A gap in Ontario's back-to-school plans? Hearing children's views

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As families and teachers prepare for children to go back to school, either in-person or online, we have not heard from children themselves about their views of the pandemic, their experiences of online schooling in the spring, and their thoughts about going back to school. Between April and June of 2020, we conducted bi-weekly online interviews (and mini check-ins on the alternate weeks) with 30 children from Southern Ontario, mostly between 8 and 15. We talked directly to children, including those living in a variety of kinds of living spaces, from different class, racial and cultural backgrounds, living in diverse family configurations, and from a range of abilities/disabilities. There were significant differences between children's experiences linked to family configuration, living space, parents' education and employment, ability, ESL, and the style of their online schooling.

Children's diverse experiences of online schooling
- Most of the children enjoyed greater autonomy with their space and time
    - They enjoyed learning at their own pace and setting their own routines. For instance, Dancer (10) enjoyed the comfort of being in her own space and in her pjs to do schoolwork, Crosby (12) liked spending much of his day playing video games online with friends, while The Glitch (10) appreciated sleeping in and eating lunch at home:

        > I would like to go to school, though I don't want to wake up at 7:30. I don't want to have to wake up at 7 again, go to school, and […] I don't really see what my mom is making [for lunches] so I don't know and then [at school] I'll have something I really didn't like.

    - Sigma (10) and Watson (12) really appreciated being able to follow their own intellectual pursuits rather than being limited by the school curriculum.
    - Children with houses and backyards – even farm spaces – had room to roam and play as a break from schoolwork, but others like Jordan (12) and Lola (8) were frustrated because they lived in apartments in the city. Jordan showed us how there is nowhere to play around her apartment (just a Go Train parking lot) and explained that she can't go for walks in her neighbourhood because traffic and high crime rates. In contrast to others who were enjoying the freedom to play, she said she wished she could go to school because "I get very bored […] there is like literally nothing you could do even though you are staying home."

- Some preferred online schooling over going to school
    - For a few of our participants preferred working at home and thus avoiding social difficulties at school. GS (13), a new immigrant from Egypt, felt ignored a lot at school and was much happier to be doing schoolwork at home. Similarly, Sigma (10) said: "I don't have to constantly be going to the grocery store and school

and dealing with all the boys in school […] people usually just ignore me at school and when I try to talk to them, they usually just push me away so I don't have to feel any rejection."

- o Others were more able to do online schoolwork at home because they could work it into their schedule on their terms and this worked well for them. Notably, these were participants with quiet houses, with room to work.
- o Those more positive about online schooling had engaging experiences online, with video-based interactions that the participants found meaningful. For example, Aveyah (5) enjoyed doing online interactive activities each day, e.g. her teacher had asked students to use food to do math and then take a picture of this and send it in. This was a minority of participants, however.
- o It also helped a lot if parents and/or siblings were able and available to help participants with schoolwork.
- o Others, like Amber (9), said that they just preferred not going to school, although she really enjoyed a car parade that her teachers put on at the end of the year.

- • Most had a hard time with online learning
    - o Many talked about challenges with self-motivation because of learning on their own, finding the work uninteresting and finding themselves easily distracted online by other websites, games, etc. Some older participants also talked about being overwhelmed with work. One participant, Jane Eyre (14) found that her challenges concentrating were exacerbated by her ADHD.

        > It's mostly just me, like, thinking I'm going to get a lot of stuff done and then not getting anything done. Yeah. It's, it's very hard to do school over the computer because there's like, I could just go watch YouTube. And you saw, like, I didn't respond to your email even though like I meant to respond to it. And I was like, yeah, I'll do that. I just need to get home from this walk. And then, you know, yeah.

    - o A number of participants, especially younger ones, those with ESL, some with disabilities, and those whose parents couldn't help them for a range of reasons, found that the schoolwork could be hard and frustrating when they didn't know what to do or couldn't figure out answers to certain questions. For instance, Lola (8) explained that it is hard to work online because "It's just, it's kind of complicated, like, I have to learn how to put my files here and my files there or where ever." Jordan (12) had some conflict with her mom when her mom tried to help with her schooling because Jordan felt that her mom didn't know the material well enough, while Elizabeth (11) and Lillian (12) both spoke about their working parents did not always having the time to help.
    - o Many also found learning online much lonelier than at school as they missed their friends and peers. Elizabeth (11) explained: "I can't really do anything cuz it's just me and my [single] mom and throughout the day, it's just me because my mom's working. Um, so you can't really do anything. Like it's hard because like, I don't have anybody to talk to throughout the day, so I'm kind of alone."

Chaaboogie (11) talked about missing sitting beside someone at school, just to chat with them. GS (13) spoke about how he would miss saying goodbye to his one younger friend at school, as GS was now moving on to Grade 9. Many missed their teachers also.

- o Some contexts are harder to work in: Children in bigger families and those living in smaller spaces talked about noise and other distractions that made it very difficult to work. GS (13) said that the hardest thing about being in social isolation was having trouble focusing on his work, "Cuz like the noises around and like when you focus it's so loud and you can't like focus and when you go somewhere you get followed by someone else…" Jordan (12) mentioned not having air conditioning in her apartment, so it was hard to concentrate as it was getting hot in June. Also, because she was in a small space her little brother would always come in her room.
- o One participant, PhePhe (9) had experienced two cases of repeated cyberbullying, which may have been linked to being online more, and having less direct supervision of time online.

- Diversity of experiences
  - o Overall children's experiences varied dramatically based on many aspects of their lives. A comparison between a few participants illustrates how significantly life circumstance shaped online schooling. PhePhe (9) was a single child with two attentive, available parents. She liked the schoolwork, was happy to do it, had a good workspace, and was totally routinized. In contrast, BJ (13) had two working parents. She had an EA for help, which was good, but she struggled too. She was not open to parental input and didn't want her mom's guidance because she felt she could do it on her own. She felt frustrated with her teachers for giving her so much work. We also talked to three children in a new immigrant family of eight. These children were seldom lonely or bored, but their parents were not able to provide a lot of help with learning, and it was really hard to get work done because the house was so noisy and chaotic.

Children's knowledge and concerns about COVID-19

Many people have suggested that the children do not fully understand what is going on with COVID-19 and are more likely than adults to take risks. However, we found that the participants were:

- Knowledgeable: Across ages, participants knew a lot about what was going on, especially if they were high risk themselves. They knew what COVID-19 was and where it came from, how it spreads, and what they need to do to be careful. Lillian (12) talked about one of her chores being disinfecting around the house. Many talked about understanding why they could not see or play with friends. Cat (14), who was high risk for COVID-19 said "I understand people have to stay behind their glass walls and their brick houses and stuff like that. I get it cuz you don't want to get sick. And all

that." They were getting information from the news, their families, and from their schools. Some found it hard to hear so much information on the news, however.

- Worried about the pandemic: They were worried about people getting sick and talked about other people not social distancing enough. When asked what kind of advice they would give to other children and to parents, they frequently stressed things like hand-washing. Participants were concerned about things they were learning about in the media, e.g. Elle (15) was worried about a beach party she'd heard about, Jane Eyre (15) was concerned about the anti-mask protests, and The Glitch (10) was worried about COVID spreading with the Black Lives Matter protests, saying "Yeah and when people were protesting about Blacks and everything... I like the protests, it's just isn't it going to spread faster because of that?" Meanwhile, Watson (12) went to the BLM protests and then self-quarantined for two weeks. Marifah (9) was really worried about even going on the sidewalk. The children tried to find strategies to connect with others but with enough social distancing (e.g. passing notes through fence; having socially distanced swim get-togethers in more affluent families). Lsav (14) explained that he gets "really anxious because of the virus" and talked about how he doesn't like going to stores because it is hard to social distance there.

Children's thoughts about going back to school
In June, almost all of our participants, across ages and backgrounds, were worried about the future, especially around going back to school

- Worries about grades and learning: There were concerns about not being ready for future grades. E.g. Jordan (12) was worried about going into grade 8 unprepared and then also not being ready for high school. BJ (12) was saying that what she did right now could have effects on her whole life and that it was important to not let her grades slip. Jane Eyre (15) also expressed concerns, and with worry, Jordan (12) listed off the months of school she'd missed.
- Worries about safety: Chicken Cheerleader (12) was on edge about going to school. She was excited to see friends but worried that maybe it would not be that safe. Jane Eyre (15) was similarly worried about going back with so many kids there. The Glitch (10) was really worried about going into the classroom, touching his desk or borrowing a pencil. He would want to be able to sanitize the desk all the time. He explained:
  > Mmm, I would still be cautious of everyone else. I would still be cautious and try not to touch anyone for as long as I can. […] I'd be scared. I wouldn't even sit on the desks. If the teacher tells me to sit down I wouldn't even sit at the desks. If I pick up a pencil that the teacher, that I have to borrow from someone then I would probably have to wear gloves to do that. […] I will be nervous if there is any touching [with friends]. I'll be shaking, my body will be shaking
- Worries about missing out: PhePhe (9) was excited to go back but her parent was saying that she wouldn't go back even if the schools reopened. BJ (12) was worried that even if schools reopened, that her mom would also not let her go back:
  > [discussing a new student entering her online class] Yeah, it was really sad. Everybody, everybody was like I wish we could meet in person. And then, then I

heard that we might be going back in June, but my mom said, you won't be able to, you might not be able to go back to school because of like, the danger it could cost.

- <u>Worries about how to play with friends</u>: Ginjja (8) worried about how to play with friends at recess when back at school, as tag and basketball would not possible and he was trying to think of alternatives:

> No games of tag, of course. […] Maybe you can use a stick. [...] I think that using a stick with tag is the only way to play the game. You can also play basketball, but if someone touches our ball with their hand, with their hands on it, oh no, they won't. So no basketball courts, so maybe there won't be any recess.

Value of children's voices

Almost every participant said that they enjoyed or appreciated being a part of this research. Many found it to be fun and appreciated having someone to talk to. Ginjja (8) said "I love having interviews" and Jane Eyre (15) appreciated the scheduled social interaction with somebody she hadn't met before. A few also said how much they appreciated that we were interested in what they had to say. For instance, Elizabeth (11) said "I just thought that it was like super cool like how you guys are documenting this because like, it is like, something big, you know, that happened and I think it is something important because it did take a really big hit on kids. I think it was a good, um, project."

Some remaining thoughts about children's experiences

- It is difficult to generalize across children's experiences of the pandemic because factors like housing/space, finances, family configurations, parents' work, dis/ability, age and style of online schooling having such a significant effect.
- Many of the children experienced a great deal of autonomy during the first six months of the pandemic. We are interested in how they will they adjust to going back to the rigidity of schooling, especially when more limits on their autonomy with new protocols around social distancing.
- During the first few months of the pandemic, children were learning a lot about the virus and how it is spread. Like all of us, they learned all the reasons why it was important to stay in and to social distance. But now they are being required to go back to school with lots of other children. Given their worries in June, we expect that many are feeling very anxious right now.
- At the same time, we have heard various commentators suggesting that children will not be able to socially distance or wear masks, but at least from our own research we found that a lot of the children were very aware of the dangers and were keen to follow safety protocols.