

From full-day learning to 30 minutes daily: The effects of school closures on kindergarteners

July 18 2022, by Natalie Spadafora and Magdalena Janus



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The [early years of children's development](#) are crucial for developing social, emotional and communication skills. Given the significance of

these years, it is vital we continue to unpack what happened for young children at different points of the pandemic.

People invested in children's development and education, from researchers to [educators to school board representatives](#), have expressed concerns about the impact of the pandemic on kindergarten students.

School closures meant kindergarteners were not able to interact directly with their peers and teachers, or practice self-regulation in a classroom. Understanding the effects of pandemic-related [school](#) shutdowns on kindergarten students is important for planning how to address its impact.

Ontario study

In Ontario, kindergarten is a two-year program (junior and senior) with children beginning to attend in September of the year they turn four.

The [mandated full-day kindergarten curriculum](#) focuses on play-based learning and includes hands-on activities, group work and social interaction.

Considering the nature of kindergarten in Ontario, teaching and learning online from March to June 2020 posed challenges for educators, students and families.

[Our team at the Offord Center for Child Studies](#) at McMaster University conducted a study titled "[Hidden Future Front Line: Educators' Perspective on the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Kindergarten Children from May to July 2020.](#)"

A total of 2,569 kindergarten educators (early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers) representing almost all the [school districts](#) in

Ontario shared their thoughts about teaching during the first set of pandemic-related school closures in spring 2020.

Barriers to online learning

Our descriptive study paints a clear picture of the learning and interactions during that time. It [highlights many unique challenges and concerns faced by educators of the youngest learners.](#)

First, educators reported significant barriers to [online learning](#) in nine specific areas during this time. These included technological barriers such as lack of access to [electronic devices](#), poor internet quality, [privacy concerns](#) and student challenges communicating in English.

Eighty percent of educators also discussed barriers around implementing curricula online. They discussed the young age of their pupils and basic incompatibility of online learning for children this age, particularly given the play-based nature of kindergarten.

As one educator shared with us: "This is the complete opposite of what the full-day, play-based learning is all about. Children need to manipulate with concrete objects, plan and investigate during play, interact with their peers and not swipe across a screen."

Educators noted kindergarten-age children could not independently log on to their online classes or complete class activities without the support of an adult or older child.

Almost 90 percent of educators noted that a lack of involvement from parents or guardians was a concern: many stated that parents often did not report on how children were doing or did not turn in assignments for them, making it difficult for educators to know their students' well-being.

Educators struggled to teach the kindergarten curriculum, and as a result voiced concerns about what implications this may have for these children's future learning.

Return to classrooms

We asked educators to share with us their concerns regarding the return to the classroom setting. Of the educators surveyed, 90 percent said they had concerns about returning to the classroom in September 2020.

Educators expressed concerns about the ability of young students to follow any potential protocols, and if it was even realistic to expect five-year-olds to be able to socially distance. Developmentally, kindergarten students often need assistance with tasks such as opening a juice box, zipping up their coat or going to the bathroom. Many teachers wondered how they could assist their pupils while keeping a distance.

Expected impact in later grades

Taken together, our findings indicate kindergarten educators faced challenges during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic that were unique because of the young age of their pupils.

As a result, we expect the lack of a fully interactive environment in kindergarten may impact some children's learning in later grades.

There is [emerging evidence](#) that [school closures](#) should be a measure of last resort in fighting a pandemic.

Continued supports necessary

Our study results also highlighted the need for continued supports for the

youngest learners and the necessity to monitor the development of students in [kindergarten](#) during the pandemic, as well as after.

[Along with others](#), we recommend that these potential struggles in learning and [self-regulation](#) be considered by educators, principals, schools, school districts and ministries of education in adjusting curricula in the coming years.

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