Perspectives of Parents of Children With Special Education Needs: Self-Efficacy and School Supports During COVID-19 School Closures

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Abstract

The role of parents in supporting at-home learning increased dramatically in the spring of 2020. Schools in most Canadian provinces closed physically due to COVID-19, and remote-learning options were quickly developed to ensure continued education for students. Many students with special educational needs, who typically benefit from a range of supports from school, became reliant on parents to provide means of access to and participation in remote learning. Using an online survey, we explored the perceptions of 263 Canadian parents of children with special education needs with regard to their self-efficacy and supports from schools. We conducted multiple linear regression analyses for each of three dependent variables (academic supports, parent self-efficacy, and social-emotional supports); independent variables included student grade level, education placement, and total school-provided supports prior to the pandemic. Findings indicated that most parents engaged in remote learning and lacked confidence in their ability to support the learning of their child. Parent self-efficacy was related to social-emotional supports from schools and not to academic supports. Parents of children in elementary grades, and of those who had received more supports from school prior to

> *COVID-19, reported feeling better supported in social-emotional areas by the school. Schools should explore ways of building strong collaborative relationships between educators and parents, as well as continuing to find ways of supporting families and students in both in- and out-of-school places. The pandemic, and school-building closures, have reminded us how partnerships between parents and schools are crucial for the well-being of all involved.*

As COVID-19 spread across the world in the spring of 2020, many countries closed in-person schooling in an effort to curb transmission of the virus. In Canada, as in many other parts of the world, schools quickly developed and offered remote-learning options, including online learning, in an effort to ensure continued education for students. This emergency-response teaching had significant implications for individuals with special education needs (e.g., Toste et al., 2021), their teachers (e.g., Schuck & Lambert, 2020), and their families (e.g., Shorey et al., 2021).

Individuals with special education needs represent a significant portion of the total student population. In Canada, these numbers fall between 10% and 20% of students, or as many as 1 million students (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2017; Government of Alberta, 2021). Though the specific strengths and needs of students vary tremendously, the schooling experience for most students with special education needs includes supports related to academic or social-emotional development. The most common identifications for students with special education needs include learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and emotional and behavioural difficulties; in some provinces students can also be identified as gifted and qualify for specialized services. Depending on the unique profile of the student with special education needs, they may need a range of support services at school. Most require differentiated instruction, individual education plans, and accommodations. Some with more complex needs benefit from educational assistants and therapeutic services like speech and language or occupational therapy, which have been reduced due to pandemic restrictions (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Toseeb et al., 2020). In terms of class placement, most students with special education needs in Canada are educated in regular classrooms, with varying levels of "pull out" service provision; segregated classes and a small number of segregated schools also exist in most provinces and territories (Reid et al., 2018; Hutchinson & Specht, 2019).

Impact of COVID-19 on Students With Special Education Needs

Some researchers have used the term "COVID slide" to refer to concerns about the effect of the abrupt end to in-person schooling that most students experienced in 2020 on academic knowledge and skills (Gordon et al., 2020; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020; Martin, 2020; Rodriguez, 2021). For students with special education needs, who rely on specific additional supports and services and who had been more likely than their peers to experience a lack of school success even before COVID-19 (de Bruin et al., 2013; Jitendra et al., 2018), learning gaps and social-emotional skill regression were likely to be magnified (Asbury et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

While little is yet known about outcomes for students with special education needs as a result of the pandemic, research has begun to explore the perceptions of parents regarding their child's experiences and behaviours during this time (Whitley et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2021). Some parents perceived poorer mental and physical health in their children (Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Masi et al., 2021). In one study focused on children with dyslexia (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020), parents reported greater conduct problems, as well as increases in emotional and attention issues, in their children. However, in a study by Shorey et al. (2021), parents of children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) noted improvements in behaviour, while parents of children with autism observed the opposite. Across other studies, parents described concerns for their children, including a perceived lack of developmental and educational progress for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (Neece et al., 2020), concerns about loss of children's support networks and routines (Asbury et al., 2021), and concerns surrounding disruptions to the social life of children with special education needs (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020). Research is clearly emerging and is mixed regarding parent perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on their children, particularly when the varying contexts of student and family resources and needs are considered.

In developing a better understanding of the ways in which the learning and well-being of students with special education needs have been affected by COVID-19 closures, it is important to recognize the key role of parents and families. After all, most students who have been engaged in learning during school closures have done so at home, and, in particular, those who were young or who had more complex needs were fully reliant on families to provide means of access and participation. According to Bérubé et al. (2021), "parents often bear much of the responsibility for the quality of the learning experience their child will have access to" (p. 7). In many situations, parents have been called upon to motivate, engage, instruct, and monitor learning and school work. As was true prior to COVID-19, parents vary in terms of their available resources. Extensive research has documented the relationship between parents' educational, social, financial, linguistic, and cultural capital and their ability to support the educational needs of their children (e.g., Alvez et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2020; Trainor, 2010; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). In the context of the pandemic, parents have needed to be able to make sense of educational materials; to navigate the social and cultural norms of schooling; to have available time, energy; and access to necessary resources like computers and high-speed internet in order for their children to participate in learning opportunities provided.

Given the range of skills and resources among parents, many were unprepared or unable to provide the extensive support some students require (Breiseth, 2020; Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020). These disparities have raised concerns about equitable access to learning opportunities during school closures (Mundy & Gallagher-Mackay, 2021). These findings have suggested that understanding the role of parents in at-home learning is of great importance in understanding the experiences of students with special education needs during COVID. In the current study, we explored the perceptions of Canadian parents of children with special education needs related to their self-efficacy and supports from schools during the first period of school-building closure due to COVID-19.

Parent Self-Efficacy for Supporting Learning During COVID-19

Self-efficacy is broadly defined as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully accomplish a task (Bandura, 1986)**.** Self-efficacy is domain-specific, and the bulk of the extensive literature exploring self-efficacy among parents is focused on *parenting self-efficacy*, in other words, the belief of the parent in their ability to perform the parenting role successfully (e.g., Wittkowski et al., 2017). The body of research exploring self-efficacy of parents related to supporting their child's learning[1] is much smaller.

In general, parents who have higher self-efficacy related to their child's learning, and thus confidence in their ability to help their children, are more likely to be involved in their children's education. They also hold and convey more positive beliefs about competency to their children, who in turn develop greater self-efficacy and ultimately experience better academic outcomes (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996; O'Sullivan et al., 2014; Tazouti & Jarlégan, 2019). Higher self-efficacy has also been found to be related to low parent–child conflict during school work (de Jong et al., 2021) and to be influenced by socio-economic and family-related variables.

Some research has shown that parents of students with ADHD have lower self-efficacy for learning, (e.g., Ogg et al., 2020; Rogers et al., 2009); however, very little literature has explored the learning-related self-efficacy of parents of students with special education needs more broadly. In terms of general or parenting-specific self-efficacy, a sizable body of literature exists that documents the manipulable nature of self-efficacy and the range of interventions that can have a significant impact, ultimately improving outcomes for children and families (e.g., Hohlfeld et al., 2018; Ruane & Carr, 2019). Given the key role of parents in their child's learning during school closures, their self-efficacy in supporting their child in completing school work and engaging in school-provided learning opportunities is of particular importance. While parent self-efficacy for learning has been explored in a small number of studies throughout the pandemic (e.g., de Jong et al., 2021; Panaoura, 2020), very few have been published that relate specifically to students with special education needs.

In extending our understanding of parent self-efficacy for learning during school closures, our study also explored the role that child-related variables play, namely, grade level, school supports prior to COVID-19, and class or school placement. Most of the existing self-efficacy literature is focused on parents of young children, during the period when they have the greatest responsibility and role in caring for their children. However, among families of children with special education needs, this is not always the case: some children will require significant learning and other supports into adolescence and adulthood. Many discussions of the role of parents during COVID-19 have highlighted the relatively greater needs of young students in accessing and participating in remote learning (aged 3–5 years [Dong et al., 2020]; toddlers and preschool-aged [Szente, 2020]). With respect to our study, we were interested in whether parent self-efficacy for learning was influenced by the grade level of their child, and whether those with younger children noted

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[1] Parent self-efficacy related to support of their child's learning will be referred to more briefly as "parent self-efficacy for learning" in the remainder of the article.

greater challenges in this area, as is suggested in the literature. Alongside grade level, we were also interested in whether the number of supports and type of placement (e.g., general education classes or more specialized settings) experienced by the child prior to COVID-19 played a role in parent self-efficacy for learning. We chose these variables in order to capture the extent of supports a child might require by virtue of the severity of their disability or disabilities. Although the research base is very limited, in some studies the disability severity of the child has been found to negatively influence parent self-efficacy (Hastings & Symes, 2002; Weiss et al., 2016). For example, Hastings and Symes (2002) reported a significant negative relationship between therapeutic self-efficacy and severity among 85 mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder, a relationship that was mediated by maternal stress. Weiss et al. (2016) similarly found that a number of variables were significantly related to parent self-efficacy. Parents felt less efficacious if their children were older, had more severe symptomatology, or faced multiple perceived barriers to service access. In contrast, Russell and Ingersoll (2021) did not find that the perceived global and therapeutic-specific self-efficacy of 51 parents of children with autism spectrum disorder was predicted by ratings of autism severity. Our study will add to this limited research base.

School Supports During COVID-19

While schools were closed physically to students in the spring of 2020, a range of supports continued to be offered by educators and school administrators, including lending needed technological devices, differentiating online offerings, providing assignments in a variety of formats, and, in fewer instances, organizing individual or small-group instruction (e.g., Manitoba Education, n.d.). Several studies have found that parents were largely dissatisfied with the academic and social-emotional supports received for their child during the first four months of the pandemic (e.g., Cost et al., 2021); this was particularly true 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). Given the emergency nature of the shift to at-home learning in the spring of 2020, it is not surprising that designing and implementing remote-learning options in inclusive ways that reflected differentiation and alignment with the goals and supports required through students' individual education plans would present challenges for educators and school staff. Parents noted particular concerns about academic offerings they believed to be inappropriate or a poor fit for their child (Garbe et al., 2020; Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020).

Emerging research is beginning to analyze the experiences of the families of students with special education needs around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Bailey et al., 2021; Castro-Kemp & Mahmud, 2021; Mumbardó-Adam et al., 2021; Nusser, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). However, much more research is needed, particularly given the ways in which our understanding of learning during COVID-19 continue to inform our social and educational systems. We have little empirical insight into the ways in which families of students at different grade levels, or those of children with complex needs, have experienced learning at home during school closures. The current study thus explored the perspectives of Canadian parents of students with special education needs during the first COVID-19 school closures in the spring of 2020, specifically regarding the relationship between their self-efficacy for learning, and the academic and social-emotional supports

received from school as well as the influence of key student-level variables, namely grade level, student support needs, and type of educational placement.

Methods

In order to deepen our understanding of the experiences of parents of children with special education needs through a Canadian lens, we conducted a mixed-methods study in the spring and summer of 2020. In the current article, we report on the survey portion, which explored the perceptions of Canadian parents of children with special education needs as they reflected on their engagement in remote, emergency learning at home.

Participants

Participants were eligible for inclusion in the research if they were a parent/guardian of a child or adolescent with a special education need who was enrolled in a school (not normally homeschooled). This was defined for potential participants as "the child receives special education services and/or has a formal identification or diagnosis and/or has an individual education program or behaviour plan." Participants were recruited through paid ads on Facebook and Instagram, the social-media channels available to the research team, and provincial advocacy organizations.

In total, 397 responses were received. Of these, 263 (66%; 244 in English and 19 in French) were retained for analysis as they contained responses to all the variables of interest. Ninety-two percent of participants identified as mothers (others identified as fathers or as an aunt), and most were in the province of Ontario (Ontario: 57%, British Columbia: 16%, Alberta: 9%, Nova Scotia: 7%, all remaining provinces: 11%). All provinces but no territories had some representation. An overview of family and child-related contextual variables is summarized in Table 1.

Measure

The 15-minute survey was available in English and French and included a consent form and questions related to (a) family-related contextual variables, (b) child-related contextual variables, (c) parent self-efficacy for learning, (d) parent satisfaction with academic supports from schools, and (e) parent satisfaction with social-emotional supports from schools.

Demographic family variables included the number of school-aged children in the home, the province in which the family was located, the relationship between the individual completing the survey and the child who was the focus of the survey, the availability of internet and devices in the home, and whether or not the respondent was engaging with their child in remote learning. Child-specific variables included their age, grade, educational identification or diagnoses (e.g., learning disability), type of placement (e.g., general classroom), and the supports they typically received at school (e.g., educational assistant); see Table 1). Three key child-specific variables (academic supports, parent self-efficacy for learning, and social-emotional support) were included in the analyses; dichotomous variables were created to capture grade level (66% elementary, Grades K–6; 34% secondary, Grades 7–12) and education placement (73%: regular class all or most of the

time; 27% special class or school all or most of the time). A continuous total-support score was created by summing all of the supports that respondents indicated their child had received at school prior to COVID-19 school closures (range of 1 to 8; $M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.83$).

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Table 1
Participant Demographics

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Variable	M (SD)
Number of school-aged children	1.88 (.89)
Age of child	10.43 (3.77)
Grade of child	
K–3	40%
4–6	26%
7–9	20%
10–12	14%
Most common identifications/diagnoses*	
Autism spectrum disorder	41%
Emotional/Behavioural disorder	33%
Intellectual/Developmental disability	29%
Learning disabilities	25%
Education placement/context	
Regular class with supports	73%
Equal mix of regular and special education	12%
Special education class	12%
Special education school	3%

*Parents selected multiple options; category does not add up to 100%.

Parents' sense of self-efficacy related to their child's learning was assessed using the first 6 of 7 items in the Parental Self-Efficacy for Helping the Child Succeed in School scale from the Parent Involvement Project – Parent Questionnaire (PIPQ; Walker et al., 2005). One item specific to COVID-19 was added, "I feel less confident in helping my child now that schools are closed," and the scale was adjusted to allow for responses on a 5-point (rather than the original 6-point) scale to align with the rest of the survey. The scale responses ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*, and Cronbach's alpha for the revised scale was calculated as 0.90.

Perceived satisfaction with supports from school was measured by two scales created for this study, one focused on academics and one on social and emotional well-being. Items were developed for the study by a diverse research team consisting of parents and educators. The academic-support scale consisted of 6 items, including, "Teaching staff have been supportive of my efforts to help my child with school work" and "School support staff have helped my child directly with school work." Respondents rated items on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).

The social-emotional–support scale consisted of 4 items and included items such as, "Teaching staff have been supportive of my child's social and/or emotional well-being" and "I am pleased with the types of social and/or emotional supports we have received from the school." Respondents rated items on the same 5-point scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.76).

Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables of interest were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27.0). To explore the influence of child and educational characteristics, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses for each of the three dependent variables (academic supports, parent self-efficacy for learning, and social-emotional supports). The following independent variables were explored as described in the Measure section: (a) grade level, (b) education placement, and (c) total school-provided supports pre–COVID-19.

Results

Parental Involvement in At-Home Learning

A necessity for engaging in most remote-learning options, or most aspects of schooling and work generally, is access to high-speed, reliable internet and internet-enabled devices. In our sample, most respondents had what they considered to be sufficient internet capacity (84%), and internet-accessible devices (90%) for their child to engage with school work. Over 85% of families reported engaging in school-related "work, learning, or activities" with their child. Of those parents who did not engage with their children, only two selected poor internet or device access as their reason for not taking part. The most common reasons selected were that the work sent home was inappropriate for their child ($n = 14$) or that they lacked the expertise to properly support their child in completing school work ($n = 10$).

Parents Self-Efficacy for Learning

Descriptive statistics and correlations between all key variables are summarized in Table 2. Parent self-efficacy for learning averaged just below the scale midpoint with approximately 84% of the sample scoring below *agree*, indicating that most participants lacked confidence in their abilities in this area. The correlation between self-efficacy and social-emotional supports was significant, indicating that parents who had higher self-efficacy for learning also perceived they were receiving greater social-emotional supports for their children from schools. The regression model was not significant, $F(3, 251) = .06$, $p < .98$, indicating that neither grade level, class placement, nor total supports received from schools prior to COVID-19 significantly predicted parent self-efficacy for learning.

Perceived Supports From Schools

With respect to academic supports for remote learning received from school, the mean score on the academic-support scale was 3.20 out of a possible 5.00, indicating that parents were fairly neutral about such supports. Examining individual items, however, reveals a fair amount of spread, with the highest endorsement for "teaching staff have been supportive

of my efforts to help my child with school work" ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.16$) and the lowest for "school support staff (educational/teaching assistants) have helped my child directly with school work" ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.45$).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Key Variables

Variable	1.	2.	3.
1. Parent self-efficacy	–**		
2. Academic supports	0.02	–	
3. Social-Emotional supports	0.14*	0.68**	–
M	2.96	3.20	3.09
SD	0.98	0.98	0.95

*Significant at the 0.05 level. **Significant at the 0.01 level.

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Academic and social-emotional supports from school were highly correlated, indicating that parents who perceived strong support in one area were more likely to feel similarly about the other. The regression model was not significant for academic supports, $F(3, 251) = 1.42$, $p < .24$, indicating that neither grade level, class placement, nor total supports received from schools prior to COVID-19 were significant predictors.

In terms of perceived social-emotional supports, the mean score for the scale was slightly lower than that for academic supports, again centring around the neutral point on the response scale (3.09/5.00). Parents were mostly satisfied with teacher support for their child's well-being but generally unsatisfied with the types of supports received. For social-emotional supports, the regression model was significant, $F(3, 249) = 4.45$, $p < .01$, with total supports, ß =.13, $p < .04$, and grade, ß = -.17, $p < .01$, as significant predictors. Parents whose children received a greater number of supports from school prior to COVID-19 were significantly more positive in their assessment of social-emotional supports received from school during COVID-19. Parents of children in elementary grades reported much greater satisfaction with the social-emotional supports provided by schools ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.88$) than those with children in secondary grades ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.06$). The model explained 5% of the variance in social-emotional supports.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the perspectives of parents of children with special education needs during a period of school-building closures due to COVID-19. We

were particularly interested in the involvement of these parents in at-home learning, their self-efficacy related to their child's learning, and their perceptions of school supports received during the spring of 2020. Given the disproportionately greater negative impact of disrupted schooling on students with special education needs, and the far greater role many parents took on during school closures, it is important to understand parent self-efficacy and its relationship to school supports.

In our sample, almost all parents reported participating in at-home learning with their child and, similarly, the vast majority had what they perceived as "sufficient" internet and device access to allow for engagement in virtual learning. Our sample clearly comprises a group of parents and guardians who, while heterogenous in many ways, have sufficient resources to allow for engagement in their child's learning at home. As has been noted throughout COVID-19, the academic progress of children and youth has been greatly influenced by the availability and skills of parents, raising issues of equity (e.g., Bérubé et al., 2021; Mundy & Gallagher-Mackay, 2021). This is not surprising; extensive research pre–COVID-19 documented the relationship between parents' educational, social, financial, linguistic, and cultural capital and their ability to support the educational needs of their children (e.g., Murray et al., 2020; Trainor, 2010; Tramonte & Willms, 2010). We discuss our findings in light of the particular nature of our sample, who are those with sufficient resources and supports in place to allow for their participation in at-home learning and their participation in our study.

Among our sample, parents reported that they did not generally feel confident in their ability to support the learning of their children, irrespective of the student's grade level and the supports received prior to COVID-19. The generally low self-efficacy among parents in our sample is a concerning finding, given the weight placed on parents to support their child's learning progress during school-building closures and the influence of parent self-efficacy on student outcomes (e.g., Bandura et al., 1996).

With respect to grade level, other studies have also failed to show a predictive relationship with parent self-efficacy (e.g., Weiss et al., 2013). However, we had anticipated that the placement and support variables might provide a sense of the degree of need or functioning of the child whom the parent was supporting. Although little research exists in the area, disability severity among children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder has been found to be negatively related to parent general and therapeutic self-efficacy (Hastings & Symes, 2002; Weiss et al., 2016). While created to capture the intensity of learning needs for a particular child, our proxy variables may instead reflect the broad variability that exists among school districts and ministries of education in the ways that their policies address diverse learning needs. A child with similar needs may not receive similar services and experience the same placements as a child in a different school district or province. Future research should explore more sensitive measures of the degree and types of support that children need in order to determine if these variables play a role in parent self-efficacy.

Our findings suggest that parents who had greater social-emotional supports from school felt better able to support the learning of their children; a similar relationship was not observed for academic supports. Given the focus of the self-efficacy scale in the present study on parent support for the learning of their children, this finding is surprising. In fact,

one study conducted with mothers of young children without disabilities during COVID-19 found a significant positive relationship between learning-related self-efficacy and perceived academic supports from school (de Jong et al., 2021). It may be that the social-emotional aspects that promote learning, such as motivation, interest, pro-social behaviours, and relationships, were more necessary or impactful for families during pandemic at-home learning. A small body of literature supports the relatively lower self-efficacy for supporting their child's learning among parents of students with special education needs (e.g., Ogg et al., 2020). For parents already insecure in their abilities to support the learning of their children, the pandemic and subsequent move to at-home learning likely exacerbated their concerns. Parent self-efficacy is understood as a highly malleable construct that strongly influences parental mental health, service use, advocacy, and student academic outcomes (e.g., Albanese et al., 2019; Meirsschaut et al., 2010; Weiss et al., 2016). At the same time, extensive literature has confirmed the inextricable and powerful relationship between social and emotional contexts and the learning process, particularly for students with academic and behavioural needs (Elias & Moceri, 2012; Sokal & Katz, 2017; Wyness & Lang, 2016).

Schools that support students' social-emotional needs may also value and be more proficient at addressing the parallel needs of teachers and parents (e.g., Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017) The role of social supports in maintaining and increasing parent self-efficacy is very strong and is supported by extensive research with a range of populations, including those with children who have disabilities (e.g., Weiss et al., 2013). While our measure focused on social-emotional supports provided by schools, future research should also explore the impact that broader social networks, including family, advocacy or parent groups, and paid supports (e.g., respite workers) might have on parent self-efficacy related to their child's learning.

It is interesting to note the influence of the number of supports received prior to COVID-19 and of grade level solely as they relate to the social-emotional supports that were provided during school closures. Parents of elementary-aged students were significantly more satisfied than their secondary counterparts. This is a finding reported often in existing literature, with explanations typically focusing on the structure of secondary schools, which have multiple teachers and subjects and an increased focus on academics rather than overall development (e.g., Collie et al., 2015; Lendrum et al., 2013). The finding regarding supports indicates that parents whose children had more supports at school prior to the closures were also more satisfied with the social-emotional supports they received while their children learned at home. While research literature has not explored this relationship, several explanations are possible. Those with high support scores typically accessed a number of human supports, some of which may have continued while schools were physically closed. For example, students who had educational assistants assigned to them may have been able to continue meeting with these individuals, with positive implications for social-emotional experiences. It may also be the case that the families whose children accessed multiple services prior to COVID-19 may have been more evident or "on the radar" of educators and school leaders and more likely to receive social-emotional supports. Future research is needed to disentangle the complex relationships between school service provision, grade level, social-emotional supports, and parent self-efficacy.

Implications for Practice

The move to emergency, remote learning during the spring of 2020 presented unique and unprecedented challenges across Canada. Educators, school systems, communities, and families were not prepared, and it may seem that the experiences of families during this time were unique. However, several findings from the present study provide insight moving forward.

Parents of students with special education needs did not feel very confident in supporting the learning of their children at home and were not generally satisfied with academic supports they received from schools. Continuing to build knowledge and expertise surrounding remote and virtual learning approaches that are effective for diverse groups of learners will enable educators and school districts to better support learners and families in all types of learning situations. These approaches must consider the ways in which parents, and not just students, can be supported as partners in learning. There is a strong literature base that existed prior to the pandemic to draw on, and new learning from the pandemic is emerging daily (e.g., Dahlstrom-Hakki et al., 2020; Mellard et al., 2020).

In addition, social and emotional supports from school are important for parents' self-efficacy in supporting the learning of their children, perhaps more important than academic supports. A focus on broad student well-being has been championed in schools for many years (e.g., Anderson & Graham, 2016), but it has not been considered in relation to parent self-efficacy. The pandemic may have made these social and emotional supports more evident to parents and may also have prompted more direct efforts by schools to reach out to families individually to support their efforts at home. Schools should explore ways of building strong collaborative relationships between educators and parents as well as continuing to find ways of supporting families and students in both academic and non-academic areas. Efforts should be made in secondary settings, where multiple teachers and a heavier academic emphasis make these types of connections more challenging. Given the influential role that parent self-efficacy plays in student outcomes, these efforts can potentially have long-lasting effects on those already disadvantaged within our school systems. The pandemic, and school closures, have reminded us how partnerships between parents and schools are crucial for the well-being of all involved.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of the study are important to consider. First, the composition of the sample is not reflective of the larger population of parents in general, and of parents of students with special education needs specifically. We had very high proportions of participants who reported sufficient access to the internet and technological devices. This is not surprising given that being recruited for the study and completing the survey relied on digital platforms but points to the absence of the voices of those who struggled the most with a lack of access during the pandemic. Relatedly, we failed in our efforts to recruit any parents from the three Canadian territories, and our participants generally resided in more highly populated regions of the country where internet access is more readily available. Parents also had the time to take part, and they spoke English or French well enough to complete the survey, which is not the case for many. Future research will benefit from

creative strategies to engage parents in multiple ways to ensure that a greater diversity of parent experiences related to COVID-19 is captured.

One other limitation is with respect to the variables and scales we used. While the self-efficacy for learning scale has been well-validated, our assessments of perceived supports from schools reflected a narrow, overall judgment on the part of parents. Broadening these to include specific, observable items would improve our understanding of supports provided by schools during COVID-19, and in general. A better sense of the severity and nature of the needs and functioning of the children would also be helpful, although this is very challenging when considering the incredibly broad range that is encompassed under the umbrella of "special education needs" in Canadian schools.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the accompanying school-building closures, has no doubt impacted students and parents in myriad ways that will not be known for some time. Understanding the experiences of parents of students with special education needs during this time is important as it provides insight into the strongest and weakest aspects of our school systems. Our study found that parents did not feel confident in supporting academic learning for their child but felt more efficacious if they and their child were supported in social and emotional ways by schools. These findings reinforce the broad role that schools play in the lives of families of students with special education needs, particular during times of crisis. Future research is needed to explore more deeply the interconnections between parent self-efficacy, school supports, and the surrounding contexts of child and family characteristics.

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