In-Person or Online? A Qualitative Analysis of Parents' Back-to-School Decision-Making During the Covid-19 Pandemic

by

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ABSTRACT

IN-PERSON OR ONLINE? A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARENTS' BACK-TO-SCHOOL DECISION-MAKING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Anna Mikaela Beijbom — University of Guelph, 2022

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The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures have disrupted family life in Ontario since its onset in 2020. Families were required to transition to online learning from March to June 2020. For the 2020-2021 school year, parents had to choose between continuing with online learning or having their children return to school in-person in an adapted school environment. I conducted a qualitative analysis of 34 interviews with parents of school-aged children in Ontario. This thesis investigated how parents navigated making the back-to-school decision on behalf of their children. The analysis shows the various ways in which considerations like the threat of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, family specific qualities, and previous experiences with online learning featured in back-to-school decision-making.

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1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent responses have disrupted global life in innumerable ways. One element of such disruption has been the introduction of new decisions for many, largely around pandemic safety. Parents of young children carry large amounts of responsibility and have long had to make a variety of decisions on behalf of their children. These range in intensity and frequency including how to dress their child, what to feed them, whether and/or when to have them inoculated against many illnesses, whether and/or how to talk about difficult or sensitive subjects with them, and, the focus of this research, decisions around their education and schooling. The objective of this thesis is to better understand the decision-making context in, and process through which, parents in Ontario have made back-to-school decisions on behalf of their children during the Covid-19 pandemic.

While there have been commonalities across experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic around the world, at the same time, individual experiences have been situated in their specific contexts (Hansman, 2022). In Canada, education is regulated at the provincial and territorial level (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2022). Thus, school closure announcements and decisions have been unique to Ontario. Adapted education responses which involved virtual schooling options and adapted school environments, were also provincially regulated (Ministry of Education, 2020b). Given the variation in responses to the pandemic across the provinces and territories, I suggest that it is valuable to investigate parents' experiences at the provincial level. After detailing the relevant contextual information about education and the coronavirus

in Ontario, I will move on to the literature review. The literature review will explore existing research on online education, parenting and remote learning in the pandemic context, and parental decision-making, specifically around children's education. In the methods section I will detail the data collection and analytic process, and offer a reflection on my own position in relation to the current research. Finally, in the analysis I will present the factors and experiences that parents described as meaningfully contributing to or shaping their back-to-school decisions. In doing so, I show how depending on a family's situated context, certain factors could feature in an overriding fashion, foreclosing the consideration of other factors.

1.1 Education in Ontario

Historically parents in Ontario have been able to choose from several schooling options. Public schools, both non-denominational and Catholic sectors, offer Anglophone and Francophone streams (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2022). Independent schools – privately paid – offer a further variety of choice. Independent schools often offer a particular draw, for instance, a specifically religious education, or a non-mainstream pedagogical approach (e.g., Montessori), and often offer smaller class sizes and more resources (Van Pelt, Hunt, & Lewis, 2019). Finally, parents who wish not to enroll in the public or independent school system may choose to homeschool their children (Statistics Canada, 2019). In the 2019/2020 academic year in Ontario, 92.8% of students were enrolled in the public school system (29.4% in Catholic schools (MacLeod, 2022)) 6.9% were enrolled in independent schools, and 0.3% were homeschooled (Statistics Canada, 2021).

Ontario’s public education system was experiencing conflict immediately prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Between November and December of 2019, all four Ontario teachers’ unions – the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA), the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF), and the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO representing French-language teachers in the province) – had voted in favour of strike action in protest to the provincial governments proposed changes to education[1] (Rocca, 2020b). Subsequent job action began with work-to-rule and escalated to walkouts, culminating in multiple province-wide walkouts from the ETFO, and all four unions holding a province wide walkout on February 21, 2020: the largest strike action since 1997 (Rocca, 2020a).

Articles were published by news outlets and parenting magazines in anticipation of possible walkouts, preparing parents for what to expect and how to cope if strikes were to happen (Brown, 2019; McCullough, 2020). At the time, the strikes were covered broadly in the news media, with a large focus on the disruption and struggles caused for families (McCullough, 2020). Headlines emphasized that the ETFO “strike put 950,000 kids out of school,” (Crawley, 2020) and later, when all four unions walked out, “millions out of class” (O’Brien, 2020; Rocca, 2020a). In response to the teachers’ strike, the Ministry of Education launched a Support for Parents initiative to provide financial

[1] Proposed changes included a cap on salary increases, increased class sizes, mandatory e-learning for high school graduation, changes to teacher hiring, and cuts to special education funding (Goldfinger, 2020)

support for parents facing increasing childcare costs[2] (TorontoTimes, 2020). The challenges that resulted from schools being closed were palpable and noteworthy. Yet while the school closures on what were casually referred to as "strike days," were certainly disruptive, they paled in comparison to what was to come.

1.1.2 Covid-19 and Education in Ontario

As the novel coronavirus entered the province, an extended March Break – a two-week school closure to "flatten the curve" – was announced on March 12, 2020 (CBC News 2020). On March 17, 2020, the Ontario government declared a State of Emergency and a province-wide lockdown (Ontario Newsroom, 2020). School closures were increasingly prolonged and the 2019-2020 school year was completed at home, online (Ministry of Education, 2020a, Office of the Premier, 2020a, Office of the Premier, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). Given the abrupt transition and lack of preparation, delivery of remote learning varied across provinces, school boards, and classrooms (Cyr, Mondal, & Hansen, 2021).

At the end of July 2020, the provincial government announced that schools would re-open in September, offering both adapted in-class learning and virtual schooling options (Office of the Premier, 2020e). Parents were now faced with a new decision to make on behalf of their children. This decision was only reversible in one direction: parents whose children returned to school could, at any time, opt to move online.

[2] Eligible parents for children up to age 12 qualified for: $60/day for children 0-6 attending a school-based childcare closed on account of strike, $40/day for Junior and Senior Kindergarten students, $25/day for students Grade 1 to Grade 7, and $40/day for students JK to grade 12 with special needs

Parents whose children began with virtual learning, however, would be committed to completing the year as such (Office of the Premier, 2020e).

Schools began staggered re-entry in September 2020. In December 2020 it was announced that the winter break would be extended, and virtual learning continued for all children until mid-February 2021, when schools again resumed in-person classes (Global News, 2020). After being open for two months, on April 12th, 2021, it was announced that the April break would be extended, and all students would continue with virtual schooling for the foreseeable future (Davidson, 2021). On June 2, 2021, it was announced that remote learning would continue through June and the remainder of the 2020-2021 school year would also be completed online (Office of the Premier, 2021). For the 2021-2022 academic school year, parents were faced with a similar decision to the year prior; their children could return to school (now with the public largely vaccinated and their children and their peers possibly eligible as well[3]) or continue with virtual learning. As we approach the 2022-2023 school year, the Ontario government has announced that boards will be required to continue offering remote options "for one more school year" (Jones, 2022).

[3] While the adapted measures schools and other arenas took to keep their spaces safe were in accordance with public health recommendations, it was largely purported that only vaccination could ultimately stop the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. In December 2020, vaccination of high-risk populations began. By April 2021, mass delivery of vaccines began to Ontarians over the age of 18. In May of 2020, the Pfizer vaccine was approved for ages 12-15 (previously for 16 up), and by August Moderna was approved for 12–17-year-olds (Ontarionewsroom, 2021a). Health Canada approved the paediatric Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine for children ages 5-11 beginning November 23rd, 2021 (Ontarionewsroom, 2021b)

2 Literature Review

2.1 Online Education

While online education was new to many families at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, harnessing the powers of internet technology for educational purposes began much earlier. Universities first began experimenting with online courses in the mid 1990's (Kentnor, 2015), and many higher learning institutions have offered "Distance Education[4]" (the term commonly used to denote online courses at the post-secondary level) at increasing rates since. For younger ages, however, online learning has developed more slowly. High schools in Ontario began offering online learning courses in 2004 (Ontario Newsroom, 2019). Initially offered as optional accommodations, completion of online learning courses is now mandatory for high school students to graduate[5] (Ontario, 2022).

Research on the efficacy of and experiences with online education has focused on the post-secondary level (Kauffman, 2015; Kentnor, 2015; Ni, 2013), likely due in part to its higher usage in this context. Some comparative studies of online and traditional learning intended to discern differences in effectiveness have found that online learning has the potential to be as effective as face-to-face learning (Kauffman, 2015; Ni, 2013). However, studies have found lower student persistence (completion of assignments and the course) online (Ni, 2013), and highly specific student qualities

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[4] While "distance education" has meant virtual delivery for decades now, "distance education" in North America began even earlier, with the development of the U.S. Postal Service).

[5] Note that this was one of the proposed changes to education that led the teachers' unions to initiate strike action in 2019, but has since been implemented in Spring of 2022

necessary for success (Kauffman, 2015; Martin & Bollinger, 2018). At the post-secondary level, quality facilitation and feedback from instructors, course design, and time management, have been described as critical for success in the online learning environment (Kauffman, 2015). Martin and Bolliger (2018) specifically explored the role of engagement in this context, revealing the importance of meaningful engagement across three levels (learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learner-content), for student success. Knowing that someone is "on the other end" of the learning experience, paying attention, available to answer questions, offer feedback, direction, and support, was imperative (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Finally, Kauffman (2015) synthesized a profile of a successful online learner: high emotional intelligence (self-awareness of needs, management of feelings), self-regulation skills, self-discipline, time management, organization, planning, self-management, and an internal locus of control (the belief that their actions determine the outcomes of their lives, rather than some external force) were all found to be essential to students' success in the online learning environment.

The lacuna of research on K-12 online learning in Canada has been attributed to its minimal offering, however, Barbour (2012) has documented an increase in frequency of online and blended (partially in-person, partially online) learning for this age group. In response to the increasing frequency with which online learning is being offered at the K-12 level, authors published a call for teacher training specifically around supporting these young students' self-regulation skills (Lock, Eaton, & Kessy, 2017). They cited the expectation (as noted by Kauffman (2015)), that students learning online be self-directed and self-regulating, and the mismatch between these expectations and

children's age, as necessitating teacher-training specifically focused on helping children to develop skills for success in the online learning environment. Cavanaugh et al. (2009) also noted how the characteristics required for successful online learning are those most common to adult learners and suggests that given the differences between how adults, adolescents, and children, learn, offering of online education should be tailored as such. What little research that has been conducted on high school students' experiences of remote learning has ultimately demonstrated that while they appreciate the flexibility offered with online learning, they have felt online interactions are inadequate substitutes for those that take place in the face-to-face classroom (Barbour et al., 2012). Overall, the literature suggests that younger students often require a considerable amount of support and direction for success with online learning. For students in post-secondary education, and to some extent even for high school aged students, there is an expectation that self-regulation skills have been developed throughout the student's lifetime, in large part through their prior education (Lock et al., 2017). Students participating in virtual learning during the pandemic, however, were as young as four-years-old, from Junior Kindergarten to grade 12; thus, expecting them to meet this profile of successful online learner would simply be unreasonable (as per Lock et al., 2017).

2.2 Pandemic Research

2.2.1 Parenting in the Pandemic

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, many researchers pivoted projects and began investigations relating to the pandemic and its effects. Wang et al. (2020)

suggested that to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on children, family functioning should be deeply understood in a contextually relevant manner. Research seeking to identify and understand the impacts of the pandemic on parents, children, siblings, family functioning and dynamics, education, mental health, and more has been conducted around the world (Briesch et al., 2021; El-Osta et al., 2021; Fontanesi et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Roos et al., 2020; Tzankova et al., 2022; Waller et al., 2020; Walters et al., 2020; Whittle et al., 2020; Yates et al., 2020). Prime et al. (2020) emphasized consideration of the family as a system in which the relationships between hardships, caregiver well-being, family well-being, and children's adjustment are not unidirectional but mutually impactful. Much of the research on parenting during the pandemic focused on parents' personal emotional management, specifically in relation to stress and metal health (Morelli et al., 2020, Waller et al., 2020, Whittle et al., 2020). Some studies were comparative, examining data collected pre-pandemic with that collected during, and overwhelmingly finding a reported decrease in parents' well-being and increase in parents' depression, the occurrence of ACEs (adverse childhood experiences), as well as an increase in children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Calvano et al., 2021, Feinberg et al., 2021, Westrupp et al., 2020).

Unsurprisingly, several studies have demonstrated the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic across demographic factors such as race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status (Feinberg et al., 2020, Uzun et al., 2021, Westrupp et al., 2020). More specifically, Westrupp et al. (2020) demonstrated a relationship in Australia between pre-pandemic socio-economic disadvantage with lower subjective well-being

during the pandemic. They also found that younger parent age was associated with lower ratings of subjective well-being, personal relationships, and community connectedness (Westrupp et al., 2020), and Uzun et al.'s (2021) use of the Child-Parent Relationship Inventory demonstrated a relationship between the mother's age and the quality of her relationship with her children. Uzun et al. (2021) suggested that mothers' life experiences and level of maturity given by age contributed to their ability to regulate their relationships. Calvano et al. (2021) demonstrated a relationship between reports of increased children witnessing violence and increase in verbal abuse during the pandemic, with factors such as parental stress, job losses, and younger parent and child age related to said increases. Feinberg et al. 's (2020) research suggested that mothers and families with lower levels of income were at particular risk for deterioration in well-being. In some of these studies, elements of online learning experiences were peripherally explored; many of these researchers conceived of children learning from home as a newly introduced "stressor" for families and treated this as a variable in their explorations. Further research has investigated more explicitly the experiences of online learning during the pandemic.

2.2.2 Online Learning and Parenting During Covid-19

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools were suspended in 177 countries, impacting an estimated 1.3 billion learners (El-Osta et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly then, over the last two years, considerable research on parenting during remote learning has taken place across the globe. This research has explored both parents' experiences of supporting children during remote learning, and their

perceptions of their children’s experiences. Capturing parents and caregivers’ experiences of remote learning has been described as inherently valuable, and as a means to a variety of ends, including understanding how to best support and facilitate at-home learning moving forward (Bates et al., 2021; Hornstra et al., 2021).

During the initial lockdowns in China, Dong et al. (2020) surveyed parents and found they generally reported negative beliefs about the value of online learning. Parents expressed concerns about the shortcomings of online learning, young children’s inadequate self-regulation, and their own lack of time and professional knowledge for supporting their children (Dong et al., 2020). A survey of parents in Northern Ireland revealed difficulty with keeping primary aged children (4-11) focused, but “pockets of positive experience,” within the initial lockdown and transition to remote learning (Bates et al., 2021). In Turkey, Misirli and Ergulec (2021) found that around half of parents surveyed reported online schooling as sufficient, but involving several problems. Such problems included infrastructure issues, communication and interaction problems, course durations, diversity, motivation trouble, problems of age/skill, and issues with evaluation (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). Parents reported an overall dissatisfaction with communication and connection facilitated between peers and teachers, stress around not having enough time to support their children, and an overall decrease in time spent engaged in schoolwork compared to pre-pandemic times (Briesch et al., 2021). Hornstra et al. (2021) found that parents perceived their secondary school aged children’s basic educational needs of autonomy, competence,

and relatedness as less fulfilled at home than they recalled them being prior to the pandemic.

Few studies have explored K-12 students' experiences of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tazankova et al. (2022) interviewed Italian high school students about their "Online School Learning" (OSL) experiences. The authors found three primary categories of change with the shift to online learning: structural and organizational, personal psychological, and interpersonal and communal factors. Some students were positively surprised in the transition to online learning, while others felt their schools were incapable of properly responding to the emergency. Students described OSL as requiring more autonomy and self-regulation from them, with many appreciating the independence. However, disruptions to routine, loneliness, and isolation were found to be problematic in and of themselves, as well as related to fatigue, and the feeling that school was a "never-ending task" (Tazankova et al., 2022). Yates et al. (2020) surveyed New Zealand highschoolers who participated in emergency online learning from March to May of 2020. Most students reported less time spent on school and feeling that they were learning less than in the classroom. However, those who spent *more* time on schoolwork than they had in class, felt they learned more. Students were asked their preference between the classroom and online school, and only 10% preferred learning at home – these students described school as too stressful, disruptive students as too distracting, and having experienced bullying in their schools (Yates et al., 2020).

Given the relative recency of this mass transition to remote learning, there is still much to be known about parent's and children's experiences. However, even less has been said about transitioning out of emergency online learning, particularly navigating the decision of whether to send a child back to the classroom during the pandemic.

2.3 Parental Decision-Making

In the summer of 2020 parents were face with a new decision to make on behalf of their children: whether to have them return to school during the ongoing pandemic, or to continue at home with online learning. This section of the literature review will first explore existing literature on parents' school choice decisions, followed by a brief theoretical discussion on decision-making.

2.3.1 Education Decisions

In Ontario, parental authority persists until children are 18 years old (Educaloi, 2021). This authority involves the parents' rights and responsibilities toward their children, which largely involve making decisions that affect their children's life and well-being (Educaloi, 2021). Parents' decision-making in relation to their child's education has been explored primarily in the context of school choice: when parents enrol their child in the education system, what school do they choose to send them to? (Altenhofen, Berends, & White, 2016; Blake & Mestry, 2019; Goldberg et al., 2018; Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). It has been shown that these decisions are typically made relatively passively – most often, parents choose a school based on their family's location (i.e., choosing the school closest to the family home, or parent's workplace, for physical convenience) (Goldring & Phillips, 2008).

However, schooling options have become increasingly diverse over the past few decades, with a rise in more specifically focused schools, be it on pedagogical approach (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio-Emelia), a religious focus, or subject-specific focuses (Van Pelt et al., 2019). Caputo (2007) interviewed twelve mothers with children who were attending or who had attended private schools in Ottawa, for whom the idea of giving their children a “head start” by sending them to these schools was a prominent consideration in their decision. More broadly, academic quality (often considered by researchers as being denoted by test scores) has been largely cited as one of parent’s main considerations when choosing schools for their children (Altenhofen et al., 2016). The roles of social networks, safety and discipline, distance between home and school, and student body composition in school choice have also been documented as reasons parents chose a particular school for their children (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Blake & Mestry, 2019; Golberg et al., 2018; Goldring & Phillips, 2008).

Decisions about which school children will attend have been shown to differ by socioeconomic status; lower-SES families have fewer available options and more constraints around their choices (Rhodes & Deluca, 2014). Radey, Langenderfer-Magruder, and Speights (2021) demonstrated this specifically within the Covid-19 pandemic context. They explored the school and care decisions of low-income single-mothers during Covid-19 in the United States. Mothers who kept their children home did so largely because of the risk of the virus. Mothers who sent their children back to school did so largely because of their own work requirements. In both cases, mothers described feeling that they had no other choice. To date, Radey et al.’s (2021) study is

the only investigation of parents' back-to-school decision-making in the context of Covid-19.

2.3.2 Theoretical Lens for Studying Decision-Making

Fall 2020 return-to-school decisions differed from previous school choice decisions in meaningful ways. Most notably, the decision had to be made in the context of a global pandemic, under threat of a virus about which little was known. Historically research on decision-making rests on an assumption of classical rationality: that an individual carefully weighs the costs and benefits, assesses risks, evaluates outcomes, and based on these calculations arrives at a "rational" decision (O'Doherty & Burgess, 2019). Research on assessment of risk tends to use quantitative methods which do not account for the influence of the contexts within which such assessment takes place (Lupton, 1993). However, more recently researchers have demonstrated that decision-making can and should be studied qualitatively for deeper understanding. I adopt the theoretical lens used in Christofides et al. (2016) for studying decision-making. That is, decision-making is ecological and heuristic. Decision-making is ecological in that decisions are based in a particular setting and context, and understanding this context is imperative to understanding the decision made. Heuristics are a set of cognitive tools used to solve problems quickly and with limited information, that can be especially helpful in situations where it is not possible or feasible to determine an optimal decision. Real world decisions – including parents' back-to-school decisions – are made in contexts constrained by limited time, information, and capacity to process information. Based on principles of ecological rationality, it is understood the individuals cannot

possibly account for all relevant information when making a decision. Instead, decision-making is more heuristic in nature. Rather than seeing this as an inferior form of decision-making, heuristic-decision making should be seen as an effective way to navigate complex environments (Christofides et al., 2016). This is the lens through which I analyze parents' back-to-school decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, I present an analysis of the various contextual factors that parents described as featuring in their decision-making, and the variety of ways in which these factors featured. I show how some factors can feature in an overriding fashion, or in ways that afford flexibility and allow for consideration of others.

3 Methods

3.1 Data

This thesis project is nested within a larger study that sought to better understand Canadian's perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the summer of 2020, preceding the commencement of my Masters' studies, I was given the opportunity to partner with researchers from York University to help conduct this research. As such, development of the interview guide involved synthesizing our research goals. J.V., the project manager from York University, sought to understand the (usually unintended) impacts of policy decisions. My own goals can most succinctly be described as understanding parents' experiences, how they made sense of them, and how they navigated such an unprecedented and overwhelmingly challenging (at least for most) time. The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed by me and the project

manager, J.V, in the Fall of 2020. An application was submitted to the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board in November 2020, and approval was granted January 2021.

Participants were selected from a larger pool of individuals who had taken part in a survey study and indicated a willingness to participate in future research projects. J.V. and I discussed our recruitment intentions – to purposively select individuals for diversity, attempting to match the broader provincial demographics. We selected participants who represented diversity across ethnicity, marital status, and education and income level. The original survey was disseminated by Leger, a private market research company, and once interview participants were selected, we connected with Leger who then reached out to the participants on our behalf.

J.V., and later V.N. (who took over as project manager after J.V.) corresponded with participants to share more study details and gather consent forms (see Appendix B). Once consent was obtained, participants were contacted by A.B., J.V. (later V.N.), or T.S. or A.D. – two lab volunteers – to schedule an interview. Due to the nature of the pandemic and physical distancing practices, all interviews took place over the phone and were recorded using mp3 audio recorders. The final data set was comprised of 34 interviews [6], which were guided by our interview guide and were between 25 and 72 minutes in length. Interviews began end of April 2021 and completed mid-September 2021. Consequently, we were able to interview parents during various phases of school: remote learning at the end of the 2020-21 school year (*n = 11*), during summer break (*n*

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[6] Two interviews were lost to recording errors.

= *7)*, and at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year (*n = 16)*. Thus, with some parents, we were able to discuss their decision for both the 2020-2021 *and* the 2021-2022 academic years (See Table 1 below for an overview of participant demographics, and Table 2 for an overview of back-to-school decisions). In appreciation of their time, participants were given the choice of $20 e-gift card to either Amazon, Loblaws, or Starbucks. Transcription was completed using transcription software from Microsoft Word by myself, J.V., V.N., and volunteers A.D., T.S., and E.P. All transcripts were checked for accuracy and corrected as needed. Participants were given pseudonyms and all transcripts were de-identified by A.B. Transcription and de-identification was the beginning of my familiarization with the data.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Decisions

Demographic Variable	Number of Participants
Age (Years)	
Under 31	0
31-35	2
36-40	4
41-45	6
46-50	12
51-55	6
56-60	1
Over 60	0
N/A	3
Gender	
Men	17
Women	17
Marital Status	
Married	30
Divorced (co-parenting)	2
Single parent	2
Number of children at home	
1	14
2	18
3	1
4	0
5	1
More than 5	0

3.2 A Note on Reflexivity

Reflexivity is essential when conducting qualitative research (Mruck & Breuer, 2003). Simply listing my demographic characteristics would not be meaningfully reflexive; rather, I intend to share here my background as it is relevant to how I approached this research. In March 2020 when the pandemic was declared and schools

were closed, I was working as a Registered Early Childhood Educator at the University of Guelph Child Care and Learning Centre, where I had been involved in a variety of roles for the five years prior. During this time, I engaged in deep and thoughtful reflection with my own beliefs and values as an educator; about children, learning, families, classrooms, educators, and the intricate relationships that weave these things together. As such, I hold strongly rooted values around all children's right to quality education and belonging and the inextricable role of relationships in learning.

I also think it is imperative that I acknowledge my own pandemic experiences and how they have certainly informed my approach to this research. Firstly, as an educator, I hosted optional virtual "Morning Meetings" with my co-teachers and class of 15 toddlers from March-June of 2020[7], so, to some extent, I have experience on the "delivery" side of the virtual classroom. Secondly, I am not a parent. I have worked closely with children from ages two months to five years and lived in households with multiple young children as a supportive adult, but I have never been a primary caregiver. I have immense compassion for the position parents have been in since the pandemic was declared, but I will never have first-hand experience to understand for myself precisely what this was like. All this to say: I arrive at this research with a fervent passion for children's rights to safety, education, and belonging, and parents'

[7] In June 2020, when childcare was declared to re-open, the Centre's director felt it was unsafe to do so under the circumstances, and was ordered to lay-off all staff and 'truly' close until it re-opened in-person, thus we were mandated to cease these meetings

responsibility to facilitate such, as well as their own rights to compassion, support, and grace.

Engaging reflexively with my position as a non-parent and as an educator helps to ensure that, in the event a parent expresses a belief or describes a situation which brushes up against my own beliefs and values (which, naturally, did happen), I am able to hold space for their experience and their personhood. In the context of interviews, this meant maintaining a non-judgmental stance and an authentic curiosity. In the context of analysis, this meant working with all extracts with a mindfulness to do them equal justice.

I also want to acknowledge the ways in which my theoretical orientations shifted throughout the research process, and how this shaped the analysis and the conclusions ultimately drawn. Initially I was interested taking a social constructionist approach to analyzing the interview data, exploring in the ways in which parents were taking up and possibly re-negotiating or reinforcing popular parenting discourses throughout the interviews (informed by Burr, 2003; Hacking, 1999; and Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). However, as I worked with the data it became clear that this approach was likely to veer towards being critical of the parents themselves. This was not my intention, and I was uncomfortable with doing this. As such, my approach shifted to a more experiential and realist perspective in which I chose to take participants' descriptions of their experiences at face value. With the circumstances as they were – lockdowns, isolation, work, school, and family life all overlapping – what I was truly curious about was "how did parents do it?" In accordance with the ecological rationality approach I adopted, my approach to

analysis was grounded in the recognition that all parents' decisions were situated in their particular contexts, and bound by limited time, information, and capacity to process information (Gigerenzer, 2000). The purpose of the analysis was not to evaluate the quality of the decisions parents made; rather, it was to understand how they navigated decisions about return to school and the contexts in which they did so. I acknowledge that this orientation shaped my analysis and the conclusions that I've drawn as I tended to regard and, consequently, present all parents in a relatively positive light. This is not to say that I naively assumed all parents to be unflawed, rather, that I was intentional about maintaining a non-judgmental stance and extending compassion to parents throughout the analysis and in drawing conclusions.

3.3 Analysis

3.3.1 Analytic Approach

My approach to coding and analysis was developed through a responsiveness to the data, rather than through following a prescribed method. Increasingly, voices in qualitative research are challenging "methodolatry" (Chamberlain, 2000; Janesick,1994) and "McDonaldization" (Brinkmann, 2014), demonstrating how formulaic approaches to qualitative psychology can lead us to fall considerably short of our research goals (LaMarre & Chamberlain, 2022). Methodolatry has been defined by Janesick (1994) as a "combination of method and idolatry, to describe a preoccupation with selecting and defending methods to the exclusion of the actual substance of the story being told." Also thought of as privileging method over meaning, in critiquing methodolatry Chamberlain (2000) notes that regardless of method choices, there is not a clear canonical path to

follow. Even heavily prescribed methods (e.g., grounded theory), can be found to have several versions with both subtle and major differences. Chamberlain (2000) sees this, however, not as a flaw, but as supporting his advocation for the development and application of methods that are appropriate to the specific research questions under consideration. Brinkmann's (2015) description of the McDonaldization of qualitative psychology explores predictability, likening the application of prescribed methods in research to the acquisition of the same service and product received every time one interacts with McDonald's. While this is a value in the fast-food industry, he says, it goes against the promise of qualitative psychology to be inductive and flexible (Brinkmann, 2015). Brinkmann (2015) argues for a focus on developing the craft of qualitative inquiry, avoiding rigid procedure in exchange for intentionality and creativity. Like the McDonaldization analogy, Chamberlain (2012) likens the approach of many qualitative researchers to simply selecting a method "off-the-shelf," without thinking carefully or critically about its fit with their research question and goals. He suggests that instead, if we work creatively, critically, and reflexively, carefully considering our practices, alternatives and why we rejected them[8], our research will "have a logic that is the methodology." Chamberlain (2012) cites the uniqueness of every piece of research, in its goals and how it seeks to meet them, as being a logical ground on which to consider

[8] For instance, I initially considered conducting a form of critical discourse analysis to investigate the ways in which certain parenting discourses were taken up, negotiated, and reinforced in parents' discussions of their experiences. After some time exploring the data through this lens, however, I strongly felt that my criticality was being misplaced. Attempts to break down parents' speech and descriptions ultimately resulted in being critical of parents themselves, in a way that I felt undermined the legitimacy of their experiences and the challenges they have faced throughout the pandemic.

methodological ideas and concepts as being there to stimulate, to be drawn on, to be adapted in context – not to be followed slavishly.

3.3.2 Analytic Process

On that note, I conducted an iterative pattern-based analysis of my interviews with parents. My analysis began with familiarizing myself with the data while verifying and de-identifying transcripts. Next, I read through each transcript and recorded informal notes on both salient and subtle impressions, discourses parents drew upon in their speech, and any other meaningful concepts or ideas presented. I inductively developed a preliminary coding scheme derived from these notes and the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I then uploaded the transcripts to NVivo 12, which I used to fully code the data. The coding process was an iterative one in which I kept more detailed notes about the patterns I identified in the data, and the ways in which these related to one another and possibly sat together, adding new codes throughout and returning to earlier transcripts with a lens informed by the others (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

I took a bottom-up approach to best capture participants' back-to-school decision-making experiences. I began by writing a list, for each participant, of everything they described as relevant to their decision. From these lists I developed a master list which included all factors and experiences discussed. There was considerable overlap amongst parents' descriptions, with different considerations contributing to decisions in both similar and unique ways, so under each I included a brief description of how they featured in each participants' own words. I then began writing a more detailed analysis of this decision-making context and experience. As I did so, I identified patterns in

decision-making across parents, as well as ways in which decision-making was unique in each family. What follows is a qualitative analysis of parents' back-to-school decision-making, particularly the factors and experiences that shaped decision-making, and the variety of ways in which these featured.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, as is the case with interview-based research, the data I worked with were retrospective accounts of participants' decision-making processes. While I purposefully took participants' accounts at face value, there are a few possibilities that should be kept in mind when considering the analysis. Firstly, given the high prevalence of intensive parenting discourses in the Western world since it first arose in the 1990's (Hays, 1996), parents may have felt a pressure to present their decisions in accordance with the child-centered values that underscore dominant ideas around what constitutes "good" parenting. Additionally, there is the possibility that in describing their decision-making, parents presented post-hoc justifications and explanations about how they navigated their choice. That is, their decision-making may have been more intuitive or less articulated, but upon being asked about how they navigated the choice, they offered post-hoc explanations. This is a limitation that, similar to limitations of other research that relies on self-report, needs to be taken into account when interpreting the research findings.

4 Analysis

This analysis was undertaken to better understand how parents in Ontario navigated the decision of whether to send their children back to school or continue with

online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. I suggest that to understand how a decision is made, it is necessary to understand the context in which the decision-making takes place. Using data from interviews with 34 parents of school-aged children in Ontario, I present an analysis that seeks to capture the overall decision-making environment in which parents navigated this decision. The following analysis demonstrates how, despite ostensibly being presented with the same two options, not all families experienced these choices in the same way. Rather, decisions were constrained for some families in ways that they were not for others. In previous research parents cited proximity to the school, academic quality, social networks and more as factors shaping their school choice decisions (Altenhofen et al., 2016; Goldberg et al., 2016; Goldring et al., 2008). In 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus emerged as a newly relevant factor shaping the school choice context. I begin by demonstrating how the influence of the virus on the decision-making process varied amongst families, acting for some as a determining factor which foreclosed any other considerations. Next, I show how, when this was not the case, family specific qualities were described as shaping the context in which parents navigated the back-to-school decision, whether by necessitating a certain choice or affording flexibility. I then present parents' descriptions of their children's social and educational experiences during online learning, and the ways in which experiential considerations could feature into back-to-school decision-making when the process was not foreclosed by the virus or family specific qualities. Throughout the analysis I also note times in which parents described their child's expressed wishes as shaping how a certain consideration featured, or as acting as a

primary consideration itself. Finally,I am not suggesting that individuals engaged in decision-making as a linear cognitive process. Rather, I am looking at the factors and experiences that featured in and shaped decisions to depict the complexity of the decision-making context and experience.

4.1 Consideration of the Novel Coronavirus in Back-to-School Decision-Making

While parents have made previous school choice decisions on behalf of their children, it is the presence of the novel coronavirus that makes the current decision-making context so unique. Return to school options involved returning to an adapted setting. Daily completion of a Covid-19 screening tool was required, as was mask wearing[9] and frequent sanitizing of hands and learning materials. Schools also implemented cohorting; students stayed within one class group and there was limited to no mixing between classes and years (Ministry of Education, 2020a). Physical distancing when possible was required (Ministry of Education, 2020a). At the elementary school level, children attended school all-day-every-day under these adaptations. At the high school level, students attended every other morning, completing afternoons and alternate mornings online. These adapted school environments were meant to limit the spread of Covid-19. This section of the analysis will demonstrate the various ways in which considerations of physical health and safety

[9] Initially the province required children in fourth grade and above to wear masks (Rushowy, 2020), and strongly recommended masks for younger children, and by January 2021 masks were required for all students grade one and above (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

in relation to Covid-19 and related adaptations factored into parents back-to-school decision-making.

4.1.1 Threat of the Virus as a Determining Factor in Back-to-School Decisions

While the virus was present in the decision-making environment for all families, it is only for some families that it acted as a critical factor in back-to-school decision-making. For most parents who chose to continue with remote learning for the 2020-2021 school year, the threat of the virus functioned as the determining factor in their decision, often foreclosing consideration of any other factors. Consideration of the threat ranged from grappling with the ambiguity around the virus' impacts on children, to reckoning with the vulnerable status of family members. Regardless, these families described the threat presented by the virus and subsequent disease as being at the forefront of their back-to-school decision-making.

A major consideration in relation to the virus was the presence of high-risk family members in the household. For families living with an elderly or immunocompromised individual – considered more vulnerable to the virus and its potential impacts – the decision of whether to send their children back to the classroom was often described as not really a decision at all. The vulnerable status of a household member outweighed any other consideration and required the child(ren) to continue with remote learning. Faye succinctly describes just how severe the potential impacts of Covid-19 could be for their family, saying, "My husband is in in a high-risk category of if if he if he catches the virus he may die because he's got a lot of conditions he's had multiple surgeries in the last year." Her husband's immunocompromised status increases his vulnerability to

severe illness, and thus acts as the determining factor in the decision that her children continue with virtual learning. She expands by saying:

> "We have always chosen to have remote learning so since last March the first lockdown we never sent the kids back to school because of the concern of the virus … I I don't have a choice if I wanted to keep everyone safe, especially my husband, cause like he's the one most protected … they definitely want to go back, go back to school, but there are certain families, I believe who will have experienced the same challenge like us because they have a vulnerable medical condition people at uh in their household as well."

It is not a preference for remote learning that led to Faye's family decision to continue with it. Rather, it is the very particular relationship between the contextual factors of the pandemic and her husband's immunocompromised status that shaped this choice. She explicitly states that both her and her children wish it were otherwise, that they could return to school, but the vulnerability introduced by her husband's pre-existing health conditions overrides the contributions of any other factors. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the importance of high-risk populations avoiding any potential exposure to Covid-19 has been clear (Public Health Ontario, 2020). Thus we can see that for some families, consideration of the virus constrains their decision-making, precluding the consideration of other factors or experiences.

4.1.2 Differing Interpretations of Similar Considerations Relating to COVID-19

Early in the pandemic, messaging about Covid-19 – how the virus spread, how to protect from it, its impact on different populations – changed rapidly and often. People around the world were consuming news voraciously, from many sources – television, newspapers, social media, academic journal articles – and information was sometimes

contradictory. It could be difficult to know what was “right,” or how to make sense of the vast amounts of ever-changing information available. The complexity of this environment is evidenced in the way that similar considerations could feature in opposite ways across parents; for some, featuring in a critical fashion and for others, as one of many considerations.

For example, the relationship between the virus and children’s age featured differently across families. For Fatima’s family, the ambiguity around the virus’s potential impact on her children’s age group featured in a determining fashion for their decision in Fall 2020; their children continued with remote learning. In September 2021, when Fatima was interviewed, her children were returning to school for the first time since March 2020. She describes both her Fall 2021 and Fall 2020 decisions:

> “Yes, they are returning to school in person because now [September 2021] we know that this COVID is not impacting kids too much. And not in Canada everywhere in the world they are opening the schools and uhm it's going uhm, right now it's going okay … And based on this information, we decided let's, let's see how it goes? [Interviewer: So last fall when it was maybe a little bit more uncertain, but schools did open, did they go in-person then as well?] No. [Interviewer: No, you kept them home.] Yes, because I don't know, we we don't have a data, we don't have a vaccine by that time.”

For Fatima’s family, in 2020, the newness of the virus and how much was unknown about it shaped the way it featured in their back-to-school decision-making. With so little known, it was difficult to know what the impacts might have been had they returned to school and contracted the virus. Thus, despite the challenges Fatima describes of working from home with her four- and six-year-old in school, they completed the 2020-2021 school year online. The potential threat of the virus foreclosed any other considerations. It was only with the introduction of the vaccine, and evidence

of how the first year with schools open went, that Fatima's family felt comfortable with their children returning to school in September 2021.

Consideration of children's age in relation to the virus could feature differently, however; when discussing their back-to-school decisions for the 2020-2021 school year, some parents described taking comfort in their children's young age and that the virus did not have much of an impact on children. For instance, Doug explained:

> "My wife and I were pretty confident that they were going to want to go back to school and they definitely wanted to go back to school. We weren't concerned about uhm, illness or whatever from COVID because I mean our kids are younger well obviously they're young and generally speaking, the incidences of um, people, you know under their age getting sick from COVID, at least the original strain anyway were very, very low."

Doug's perspective that incidences of children getting sick from Covid were low shaped the way the virus factored into his family's decision. When featured in this way, concerns about the virus are reduced, and thus it does not shape the decision determining fashion, which enables families to engage with other factors when making the back-to-school decision. For example, Doug acknowledges his children's wishes to return to school, and unlike in Faye's case, because the virus does not feature in an overriding fashion for Doug's family, consideration of their children's wishes can feature in their decision-making.

Parents' personal experiences with the virus could also shape the way it featured as a factor in back-to-school decisions. When parents had to make the initial back-to-school decision in Fall 2020, some families had already had first-hand experiences with Covid-19. For some, this led to being extra cautious, and the choice to continue remote learning. For others, it offered a sense of relief or comfort, and the ability to consider

both in-person and online options. For example, Faiz describes how his wife's work in a retirement home shaped their decision to keep their son learning at home in Fall 2020:

> "His mom works in a retirement home and is the retirement home uh, is down or went down from 164 residents down to something like 85, so almost 50% of the patients passed away? [Interviewer: Oh God.] In a matter of you know, 15 months. So for her you know she's come home from work, crying and saying, you know that patients gone and she didn't really know them, but she still knew them right? She saw them, she cooked for them. And it was difficult for her so uh, we had seen the spikes, we had seen the data curves, we knew that it was still out there, we didn't want to risk it"

Having seen the worst of the impacts of the virus first-hand, the potential harms appeared to be at the forefront of the decision-making process for Faiz and his wife, who chose to continue with online learning for their son. In contrast, Kaiya's family's first-hand experience with the virus featured in a way that eased their concerns about sending their children back to school. When asked if she was worried about her children returning to school, Kaiya shared:

> "Well, two of my kids had it [Interviewer: Oh, did they?] 'cause both, my husband and I had it so two of my kids got it, and the other three, no, not really … I mean, even if they do, you know they're young they're healthy. I see with my other two kids, one of them I don't even know she had it my 6-year-old she had zero symptoms the only reason I know is because I had her tested because I had it. [Interviewer: Right] And then my my 13-year-old daughter had it. She was like, you know, tired and lethargic for a day or two, but she was fine. [Interviewer: Right] So you know, my other kids is healthy my you know my 4-year-old little … No, no, not really."

At the time that they had to make the choice between online learning and returning to school, Covid-19 had already entered Kaiya's family's household. Two of her five children had already contracted the virus, and she described their experiences of illness as minimal. This, in combination with her other children's health, seemed to reduce the sense of threat Kaiya felt around the virus, enhancing her comfort with her

children returning to school, and thus enabling the possibility for consideration of factors beyond the virus when making this decision.

Several parents described considering the activity of other members of their household as relevant to their back-to-school decisions. For example, whether parents had to leave the house for work, or whether after school care would be required for their children. These considerations shaped the way the virus featured as a factor in parents' decisions. Hila describes the ripple effect that would result from sending her son back-to-school and how this impacted their decision:

> "So I guess a huge, well, basically the main deciding factor for us is who's sort of like picking them up and who's dropping them off and where are they staying after school? And then the other issue is, like if he goes back to school, and then my mat leave is over I have to go back to work, and then that means like my younger son has to go to daycare full time, which now means we have three different sets of interactions with so many people outside of the home, constantly bringing those interactions back into the home."

Given Hila's son's young age, he would be unable to be home alone before or after school. Thus, he would need additional care at this time, and his return to school would mean not only increasing exposure via the classroom, but through aftercare as well. Hila attributes their family's decision to continue remote learning to a desire to avoid this increased exposure. She describes each potential exposure as quantifiably meaningful and as reason to limit as much as possible, thus, to continue with remote learning. In contrast, Kimberley describes consideration of other household exposures as influencing her and her partner's decision in the opposite way:

> "At some point I guess my husband ended up having to go to work like twice a week or something like that or three times a week so he was going back and forth, so everyone had to be careful and you know, just try to go about life as as as best as possible."

Instead of viewing each potential exposure as additive, Kimberley describes a sense of acceptance in that exposure in one form already requires her family to be careful, thus justifying additional exposures and continued carefulness. For her, it is as if there is a threshold here where additional exposures are not additive but accepted. Looking at the different ways in which considerations such as children's age, previous experiences with the disease, or total exposures shaped the way the virus featured in parents' decisions shows that while it had the potential to feature in a critical fashion, and did for some families, this was not the case for all.

4.1.3 Safety Precautions as a Factor in Back-to-School Decision-Making

In cases where the virus did not immediately foreclose consideration of other factors, many parents described the safety precautions available as shaping the way it featured in their back-to-school decision-making. There was concern around the virus, but parents took enough comfort in the mandated safety precautions that this allowed for consideration of all options. For instance, Glenn describes feeling "as comfortable as [can] be" sending his daughter back to the classroom:

> "We really felt that the message that they were putting out in terms of schools being safe relative to the community, and all of that, that with the the protocols they put in place in the school that having her in one place during the week would probably present less of a risk, especially with all those protocols, than her being home. And then maybe we go to the grocery store and then maybe we go to this store or we go to the park and she's playing with other kids even though it's outdoors, she's eight, you know, they're not necessarily going to have those masks on all the time or you turn your back and somebody sneezes on them. Whereas at school it's a lot more controlled. So we were we were as comfortable as you can be in the circumstances sending her back."

For Glenn’s family, the school serves as a controlled environment in which the risk of the virus is most regulated when compared to the community. While similar regulations to those in school were present throughout the province at this time – mask mandates and physical distancing – Doug suggests that such practices may be less regulated in public settings, whereas they would be strictly enforced in the classroom setting. Like Glenn, many parents described the presence of these regulations in the classroom as offering a sense of comfort when considering their child’s potential return to school. For others, safety precautions were described as less about what the school did, and more a matter of individual control and protection. As Krista described:

> “Uhm, you know, I think whatever they were doing is kind of like the best that they can do, you know? Uhm, if I honestly think it's not so much what the schools are doing, I think you know like its what the individuals do right, you know, like you have to be vigilant. You have to wash your hands. You have to not touch your face, that kind of thing and you have to be kind of mindful of the social distance. You know you're with other people. So I I think what the school does had very little bearing on our decision”

For Krista, the sense of safety or precaution does not come top-down from what the school is implementing, but rather from a sense of personal vigilance that can serve as protection. Other families described a somewhat similar approach, sharing ways that they prepared their children for the changes and ensured they understood what had to be done to remain safe – mask wearing, sanitizing, etc. Overall, when parents described feeling that the adaptive measures offered adequate protection from the virus, their decision was not immediately made in response to its threat.

In Fall 2020 practices like mask-wearing, sanitizing, and physical distancing were still relatively novel. Some parents described consideration of their child’s ability to

understand and follow the adaptations as providing a sense of comfort with their children returning to the classroom. As Melanie describes:

> "I was not afraid to send him back I was actually happy … they were wearing their mask in the classroom. Um, so that was a full time wearing of the mask. They were kept in a bubble so they couldn't go outside of their class bubble. Um, so they couldn't um, conversate with any other kids outside of their bubble. There was no play time … and luckily he was at an age that he understood that it he has to follow these rules and guidelines and so it was not a trouble for him."

Melanie recognizes the rules and guidelines as something that may require a degree of understanding to follow. Thus, they feature in her decision-making in relation to her son's age and subsequent ability to understand and follow the guidelines without difficulty. Age related protection considerations expanded for the 2021-2022 academic school year, when the vaccine was made available as a precaution for children ages 11 and up (Ontarionewsroom, 2021a), further shaping the way the virus and precautions might feature in decision-making. As Scott describes:

> "It's sort of a Grade 7 and up, so the majority of the kids are vaccinated, so there's like, you know, less concerns in that sense but they still have the face mask wearing, washing the hands all the time using sanitizers and all that type of stuff, but it's I think it's probably less stressful for us now that she's older too."

Scott's daughter returned to school in Fall 2020, but as he describes her return in Fall 2021, he takes additional comfort in her being old enough to get vaccinated. For some parents with eligible children, this consideration also featured in their 2021-2022 back-to-school decision. Overall, parents described the established safety precautions, their child's ability to follow them, and their age-related access to the vaccine, as shaping the way consideration of the virus featured in their back-to-school decision-making. The protections offered by such precautions were described as reducing the

sense of threat from the virus, thereby allowing for consideration of further factors when making this decision.

4.1.4 Consideration of the Virus as a Non-Issue in Returning to School

For some parents, concerns about Covid-19 were minimal or non-existent. In these cases, the virus hardly featured as a consideration when making the back-to-school decision. “I had no concerns of him going back to school,” Dan told us, and Donny described his perspective as “It was like if you're gonna get it, you're really gonna get it already by this point, like even, for like for us, you know.” Of course, we cannot speak to these families’ perspectives on the virus when the pandemic began, however we can see that, at least by the time a decision was required of them, some families were unconcerned about the possible health risks presented by the virus. Some parents described feeling that too much had already been sacrificed to the pandemic, and an unwillingness to give up too much in the name of Covid-19. For example, Amira describes not wanting to live in fear:

> “I mean it's not good to say that if you get sick, hopefully you will recover, but you cannot stay home and say I'm scared of the corona, so I in my opinion we have to go out those who are vulnerable older people, smoker, kids with disability, special needs, asthma, yes, they have to go, and if they got get sick then we will treat them you know we will try to recover from it because so many people got sick and they will recover much more than those who didn't recover.”

For Amira, the prospects of treatment and recovery contributed to a sense that life had to carry on. She sees staying home in fear of the virus as not an option, given

how many more people recover from the virus than those who do not. It is as if there is no choice to be made because there is no reason not to return to school.

In this section of the analysis, I have demonstrated the various ways in which consideration of the virus featured in parents' back-to-school decision-making. For some, the virus constrained decision-making, acting as an overriding factor and foreclosing all other considerations, and the children continued online learning. For others, consideration of the virus featured in such a way that it was one of many factors relevant in their decision-making. For many families, considering available safety precautions afforded them the ability to think beyond the threat of the virus and consider other factors. Finally, for those unconcerned about the virus whatsoever, this lack of concern was described as a reason to return to school once possible.

4.2 The Role of Family Specific Qualities in Shaping the Decision-Making Context

For those able to consider beyond the threat of the virus, family specific qualities meaningfully shaped the context in which parents navigated back-to-school decision-making. I use the phrase "family specific qualities" to represent meaningful factors that differed amongst families, constituted by the nature of each individual member and the overall family structure and dynamics. This included things like the characteristics of the child, as well as the parent and family's capacity to support their child in online learning. It would be remiss not to note the relationship between a child's qualities and parents' capacities - for instance, a young, highly energetic child requires far more from a parent than a relatively independent teenage child. A parent who did well at home with the

latter may have found themselves similarly overwhelmed with the former, and vice versa. Ultimately, while the ways that these considerations featured were unique to each family, all parents generally described some combination of their child's qualities, their own qualities, the dynamics within their family, and family structure as meaningfully shaping the context in which they navigated back-to-school decision-making.

4.2.1 The Role of Children's Individuality in Shaping the Decision-Making Context

Most parents described considering their children's unique needs when deciding whether they return to school or continue with online learning. For some families, this consideration featured in a critical fashion: consideration of their child's specific qualities or needs necessitated a return to the classroom. On the other hand, some parents described their child's disposition as adaptable or flexible, making both options feasible[10].

For parents whose children had special needs, these needs featured in their decision-making in a determining fashion. For example, Rachel describes how her son's ADHD/Asperger's featured in such a way that it necessitated a return to the classroom as soon as possible:

> "[The speech-language pathologist] said to me, "if you are able to, get him in, " because again um, um, um, um, the breakthrough for children with autism is, is, is repeat, repetitive work and for them to repeat others or to copy so, when they see other children acting, like trying and learning and doing stuff, he will eventually will want to 'cause again, he's high functioning so he's Asperger, so [the speech-language pathologist] says "[Your son] has that opportunity to be able to see what other children act like and how

[10] Note that no families described consideration of their children's unique needs as necessitating the continuation of online learning.

> they talk, how, what they do, and he's able to learn skills that you cannot teach him at home. No matter how much you try to teach him those skills, those skills can only be gained by seeing other children do it and copy them." … So, the, my speech pathologist said, "I would recommend highly that you send him back to uh, um, um, to school,"

For Rachel, consultation with her son's speech-language pathologist highlighted the importance of considering her son's unique needs when deciding whether he return to school or not. Access to resources and supports often provided through schools, for example educational assistants and behavioural therapists, were not available at home. This exacerbated her family's difficulties with online learning, and ultimately consideration of her son's needs featured in a way that necessitated a return to the classroom. For families with children receiving additional supports in the school setting that were not available or transferrable online, these considerations could feature heuristically; other factors did not require attention, because this alone made the decision.

In other cases, however, parents described consideration of their child's qualities as featuring in a way that both in-class and online learning were considered viable options. For instance, Kevin describes his son's personality as acting as a sort of buffer to the challenges of the pandemic and remote learning:

> "I I say he's he's a pretty laid-back person so since it didn't impact him that much, but luckily he doesn't have those very emotional issues or anything like that because I heard some kids actually got de-depressed and yeah, so I would definitely think is kind of lucky, but I think the learning attitude is just getting worse, right I think because online is more on self-discipline, right? And then you go to school I think they put more attention to the kids when they're in person, yeah, they expected him to to be to assess his attitude and be more proactive and then him to be more serious in uh doing of the work right, so."

Facing similar challenges to other families, Kevin attributes his son's ability to navigate this new environment relatively successfully to his laid-back personality, his lack of "emotional issues." While he sees the online learning environment as conducive to challenges (e.g., depression), Kevin credits his son's disposition as having protected him from being impacted too much by the heightened expectations of discipline and proactivity. Like Kevin, other parents described their children as being relatively adaptable or resilient given the circumstances. In these cases, consideration of their child's individuality factored into their decisions, not as a determinant; but as a buffer, allowing room for the consideration of yet more factors.

Additionally, parents sometimes discussed their children as having had a more direct, explicit role in decision-making. Most often the case in families with older children, some parents shared that their child's expressed wish to return to school featured prominently in their decision-making. For example, when asked about making the choice to return to school, Sitara explains, "Uhh, well we asked him. We asked him and it was not a hard decision for him and he said, 'Yeah, I'm going.'" Dan also describes, "Uh, well he basically said "I'm going back as soon as I can." I I I had no issues with that. He wanted to to be where the school environment," In these cases, parents often described other factors or experiences that shaped their support of their child's expressed wishes. For example, taking comfort in the precautionary measures, or seeing the impacts of online learning on their children, were described by some parents as reasons for allowing their child's wishes to inform decision-making.

Thus, we see that while in all families, children have unique needs and characteristics, it is only for some that these considerations feature in a critical fashion, overriding consideration of other factors. For others, it is not that their children do not have unique needs and characteristics that feature in their decision-making, rather, that they do not feature in a determining fashion*;* instead, they contribute to the overall context in which the decision is made, while allowing room for other considerations as well.

4.2.2 The Role of Family Dynamics and Structure in Shaping the Decision-Making Context

Overall family structure and dynamics uniquely shaped the context in which families experienced the pandemic and navigated back-to-school decision-making. Within any given family, structure and dynamics varied. A two-parent household could take the form of both parents working from home, introducing challenges like finding appropriate spaces for everyone to complete their daily tasks. Two-parent households may also have had one parent working from home while another worked out of the house, introducing challenges like an increasingly imbalanced distribution of household responsibility. Some parents had blended families, navigating co-parenting and children moving between households during lockdown. Others yet lived in single-parent households in which all work, parenting, and educational responsibilities fell on the one parent.

Many parents described feeling that they did not have the capacity to support their children during lockdowns and remote learning. Beyond directly supporting their children, parents have work and household responsibilities, and their own emotional

and social needs to attend to. Parents found themselves struggling to balance their own transition to working from home with supporting their child’s education. This difficulty was sometimes associated with offering support in a specific subject, as demonstrated by Masha and Abigail:

> “And then they have their homework. I don't, I don't know, I didn't know French, I don't know how to help them.” – Masha

> “I couldn't keep up doing all that homework. I had two kids that I had to do homework with after 100 hours and my husband can't my husband like I don't know this math I can't help you know. And I'm like I can't have you bomb out like I almost called the guidance counselors that I want to pull her out of this class, 'cause I can't I can't, I just can't.” – Abigail

With the shift to online learning, many parents described feeling that there was an increased expectation that they facilitate their child’s education. This was often described as particularly difficult when parents themselves were unfamiliar with the subject material their children were learning. However, children’s general educational and supervisory needs also exceeded what many parents were able to attend to, given their own responsibilities As Dionne describes:

> “Again, if it's virtual, I have to be, on top of things, I have to be present, I have to make sure he is focused and not distracted um, you know he has the proper, you know quiet space he has the laptop, he has, what is required for him to do that task um, for me, I'm I'm I'm against the virtual for this age group … So those are distractions that is not helping for him to be attentive to do the schoolwork rather than if he's in school, there's structures, there's systems, there is timelines to do things whereby at home, there's distraction … at home I have other duties and responsibility, and I can’t dedicate that to him, for him to be 100% attentive at home.”

Dionne describes the combination of attending to her son’s needs and her other duties and responsibilities as exceeding her capacity. A major element of in-person schooling is that parents can count on their children being supervised for at least six

hours a day. During this time, many parents work – necessary to financially provide for their children and family. They may run errands or complete household tasks, attend appointments, exercise, or otherwise make use of the child-free time. School closures, however, stripped parents of this resource. With children learning from home, all supervisory responsibilities fell to the parents, and many parents described experiencing the demands of having a child learning from home as brushing up against their own capacities. In some instances, considerations of parents' capacity could feature in decision-making heuristically: if parents felt that they could not adequately support their children with a specific subject or their overall education, this alone may determine the decision by way of having the child return to school.

In addition to the regular limits of capacity and the pressures faced by all during the initial stages of the pandemic, some parents grappled with further challenging circumstances which limited their abilities to support their children with remote learning. Such circumstances included threat of eviction, job loss, and the loss of family members or close friends. For example, Sabina described her own overwhelming life experiences during the pandemic, and the unique impact this had on her dynamic with her son and his education:

> "I was too much into my work (Interviewer: Mmm), like that I I totally forgot him, so it's actually my bad … Like last year I literally did not actually even check his work, or like uh maybe a few tests I review with him you know, but like he actually he does his thing him, himself but then, like um like I think like um my uh, like oh, 'cause he does do his health, like he has health class and so he was like, "Mom, I think um you need to work on your anger management," [Interviewer: oh] like he tell me that I felt like like he was nine and I was thinking like, oh my God, you know like I feel so bad like um and also and then but I do actually talk to him and say "sorry,

> Mommy is sick," like you know, like um like it was, since like my friend passed away so early this year already like that right… but like I'm blessed, like he he he was very independent, like um and and took care of it …so yeah, like so, this poor kid is just, uh, alone … 'cause the whole year I didn't pay attention to him at all like he's just on autopilot and took care of himself, like, yeah, anyway that's why I said I'm blessed, like, uh, even though after screaming and like yelling like he is just um, he's still there like, "love you Mommy,"

Throughout her interview Sabina detailed the challenges of her career, single motherhood, the loss of her close friend, and concerns about her parents' health and well-being as contributing to her difficulty meeting her own needs, let alone her son's. She describes her young son as having risen to the challenges of remote learning in terms of independence with school and even making himself toast or other snacks. Sabina expressed guilt over her limited capacity, and gratitude for the graciousness of her son. These experiences shaped the context in which Sabina's navigated the decision of whether her son return to school or not, as she later describes the difficulties she and her son experienced as making it clear to her that he needed to return to the classroom because she could not support him learning from home.

Several parents shared that they were increasingly frustrated with their children during remote learning, and found that overall, the demands of work and school from home exceeded their capacities in ways they reported not having experienced prior to the school closures. For all, but especially for single parents, balancing workloads and children's educational needs at home presented an incredible challenge. Earlier we saw Rachel describe her son's Asperger's as making her decision clear, and below she describes reaching a point at which it was clear that, also for her own sake, she needed her son to return to the classroom as soon as it was an option:

> “All of a sudden, I just I, I couldn't do it anymore, I had to sit there because he's going virtual learning and virtual learning and he’s 5 years old, who's going to stay, right? I'm by myself, I'm a single mom. So, it's kind of a little difficult for me to just have him, um, um, honestly just, I couldn't do anything else to be completely honest.”

Being a single parent means the responsibility of caring for her child falls entirely on Rachel – there is no partner to share this load with. As such, the constraints on her capacity are shaped accordingly. For some families, however, their dynamics or family structure were conducive to consideration of further factors. Parents who felt they were able to sufficiently support their children’s needs while engaging in remote learning described this as offering a sense of flexibility regarding back-to-school decisions: it could go either way. For example, Scott describes the ways in which the dispositions and capacities of himself, his wife, and his daughter, contributed to their household’s experience with online learning:

> “We got we're lucky that she's a good student, and she's diligent and and you know, my wife and I were able to for when she did have difficulty with something, we were able to kind of between the two of us, figure out how to help, help help her with that … she was she seemed to be on top of things she was was on top of the workload, she seemed she didn’t seem to lose any ground in that sense, uhm although my wife uh, did did kind of do a few extra things with her to kind of help her with her her French 'cause she's in a French program, you kind of, you know, keep that keep that level up. But her math was fine, and and her science was pretty good from what I saw, so yeah, no, they they did a pretty good job.”

Scott regards the qualities his daughter possesses as reducing the burden of online learning – she is a good student, she is diligent – but consideration of their family specific qualities does not stop here. He considers the combination of his daughter’s qualities with his and his wife’s ability to help her when needed as enabling her to be relatively successful with online learning. Thus, the qualities of their family feature in the

decision-making context as affording consideration of yet more factors; online learning is not inherently untenable, and therefore both options could work. Josh describes a similar situation with his own family, attributing the sense of flexibility to their traditional family structure:

> "We're very fortunate because she's basically like my wife would sign her up for a lot of like additional courses, so she already did some like online stuff like uh, but she got like straight A's this year so and this was all online so she's she my wife my wife stays at home. My wife stays at home. I'm more traditional, I guess I guess that's probably the best way to describe it. So she's very hands on. We're very fortunate because of our dynamic, so I go to work and she's at home and so really, it's not, we didn't have this daycare nightmare that some people unfortunately really got messed up with right where they're like I don't like to put my kid and it was just it was it was pretty easy for us to transition over just because our dynamic made it possible,"

Josh's traditional family structure shapes the context of his and his wife's back-to-school decision-making in a few ways. His wife's being home and not working reduces the need to consider childcare if their daughter were to return to school (recall Hila's explanation of the ripple effect of sending her son back to school). This also enables his wife to dedicate the invaluable resources of time and attention to helping their daughter with her schoolwork, and he largely attributes this to having eased their transition to online learning. Having what he considers relative success with online learning due to their family dynamic means that Josh's family can also consider other factors when deciding whether their daughter should return to the classroom or continue with remote learning.

Overall, this section has demonstrated the ways in which specific child or family qualities shaped pandemic experiences, and how these experiences shaped the context

in which parents had to make their back-to-school decision. For some families, consideration of these qualities featured in an overriding fashion. Parents described their children’s needs or their own capacity as necessitating the child’s return to the classroom. For others, consideration of family specific qualities shaped the decision-making context by way of affording flexibility and allowing for consideration of both online learning or returning to school as viable options.

4.3 Experiential Considerations in Back-to-School Decision-Making

Parents whose back-to-school decisions were not constrained by considerations of the virus, or their family specific qualities, often drew on their impression of their children’s earlier experiences with online learning when navigating the decision of whether their child return to school or continue online. Understanding these previous experiences is necessary to understanding how social and educational considerations featured in parents’ decisions. The following section first present parents’ descriptions of their children’s social experiences during lockdowns and remote learning. In doing so, we see that parents saw their children’s social worlds as very limited during online learning. I then present parents’ descriptions of their children’s educational experiences online, which were most often described as insufficient compared to the classroom. After detailing these experiences to provide the necessary contextual groundwork, I show how considerations of children’s social and educational experiences featured in back-to-school decision-making in a variety of ways.

4.3.1 Social Experiences During Online Education

Physically attending school is a highly social experience. Children attended classes surrounded by peers, interacted with teachers and school staff, played at recess, went on field trips, and occasionally gathered with the whole school for assemblies. During lockdown and remote learning, social landscapes changed dramatically, including for children. Peers were now accessible only through screens, and while many families discussed using apps like Zoom and Messenger to connect their children with their friends, the feeling that children were socially isolated and suffering was frequently reported.

Most parents described a sense that going to school offered their children more than an academic education; leaving the house, going to school, being "out in the world," provided crucial opportunities for social and general life learning. Faiz describes a peripheral learning that takes place in schools that cannot be achieved at home – it is what children absorb being out in the world, through interacting with others:

> "They learn … uh, they're sponges, they learn from their friends, they learn from their social networks. They learn from informal conversations with teachers, you know when the bell rings and everybody goes out for recess teacher might say 'Hey [son], what what do you think about this or that and the other?' That stuff has all gone away. They learn from other adults they learn from the bus driver they learn from, you know, going out to grab a snack at lunchtime, whatever, all that stuff has gone away. Which is unfortunate uhm they learn from the emotional intelligence of dealing with other people that's for sure gone away uhm yeah, so if you ask me is the learning part the same I would say that would be a partially correct answer. Academically, they're learning in the same academic material. Are they learning the same? No, I think they're at like 75% of what they normally absorb in a day."

This sense that children learn valuable, intangible lessons and skills simply from navigating the world and interactions with others on a day-to-day basis was shared by

many parents. Parents saw daily interactions that occurred outside the house, outside of the family, as crucial contributions to their child's life learning experiences. Many parents expressed concern over the loss of these learning opportunities, that were seen as irreplaceable and unable to be replicated in the online environment. In addition to concerns about what was being missed out on at home, some families described seeing the limits of their children's social interactions as having a negative impact on their children in observable ways. Several described seeing changes in their children's behaviours and demeanours as indicative of suffering these limitations, and described the lack of socializing as "devastating," "tragic," and "awful." Donny describes the impact that he saw stay-at-home orders, and the loss of interaction, have on his daughter:

> "And of course, she's not getting the full experience of starting high school, and I think socially she's definitely missing the interaction … She's missing all the all the socialization, uh and so for her I think it's it's I would say it's been bad … but uh she spend - she sleeps, she sleeps a lot more than if there were classes were going on, some time in school."

Several parents described feeling that their children were missing out on the full school experience. For some parents, this was attributed to missing specific events, like sports, prom, or an end-of-the-year trip the school did as tradition. For others, it was more ephemeral, ascribed to the sense that there is a "real" or "true" school experience and that crucial to that, is being in a brick-and-mortar classroom, in the presence of peers and a teacher. Parents often attributed changes they saw in their children as related to this loss; for instance, Donny sees the impact of missing the socialization element of schooling as manifesting in his daughters' sleeping behaviours.

Parents also described the negative impacts of limited socialization as evidenced through a perceived decline in their child's social skills. Glenn shares how he has seen his daughter regress during stay-at-home orders, and the ways in which it became apparent to him that being around other children was essential for her well-being and development:

> "You can see a regression of of her uh social skills or social interactions with us … it was almost like where you see the progression in school … we were seeing it go backwards. And and really and when you come to that realization that … your seven- and eight-year-old daughter has only been around adults and she's not at that point where very much adult interaction is relevant, comprehensible, or even enjoyable to her, then there's a lot of frustration there's a lot of like "I'm really bored and all I want to do," and she would be watching videos of kids, she'd want to watch kids shows, which she always does, she's a kid, but she was watching want to watch younger kids shows. [Interviewer: OK] And and so it was like, alright? You need to socialize with other kids and you need to play with other kids."

Glenn describes a limit to which adult interaction is relevant or enjoyable to his daughter, at which point he sees a social need that can only be met by other children. Not only is she not gaining from valuable social experiences that are not available online, but she is also losing skills she gained from her social experiences before the pandemic. Parents saw schools as offering children a place to build interpersonal skills and develop relationships, to connect with peers their own age and learn from those around them, and many described stark indications of the impacts the absence of this socialization had on their children. In considering children's social experiences during previous online learning and lockdowns, many parents described a sense that valuable opportunities and experiences were being missed, and skills not being developed or even lost.

4.3.2 Education Experiences During Online Learning

In addition to the limitations that lockdowns and online learning placed on the quality of children's social interactions and experiences, parents described the online setting as limiting the quality of educational experiences as well. Nearly all parents described feeling that the online education their child received was insufficient. They described feeling that teachers were unequipped to navigate the new learning setting, and that the instruction their children received was poor both in quality and frequency. Overall, parents described a decrease in satisfaction with their children's education during remote learning. Jerry's description captures a multitude of ways in which the experience was challenging and inferior:

> "The learning was was very it was very chaotic it was it was definitely not, you know, synchronous learning. It was a lot of here's assignments or tasks or topics and kind of figure it out and the scope of learning at that time, the subjects were already definitely narrowed [Interviewer: Right] by the by the teachers, right? They were really only focusing on on core subjects, ah so it was, you know, was the duration was quite short as well, and we're probably. I don't even think it was. I don't even think was 90 minutes in in the morning round, I think with good some days was it was even less so."

The view that their children's educational experiences were of lower quality during remote learning was shared by many parents. Several parents described experiencing a major decline in the amount of time their children spent in connection with or receiving instruction from their teacher(s) during Spring 2020. As well, they described an increase in the amount of independent work to be completed by their children, and a narrowed curriculum scope covered overall. Further, they described an increase in teacher's reliance on YouTube and parents' assistance to deliver children's

education. Views on the quality of the educator themselves varied widely across parents, with some largely disappointed in their child's instructor and other attributing the quality of the instruction as a major element of their child's relative success. Even with a teacher they felt was great, however, some parents still felt the quality of online programming was insufficient, as Glenn describes:

> "But in terms of broad stroke, the approach to the schooling and all of that in person was great online online was... I would say, and this is from the programming, not the teacher, it was below expectations of where it should be, … like for another example she had a gym teacher that did really well in the beginning of it … 2/3 of the way through the end of the year's online programming, that teacher just said, here's some links to some YouTube videos for dancing in yoga you can do that or just go outside and play and then she just stopped showing up and they just had extra recess time … I think the program overall was severely lacking."

Naturally there was a lot of variation in experiences that families had with their children's educators during remote learning. Some families found that their child's teacher was largely inaccessible and that this only exacerbated the challenges of remote learning. However, even when parents described their child as having a teacher who they viewed as doing the best they could, the nature of online learning – largely asynchronous, via Zoom where cameras could be shut off and students could be otherwise engaged, an inability to pick up on any subtleties – could not be entirely compensated for by a quality teacher.

In tandem with the perspective that the education being delivered to their children during remote learning was of poorer quality than that delivered in the classroom, many parents described the sense that their children also had a more difficult time receiving education from home. Parents described a sense that the classroom is inherently the

place where children learn best (some stated this explicitly), and that home involves too many distractions to be conducive to learning. Most parents reported that their children faced more distractions at home than they would in the classroom and saw this as negatively impacting their child's educational experience. For instance, Abigail describes her daughter's challenges learning from home:

> "And she can't learn like that [online]. I know this, like for her to go to school, she excelled better in the classroom than she does at home 'cause there's too many distractions like my one kid, my my youngest came out with a great cat eye eyeliner like she's like I shut off the I shut off the sound or the microphone and the screen so they can't see me, but I'm practicing my makeup I'm like that's now what you're supposed to be, I, you're supposed to be learning not making a smokey eye it's just too many distractions here like you know and my fridge was empty like every day and you know they're on their phones, they have like Xbox, you know they got distracted but at school, you don't have that distraction, you've got to learn. And here there's just too many distractions."

Abigail details just some of the many distractions available to children learning from home that are not typically available in the classroom, like phones, Xbox, even the refrigerator. Many parents described similar experiences, acknowledging the presence of distractions in the classroom, yet expressing the view that learning to be disciplined in the face of classroom distractions is part of the educational experiences. In addition to challenging experiences with the curriculum and content of online learning, parents also described the role-learning of "how to be a student," that could only be done in school, and was being lost at home. Kaiya describes the difficulties they had with their young daughter's at-home education:

> "It's your first time in a desk, and now she you know she's not in school and so she sits in front of the Zoom … so you know she'll get up and go to the bathroom in the middle of the Zoom which, and if she was in class she couldn't do that or she gets up to gets a snack like if you were in class, you

> wouldn't do that so she's you know, like with the modeling and the training that you do in those early years."

With the transition to online learning, supervisory responsibilities shifted. Educators were no longer able to regulate behaviours they typically would have in the classroom (e.g., eating or using the washroom). This responsibility then fell to parents who, as demonstrated above, also grappled with their own work and personal demands. Parents could not necessarily provide the methodical structure and discipline more often found in the classroom. In the classroom, through interaction with the environment, the teacher, and the child's peers, children learn how to be students. They are required to follow the routines and rhythms of a classroom, learning how to fill this role of "student." Such training seems to be inimitable in the home environment, where, without the environmental cues, structure, or discipline, children were more susceptible to distractions. Of course, older students have experienced this contextual role training in their previous school years, and likely do have an understanding of how to be a student. However, they learned this role in the classroom context, and how to be a student in the home environment is a new and challenging task. Dan describes how, even in the face of distractions, he views the classroom environment as more conducive to learning for his high-school aged son:

> "So even if you're not paying attention, being in the classroom, you're at least hopefully hearing most of what's being said and some of it sticking in at home you can be on mute and you can just not even be involved at all, uh, I know, even for meetings, like all of my meetings now have been virtual well there's plenty of times - and it's hard not to - it's like you're you're not involved, so no one or very few have their cameras on you have yourself on mute just so you you don't accidentally say something that you forget you're in a meeting, and it's like oh and email comes in, it's like so

> you lose your distraction, you you don't have that focus like you do when you're in person."

Dan draws on his own difficulties working from home to inform his understanding of the role that passive learning can play in a child's education: at home, it is possible to be entirely checked out from what is going on, engaged in another activity completely. In school, while the mind may wander, the body remains in the classroom and there is the possibility that some of what is being said is being heard. Many parents similarly described the nature of school such that the environment contained less distractions and the structure was more conducive to supporting students in resisting distractions that were present. Attending school offered not only a learning supportive environment, but a sense of structure and routine that some parents felt was imperative to their child's education. Amira describes what she feels her son receives in the classroom that he does not experience during remote learning:

> "A lot he he he wear, because they were uniform, he is now wearing uniform and feel more professional because he's wearing and my son when he wear his uniform to school he feel he's going to school it affect his attitude he feel when he I dropped him his dad pick him at 9 you have to be in bed, he's exhausted before no school online he can sit up till 12 he tell me nobody joined in class until 10, I cannot, I cannot I don't like to tell him you're a liar and now he has to be there at 8 he wake up early."

Amira describes challenges with having her son maintain a sense of routine during remote learning. Attending school and what this entails, for example, wearing a uniform and following a schedule, offer important structure for her son. Many parents described finding it challenging that without the structure attending school provides, the onus was on themselves to enforce a routine for their child.

Overall, parents reported that the quality and amount of content their children were being taught and retaining declined during online learning. They also expressed concern over the non-academic, role-based learning that takes place in schools that they felt was inimitable at home. Parents of young children were concerned they were not learning how to be a student. Parents with older children who had previously learned this role described the important differences between the in-school and online learning environment as making the skills difficult to transfer. Ultimately these considerations contributed to a sense that educational experiences at home were not comparable to those possible in the classroom.

4.3.3 Consideration of Social and Educational Experiences in Back-to-School Decision-Making

This final section of analysis will show how consideration of children's social and educational experiences during previous online learning, like those described above, featured in parents' back-to-school decision-making. While most families discussed elements of both as meaningful to their pandemic experiences, some emphasized social considerations, others educational, and some referred to both explicitly when describing how they ultimately made the decision of whether their child return to school or not. Given the limited and inferior social opportunities available online, most parents saw attending in-person school as the option most supportive of their child's social well-being. For William's family, the discrepancy between the activities that were allowable during remote learning and lockdown, and his daughter's personality and preferences, featured such that they necessitated her return to school:

> "She's not really an outdoors person so she likes to be inside and that's it's hard to explain that we can't really have play dates inside, whereas we have neighbors, kids, roughly the same age, they like playing outside, but my daughter's not like that, she's more of like crafty type or more of a homebody wants to stay inside type of a person … so it because once you say go for a walk or do this and that that's like well my daughter is not really like that so … I think we decided because we figured she's sort of an extrovert so we just uh I think it was better for her to go back to school."

For many families, walks and time outside were a respite from the monotony and stagnant feelings present during lockdown. Given that these available activities did not align with William's daughter's interests, even the minimal social experiences that were available could not meet her social needs. So, while William described making the decision about whether his daughter would return to the classroom or continue with remote learning as "very difficult," he describes consideration of her social well-being as the crux of their decision to have her return to school. Other parents similarly prioritized their children's social well-being and ability to connect with their friends when navigating the back-to-school. While for most families this consideration shaped their decision in favour of returning to the classroom, for Kimberley and Josh, circumstances attributable to the pandemic led them to view online learning as most conducive to their child's social well-being. Kimberley's family presented a unique situation in which both children originally returned to school in-person, but by October, one of her children switched to remote learning, while the other continued at school:

> "So they did have the option to go into school and they both did. With my older daughter, all her friends like their parents were all like paranoid, and you know vaccine at the time, so they ended up going straight to online um, which, so I I let her switch over by October as well. So and then my son, you know, enjoyed being in person and enjoyed seeing his friends. So I had this odd situation where one was at school and one was online and they both had different schedules. [Interviewer: Oh my gosh.] … you know I I

> tried to accommodate because that seems to be, you know, like my daughter doesn't want to be there with this, you know, none of her, not so many of her friends were there … so yeah, so like whatever was best for them."

Of course, we cannot know the reasons that other parents choose remote learning for their children, though Kimberley attributes this decision to Covid-19 related concerns, and as having a ripple effect on her own daughter's experiences. What we can see is that the pandemic uniquely shapes her daughter's social context as, since her friends remain learning online, returning to school herself becomes more isolating. Thus, it is opting to continue with remote learning that is most conducive to her daughter's well-being, and Kimberley describes this as functioning in such a way that they choose to switch to online learning.

For Josh's family, the option to continue remote learning offered a predictability that they felt was most conducive to his daughter's social well-being, and that would not have been attainable if she were to return to school:

> "We decided to keep her online all the way through. I I forget exactly because there was so much that went on a uhm I forget it exactly but she we just kept her straight online, like we didn't want to take the chances, we didn't want to swing her back and forth. The one thing that we thought that was most important regardless, she'll get through this. But the one thing we can provide as a parent is stability, so consistency so she can learn. If we're bouncing if they're back and forth and she doesn't know one day to the next, who her friends are going to be are they going to be online friends or are they going to be physical friends, so she stayed on the online all the way through."

The possibility of additional closures and of having to oscillate between online and in-person schooling was seen as having the potential to negatively impact Josh's daughter's social well-being. Josh describes seeing consistency as an important part of

a healthy social life for his daughter, and they are able to provide this to her by choosing to continue online learning. It is worth noting that the way these social considerations featured in Josh and Kimberley's decisions to keep their children home are fundamentally related to the situated context of the pandemic. That is, if not for pandemic related concerns, Kimberley would have been able to connect with her friends in the classroom, and Josh's daughter would have consistency at school if not for threat of future lockdowns and stay-at-home orders.

While some families emphasized explicitly their child's social experiences in describing their back-to-school decisions, for others educational experiences featured more prominently. In these cases, many parents emphasized the insufficient educational quality online, as well as the feeling that learning is best done in the classroom:

> "Oh it it was a very easy decision for us because we've always like I mean, I'm not really concerned about, you know, like the virus itself you know in terms of them going to school or whatnot, I think sure, there's a risk, but then I really kind of believe that learning in person, you know, is really superior to learning online (laughs) and I think my daughter if, like does feel that way as well …So it was never a question for us that as soon as schools reopen, we go back." – Krista

> "I sent [oldest] back to school like my oldest back to school 'cause that's where she learns and my youngest went back." – Abigail

The view that the quality of education delivered and that children's ability to learn this material is superior in the classroom compared to online learning was shared by many parents. For parents for whom considerations of the virus or family specific qualities did not preclude the return to the classroom from being a viable option, many families cited the superiority of classroom learning as a primary factor in their decision-

making. In some cases, this consideration could feature heuristically: for example, as Krista explains, given the superiority of in-person learning, “it was never a question.” Furthermore, while some parents emphasized consideration of their children’s social or educational experiences, such considerations could also be described together. Additionally, parents also acknowledged that returning to the classroom did not mean returning to an environment identical to the one experienced before the March 2020 shutdowns. However, despite the precautionary adaptations and ways in which returning to school might look different, the social and educational opportunities afforded by being in the classroom were still seen by parents as being highly valuable for their children:

> “I want [him] to have some uh social interaction with other people. Even though it's not as much, but I I really want [him] to actually leave the house to meet people to talk to people, right? That's the main reason And also I think learning in in person uh I still think it's better learning it purely online. A certain portion you can do it online, certain stuff. But overall I think being at the school is better” - Kevin

> “He wanted to to be where the school environment, to be able to at least see your friend that's sitting next to you in your class, even if they're 6 feet away with a mask on, at least you can see them while you're doing your classwork. He said he never did like the learning online. It’s not, doesn't work for him.” – Dan

Safety precautions like mask-wearing, distancing, and cohorting meant that in returning to school children might still experience limitations on their experiences that were not present prior to the pandemic. However, the presence of friends, in-person interaction, and ability to learn better in the classroom were often emphasized as contributing to the view that the classroom offered superior social and educational experiences. This view was shared by many parents, and when considerations of the

virus or family specific qualities did not preclude returning to the classroom as a viable option, many families described this as shaping their decision in favour of a return to school. Finally, Dionne offers a perspective on her son's return to the classroom that captures several elements of what many parents described in relation to their decision to have their children return in-person school:

> "For me, I believe kids needs to be in the classroom. They need to be with their peers. They need structure. They need routine, and for me this is what was lacking. Uhm, yes, he was doing what needed to be done, but it was just sugarcoated. It was just it was just simplified. He was not getting the attention he required. [Interviewer: Mmm]. So for me I was happy I was like yes, finally he can go back. I'm sending him back. He's going to see his friends. He's going to be with the teacher. He's gonna be back in the classroom doing the schoolwork that he has to do."

This extract from Dionne encompasses many of the considerations that parents described as shaping their decisions: school as the place where learning happens, the routine and structure necessary for education, inferior educational experiences online, and the importance of being with friends and around peers in the classroom. Overall, most parents felt strongly that remote learning had its place as an emergency response to the global health crisis we faced, but that it was not an alternative or appropriate substitute to the vital learning – both academic and social – that children experience within the school setting.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This analysis sought to understand how parents navigated back-to-school decision-making on behalf of their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, I explored what factors were considered, and how these shaped the decision-making

context, featuring in a variety of ways. In doing so, I provide nuanced insights about the context within, and process through which, parents navigated making the decision of whether their child return to school or continue with online learning. I show how, despite being a technically dichotomous decision – “In-person or online?” – the context in which the decision was made, the variety of factors considered, and ways they featured were highly situated and complex. The analysis reveals that some families experienced critical constraints around their choices while others experienced more flexibility, depending on how a given factor featured in their situation.

While all parents expressed a desire for their children to be happy, to connect with their friends, and to be receiving a quality education, not all families were able to prioritize these considerations when making school choice decisions for their children during the Covid-19 pandemic. For some families, considerations of the virus and its potential threats to their health were the first and only factor involved in this decision. The virus featured heuristically, in a critical, determining fashion. Only if this consideration was not a determinant were families able to consider additional factors. In this case, some parents grappled with specific qualities of their child, their own capacities, and their family structure and dynamics. These considerations could also feature heuristically (most often by necessitating a return to the classroom), however for some families these considerations afforded flexibility for consideration of further additional factors. Further, children’s previous experiences with online learning, particularly social and educational experiences, provided important contextual insights and ultimately shaped the way social and education considerations featured in decision-

making. While there were a variety of reasons that some families chose to have their children continue with online learning, for most, having their children return to the classroom was the ideal choice. At times, parents also discussed the role their children's expressed wishes played in shaping their back-to-school decisions – often, if parents' choices were not constrained by other considerations, the child's request contributed to the decision.

It should be noted that in the analysis I sometimes demonstrate the ways in which a parent's decision differed between the 2020-2021, and the 2021-2022 school year. For example, Fatima's explanation that for the 2021 decision, the protections offered by the vaccine, and the insights gained during the first year of schools being open, shaped her decision to have her children return to school when they had previously remained online. When parents explicitly acknowledged important contextual differences and how these shaped their decisions, I did my best to capture and represent this. However, more could likely be made from a deeper investigation into the ways in which the decision-making contexts of the 2020-2021 school year differed from the 2021-2022 school year, and how decision-making was shaped accordingly. While this was not the primary purpose of the present study, this could be a valuable avenue for future research.

Grappling with what is demonstrated throughout the analysis has a few meaningful implications. Firstly, the insights revealed here are beneficial for revealing that even a dichotomous decision is incredibly complex, shaped by factors far beyond simply "I want my child to be in school," or "I want my child to learn from home."

Reckoning with the ways in which considerations of health, safety, children's individuality, parents' capacity, family structure and dynamics, and social and educational experiences either constrained or at least informed parents' decisions can serve as a helpful reminder to avoid reducing vastly diverse populations to one of two groups.

Secondly, this research adds to the body of literature on school choice. Particularly, that which has demonstrated how increased choice options are disproportionately available to different families (Goldberg et al 2018; Lareau, 2003; Goldring & Philips, 2008). While most parents' school choice is made based on where they live (Carpenter & Kafer, 2012), considerations beyond the practical tend to be made in pursuit of maximization – of the child's success, nourishment, well-being, opportunities (Caputo, 2007). However, access to these options is shaped by access to financial resources and therefore unequally available to families of higher socioeconomic status (Altenhofen et al., 2016). Often maximizing decisions are more easily available to those who already have more resources, perpetuating and even widening the gaps created by disproportionate advantages within society. Towards the beginning of the pandemic there were suggestions that Covid-19 would serve as an equalizer (Cuomo, 2020; Owoseje, 2020). These claims were based on the suggestion that public health crises do not discriminate based on demographics such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status, and intended to emphasize that no one was "safe" from Covid-19 (Stavropoulous, 2020; van Buuren, Tang, & Martimianakis, 2020). As the pandemic progressed, however, studies have been conducted to demonstrate the ways

in which the impacts of the pandemic have been disproportionately distributed (Mein, 2020). This analysis extends such considerations to back-to-school decision-making in the pandemic context. By showing how different families experienced constraints or flexibility around their decisions, I offer a nuanced depiction of ways that families could experience impacts of the pandemic disproportionately. In doing this, I am not suggesting that parents whose decisions were less constrained did not also face a difficult choice, simply that different factors featured in different ways for different families, that meaningfully shaped the decision-making experience.

In addition to offering a more nuanced perspective on the various considerations that can shape school choice, this analysis demonstrates the way personal or familial health status functions as an important social location in the current context of back-to-school decision-making. Pre-existing health conditions within a family fundamentally constrain the choices that can be made within the pandemic context. When there was a family member with a pre-existing health condition in the household, there was no back-to-school decision to be made: the threat of the virus overpowered consideration of any other relevant factors. Parents for whom this was the case described grappling with many of the difficulties that other parents described as meaningfully shaping their decisions. They described increasing frustrations and tension in their households, the impacts of limited social experiences on their child, and dissatisfaction with their children's education. However, despite these challenges, the virus featured in such a way that it precluded these considerations from any ability to shape the back-to-school-decision.

Finally, a practical implication of this research is the insight offered around parents' views on online learning. All parents interviewed described a degree of dissatisfaction with online learning. Even when improvements were noted, or a quality teacher acknowledged, there was a sense that the education afforded to their children through the remote format was inadequate compared to that attainable in the classroom. Of parents who opted to continue with online learning, each one of these families' choices was inextricably linked to contextual factors resulting from the pandemic. For most, it was the threat of the virus itself that featured in a determining fashion. The other considerations that contributed to parents' decisions to continue remote learning were social well-being and consistency in relation to this. Of the two parents who described choosing remote learning for social reasons, one described this choice as made because her daughter's friends were all online – however, under regular circumstances, her friends would have been in the classroom and subsequently, so would she. For the other, it was the desire to maintain a sense of predictability for their daughter, and the inability to forecast the pandemic's progress and the possibility of future school closures that shaped the decision to continue online learning. Prior to the pandemic unplanned long-term, province-wide school closures in Canada were unheard of; recall the disruption caused by a single strike day. Anticipation of the possibility of school closures was not a factor in parents' school choices until the arrival of Covid-19. If not for the ongoing and frequently changing state of the pandemic, this same sense of consistency could be offered with a return to the classroom and would not require continuation with online learning.

Ultimately, this analysis has illustrated the complex context and ways in which parents navigated back-to-school decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic. By showing the variety of ways that consideration of a given factor could feature in a family’s decision, I demonstrated that the choice between virtual learning and returning to school was not a simple dichotomous decision. Rather, parents’ ability to even consider certain factors, and ultimately the accessibility of different options, could be constrained by various considerations. This research contributes to pandemic related investigations, offering more insight into familial experiences of Covid-19, as well as school-choice research, by deepening our understanding of the pandemic school-choice context.

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TABLE 2

Table 2
Participant demographics and family characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship Status	Children in Household	Back-to-school Decision
Abigail	45	Married	2	In-person both years
Adam	60	Married	2	In-person both years
Amira	53	Married	1	In-person both years
Brandon	N/A	Co-parenting	1	N/A 2020, In-person 2021*
Connor	53	Married	2	In-person 2020, N/A 2021**
Dan	46	Co-parenting	1	In-person both years
Davis	51	Married	2	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Dionne	40	Married	2	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Donny	52	Married	1	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Doug	49	Married	2	In-person both years
Faiz	49	Married	2	Online 2020, In-person 2021
Fatima	37	Married	2	Online 2020, In-person 2021
Faye	43	Married	2	Online both years
Glenn	40	Married	1	In-person both years
Gregory	43	Married	2	Online 2020, In-person 2021
Hila	33	Married	2	Online 2020, N/A 2021
Jerry	46	Married	2	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Josh	47	Married	1	Online 2020, N/A 2021
Kaiya	N/A	Married	5	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Kevin	49	Married	1	In-person both years
Kimberly	47	Married	2	1 Back-to-school, 1 In-person
Krista	51	Married	1	In-person both years
Luc	42	Married	2	Continue homeschool
Mahika	42	Married	2	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Masha	39	Married	3	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Meganne	49	Married	2	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Melanie	47	Married	1	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Neil	44	Married	2	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
Poojan	47	Married	2	Online 2020, In-person 2021
Rachel	35	Single	1	In-person both years
Sabina	46	Single	1	Online 2020, In-person 2021
Scott	54	Married	1	In-person both years
Sitara	46	Married	1	In-person 2020, N/A 2021
William	N/A	Married	1	In-person both years

*Brandon's son was starting Junior Kindergarten in 2021. His son was not eligible for enrolment in school during the 2020-2021 year, hence no decision was required.

** Parents interviewed before the commencement of the 2021-2022 school year were only able to report on the decision they had made for the 2020-2021 year. We cannot assume what decision was made for the following year, hence it is not recorded.

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

General COVID-19

- How is COVID-19 affecting your life?
- What are currently your biggest concerns about COVID-19?

School closures

- How did schools closing in the Spring effect your family?

School reopening

- What do you think about how school reopening has gone?
- What concerns did you have at the beginning of the school year?
    - [If the following are not mentioned, ask:]
        - How satisfied are you with the COVID-19 precautions taken in your child/childrens' school(s)?
        - How satisfied are you with the academic aspects of school this year?
        - Have you felt that your child/ren's social needs are being met at school this year?
- Did you consider any options other than in-person school? What were the factors that you considered when you were making these decisions?
- What are some things that could happen that would make you more satisfied with schooling during COVID-19?
- Have changes to how school happens this year had impacts on other parts of your life?
    - Have you or other adults in your house had to change the way you work because of changes to school this year?
    - Has your child had more sick days at home this year because of COVID-19 precautions at school?
- How sustainable do you think the current schooling arrangement is for your family?
- Has your impression of what it looks like to be a good parent changed during the pandemic – if so, how?

Wrap-Up

- Is there anything else you'd like to mention that came to mind during our conversation?

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Letter and Consent Form

Hello,

You are receiving this email because you completed a survey about COVID-19 earlier this Spring and indicated interest in participating in future surveys or interviews. You are invited to participate in a research study about people's views about schools reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic. This information letter is to help you decide if you want to be involved. If, after reading through this information letter, you decide to participate, please sign the consent form (last page) and return this document via email. Upon receipt of a signed consent form, the researchers (either Vivian Nelson, Anna Beijbom, or Jenna Vikse) will contact you to schedule your interview.

Purpose of the research:

Reopening schools during COVID-19 has been a complicated issue for a lot of people. The goal of this research is to learn more about what people think about how school reopening has affected them and their families.

Who is conducting this research study?

This research study is being conducted by Anna Beijbom, MA student (abeijbom@uoguelph.ca), Vivian Nelson, MA student (nelsonv@uoguelph.ca), and Jenna Vikse, Project Manager (jvikse@uoguelph.ca) in the Department of Psychology at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario. The project is supervised by Dr. Kieran O'Doherty, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, odohertk@uoguelph.ca, 519-824-4120 x 58919. Dr. Eric B. Kennedy, Assistant Professor, Department of Disaster & Emergency Management at York University (eric.kennedy@yorku.ca), Dr. Claudia Chaufan, Associate Professor, Department of Health Studies at York University (cchaufan@yorku.ca), and Research Assistants from York University will not be transcribing the data, but may be involved in analyzing the results of the data, using de-identified transcripts.

Why am I being invited to participate in this research study?

You are being invited to take part in this study because:

- You are an adult aged 18 years or older
- You understand and speak English
- You have previously completed a survey about COVID-19 and indicated interest in participating in future research
- You live in a household with school-aged children

What will I be asked to do?

You are invited to be interviewed on your thoughts and opinions about schools closing and reopening during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., "What has this school year been like for you so far?"). You are invited to answer in your own way, using your own words and drawing on your own experiences. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers, we are just looking for your input.

During the interview, you will be asked to provide your full name and email address for compensation purposes. No further demographic information (age, occupation, etc.) will be collected during this interview, as you already provided that information when you completed the initial survey about COVID-19 earlier this year.

Because of physical distancing requirements, you will be interviewed by telephone. The interview can be scheduled at a date and time that is convenient for you. The interview should take approximately 30-60 minutes, though the exact duration of your interview may vary.

Are there any risks or possible negative outcomes for me if I participate?

There is no foreseeable risk or harm related to participating in this study. However, there is the possibility that while answering some of the questions you might feel upset as COVID-19 may be a stressful topic for some. If you feel distressed at any point during the interview, please notify your interviewer. Your interviewer will provide you with contact information for resources if you would like to talk to someone about your distress. You can always choose to take a break, skip questions, or end the interview.

Below is a list of resources for counselling and other support services for you to reference in the event you would like to talk to someone after our discussion. If you experience any discomfort during the study, you are encouraged to contact your family doctor, a mental health professional in your area, or one of the resources below. If you feel significantly upset at any point during the interview, you are encouraged to contact a local crisis line, or call emergency services.

To find help in your area, please visit:

- Your province's psychological association to find a psychologist to talk to.

- The Canadian Mental Health Association to find resources and tips for getting help in your area www.cmha.ca.
- Call 211 to find other helplines, crisis services, distress centres, and support groups.

What are the benefits of the research project?

Participation in this research project yields no direct benefits to participants. However, the results of this study will help policymakers, scientists, health care workers, education specialists, and other researchers understand the issues that Canadians are concerned with when it comes to schooling during COVID-19. It will help to make sure that science and policy can account for the opinions of Canadian residents.

After I agree to participate and sign the consent form, can I change my mind?

Your participation in the research is completely voluntary and participants may choose to stop participating at any time without any consequence or penalty. Furthermore, you are not obligated to answer any questions, and your participation in the study will not be affected if you choose not to discuss certain topics with the interviewer or ask to move on to another topic during the interview.

If you choose to withdraw during the interview, all data collected up to that point will be destroyed and not used as part of this project. If you change your mind about participating after your interview concludes, you can contact the researcher up to 14 days after your interview date and request to have your interview data destroyed. Your honorarium eligibility will not be affected by this action. After that point in time, the data from your interview will be de-identified and integrated into the overall data set and it will no longer be possible to remove it.

Prior to your interview, your interviewer will review this information letter with you, remind you of the procedures to be carried out, and confirm that you still wish to participate in the research.

Who will know what I said or did in the study?

The interview will be recorded with a digital audio recorder, and may be supplemented by field notes made during our discussion. Field notes will be taken electronically, and will be stored on an encrypted computer, within a password protected document. After recording the interview, the dialogue will be transcribed with all names replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

All data will be stored and archived securely on encrypted computers using a password-protected drive space, which can be accessed only by qualified laboratory personnel under the supervision of the faculty supervisor. The York University faculty collaborators (Dr. Eric Kennedy, Dr. Claudia Chaufan, Ilinca Dutescu, Norah Yousefi, and Hanah

Fekre) will not have access to raw audio or audio-visual files, and only the de-identified transcript data will be shared with them (via institutional email). Your name will not be released, nor will it appear in any other forms of dissemination. We will take precautions to not use any information that may allow you to be identified when writing future publications resulting from this research (e.g., inadvertent data linkage through identifiers like occupation, ethnicity, or hometown). However, please be aware that we are sometimes identifiable through the stories we tell – this should be kept in mind when deciding what to share in your interview.

How will you protect the information I provide? How will my data be stored?

The interview will be recorded on a digital audio recording device. Once the interview concludes, the recording will be uploaded within 24 hours to a secure University of Guelph lab drive, accessible only from an encrypted laptop. The lab drive is only be accessible by faculty and graduate students associated with Dr. O'Doherty's research laboratory.

Transcription of the interview will be completed within 60 days of your interview. While transcribing interviews, direct identifiers (e.g., name, work place, etc.) are removed and replaced with a pseudonym or code. The original raw audio files will be permanently deleted from the audio recording device as soon as copies of these files have been uploaded to Dr. O'Doherty's secure research lab drive. These audio files will be stored in the lab drive for three years from the date of the interview, to reference in the event of discrepancy or error within the de-identified transcript. Only the research team at the University of Guelph will ever have access to the audio files, as well as the list of codes that link participants' real names or other identifiers. This information will be stored on Dr. O'Doherty's research lab's drive, and only members of Dr. O'Doherty's lab have access to that drive. After three years from the date of interview, these audio and audiovisual files as well as the master file will be permanently deleted from the lab drive. The de-identified transcript data will be stored indefinitely, as it may be pertinent to a future research topic, and may be used for future research projects.

How will you use the information you collect?

The analysis of this de-identified data will appear in Anna Beijbom's Master's thesis and may be published elsewhere through peer-reviewed journals. The analysis of de-identified data might also be presented at international conferences by members of the research team.

Will I receive any compensation for my participation?

Participants will receive a $20 e-gift card to their choice of: Starbucks, Amazon, or Loblaws. You will need to provide a preferred email address to receive your gift card. Your email address will be collected separately from the rest of the study data and will not be linked to your responses to any questions in the study. If you consent to take part

in this project, you will receive an e-gift card through email within 14 days of your interview. E-gift cards to Starbucks, Amazon, or Loblaws never expire. The file containing email addresses provided for compensation will be deleted after the incentives are disbursed.

Will I receive information about the results of this research?

All participants will be emailed a copy of the executive summary following the conclusion of the research project.

What are my rights as a research participant?

You do not waive any legal rights by agreeing to take part in this study. Information you provide will be available only to the researchers, to the extent allowed by law. The researchers may remove you from this study at any time.

This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants. If you have questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study (REB#…), please contact: Manager, Research Ethics; University of Guelph; reb@uoguelph.ca; (519) 824-4120 (ext. 56606).

Funding:

This research is supported the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

Conflicts of Interest:

There are no conflicts of interest to report

Commercialization:

This research will not be commercialized.

Consent with signature:

I have read the Information Letter and have had an opportunity to have my research questions about the project answered. I freely consent to participate in this research.

____

Participant Name (please print or type)

______________________________________ _______________________

Participant Signature Date