about their children's ability to maintain social connections and friendships with their peers while learning from home (Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020).

One of the strategies used to curb the spread of COVID-19 was *social distancing* (later dubbed *physical distancing*), the practice of limiting contact with others and maintaining a 2-meter distance unless dealing with members of one's household (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020). A direct result of this social distancing policy was that organizing playdates among children to facilitate pretend play was no longer a viable option. Without this social form of pretend play, along with not being able to attend

school in person, Kindergarten students continue to be at risk of missing out on a significant component of the social-emotional development that is critical for this age group.

It is evident from the current research, then, that online Kindergarten poses many challenges for children, their educators, and their primary caregivers, due to the developmental level of the students and their specific learning needs. The COVID-19 pandemic displaced many Kindergarten age learners into online schooling formats, which presented very unique challenges and demands.

Chapter Summary

This chapter highlighted the literature that pertains to the lived experiences of Kindergarten educators during a global pandemic. The first section provided insight into the theoretical framework of identity as lens for educational research. This section was followed by a discussion about identity both in a general sense and specific to educator identity. The subsequent section explored online learning in general, and its benefits and disadvantages with a focus on young learners. Additionally, the early learning context in which the proposed research is situated was detailed.

Lastly, this chapter suggested that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic warrants an examination of Kindergarten educators' perceptions of themselves as an educator and their view on their practice going forward. The following chapter will discuss the chosen methodology and describe the methods selected for this study, as well as how the data were analyzed. At this point, there is little research that explores this impact with a specific focus on Kindergarten educators' professional identities.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This research project was situated within a post-constructivist qualitative paradigm. A *post-constructive worldview* means that human beings “do not construct reality, because reality itself is so rich and significant that all we need to do is to read it” (Shank, 1993, p. 920). In this context, “reading” takes on a deeper meaning than merely extracting information from a text. Shank (1993) held that reading and listening to stories are attempts to make sense of reality. The processes of reading and writing, telling and hearing, and narrating and understanding are, in essence, all the same process.

I chose interviews as a means to hear the stories of Kindergarten educators who were in a new reality that barely resembled the teaching practice they were familiar with. I invited the educators to speak about their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences were analyzed using a thematic approach. The current chapter will outline the methodological framework and the data collection plan for this study.

Research Questions

The questions I attempted to answer through my research were the following:

1. How do Kindergarten educators describe their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has teaching during a global pandemic impacted Kindergarten educators' sense of professional identity?
3. What critical incidents do Kindergarten educators identify, and how do these impact their overall experience?

Research Design

For 18 months between March 2020 and June 2021, educators shifted back and forth several times from teaching face-to-face in a classroom to fostering an appropriate and supportive online learning environment. In this study, I explored the experiences of five Kindergarten educator participants to gather an understanding of how teaching during the period of March 2020 to June 2021 had affected their sense of identity as an educator.

I selected a generic qualitative research approach for data collection and analysis. *A generic qualitative approach* is an option when a clear affiliation with an established methodology is not apparent or when a researcher combines different qualitative methodologies (Caelli et al., 2003). For example, a researcher may opt for a generic qualitative approach when the focus of the study, the content of the information desired, or the type of data to be obtained do not fit within an established methodology such as ethnography, case study, grounded theory, or phenomenology (Percy et al., 2015). My research questions indicated that a qualitative approach to the proposed study was warranted, but they did not suggest a particular traditional methodology. Instead, then, *generic qualitative inquiry* investigates people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences of things in the outer world (Percy et al., 2015).

According to Caelli et al. (2003), researchers who employ a generic qualitative approach "simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (p. 11). Generic qualitative methodology allowed me to listen to and examine the personal accounts of a specific

group of educators' experiences throughout 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, I explored the way in which these experiences have impacted the educators' professional identity. A generic qualitative approach enabled me to draw on the strengths of firmly established methodologies including narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and ethnography, while allowing a flexible approach for data collection that does not entirely align with any other specific methodology (Kahlke, 2014). Taking a generic qualitative approach allowed me to utilize a flexible approach to data collection, including interviews, and allowed me to examine the data through critical incident analysis while concurrently attempting to understand the experiences and understandings of the educators as they presented them.

Questions were developed in order to elicit responses from the educators based on their reflection of the time spent teaching online and prior, and how these experiences may have impacted their personal views on teaching. They focused broadly on teaching Kindergarten virtually, including various essential components to the Kindergarten program, as well as specifically in relation to the situation of the pandemic. Participants were challenged to consider how their experience teaching between March 2020 and June 2021 had an impact on their pedagogy.

Examples of questions that were asked during the interview include the following:

- Can you describe a high point in your teaching during the pandemic, and what made it a high point?
- How do you feel about having to incorporate the socio-emotional component of your teaching in an online format?

- Can you tell me about the support you have received during the pandemic, both with regard to teaching and wellness practices?

Researcher Positioning

In considering the position of the researcher in this study, it is important to understand what potential biases I, as the researcher, have, based on my past experiences. Bukor (2011) describes that “the study of experience begins with the researcher’s intentionality since he/she determines where the study begins and ends” (p. 103). Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that as a Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) with a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education (ECE), my interests lie in the field of early learning. As such, in the work that I engage in, I “draw from [my] professional knowledge of child development, learning theories and pedagogical and curriculum approaches to plan, implement, document, and assess child-centred, inquiry and play-based learning experiences for children” (College of Early Childhood Educators [CECE], 2017, p. 10). My years of working in the ECE field and my theoretical background caused me to wonder about the impact of the COVID-19-related school closures and the subsequent move to an online learning format for those who teach Ontario’s youngest students.

Based on my educational background and practical experience, I identified significant challenges related to teaching 4- to 6-year-olds on a virtual platform. Since learning in a Kindergarten classroom is markedly different from learning in higher grades, the delivery of the material is necessarily different as well. Kindergarten classrooms generally consist of learning centers and one or two larger areas, such as a carpet, where whole-group instruction occurs. The centers have specific purposes and

address the five developmental domains: (1) physical, (2) cognitive, (3) social, (4) emotional, and (5) communication, language, and literacy. Translating this play-based learning model into an online learning format presents, as I see it, a tremendous challenge. In addition, the SEL (discussed in Chapter Two) that is a fundamental part of Kindergarten learning is notably absent in an online environment.

It was essential for me to interrogate my perspective on this topic since it informed my motivation to undertake this study. Additionally, my view on the topic identified the potential researcher bias involved. Although I did attempt to use bracketing throughout the study, it is critical to recognize that removing myself entirely from the research was impossible. As well, it is unnecessary in generic qualitative research (Caelli et al., 2003).

Participants

The study participants were public school educators with at least 2 years of experience in teaching Kindergarten. The three criteria for the participants were:

1. Participants must have an Ontario College of Teachers certification or an Early Childhood Educator (ECE) diploma from a recognized Ontario college.
2. Participants must have held a position as a Kindergarten educator during the 2020/2021 school year.
3. Participants must have at least 1 year of experience in teaching Kindergarten prior to the 2019/2020 school year.

This last criterion was necessary because the educator must be able to compare and contrast teaching Kindergarten in a traditional classroom setting with the online learning approach that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this criterion,

participants may have taught in a physical Kindergarten classroom, fully online, or going back and forth between remote and in-person teaching during the 2020/2021 school year.

Through my work as a research assistant, I was engaged in a project examining teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to supporting students with special education needs. Since I had a focus on Kindergarten educator experiences related to their identity, I was able to ask participants of the project I assisted with my specific interview questions. I worked hand-in-hand with my supervisor in all aspects of the research process, including conducting all of the interviews.

Participants for this research study were selected through a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. Advertisements were posted on social media accounts, seeking Kindergarten educators who fit the above criteria. This advertisement encouraged interested participants to send a private message response containing their email address, after which a letter of information was sent to the contact information provided. The potential participants would be invited to review the letter of information and the informed consent form. Because this approach did not yield the desired number of participants, a local school board was engaged in an attempt to find more participants. After obtaining ethics clearance from the school board, I was able to recruit the remaining three participants.

A minimum of six participants were sought who agreed to one individual, 45- to 60-minute interview via an online platform such as Zoom or Skype. Of the initial six participants, one withdrew from the study before the interview process took place. The interviews took place between April and June of 2022.

Procedures and Instruments

In this section, I will cover the procedures and instruments I selected for this study. These procedures and instruments were congruent with a generic qualitative approach (Kahlke, 2014) and included semi-structured interviews and field notes. Additionally, as a professional transcriptionist, I chose to pay particular attention to the transcription process. I will discuss the challenges of rendering an accurate transcript, and highlight how the process of transcription can potentially skew the data generated.

Interviews

Since the objective of this study was to explore how Kindergarten educators make sense of their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, I opted for semi-structured individual interviews to collect my data. Fontana and Frey (2005) viewed interviewing as a means of contemporary storytelling rather than as a neutral tool to gather data. For this reason, I selected interviews as the primary data collection tool in order to capture the experiences and stories of the participants. One-on-one interviews allowed me to ask my participants questions specifically geared towards their lived experiences. Specifically, I was interested in how my participants described and made sense of critical incidents in their teaching practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the current study, interviews were an appropriate method since they enabled me to focus on specific experiences and ask participants to elaborate. In a one-on-one interview, for instance, I was able to ask probing questions and request clarification. The data from these interviews lead to the rich description I provide in Chapters Four and Five of this study.

The interviews took place on two online platform that were chosen by the participant, namely Zoom and Skype. I chose a *semi-structured interview* approach because it offered a structure that would prevent the participants from straying too far from the study subject; yet, at the same time, a semi-structured interview allowed for additional probing questions and requests for clarification. These interviews were “negotiated accomplishments of both interviewers and respondents that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 716).

The questions in the interview encouraged the participants to share and reflect on their experiences with teaching Kindergarten during a pandemic. Additionally, I asked probing questions to draw out more nuance and depth in the experiences relayed by the participants. An example of an interview question was: can you tell me about an event in your practice that you consider a high point? Clarifying information could be given if needed, such as an explanation of the question or an example of a high point mentioned by another participant.

Below in Table 1 are the questions that the participants were asked to reply to.

Observation Notes

I aimed to create observation notes before, during, and after the interviews as an additional tool to support the interviews. Body language and facial expressions are an important aspect of understanding one's personal experience. In other forms of research such as ethnography, taking field notes is seen as an effective way to document observation (Tjora, 2006). However, most qualitative research methodologies currently concur that field notes are essential for rigorous qualitative research and provide rich context for data analysis (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

Table 1

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1	How long have you taught Kindergarten?
2	Do you follow the Ontario Kindergarten Program in your teaching?
3	Describe how your teaching methods have changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
4	Can you describe a high point in your teaching during the pandemic? What made it a high point?
5	Can you describe a low point in your teaching during the pandemic? What made it a low point?
6	Can you describe a turning point in your teaching during the pandemic? Clarification: An incident that made you look at teaching differently than before, either teaching during the pandemic or teaching in general.
7	Has the pandemic had an impact on how you see yourself as a Kindergarten educator? Can you explain how?
8	Is teaching Kindergarten online as effective for you as in person?
9	Describe how you incorporated the socio-emotional component of your teaching in an online format? How do you assess if that strategy is successful?
10	Are you able to meet the needs of all of your students, including those with special needs? Please describe the accommodations you are able to make. Conversely, please share the barriers you encounter.
11	If there are students whose needs you cannot meet in an online teaching format, can you describe an example?
12	Can you tell me about the support you have received during the pandemic, both with regard to teaching and wellness practices? Who is providing support for you? School board, principal, other?
13	Is your teaching as effective as it was before the pandemic? Can you explain why or why not?
14	Do you enjoy teaching Kindergarten as much as you did before COVID-19? Can you describe why or why not?

The use of observation notes for this study aligns with generic qualitative methodology. Although field notes are often associated with in-person, on-site observations of a specific phenomenon, I concur with Phillippi and Lauderdale (2017) in their claim to the value of documenting such observations as body language and facial expression within any qualitative research methodology. Although the recording device captured the spoken words, there is a sizeable nonverbal component involved in communication: “Verbalizing is not the only way our lives speak, of course. They speak through our actions and reactions, our intuitions and instincts, our feelings and bodily states of being, perhaps more profoundly than through our words” (Palmer, 1999, p. 6). Jotting down observations of body posture, facial expression, and tone of voice allowed me to capture details that added to the context of the experiences that the participants shared. In other words, field notes enable a researcher to record important aspects of an observed interaction (Tjora, 2006), which could potentially slip the researcher’s mind between the time of observation and the data analysis. Tracy (2010) asserted that an abundance of rich complexity is a hallmark of high-quality qualitative research. The field notes recorded before, during, and after the interviews aided in creating such an abundance for this study.

Making observation notes during the interviews presented the risk of detracting the researcher’s attention from what is being said. In this case, it was my belief that the benefits of jotting down the nonverbal components of the interview outweigh this risk. The verbal component was recorded and available to replay as many times as necessary to accurately represent what was said. The nonverbal components were vital but fleeting, and therefore, needed to be recorded in the moment.

Transcription

I have a personal affinity with the process of transcription since I am a professional transcriptionist who specializes in academic transcription. From my 8 years of experience, I believe that transcription can have a significant impact on the quality and quantity of the data garnered from interviews. The opportunity to transcribe the interviews myself allowed me to immerse myself in the participants' experiences and gain a deeper understanding of their stories. Tilley (2016) asserts that transcription is a key phase in data analysis, the importance of which is often overlooked. During the transcription process, the transcriptionist makes seemingly minor decisions *in situ*, meaning in the original place. Examples of such decisions are whether to add a period or an ellipsis, or whether or not to record a pause in speech.

However, these decisions can significantly influence the data that can be garnered from the transcripts. For instance, leaving out pauses in replies may make a response look much more assured than the participant originally uttered it. If going solely by the transcript, the hesitancy and uncertainty that repeated pauses and silences would indicate will go unnoticed and undocumented in the results. This skews the resulting data, particularly when researching thoughts, feelings, and emotions rather than empirical facts.

By transcribing the interviews myself, I remained closer to the *raw data*, meaning that which actually took place during the interviews. The term *raw data*, warned Tilley (2016), is problematic when describing a transcript. Raw data is only "raw" in the moment it occurs. A completed interview transcript is at least twice removed from the

original data already; it is recorded, and the recording is typed up (and interpreted, to a certain degree) by the typist (Tilley, 2016).

Unless transcribed by the researcher, body language is not included in a transcript. Even if the researcher transcribes the interviews, it is impossible to capture every nuance and every detail that transpired. It is essential to keep in mind that “what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6).

If I had had the interviews transcribed by a third party, I would have distanced myself even further from the raw data (Tilley, 2003). As well, I would have missed out on the opportunity to add thick description while the interviews are still fresh in my memory. *Thick description*, a term originally coined by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle in 1949, refers to intelligibly describing the context of social behaviours, events, institutions, and processes (Geertz, 1973). In other words, thick description involves adding details and descriptions that give greater insight into what is observed.

During an interview, participants may exhibit body language or inflections in speech that offer insight into their responses or add depth. For instance, the words “it was a fun time for all” may be spoken highly sarcastically or in a relaxed, upbeat manner. The tone determines the meaning of the sentence, and without that context, the sentence may not convey what the participant meant to say (Bailey, 2008). To ensure that I could add this extra layer of meaning, I transcribed the recorded audio immediately after each interview.

Upon completing the transcription process, the participants received a copy of their respective transcripts for member checking. In this case, *member checking* refers to

supplying the participants with the raw transcripts of their interviews, and allowing them to point out any identifying information that they wish to have redacted. I explained this process in detail at the beginning of each interview to each participant. Once participants completed their member checking, I would redact the transcripts per their requests.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are concepts that originate in quantitative research, and are often debated when it comes to qualitative research. Qualitative researchers are expected to clearly demonstrate that their research process in its entirety is worthy (Carlson, 2010). In line with generic qualitative methodology, my findings did not render an objective view of the experiences of the participants. As Fontana and Frey (2005) posed, “it is the researcher who ultimately cuts and pastes together the narrative, choosing what will become part of it and what will be cut” (p. 697). However, the objective of qualitative research is not to present quantifiable or empirical data: “Qualitative researchers who engage in critical analysis of data are not claiming positivist objectivity, but rather critically questioning the implications of their subjectivities in relation to their interpretive and analytic work” (Tilley, 2016, p. 152). Since my study took a generic qualitative approach and focused on examining subjective experiences, it could not lead to objective findings. Percy et al. (2015) stated that *external generalization* (reliability) in generic qualitative research is not imperative because, in many instances, the data are not quantifiable. Since the objective of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of individuals, quantifiable data are not an expected – or even desired – result. Rather than striving for reliability, I took a reflexive approach to the study to “tease out what aspects of what is ‘observed’ derive from the researcher, what from the object of observation (the

participant), and what from the interaction between them” (Josselson, 2012, pp. 9-10). A self-reflexive researcher is aware that they impact a situation simply by being a part of it. Taking a reflexive approach means that researchers “interrogate their own predilections or opinions and ask for feedback from participants” (Tracy, 2010. p. 842). Field notes and my research journal aided in this reflexive practice and contributed to a robust audit trail.

Data Analysis

Once the data was collected, the interview transcripts were coded for units of meaning using manual data analysis. Methods of coding included *a priori* codes (codes that are developed before examining the current data) and *inductive codes* (codes that are developed by the researcher as they examine the data (Ekka, 2014). The resulting codes were compiled into categories, after which I identified the overarching themes (Tilley, 2016). As noted by Saldana (2009), coding is not merely labelling but linking similar ideas and, thereby, uncovering themes.

Upon completing the coding process, I began the analysis of the data using a thematic approach, congruent with a descriptive qualitative research methodology (Kahlke, 2014). I chose Braun and Clarke’s six-step thematic framework to analyze my data. The findings of the study were viewed in light of critical incident theory to inform my understanding of the participants’ descriptions of their teaching experiences.

Confidentiality

All interview data was recorded in an electronic format and stored on a password-protected USB stick, which will be kept in a locked space in my home for five years. After this period, the data will be destroyed. Only my thesis advisor and I will have access to the raw data at any time. The five participants were assigned a pseudonym to

protect their identity, and any identifying information regarding, for instance, school boards or locations in the interview transcripts was redacted. As well, participants received a copy of their interview transcripts for member checking. They could request information they felt might threaten their confidentiality to be removed from the transcript. Due to the nature of the research and the fact that interviews occurred in an online video format, participants could not be fully anonymous to the researcher; however, all data was kept strictly confidential.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Rather than rigor, which is a term commonly associated with quantitative research, qualitative research can demonstrate trustworthiness (Maher et al., 2018). I aimed to demonstrate the trustworthiness of this study by meeting the following four criteria: transferability, dependability, credibility, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

In qualitative research, *transferability* refers to the ability to apply the findings of a study to other situations or contexts. *Purposeful sampling* can increase transferability; selecting participants who are consistent with the research design enhances the potential for readers to assess transferability to their specific context (Jensen, 2012). For this reason, I identified specific criteria that the participants must meet. Thick description also increases transferability by enabling readers to estimate whether or not the findings are transferable to their particular situation (Jensen, 2012).

Dependability ensures that the study is described in such a way that another researcher could potentially recreate the project (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Dependability is achieved by documenting in detail the process and methods used in the study; in other

words, creating “a detailed audit trail” (Maher et al., 2018, p. 3). I used my research journal and field notes to construct my audit trail for this study.

Credibility assures that the study findings accurately describe the participants' social reality. One way to contribute to credibility is to have the participants member check their contributions to the study (Birt et al., 2016; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). For the current study, as addressed under the heading Transcription, the Kindergarten educator participants received transcripts of their individual interview for member checking.

Lastly, confirmability is essential to establish trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The goal of *confirmability* is to limit researcher bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Researcher bias is not inherently problematic, as long as the researcher identifies and addresses any biases that could potentially influence the development of the study or the engagement of the participants (Carlson, 2010). To this end, I attempted to describe my background and interests as clearly as possible to outline my position in this research project.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the chosen methodology (generic qualitative research), as well as the method that was selected (semi-structured interviews). I listed the research questions, and I highlighted the theoretical framework. In addition, I addressed researcher positioning within the study and noted my background in the ECE field.

I identified various issues with transitioning Kindergarten students from in-person education to an online platform, and described my intention to explore how these circumstances impact the participants' perception of their practice and themselves as

Kindergarten educators. The data generated in the interviews will be presented in Chapter Four of this paper.

Lastly, in this chapter, I outlined the procedures that were put in place to safeguard the participants' personal information, and the measures to ensure trustworthiness. As discussed above, this was attained by meeting the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), in addition to utilizing critical reflexivity.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

To investigate the experiences of Kindergarten educators who shifted their practice to online teaching during COVID-19, this study focused on the following questions:

1. How do Kindergarten educators describe their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has teaching during a global pandemic impacted Kindergarten educators' sense of professional identity?
3. What critical incidents do Kindergarten educators identify, and how do these impact their overall experience?

The study participants were asked to share about critical incidents in their teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic – namely high points, low points, and turning points. Shapira-Lishchinsky (2011) defined *critical incidents* as “significant turning points” (p. 648). In examining their teaching experiences during a disaster, educators can identify critical incidents that involve ethical conflict and moral distress. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines a *disaster* as “a sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, or destruction” (para.1). With a worldwide loss of life of approximately 2.03 million as of January 17, 2021, COVID-19 categorically qualifies as a disaster. Teaching during a pandemic in a rapidly changing world brings with it many critical incidents (see, for instance, Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Hickman and Stokes (2016) suggested that reflecting on critical incidents can help educators critically engage with their continued professional development. Critical

incidents, in this sense, can be a catalyst for change. The critical reflection brought on by a significant turning point can allow for a broader perspective (Mohammed, 2016).

Kim and Asbury (2020) found that for most educators in their study, *turning points*, or critical incidents, referred to finding a way to approach a situation differently. For one educator, it was the realization that “not all activities are essential” (Kim & Asbury, 2020, p. 1067).

What one considers a turning point is, of course, dependent on one's *frames of reference*, or “structures of assumptions and expectations on which our thoughts, feelings, and habits are based” (Mezirow, 2010, p. 22). Frames of reference are deeply personal; conceivably, experiences that profoundly affect one individual may have a negligible influence on another. For instance, being terminated from a teaching position may cause one person to doubt their abilities as an educator and lose faith in their capacity. Assumingly, another person may shrug their shoulders, take a deep breath, and set out to find a new position elsewhere. This second person may hold the firm conviction that being terminated was due to a circumstance rather than a character or personality flaw.

A critical incident like a job loss – or, indeed, a pandemic – may impact one's sense of identity as well as their worldview. The educators in Asbury and Kim's (2020) study acknowledged that their professional identity had been affected by the school closure and the subsequent move to teaching remotely. Several educators indicated that they felt more like an administrator than an educator, and they doubted that their students' primary caregivers valued their work during the pandemic (Asbury & Kim, 2020).

Generally, in this study, it appeared that the educators enjoyed talking about their teaching experiences and their ideas about various topics including the ups and downs of online teaching during the pandemic. The information that was shared during the interviews was valuable in allowing me to get a sense of each of their experiences and beliefs. One interesting finding was that although my questions pertained almost exclusively to online teaching, without exception, the educators shared their thoughts and feelings about the return to the classroom and having to adjust their practice to the limitations posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This would seem to indicate a possibility for future research.

The interview data was analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis framework as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is not tied to any particular theoretical or epistemological perspective, which means it's a flexible method for analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) and an appropriate choice for a generic qualitative study. This method was used in order to develop themes in which the research questions can be addressed. What follows is a description of how the data was analyzed, along with the main findings of the study.

Analysis of the Data

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest the following six steps for thematic analysis:

- Step 1: Become familiar with the data
- Step 2: Generate initial codes
- Step 3: Identify themes
- Step 4: Review themes
- Step 5: Define themes

- Step 6: Write-up

Of the six potential participants that were recruited through the use of a snowball approach, five participated in a one-on-one interview. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the data verbatim, but limited the number of repeats in a stutter to three and left out vocalizations like “um” and “uh.” The resulting transcripts were sent to the respective participants for member checking. None of the participants felt the need to make any changes to the transcripts. Once I had the transcripts at my disposal, the actual coding process commenced.

The next step was the initial coding process. I had read the transcripts with the audio running alongside as part of the proofing process. However, for the initial coding, I did not use the audio because I felt that I had sufficient familiarity with hearing the participants recount their experiences since I transcribed the data personally.

I used open coding; I did not create a codebook prior to the data analysis, but I developed and modified the codes as I worked through the coding process (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Keeping in mind that coding is “flexible and organic” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 4), I worked my way through the transcript several times, and my codes changed throughout this process as I gathered more insight into the stories of the participants.

This deductive approach yielded a large number of codes, which I then grouped into themes (Step 3 of the thematic analysis framework). Since many codes were quite similar (e.g., “negative utterance” and “negative reaction”), I chose one code to cover these similar chunks of texts. This resulted in a more manageable number of codes. I created a column for each participant and listed the codes from their interviews. Then, I labeled each code with the appropriate theme under which I felt it belonged.

As suggested by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), for Step 4 of the thematic analysis framework, the codes were then grouped by the identified themes in a separate document. This gave me the opportunity to review the themes I had developed. I noticed overlap in certain themes; for instance, the theme “Caregivers’ Attitudes” overlapped with the theme “Support.” I also found that the theme “Teaching Methods” actually had two subthemes, namely “Play-Based Teaching” and “Changing Teaching Methods,” and I identified “Privacy Concerns” as a subtheme of “The Challenges of Virtual Teaching.”

Lastly, I refined the themes to better reflect their essence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My initial list consisted of 22 themes, many of which I identified as subthemes rather than overarching themes. Two main themes developed first – namely, “The Challenges of Virtual Teaching” and “The Challenges of Virtual Learning.” Upon further reflection of the data, four additional themes were identified, most of which had one or more subthemes. A diagram of the resulting themes and subthemes will be presented in the next section.

Findings

A total of six main themes, each with several subthemes, were identified as significant in this data set. Figure 1 shows the themes, subthemes, and in some instances, sub subthemes. These themes will be discussed in the following section.

The Challenges of Virtual Teaching

The participants identified many challenges of teaching on an online platform, as well as significant challenges to do with delivering a Kindergarten-specific curriculum. These challenges will be highlighted in this section.

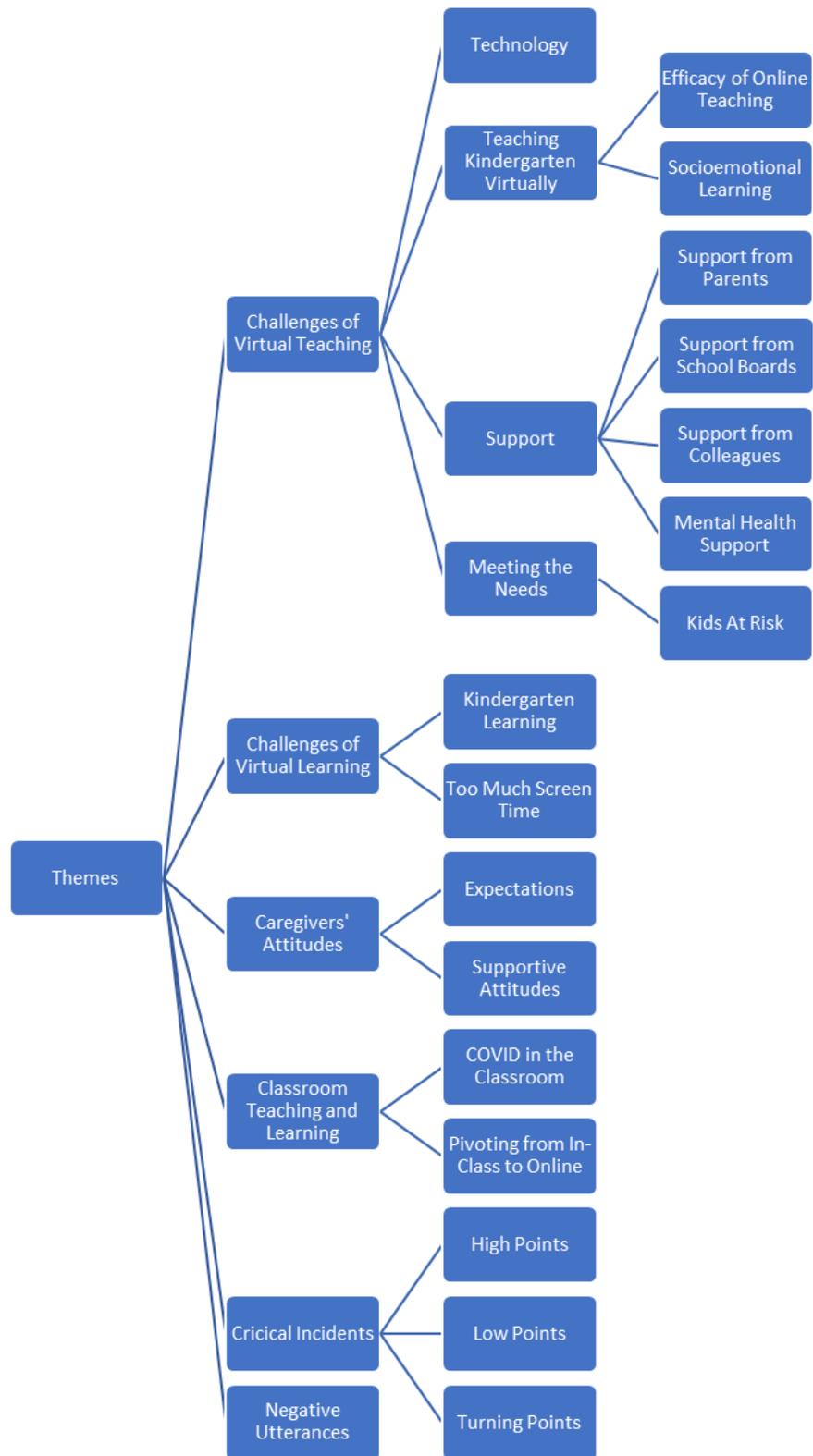


Figure 1. Themes and subthemes.

Technology

A significant part of the challenge with online teaching identified by the participants is, not surprisingly, the technical component. The educators indicated that they had to learn new technology quickly and without much support. They explained that they taught themselves the use of voice clips and bitmojis to make the online environment look friendlier and more personal. To be able to maintain oversight of their online classrooms, the educators indicated that using two monitors or two computers was helpful so that they could see both the students and their slideshow from which they were teaching. The educators shared that they downloaded grid apps that helped them keep track of their students. For these educators, their class sizes varied from 16 to 30 children, and the educators indicated that the higher the number of participants, the more challenging the meeting for a variety of reasons. One main reason stated by all the participants was muting and unmuting. Students had to learn to mute and unmute themselves, and they needed to stay muted when someone else was talking because only one person could talk at a time. As Camilla stated, “[...] 30 kids on a Zoom call. That is a nightmare.” Finally, the educators expressed that they found that many of their common activities like singing songs were complicated by lag.

Other concerns with the virtual learning environment were related to the privacy of both the teachers and the students. Kelsey mentioned, for instance, having to shut down Zoom sessions during breaktime to safeguard privacy, and Maci brought up the possibility that students might see aspects of other children’s homelives that were not appropriate for them to see. As an example, one of the educators had students who were

involved in active Family and Children's Services (FACS) cases, with primary caregivers who experienced substance abuse disorders.

Teaching Kindergarten Virtually

The participants unanimously agreed that teaching Kindergarten virtually poses challenges that are unique to this student population, which still needs hands-on assistance in many aspects. Camilla stated, "I mean, it's just like honestly half of my job basically disappeared when we went online, because half of my job is just taking care of the basic needs of the children." This same participant shared that setting up an appropriate Kindergarten learning environment posed a significant challenge. She described teaching in her fully play-based classroom as "basically setting up the learning environment for the students, and then circulating and getting to have that one-on-one time with each kid." Camilla indicated that she and her teaching partner found it impossible to recreate this process on a virtual learning platform.

Another factor that complicated matters was the fact that the learning environment at home was largely beyond the influence of the educators. According to Camilla, "the environment that they have is what's at home. And we don't have the opportunity to set that up for them." One of the aspects that became evident to the educators was the inequalities between the families of the students and the widely varying home environments within which the students logged on to their virtual learning platforms. Educators reported multiple examples of this inequality, including having a student as far away as India, whose family was unable to return home due to the pandemic and the resulting travel restrictions, students living under difficult circumstances in families that struggle with substance use disorder, and other students

with chaotic homelives and multiple siblings in the same room who were trying to do their own online schooling. Educators indicated that the noise in the house made it virtually impossible for these students to hear anything. Educators reported that some students did not have the opportunity to get online on a regular or even semiregular basis. They expressed frustration in that even though they provided families with alternatives to keep up with their child's schooling, oftentimes the homework did not come back, and the educators could not get through to the families via phone or email.

Behavioural challenges were also significantly harder to deal with in a virtual environment. The educators reported that students were harder to engage in the material offered by the educators since they were surrounded by their toys and often their family. According to Maci, redirecting students through a screen was not very effective, and Camilla shared that getting children to pay attention to the screen was challenging for primary caregivers as well: "I have parents messaging me, saying, 'He's not paying attention. Can you do something?' I'm like, 'Well, you're sitting beside him.' Like I—there's only so much I could do from a computer screen." Perhaps the most salient remark in the context of virtual Kindergarten is Kira's statement: "Being online is just painful."

Efficacy Of Online Teaching

The participants were asked about the efficacy of online Kindergarten in their opinion as Kindergarten educators. Their responses were clear: teaching Kindergarten online is not nearly as effective as teaching in the classroom. One of the participants reported that there was a lot of wasted time, academically speaking. As well, carpet time, an important aspect of Kindergarten which supports social and emotional development

and promotes academic learning simultaneously (Cefai et al., 2014), did not work very well online. One of the participants, Kira, posed that while it may work for older students, for Kindergarten-aged children, online learning is not as effective as in-class. Camilla said, "It only worked with part of the class," and she indicated that she felt that online Kindergarten is not "developmentally appropriate."

One of the other educators, Angela, paints a much more positive picture. She came to see herself as "a relationship builder between our families and schools. Being in the homes of my students was a powerful opportunity to connect with the parents on a meaningful level." Angela's statement correlates with the findings of Kim and Asbury (2020), as discussed in Chapter Two of this paper; namely, that educators put a high value on the relationship with the families of their students.

Socioemotional Learning

When asked about how they facilitate and safeguard SEL, a focus of *The Kindergarten Program* (2016) and a large component of Kindergarten teaching, all of the participants expressed concern about this aspect of teaching. Kelsey stated that SEL is "a huge part of Kindergarten," and that many students struggled in this regard during the online learning periods and even when they returned to the classroom under COVID-19 restrictions. Camilla shared, "Basic socioemotional teaching component now is turn off your sound," and shared her concern about the lack of in-person contact with the Kindergarten students. According to Angela, "socially, there was a big gap."

In addition to the educators, the caregivers, too, were concerned about the lack of SEL happening on the online context. When asked how she incorporated the socioemotional aspect of Kindergarten learning online, Maci shared the following:

Yeah, I was, that was definitely challenging. So the first time when we weren't online at all, that was a big concern for the parents. Well, can you set up a Zoom call so the kids can play and talk online? And that was really more than any academic issues, **that** was their concern, right?

Kira shared, "I'd say it's the social interaction and the social learning that is just such a big part of Kindergarten. It just doesn't translate to online."

Support

The theme "Support" emerged from the responses to an interview question asking participants if they felt they had received support during the time they were teaching during COVID-19. The following subthemes were identified: "Support from School Board and Administration," "Support from Parents," "Support from Colleagues," and "Mental Health Support." These themes will be discussed below.

Support from Primary Caregivers

All of the participants indicated the importance of support from the students' families. One of the participants stated that the level of support from primary caregivers showed a downward trend, reaching a low point during the shutdown in January 2021: "[...] the interest and the commitment from parents just wasn't there" (Kelsey).

Support from School Board and Administration

One of the interview questions pertained to whether the educators felt that they received the support from their respective school boards. Of the five educators that were interviewed, only one felt she had received the support she needed to be successful in the process of shifting to an online teaching environment, as well as throughout the pivoting from online to in-class and vice versa over the course of the following 18 months:

[...] we had an amazing principal. She was incredible. She would offer to take kids in breakout rooms and she would pop in and join our circle time once, twice a week. That was rare though, I think. I don't know if anyone else would have that, but our principal was so dedicated to making that work. (Angela)

It wasn't just the Principal that supported Angela; she also received support from resource teachers and a speech and language pathologist (SLP). The online environment made it possible for the SLP to see children on much shorter notice, and long waitlists, as is usually the case, were no longer an issue. As Angela put it, "[...] honestly, I have to say everyone came together. I did have a ton of support."

In stark contrast to Angela, the other four educators felt that support was notably lacking. As Kelsey noted, she had "Nothing from the board. [...] literally, we were thrown to the dogs."

One of the participants spoke specifically about support for the pivot to online teaching:

Yeah, I don't think—we didn't get support. I know the teachers that knew they were online and got assigned online at the beginning of the year were given two weeks to get all of their stuff together. They were given this—they had online training, and when we were asked to just, okay, on Monday you're going online, like there was nothing. (Camilla)

Another participant, Kira, shared that there wasn't a lot of support from the school board, but she expressed understanding for the fact that the board members were also faced with a situation that was entirely new and overwhelming, noting that "[...] the board people who were so inundated with everything." When asked if she could rely on

support from the school board or the administration at her school, participant Maci responded with a very succinct, "Welcome to the deep end. Good luck."

Support from Colleagues

Several of the participants emphasized the importance of collaborating with their colleagues. One educator, Angela, indicated that she missed the daily contact with her fellow educators:

We have a close-knit community. We were going out for drinks every Friday, or most Fridays. [...] We were just so close and wanting to be together, and [...] so when the pandemic hit, we really missed that. We really missed not seeing each other every day.

Likewise, Maci shared:

We all kind of pitched in. We'd share each other's, you know, here, this is a slideshow I'm using for this week, or this is today's slideshow, or here's the link to some resources I found, and that kinda stuff. Definitely. We for sure helped each other.

Camilla, who reported that she did not receive any support to speak of, suggested "Maybe collaborating with other teachers would have made a difference."

Mental Health Support

When asked if there were mental health supports made available to them, the educators responded with a unanimous "no." According to Kelsey, "the lack of support was unbelievable." Maci reported getting lots of kudos from her administration, but no mental health support or wellness resources:

[...] kudos, we always got those. But support with regards to, here's some resources; use these. Or here's our expectations of what we'd like it to look like. Or here's a sample of what you can do. Here's how to do it. That kinda stuff, no. Angela shared the various mental health strategies she and her teaching partner employed to make sure the students were doing well. The two educators did mental health check-ins daily and used a variety of other mechanisms, such as the stress-o-meter and the zones of regulation.

However, for the participants themselves, there were no mental health resources available. They indicated that the pressure of the job impacted not only they themselves, but their families, as well:

But when you're so overwhelmed and you're up all hours of the night, and you haven't seen your family, and your kids are saying—your daughter's saying, mom, are you gonna come downstairs?! Right, again, oh, at what point are you coming downstairs? You start to feel that, right? And I know so many teachers felt the same way, a hundred percent. We were all feeling the pressure, right?
(Maci)

Meeting the Needs

When asked if they felt like they could meet the needs of all their students in an online teaching environment, the educators were unanimous in their response again: no, they could not. The reasons for feeling this way were varied, but they often pertained to the inability to actually get the children onto the virtual learning platforms. When asked if she and her teaching partner were able to meet the needs of all their students online as effectively as in the classroom, Kira replied, “Not the same. Definitely not the same.”

Kira also reported concerns about students being missed in a Zoom meeting because the educators could not see them raise their hands. She expressed receiving complaints from caregivers who felt their child was being left out.

Angela indicated that she had several students who never made it online, and she was unable to reach the family to check in. The families did not respond to emails or voicemails. Camilla shared that her school did not have enough resources to provide each student with what they needed to be able to participate, and Kira reported that the tech that was available was given out to students in classes in the upper grades, but not to Kindergarten students. As well, Angela shared that she felt that she and her teaching partner could not meet the “social needs” of the students in an online learning environment.

Additionally, meeting the needs of students in a social sense was difficult, according to Angela. She shared that she had students with whom she “just couldn’t make a connection,” and she indicated that the inability to work together to problem solve, interact, and share experiences in the classroom was a major drawback of online Kindergarten. “You can’t build virtual cardboard castles,” Angela noted. In a similar vein, Maci shared, “everything works better in person.”

The educators identified that students with special needs faced additional challenges in their learning. Without exception, the participants felt like they could not meet the needs of these students in an online format. Kelsey stated about one of her students with special needs that school online “[...] just didn’t do anything besides frustrate him.” Angela had students with special needs who hid from the screen, and one

of these students expressed that he hid because he did not want his classmates or his teachers to see him.

Kira discussed a similar experience with a student whose caregivers just could not make him feel comfortable with being online for school. The educators indicated that the children who had a hard time with the online learning environment tended to disappear during the day, and some of them never made it online at all. A student with selective mutism in Maci's class lost all trust with their teachers and reverted to the point that the trust between educators and student had to be rebuilt from the ground up. Camilla shared that she frequently made time after school hours to meet with students one-on-one, but she also indicated that time-wise, it was simply not possible to do this for every student every day.

Kids At Risk

A separate theme that developed under the theme "Meeting The Needs" pertained to the students who had challenging homelives with parents who struggled with substance use disorders. Angela indicated that several of her students were involved with FACS. The participants shared that students with chaotic homelives often did not make it online at all, and when the educators attempted to provide the students with materials to work on, there was generally not much response from the caregivers. This aspect of online teaching was a source of concern for the participants. With regard to students with chaotic homelives and concerning family dynamics, Angela shared, "There was a couple of families like that, that I thought, oh, that six hours of day—a day that they were at school, they were safe and loved and cared for."

The Challenges of Virtual Learning

The next section focuses on the second theme, “The Challenges of Virtual Learning.” This section covers the challenges that the students and their families experienced during the shift to an online learning environment. Like the first major theme, this theme has subthemes, “Kindergarten Learning” and “Too Much Screen Time,” which will be discussed separately.

Kindergarten Learning

As discussed in Chapter Two, Kindergarten learning is markedly different from learning in the older grades. Kindergarten students thrive in an environment where they are taught a play-based, inquiry-based curriculum with plenty of opportunities to socialize with their classmates, use hands-on approaches, work together to problem-solve, and figure out the intricacies of social relationships (Casey et al., 2008; OME, 2016). During the pandemic, many of the features of this learning approach had to change, but this proved difficult, according to the participants. Kelsey expressed, “when they shut down and we had to go online, it was hard to be very play based,” and Kira shared, “knowing that So-and-so, Johnny, really needs to work on printing his name, but trying to coach somebody through that online is not the same as being there beside them.” Kira also stated that for her, one of the challenges of teaching online was, “Just the lack of actual—our normal teaching.”

When a return to the classroom was possible, children were seated individually at a desk, rather than in groups, which prompted Kira to say, “It was just so un-Kindergarten,” and “That age, they’re not meant to sit in desks. They should be sitting crisscross on the carpet.” Additionally, the participants felt that the Kindergarten curriculum did not translate to an online environment very well. “When you shift to an

online environment, that's pretty well impossible to do," shared Camilla, who felt that teaching online was "not really the right way to teach Kindergarten."

Too Much Screen Time

Camilla shared that she felt it was "not good for kids to sit in front of screen all day.[...]Their bodies are not made to sit still." Maci shared, "Kids weren't used to sitting in front of the computer for a long time, being engaged." Kira had students who were enthusiastic learners in class but were not comfortable at all online. One of Kira's students, when prompted by the caregiver to join the morning Zoom meeting, stated, "That's not school." Kira also shared that caregivers expressed a concern that their children were getting far too much screentime. Some of Angela's students did not want to sit at the computer all day, and Camilla shared that she felt the amount of screentime was not developmentally appropriate for Kindergarten students. She said, "It is not what they need." Maci supported Camilla's statement with the following: "Kids need to learn, but there is so much learning not at the computer." Kelsey expressed that she had students whose caregivers could not persuade them to stay online for school. The students were simply not interested in being online.

Caregivers' Attitudes

The third theme that emerged in the data analysis was that of "Caregivers' Attitudes." The attitudes of the students' primary caregivers varied from educator to educator, and from shutdown to shutdown. For instance, Camilla noted the following variation:

[...] we had parents that were really great, that supported their child's learning, so they would provide them with materials, and they would let—they would follow our instructions that we sent. And then there were parents that would just kind of sit there and answer for their child.

Expectations

Kelsey shared that she felt that Kindergarten students need more support from parents than older students, but “some had like three kids online. And so [...]it was tough for those families. The other—tough for families with more kids online.” Angela felt that some parents considered a Kindergarten educator to be a babysitter, and Camilla shared that she felt some primary caregivers expected teachers to just keep their children busy: “some parents, what they just wanted was for us to keep their attention long enough on the computer so that they could go about their day.” There were also caregivers who expressed expectations as it pertained to academic achievement. Kira reported having a parent, for instance, share his concern with her about the English proficiency of his child as a result of pivoting to an online learning environment.

Supportive Attitudes

Kira found that parents were present mostly in the early stages of the pandemic, but that presence waned as time went by. Maci shared that some caregivers provided their children with workbooks in an effort to support their children's learning, which, although intended to be supportive, did, in fact, hinder the teaching that the participants were attempting to do.

Maci expressed a lack of caregiver support specifically when the student and their siblings were involved in physical altercations on camera. Several of the participants

reported parents telling them they had not realized how challenging the job of educator was until they had to support their child through the online education.

Angela shared that several of her students had families that were in crisis due to mental health issues. According to Angela, the school she works at is a “needy” school. She reported having several students involved in FACS cases. Conceivably, this would impact the caregivers’ ability to support their child, as well as the child’s educator.

Kelsey stated that she felt that for some parents, “Kindergarten wasn’t a big deal” – which, she believes, was part of the problem with pivoting to online learning for these parents’ children. The overall sense with regard to parents’ attitudes seems to be that the degree to which they are supportive varies not only from participant to participant, but also from time to time.

Classroom Teaching and Learning

Fourth, a theme that emerged from the data analysis was “Classroom Teaching and Learning.” The educators in this study shared a lot of information on the typical manner in which they teach their curriculum under non-pandemic circumstances. In all of their classrooms, there is an emphasis on teaching self-regulation, problem solving, and cooperation with other students. There is ample opportunity for students to make their own choices regarding the activity they wish to do, and several educators mentioned that their students are allowed to pick their own snack times, help themselves to their food, and decide who they wish to sit with. Being able to make these choices fosters the development of students’ socioemotional skills, as was discussed in Chapter Two of this paper.

All of the educators indicated that their classrooms offered a mixture of direct instruction and inquiry-based learning. The level of direct instruction versus inquiry-based, self-directed learning varied from educator to educator. Nevertheless, the emphasis on a holistic development of the student was present in all of the classrooms, according to the participants.

Camilla shared that she and her teaching partner consider the environment as “the third teacher” (Edwards et al., 2011), which was hindered considerably by the pandemic. For instance, setting up *learning provocations* – materials or objects that evoke curiosity and inspire play or investigation – in the classroom for the students to examine and interact with was no longer an option.

Although the amount of direct instruction versus inquiry-based, self-directed learning varied among the participants, the educators all underlined the importance of a hands-on, play-based learning approach in the classroom.

Teaching in the Classroom During COVID

The participants stated that the return to the classroom posed its own set of challenges, as well. They found that the teaching environment during the COVID-19 pandemic was entirely different compared to that before the pandemic. Kira described the new reality as, “It was just so un-Kindergarten.” She shared that students were assigned desks, and the carpets were taken out due to the fact that they were difficult to sanitize. Carpet time, this classroom’s term for circle time, took place with the children sitting at their desks, which prompted one student to say, “I don’t get why this is called carpet time” (Kira).

The educators shared that they had to take many precautions to create a safe learning environment in the classroom. This included sanitizing the materials daily, rotating materials on a weekly basis, and ensuring that each small group had its own materials to work and play with. According to the participants, their students were generally divided into small groups, and they could only play with the children in their group. Bins of materials were assigned to each group. Wandering from station to station in the classroom, as is custom in most Kindergarten classes, was no longer allowed.

Kelsey reported feeling like a gatekeeper who had to assess children's health and decide whether or not a child was allowed into the classroom. While a quick health assessment when a child enters the classroom is common, she noted that this took on a different dimension during the pandemic. When a child who exhibited signs of a cold arrived, they had to be screened for COVID-19, and if they failed the screening (i.e., if they answered "yes" to one of the questions on the screening form), Kelsey had to contact the caregivers to come and pick up their child.

The fact that children were no longer allowed to freely choose their activities, when to have a snack, and who to sit with, prompted this statement from Camilla: "COVID has taken away part of their self-regulation." And after a thoughtful silence, she added, "I'm policing a lot more."

Pivoting From In-Class to Virtual Teaching

The participants indicated that having to pivot from teaching in the classroom to teaching online was challenging, especially since it was generally on short notice. One of the characteristics of the pandemic was that an outbreak in a classroom or a school could happen at any time, which meant the classroom or the school needed to shut down to

prevent further spread of the virus. For the participants, the lack of notice was a cause for frustration.

The Classroom and COVID-19

Teaching in-person in the classroom during the pandemic was a subject all of the participants shared about in-depth, even though there were no interview questions explicitly related to this subject. The educators indicated that teaching during the pandemic brought many challenges of a unique nature. Kelsey reported that upon the first return to the classroom in September of 2020, her Principal urged her and her teaching partner to make sure to keep the children separated in the classroom. She shared that her classroom had previously been very open, and students were encouraged to seek out their own materials, as well as who they wanted to sit with at snack- and lunchtime. However, during the first return to school during pandemic, the daily activities had to be scheduled much more rigorously. Even so, at the time of the interview, which took place in 2022, Kelsey reported that virtually everything had returned to “normal” with the exception of the fact that educators are still masked in the classroom.

Camilla stated that her classroom was not big enough to practice social distancing with the students, and Maci reported that the return to the classroom was challenging for some students as well, which resulted in unwanted behaviours like tantrums. Overall, the Kindergarten classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic did not resemble the environment that the educators were used to and viewed as the optimal environment to teach young learners.

Critical Incidents

During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on high points and low points of their overall experience teaching during the pandemic. This gave way to the fifth theme in the data analysis: “Critical Incidents.” A *critical incident*, as discussed in Chapter Two, is a significant turning point that causes one to consider events or circumstances in a new light (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). This section covers the significant events the participants reported in their interviews.

The High Points

The participants interpreted their experience with high points in various ways. For Camilla, the only high point she could think of was the fact that she and her teaching partner made it through the experience. Kelsey admitted she could not think of any actual high points. For Angela, the high point was that the families were very involved during the first lockdown. They supported their child’s learning and communicated with the educators. Kira shared that her high point was hearing back from primary caregivers, specifically “how much they loved being able to actually see us and interact with us.” For Maci, the high point came at the end of the year when she and her teaching partner dropped off end-of-the-year gifts at their students’ houses: “the parents came out. The kids came out. They were just happy to see us, happy to—parents were thankful for, especially that first year, for all the work.”

The Low Points

When asked about a low point about teaching during the pandemic, the responses of the five educators were varied. For Kira, Camilla, and Angela, the inequity among the students were hardest to deal with. Having students whose homelife was not conducive to

online learning was a significant challenge, as is evidenced by the following quotes from the transcripts. Firstly, Kira stated,

those kids that did not show up for whatever reason, and you really kind of, you know, were losing in the online. [...] just by trying to work with the parents, and they just—their comfort level wasn't there, and knowing that there really wasn't much that we could do. [...] we try to connect with them, and in the end, they were just kind of left hanging out there and weren't really part of our class and part of our group for that time we were online.

Camilla added that,

the low point was just the inequities, I think, that we had to witness between the different families [...] seeing some of the kids really struggle and then other ones shine because of the supportive environment that they have at home was just really sad.

Lastly, Angela echoed the sentiments of the other participants in saying:

The low point for sure is that I had kids that never made it online. And they came from chaotic home lives, and I really tried to reach out to these families, and calling, and emailing, and they're not picking up. And they were going through a mental health crisis themselves. And not knowing how that kid was doing.

However, two of the educators had a different take on the low point. They indicated that a lack of support from the primary caregivers resulted in less focus and attention from the students. This made teaching online a frustrating experience which represented their low points.

Kelsey expressed her low point as the final time they transitioned back to online in the spring of 2021:

the low point was the last time that we went off. Because we had kids—barely anybody showing up. The first day, they showed up. Second day, more dropped off. More dropped off. [...] And there was very little—there wasn't a lot of stuff being submitted that we could even take any kind of comments for reports or anything like that. It just—the interest and the commitment from parents just wasn't there.

Similarly, Maci also indicated that the lack of primary caregiver support to be her low point:

I think the low point was for me, is the ones who did sign on or didn't bother signing on, the lack of focus. The lack of attention. The lack of parent support in them, prompting them to try and do something.

The Turning Points

When asked about a turning point in their experience with teaching during the pandemic, Camilla responded by saying:

the resilience of the kids really impressed us, like the fact that when they first told us, oh you have to—I was like, how are we gonna get four-year-olds to log onto Zoom and to do all this stuff? And the thing is they pick it up really quick, and they do—they know how to mute and unmute themselves. They know how to change their backgrounds [...] I was really impressed with the—what our kids were able to do.

For Angela, the turning point was the shift she noticed in families' attitude towards teachers. She describes teaching as an often "thankless job," and states that primary caregivers tend to underestimate Kindergarten teaching in particular. According to Angela, many view it as "just babysitting." However, during the first shutdown, this attitude changed significantly, when the primary caregivers had to take over much of the role of the educators. Angela received comments such as, "Wow, I didn't realize how hard it was what you guys do all day," and "Oh, I could never do what you do!" Angela said, "the biggest shift in the energy with the families, that, that was most noticeable to me." For the other educators, there were no specific turning points they could identify. One of them, Maci, shared that there were turning points throughout the entire school year every time the changing circumstances necessitated a new approach to any type of issue, whether it was related to the curriculum or classroom management.

Other Notable Findings

A significant finding of this study pertains to the subject of the educator's identity and how, if at all, teaching during the pandemic had affected the way the participants saw themselves as educators. The data did not offer much in the way of a reply to this query, and "identity" did not develop into a theme. Since the subject of professional identity was pertinent to answering one of the research questions, I will briefly discuss what the educators shared about identity in this section.

Additionally, I was struck by the many negative terms the participants used to describe their experience with teaching Kindergarten online (as well as in the classroom) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although perhaps not a theme in the true sense of the word, I felt it was worth noting.

Educator's Identity

One of the research questions this study sought to answer was whether teaching online during the pandemic has changed the way the participants see themselves as educators. The question was posed to all five educators, and only one of them answered with a definite “yes.” When asked if teaching during the pandemic had made her look at herself as a teacher differently, Kelsey replied, “A hundred percent it did, yeah. It made me feel less qualified.” This was a sentiment she later reinforced with the following statement: “it really made me feel like I was not qualified. And I remember thinking, I cannot wait until June. I can't wait 'til this is over.”

Camilla commented that she did not feel like what they were doing was really teaching, but rather, “[...] entertaining the kids for the day on screen.” As well, Camilla stated that caregivers wanted the educators to keep their kids busy so they could go about their day, which supports Angela's notion that caregivers viewed the educators as “babysitters” rather than teachers.

Negative Utterances

One of the things that jumped out while poring over the coded interviews was the large number of negative utterances that the participants weaved through their responses. Many times, they would end an answer with, “It's not fun” (Kelsey), “It's really hard” (Camilla), “It was really tough” (Kira), “It didn't feel right” and even, “I can't take it” (Maci). Interestingly, the only participant that did not make any negative statements was Angela, who was also the only participant to state that she had a lot of support, both from the school administration and from her colleagues. She said, “I know I had it easier than

others.” This statement is in stark contrast with Kira, who said, “I hated every second online.”

Chapter Summary

The findings outlined in this chapter describe the experiences of the participants. Each educator interviewed shared their views of teaching online during COVID-19, which varied in detail but were overall quite similar in the positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Support during the process of pivoting to online teaching and then back to the classroom was an important aspect that re-occurred in the findings. The educators indicated that teaching Kindergarten online is far from ideal, and the lived experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was largely a negative one. The findings presented a few high points, many small turning points, and distinct low points. Overall, the findings indicated that the experiences discussed by the participants influenced their view of themselves as educators, where one of the participants stated that she saw her role of teacher as entirely different than when teaching in the physical classroom. In Chapter Five, these findings will be discussed and contextualized within current literature and theory.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Initially, this study sought to explore the impact of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic on the professional identity of Kindergarten educators by asking educators, among other things, to identify three critical incidents in their experience during the pandemic: a high point, a low point, and a turning point. The idea behind the study was a personal one; the study was motivated by my own curiosity as a researcher, an ECE, and as a Montessori teacher, with the overarching question as to whether or not it is possible to teach young children online rather than in a classroom environment. I wondered how this experience of teaching online during the pandemic was impacting teacher's own views of themselves as educators. This study sought to explore this phenomenon by inviting educators to share their experiences.

Conclusively, the research examined the experiences of educators who had to teach Kindergarten in an online environment – which, as gleaned from the literature as well as concluded from my own education, is not an environment conducive to teaching a hands-on, play-based, inquiry-driven curriculum as outlined in *The Kindergarten Program* (2016).

Interpretation of the Findings

Based on the findings presented in Chapter Four, the following discussion examines these findings in light of the research questions this study sought to answer:

1. How do Kindergarten educators describe their teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has teaching during a global pandemic impacted Kindergarten educators' sense of professional identity?

3. What critical incidents do Kindergarten educators identify, and how do these impact their overall experience?

How Do Kindergarten Educators Describe their Teaching Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Overall, the educator participants shared the ups and downs of their experience teaching during the pandemic. Similar to findings of studies conducted by Kim and Asbury (2020), Asbury and Kim (2020), and Kim et al. (2021), for the most part, participants in this study described their overall experience as unfavourable. Previous research indicates that educators who taught during the pandemic expressed a lack of support from primary caregivers and a sense of being overwhelmed by the abrupt changes in their teaching practice, which is no different for the educator participants in the current study. Moreover, the fact that they were teaching Kindergarten further compounded the challenges specific to this age group, namely the socioemotional aspect of Kindergarten learning as well as the virtual implementation of an otherwise hands-on, play-based Kindergarten curriculum. As discussed in Chapter Two, tactile opportunities for rich exploration of the environment are crucial to engaging young learners (Pascal, 2010). These tactile opportunities are nearly impossible to provide in an online learning environment.

The recounted experiences in this study show that teaching Kindergarten online is not ideal, and should not be considered best practice, going forward. It is a temporary solution to a difficult situation, but it is – at least, according to the educators who participated in this study – not the preferred way to teach Kindergarten. The participants were united in their sense that for young children, the personal connection and the

physical presence of the teacher is crucial for creating an optimal learning environment. This is in line with the guidelines set out by the OME (2016), discussed in Chapter Two, which state that being part of a classroom environment and having hands-on, experiential learning opportunities are vital for developing the relationships that support a child's socioemotional development. This study found that the educators had difficulty promoting socioemotional learning opportunities in an online context, and identified further challenges connecting with each student daily, as evidenced by statements like, "academically, they did okay. But like socially, that was, that was a big gap," and "you don't have time to talk to the kids like when you're in that conference format."

In a similar vein, the participants expressed that they felt COVID-19 had taken away their students' self-regulation. For instance, in Angela's classroom, students were no longer allowed to determine when to have lunch and who to sit with. The research presented in Chapter Two underscores the importance of the development of self-regulation and executive functioning in the early years (see, for example, Ballantyne et al., 2007; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.; Casey, 2008; Pascal, 2010). The unique needs of Kindergarten students center on interaction with peers and adults in a hands-on environment. An online environment presents significant challenges to the meeting of those aforementioned needs, as was evidenced by the statements of the participants in this study, and a classroom with COVID-19 restrictions proved to be very limiting in that same regard.

Educators indicated experiencing high levels of stress due to the long hours they were putting into preparing the online learning environment for their students, as well as the inability to connect with all of their students on an individual basis. This notion is

supported by findings of MacIntyre et al. (2020), which showed that teacher stress has been identified as an increasing challenge throughout the pandemic. Educators felt pulled in multiple directions: between their own learning curve (which significantly increased their workload), supporting their young learners as well as the students' families, and balancing their personal lives with their *own* children engaged in learning from home. The lack of mental health support that the participants indicated is in line with the experiences of Kim and Asbury (2020), whose participants also reported similar challenges.

How Has Teaching During a Global Pandemic Impacted Kindergarten Educators' Sense of Professional Identity?

The overall result from this study is that four of the five educators stated that while they feel that an online learning environment is far from ideal for Kindergarten-aged students, teaching Kindergarten online has not affected how they view themselves as educators. However, one of the participants, Kelsey, shared a markedly different viewpoint: she stated that having to shift to teaching online actually made her feel unqualified for the job of Kindergarten educator.

According to Bullough, Jr. (2008), "the ability of teachers to maintain their commitment to teaching is influenced by their professional life phases and their identities, and that these were mediated by the contexts or 'scenarios' in which they lived and worked" (p. 12). This is evidenced by this particular participant in the sense that she decided to retire a year earlier than she had originally planned as a direct result of the way the COVID-19 pandemic changed the face of teaching Kindergarten. The way Kelsey responded to the abrupt and long-lasting change in circumstances brought on by

the pandemic corresponds with the finding of Godinic et al. (2020), as discussed in Chapter Two of this paper. The newly emerged reality of teaching during a pandemic no longer resembles the reality she knew, and this led to a different view of herself as an individual in that new reality.

When asked about the impact that teaching online had on their view of themselves as an educator, two of the five participants relayed that they had started to see themselves differently. This is in line with the findings of Akkerman and Meijer (2011), discussed in Chapter Two, who posed that teacher identity is an ongoing process of construction rather than a static entity. It stands to reason that dramatically changed circumstances (such as a shift to teaching online) would influence this process of construction. If we consider the fluent nature of identity and the fact that identity is a fluid construct that can change depending on the social context one finds oneself in (see, for instance, Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Gee, 2000; Lichtwarck-Aschoff et al., 2008; Zembylas, 2003), it makes sense that the educators saw themselves differently as an online facilitator than as an in-person educator.

Chapter Two asked the following question: “if one’s identity as an educator is negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, does this affect one’s self-efficacy beliefs?” As discussed in that chapter of this paper, an educator’s sense of professional identity is impacted by social and environmental factors, both positive and negative (as discussed by Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000; Lichtwarck-Aschhoff et al., 2008). This negative impact would seem to apply to one of the participants, Kelsey, who saw herself as less qualified for her job due to the pandemic-mandated teaching restrictions, both when online *and* back in the classroom. The efficacy

of Kindergarten online as a whole was questioned by all of the participants, which stands to reason if one considers that Kindergarten students benefit from play-based, inquiry-based education (OME, 2016), and that such a learning environment is hard to replicate online, as mentioned by the participants in this study. However, aside from Kelsey, none of the other participants expressed feeling less capable or doubting their efficacy as a teacher. Being an ECE myself, I was expecting a different result, especially in light of the severe limitations to best practice for early childhood professionals that the pandemic posed. The fact that the participants did not feel that their sense of professional identity was negatively impacted by their experiences during the pandemic reflects positively on their sense of self and their perception of their efficacy as a Kindergarten educator. It is unclear which factors help protect this almost unwavering sense of identity even in critical incidents.

What Critical Incidents do They Identify, and How do These Impact Their Overall Experience?

To explore the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on teaching Kindergarten, the participants were asked about a high point, a low point, and a turning point in their experience with teaching during the pandemic. This approach drew on the study conducted by Kim and Asbury (2020), as well as Mohammed (2016), who posed that critically reflecting on a turning point can foster a broader perspective on the circumstances, which may in turn give rise to a sense of understanding and acceptance. These particular experiences are considered *critical incidents* (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011) from which the participants can gain a better understanding of their lived experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in Kim and

Asbury's (2020) study shared that most low point scenes related to uncertainty, while most high point scenes reflected the importance of relationships, and most turning point scenes were about finding a way. The educators in the current study used similar language when they shared their experiences, both the negative ones (for instance, "[...] when we went online, it was like, okay, I guess we'll just make it up as we go," and "we didn't know what was happening, those <sic> first April to June") and the positive ones, (for instance, "We made it work," "...hearing back from the parents, you know, how much they loved being able to actually see us and interact with us," "The parents came out. The kids came out. They were just happy to see us"). This suggests that the lived experiences of the educators in England were comparable to those of the participants in the current study.

The participants had no trouble identifying various low points, which were largely related to students not being able to participate in the online learning environment and the lack of support they faced, specifically from caregivers. In line with the findings of Kim and Asbury (2020), there were also mentions of low points relating to uncertainty. The educators in the current study felt overwhelmed, for instance, by the fact that there was no clear direction and they were, as one of the participants put it, "thrown to the wolves." Additionally, the participants indicated that there was a lack of developmentally appropriate teaching materials provided by the school boards. Often, the educators shared the resources they found on their own with colleagues, which furthered a sense of community – a positive effect.

When asked about high points, the participants were far more hesitant. Conceivably, during a time as tumultuous as a global pandemic, which necessitates an

abrupt and deeply impactful change in practice, it is hard to identify moments that stand out in a positive way. Additionally, the participants struggled to translate the play-based, hands-on Kindergarten program into a meaningful online curriculum. Even upon the return to the classroom, some of the most valuable components of the curriculum, such as circle time (or carpet time), were no longer feasible due to restrictions brought on by the pandemic. As one of the participants stated, it was just “so un-Kindergarten.” The hands-on component and the need for classroom communities was highlighted in Chapter Two (see, for instance, Ballantyne et al., 2007, and OME, 2016). For the participants, it was difficult to see the positives under the challenging circumstances.

The high points the educators shared in this study did not pertain to teaching but rather, to the interpersonal relationships with students and their families. This is in-line with the findings of Kim and Asbury (2020), whose participants also identified high points that related to the relationships with students and their families.

In the current study, the participants had trouble identifying a specific turning point in their online teaching experience. They relayed that they experienced many small turning points: moments in their teaching practice where they had to shift to accommodate a change in circumstances, or a different approach to teaching because what they were doing was not working for either the students or the educators. This is in stark contrast with the educators that were interviewed in Kim and Asbury's (2020) study, who expressed that they could identify singular instances in which they realized that teaching during the pandemic necessitated a different approach, or instances in which they realized that their main focus needed to shift from teaching to facilitating a

supportive environment – one where the curriculum had to take a backseat for the time being (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Implications

The current study looks at a very small sample size with a very specific focus, and cannot be generalized to the larger context of educators as a whole or for one specific school board. However, within this deep focus on the experiences of the five educator participants, there are some tentative implications that can be gleaned from the themes discussed in Chapter Four. Implications can be examined through the following four categories: implications for practice, implications for research, implications for policy, and implications for teacher training

Implications for Practice

It was clear from the participants' responses that they felt that teaching Kindergarten online was vastly different than in-person in the classroom. The findings suggest that despite the best efforts of the educators and the responsive approach taken by educational administrations and school boards across the world, for these five educators in Ontario, their ability to implement an engaging Kindergarten program was significantly impacted. *The Kindergarten Program* (2016) does not offer alternate curriculum components for online learning in case of a large-scale societal disruption. Educators were left searching for alternatives to and supports for implementing this curriculum online. In order to prepare for future disruptions such as the pandemic, best practices from educators need to be explored to better understand successful strategies and techniques. Any research exploring the experiences of educators during the pandemic can support future situations where online teaching becomes essential. However, this

research will need to take into account the issues that can arise with formalizing an online Kindergarten curriculum, specifically the risk that the online delivery will be presented as being as beneficial for young learners as an in-person delivery. This does not support the best practice of a hands-on, play-based, inquiry-driven Kindergarten approach. The findings of new research and the resulting new best practices specific to online learning could be included as an addendum to the current Kindergarten curriculum document.

Implications for Research

Findings discussed in this paper shed light on the experiences of Kindergarten educators teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings contribute to the growing body of research related to teaching during the pandemic (for instance, Frenette et al., 2020; Horowitz & Igielnik, 2020; Kim et al., 2021). Understanding the experiences of these five educators provides insight for educational researchers to better understand early learning challenges and successes involved with online learning.

More research is needed in this still rather new area of educational research. The COVID-19 pandemic, which is ongoing at the time of writing this paper, has given rise to many new areas of study. Up until this point, however, the particular impact on Kindergarten educators and students is under-researched. A larger and more longitudinal study could look at the effect of the pandemic on the pedagogical practices of Kindergarten educators. More research, too, is needed on the effect of teaching online on how Kindergarten educators see their profession and how they adjust to a large-scale societal disruption (Camillus et al., 2020).

As well, future research could focus on the change in perception of the teaching profession when teaching online, the effect of online learning on Kindergarten students,

and whether or not the recent period of online learning has resulted in long-term implications for the current cohort of Kindergarten students in terms of social and emotional development. It is the hope of the researcher that future studies will continue to examine the experiences of Kindergarten educators and their students, and design supports that are readily available should the pandemic necessitate pivoting to online teaching in the future.

Implications for Policy

The educators in this study, for the most part, stated that they felt there was a lack of support in place, specifically at the beginning of the pandemic. These findings support the notion of ensuring that current policy will best support educators moving forward. Current policy may require amendments to ensure that educators are given the support they need to continue their practice safely in case of a sudden shift in circumstances. This includes, but is not limited to, technical support resources such as webinars, instructional videos, or downloadable PDF documents; mental health and wellbeing support and resources, such as mindfulness workshops or apps; and financial support in case educators need to purchase software or even hardware to be able to teach online. With regard to coping with stress and anxiety, educators indicated that they highly valued the contact and exchange with fellow educators. A network of educator support would be a valuable tool to assist educators in coping with the mental health implications of teaching during a large societal breakdown like a pandemic. School boards could initiate the creation of a community of practice for the educators in their employ. Alternatively, social media offers many opportunities for educators to form their own professional learning and support networks online.

Implications for Teacher Training

Teaching during a pandemic is an entirely new phenomenon for most – if not, all – currently employed educators. The findings from this study suggest that educators are ill-prepared to deal with drastic shifts to the way they deliver the Kindergarten curriculum – one that is so deeply rooted in a specific, and physical space. The educators identified that additional support from their administration and workshops provided by the school board, when available, was helpful. Based on these findings and the possibility of a large-scale societal disruption, although uncommon (Camillus et al., 2020), it cannot be assumed that an event like a pandemic or another cause for school shutdowns will not occur in the future.

For this reason, it would be beneficial for school boards to be proactive in implementing training for educators ahead of a similar disruption. It would also be important to consider the role of preparing teachers before they go out into the field during their teacher education programs. Perhaps there is room for teacher training to include a segment on how to adjust to suddenly changing circumstance which necessitate a shift to online teaching.

Conclusions

This small study offers insight into the experiences of five Kindergarten educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interviews, these educators shared their experiences about teaching during the pandemic, shifting suddenly to online teaching in the middle of the school year, returning again to the classroom under strict restrictions, and then shifting back online for the remainder of the second year (March 2020 through to June 2021). Without exception, the participants shared that they felt online

Kindergarten is not a best practice for educators nor students. Facilitating a proper Kindergarten learning environment at home, according to the educators, is challenging. Teaching a play-based, inquiry-based curriculum through a computer screen is, as some of the participants shared, impossible namely due to the absence of in-person, hands-on instruction (for instance, to correct pen grip), and the inability to provide the students with the materials needed to conduct inquiry-based learning at home. The latter was put into words succinctly by one of the participants, who commented, “You can’t build virtual cardboard castles.” However, despite the challenges encountered by the educators, they found ways to make it work for them, including connecting with other educators online to share resources and organizing virtual happy hours with colleagues. Their determination to offer their students the best education possible under challenging circumstances was evident in their interview responses. They collectively identified various strategies and best practices for teaching their Kindergarten students online, including the use of bitmojis and sound files, strategies for mental health and wellness, and interactive games.

The significant change in the role of Kindergarten educators was the impetus for the research question that asked if Kindergarten educators viewed themselves less positively as educators after the pandemic. However, four out of the five educators felt as positively about themselves as educators as they had before the pandemic started. The fifth educator, on the other hand, shared how incompetent and inadequate teaching during the pandemic made her feel. It is conceivable that there are many more educators in Ontario who share this sense of inadequacy with regard to professional identity as the participant in the current study.

What became clear during the data analysis is the importance of support, not only from the school boards and the administrators, but also from colleagues. Several of the participants indicated that pivoting to online learning at a moment's notice was among the biggest challenges they had encountered in their careers. Although they identified significant challenges in doing their job effectively, comfort was found in sharing the experience with others. The support they identified receiving from increased collaboration with colleagues exemplifies the importance of school teams that focus on collaboration and supporting one another's success. Those participants who did not feel supported identified a more negative experience overall.

In conclusion, this study offers several suggestions for the facilitation of appropriate supports for educators, best practices for teaching Kindergarten online, as well as recommendations for further research to investigate how both Kindergarten educators and students were – and will undoubtedly continue to be – impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is my hope that this study will provide an impetus for further research into the aforementioned subjects.

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