

**PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
TEACHING IN THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

Honors Sociology of Education Students Spring 2021

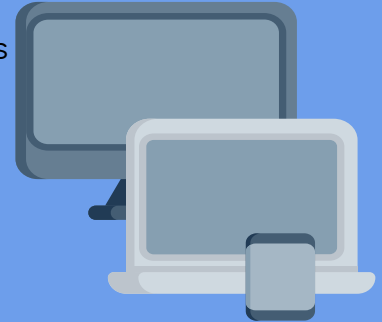




RESEARCH METHODS

RESEARCH METHODS: PURPOSE AND PROCEDURES

- ★ Purpose: to understand elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of teaching and learning during the pandemic.
- ★ Procedures:
 - Class collectively designed an interview guide and received IRB approval for the research project
 - Each student conducted a semi-structured interview with a Virginia K-6 public school teacher
 - Interview Length: Range 17-69 minutes; Mean=35 minutes
 - Each student transcribed their interview, redacting names of people and schools
 - Transcribed interviews were placed in a Google folder for student



PARTICIPANTS

N = 18; 88% Female

Pre-K = 1

Kindergarten = 5

First Grade = 3

Second Grade = 4

Third Grade = 2

Fourth Grade = 1

Fifth Grade = 5

Sixth Grade = 0

Other [K-5] = 1

SPED/Gifted = 2

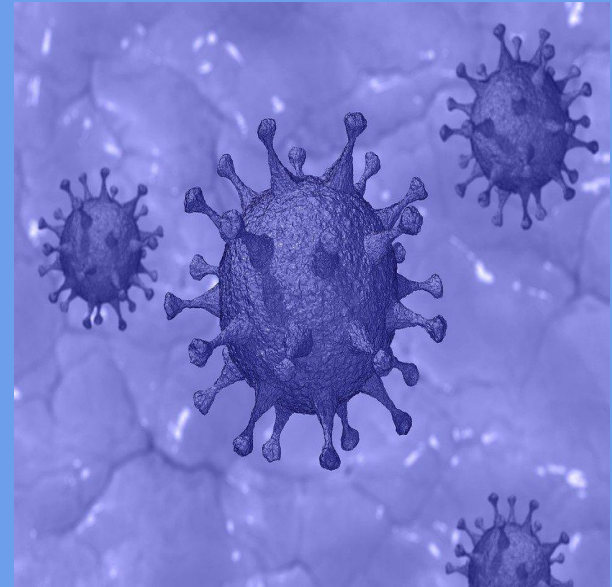
School Characteristics	
Composite Index Score	.30 - .40 = 60% < .30 = 1% > .40 = 22%
% Students F/R Lunch	Range = 15.19% - 98.3% 55.5% < 40% (Exceed Threshold Point)



PANDEMIC TEACHING FORMATS

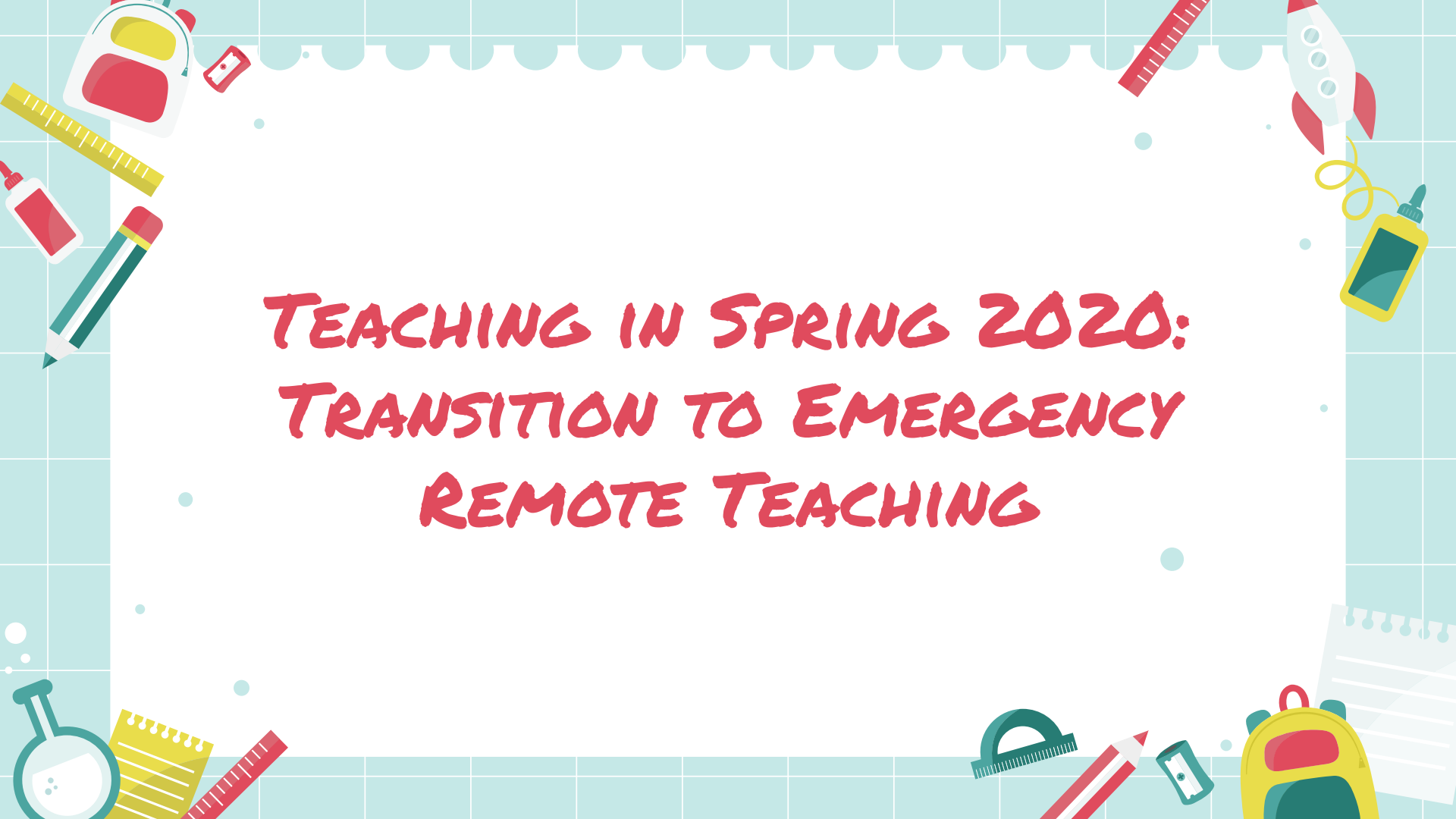
- ❖ Spring 2020
 - Moved to virtual
 - Most offered synchronous & asynchronous
 - Some only offered asynchronous instruction
 - Many schools didn't require student participation
 - Only assignment "packets"

- ❖ AY 2020-21
 - Fully in-person (n=3; 17%)
 - Fully virtual (n=2; 11%)
 - Hybrid of online/in-person (n=10; 59%)
 - Changed formats during the year (n=3; 17%)



CODING + DATA ANALYSIS

- ❖ Interviews explored 5 areas:
 - Teachers' experiences during Spring 2020
 - Teachers' experiences this academic year
 - Professional and personal challenges teaching during the pandemic
 - Challenges teachers perceived students experienced learning during the pandemic
 - Teachers' perceptions about how the pandemic will affect education in the future
- ❖ Students divided into teams, with each team coding one interview area
 - Students coded their section of the interview individually, then the team coded collectively
 - From the codes, teams identified themes which they will present today



**TEACHING IN SPRING 2020:
TRANSITION TO EMERGENCY
REMOTE TEACHING**

INITIAL TRANSITION TO ERT

No one knew what was happening

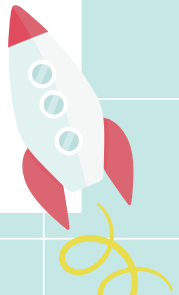
“it was just, it was a lot of people working really hard with very little information to fuel what they were supposed to be doing, which made it 100,000 times more difficult.”
(TO04, Grade 5 SPED)

No clear instructions/expectations

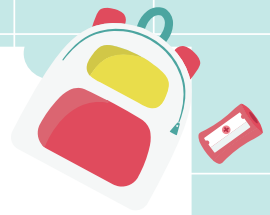
“we were adding stuff to Google Classroom, and emailing and checking in, but there was really no expectation of what to do, and then they decided that we were going to have to meet with the kids, but they never said how many days, or how many hours, they were just like “meet with your kids!!” And we had to expose them to the fourth quarter material, but they didn’t tell us like how many days really to spend on stuff, they didn’t tell us how many hours to be with the kids, what kind of assignments, we weren’t taking attendance, so it was just all over the place! And there weren’t really many guidelines last year.” (TO12, Grade 2)

Supportive and Understanding Administration

“We have really supportive staff and administration, but from what I remember, she was there to help us if we needed her to do something, but I think she realized that whatever we were doing is the best that we could do, and that was going to be - good enough.”
(TO02, K)



MAIN FOCUS OF ERT



Focus on social health and development over academics

“And I know for my class it was a lot of ‘how are you?’ a lot of more SEL (social emotional learning) not so much academic which worked a lot for my class.”
(TO01, K)

“I would say it was not as focused on the standards we have to teach per the curriculum but things that would keep them interested and connected.” (TO15, K)

“We would do some kind of review lesson or we would play a game you know just for them to see each other and talk to each other.” (TO03, Grade 3)



ISSUES FACED WITH ERT

Trouble Engaging Students

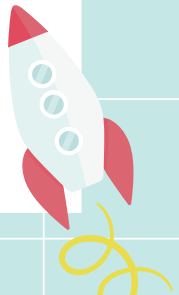
“at the beginning, it was hard because I was struggling to keep the students engaged that would generally struggle in a normal school year so they are especially having a hard time online” (T003, Grade 3)

“And I thought, “I’m gonna lose them in five minutes.” (Chuckles) Two minutes, I don’t see how that works” (T018, K)

Limitations of Students’ and Teachers’ Resources

“Basically they were like you’ve got to stay home and figure out something for these kids to do that they can do at home without all these supplies.” (T002, K)

“And it’s just, it’s tough because the number one problem with our school and just with our population is resources. And if they don’t have paper and pencil, I can’t get them to write. If they don’t have books at home, I can’t ask them to go read something. So, I have to hand deliver everything to them” (T006, Grade 1)



ISSUES FACED WITH ERT

Limitations with Technology

“Because Kindergarten virtual learning in the spring was real hard. Because like they can’t get on by themselves. Like 5th graders can probably get on solo and figure it out but Kindergarteners needed an adult there and we didn’t quite have that luxury at the time.” (TOO1, K)

“They gave us a bunch of six year olds and said ‘Alright, teach them how to use a computer’ and we were like ‘We don’t even have computer class this year!’ They’ve had no experience with a computer.” (TOO6, Grade 1)

Loss of Learning

“A lot of kids did not show up, I had some religiously come, but the loss of learning that happened during that time specifically was dramatic. . . everyone is at least a half a year to a year behind.” (TOO4, Grade 5 SPED)

“I mostly say that because with Kindergartners we don’t do a lot of computer learning in the first place. . . because we’re trying to get them used to writing with a pencil and recognizing letters and numbers still so it wouldn’t be beneficial for them to do a whole lot of computer work.” (TO15, K)



**FINDINGS: TEACHING THIS ACADEMIC
YEAR**

WORRIES CONSIDERING ISOLATION

Children are more isolated when learning

- Smaller classes
- Less group projects, or none at all
- Online learning makes for being away from friends physically
- Individual/independent work

Depression in children: “Well, I know last year when we went home, I honestly had some kids that messaged me saying like I am not doing well, Mrs. Teacher I am so lonely and desperate I need to see people. This was when the whole world shut down. He said I don’t know if I want to live if I can’t do anything soon, I am seriously depressed.” (T011, Grade 5)

UNPREPARED/UNABLE TO DO JOB

9 out of 18 teachers described feeling unprepared or unable to do their job in some capacity. Many mentioned frustrations with technology not working, keeping students engaged, and not having enough time to teach each lesson.

“It’s not what I went to school for. It’s not something that I was prepared for.” (T006, Grade 1)

“What would take us a week in the normal year, is taking us two or three weeks cause I only see ‘em two or three days a week. Then, I got to get to all 10 of my kids that are here in person, and it’s really difficult.” (T012, Grade 2)

“If they don’t have paper and pencil, I can’t get them to write. If they don’t have books at home, I can’t ask them to go read something.” (T006, Grade 1)

COLLABORATION

Many teachers emphasized the importance of working together with families and other teachers in order for their students to be successful during this time.

Teachers described

- Being reliant on parents for virtual participation
- Working and teaching collaboratively with other teachers
- Relying on younger or more tech savvy teachers for assistance with technology
- Having to teach families how to use technology

“it’s just a lot of constant communication so that everyone is in the loop and knows what’s going on.” (T005, Grade 1)

“You know, at first, we had to teach parents and grandparents how to use these platforms, and that was also another big challenge.” (T013, Grade 3)

STUDENT CONNECTIONS

When asked about their biggest success they had with their students many mentioned how they were able to keep a connection with their students

Despite being virtual teachers mentioned

“I think our classroom culture and relationship is a lot stronger because I have less kids so I can make a bigger impact on them individually. Not just academically but socially and emotionally. Um, we get to have a lot of real conversations about the world, at a kindergarten level, that I probably wouldn't have had somewhere else.”
(T002, K)

- Attendance has been a lot higher this year than past years because they just want to see their friends
- They have been able to build a closer relationship and a stronger connection with their students
- The stronger connections have helped students succeed more academically

“Some of them were able to practice skills of learning without behavior impeding them, and we were even able to put in place understanding of how to handle when you get frustrated in a safer space than school and I've watched them translate it to the in person environment and they're doing a lot better.” (T004, Grade 5 SPED)


ACADEMIC CHANGES



Many teachers struggled with with the sudden change in the courses and priorities

- Changes in the Curriculum

- Troubles with reducing the amount of information

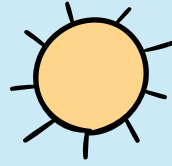
-  ■ “I have a very limited amount of time with them on the screen. So I had to decide what was the most important thing that needed to be from me.” (T018, K)

- Cutting out entire subjects from being taught live due to time issues

- “So we spend most of our time on reading and math. Most of the science and social studies is done asynchronously, so they - they watch things and do things on their own, and I’ll add a little bit here and there.” (T018, K)
- “So, we’ve had a lot of challenges with pacing, and prioritizing the curriculum. Like, what’s really important and what do we really need to spend time on? And what are skills or SOLs that we can kind of...not really to say push to the side, but you know, we have to prioritize them...” (T013, Grade 3)



ACADEMIC CHANGES



Many teachers have also been struggling with how each lesson is being taught and how to adapt to these changes.

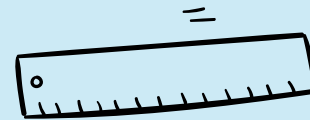
- Changes in Instruction

- Issues socially and having to find new ways to teach

- “We can’t play games. We can’t use manipulatives like we would in the classroom so, um, that-that distance between us, um you know, with that screen has really been difficult.” (T008, Grade 2)

- Issues with having students learning new skills and retaining information

- “Some of them still have skills that they have not learned since second grade. And even skills that they weren’t even able to teach in second grade because of virtual teaching last year. And the students only come to school twice a week so we are still trying to truck through everything.” (T003, Grade 3)

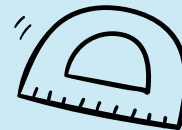
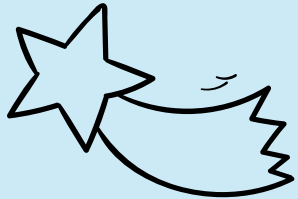


PARENTAL AND STUDENT CONCERN



Many teachers found that one of their greatest challenges was keeping their students engaged as well as conflicts with parents.

- Student Engagement
 - Teachers struggled to keep students focused and on task through a computer screen.
- Parent Interference
 - Teachers found that they had more conflicts with parents this academic year.
 - These conflicts included problems with scheduling, instruction, and lack of communication.



PARENTAL AND STUDENT CONCERN

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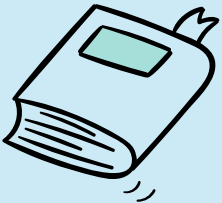


- Student Engagement

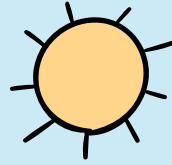
- “it’s been really difficult you know keeping kids engaged when you’re on a computer and you’re not with them. Keeping them, um, you know their focus on things when you can’t be with them and you know they can’t- they can’t work with me, I can’t work with them when they’re on a screen.” (T008, Grade 2)

- Parent Interference

- “I do have probably about three groups of parents or three sets of families that have been really hard to contact. I’ve emailed, called, messaged on their Canvas app... some parents are just really non-responsive or kind of almost had an attitude..” (T007, Grade 1).



LACK OF RESOURCES

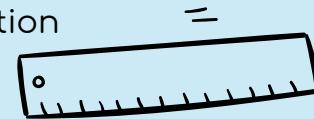


Many teachers have expressed that they were not provided with adequate materials/resources for learning and instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This lack of resources has been conveyed in multiple ways:



- **Technological difficulties**
 - Issues and lack of experience navigating the technological aspects of pandemic teaching
- **Improper training**
 - Not trained/equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to teach virtually
- **Lack of administrative assistance**
 - Little to no communication or assistance offered by administration





TECHNOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES

"I love having technology but it is the problems that we have that stop the teaching...and I think that is kind of the biggest hurdle... if my computers kicks me out of my google meets or something...it takes me more time to bring them back and start over again." (T009, Grade 2)

LACK OF RESOURCES

IMPROPER TRAINING

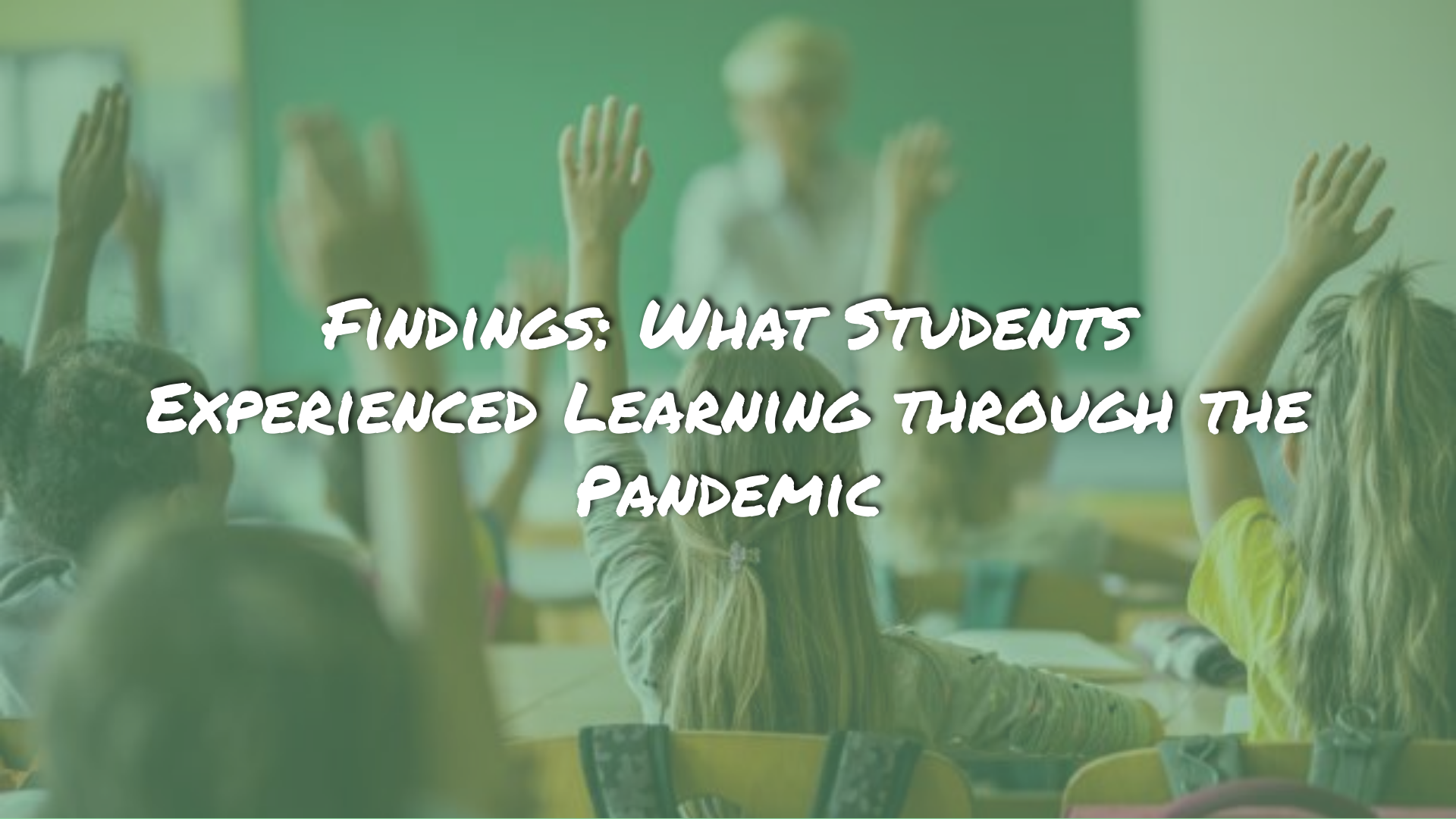
"So, whenever they cancelled last year...they were like "Okay, so now no one's coming back to school. You're going to start doing everything virtually." Like, okay? What is that? Like what does that look like?" (T006, Grade 1)



LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANCE

"It was...it was actually no communication at all (*meaning from Admin. last March*)."
(T013, Grade 3)

"She was very supportive of it, but, um, there again wasn't that clear of this is what I want you to do kind of thing."
(T002, K)

A photograph of a classroom with several students raising their hands. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent green filter. The text is centered and reads:

**FINDINGS: WHAT STUDENTS
EXPERIENCED LEARNING THROUGH THE
PANDEMIC**

MISSING OUT AND LACKING NECESSITIES

- Missing out on...
 - Interactive/ “non-critical” elements and classroom skills
 - “We haven’t done science this entire third quarter. It’s not in the power standards.” (T006, Grade 1)
- Lacking...
 - At home (materials and support/assistance), Social interaction, Hands on learning and fine motor skill development
 - “And if they don’t have paper and pencil, I can’t get them to write. If they don’t have books at home, I can’t ask them to go read something.” (T006, Grade 1)
 - “... the interactive part is really what is missing because they can’t be around each other all of the time which is really unfortunate because they can’t learn from each other.” (T003, Grade 3)

RANGE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

- Lack of parental support = students are less engaged and are not encouraged to complete tasks
 - “You have got to work with your child at home. If you do not, they are not going to be successful in kindergarten. You know, they are already behind, you’ve got to work with them so that they’re not going to get further behind.” (T014, Pre-K)
- Too much parental control = parents are doing the work for their kids, and kids are not getting the material.
 - “Their parents are telling them [the answer], that’s one of the hardest parts ... it’s gotten better, parents have started to understand that this doesn’t mean that your kid is getting an F on this assignment, it just means I know how to guide my instruction.” (T018 , K)

FALLING BEHIND AND STRUGGLING

- Falling behind...
 - Academically, Socially
- Struggling with...
 - Mental health, Technology
 - Staying engaged
 - Math and Reading
- Students finding it difficult to adapt to change.

“But academically wise, they're going to be really **behind**, I'm afraid to say.”
(T007, Grade 1)

“**Mental health** with our kids has been a thing, especially in the upper grades.”
(T004, Grade 5 SPED)

“... trying to get a five or six-year-old kid to **sit down** and **learn** on a screen for thirty to forty-five minutes.” (T017, Grades K-5)

“Because a lot of the students at first, and even now, they were scared. **They were scared**...they were like ‘what is COVID-19? what is corona?’” (T013, Grade 3)

POSITIVE NOTES

- Enhanced engagement for some (17%)
- More individualized attention (22%)
- Students are...
 - Demonstrating resilience/
Taking initiative (22%)
 - Adapting to the online environment and unfamiliar technology (39%)

“Giving them **a little more of a chance to talk about their day**, and that was the best part about being virtual.” (T012, Grade 2)

“Y’know, it -- **we’re very amazed**. Of how well they are doing, to be honest with you.” (T016, K)

“You know, um, and it has definitely **taught them to be advocates for themselves** as well. Because a lot of times, the kids will message me...” (T003, Grade 3)

“The **small numbers** that we do have **in the classroom**, that does give us a great opportunity to spend **a lot of one-on-one time** with the kids, so we do.” (T014, K)

“It has been impressive to watch them because **they are far more resilient than I’ve been** as we’ve switched.” (T004, Grade 5 SPED)



**LOOKING
TOWARD THE
FUTURE: PUBLIC
EDUCATION
POST-PANDEMIC**



NEGATIVES



Setting Kids Back

“So, you know, lots of kids that will be ascending on from each grade level all the way up, or your gonna have kids that really have to do some catching up at the beginning of the year. They're not gonna be where we would typically get them, you know, not only virtual, but we haven't gone to school five days a week all year, you know, it's just been one day a week, you know, we've just had - there's been less instruction all the way around.” (T018, K)

“Whether it's first grade, I mean, it's a ladder. *Everyone is going to be behind.* You've got high schoolers coming in that are going to be graduating and moving onto college. *They are not prepared for college.* They really are not. They- they are going to sink; they're going to drown” (T014, Pre-K)

Health and Safety

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“So my concern of course was (laughs throws arms up) more cases and having to quarantine and not being vaccinated. So I would say I was never too, I mean, there was a lot of concerns with instruction but my main concern was safety and health because well especially a five year old it's kind of hard to explain like ‘nope you need to keep your mask on’ like ‘no I know I know it's annoying but keep it on. Over your nose please!’” (T001, K)

“Some teachers are more, you know, immune compromised or have a family member that is and you have other staff members who may be in close contact with some students than others and so it's just important to remember to make sure that, you know when schools are going back that they're doing it safely and following the guidelines, um, you know just to keep all students and the staff and their families safe because then you know, the students anything they're exposed to they are taking home to their families as well, so making sure that their families are able to stay safe as well, yeah.” (T005, Grade 1)



Technology

“I think in the future teachers will incorporate technology more within their classroom, um, so even you know in virtual learning maybe isn’t an option anymore they could still you know, teachers are more comfortable with it now and there are so many more resources that we are aware of that we can then use in the classroom too,…” (T005, Grade 1)

”I think this is going to open up a new wave of, um, just technology support and getting them more comfortable with that process, because like I said, we didn’t have computers last year. These kids had no computer technology skills. Now, they’re going to come into next year with huge skills, and a lot of the SOLs will be computer based, so now they’re going to be another step ahead…” (T006, Grade 1)

Parental Involvement

“...their parents are right there with them; been involved in every part of their education and it’s like they’ve had their own little one-on-one tutor. They’re getting the instruction, getting what they are suppose to learn, and then the parents were taking it and then working with them one-on-one” (T018, K)

“It’s not me teaching your child. It’s us working together to make sure your child is getting the education that they deserve” (T006, Grade 1)

POSITIVES



POSITIVES



Teachers

“...hopefully there will be a little bit more respect in the education field.

Cause parents have now seen how hard it is and what we are working on and how much effort it takes” (T001, K)

“Teachers have learned that we are, we’re pretty flexible at this point. Um, yeah I think that’s an outcome that’s definitely uh beneficial to everybody that we can turn our house into a classroom within a matter of seconds” (T010, Grade 4)

Mental Health Awareness

“I think just education maybe putting more emphasis on social wellbeing of kids, the mental health of kids. Um, I hope that translates to teacher mental health as well. I don’t think that they’ve really spent a lot of time on that with teachers. I think they just know teachers are going to do whatever it takes to get the job done, and they haven’t spent a lot of time on that” (T008, Grade 2)

“...I am hoping this will bring forward some more change when it comes to social emotional learning and putting that more in the forefront where it belongs instead of on the back burner” (T001, K)





NEGATIVES

Socialization

”Um, I just think, y’know, there are some kids that are great virtual learners but I think the majority of kids just need to be in school. Even if they are good virtual learners, they still need social interaction.” (T007, Grade 1)

“But my children need social interaction, so my kids are going to be in school...because they really need that social interaction. It’s so, um, so important.” (T013, Grade 3)

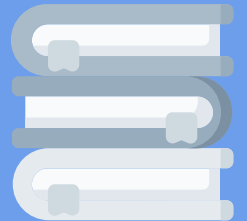
“Probably, as far as what I feel like will affect the kids the most is the social element of school. You know- Kindergarteners in particular are pretty adaptable and pretty quick learners but they didn’t get that typical initial- initiation into school that most kids get. They didn’t get to meet us, or any of their classmates, in-person until March.” (T015, K)

“Our biggest concern is the social-emotional piece for the kids, like, even though they might look okay, they might not be okay inside” (T016, K)



IMPLICATIONS + CONCLUSION

- Teaching and learning during the pandemic has been difficult for everyone
- However, both teachers and students have overcome many challenges
- We can, and should, learn from the experiences during the pandemic to improve schools
- The pandemic exposed inequalities in resources between families and schools
- Failure to address the challenges and inequalities identified will contribute to teacher attrition and contribute to greater educational and economic inequalities



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YOUTUBE LINK

Click [HERE](#) to watch a video presentation of this research

