Holes, Patches and Multiple Hats: The Experiences of Parents of Students with Special Education Needs Navigating At-Home Learning During COVID-19

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Abstract In the spring of 2020, schools across Canada and beyond closed as a public health measure to address the growing COVID-19 global pandemic. The abrupt shift to at-home learning necessitated, for many children, significant engagement by parents and family members. This chapter

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brings forward the perspectives of 36 Canadian parents of students with special education needs as they supported the learning of their children during school closures. Analyses of in-depth interviews revealed interrelated influences of community, family and school supports, parent efficacy and mental health. Stories shared by parents highlighted the weaknesses of school systems that were exposed when the first wave of the pandemic hit. Lessons learned include the need to develop and sustain networks of support for families of students with special education needs, particularly working mothers, and the importance of building authentic and productive partnerships between families and schools.

In the spring of 2020, schools across Canada and beyond closed as a public health measure to address the growing COVID-19 global pandemic. Many schools developed remote learning options for students during the physical closures, ranging from paper-based work packages dropped off on porches to virtual sharing of schoolwork and synchronous, real-time instruction (e.g. Manitoba Education, 2020). In Canada, education falls under the mandate of individual provinces and so while many commonalities existed, each provincial ministry developed their own approach to continuing learning supports for children and youth. Within provincial guidelines, individual school boards, schools and teachers then created their own practices, resulting in a wide range of learning experiences for children and youth across the country.

The abrupt shift to at-home learning necessitated, for many children—particularly those who were young or who had needs requiring greater supports—significant engagement by parents and family members. Most teachers had never imagined the learning, socialisation and relationships of a six-year-old developing via an iPad. Teachers had a range of skills in using various types of technology to enable their pedagogical and assessment approaches and many also juggled the at-home learning of their own children, the concerns of parents of children in their classes and the challenges of life in a pandemic. Parents similarly negotiated employment, childcare, eldercare, at-home learning and myriad other responsibilities. For many parents of children with special education needs (SEN), some challenges were unique and/or more significant.

The term 'children with special education needs' is very broad and encompasses any child or youth who requires academic or social-emotional supports to be able to successfully navigate formal schooling (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). Some, but not all of these students would identify as having a disability of some kind. Each province in Canada has their own inclusive and special education system which defines ways of identifying students in need of supports, determining appropriate services and funding those services. Common identifications include learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia), autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities, giftedness or visual impairments. Many students also receive services without a specific identification. Services include accommodations to grade-level work (e.g. spelling software or chunking of assignments) or human supports, such as speech language therapy or time with an education assistant. All provinces describe their approach as inclusive, and all prioritise regular education placements over congregated or segregated settings (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020).

Little is known about the ways in which services and supports available to students prior to the pandemic were offered or adjusted during physical school closures, when many students engaged with school learning virtually. In some school boards, schools organised individual sessions with educational assistants or resource teachers, differentiated materials sent home and collaborated with parents to find effective ways of continuing learning during closures. In other instances, class materials were posted online to be downloaded and completed independently by students with little adaptation or instruction. The term 'emergency' distance learning is important to keep in mind in considering the range of ways in which students were supported (or not). Certainly, most school systems did not have plans in place for the implementation of individual programmes and offering a range of human supports virtually. Everyone was caught off guard when the pandemic hit (Barbour et al., 2020; Gallagher-Mackay & Brown, 2021).

Research that has been conducted to date indicates that parents were largely dissatisfied with the academic and social-emotional supports received during school closures; this seemed to be the case for children with a range of special education needs (Masi et al., 2021; Neece et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2021; Soriano-Ferrer et al., 2021; Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2021). Particular concerns have been noted by parents about academic offerings they believed to be inappropriate or a poor fit for their child

(Garbe et al., 2020; Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020; Whitley et al., 2020).

As the profiles of students with SEN vary broadly, so too do the families in which they are situated. During periods of school closure, some single parents supported multiple children with learning disabilities in at-home learning with few other supports and other families accessed paid tutoring or respite workers. Some families were familiar with the curricular content and had skills and resources to be able to navigate the technology required by schools and others were new to the system or culture or language of instruction (Breiseth, 2020; Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). The inequities that already exist in our school systems and broader society were thus magnified.

Our team, like many others around the world, took the opportunity to engage with families to understand their experiences during the pandemic. We are members of faculties of education engaged in research surrounding the inclusion of students identified with special education needs in school. We are aware of the issues for families and educators in the system and were interested in learning from parents and families about their experiences in navigating at-home learning during school closures. We believe that these insights can inform our post-pandemic planning, as we consider how best to support children, youth and families who have been impacted by disrupted schooling. Findings can also inform the literature that has long explored the ways in which families and schools can best engage in order to meet the needs of children and youth with SEN, particularly given the tensions and barriers that continue to be documented (e.g. Bennett et al., 2020). The current chapter brings forward the perspectives of Canadian parents of students with SEN as they supported the learning of their children during COVID-19 school closures.

METHOD

In order to deepen our understanding of the experiences of parents of children with SEN through a pan-Canadian lens, we conducted a mixed-methods study in the spring and summer of 2020. In the current paper, we report on the interview phase that explored the perceptions of 36 Canadian parents of children with SEN as they engaged in remote emergency learning at home.

Participants

Participants were eligible for participation if they were a parent/guardian of a child or adolescent enrolled in a school (e.g. not normally home-schooled) with a special education need. This was defined for potential participants as: 'they receive special education services and/or have a formal identification or diagnosis and/or have an individual education, program or behaviour plan'. Participants were recruited through paid ads on Facebook/Instagram, social media channels of the research team and through provincial advocacy organisations. Interested parents reached out via e-mail or indicated their interest in an interview once they completed the survey. In total, 36 parents took part in an interview. Of the participants 8% were fathers, 89% were mothers and one was an aunt with full custody. Most participants (86%) were from Ontario, the largest province in Canada, and the rest were from other provinces. Most of the children with special education needs were in Grades 1 through 6 (72%), with 22% in Grades 7 or 8 and the remaining 6% spanning Grades 9 through 12. Twenty-five of the families had one child living at home, 44% had two and 31% had three or more. Parents reported a range of identifications for their children, including intellectual disabilities, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Data Collection

The interview guide began by asking parents to first talk about the educational journey of their child with SEN and then to reflect on the experience of COVID-19 school closures for their family, including engagement with at-home learning. Conversations were wide-ranging and loosely structured. Parents were interviewed virtually, either by Zoom or by telephone. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted between 28 minutes and 2 hours, with an average of 55 minutes.

Analyses

The main purpose of the qualitative coding was to emphasise the voices and experiences of the participants related to at-home learning during the spring of 2020. Thematic analysis was utilised as it is an approach for

examining different perspectives in participants, finding similarities and differences in responses, and discovering unanticipated responses (Nowell et al., 2017). Our research team first divided the transcripts, reading and re-reading and noting initial codes that emerged. Approximately 40% of the transcripts were read by two or more team members. In an effort to improve the credibility and conformability of our data, analyses and interpretation (Elo et al., 2014), we next came together and discussed the codes and engaged in a collaborative, iterative process of identifying and naming themes emerging across the transcripts. Themes were identified by reading the coded segments and looking for patterns that existed in the collective stories of our participants. We were interested in the common experiences shared by all families. To illustrate the themes, we provide quotes from the transcripts of various participants.

FINDINGS

Our analyses revealed five major themes that capture the experiences of parents during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring of 2020: (i) *Holes and patches in the support net*; (ii) *School and teachers: What do we want? What can they offer?*; (iii) *Choosing pandemic priorities* (iv) *I was a parent. Now I'm a teacher and a parent*; and (v) *Stress and hardship*. These themes are closely related to one another, and the stories families shared often wove together aspects of each. Thus, although we outline these themes in a linear fashion, they should be thought of as interconnected and reciprocally related. In describing our findings, we have given as much space as possible to the voices of parents by presenting their experiences in their own words that they shared with us in interviews. We have not paraphrased or interpreted meaning so that the reader can gain insight into the issues that they were facing during the early stages of the pandemic.

Holes and Patches in Support Nets

The first theme that emerged from the experiences shared by families relates to their perception of supports that they needed and/or were receiving. Examples were often related to caregivers or workers who, prior to COVID, had served as integral parts of the support net surrounding the children and their families. These individuals served many roles for the families including respite, to allow parents time for themselves or to take care of other children or responsibilities. The absence of respite was noted

in particular because of the school closures, resulting in parents being home with their children full-time. Some parents noted how the lack of respite they received was negatively affecting their wellbeing and those of their family broadly. One mother reflected:

> For a lot of typical parents but specifically parents with special needs kids, it's respite to have your children go to school and to be able to have that break and a lot of parents don't have that and people who are working from home or who are not working because of COVID or not working in general, they're now, let me use the word they're stuck at home 24 hours a day without the oftentimes proper training to deal with these behaviors of children. And there's going to be some huge breakdowns.

Some families were able to find and fund individuals to come to their home during the day while others spoke of these in terms of their absence and the impact that they had on themselves and their child(ren). One mother shared:

> So normally my daughter does have a caregiver. She does have quite a few physical limitations. So she's also quite tall and heavy for her age. So she needs basically, you know, one on one support all the time. But I didn't have any caregiving assistance. Like when I was home in the spring, it was just me and the kids until the summer.

Other families pointed to the supports that existed within their families and how essential these were to the ability of themselves and their family to function and to juggle the many responsibilities they had in the midst of a pandemic. One mother shared her experience in maintaining a demanding full-time position in the mental health field while also supporting her children with special needs during school closures. She described 'being isolated from my co-workers and from the support system as well. And educating two special needs children at the same time, and my husband works night shifts, so he was not able during the day to support'. For participants who did have spouses, these were commonly mentioned as essential sources of support, as parents navigated and negotiated the daily demands.

> Yeah, I mean, you know it's hard I mean we're—we're very fortunate because we're two. You know, we both have work, we have good resources we're both, you know we have—both my husband and I have graduate

degrees, I think we, we really value education and we're prepared to put in the time and continue working with her. And I realise it's not, you know not every family is in that situation.

A few parents noted the support they felt from other parents, particularly those of children with special education needs. One mother started a Facebook group for parents to share views, experiences and strategies and was amazed at the 'incredible' response, with 120 members joining in two weeks. Others connected via virtual platforms, either personally or as part of established advocacy groups (e.g. autism or dyslexia-focused organisations). One mother of four, who was also teaching full time during school closures, shared her approach to garnering support.

And I think I've learned through this whole experience that, you know, I've always tried to be strong, you know, and do things on my own. But I've gotten to that point during this time that I just realised I can't. Like I just can't like I literally could not. So I've reached like, I reached out to that friend and said, Listen, like you said, you want to help. This is what I need. I need a meal. Can you just bring me a meal, right? Anyways, the meal turned into three weeks of meals, right? So even though we're far apart, I realised I have to ask more, right? Like because people can't see you. So like, you could just be in your home and if you didn't reach out like it could just get bad, right? So the importance of really just reaching for help when you're really struggling and I guess I worry about the people that are just trying to be strong through whatever they're going through because you can't do it on your own right?

School and Teachers: What Do We Want? What Can They Offer?

Parents reported a wide range of interactions, communication, resources and supports that they received from schools while buildings were physically closed. The range was notable, given that many parents were in the same province or even the same school board. Stories shared by parents relating to schools and teachers often focused on the materials and resources they received, whether these were available, and whether they were a good fit with the learning needs of the child. These discussions tended to highlight the academic and curricular learning areas that were of concern for some parents.

Unfortunately because of her learning disability, most of the resources that are online are not you know adapted to her and one of us still needs to be there with her to teach her how to use some of the online resources…her school has been a big disappointment—we've really not received a lot of support from her teacher, so that's—that's been a challenge.

Parents also spoke about the human aspects of supports from schools—whether the teacher checked in on them, communicated understanding and social-emotional support, and were viewed by the parent as caring about and understanding the child and family. Many families noted the efforts their child(ren)'s teachers made, while as many others noted the absence of communication, offers of help or clear expectations. One parent described how 'her teacher and her EA said that they were available anytime all the time for whatever she needed just call them and you know, and so that's nice because you know they did make themselves available to everybody a lot'.

Many parents believed that teachers were ill-prepared to support their children during school closures. Even those who noted the good intentions and efforts of teachers also expressed their dissatisfaction with the actual supports that were provided for their child(ren) and family.

for kids with special needs a) to lose the routine and b) to lose the progress that they made during the year because her teacher is awesome. I'm so thankful she's at the school she's at. And the teacher…she's really been a lifeline in all this but again, virtually there's only so much you can do and she's connecting with them every day, from 12:00 to 1:00. So that's providing some consistency. But again, the rest of it is independent working. And that's really hard for kids with special needs.

The varied expectations of families, with respect to what they wanted from school, were evident throughout our interviews. Some felt that too much was being expected of children and families during physical school closures and were resistant to pressures they felt from school. These families felt supported by teachers and principals who let them know that the work being sent home was optional, and that they needed to make decisions that worked for their child and family. Other families were concerned about their children falling behind and described self-imposed pressures. These families sought direct supports from EAs, teachers or other school

support staff, as well as materials that were aligned with the level that their child was at currently.

As described in the Methods section, our sample had far more elementary-aged children than secondary-aged. The few parents of older youth described challenges unique to the structure and academic emphasis of high schools. The emphasis on grades and credit attainment weighed heavily for some. These parents highlighted the disparity between the approaches and skill sets of teachers. Their child might have synchronous instruction, rapid and detailed feedback on assignments, recorded video supports and frequent check-ins in one course with the opposite in the next. They also spoke about the difficulty of shifting a complex school support structure to a virtual environment.

> Yeah, I just find as soon as the school turns virtual, the resource room goes totally quiet, right? Because I just don't think they know how to manage it. Or how to support the kids. And yeah, it's really, really tough, to be a kid with a learning disability trying to learn remotely and you have ADHD and you can't focus and, you know. And now it matters because it's grade 11. You're feeling isolated and disconnected. It's a lot.

Choosing Pandemic Priorities

Through sharing their stories about supporting their children during the pandemic, priorities were revealed. Parents described having to make choices about whether or not to focus their time and energy on, for example, keeping up with their child's schoolwork, completing paid work hours, parenting effectively, protecting their own mental health and/or ensuring the social-emotional wellbeing of the family.

Many families decided that their efforts were not well placed on schoolwork. This decision often emerged following initial attempts to engage their children in synchronous classes, or in completing materials sent home. Some parents described how their children resisted the remote learning and in fact found that their child's mental health was being negatively impacted through the process of attempting to complete schoolwork in this way. Many questioned the value and the learning that were really resulting from the remote offerings.

> It's too much trouble for family to try and make something that doesn't work for him. Why are we going to do that to his teacher to make him go

through something that's going to be a negative experience for all of them? And, isn't going to provide him with any real, like, educational opportunities? So, we're just not going to do that, because he's been having a really tough time the last couple weeks, and his self-injury is like through the roof. So, we don't want to struggle through that.

The decision about which areas to focus on and which to 'let go' also depended on the learning profile of the child and the parents' beliefs about areas most important to their development. In one example, a parent chose to focus on reading and English Language Arts, an area of difficulty for the child and one she felt was of major importance, and to 'not stress about French'. Another family prioritised intensive private tutoring for their child with dyslexia in place of Language Arts instruction, believing that it was likely to make the biggest difference in ensuring progress for their child. Yet another felt that 'things that are going to matter most for life skills' were priority, particularly core language and math applications.

Some parents went further to describe their resistance to the efforts of schools to continue offering schoolwork during the initial pandemic closures. One mother described how she was 'diametrically opposed to it. So like, I'm not taking part in it. Like, what are you going to do? Come after me for truancy? You closed the school'. Others resisted because of the needs of their child. One parent described attachment issues experienced by her adopted child and the necessity of her and her husband remaining firmly and exclusively as '"parents" period, like our job is kind of unconditional love'.

The pressure to continue to fulfil obligations for paid work, generally but not exclusively from home, was also described by many parents. Work often took precedence over engaging in remote learning. Parents also described the significant challenges of fitting their paid work and school support into each day. Some negotiated changes to their work schedule with employers or created alternating schedules with partners or other family members to be able to organise their days and meet all of their obligations.

Being a single parent of three girls and two with special needs and working full time… If you're working full time, you just don't have…. like I kind of joked with all my friends and people that have a connection within the special needs world or just parents in general, when this whole thing happened and said, like, forget it. Like either your work is suffering or your kids are on

screens or you know, you can't all of a sudden become a homeschooler to children when you're managing a full-time job, right?

In fact all of the parents talked about their expanding role—from parent, and perhaps educational advocate and homework coach, to that of teacher.

I Was a Parent. Now I'm a Teacher and a Parent

Parents described many ways that their role shifted during school closures, from partnering in the education of their child, to feeling significantly or entirely responsible for academic learning. 'So I was basically his EA, and his teacher and his mom. And it was super stressful'. This theme was also woven through all of the others. Supports mattered in relation to parents' efforts to ensure their children kept up with learning and development. Pandemic priorities determined how invested parents chose or felt pressured to be with their children's schoolwork.

The degree to which parents interacted with the education system and their child(ren)'s teachers prior to the pandemic varied, with most parents in our sample describing regular contact at a minimum. Some parents detailed extensive involvement, frequent communication, advocacy and co-planning in the years leading up to the pandemic. However, while many parents were already spending hours engaged in the education of their children, the role of teacher was new for them. Many felt unprepared for this. They struggled to engage their children in learning and to teach concepts and content knowledge, particularly if work sent home needed to be adapted or modified to suit their child(ren)'s ways of learning or readiness. They questioned themselves, their skills and their ability to maintain effective teaching, along with the rest of their responsibilities. Many parents also described the contrast between what they felt was required of them to support their child who had special education needs and the relatively independent learning of their other children.

> I haven't heard from the teacher. And we're literally just doing all of it. We're not even modifying it, which I guess maybe is why it's taking so long, but there's some times where 'll get a question and I just go, "we're just not doing that one". Yeah, if I think it's complicated. She has a hard time. Like I said, we've mostly done math, we do some writing. I try to scribe and it's pretty, like I don't know what the teacher is looking for, for her, for her

level. So I don't know… hopefully it's okay. That's pretty much it. Like I'm pretty much deciding. Okay, is that enough? Do I think she should write more? Do I think, you know, is that what the teacher is kind of looking for? Did she get the point? So I'm kind of having to figure that out and like that I'm not a teacher. So I'm guessing.

Many examples emerged of creative approaches parents adopted, particularly those who had the time, a background in childcare and/or solid understanding of the content, as they figured out what worked for their child and their learning. Some developed schedules for the day, with work periods mixed in with outdoor breaks and independent screen time. Others realised that giving their child some choice in what work they did or how they completed it helped motivate them.

One of the things that I tried to do and you know, I'm not a teacher, it's not a skill that I have. But realising, you know, perhaps if I link this to something that they're interested in, then maybe it will kind of enhance the learning a little bit. So you know, when I'm doing math with my kid, it's all like Lego Star Wars figures. So he's like adding and subtracting the number of figures that it will take to, you know, defeat Darth Vader or whatever. But H's learning at the moment. H's doing these things. And now he loves math. And I think that is helpful.

The few parents of high school students described efforts to master curricular content to be able to teach it to their adolescents and the tensions emerging within this role, particularly with respect to the long-term implications.

Yeah, totally unrealistic to have to do this right. Because you work all day. You come home, you make dinner and you switch right on, until you go to bed. Right? It's not an ideal position to be in. I don't really know the curriculum. So I'm having to try and figure it out where we don't have access to textbooks. We weren't given any virtual access to textbooks. So you're trying to Google Khan Academy and figure things out, and then try and teach your kid about it. It feels really arduous. Right? And very unrealistic. And then I just worry, like, what is he getting out of this? And you know, should he just do a whole extra year of high school? Has he really learned how to learn? And like, you know, have I taught him right? I don't really know. Like, he's done okay. It's not even about the grades. It's about like, does he have the skills? And, what he missed out on during this time; socially

and in terms of his ability to ask for help, and, you know, understand what he knows and what he doesn't know.

One by-product of adopting a teaching role noted by many parents was how much they learned about their child, their ways of learning and their skills and knowledge in various areas. Even those who described very high levels of involvement with school expressed surprise and a deepened understanding of where their children were at. For some, this actually shaped their vision for the future of their child(ren).

It's allowed me to kind of, I guess, maybe come to terms with what the future will be like, and what I need to start planning now to make sure that it's successful for her. Which I think it sucks in some ways, but it's a really good thing for me to start thinking about.

Stress and Hardship: This Is Just. So. Hard

The unavailability of supports, juggling and balancing of priorities, and engaging in teaching or at least monitoring school-assigned learning compounded for many parents in ways that left them feeling frustrated, exhausted and overwhelmed. Not to mention that there was a global pandemic raging that required parents to keep themselves and their children safe and calm. The lack of respite or any breaks described in the first theme was raised by many parents as a barrier to them being able to better manage the stresses of supporting their children at home.

For parents who continued to work, stress was often associated with time and conflicting priorities throughout the day. One mother shared that '…my partner and I are working from home, and my partner put it best when he said that it's basically three jobs for two people'. Stress also emerged from the perceived lack of control and choices available to families. The school and societal shut-downs meant that options were limited and families' lives and movements were at the mercy of public health decisions. Those who needed to work for financial reasons felt the weight of trying to do it all—to maintain their identity as a reliable employee alongside a parent invested in the wellbeing of their child. Single parents in the sample noted the absence of a partner in sharing the load and felt that this added to their struggle and stress level and the lack of choices they had before them.

So I don't have a choice but to continue working hard and overworking and burning myself out and all these things. Because like, I have a responsibility, I love my child, I need to keep my job, right. So I'm not in a position where I can make any choices.

Many parents shared worries they had during school closures. They worried about their child(ren)'s wellbeing—were they getting too much screen time? Too little math time? Too little interaction with other children or adults? Would missing out on occupational therapy mean less growth over their lifespan? Would COVID-19 mean that their child might not learn how to read? They also worried about their efforts as parents— were their teaching efforts jeopardising their relationship with their child? Were they doing the right things in teaching their child? Should they be doing more? Less? Should they be following their child's lead, the advice of teachers, their colleagues or the media? 'As a parent, you feel like it's your responsibility. So you do it but it's exhausting. And then you just worry, is it the right thing to do?'

And this is what we worry the most of our, our kids I mean, people with Down syndrome, and I don't want to generalize but they thrive in social settings right and this is how I've seen my daughter grow and learn is with her peers with other kids age with, you know, mentors and then she, my daughter is very physically active so she knows a lot of extracurricular sports and activities and now that this is all gone. I personally don't worry that much about academics, I mean she's going to catch up eventually but what is the impact of her not having all these social interactions?

Discussion

Overall, the parents in our study point to a system for students with special education needs that was exposed for its weaknesses when remote emergency learning during the first wave of the pandemic hit. As we noted, no-one was expecting this pandemic nor the continued upset it has caused in the school system. However, there are a number of lessons that we can learn from the first wave. These lessons emerge from the themes presented. Understanding the holes in the academic and social support networks of parents, the differential response of schools and parent reactions to these issues helps us discuss the implications for families of students with SEN going forward.

Perceived Support and Parent Efficacy

Past research indicates a need for parents to feel supported in their role as caregiver of children with disabilities, in order to feel that they are capable in their role (Resch et al., 2010). While some research indicates that parents feel overburdened (Whiting et al., 2019), it is also the case that some parents do feel capable of coping with the day-to-day world of parenting a child with a disability (e.g. Dempsey et al., 2009; Woodman & Hauser-Cram, 2013). It is believed that these parents have the resilience to face adversity—similar to what one might expect in the population of parents in general (Gavidia-Payne et al., 2015).

In our research, when parents had the skills necessary to bounce back (e.g. understanding their emotions, knowing what tangible supports they need to cope, who they can contact to get those emotional and tangible support networks and taking care of themselves), their sense of confidence increased. The parents that we interviewed shared great understanding of their child(ren) and their needs, even going so far as to say that they weren't going to engage in the work sent home as it was too stressful and a poor fit for a child's needs. Those parents that had support from other family members or friends or who could afford to pay for it, discussed the ability to share the responsibilities. Unfortunately, for those that did not have these supports, they often questioned how they were doing as parents. As we move forward, it is important to continue to engage parents in networks that will help them to feel capable and confident in their role of parent of a child with a disability.

Parents' Mental Health

As has been reported in larger quantitative survey research (e.g. Masi et al., 2021), the mental health of parents was impacted by the pandemic. Mental health, including coping skills, depression and anxiety, has been identified for many years as a crucial variable affecting the ability of parents to manage, navigate and experience joy and optimism in life with a child with disabilities (Aunos et al., 2008; Bonis, 2016; Minnes et al., 2015; Wade et al., 2015). Parents in our study spoke of the isolation factor and the stress associated with being caregiver and teacher with the weight of both of those roles being heavy in the moment as well as worrying about the future of their children.

Although work has been found to have positive benefits to some parents of children with disabilities (Morris, 2014), parents can also experience stress when trying to balance the two, especially when employment is demanding or inflexible (Brown & Clark, 2017). Among the parents that we interviewed, efforts to manage both work and parenting effectively were more pronounced, as these roles took place simultaneously, often at the same kitchen table. The pandemic has focused attention on the heavy burden placed on women and mothers to juggle multiple roles, with concerns raised about the short- and long-term consequences (Collins et al., 2021; Halley et al., 2021; Linos et al., 2021). Our research makes clear the extensive efforts that mothers of children with SEN have undertaken in an effort to maintain their career path and ensure financial stability for their family, while trying to ensure that their children continue to learn and develop.

Parent Involvement

Parents have extensive knowledge about their children based on years of experience, see themselves as experts about their children and report both challenges and benefits associated with sharing their knowledge with educators (Boshoff et al., 2018). When parents are involved in their children's education, students achieve better academic outcomes (Ma et al., 2016). Parents who learn how to advocate for their children feel better able to work with schools (Cadieux et al., 2019). Unfortunately, it is also true that strained relationships can occur when children are struggling in school (Mautone et al., 2014).

What was very evident in our discussions with parents is that they had a great deal of sympathy for the teachers and the situation that remote emergency learning created for teaching with technology while they too were dealing with the ramifications of the pandemic in their own lives. Having to be both parent and teacher provided great insight into the work of teachers and how much it was missed when the parent had to try to be all things to their child. Parents who had built positive relationships with their child(ren)'s teachers prior to the pandemic still presented them in a positive way, even if school was not going well for their child currently.

Tensions still arose, however, in particular among parents who had other children without disabilities. These parents noted the contrast between the learning opportunities offered for their neurotypical child compared to the limited meaningful or appropriate offerings for their

child with SEN. Further tensions occurred when parents did not hear from the school at all. The issue of *us* versus *them* was presented by a few parents, who continued to be concerned about the lack of engagement for their children. It is not surprising that the experiences of school prior to the pandemic continue to play out during the pandemic, and that there are parents who feel schools are doing their best while others feel schools could be doing better. As always, the goal should be for schools and parents to work together for the benefit of the student.

Conclusion

Most of us are dreaming of a world post-COVID and hoping to leave memories of physical distancing, school closures, restricted travel and ever-present fears about health and safety behind. This unexpected and hopefully rare event has, however, allowed for a magnified focus on many of our social systems, including schools and the particular experiences of those with SEN.

The themes identified in our research were led by the voices of families who navigated at-home learning during the spring of 2020, and revealed the challenges parents faced, often in the face of support systems full of holes. Many of our participants described their increased understanding of the strengths, needs and learning preferences of their children as they adopted newly expanded and challenging roles as parent-teachers. These themes were interwoven in the stories of families and led to the discussion of lessons learned. Moving forward, we utilise these themes and lessons to raise new questions about the education of students identified with SEN especially surrounding collaborative relationships between school and home. Can parents who are able be more of a partner in their child's education? Can there be time and space for this in our often-overloaded school schedules? How can we create partnerships with those who are disengaged or without the capital to be able to navigate the pathways into and through school systems? How can educators and system leaders develop a real understanding of the complexities involved in parenting, working and supporting the learning of children with special education needs?

Hopefully, the spotlight forced on our schools, communities and support systems by the COVID-19 pandemic will inform efforts that support the learning, wellbeing and long-term success for students with SEN. Centring student and family voices in these efforts is a necessary first step.

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