

Pandemic Impacts on TDSB Kindergarten Children and Pedagogic Approaches to Support Them



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Executive Summary

The early years is a formative time in children's learning and development which focuses on learning through relationships, play, exploration, and inquiry. Young children have lived their earliest experiences through a pandemic and lockdowns which have impacted these fundamental principles of early learning to some extent. This research sought to understand the impacts of the pandemic on Kindergarten children and shifts in educators' pedagogy to support them across the TDSB.

Maintaining an asset-based view of the child and their incredible resilience, educators shared observations of pandemic impacts from their Kindergarten classrooms across numerous areas. These include emotional, social, communication, independence, self-help, physical, literacy, mathematics, general knowledge, mental health, school attendance, punctuality, and learning environment domains. Parents also expressed steady levels of concern for their Kindergarten children throughout the pandemic.

Focused conversations and surveys with educators and parents also revealed that young children and their families had a wide range of experiences during the pandemic. They described the hardships, adjustments, special moments, disruptions, and new norms that families encountered together with their young children. They also collectively honoured the skills, knowledge, and experiences acquired during the pandemic.

COVID-19 introduced new challenges, needs, and opportunities in formal schooling. Nevertheless, schools have further supported resilient and adaptive Kindergarten children affected by the pandemic through key pedagogic approaches and techniques as follows:

- Emphasis on social and emotional learning
- Use of responsive and differentiated learning
- Balance of modeling and direct instruction
- Concentration on play-, outdoor- and inquiry-based learning
- Invitations for and honouring student voice and parent engagement
- Leverage technology, school and TDSB supports

Supporting and strengthening well-being, consistency in Kindergarten pedagogic implementation, and professional learning supports were suggested conditions to mitigate pandemic related unfinished learning among TDSB's youngest learners. Schools, in close partnership with families, play a critical stabilizing role to support resilience, well-being, and development for Kindergarten children.

Background

Early childhood is a critical period because it provides the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, health, and well-being.¹ This period is significantly influenced by young children's experiences and environments. The lived experiences of current Kindergarten children have been marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools, early childcare and community programming, activities, and playgrounds were shuttered across Ontario and based on localized contexts. This was accompanied by shifts to virtual learning, cohorting, and public health requirements like masking, physical distancing, and quarantine as part of the evolving reality over the past two and a half years to minimize transmission and protect against COVID-19.

Young children learn through relationships, play, exploration, and inquiry. The pandemic and related restrictions and protocols presented extraordinary circumstances and have impacted these fundamental principles of early learning to some extent. Specifically, closures to schools and early years programs, confinement, and physical distancing hindered children's ability to form and maintain relationships with other adults and children outside the home. Mask wearing may have affected their social, emotional, and linguistic development. Other mandatory health and safety protocols such as sterilization, provisions against particular types of learning materials (e.g., coarse and natural materials like fabric, sand, water, etc.), and forbidding sharing restricted play, exploration, and inquiry as it naturally occurs for young children.

However, young children and families have had a wide range of experiences during the pandemic. The disproportionate burdens and exacerbation of ongoing inequities by COVID-19 have been embodied by the truth that we "are in the same storm, but not in the same boat," especially for Indigenous, racialized, low-income, newcomer, and other marginalized groups and their intersections.

As part of TDSB's commitment to the success of children through strengthening early education and care, to support the Pandemic Recovery Plan, and to affirm the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Board resolved that understanding and responding to the needs of Kindergarten children is important. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to understand: a) how the pandemic has impacted Kindergarten children and b) shifts in educators' pedagogic approaches to support them.

¹ Ontario Ministry of Education. (2014). How does learning happen? Ontario's pedagogy for the early years: A resource about learning through relationships for those who work with young children and their families. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

These questions were addressed using a mixed methods approach, leveraging existing sources of information, and honouring educators' and parents'² voices.

- 1. Parent Check-in Surveys:** Since the beginning of the pandemic, parents of TDSB students were invited to complete anonymous, online check-in surveys to share their experiences and perspectives about their child(ren)'s learning and well-being. These check-in surveys took place in June 2020, Winter 2021, and Spring 2022. Data were re-analyzed with a focus on parents who indicated their child(ren) was in Junior or Senior Kindergarten at the time of survey administration.
- 2. Educator Focus Groups:** In October 2022, TDSB Research and Development facilitated two focused conversations with three Kindergarten classroom teachers and six Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECEs) with experience in the regular Kindergarten program, Early French Immersion program, or Extended Day Program across schools in the TDSB that varied by the degree of external challenges they faced. These experienced educators entered the conversation in much the same way as how they approached their profession. That is to say, they maintained a holistic and asset-based view of Kindergarten children and their families, emphasized the importance of responsive relationships and partnerships with children and parents, advocated for the importance of early years, and centered their practices in evidence-based early years pedagogy and development.

“I love Kindergarten. It's where my heart is, and that's why I've been there for so long. I find that there's a lot of joy there and a lot of creativity and it's untouched ground. So, what [children] bring is truly who they are. And so, the honesty that you get in Kindergarten, it's like no other grade I find.”

- 3. Educator Survey:** Considering the size and diverse contexts across the TDSB, an educator survey was developed to learn from additional voices about the breadth of pandemic impacts and pedagogic shifts happening in Kindergarten spaces. During November 2022, school-based and central educators and administrators with experience and understanding in Kindergarten and early childhood development were invited to complete a brief, anonymous online survey. To date, 555 educators completed the survey. Over half of the respondents were Kindergarten classroom teachers (N = 299, 54%), followed by other educators (N = 139, 25%; e.g., school administrators, Kindergarten prep teachers, central coaches supporting Kindergarten classrooms) and DECEs (N = 114, 21%). Three quarters of respondents (N = 407, 74%) indicated that they have worked with the TDSB (including predecessor boards)

² The term parent is used throughout the report, but is inclusive of parents, caregivers, guardians, families, elders, aunties, etc.

for over 11 years. Overall, there was good representation across each Learning Centre (LC) in the TDSB, with slightly higher representation from LC4 (LC1: N = 117, 22%; LC2: N = 100, 18%; LC3: N = 137, 25%; and LC4: N = 173, 32%; 18 staff (3%) did not know which LC they worked in).

Findings shared throughout this report represent a consolidation of descriptive analyses conducted with quantitative parent and educator survey data as well as a narrative inquiry approach³ taken with the qualitative focused conversation and open-ended survey data.

³ Leggo, C. (2008). Narrative Inquiry: Attending to the Art of Discourse. *Language and Literacy*, 10(1), 1-21.

Life Experiences During the Pandemic

Educators described what they knew about the life experiences of current Kindergarten children during the pandemic, when they would have been 2-3 years old. They described the hardships, adjustments, special moments, disruptions, and new norms that families encountered together with their young children.

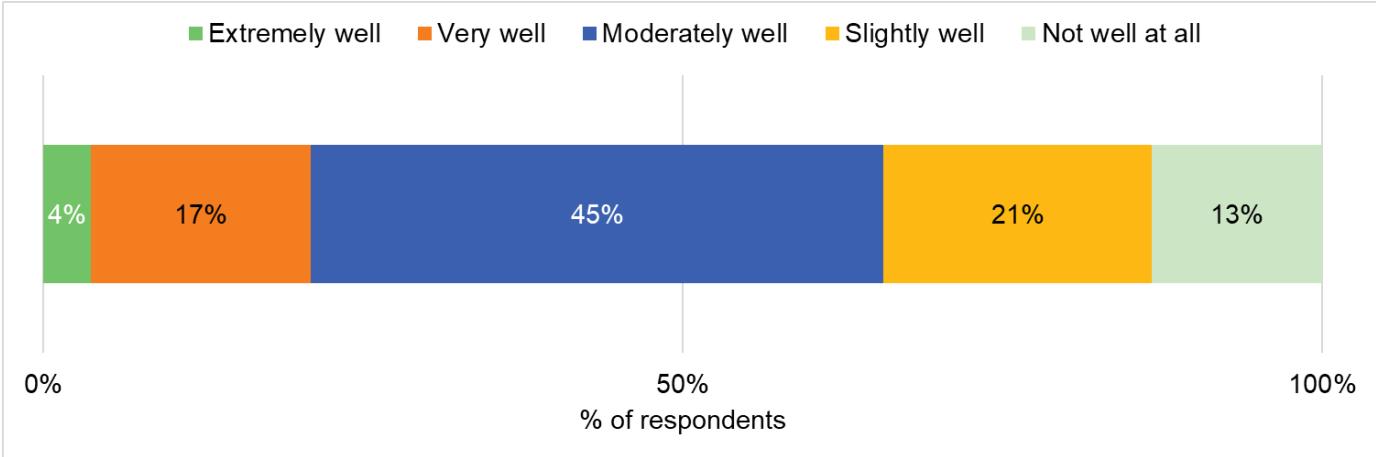
Familial Hardships and its Ripple Effects

Life was significantly disrupted by COVID-19 and this was felt in different ways. There was a lot of fear, confusion, isolation, and uncertainty during this time, with some of these emotional responses persisting today. Educators remarked that families experienced heightened degrees of loss – loss of health, loved ones, employment, income, opportunities – and this may have strained family dynamics and the home environment. This was also experienced by their young children.

“And the possible strain of that impact in the family home...Some families had to readjust their whole life, loss of job, loss of income. And that in itself had a big impact on how they might have been in the home with all the stress levels and things like that for two- and three-year-olds at that time.”

These educator perspectives were corroborated by parents of Kindergarten children themselves in the winter of 2021, when one third of them revealed that they were only coping slightly well or not well at all (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Degree of Managing or Coping among Parents of Kindergarten Children (Winter 2021, N = 12,467)



Parental Adjustments to Pandemic Realities

The uncertainty and inconsistency throughout the pandemic were hard to manage for some families and young children. Educators described that some parents adjusted by attending to their children's wishes and by providing extensive support to their children. This encouraged some children to depend on their parents with self-help skills such as going to the washroom, getting dressed, and eating.

“A few of them, they got maybe extensive support from the parents in terms of their self-help skills, like potty-training or going to the washroom or dressing them up. So, they were given a lot of support as opposed to teaching them.”

Establishing routines may have been difficult for some families where adults worked more than one job or where there weren't regularly scheduled commitments to leave home. Due to lockdowns and restrictions, early years programs and activities were not available to provide some element of structure or routine to a child's day or week. And with limited options for childcare, some parents relied on other family members or brought their child to work with them to ensure their supervision and safety.



Limited Opportunities to Socialize

Owing to the constant disruptions and closures, Kindergarten children were primarily socialized at home by their family members. There were very limited opportunities outside of the home for young children to interact with new or different people because formal and informal learning experiences, such as EarlyON Centres, sports, and lessons, were not available.

“My interpretation has been that there's just been a limited experience outside of the home, even more so than before. Before you may have gone and stood in a lineup somewhere, but if your family wasn't going anywhere, then maybe you haven't stood in a lineup before. Maybe you haven't played with other children before outside of your family. Or if you're an only child, maybe you've never played with other children if your family wasn't going anywhere.”

“Kindergarten students have spent half (or more than half) of their lives living in a pandemic world. They have lived with reduced in-person experiences (e.g., playing in a park/playground, walking in a mall/grocery store, visiting a library). These experiences give children vocabulary and opportunities to communicate about their experiences. These children have also had no/limited social interactions, involving how to share or negotiate sharing spaces.”

Delayed Access to Identification and Intervention

Educators were concerned with how the pandemic worsened the situation for children with latent special needs, especially speech and language, behaviour, hearing, and sight concerns as well as autism spectrum disorder. Lockdowns and interruptions to socialization and developmental services affected parents' abilities to potentially gauge their child's development. The pandemic also limited access to resources and professionals to formally identify delays and do so early (e.g., routine checkups) as well as access to interventions. For children who received diagnoses and/or support during the pandemic, it was often completed virtually, with outcomes considered by educators to be inaccurate or insufficient.

“So, we are also experiencing families who are not familiar being around other children at all other than their own, and not realizing that their child, that their oral language isn't maybe as developed as it could be at that time. They have no idea. And so, it's the first time that they're hearing that is from us, and their child could be five already because they've maybe been at home the whole pandemic. [...] There hasn't been any access to early intervention for a lot of families. Even if they were connected with doctors or community agencies, all of that was gone for a period of time. And a lot of those programs, even EarlyON, was not available for a period of time. So, lots of those supports for families and our early learners were just not there.”

Adapting to New Norms

During the pandemic, wearing facemasks, physical distancing, and sanitization were a few public and personal health strategies adopted to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

Grounded in early childhood development, educators appreciated how these normalized behaviours particularly affected toddlers at the time since facial expressions and touch are important sources of learning and expression during this period. Educators noticed a greater proportion of Kindergarten children refrain from approaching others or feeling confused by touch altogether, stemming from physical distancing guidelines.

“For those children that were two and three, and knowing about early development. And they would see that that's a normal thing to have someone with half of a face based on a mask.”



Recommendations at the onset of the pandemic also meant that toys were regularly sanitized and allocated to each child, limiting opportunities for children to practice sharing, turn taking, and cooperative play. Sanitization also limited the types of learning materials that were available in schools and childcare centers when

they did reopen. For example, toys made of plastic were commonly used, as opposed to coarse or natural materials and sand/water tables. Books were separated for a minimum period before another child could use them.

“During the pandemic, either they had their own toys at home that they did not have to share with anyone. And when they came to school they had their own bins and we said that, “Okay, this is just for you and [it had to] be sanitized if somebody has to use it.”

Virtual Early Learning Experiences

More recently in the pandemic, most young children’s first experiences with learning were in the virtual environment. This was also one of their first opportunities to socialize with educators and other children while navigating the digital domain. Educators believed that learning online for developing brains at such a young age is not ideal, nor are three- to five-year-olds equipped to learn in this modality. For many children, Senior

Kindergarten or Grade 1 began without them having seen the inside of a school building or classroom.

“For most, if not all of these students, we are probably the first educators that they probably saw. And again, because they didn't have the opportunity to go outside in their community.”

Focused conversations conducted by the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement with African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black families⁴ found that facilitating virtual learning at home was complicated by the number, age, grade level, and learning needs of children at home; availability of technology and Internet at home; and parents' understanding of the school system and subject areas. Nonetheless, parents of Black children also found that virtual learning provided opportunities to know their children's educators better, witness their children's learning and interrupt harmful experiences, develop their advocacy skills, and better understand how the TDSB works.

⁴ Munroe T., Murray K., Munroe G-C., Thompson G., Hardware S., Douglin M., Igbu S., Yusuf E., Walker A., & Sylvestre, D. (2022). Focussed Conversations with African, AfroCaribbean, Black Students, Families and Community

Impacts of the Pandemic in the Kindergarten Classroom

The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant life event which dominated the lived experiences of current Kindergarten children. It limited opportunities for children to feel connected, nurture a sense of self, feel engaged, and express themselves in relation to people and spaces outside the home. Their experiences further differed based on individual and family circumstances. To understand how the pandemic has affected Kindergarten children and their development, educators shared their observations from their Kindergarten classrooms and schools. Educators maintained an asset-based lens of Kindergarten children through sharing their observations. They held a central belief in young children's resilience and adaptability and the importance of consistent early learning experiences to respond to unfinished learning because of the pandemic. Educators' observations were organized according to the following nine domains.

- **Emotional.** Separation anxiety has been a more common and prolonged condition among current Kindergarten children, having not been separated from their families for early years care or programs. Children demonstrated more anxiety behaviours (e.g., thumb sucking), stress, frustration, nervousness, and were quicker to anger in response to “no”, first-then, or “not now, but later” statements. Their emotional reactions have intensified in their expression, which educators described as “more visual and more vocally present than before.” Educators found that they have been spending more time than in previous years working on identifying and managing emotions. Some children have also demonstrated a preference to switch between learning centers or activities at a higher rate. Due to the novel experience of being in a large and possibly overwhelming learning environment, more children have found it challenging to focus for sustained periods or persevere with tasks. Educators also noticed that some children intentionally seek out adults in the classroom, instead of peers, for their emotional needs, affirmation, validation, or approval.

“I guess one more thing is much more reliance on me, or the adults in the classroom I should say, for not just the physical needs, but the emotional needs. Whereas in the past, a lot of students would get their support from their friends or their peers and things like that. And now they're seeking out the adult.”

- **Social.** For many children today, Kindergarten has been the first time socializing with groups of other children. Some children initially reacted by socially withdrawing, such as choosing not to participate due to fear, choosing to play with an adult or choosing to be alone altogether. Navigating large groups and exercising self-regulation has been more difficult for some children. As such, educators have

observed more physical and argumentative interactions (e.g., sitting and jumping on one another; swearing; hitting, biting, pushing, pinching, and scratching peers and educators) if there is a misunderstanding. There have also been additional struggles with play skills, such as sharing, turn taking, waiting their turn, problem-solving, and negotiating ideas. Current Kindergarten children continued to show greater readiness for parallel play rather than cooperative play. The classroom has also provided Kindergarten children with some of their first experiences with listening and following instructions from different adult authority figures and learning to heed social cues through facial expressions in the absence of masks.

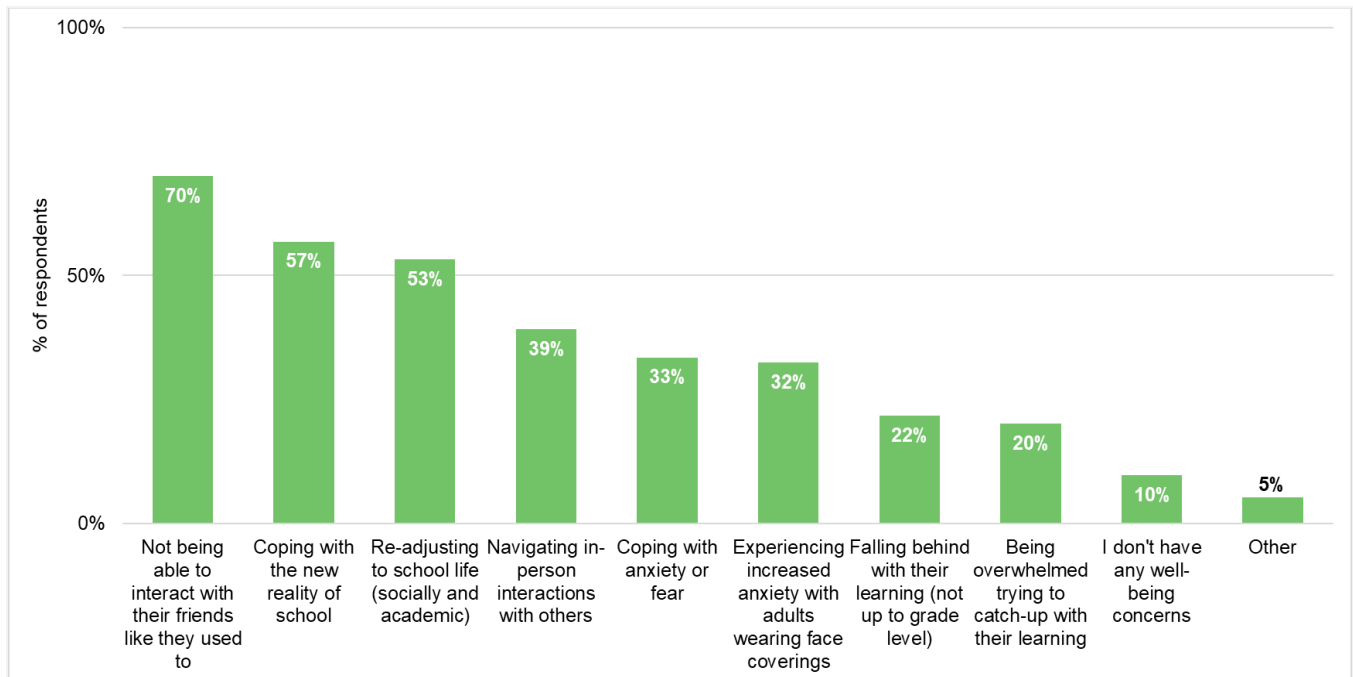
“General struggling with sharing concept, because during the pandemic, either they had their own toys at home that they did not have to share with anyone. And when, they came to school they had their own bins and we said that, “Okay, this is just for you and [it has to] be sanitized if somebody has to use it. So, that kind of concept early learners are, they’re saying, “No, this is mine as well as this,” as opposed to they have to share this with the whole class.”

“I think that on average, current Kindergarten students are less socialized than those who started Kindergarten prior to COVID. They have difficulty in large classes because many of them have not previously experienced navigating large group activities and events. I notice that students are having difficulty in their social interactions with peers and have to be explicitly taught to share and take turns.”

Support for these emotional and social concerns from educators were also echoed by parents in June 2020. Figure 2 depicts the well-being concerns parents had of their Kindergarten children returning to school. Their leading concerns were primarily social in nature. Parents were worried about their Kindergarten child(ren)’s inability to interact with friends like they used to, ability to cope with the new reality of school, re-adjust to school life, and navigate in-person interactions with others. A similar finding emerged from focused conversations with African, Afro-Caribbean, and Black families who expressed concerns with social and emotional isolation among their young children.⁵

⁵ Munroe T., Murray K., Munroe G-C., Thompson G., Hardware S., Douglin M., Igbu S., Yusuf E., Walker A., & Sylvestre, D. (2022). Focussed Conversations with African, AfroCaribbean, Black Students, Families and Community

Figure 2: Prevalence of Parents' Well-being Concerns about their Kindergarten Child(ren) Returning to School (June 2020, N = 6,452)



- Communication.** Another prevalent observation among educators was that more Kindergarten children appeared reserved and reluctant to speak with their educators or peers. This could be attributed to interruptions to socialization experiences with people outside of their family or children initially feeling overwhelmed by the classroom environment. Opportunities that may have existed during the pandemic to learn to communicate with others, especially virtually, were not incredibly complex and were more controlled, with children muting themselves when they were not speaking. Furthermore, face masks obstructed facial modeling that children need at this developmental stage to learn language and hear and see how to form sounds and words clearly. In classrooms, educators noticed more children using less language, creativity, and imagination in conversation and in play. Some children were uncomfortable with speaking in full sentences but developed adaptive communication and attention-seeking strategies because of pandemic realities.

“Oral language [communication] is a big one. They're significantly behind compared to pre-pandemic. For the students who were online a lot or more, there was less of a back and forth that would happen inside a classroom, for example. Not just with the other adults but with the other kids. A lot less opportunities to talk, a lot less complexity. Online, there was much more taking turns, one at a time talking, for obvious reasons.”

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- **Independence and Self-help.** Educators reported that a larger fraction of young children have exhibited a greater dependency on the educators in the classroom for support with going to the washroom, putting coats and shoes on, and feeding themselves. This may have stemmed from the availability of adult support at home during the pandemic and seldom opportunities for children to exercise independence and self-help outside the family unit. This has been particularly common among current Junior Kindergarten children.

“For me the self-regulation piece, the self-help skills. Where you noticed a lot more coming in diapers this time around, a lot more not able to feed themselves or willing to feed themselves. They’ll just sit there and open their mouth, or they’re telling you how to open their container but they’re not trying to open their container.”

- **Physical.** The pandemic also affected children’s physical development through stay-at-home orders and disruptions to accessing early years programming and public amenities like playgrounds. Educators believe this resulted in increased sedentary behaviours and decreased physical activity, coordination, manual dexterity, and time spent outdoors among children. Fine motor skills (e.g., opening a marker, building with Lego, zipping up a coat) and gross motor skills (e.g., walking, jumping, skipping, climbing, catching) seem to be underdeveloped among current Kindergarten children more than previous years. Interestingly, educators noticed that a greater proportion of young children acquired greater awareness of their health and how to stay healthy. However, with less exposure to other children, and thereby less exposure to germs, educators have noticed that children are sick more than any other year. Educators have also noticed that Kindergarten children who required regular medical check-ups were not able to do so during the pandemic and have presented in the classroom with vision and hearing concerns not yet addressed by a health professional.

“Noticing some students when you take them to the gym, some of them don’t know how to jump or skip or walk. So, just those gross motor skills.”

“Activities need to be less active as we have so many students coughing when they run the length of the gym for group running games.”

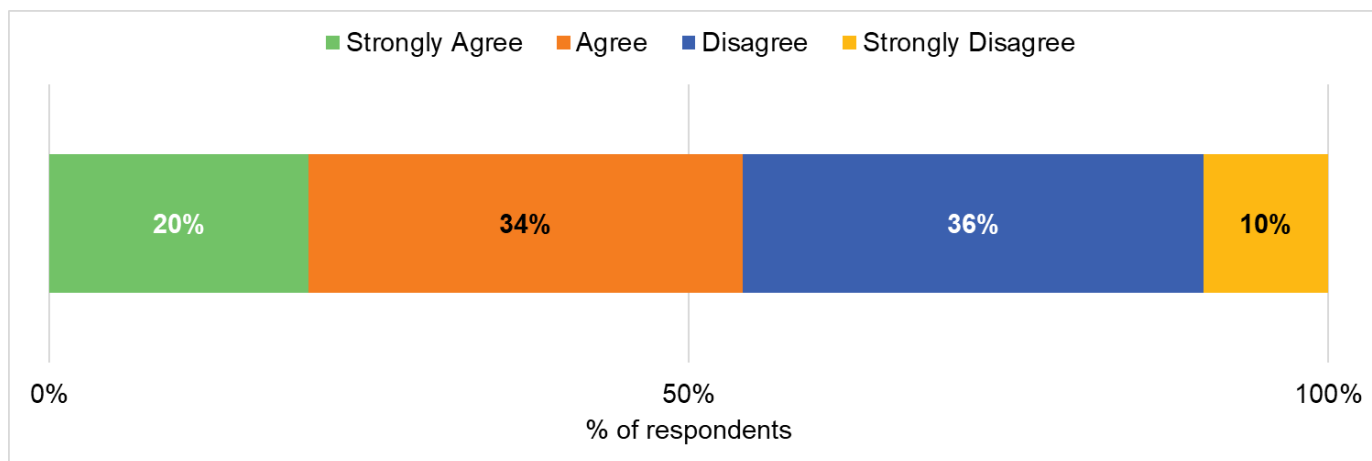
- **Literacy, Mathematics, and General Knowledge.** Limited formal and informal learning through schooling and early years programming due to the pandemic may have reduced opportunities for children to develop reading, writing, and numeracy skills. These educator concerns were in line with previous TDSB analyses which

revealed that 32% of a purposive sample of Grade 1 students did not meet targeted reading behaviour expectations in January 2021.⁶ Analyses across the 2021-22 school year revealed similar patterns.⁷ Educators also raised concerns about the limited engagement of wonder, curiosity, critical thinking, and learning experiences outside the home (e.g., attending community events, zoo, library, grocery shopping, places of worship, birthday parties, etc. were impacted by the pandemic) to develop children’s background knowledge and schema.

“Lack of in-school learning may impact their knowledge of letters, phonics, and level of reading and numeracy skills development. Extra support will be required.”

What’s more, just over half of parents of Kindergarten children during Ontario’s second wave of the pandemic in Winter 2021 strongly agreed or agreed with the feeling that their child will fall behind in school because of COVID-19 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Parents’ Level of Agreement regarding their Kindergarten Child Falling Behind in School due to COVID-19 (Winter 2021, N = 12,513)



- **Mental Health.** Families have experienced one or multiple adults lose their job, food insecurities, increases in costs of living, grieve the loss of loved ones, and high levels of stress, fear, and unknowns during the pandemic. Educators expressed their concern for the impact of familial trauma on some Kindergarten children. Educators believed this trauma and stress manifested in the Kindergarten classroom through more argumentative behaviours and ‘adultification’ of children. Specifically, some Kindergarten children have requested to take extra food home for their family and

⁶ Toronto District School Board. (2021). COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery Plan. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/Pandemic-Recovery-Plan-June-23.pdf>

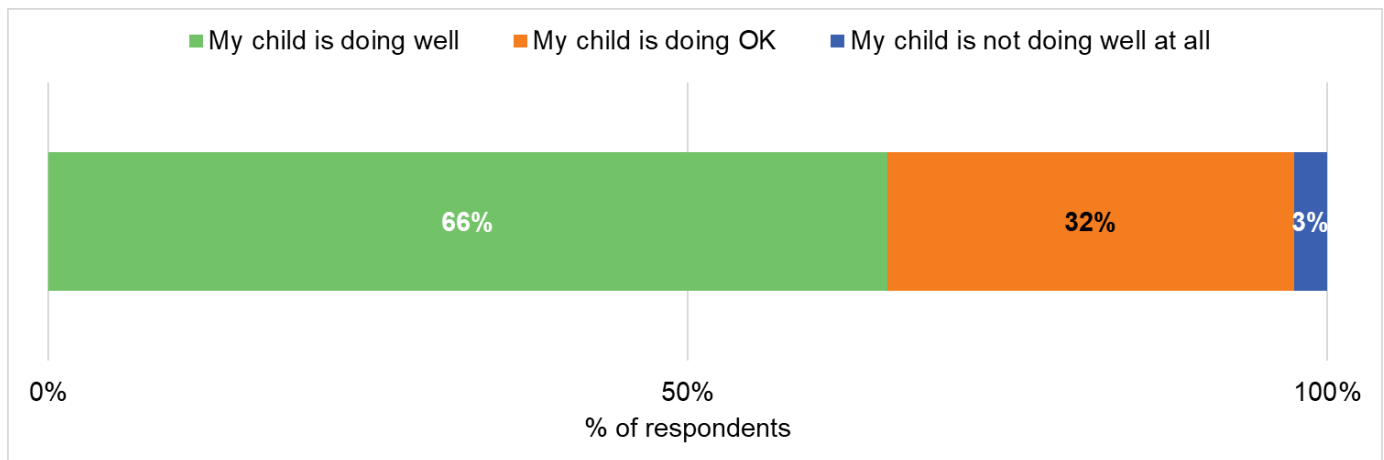
⁷ Toronto District School Board. (2022). COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery Plan Update: October 2022. https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/docs/Update_%20October%202022.pdf

have discussed or incorporated the topic of financial constraints during play. This theme is consistent with earlier TDSB research which found that 8 out of 22 wards had at least 10% of families often worrying about food insecurity (from September 2020 to Winter 2021).⁸

“And I just didn’t remember Kindergarten being a place about money because they always would say, “Yeah, I have \$100, I have 100 million.” It was always this great imagination that they could get whatever they want just because they could. And it wasn’t that they were affluent, it’s just in a child’s imagination. [...] But now it’s just this reality of yeah, ‘No, I didn’t get that,’ or ‘I may not get that.’”

This finding converges with parental beliefs about their Kindergarten child’s mental health and well-being when surveyed in Spring 2022 (see Figure 4), at which time, only two thirds of parents considered that their Kindergarten child was doing well.

Figure 4: Parents’ Beliefs about their Kindergarten Child’s Mental Health and Well-being (Spring 2022, N = 5,905)



Educators took pause to acknowledge their own mental health and well-being. Much like students across the TDSB, they too experienced loss, trauma, and the emotional and cognitive demands of living and working throughout the pandemic.

“My colleague said to me, “We’re human. There’s only so much we can do.” We put this fire out over here, and then another fire is over here. And they’re asking us to be octopus, and we can’t. It’s humanly impossible. [...] I mean I think we’ve said it, but I think it needs to be said again, support for the educators because

⁸ Toronto District School Board. (2021). Parent Winter Check-in Survey - Ward Results. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/research/Research/School-During-the-Pandemic/Student-and-Parent-Winter-Check-in-Survey-Results-by-Ward>

the burnout rate is real and the anxiety levels and just the stress of it all. [...] It's a pipe that's going to be burst, and then they can't clean up the spill. It feels really bad."

- **School Attendance and Punctuality.** Since returning to in-person learning, educators observed that some Kindergarten children are enrolled in their class but not attending while others arrive at school late or at inconsistent times. Educators acknowledged that school drop-off may be difficult for parents who work multiple jobs or are experiencing loss. Educators also remarked that students have been absent more and for extended periods of time compared to before the pandemic. Educators expressed concerning implications of poor attendance and tardiness with respect to adjusting to school routines and missing important learning experiences.

"The current level of illness and absenteeism is unprecedented. In my 25 years, I have not seen this kind of absenteeism due to illness. It is not uncommon to see 1/3-1/2 of the class away."

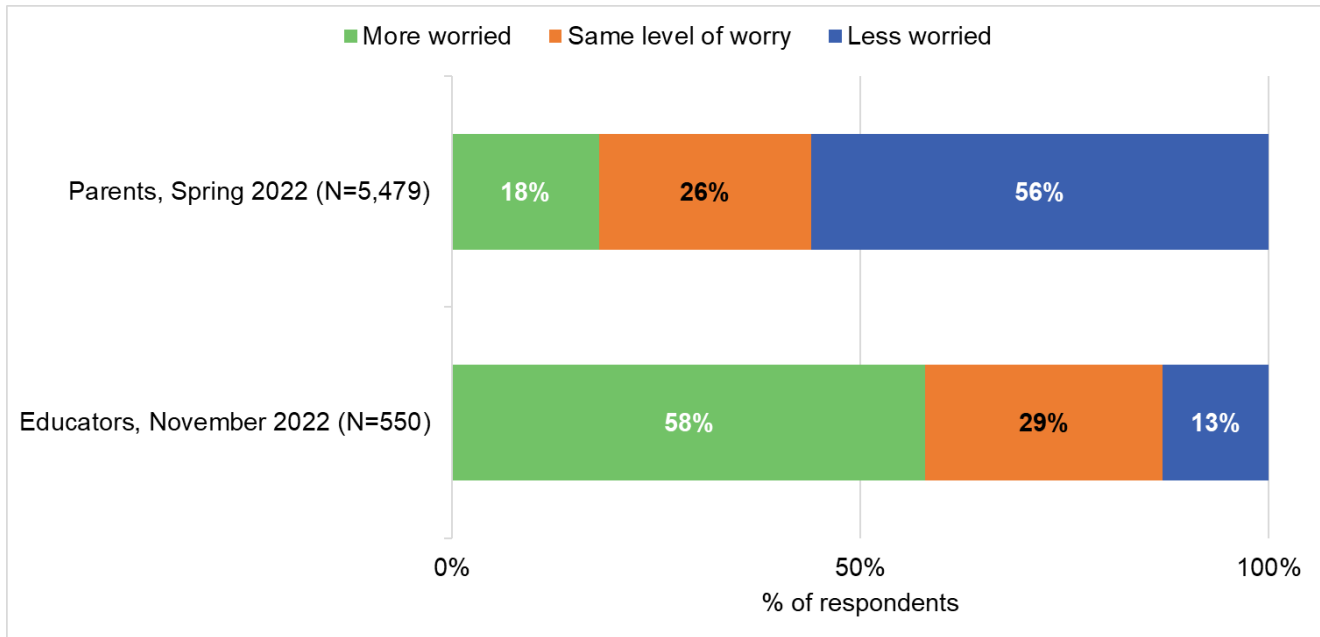
- **Learning Environment.** The physical classroom was a new environment for many current Kindergarten children, given that school and daycare closures limited their exposure to what this could look, feel, and sound like. Educators described that the transition has taken more time for children to feel safe at school, citing close calls with regards to safety, learning how to safely use equipment, and exit behaviours (i.e., children leaving class and leaving school). Educators also shared that more students have been less careful towards classroom tools and materials. Some children required additional time to understand and follow instructions and routines (e.g., lying up, sitting, and listening on the carpet), and explore learning materials before engaging with them.

"A lot of it is, I don't know, this strange lady who's asking me to sit on the carpet or to do the activities, I don't know them. So I'm going to display certain behaviors because I'm just, this is all new and all overwhelming for me."

Taken together, it's not surprising that educators and parents of Kindergarten children have expressed an underlying degree of worry or concern towards the impact of the pandemic, lockdowns, closures, and health and safety protocols on these young children's learning and development. Figure 5 displays the degree of worry among parents of Kindergarten children in Spring 2022 and educators who were surveyed in November 2022. Over half of educators were more worried about the impact of the pandemic on Kindergarten children's education compared to when school closures

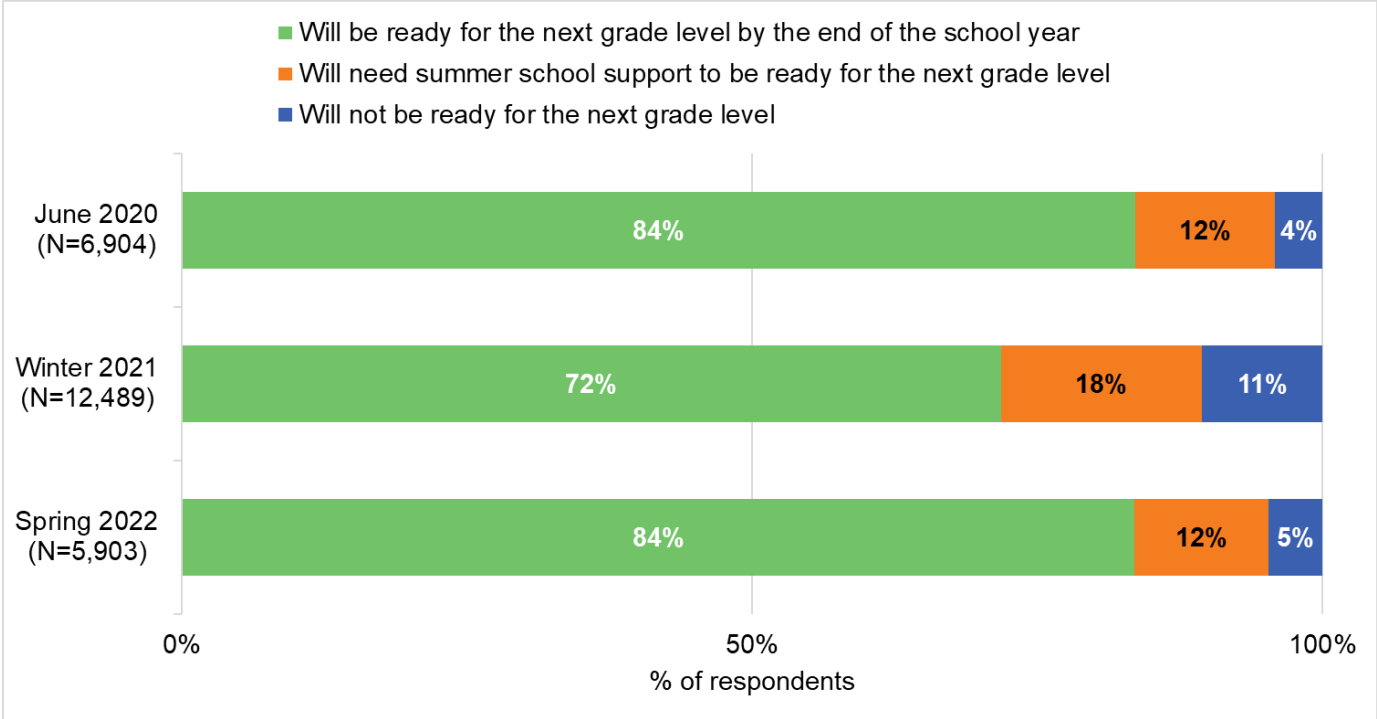
began (in March 2020). This contrasts to less than a quarter of parents feeling more worried.

Figure 5: Parents' and Educators' Relative Level of Worry about the Impact of the Pandemic on Kindergarten Children's Education Compared to the Start of School Closures



Despite these steady concerns, most parents of Kindergarten children believed that their child will be ready for the next grade level throughout the course of the pandemic (see Figure 6). This may speak to parental beliefs of their young child's resilience, capabilities to overcome pandemic impacts, and/or degree of understanding of the Kindergarten program and Grade 1 curriculum.

Figure 6: Parents' Beliefs about their Kindergarten Child's Progress over the Pandemic



Honouring Skills, Knowledge, and Experiences Acquired During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, children and their families had a wide range of experiences and opportunities. This section demonstrates the skills, knowledge, and experiences current Kindergarten children acquired, including fluency with technology, connections between family and classroom experiences, expansion and expression of student interests, and increased opportunities to learn in rich contexts.

Fluency with Technology

Educators were amazed by the skills and ease of using technology exhibited ubiquitously by Kindergarten children. Many developed correct finger and hand positioning for using a tablet, the ability to navigate technology (e.g., unlock an iPad) and virtual platform features (e.g., turn the video or microphone on/off) with ease, accessed learning applications, and understood etiquette in the virtual space. A greater proportion of Kindergarten children have been able to independently use technology and eagerly ask to use digital tools during the school day.



“These youngest learners that we have in our space at the moment are quite tech savvy actually. They’re able to navigate their Zoom call, they’re able to navigate turning on and off their microphone. [...] They already know how to even access their Jamboard and trace and use different tech tools.”

Enhanced Connections Between Family and Classroom Experiences

The pandemic provided opportunities for many children to learn from and bond more with family members. These experiences were even more impactful since there were few outside influences on children. Educators described that Kindergarten children learned some socialization and caregiving behaviours from their family members, as

well as creative communication and attention-seeking behaviours while parents worked from home.

The prolonged time together meant some Kindergarten children were more engaged and connected with their family members. Children enjoyed baking with their parents, from which they learned how to measure. They also learned about family values, such as the importance of spending time with parents and taking care of siblings.

These strong family connections have manifested in the classroom unlike in years past. For example, educators have noticed that a greater proportion of Kindergarten children made more associations between their learning in the classroom to their family. These associations have persisted beyond the typical first month of school. Also, many Kindergarten children have sought constant reassurance from their educators, as they would have from an adult at home during the pandemic.

“A lot more students who are drawing family pictures by choice. Before you would always have your usual kids who would like to draw things like that, but we have a bigger group, and for longer periods. I would say that usually that starts in September and then they start to branch off into different things. But we're still seeing a lot of kids who are interested in drawing or creating with different materials people in their family, which is lovely.”

Expansion and Expression of Student Interests

Educators revealed that some Kindergarten children had opportunities to discover new interests during their pandemic years. Some families were able to encourage their young children's interests by taking them fishing, traveling to new places, imparting knowledge about mythology, ensuring books were available, and spending time cooking and outdoors.



“I find that children are cooking more with their families. They have a better understanding of where food is coming from, how plants are grown, which is beautiful. [...] One student [...] taught me that when hawks are already in circles it means they've already eaten. [...] They're more in tune into their nature and I think that's beautiful. Yeah, that's a great skill that they've developed more.”

For other children, the Internet allowed them to explore their interests with fewer barriers, which may not have been possible prior to the pandemic due to less availability, choice, and awareness of online resources. One educator commented on a student who developed an interest in arts and crafts through YouTube and provided a descriptive tutorial to their educator which was modeled after an episode she had watched.

“And for some that may not have the experience to go and do experiences outside of the home because they have a digital tool called YouTube, they could really search up ways to fold paper or to draw and to be independent that way. I had a student who I actually sat down with yesterday and she pretended she was the person on ‘Art for Kids’ and she sat beside me, and she was telling me step by step of things to do. [...] For a four-year-old to come and sit beside me and explain a tutorial essentially was huge.”

Increased Opportunities to Learn in Rich Contexts

Educators credited bilingual home environments to promoting and supporting the acquisition of an additional language among very young children. Since some Kindergarten children were often in the presence of family members who spoke other languages, this exposure and the opportunities to interact with them allowed young children to easily learn how to communicate in more than one language.

“Some kids are coming with the knowledge of a second language or even a third language. [...] Because they've been home for such a long time, they've still had the chance to interact with their family members in their first language. So, they've actually come strong in both two languages.”

Among some Kindergarten children, educators noted the rich vocabulary acquisition and the ability to communicate with specificity. They attributed this to experiences they had and opportunities to learn and talk about these experiences, interests, and new knowledge with a family member.

“I see how articulate some of them are. So, obviously they've had experiences, like I mentioned. The little boy who goes fishing often with his family, so he talks about the type of fish he catches. He has that rich vocabulary, he talks about the bait, he's able to name the places where they go fishing.”

Pedagogic Strategies, Techniques, and Tools to Support Kindergarten Children

COVID-19 introduced new challenges, needs, and opportunities in formal schooling. Educators were concerned about the overall learning experiences and well-being of Kindergarten children. Through their responses, educators demonstrated genuine care and willingness to support children to excel with an equal commitment to joy, well-being, and engagement. They described how they integrated the following different pedagogic strategies, techniques, and tools to support Kindergarten children.

- 1. Emphasizing Social and Emotional Learning:** A predominant shift in the classroom thus far has been a focus on supporting Kindergarten children with social and emotional learning. Educators acknowledged that the pandemic created a situation whereby curriculum and academics are important, but student well-being and mental health must take priority. They have been nurturing emotional learning by providing longer periods for children to self-regulate during the day, a self-care center, explicit instruction on zones of regulation, and practicing calming strategies and mindfulness activities. They have been nurturing social learning, a sense of belonging, and inclusion through social story teachings and using videos and social skills programs (e.g., Second Step Program, Sesame Street videos, Tommy cat and



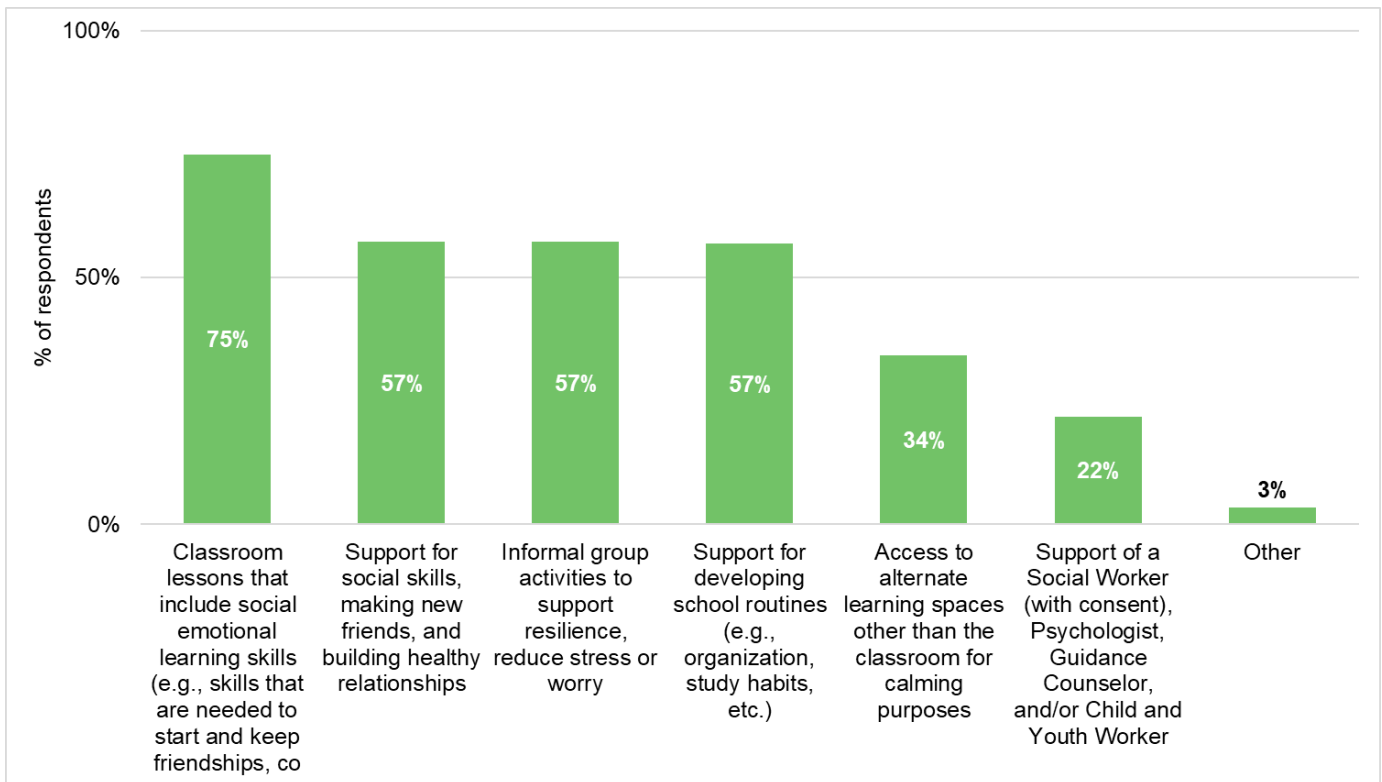
Tabby cat). Overall, educators have been attending to children's needs by centering social and emotional learning through the four frames of Kindergarten.

“The four frames of Kindergarten allow educators to really focus on the needs of their students. I have shifted more into how to better support self-regulation, mental health, and overall well-being. Also, being mindful of how to develop social skills has been helpful this year as students navigate many different experiences.”

It follows that parents of Kindergarten children also believed that supports that were more social and emotional in nature would benefit their child's

well-being the most in preparation for starting school. Figure 7 presents data collected from parents of Kindergarten children surveyed in June 2020. As can be seen from the chart below, classroom lessons that include social emotional learning skills; support for social skills and relationships; informal group activities to support resilience and reduce stress or worry; and support for developing school routines would be of greatest benefit to their Kindergarten child's well-being in preparing for school.

Figure 7: Prevalence of Supports to Benefit Kindergarten Child(ren)'s Well-being to Prepare for Returning to School as Indicated by Parents (June 2020, N = 6,378)



2. **Responsive and Differentiated Learning:** Kindergarten children arrived at school with varying life experiences and skills. A recurrent theme among educators was an ongoing commitment to provide a responsive, differentiated, and scaffolded program to meet the needs, interests, and strengths of each child. To do so, educators learned about the children in their class from an asset-based and holistic lens, one that honours their unique ways of knowing and being in the world and by building reciprocal relationships that promote trust and safe spaces for children's learning and growth. Educators concurrently accommodated each child with learner-focused invitations while also incorporating universal design to reach a wider breadth of children. Responsiveness and differentiation have also manifested in the techniques

educators adopt. Namely, they have employed more one-on-one and small group instruction, slower paced and repetitive instruction, shorter lessons, chunking of tasks, breaking down skills and concepts, additional time for transitions and processing instructions, and use of visuals and kinesthetic learning to support student success.

“With [Kindergarten], we always worked to meet the children where they are at. I do not, and have not, had an expectation of where children 'should' be. Our job is to respond to children's needs, which will always vary year to year and from school to school.”

“Children are resilient. Even though the pandemic played a significantly negative role in Kindergarten learning, I teach the Kindergarten children in the similar way I used to teach with flexibility, respect and patience to help them reach their potential.”

- 3. Balance of Modeling and Direct Instruction:** Educators revealed that many Kindergarten children missed formal learning opportunities outside of school that contribute to socialization; children spent more time communicating using technology and less time building relationships with other children their own age. To better support children’s development, educators have used role modeling and direct instruction to teach Kindergarten children how to play cooperatively, gather in groups, share, take turns, wait for their turn, use kind words, complete self-help skills, communicate orally (e.g., ask a question, greet one another), and problem-solve. Educators shared that they also rely on role playing and interactive forms (e.g., puppets, rhymes, songs, poetry, movement, social stories) to maintain focused attention to teach important skills.

“There's much more of a need for direct teaching of those kinds of skills. So, it's much more conversations, much more role modeling, much more direct instructions than I'm used to or would typically do in a pre-pandemic year.”

- 4. Play and Outdoor-based Learning:** Children have diverse learning needs and require diverse learning approaches to help them succeed in their learning. Educators touted the importance of open-ended outdoor- and play-based learning to attend to children’s diverse learning needs. Considering the impact of the pandemic on children's learning and well-being, outdoor education and play-based learning surfaced as overwhelmingly effective and frequently adopted pedagogies among most educators. Educators described that outdoor education and play-based learning offer rich learning opportunities for Kindergarten children and are inherently

necessary for their development. They shared anecdotes of how they have successfully integrated outdoor and play-based pedagogies into their lessons. For example, educators organized weekly community walks, implemented open-ended invitations outdoors, arranged for yoga, dance, and mindfulness to develop children's social and emotional skills, motor skill development, and general knowledge.

“Kindergarten children need hands-on, play-based learning. They need unstructured time to play with each other and explore outdoors and indoors. I try to provide them with infinite opportunities for them to collaborate, problem-solve and learn together. This happened before the pandemic obviously, but I will never ever take it for granted.”

“I have also embedded Indigenous Perspectives in our [Kindergarten] program to learn from and with the Land. This has supported the development of a solid sense of place and belonging, and a strong need to care for each other and the Earth.”



- 5. Inquiry-based Approaches:** Since schools transitioned to in-person learning, following simple routines, responding to back-and-forth questions, and maintaining stamina during learning activities have been more difficult for some Kindergarten children. Educators explained that they have been integrating inquiry-based learning practices in their classrooms to help rebuild stamina and develop and maintain interest. Inquiry-based learning has also been used to build social, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills.

“The other thing too is around stamina at centers or stamina at an activity. Even for year two learners, because I was in the classroom last year, and so my year twos, I had most of them, other than the ones that came from online, all year last year. And for them we had to rebuild that stamina for attending to a task that they have chosen for a little bit of time. It's not just touch this, and then move

somewhere else, and touch this and move somewhere else. We had to really re-establish those types of routines.”

- 6. Honouring Student Voice:** A key pedagogic practice that most educators have adopted in their classrooms has been honouring student voice. Specifically, educators discussed how circle talks have become more useful since the pandemic because they encourage children to develop speaking and active listening skills. Multiple educators mentioned that they adopted conversational approaches to ensure children get opportunities to engage in frequent conversations while honouring equity of voices within Kindergarten classrooms. Moreover, Kindergarten educators shared how they have been utilizing sharing/talking circles approaches within Indigenous conversational protocols to honour diverse voices and develop active speaking and listening skills among children.

“What we call [...] circles or more just class meetings. Because I find a lot of times when we just allow kids to raise their hand, we're always going to the same children and not giving maybe children that are having a harder time settling in an opportunity for their voice to be heard. So, there's something that some of us do back from daycare days and I know it's an Indigenous practice as well, where we just sit in a circle, symbolizing that every voice is important. Everyone has the opportunity to be seen and heard. [...] I think opening that up to a circle and just naming every child in the circle, even though it's time consuming and giving everyone an opportunity to have their say has some validity.”



- 7. Use of Technology in Kindergarten Classrooms:** The pandemic altered instructional practices and modes of teaching and learning. Following the lockdowns

in March 2020, all educational activities moved online. According to educators, despite the challenges of teaching young children virtually, the pandemic contributed to improving their technological fluency. Educators disclosed that teaching virtually encouraged them to experiment with different pedagogic practices in their Kindergarten classrooms. Since returning to in-person teaching, they have incorporated different technological teaching strategies in their classrooms to enhance children's learning and development of core foundational skills as well as engage parents. Specifically, educators leveraged tools that were inclusive and reflective of their communities (e.g., Seesaw, ClassDojo), involved Kindergarten children with documenting their learning and work, and incorporated more digital media in their classroom program.

“I leverage technology tools including Apple - Keynote to teach students letter sounds, create stories and learn about the elements of stories. I have learned reputable sites for students to practice literacy skills, read books through the virtual library and use Brightspace to communicate with parents.”

- 8. Parent Engagement:** Despite the negative impacts of the pandemic on Kindergarten children, educators emphasized how the pandemic fostered and/or deepened engagement, partnership, reciprocity, and knowledge exchange with parents. This was made possible by educators building trust and relationships over time with parents. This allowed parents to feel vulnerable and educators to learn about children’s families, interests, and needs which positively shaped their pedagogy. Educators disclosed that the use of technology and virtual platforms (e.g., Google Classroom, Brightspace, email, class website) made it easier to communicate with parents online about their child’s learning and progress and strengthened parents’ understanding of, appreciation for, and involvement in the Kindergarten program during and after the pandemic. Traditional forms of communication (e.g., phone calls, newsletters, school planner) still proved to be effective. Educators also shared that they leveraged partnerships with families and family capital to provide Kindergarten children with the intentional and responsive strategies and practices they need to succeed in their learning and support the continuity of learning experiences from school to home. For example, educators have been providing families with literacy games, book borrowing programs, support with navigating the system, and host Family Fridays whereby families’ expertise are honoured through weekly invitations.

“I used a different lens to view the relationship and connection between the students, their families and educators. I chose the holistic approach to child development”



- 9. Leveraging School and Board Community for Support:** Educators recognized that sometimes children’s needs transcend the formal classroom. As a result, there has been greater collaboration between Kindergarten educators in the school and beyond for sharing best practices. Many educators revealed that children with special needs may have missed out on opportunities for early intervention, delayed funding, therapy, and resources during the pandemic. To ensure children receive necessary and timely support, educators continue to bring their concerns to their In-School Support Team meetings and request additional support from their Reading Intervention Coach, Speech and Language pathologists, Special Education consultants, and Psychologists, among others. Kindergarten educators have also connected parents with TDSB and community supports and encouraged them to seek external support and interventions.

Moving Forward

Supporting and strengthening well-being, implementation of Kindergarten pedagogical approaches, and professional learning supports were suggested conditions from educators to mitigate pandemic impacts on unfinished learning among TDSB's youngest learners.

- **Supporting and Strengthening Well-being:** The results from focused conversations and surveys with educators and parents revealed the impact of the pandemic on the well-being and development of Kindergarten children. Both educators and parents indicated that mental health and well-being support would be of benefit. Educators also appealed for earlier identification and additional in-class and central supports for Kindergarten children emerging from the pandemic with diverse learning and special education needs. These kinds of supports include assigning more Educational Assistants and Special Needs Assistants to Kindergarten classrooms to support the needs and overall well-being of Kindergarten children, and hiring more professional student support personnel, such as Social Workers and Speech and Language Pathologists. Expanding the availability of these human resources is even more necessary given that access to support outside the TDSB has dwindled and parents are having more difficulty navigating access to outside agencies.
- **Implementation of Kindergarten Pedagogical Approaches:** Educators maintained the view of children as competent and capable. They stressed the importance of the six evidence-based pedagogical approaches as foundational to a high-quality Kindergarten program that nurtures children's learning and development. These approaches include responsive relationships; learning through exploration, play, and inquiry; educators as co-learners; environment as the third teacher; pedagogical documentation; and reflective practice and collaborative inquiry.⁹ In fact, educators advocated that these approaches extend to primary grades as well. Educators also emphasized the importance of adequate and meaningful parent engagement in both academic and extracurricular activities to create spaces for families to bring their cultural capital to Kindergarten classrooms.
- **Professional Learning Supports for Educators:** The sudden shift in educational delivery and ongoing needs among children due to the pandemic called for the need to prioritize professional learning and support for Kindergarten educators. Educators suggested that their Kindergarten peers may benefit from professional learning on

⁹ Ontario Ministry of Education. (2016). The Kindergarten Program. (Online). Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/kinderprogram.html>

evidence-based early years pedagogies such as inquiry, outdoor, and play-based learning and honouring student voice (e.g., through talking/sharing circles, student-directed learning). It was apparent that school administrators play a critical role in championing the early years and providing release time for planning and learning for their Kindergarten teams. Educators also emphasized the need to create professional networks or communities of practice among DECEs and Kindergarten teachers to provide spaces for co-learning, sharing of resources and pedagogic practices, problem solving, and mentorship.

Conclusion

The experiences and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were not uniform for Kindergarten children and their families across the TDSB. This research affords insights and observations from educators and parents of Kindergarten children into how these experiences and impacts have manifested in their classrooms and schools. Considering how decisively formative the early years period is, and how returns on investment during this period are plentiful and long-lasting,¹⁰ it is vitally important that the pandemic recovery for Kindergarten children is anchored in their family. When coupled with optimal conditions for learning, schools play a stabilizing role to support resilience, well-being, and development for its youngest learners.

¹⁰ Heckman, J. (2011). The economics of inequality: The value of early childhood education." *American Educator*, Spring, 31-36.