

“It’s Not the Same as School”: Online Learning During COVID-19 for Families Facing Socially Disadvantaging Circumstances and the Role of a Community Organization

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Based on the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, we studied the experiences of families and children facing socially disadvantaging circumstances in Montréal in navigating this novel learning environment, with a focus on community organization supports. These families faced pronounced difficulties adapting to online learning due to disorganized communication with schools, unexpected shifts in parents’ roles, and resource constraints. However, the community organization was instrumental in supporting families and promoting a sense of agency in children. Policymakers ought to prioritize investment in community organizations that target educational supports to prevent/reduce adverse outcomes associated with pandemics or other public health emergencies.

Key words: COVID-19, school, community organization, children, social disadvantage

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19, an infection caused by the novel SARS-CoV-2 virus, a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) resulting in the implementation of various precautionary mechanisms, policies, and procedures around the world. In Canada, the COVID-19 pandemic generated a complex web of impacts affecting many residents, particularly children and families facing “socially disadvantaging” circumstances (Tabner, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, individuals in these communities were already experiencing increased stress driven by various systemic and structural factors, along with poorer social determinants of health (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). Preliminary evidence and anecdotes indicated that COVID-19 and pandemic-related precautionary measures served to significantly exacerbate the burdens these families faced (Patel et al., 2020; Westrupp et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022).

In addition, the pandemic resulted in a diverse range of approaches and tools being used to minimize spread and encourage “social distancing.” In the Canadian context, education policy remains highly decentralized (Lachance, 2024; Wallner, 2012), and policy choices made during the pandemic in educational settings within each province/territory “varied substantially, especially the length of province-wide school closures” (Lachance, 2024, p. 13).

In Montréal specifically, there were several periods within which schools were closed and learning transitioned to online spaces in the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. For most young people, these transitions were challenging, and the impacts transcended the individual young person to layer additional stress and concerns onto parents, caregivers, and families supporting young people. The impacts of school closures for children living in poverty have been highlighted since the early days of the pandemic (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Yet in Montréal, the experiences of families facing social disadvantages in relation to these closures and transitions were not captured to a sufficient degree.

Based on these concerns and gaps, the objective of the current study was to understand, highlight, and disseminate impacts faced by children and families facing socially disadvantaging circumstances in supporting children's learning during COVID-19, drawing on the experiences of families assisted by the Welcome Hall Mission as a case study. The overarching research questions were: (1) What are the experiences of children and families facing socially disadvantaging circumstances in undertaking at-home learning for children during COVID-19; and (2) What are the experiences of community workers in providing learning supports for these families during COVID-19?

In responding to these questions through the analysis of collected data, described below, we draw on our collective experiences and expertise as (a) a PhD candidate and researcher from Toronto conducting research at the intersection of policy, ethics, and childhood health and well-being; (b) an undergraduate student training in law and ethics in Montréal with experience in working as a youth advisor; and (c) a nurse, clinical ethicist, professor, and community organization interlocutor in Montréal with extensive training in qualitative methods and a childhood ethics framework and prior experience working with the collaborating centre outlined below. None of the coauthors had prior experience or interactions with the families who participated in this study, though Franco Carnevale had prior experience working with the staff participants in other collaborative work. Acknowledging our positionality as individuals operating within, while existing outside of, the communities in this study is critical for analytical approaches and frames subsequently described.

Key terms / definitions

Here *socially disadvantaging circumstances* or *social disadvantages* refers to external factors leading individuals and groups to live in poverty and/or face various structural, political, and systemic disadvantages or biases as a result of their intersecting ethnic, cultural, class/socioeconomic status (SES), and educational identities and experiences (Kopel et al., 2014; U.S. Code of Federal Regulations, 1998). Our understanding of social disadvantage is aligned with teachings from scholars focused on dismantling deficit thinking (Nicholson et al., 2015; Valencia, 2010), wherein the complex systems rooted in society construct and contribute to various disadvantages that children and their families can face as opposed to thinking of these concerns as internal deficiencies (Nicholson et al., 2015; Valencia, 2010). In addition, *children* refers to any individuals under the age of majority, which differs from context to context (Carnevale et al., 2021). Importantly, we use *children* interchangeably with *young people* in this manuscript.

Theoretical orientation

In approaching this work, we relied on the childhood ethics framework to inform how we positioned and thought about young people. Within this framework, children are recognized as active agents with morally relevant capacities, interests, aspirations, and concerns (Carnevale et al., 2021). Their rights to participate are also actively promoted within this framework. Facilitating young people's participation is of vital importance to discern their

best interests and socio-political identities (i.e., the social and political ideologies they align with or that map onto their personal identity). Childhood ethics also acknowledges that children are relationally embedded and rely on social relations (with parents, family members, teachers, providers, friends, etc.) to navigate their worlds (Carnevale et al., 2021). Young people are shaped by their social worlds but also jointly shape their social worlds; this aligns with teachings from Frønes (1993), wherein the diversity of childhoods is acknowledged as existing at “the intersection of different cultural, social, and economic systems, natural and man-made physical environments” (p. 1; see also Galman, 2019). As such, relational models of autonomy, as opposed to more individualistic ones, orient the childhood ethics framework (Carnevale et al., 2021). In practice, this means that input from young people’s “relational interlocutors” is necessary to get a full picture of what a particular young person may need or what is in their best interests (Carnevale et al., 2021).

Voice is central to the childhood ethics framework. A *thick* conception of voice prioritizes thinking about voice beyond merely one’s verbal utterances, recognizing that expressions can be varied and related meanings are “relationally embedded articulations of their agency” (Carnevale, 2020; Carnevale et al., 2021). Inclusion of young people’s voices, either directly through conversations *with* young people or through an interlocutor who has the young person’s best interests in mind (such as a parent or caregiver), is a way to recognize young people’s agency and participation capacities. Qualitative research can help researchers elicit and, more importantly, listen to the voices of young people (albeit not always expressed by the young person themselves) in a way that grants the young person the choice to express and share what they wish to share and in the ways that they prefer. These perspectives shaped our inclusion of young people, their parents/caregivers, and their community support workers as participants in this study, along with the methods and qualitative approaches that we relied on.

Methods

Study design

This study was oriented by a qualitative description methodology (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Caelli et al., 2003; Merriam, 1997). Qualitative description is particularly useful in studies where time and resources are limited and where input from individuals experiencing a shared phenomenon of interest is being investigated (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Neergaard et al., 2009). Use of this methodology involves presenting facts in “everyday language” in order to offer a “comprehensive summary” of an event or phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336). As Sandelowski has argued, qualitative description is particularly valuable to provide “answers to questions of special relevance to practitioners and policy makers” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337). Given the ongoing importance of COVID-19 impacts on children for policymakers, community organizations, clinicians, and parents, especially as we look back and begin to assess pandemic-related decisions, this study qualified as one with particular importance for political figures. Moreover, based on the fact that data collection related to this study was time-sensitive in order to meaningfully guide policy deliberations (within the pandemic and beyond) related to family supports and education and due to the constraints of continued engagement with the populations of interest, qualitative description was a good fit.

The study was conducted in collaboration with the Welcome Hall Mission, a nonprofit community organization in Montréal, Quebec, Canada. This organization was established in 1892 and provides support for vulnerable populations (Montreuil et al., 2017; Welcome Hall Mission, 2025). One of many services the organization offers is a family support program in which academic support is provided to children living in poverty, along with other services to assist families. While COVID-19 led to alterations in some of the programs the community organization offers and to the ways in which services were (and continue to be) provided, the community organization team continued to support families experiencing social disadvantages.

Prior to the study, administrative support from the partner organization was obtained, along with ethical approval from McGill University's research ethics board (REB #: 20-07-046). Data collection and analysis were completed by undergraduate students simultaneously serving on the VOICE Childhood Ethics Project Youth Advisory Council, with support provided by a doctoral candidate with experience in qualitative analysis (Sydney Campbell) and the principal investigator of the study (Franco Carnevale).

Recruitment and data collection

Data in this study was drawn from two sources: interviews¹ with parents, children, and Welcome Hall Mission (WHM) staff participants and secondary data drawn from written notes recorded by WHM staff. To recruit families, a contact list of the child/parent (or legal guardian) names and contact information (i.e., phone numbers) for families who participated in the WHM family support program during COVID-19 was provided to researchers by WHM staff. The contact list consisted of only those who agreed to be contacted by the research team, to avoid causing stress to families facing socially disadvantaging circumstances in being contacted without permission/forewarning by the research team. Verbal consent or assent² was sought and received from all participants who agreed to participate following introductory calls. Interviews were conducted between October 2020 and February 2021. Interviews were semistructured in nature, with parents/caregivers and children who utilized services (specifically the family support program) from WHM during the COVID-19 pandemic and with WHM staff who provided supports during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research assistants (RAs) able to speak both English and French conducted the interviews in the participant's preferred language. Family interviews were conducted over the phone and staff interviews were conducted over a web teleconference platform (i.e., Zoom). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, except for the interview with WHM staff members.

In interviews, parents/caregivers were asked to (a) share their experiences receiving services from the WHM during COVID-19 to assist them in supporting their child/children's academic progress during at-home learning, (b) reflect on the impacts that COVID-19 had on their ability to provide support and on their child's progress / academic well-being, and (c) discuss their perceptions of any necessary next steps or concerns that government and policymakers ought to be aware of in relation to school closures. For the children who participated, interviews focused on asking them to share their experiences of learning in at-home spaces / transitioning to at-home schooling and their experiences of receiving support from WHM during COVID-19. Finally, WHM staff reflected on their perceptions of the struggles of families facing socially disadvantaging circumstances with providing home-based learning support for their child/children during COVID-19 and their insights regarding the provision of virtual WHM support programs for families during this time. Interviews with parents/caregivers and WHM staff participants lasted between 34 and 90 minutes; during interviews with parents, child participants would be invited to answer questions, and these lasted less than 10 minutes.

Secondary data analysis was conducted on two individualized booklets that were constructed by WHM staff for children who received academic supports from the team. The purpose of including this data was to analyze the child and family needs identified in partnerships between the WHM staff and the family/child, along with the strategies the WHM team used to meet these needs. This secondary data was anonymized by WHM staff prior to being shared with the research team.

Data analysis

Following transcription of the interview audio-recordings, researchers took time to do an initial read of the transcripts and become familiarized with the data. RAs also met after reading and rereading the transcripts to discuss potential analytical directions and make/finalize memos. Next, coding proceeded to capture pertinent

features of the data systematically across an individual family, and a narrative synthesis for each family was developed to capture meaning at the individual (family) level. This process was followed by a collation of codes across the entire data set (i.e., family interview transcripts, staff interview transcripts, and individualized booklets) to generate potential micro and meso themes relating to a single family/participant, grouping these into meso and macro themes across participants before developing a family narrative and the overarching cross-participant narrative outlined here. Reviewing, refining, and redefining themes also took place (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

While qualitative description is regarded as being less interpretive than other methodologies due to the “low-inference” interpretations that analysis methods involve within qualitative description, many scholars assert that descriptive approaches still entail interpretation (Sandelowski, 2000; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). As such, analysis in qualitative description studies remains inductive and iterative, whereby repetitive reading, reviewing, and refining themes and subthemes occurs, while researchers keep the entire body of data in mind (Bradshaw et al., 2017).

Trustworthiness and rigor

To build credibility and demonstrate trustworthiness, RAs involved in the study initially focused on building rapport with participants prior to commencing interviews; this was built by being responsive to participants’ stories, genuinely being interested in their perspectives/experiences, and being patient/flexible to explore aspects of the experience that the participant emphasized (McGrath et al., 2019; Salmons, 2014). Regular debriefing sessions took place between junior RAs and the senior RA following interviews to continue establishing critical reflexivity and ensure integrity in the research process. Support and training frequently occurred between junior and senior RAs and the principal investigator to stimulate discussion during coding and iterative analysis of the data.

Results

Five families participated, consisting of five parent/caregiver participants and three child participants, along with two WHM staff members. For additional demographic information relating to family participants, including parents and children, please see the [supplementary materials](#) (S3, Table 1).

In what follows, we present data that was analyzed within this study and structured into seven themes. Descriptions of these themes are provided, interspersed with exemplar quotes from participants. It is important to note that it was challenging to talk directly with child participants within the context of this study as the interviews took place early in the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews occurred over the phone, and child participants often lost interest or suddenly left the call. These challenges are described further in the limitations section, but the result is that most of the findings relating to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s schooling experiences were described by parents/caregivers.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns on participants’ baseline mental well-being

During the interviews, we learned about the nuanced ways in which Quebec’s public health and containment measures impacted the participants’ mental well-being. We understood that mental and emotional strains caused by the pandemic also influenced participants’ capacity to react and adapt to the various changes they faced. In this regard, the following theme informs and intersects with many of the additional findings that are described in this paper.

First, three parent participants reported experiencing heightened anxiety caused by disruptions to their routine and their daily habits. For instance, Lee³ struggled with insomnia due to overwhelming stress. She added that the pandemic was life altering: “*Td say that I’ve never experienced anything more difficult than this year. This COVID*

situation is ... it's really something I will never forget" (translated). Tate mentioned that for her children, the experience was comparable to being like "*an animal in a cage*," highlighting the isolation and helplessness her family felt during the lockdown.

Many parent participants experienced isolation from their close social support network, leading to mental health impacts. Val shared her concerns of not being able to see her sister—her only family. She stated that she and her sister would have liked "*to stay together, to take care of each other, but [we] cannot because of the law*." In this sense, the family perceived the law as a hindrance to their need for reciprocal family support and care, and it exacerbated their fears.

Overall, the participants experienced stress and anxiety associated with the pandemic and subsequent governmental measures. The latter became sources of isolation and weariness because participants could no longer go outside or meet with close family members.

Role of the public sector in helping families navigate the pandemic

The interviews reveal that certain shortcomings in the public sector (specifically schools and the government) deeply impacted the participants and their families as they struggled with a lack of communication from and with their children's schools during the lockdowns. Many felt they had been forgotten and did not deserve help.

Pat mentioned that she felt lost because the school never informed her of her child's progress:

Because in the beginning, her teacher didn't give that [roadmap of daughter's homework for the week]. It's only after like 3–4 weeks that she had that. So, the first two weeks, the first four weeks, the parents were lost. Like, "What is my kid doing at school?"

Because of this oversight, Pat distrusted the homework sent by the school and preferred getting approval from a staff member at the WHM before letting her daughter do the assignments. Overall, most parent participants wished for more communication and a personalized approach to the support provided by schools.

For some parent participants, there was a belief that the government's role should primarily focus on funding and supporting community organizations providing more immediate assistance to families. Cove summarized the sentiment: "*My message is that the government should help organizations like the WHM and (name of another organization). ... Organizations like these, they're good for the parents*" (translated). Additionally, Lee, despite her strong belief that the government did its best considering the circumstances, acknowledged that it could have responded faster to avoid the students losing a full year of schooling.

In general, the parent participants' experience with the public sector was coloured by a lack of communication and absence of support related to their child's education, which led to some parent participants turning towards community organizations such as the WHM.

Parents' role in their children's schooling

The interviews captured how parent participants viewed their own purpose and abilities in supporting their children's education, as well as the challenges they encountered in navigating this new extended role of educator as a result of lockdowns and school closures.

First, most parent participants acknowledged that their children benefited from the involvement of adults, including parents, in their education. However, some believed that the WHM staff or schoolteachers were better suited to support their children, a sentiment that often arose from a perceived lack of abilities and knowledge

on their part. For example, Tate shared with the interviewers, *“I don’t know, but me, I find that with someone with a method, it’s a lot easier for a child. Me, I tell my children ‘Do your homework!’ and I don’t really have the method to do that”* (translated). Cove also relied on the WHM’s services after not being able to help with her children’s mathematics homework. Thus, many parent participants believed that their “lack of knowledge” constituted a barrier to being more involved in their children’s education.

Pat’s experience, however, was slightly different from the rest. She stayed at her daughter’s side during every online class, taking notes for her, apprehensive that her daughter would fail her courses without her. This helped her daughter, but Pat highlighted that her other responsibilities were neglected as a result. Consequently, she had to learn to give her daughter more confidence and more space to study independently. She said:

I think maybe I didn’t give my daughter enough credit but she ... she’s a really smart child. When she puts her mind to it, she can do it. It’s just she needs some reassurance. Right. From the teacher, from me, from ... with us working together.

Overall, the parent participants’ role in their children’s education was often undefined. Indeed, the lockdowns propelled them into a role for which they were unprepared. Some felt inadequate in this role; others felt they had to supervise their children more closely, with some detriment to their independence and self-growth. This disparity of experiences encouraged parent participants to find the right balance between playing a crucial role by their children’s side and letting them learn on their own.

Relief provided to families by the Welcome Hall Mission

In discussing the benefits of the WHM’s services during the pandemic, many parent participants were grateful that the organization could alleviate some of their responsibilities, notably by helping their children finish their exercises before their parents came home. This allowed the WHM to fill the gaps that parents believed they could not meet, as presented in the previous theme. For instance, Pat said,

How can parents struggle 9–5 jobs, coming home, cook their dinner, wash the dishes, and then they’re so tired they just wanna lie on the sofa and just fall asleep? Where is the time-out to do things with their kids, help with homework?

She added, regarding the value the WHM brought to families,

So that’s where the WHM comes in play, or any other program, to step in prior to the kids coming home from school, to get the homework done after school. So, when the parents come pick them up from daycare or WHM, they don’t have to check if the kid’s homework is done.

Thus, in her view, the WHM provided relief for parents by alleviating some of their responsibilities, allowing them more time for chores and providing them peace of mind knowing their children’s homework was done.

Additionally, the WHM impacted many facets of the children’s lives, notably their mental health and self-confidence. Cove noticed that her children who attended the WHM were less stressed because they had the opportunity to learn and study. According to her, *“if the children are well-supported, they will grow and study well. If the children are less supported, they will not study, not understand, and that makes them stressed”* (translated). Sol shared that she appreciated the WHM because the class sizes were smaller so she could always ask questions, which was often not possible at school.

Then, the WHM promoted agency and self-confidence so that children could achieve their goals. For instance, the WHM encouraged children to seek the services of the organization by themselves. To do so, they needed to

develop a strong bond of trust with the children and their parents through consistent communication. Parents were also encouraged to be more active in their children's education, even without the WHM. The accounts also reveal that the WHM's success rested on their ability to tailor their services to every family's needs. Indeed, Lee noticed that her son would finish the homework *that he refused to do at home* at the WHM. For her, the organization appeared more knowledgeable of her children's needs and abilities and had an educational approach that was appreciated by young people.

Finally, WHM staff created instruction booklets that provided students with specific homework based on their abilities, initiated follow-ups with the parents by phone, and communicated remotely as much as possible in light of the restrictions on in-person activities. After reviewing instruction booklets prepared by the WHM, we saw that the children obtained feedback from the staff. Staff provided them with concrete suggestions on where they could improve to achieve educational goals; this is an example of how the WHM was able to tailor their services to the needs of each family and child. Additionally, the booklets encouraged parents to note their observations on their children's abilities (e.g., strong points, improvements, challenges) so that they felt more involved in their education. Thus, the WHM succeeded by listening attentively to the families and trusting the parents' and children's inputs. However, their success ultimately depended on the parents' readiness and availability to participate.

Child participants' development of agency and self-confidence

Throughout the interviews, we noticed that some child participants experienced significant development in agency and self-confidence. Acknowledging that there is no universal definition of agency in the literature, we refer to agency as children's ability to act deliberately and speak for themselves, and the ways that doing so shapes their lives and the lives of others (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016). Some parent participants shared how their children developed new skills, overcame personal obstacles, and demonstrated increased self-assurance during the pandemic. For instance, Lee noticed improvement in cooperation among her children. She mentioned, *"Still, at home, they would study online with their teacher and after, the younger ones would help each other. My daughter would help the younger ones. They would all do their homework"* (translated).

Pat provided a more comprehensive account of this theme.⁴ She mentioned that her daughter was extremely shy and not confident enough to even raise her hand during class. After meeting with her teacher individually, her daughter announced that she was ready to learn by herself: *"And with a lot of reassurance and positive feedback and encouragement ... finally [daughter's name] said, 'Mom, I think it's time I go learn on my own, and you can do your own thing now.'" This case, specifically, shows how the daughter prioritized and expressed her own interests after carefully weighting the implications of her decision. Another important adult in her life who helped her build confidence was a WHM staff member. Pat referred to this staff member as a "big sister," indicating the trust and support she provided. Since the WHM's involvement, Pat noticed huge improvements in her daughter's capacities and agency.*

Overall, the parent participants' trust in their children to know their best interests and make the right decisions for themselves inspired greater collaboration, not only among the children themselves, but between the children and the adults in their lives.

Navigating limited resources during the pandemic

The issue of resources was critical during the pandemic as constraints have affected participants, the WHM, and school boards in various ways. The term *resource* refers equally to material goods, such as electronic devices (computers, tablets, etc.) and physical space (rooms in the WHM) as well as immaterial things such as time spent with each child, teacher's presence, and ability to communicate with parents. Even prior to the pandemic,

families interviewed faced limitations due to being socioeconomically and politically disadvantaged and living in impoverished neighbourhoods.

First, resource constraints increased tensions at home. Tate shared that her family did not have enough computers and she had to impose a strict rotation on her children, leading to disputes arising in their household. Pat shared similar sentiments, and felt as though families experiencing socioeconomic disadvantages did not receive an appropriate amount of resources from schools. She said:

The neighbourhood we live in is full of like low-income house, low-income neighbourhood, so one out of five or one out of ten families don't have computers. So, what does that say? We don't have a computer for them [children], what? They [schools] just forget about us? So, then you're telling, sort of hinting to us that it's okay if we drop out of school? It's sort of saying that!

Additionally, parent participants and WHM staff both mentioned that the organization was forced to cut opening hours and available class space due to staff shortages and public health directives to respect distancing and minimize transmission risks during the pandemic. This meant that children who wanted to go to the organization could only do so on certain days, even if they needed more help. Cove said, of her daughter who needed help with her math homework but could not get it because of the limited resources of the staff, "*She was really crying. She was asking ... I want them to help me, but we don't go every day. We only go twice a week*" (translated). A child participant, Bay, said she would have liked more support from the WHM, with more lessons and class time. Those same limitations were noted by WHM staff who regretted that some families were denied service because demand eventually outgrew their available resources and some could not be contacted by online means.

Finally, for Val, online learning and the necessity for electronic devices caused her financial strain on top of her existing precarious situation. She said: "*You know, it's expensive, and look, I'm a single mom and I take care of three kids, so I have to spend a lot.*" Pat raised a similar concern that due to her financial situation, she could not afford a suitable computer for her daughter and she feared this was the reason her daughter fell behind in her class during the lockdown:

I couldn't afford to buy a computer so. ... We had to accept what was given to us. She didn't have a computer but, in my mind, I always, you know, wonder what if we had a computer, how would [her] grades be then?

These accounts show that resource constraints caused distress in some participants, children and parents alike, and hindered their transition to at-home learning—an experience heightened by the preexisting precarity of living in a socioeconomically disadvantaged position.

Learning in a novel online format

Most parent participants found that learning at home was not optimal for their children due to unique difficulties presented by this format. However, most were still willing, or had no other choice, to adapt to the new challenges. The main sentiment was that children lacked support from their teachers at home. As Val said, "*It's not the same as the school. Even my son he told me it's not the same. ... It's just the video chat, and they explain it's not enough for them.*" Most participants agreed that learning at school was preferable because the environment was calmer and the teachers were more available to answer questions. However, some parent participants, including Tate and Pat, thought that online learning was sometimes preferable for the parents because they could oversee their children's progress, which they could not in a nonpandemic context because they often stayed late at work.

The child participants themselves appeared to prefer in-class teaching because they found the environment at

home too loud and the workload inadequate. Bay mentioned during the interview that her workload increased, and she found studying at home to be “stressing” for her, stating, “*it’s calmer at school.*” As for Sol, her teachers had no time to answer her questions due to the large online class size. She also agreed that her house is too noisy to study well. This was corroborated by Cove, who stated:

The children would say every day that “Really, Mom, we are ready to go back to school, we want school.” You know? That’s what they would always tell me. Because they would complain sometimes—“there’s this course that I don’t understand, there’s this thing that I don’t understand.” (translated)

Nell, a child participant, mentioned that he preferred learning at school because he liked his teacher.

Overall, the sentiment around online learning differed between parent and child participants. For the former, at-home learning allowed for greater supervision of their children’s progress, while for the latter, school was preferable because it provided greater communication with the teachers and a calmer environment. Thus, there is no clear answer as to which learning method is the better choice for families, but it is certain that transitioning to an online learning format contains challenges.

Discussion

The results from this study highlight how the hardships of families and children facing socially disadvantaging circumstances were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and how community organizations provided services to relieve or mitigate their struggles.

Established importance of “community”

The experiences and priorities of parent and child participants differed, but the testimonies have shown that family members relied on each other throughout the pandemic and that such support was crucial. Our findings align with the growing recognition of communities as important sources of services and support for families (Christakis & Fowler, 2009; Crnic & Booth, 1991; McDonell et al., 2015). For youth and families experiencing social disadvantages in particular, very little has been written on the educational benefits of community organizations. In a report by McCabe et al. (2013), the authors conducted interviews and case studies to explore how people form social networks and the ways in which social networks are used to move into, through, and/or out of poverty. This research found that social networks were essential for surviving poverty and navigating complex systems (McCabe et al., 2013). Based on the results of our study, it was apparent that families found the education system particularly complex in light of the pandemic and associated precautionary or containment measures. Thus, they shifted to utilizing, recognizing, and emphasizing the value of their social networks. McCabe et al. (2013) also discussed the ways in which agencies and community organizations can act as venues to facilitate social network building. While this was challenging during the pandemic, results from this study indicate that WHM facilitated new or deeper connections for families—whether between families and WHM staff or within a family unit. Thus, policymakers should consider strategies to foster greater community engagement among families, which can provide crucial support during crises. Indeed, fostering communities and community engagement is one way for policymakers to ensure that services provided to families facing social disadvantages are more responsive to their needs (Moore et al., 2016).

However, even in the literature, there is no clear agreement as to the definition of community. One tentative definition is that the nature of community ultimately depends on the perception of each person belonging to that community and their relationships with the people of that community. A stronger feeling of belonging leads parents and children to contribute more to the community. On the other hand, individuals and families who believe that

they are isolated from their community are less likely to make use of the resources the community can provide (Moore et al., 2016). For the purpose of this study, *community* is defined as a network consisting of individuals and organizations interacting and supporting each other, bound by shared experiences or characteristics, a sense of belonging, and physical proximity. This relates to the experiences and stories shared by Pat indicating that WHM staff and services “came into play” at junctures where extra support was required. Val described something similar when she shared how challenging it was to be separated from her sister during the lockdowns.

Effects associated with socioeconomic disadvantaging circumstances

The families chosen for this study were all facing socioeconomically disadvantaging circumstances. However, those disadvantages manifested themselves in different ways and demonstrate the intersectional repercussions of the pandemic. For one, in poorer communities, health, education, and community services are usually scarcer because not enough resources (both material and service related) are devoted to these services. This was made evident in the accounts from Tate, Val, and Pat who faced challenges with gaining access to resources like computers to assist their children with online learning. This challenge was also described very early in the pandemic by a group of researchers in the United States (Blagg et al., 2020). With fewer resources, existing local services were also less prepared to respond effectively to the complex needs of families facing socioeconomic disadvantages, which had downstream impacts of affecting the well-being and trust of families.

Not only did the lack of resources and support generate mistrust, but it generated a feeling of being stuck in a cycle of poverty. Parent participants expressed concerns that their children would fall behind their peers because of their own financial restrictions. Like Pat expressed, this generates a cycle of poverty where poorer children face greater obstacles when pursuing education that could improve their socioeconomic situation. Indeed, childhood poverty is strongly associated with poverty in adulthood (Sandel et al., 2016). Many participants were apprehensive about the lack of public sector support (from schools and the government) and turned towards organizations such as the WHM. The organization, being closer to the families and more aware of their realities, might have a better understanding of their precarious situation and be able to offer individualized solutions—as supported by the WHM’s personalized approaches.

Finally, research also shows that childhood poverty is a social determinant of health over one’s life course (Sandel et al., 2016). As the results of this study show, the pandemic exacerbated parent and child participants’ baseline stress and anxiety through disruptions to their daily lives and isolation from their peers. However, poverty—being well associated with negative health outcomes in the literature—is another factor associated with negative mental health (Patel et al., 2010); this adds layers to the emotional and psychological turmoil that participants described.

The evaluation of technology

One major obstacle to learning at home for the participants was the lack of electronic devices. The importance and value of technology for students in the 21st century has been discussed in the past (Fatimah & Santiana, 2017; Gajjar, 2013; Larson & Miller, 2011). More recently, this topic has also been discussed in a COVID-19 context, to examine the vital role of technology in the lives of students, parents, and teachers (Ewing & Cooper, 2021; Pozo et al., 2021; Yates et al., 2021). However, despite this challenge, the participants in our study had mixed feelings about their use of electronic devices. Most parent and child participants still preferred the school setting because it provided a calmer environment and better access to their teachers, which allowed them to ask more questions and clarify assignments. These findings align with the perspectives of students elicited by Ewing and Cooper (2021), as well as by Yates et al. (2021), who described that help was more accessible in an in-person learning setting. In an online format, teachers were less accessible, while many of the parent participants admitted they lacked the

knowledge, capacity, or methods to teach their children by themselves (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Yates et al., 2021). In a study from Australia, parents highlighted that their role in supporting children with online learning was mainly supervisory (Ewing & Cooper, 2021), and in some ways this aligns with some of the perspectives shared by parent participants in our study. For example, Pat sat with her child to supervise her during school periods. However, considering that parents in this study were facing socioeconomic disadvantages, the lack of resources made it challenging for some parents to fully occupy this supervisory role and be comfortable or confident in that role. Furthermore, for many of the families, there were challenges associated with accommodating multiple school-aged children doing different activities. For families with experiences of socioeconomic disadvantages, in particular, these issues also appeared to be more complex to solve based on limited individual resources and access to community resources.

Overall, the parent participants' accounts indicate that dedicated spaces and environments for the children to learn is optimal, along with early resource investment for these families that occurs in an organized and fair way. However, parent participants did appreciate being closer to their children and being able to oversee their children. In light of this, schools could find ways to engage parents more in their children's education in the future, even during in-person learning.

Learning from children during the pandemic

One key aspect of this study was children's agency during the pandemic, notably during the school closures. The childhood ethics framework we used to orient this study recognizes children and youth as active agents in their everyday lives. By agency, we mean the children's ability to act deliberately, make decisions for themselves, and express their aspirations, concerns, and capacities based on their own experiences as individuals living in a community with peers and social institutions (Siedlikowski et al., 2022).

The results of this study demonstrate that in many cases, children and youth understood the gravity of the situation which their families were in and quickly developed a sense of responsibility for their family's well-being. Consequently, these findings suggest that promoting the active participation of children within the household not only reduces stress for the entire family unit through the division of chores but also encourages significant development in the children's self-confidence as they gain more responsibility. This finding of altruism, responsibility, and self-direction, both during educational activities and beyond, aligns with work by Larcher and Brierley (2020) to highlight the value of including children as partners in recovery plans from COVID-19 (especially school closures). During the pandemic and for families from this study, children were seen as more equal members of the family, where the outcome of the household depended in part on their actions.

The children also proved to be capable decision makers when they decided to attend the WHM on their own initiative. It is crucial for policymakers to recognize that children and youth must be directly involved in decisions affecting their lives as their future outcomes are strongly defined by their childhood experiences and their voices can contribute meaningful insights and recommendations to shape steps forward (Larcher & Brierley, 2020). Still, parents and teachers remain important figures in encouraging children to explore beyond their comfort zone and develop their self-confidence, both with regards to their education and their place at home. This relational aspect to young people's agency and autonomy is a key feature within childhood ethics, where scholars recognize the inherently value of relationships for children's development and the reciprocal nature of these relationships (Carnevale et al., 2021). That reciprocal role is evident through this research, where young people helped their parents and siblings and simultaneously relied on assistance from their parents, teachers, and community programs.

Successes and challenges during the transition to at-home schooling

Participants described how schools and community organizations facilitated the transition to at-home schooling during the pandemic, but some also shared instances where they felt this support was missing. For instance, Pat decried the lack of technological device provided to her daughter, which led her to fall behind her peers following the transition.

Parent participants seemed to view the government's role as more remote than the WHM, whose involvement with the children and broader family was seen as more direct and immediate. It appears that community organizations are in a better position to form close bonds with families, considering their proximity with families, both geographically and relationally. The ease of access associated with community organizations compared to governments and/or private organizations is also something that has been discussed for decades (Robinson & White, 1998). Also, the mission of the WHM, being centered around marginalized households, allows the organization to better understand the realities and complex needs of families facing socially disadvantaging circumstances. However, this does not imply that the government's engagement should be limited to financial support for these organizations.

One key feature that was present in successful transitions or positive educational experiences during the pandemic was communication. When communication provided by government, schools, or the community organization was clear and informative, families generally associated this with better experiences and/or educational outcomes. For instance, Cove mentioned how her children felt relieved and less anxious after attending homework sessions at the WHM because there they felt supported by the staff who took the time to explain exercises to them and called home to check on the family. Tate mentioned that her children built strong ties with people at the WHM, making them eager to return to the organization and study more. These families' experiences show the importance of community for transitioning to at-home learning and the benefits that being integrated in the organization has brought. Additionally, clear communication provided parent participants more stability because they knew what to expect in terms of homework, lessons, and assignments for the foreseeable future. Parent participants felt most confused when left to themselves to oversee their children's learning. Pat, especially, turned towards the WHM when she felt her daughter's school was absent during the transition. Our results would also suggest that the WHM's tailored approach to each family's needs and its commitment to supporting both children and parents, whether at school or at home, were particularly helpful. Thus, considering that these families' needs are complex, it is important for service providers to understand the circumstances associated with each of them to provide the best service.

Finally, maintaining social connections during the pandemic was an important mechanism to escape from the everyday stress and anxiety that parent and child participants faced. Those connections consisted of friends and family members, as well as WHM staff and schoolteachers—likely because these are the individuals they could see most frequently during the early days of the pandemic. For both parent and child participants, social connections and interactions had positive impacts on their mental health and well-being. While literature on the impact of the pandemic on children's well-being is still scarce, it has been recognized that pandemics can hinder child development due to the risks of illness, protective confinement, social isolation, and the increased stress levels of adults around them (Araújo et al., 2021). Thus, socialization and relationships are crucial for increasing well-being among children, which favours their growth and development (Araújo et al., 2021). Furthermore, schools provide for a range of socialization activities, ranging from educative and evaluative to extracurricular, which can be difficult to replicate at home.

Staff members at the WHM found that communicating regularly with the participants at home eased their anxiety because it provided a valuable opportunity for them to voice their concerns. However, the availability of resources

was an important theme throughout the study, especially for the WHM, where it had a direct impact on the quality and quantity of services they could provide to families. Because staff numbers were lacking and the organization had to reduce its opening days to families, some participants, especially child participants, were particularly distressed by those restrictions. Thus, figuring out ways that families can stay in contact with dependable members of these organizations despite resource constraints both at the individual and organizational level is a key next step.

Parents in their new role(s)

Many parent participants felt inadequate following the new responsibilities they acquired during the pandemic, namely those of supervising and being more involved in their children's education. This theme has also been discussed in research that focused on parents' experiences with at-home learning for their child with special education needs or disabilities (Greenway & Eaton-Thomas, 2020) and in a paper examining the experiences of parents in Greece with at-home learning and new parent-teacher roles acquired (Rousoulioti et al., 2022). Another study in China surveyed the mental health of students' parents and found that numerous factors, such as social support and parenting style, influenced their anxiety and depression (Wu et al., 2020). Our results suggest that for some parent participants, this feeling of inadequacy stemmed from a lack of confidence in their own education and knowledge. Parents preferred to delegate those tasks to the WHM, whom they felt were more qualified. This perceived ineptitude could possibly be eased by giving parents the appropriate tools and resources to support their children. The booklets given by the WHM appear to be a simple and efficient way for parents to oversee their children's homework and help them through it, without being too demanding.

However, another parent participant instead lacked confidence in her child's ability to learn by herself, which led to a situation where the parent was overbearing and directed her child's learning. The confusion and lack of communication from schools might have encouraged the parent to play a more involved role. Overall, our study suggests that the transition to at-home learning during the pandemic, schools did not prepare parents to be more directly involved in their children's education and did not provide parents with adequate tools to deal with this responsibility.

Limitations

Since only five families participated in this study, which included five parents and three children, the transferability of these results to other families is unknown. Furthermore, this study could have benefited from more testimonies of the children themselves, as the current results are mainly analyzed from the perspective of the parents. It is important to note that the interviews all took place over the phone, as this was the preferred method for participants—considering the identity-related concerns they experience based on the marginality they are often facing—so this resulted in some disconnected conversations with parent participants and the child participants who did join. For instance, in one family interview, a young person started an interview with the researcher and then abruptly ran away and did not come back. Based on the distanced connection, it was a challenge to facilitate a return to the interview or even to ask participants if they wanted a break in the same way one could during an in-person or web teleconference interview. Also, during this study, it so happened that only mothers were interviewed, which provides results from a specific angle. In the future, it would be useful to examine the perspectives of other parents/caregivers (fathers, grandparents, siblings, etc.) to understand a wider scope of experiences. Finally, the researchers noticed a language barrier during certain interviews, wherein translation support would have been beneficial.

Conclusion and next steps

In light of the findings from this project, we recommend that policymakers in provincial and territorial governments prioritize financial supports and incentives for community organizations that target educational supports for children—during a pandemic, but also in the months and years the follow, when children are “catching up” from the delays they faced. In resource-constrained settings, both in school systems and in neighbourhoods, the need for this financial investment is even more clear and pronounced. However, there is also a need to recognize that school closures impact children and families in many ways, beyond purely educational or academic concerns. Isolation and the removal of schools as safety nets for families and children facing socially disadvantaging circumstances results in significant effects, which may be emotional, psychological, social, or physical in nature. This research reveals that community organizations located on the ground and in accessible locations for these families stepped up to meet the gaps—even if that meant extending the boundaries of their mandates and facing resource constraints. Thus, policymakers ought to acknowledge and prioritize these spaces during pandemics.

More research is required that engages with children from families experiencing various social disadvantages, in particular. In light of COVID-19 restrictions, in-person data collection approaches were not permitted, but it would be ideal if such methods were used (particularly ethnographic methodologies) to witness some of the ways that community organizations assist young people with transitions to online schooling within a pandemic context.

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- 1 See supplementary materials (S1) for interview guides, available here: https://www.mcgill.ca/voice/files/voice/jcs_supplementary_materials_final.pdf
 - 2 See supplementary material (S2) for consent/assent forms.
 - 3 All names used herein are pseudonyms assigned by our research team to protect the participants' privacy under ethical research guidelines.
 - 4 A more comprehensive narrative related to this participant's experience can be found in the supplementary materials (S4).

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