

***Parental Perspectives on Distance Learning during Class Suspension:
A Study from the Hong Kong Early Childhood Education Sector***

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Abstract

Since the first class suspension, announced in Feb 2020 due to the prevalence of Covid-19, many schools, including all kindergartens, primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, have redirected their face-to-face learning to online learning to strive for 'suspending classes without suspending learning'. The physical closure has switched face-to-face learning to learning at home, which has given rise to a new role for parents and guardians in children's learning. As a significant stakeholder in the education process, parent-child experiences are among the most influential driving factors contributing to the success of any educational reform, and hence should be analysed to inform future decisions. This research sought to examine parental issues experienced by the parents of children engaged in distance learning. Parents agreed with the policy to keep the learning going, but they also highlighted the challenges they faced while supporting their children's home learning. Parents explained that they were experiencing difficulties balancing their responsibilities, learner involvement, accessibility, and learning outcomes. Some notable implications and recommendations for future implementation of distance learning or blended learning were discovered as a result of the study. Parental views towards the Hong Kong kindergartens' readiness to adopt technology in emergency distance learning adoption were also discussed.

Keywords: Early Childhood education, distance learning, parental perspectives, digital learning, challenges

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Introduction and Literature Review

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of students around the world were subjected to temporary school closures in an effort to promote social distancing and thereby slow the virus's spread (Viner et al., 2020). Nearly 200 countries have closed schools, with over 90 % of these students, ranging from early childhood to higher education, experiencing some kind of disruption in their education (UNESCO, 2020). Many countries and territories around the world, including the United Kingdom, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States, have temporarily closed their schools. During previous infectious disease outbreaks such as the Swine Flu and MRSA (Methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), school closures were found to be effective in reducing transmission (Cowling et al., 2020; Nafisah et al., 2018; Rashid et al., 2015). The Novel Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) was first reported in Wuhan, China, December 2019, and rapidly spread around the globe, hitting Hong Kong in January 2020. Considering the high infection risk of the pandemic, the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) announced on January 31, 2020, that all schools in Hong Kong (including kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, special schools, and private schools offering non-formal curricula) would be suspended until, March 2020 (HKSAR, 2020).

Kindergartens in Hong Kong

All kindergartens in Hong Kong are private, and these vary based on various other aspects. International kindergartens use multiple worldwide curriculum frameworks such as the British Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) Primary Years Programme (PYP), and Reggio and Montessori. In addition, the Education Department follows a local curriculum. Registration with the Education Ordinance and Education Bureau inspectors provides an additional layer of security and ensures that each kindergarten receives routine supervision.

Background of Pandemic in HK and Distance Learning

All schools in Hong Kong began class suspensions at the end of January, 2020. With such a long period of class suspension, various stakeholders expressed their concerns that students' learning would be hampered, should they be allowed to be idle at home during this period. Therefore, a press release titled 'Suspending Classes without Suspending Learning' was issued by the Secretary for Education in early February 2020, suggesting that schools continue to deliver their learning and teaching through an online mode during the period of class suspension. It was also suggested that schools should cooperate closely with parents to maintain balanced learning for students.

According to Hannum et al. (2008) and Abuhammad (2020), distance learning refers to a platform that schools use to meet students' learning needs. It is also an effective approach in delivering learning at the college, university, and high school level. In this paper, distance learning refers to 'online learning experience through the internet', including the synchronous and asynchronous learning mode, where students can engage in learning with their teachers and peers at a time and in a space that they find suitable (Dong, Cao & Hui, 2020).

Distance Learning for Young Children in Hong Kong

With the proposition 'Suspending Classes without Suspending Learning', many schools started to engage in online learning, including the majority of kindergartens adopting local or international curricula, which constitute more than 1,000 kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-child-care-centres, with approximately 180,000 children aged two to six years. The online learning mode varied across kindergartens, including synchronous and asynchronous mode, or a mixture of both. In Hong Kong, distance learning is a new practice in kindergartens. The primary reason for this is that young children aged two to six years need an abundance of concrete hands-on learning experience and social interaction in order to help them develop their understanding of the world. In the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (EDB, 2017), it is stated that information technology is only an assistive technology that should not replace other authentic and real-life learning.

Parental Belief and Perspectives towards Online Learning for Young Children

Parents play a vital role in establishing distance learning for young children. Many young children depend on parents and caregivers for online learning support and direction. According to research conducted before the pandemic on virtual school learning environments, parents act as learning coaches for students who spend a large portion of their day in an online setting (Hasler Waters & Leong, 2014). When surveyed, teachers described the following parental scaffolds as beneficial to the virtual learner: (a) arranging and managing students' schedules, (b) fostering relationships and experiences, (c) tracking and encouraging student participation, and (d) instructing students as required (Borup, 2016).

The current body of literature and empirical research on parental involvement and difficulties in their children's learning experiences primarily focus on the conventional school site-based setting, even though parental involvement can vary significantly in an online environment (Liu et al., 2010). Many studies have called for further research into parental involvement in distance learning (Black, 2009; Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Rice, 2009). Parents' ability, problems, and needs when working in remote learning environments directly affect their children's academic progress.

Examining parents' daily life experiences and obstacles could provide data helpful in creating programmes and regulations that address parents' unique requirements in this online learning environment. The aim of this study is to elicit the self-identified concerns and challenges parents experienced when aiding their children with remote learning during the Spring-2020 COVID-19 school transitions.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the parental views regarding the **challenges** of distance learning faced by their children during the class suspension?

RQ2: What are the parental views towards the **readiness** of the Hong Kong kindergartens to adopt technology in emergency distance learning adoption?

Research Methodology

The mixed-methods research design was employed, using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as the primary means for gathering data. The research used qualitative findings that drew on parental viewpoints and experiences to support parents' participation in their children's education. Furthermore, the research investigated how parents' participation in their children's technology use and education was conducted. First, we conducted online surveys and semi-structured interviews to obtain demographic and general information. The data were analysed according to standard protocols for assessing observation objects and indicators (Clarke, V., & Braun, V., 2013).

Participants

Data were obtained from an online survey of parents of at least one child who had attended a physical school in a conventional learning setting before school closures and changes to remote learning formats during 2020-2021 due to the pandemic in Hong Kong. This study cohort consisted of 22 parents. Twenty of the participants self-identified as mothers and two self-identified as fathers. Demographic information included respondents' education level and household size. Fourteen parents reported having a graduate degree, five reported holding a Post-graduate degree (Masters and Doctorate level), and three reported holding an Associate degree or lower. Two households confirmed that they did not have internet access. The survey began on December 15, 2020 and finished on Feb 15, 2020. To triangulate the data for reliability and validity 14 Zoom interviews were conducted.

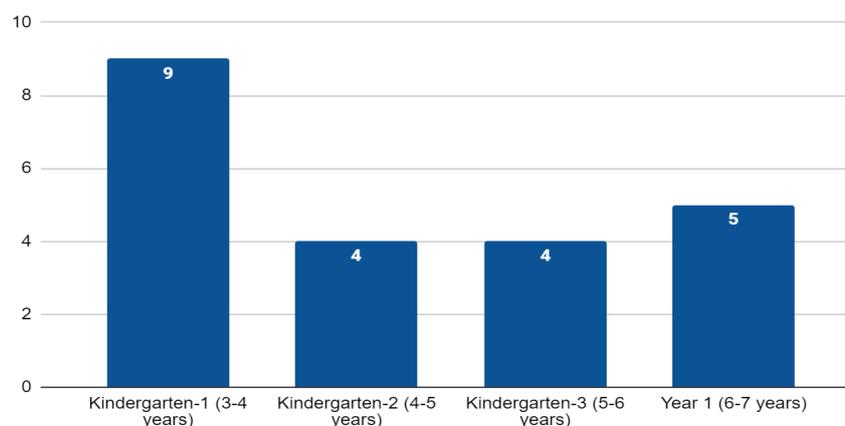


Figure 1: Participants' Children's Grade Distribution

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. First, the descriptive statistical analysis was performed; parental characteristics and children's online learning activities were measured. The answers were ranked from one to five, with one being 'strongly disagree' and five being 'strongly agree.' Additionally, qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions and interviews. The team shared data coding and interpretation responsibilities. Multiple discussions between the two coders were required to resolve data interpretation conflicts that arose as a result of whom was doing the coding. Creating categories from qualitative data was generally straightforward. The two coders gathered to discuss any coding conflicts and reached an accord by redefining words.

Findings and Discussion

The survey findings comprise two parts based on our research questions. The following section discusses the challenges and opportunities educators have experienced and emphasises the teaching strategies educators have used to enhance their practice.

RQ 1: What are the parental views regarding the challenges of distance learning faced by their children during the class suspension?

The themes extracted from data presented in Figure 2 indicate that play, partnerships, and collaboration were the three major concerns shared by parents. The other major components were student participation, support, and independence, whereas many parents indicated the lack of resources as the premier factor influencing their children's participation in online learning.



Figure 2: Themes generated from data (Word cloud)

Following the systematic process of combining themes in different categories, the themes were separated into five major categories, Figure 3.

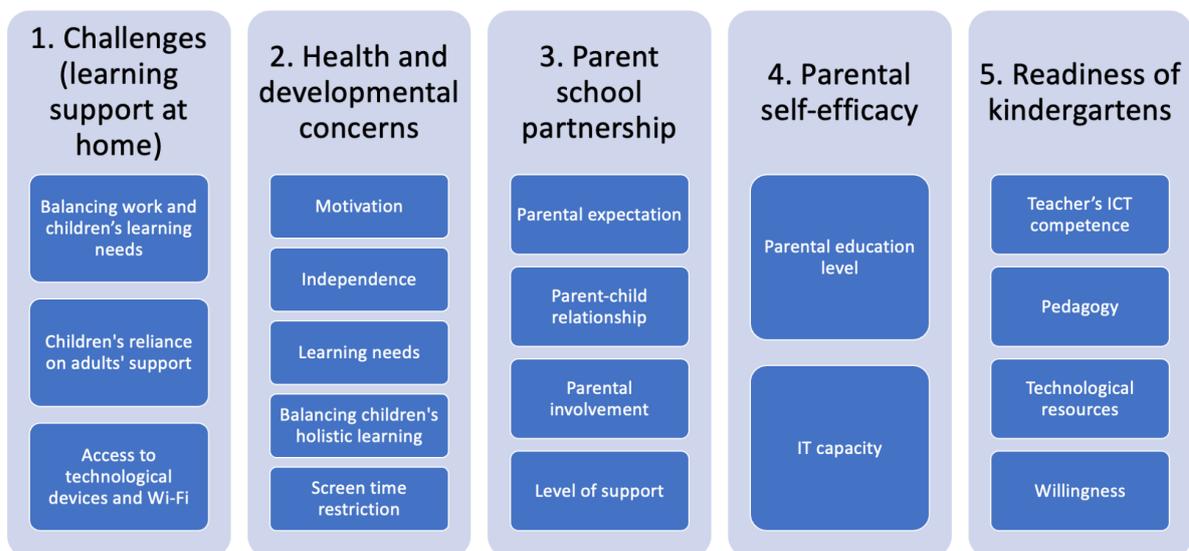


Figure 3: Parental Views on Challenges

1. Challenges to Providing Learning Support at Home

1.1 Balancing Work and Children's Learning Needs

80% of the parents surveyed stated that balancing work and children's needs was tough while children have online sessions at home. Some respondents suggested that they frequently have other work to do while their children are online. Supporting children while they are working online may require professional support. Thus, parents found it challenging to focus on their own work.

1.2 Children's Reliance on Adult Support

Twenty parents indicated agreement that adult assistance is a necessary part of children's online learning. Parents or caregivers would have to sit alongside children to keep them focused and give appropriate responses to the teachers. Over 70% of the population in this study reported experiencing problems supporting children's online learning, including problems with their children completing assignments independently and lack of attention or willingness to work on such assignments.

1.3 Access to Technological Devices and Wi-Fi

Access to computers and Wi-Fi is an essential aspect of online learning. The study, therefore, investigated whether children had uninterrupted access to technology devices and Wi-Fi, such that they could maintain a consistent online learning experience. Seventeen participants said they could allocate the required technological hardware device, such as laptops or tablets (including mobile devices), for their children's online learning. Some of the participants could seldom spare a computer for their children's use. Also, Over 50% of participants claimed that they could only connect to Wi-Fi "sometimes", which might potentially interrupt online learning.

2. Health and Developmental Concern

2.1 Motivation

Survey data revealed that parents were concerned about their children's learning motivation when using online learning. The majority stated that the youngsters experienced a different range of frustrations, such as loss of attention and motivation to offer adequate responses, throughout online classes. One of the key reasons, the participants determined, was that online sessions were difficult for student-teacher interaction. Figure 4 indicates that 63% participants reported difficulty for teachers to maintain enough engagement throughout the online session.

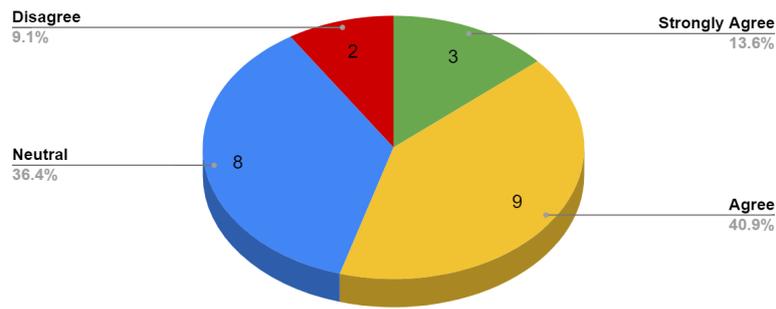


Figure 4: Parental Views on Student Motivation

2.2 Independence

Approximately 91% of the parent cohort witnessed disappointment and a lack of enthusiasm, along with their children's need for technical support, throughout the online sessions (Figure 5). Therefore, it is critical to have people there to help with online learning. Additionally, the participants noted that it was challenging to raise children's independence.

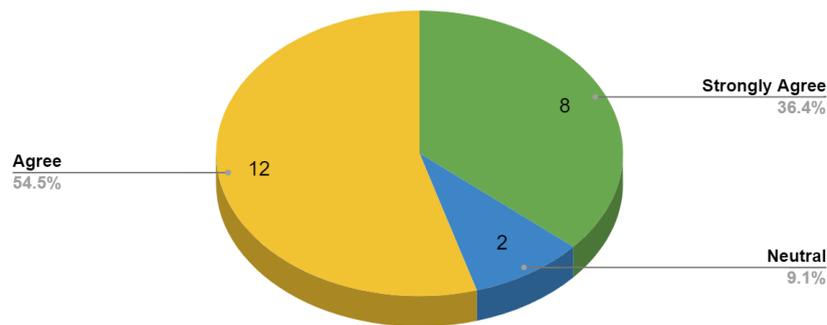


Figure 5: Parental Views on Student Independence

2.3 Learning Needs

Almost 90% of the participants observed that it was difficult for teachers to have direct contact with children during online learning sessions and for teachers to observe the needs and challenges the children encountered during online learning. This presented a significant challenge for teachers in their efforts to cater for the individual learning needs of children.

2.4 Balancing Children's Holistic Learning

The Kindergarten Curriculum Guide advocates holistic development in children. Many parents were concerned about social isolation. Figure 6 indicates that all participants expressed concern that students were at risk of being deprived socially because of their lack of face-to-face communication in the online learning context. In general, parents were afraid that online learning would interfere with their children's personal, social, and emotional skills.

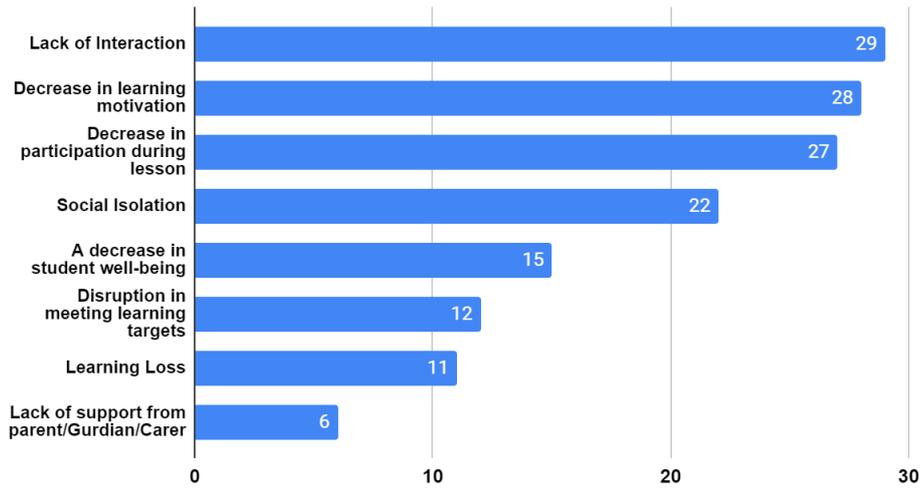


Figure 6: Parental Concerns about Impact on Students

2.5 Screen Time Restrictions

As indicated in the survey answers, prior to the onset of the pandemic, participants tended to limit their children’s device “screen time”. Over 95% of participants allowed their children to have regular usage of technological devices. Over 75% tended to set the screen time limit ranging from 10 mins to 30 mins each time. Parents were concerned that the time that their children spent interacting with on-screen technology might lead to developmental or health problems. More than half of the total participants said that schools should break down the online learning sessions into short sessions, which they should then alternate with screen time breaks.

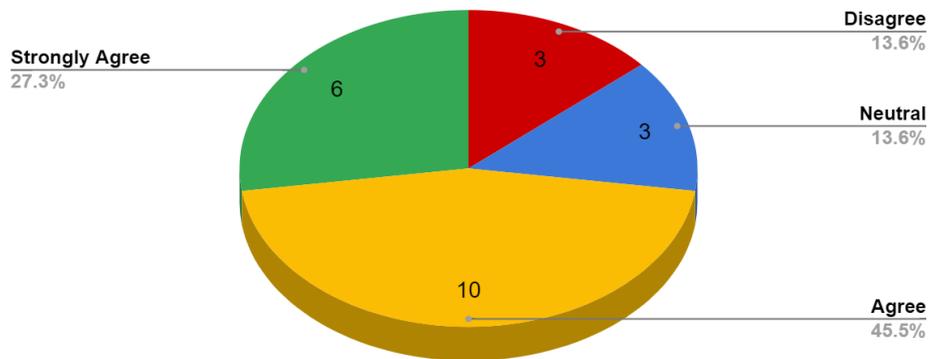


Figure 7: Parental Views on Screen Time

3. Parent-School Partnership

3.1 Parental Expectations

Over 54% of parents showed appreciation to their children’s school and teachers for their effort in sustaining children’s learning during the pandemic. However, the participants also expressed concern about the impact on children’s learning during the pandemic under the online learning mode. It was evident that parents were concerned that children’s learning, both academically and socially, would be hindered under the online learning environment.

3.2 Parent-child Relationship

Online learning has introduced both positive and negative effects to the parent-child relationship. Some parents expressed the view that with the increase of time spent together with their children at home could help them develop a closer relationship. However, tensions arose when parents had to push their children to finish their schoolwork and keep them engaged in online learning, in particular those parents who had to balance their own workload and their children's learning.

3.3 Parental Involvement

For young children to successfully engage in online learning, it is important for their parents to be involved. Therefore, it is vital for schools to provide proper support and guidelines for parents on how to use online learning tools, platforms, and apps. Yet, the data revealed that parents felt that they received insufficient support from schools to enable them to comfortably interact with the online learning tools and platforms, as well as to support children's learning at home. Out of 22 participants, only seven felt that they had received regular and ample guidelines and support from schools, while nine participants stated that they had received no support or guidelines from schools. This lack of perceived support and the frustration it would necessarily cause, would most likely be increased for parents with lower IT competency.

3.4 Level of Support

To make learning and teaching successful, a concerted and sustained effort is required from different parties. Parental involvement is one of the key components of young children's success in online learning. Therefore, it is vital that schools provide proper support and guidelines for parents on how to use online learning tools, platforms, and apps. Yet, as previously stated in section 3.3, parents felt that the provision of such support was inadequate.

4. Parental Self-efficacy

Even though most of the participants considered their own IT skills competence as being "above average," more than 50% considered that they did not have sufficient IT knowledge and skills to manage and support their children's online learning. Some were exacerbated when parents returned to their physical workplaces after a period of working from home and supervision of their children's online sessions had to be placed in the hands of an adult guardian, such as a paid domestic helper or family member. Under these circumstances eight out of the 22 participants stated that they were not able to support children's online learning efficiently.

4.1 Parental Educational Level

More than 80% of the participants stated that they were university graduates, of which more than 60% of them held a post-graduate degree. This reflected that most of the participants in this study were of higher education level and they expressed that they were confident in supporting their children's learning.

4.2 IT Capacity (Self-efficacy)

Besides the academic support, almost 90% of the participants considered that they had sufficient computer knowledge to support their children's online learning. They were confident in manipulating various IT devices and using various online learning platforms.

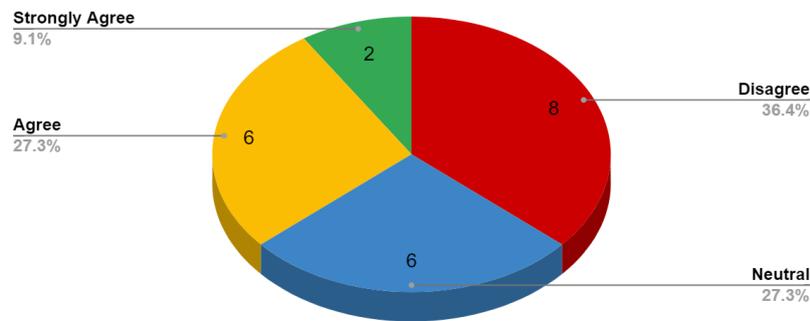


Figure 8: Parental Views on Self-Efficacy to Support Online Learning

5. Readiness of Kindergartens

In addition to considering the role of parents, we also need to look into the readiness of kindergartens. As the online sessions deliverers, it would be expected for teachers to have mastered the technological skills being used in online learning. Comparing the schools that had started to use technological platforms with those that started only after the outbreak of the pandemic, 10 out of 22 participants conceived that the former group of teachers possessed a higher level of technological skill. This could be a crucial factor in facilitating the implementation of online learning. A higher level of technical skills would mean a wider variation in the online teaching strategies employed, the design of the activities, the confidence in using the technological devices and platforms, providing the essential feedback and support to parents and children (Martin, Budhrani & Wang, 2019; Ventayen 2018). This could result in a better online learning experience for young children. According to Robih, Suratman, & Soesatyo (2017), the role of teachers in online learning was not only as materials providers, ~~giver~~, but also as motivators. Therefore, the level of technological competency could make a difference in the quality of the online learning and thus the learning motivation and outcome for the children.

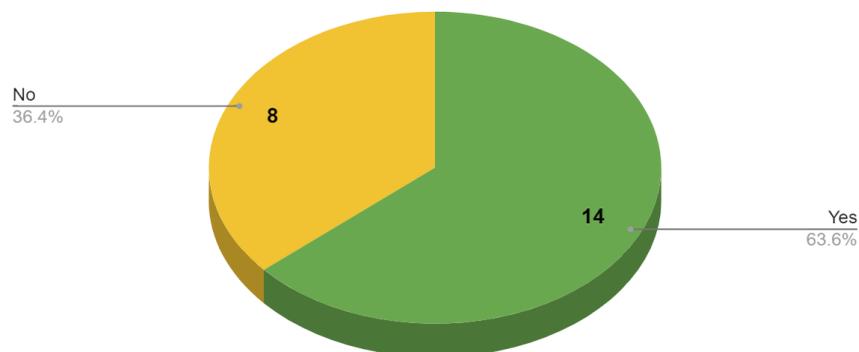


Figure 9: Parental Views on Future Use of Technology in ECE Classroom

5.1 Teachers' ICT Competence

To contribute to the success of online learning, teachers' ICT competence is one of the most important elements. In the survey, around 50% of the participants considered that those teachers who had already started using online learning platforms before the pandemic possessed better ICT competence and performed better in the online learning period. This could be in terms of handling the technical issues, as well as in the pedagogies they adopted.

5.2 Pedagogy

Parents were concerned about the pedagogies that the teachers adopted during the online learning period of the pandemic. As mentioned in the previous section, most of the participants observed that their children demonstrated loss of interest and reduced motivation during the online learning sessions, one of the crucial reasons was that it was difficult to have teacher-student interaction during online learning. The lack of physical interaction made it difficult for children to maintain their attention. Therefore, teachers had to find appropriate ways to interact with children to keep them engaged. It was also essential for teachers to find other ways to create different stimulations to keep children attentive to the learning.

5.3 Technological Resources

From the questionnaire, many parents expressed that in order to enrich the online learning experience of the children, schools should continue to equip themselves with more hardware and software resources if the pandemic persisted, or post-pandemic. This would indicate that the parents were expecting a more diversified online learning experience for their children.

5.4 Willingness

During the pandemic, the Hong Kong government urged businesses to enable their staff to work from home wherever possible. Employees were expected to work at home and conduct regular online sessions with their colleagues and superiors. Some schools required teachers to go to school on shift to provide some regular childcare services and online teaching, while other teachers were allowed to stay and work from home, providing the online teaching for the children.

RQ 2: What are the parental views towards the readiness of the Hong Kong kindergartens to adopt technology in emergency distance learning adoption?

1. e-Channels to Enhance Communication

During the epidemic, online learning created distance between schools and families. Few participants, however, expressed satisfaction with their communication during the pandemic. Many parents reported that they felt more connected to the schools during this period due to their increasing contact through phone calls, instant messaging, emails, and e-platform communication. This suggested that schools continue their communications with families regardless of the situation, as technology might affect the relationship and cooperation.

e-Channels to Enhance Communication	Action: Continue to use various communication e-channels	<i>Apply communication structures and strategies to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strengthen internal and external communication ● Strengthen collaboration ● Communicate clearly and coherently ● Digital portfolio, the opportunity for parents to participate in the learning journey ● Surveys and data collection for Parental voice and views
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Figure 10: e-Channels to Enhance Communication

2. Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Despite the suspension of courses, educators were able to find creative solutions. Strategies were built on delivering high-quality Early Years practices. Educators developed relevant and relatable experiences to motivate students to take action and become engaged. These were examples that supported the development of conceptual understanding, demonstrating curiosity, creativity, imagination, and the social-emotional and physical growth of young learners.

Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge	Action: Professionally develop teachers to apply different pedagogical methods combined with technology to implement future teaching and learning	<i>Enhance pedagogical practices to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● PD opportunities to understand the right use of technology. ● HK Kindergarten Curriculum Guide to enhance through curriculum reform ● Increase student engagement and participation ● Make teaching and learning student-centred ● Strengthen student choice and ownership
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Figure 11: Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge

3. Real and digital learning spaces exposure to continue

The learning environment and authentic resources promote good Early Years practice. Initially, educators found it difficult, but as they gained experience, they explored new ways to use the digital environments, such as nature, planting, yoga, dancing, and obstacle courses at home. Fostering creative thinking with open-ended resources using multiple venues for asynchronous and synchronous instruction generated interest and boosted enthusiasm, e.g., Zooming from a beach looking at patterns in nature.

Real and digital learning spaces exposure to continue	Actions: Set up environments to support the implementation of teaching and learning	<i>Create a learning environment to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promote interactive learning ● Make learning meaningful and fun ● Foster a sense of trust and safety ● Previous experience in using online learning and teaching platform ● Hardware and software to use regularly
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Figure 12: Real and Digital Learning Spaces Exposure to Continue

4. Home School Partnership

Many practical learning opportunities were provided for pupils by resource packs made by educators. The basic demands of distance learning were met with materials sent out regularly with resource packs. Facilitators and parents have been highlighted as crucial to remote learning success. The level of help was variable, with more support given in international schools. Some schools cannot even provide online learning and depend on resource bags to send out to the children's homes.

Home School Partnership	Action: Strengthen partnerships to enhance good practice	<i>Form effective partnerships to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work towards common goals/ build shared understanding ● Strengthen capabilities of all stakeholders
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Figure 13: Home School Partnership

5. Technology Integrated Blended Approach

Virtual learning environments pose new difficulties for ECE educators. With limited technical ability and support from home, educators found the introduction of technologies problematic in that they risked impairing children's motivation and learning. Although basic technology had previously been incorporated into face-to-face instruction as a teaching tool in the school setting, the way technology now had to be applied was a new phenomenon to many, and it exposed educators' lack of experience more clearly.

Technology Integrated Blended Approach	Actions: Deliver teaching and learning through technology	<i>Leverage technology to:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase technological competence across all stakeholders ● Facilitate and amplify learning and teaching ● Connect and collaborate ● Students readiness to be aware and feel easy to use technology through blended learning adoption
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Figure 14: Technology Integrated Blended Approach

Conclusions and Future Directions

With the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination worldwide, many schools have resumed face-to-face learning. However, due to the unstable situation, schools still need to be prepared for blended learning or online learning at any time.

Through this study, we understand that there were many challenges faced by both parents and schools when implementing online learning, namely, the learning support at home, the children's health and developmental concerns of the children, the parent-school collaboration, parental self-efficacy, and the level of preparedness of the kindergarten. It is crucial for the stakeholders to address all these issues in order to provide a more efficient and enriched online learning experience for young children.

Additionally, in order to make online learning more successful, it is important for school personnel to ensure the continuous renewal and maintenance of technological devices and as well as their own knowledge in using the online learning tools and platforms, and with the appropriate pedagogies in hand. It is important for teachers to build on their success from face-to-face teaching and, together with their knowledge in technology usage, to transform them into their technological pedagogical content knowledge. A concerted effort is needed to make the implementation of online learning a success. It is essential for all stakeholders to collaborate in order to understand the challenges each party is facing. An open communication system should be maintained between the schools and parents, making it easier for schools and parents to communicate the views, opinions, and children's progress updates during class suspension.

The learning mode under this "new normal" has generated opportunities and changes in learning, as well as opening up the gateway for learning locally and globally. With technological advancement, it has connected people all over the world irrespective of geographical distance. It is an ideal opportunity for kindergartens to connect to professionals around the world to enrich the learning of young children and to promote teachers' professional development. It offers benefits for children to learn from resources and the global community, and to enhance their globalisation mindset through interacting and exploring materials and cultures from other countries.

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