



Supporting English Language Development of English Language Learners in Virtual Kindergarten: A Parents' Perspective

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Abstract

The researchers of this case study explored English language learner (ELL) parents' experience as they supported their children's English language development in an online (virtual) kindergarten programme. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Then the researchers used thematic analysis to describe the participants' lived experience with the phenomenon. Findings indicated that online learning increased the emotional stressors for parents of ELL children, and altered the communication between parents and teachers. Meanwhile, the use of breakout rooms reinforced the children's language development, and translation services supported parents. Based on the findings, the researchers recommend that schools and boards provide the parents and families of multilingual learners with ongoing workshops to give them the tools and confidence to continue supporting their children in person and online. They also recommend a greater investment in translation services.

Keywords: virtual kindergarten; online learning; ESL; English language learner

Introduction

The onset of COVID-19 transformed educational practices and the learning environment nationally and globally, shifting the paradigm from a face-to-face, hands-on model to an online and hybrid mix. In Ontario, Canada, virtual learning began in March 2020, forcing students, families, and teachers to embark on a learning experience of reshaping the environment and instructional approaches in education. The unexpected turn in education exposed inequities of resources and support and a wave of obstacles—particularly for parents whose first language is not English—and their English language learner (ELLs) (or multilingual) children (Santiago et al., 2021). Families of ELLs, specifically those with children in kindergarten, had to not only navigate an alternative platform and style of learning but, more importantly, support the development of English academic and social language from home.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2007) document, *Supporting English Language Learners in Kindergarten*, English language learners are identified as being learners in a provincially funded school with a first language other than English. English language learners may arrive from another country voluntarily or as a consequence of crisis, or may be Canadian born. In 2013, over 25% of students attending a provincially funded school in Ontario were identified as English language learners (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b).

For many families of ELLs, kindergarten is a child's first experience of being immersed in a Canadian school and an English programme. The Kindergarten Program is designed and facilitated through a child-centered lens, emphasising the value of nurturing a safe and developmentally appropriate learning experience through an inquiry- and play-based programme. The programme's approach is essential in developing the child's intellectual, social, emotional, and physical skills (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a). The educators (teacher and early childhood educator) in the Kindergarten Program facilitate the development of such skills and language by co-constructing and providing opportunities that intentionally and purposefully stimulate children's curiosities, interests, and thinking through meaningful communication and materials (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a).

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2016b) recognises the need for additional support for ELL children as they transition to kindergarten. Because English is not the predominant language used in the homes of English language learners, the educators are responsible for considering the instruction necessary for their play- and inquiry-based learning environments so they can maximise English language acquisition. However, the recent implementation of virtual learning has disrupted educators' support systems, and how they observe, plan, and structure the environment to extend the ELLs' familiarity with, use of, and confidence with the English language.

Although the Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a) acknowledges the parent as the child's first teacher (bringing social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives), it also recognises that a child's learning and development are supported by relationships among the teacher, family, child, and learning environment. Collaboration within these relationships is essential to understanding and supporting the complexity of a child's early experience with language and school. However, the collective approach is complicated by many factors that emerged from the restrictions and precautions caused by COVID-19, leaving parents of ELL children at the forefront of the child's language journey.

Literature review

COVID-19 resulted in mass school closures, affecting 1.6 billion children worldwide (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). The timing and protocols for school closures varied among countries, states, and provinces and, for many families, resulted in virtual learning. Research suggests that virtual learning put children's social, emotional, physical, and academic skills at risk—particularly those who are in immigrant families or marginalised groups, or are living in low socio-economic households (Adibelli & Sümen, 2020; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). Introducing virtual learning when they are already coping with COVID-related hardships (including financial instability, unemployment, food insecurities, and housing issues) disproportionately affects students with lower socio-economic backgrounds, racialised children and youth, newcomers, and students with disabilities (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). Studies have found that inequity between families is related to availability and access to technology and the internet, digital literacy skills, and English proficiency (Andrew et al., 2020; Dreeseni et al., 2020; Timmons et al., 2021). Evidence suggests the greatest impact is on vulnerable populations.

In the context of the early years, virtual learning has adverse effects on preschoolers' language and literacy development (Pascal et al., 2020; Timmons, et al., 2021). Early childhood is a significant time for growth and for children to engage in cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development (Anderson et al., 2003). Critical moments of learning occur during meaningful play and within the context of relationships among the educators, environment, and family (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016a; Pianta et al., 2002). Research indicates that virtual learning disrupted play as the central learning block, making it challenging for educators to

construct authentic and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning and engagement (Ford et al., 2021). For English language learners, social opportunities—such as those experienced in play—promote language acquisition (Cummins, 2007). When there is no opportunity to be organically immersed in the English language, and the learner is confined to home in a remote learning environment, the usual methods and strategies used in the school environment to encourage comprehensible input (such as materials, and verbal and non-verbal cues) are limited or even removed (Sayer & Braun, 2020).

Virtual learning also affected the roles and responsibilities of families in the learning network, placing greater reliance on families to provide direct learning support without formal training (Timmons et al., 2021). As partners in education, and a child's first teachers, families set the foundational skills for early communicative and receptive language development (Crew, 2020). However, research suggests that minority and multilingual families find there are barriers to accessing services and support systems for early literacy support (Utting, 2007). Pote et al. (2019), noted that such barriers are often a result of the family's unknown need for support or point of contact, support accessibility (time, cost, location), and fear of stigma.

A child's English language development and comprehensible input are also affected by their parents' proficiency. Parents with limited English language proficiency may have trouble understanding and interpreting teacher and school communication, assignments, and activities (Blagg et al., 2020). Other studies have indicated that parents with limited English language proficiency may not always perceive themselves to be contributing to their child's English language development, resulting in non-involvement as their best solution (Dixon & Wu, 2014). However, if a parent prioritises education they are likely to be more involved, and are more likely to engage, interact, and expose their child to literacy activities and reading at home (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007; Reyes & Azuara, 2008).

Research question

The researchers aimed to explore parents' experience of supporting the English language development of their ELL child in an online (virtual) kindergarten programme. Discussion on the research question focused on the recall and reflection of a typical school day.

Methodology

The researchers conducted a qualitative intrinsic case study. This was used to develop an understanding of the phenomenon experienced by the participants. Intrinsic case studies are undertaken by researchers with a particular and/or personal interest in exploring a case (Stake, 1995). Therefore, the purpose of an intrinsic case study is not to draw theoretical conclusions, but to develop an understanding of the topic. As a former ESL literacy coach and current kindergarten teacher, the researcher was interested in learning and sharing the experience of the parents of ELL students in the virtual Kindergarten Program.

Methods

The methods used in the research aligned with the qualitative procedures used in an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995).

Site

The study took place in a publicly funded virtual school in the Southwestern Ontario region. The virtual school was created in 2020 in response to the effects of COVID-19 and, at the time of the study, had been running as an online K–8 school for a year.

Recruitment

The participants were recruited through a letter posted on the virtual school's online platform. The recruitment letter was translated into Punjabi, Hindi, Arabic, and Chinese. To participate in the study, participants had to be a parent of an ELL enrolled in virtual kindergarten from September 2020 to June 2021, have a first language other than English, and have emerging oral and literacy skills in English. Those interested in participating were encouraged to contact the researcher through translation services (contact information was provided on the form).

Participants

Seven parents showed interest in participating in the study; however, only two participants met the inclusion criteria and were recruited.

Gurpreet (pseudonym) is a mother of three (all under the age of 5). She completed 2 years of post-secondary education in India in the Bachelor of Arts Program. In January 2017, Gurpreet immigrated to Canada by spousal sponsorship. Gurpreet is a stay-at-home mother and has not been enrolled in English classes since her arrival in Canada. Gurpreet and her family speak Punjabi at home.

Yousef (pseudonym) is a father of five (all under the age of 12). He completed grade 8 in Syria. Yousef started his family in Syria, then moved to Lebanon to escape the war. He later immigrated to Canada on refugee status in January 2017. Due to the pandemic, Yousef is no longer working and is currently a stay-at-home dad. Since his arrival, Yousef has not enrolled in English classes. Yousef and his family speak Arabic at home.

Data collection

In June and July 2021, data were collected by phone with semi-structured interviews and the assistance of Punjabi and Arabic-speaking translators. The translators translated the questions and anything stated by the participant or researcher. Both translators signed a confidentiality/non-disclosure agreement.

The three-way calls lasted 45–60 minutes. At the end of each interview, the participant was compensated for their time with a \$25 Walmart E-Gift Card from the researchers.

Data analysis

The participants' experiences were explored and analysed according to the nature of an intrinsic case study. First, their stories were transcribed and reviewed individually, and then all of the cases were analysed to uncover common themes.

Results

The following themes describe the phenomenon experienced by the participants.

Unconditional support at an emotional cost

Despite the differences in educational background, the parents emphasised the importance of education and recognised the need to support their child's language development during online learning. Gurpreet and Yousef discussed how they sat with their child during the day, supporting them and translating as best as they could. Because their children were in kindergarten, they felt more comfortable supporting literacy and numeracy.

Gurpreet explained:

Because the class is kindergarten, I mostly understand the messaging during the online learning because it is basic English. But if he was older, it would be so hard for me to support my child. I would definitely need support from the interpreters.

Yousef shared similar feelings:

It was much easier to help my younger child than my older children because the English is different, I can understand it a bit more.

The parents' emerging level of English language proficiency enabled them to provide language support during their child's early years.

Although they felt comfortable translating the lessons and instructions for their children most of the time, the online experience took an emotional toll on the parents.

Yousef explained:

Because I have limited English, sometimes I feel like my child is having to learn on their own, even though I am right there next to them. It was very hard for me.

Gurpreet also felt helpless:

It makes me absolutely sad that I cannot understand fully the English language and that I needed translation and interpretation. It made me stressed to know that I couldn't always understand.

Yousef also added that he was uncomfortable and unfamiliar with using the school's communication platform because he had not been taught how to use it. As a result, he once again relied on his older children to check the online platform regularly for daily communication.

While providing language support and translation, Gurpreet and Yousef commented on the constant need to redirect their child's attention during whole group instruction, and the additional pressure this put on them.

Gurpreet shared:

The struggle is keeping my child's focus and attention for the entire school day. It is a lot of work for me to monitor him and make sure he is sitting and focused and having to make sure I understand, and he understands.

Yousef shared his distress:

It was difficult because my wife or I always had to sit with our child. I am always with him and helping as much as I could. Overall, it was just very overwhelming and hard.

Although it can be tiresome, the parents' ongoing support to redirect their child's focus has been found to be necessary in motivating and sustaining online engagement in young learners (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

Parent-teacher communication

During the interviews, the parents shared their feelings about initiating and participating in conversations with their child's educators. Although they enjoyed their children's educators, the parents felt stressed when communicating with them online. Gurpreet and Yousef attributed this discomfort to the openness of the online platform and their level of language proficiency.

Gurpreet shared her concern:

Right now, if I need to talk to the teacher, I am so sad because of the communication barrier and I am not able to communicate. Because of that, I cannot ask the teacher about how my child is doing and how he is progressing, and these are all questions I would like to ask and know about.

Yousef expressed similar feelings:

It's difficult to communicate with the teacher online because I don't know English well. Sometimes I have to rely on my older children, but I feel bad asking my children all the time.

However, Yousef noted that prior to online learning he felt confident and at ease communicating with his child's teacher:

In person, it was a different feeling. I was comfortable trying to communicate with the teacher when I would pick up my child in person. It was harder to communicate with the teacher online and I would have my child speak and ask the question.

The shift to online learning removed the casual social interaction between parents and educators, leaving many parents of language learners observing a new form of anxiety and insecurity with communication (Chen, 2021).

Importance of small-group instruction on language development

At the beginning of the interviews, the parents shared that English was not commonly heard or used in the household. They noted that apart from a few television shows that the children watched, and the voices of their educators, the children were immersed in their native tongue.

The limited exposure to the English language worried the parents.

Gurpreet explained:

When he is in school, he learns so much more in that environment than in the home.

Despite the concerns voiced by Gurpreet and Yousef, they were relieved and observed an increase in their child's use of the English language when the educators provided small-group instruction in the breakout rooms.

Gurpreet explained:

A benefit of virtual school was the breakout groups. It gave time for the teacher to work more closely with my child on areas I didn't always understand or had difficulty translating. I noticed that my child learned a lot from the small group.

Yousef's experience coincided:

When my child had someone who can work with them one on one, it was great for their language and to support their learning.

Gurpreet and Yousef's trust in small-group instruction corresponds with current research that attributes breakout rooms to empowering student learning, increasing collaboration, peer support, and English language acquisition (Chandler, 2016; Cheung, 2021).

The use and need for translation support

While supporting their children with online learning, Gurpreet and Yousef juggled the roles of parent, teacher, and translator. Despite their multiple responsibilities, they were motivated to seek available translation support when the language used in the virtual school was high priority and beyond their level of proficiency.

Gurpreet explained:

I am comfortable to contact the translator when I really need it but there are not enough Punjabi interpreters. I wish we had more translation support because we need more interpreters to provide interpretation for families.

Yousef's feelings echoed Gurpreet's feelings of confidence in the translator:

So if the teacher wanted to talk to me or sent me something that was important, I felt comfortable calling the translators to help me and explain things to me or join me on the phone to speak with the teacher.

The motivation these parents shared was heavily influenced by their level of comfort with the translators. Currently, schools in Ontario use Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) to provide translation support for families. However, the number of translators and languages available to families is limited and depends on the availability of workers and the school board's demographics. Although the school board associated in this study has a high demographic of Punjabi- and Urdu-speaking families, there is only one translator available.

Discussion and recommendations

This single case study explored multilingual parents' experience of supporting the English language development of their ELL child in virtual learning during COVID-19 school closures. Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that the findings from a single case can be re-contextualised for similar contexts. The following section discusses the findings as they relate to the literature, and recommendations for practice.

Research shows that multilingual families who are supporting their children with online learning feel overwhelmed due to the variance between home and instructional language (Cioè-Peña, 2021). For the parents in this study, the content did not exceed their knowledge base; however, the directions and instructions did. Despite the obstacles they experienced, the participants shared their untiring devotion to support their children. However, research has noted that even when the content is appropriate, and there is an intention to support, parents lack the formal and developmentally appropriate training of educators, creating additional learning obstacles for children (Ford et al., 2021; Timmons et al., 2021).

The participants' feelings of being uninformed and unprepared are not uncommon. Parents interviewed and surveyed during the pandemic often spoke about feeling left in the dark when navigating platforms and online learning tools (Daniela et al., 2021; Guruge et al., 2021). For new immigrants the digital divide further marginalised families (Lukawiecki et al., 2022). To support the autonomy of parents of language learners, it is important that school boards invest in offering opportunities to develop digital literacy skills and free technological support in languages that meet the needs of the demographic (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020).

Furthermore, the stress expressed by the participants extended the inequity factors (such as digital literacy, access to technology, and levels of proficiency), to include stressors relating to the changing roles and responsibilities of parents in a new country (Andrew et al., 2020; Dreeseni et al., 2020; Timmons et al., 2021). As the participants shared their burdens, it became

apparent that the virtual learning experience was harming their self-worth and confidence, and creating the potential for burnout. Current research highlights the mental health risks experienced by immigrant families when supporting their children with virtual schooling, while also noting the fear of stigma (Guruge et al., 2021; Pote et al., 2019). Providing access to support groups and communities (virtual and in person) that reflect the families culturally and linguistically, could help to establish critical strategies that support their mental health and wellbeing, and their goals as parents (Rojas et al., 2022). Extending such services cross-culturally could also facilitate connections, build community, and create additional support networks.

A critical component in relieving the stress of virtual learning was the support and assistance received by the translators. It was clear that the translators were perceived as more than just providing a service—they were trusted, respected, knowledgeable, and depended on in times of need or uncertainty. Settlement workers are integral members of the school community. Allen et al. (2021) define the dynamic role of SWIS workers as:

. . . cultural supporters, interpreters, translators, informal educators, English-language instructors, resource and community connectors and brokers, supportive counsellors, socio-cultural communicators, advocates and allies, community organizers, fundraisers, and more (p. 57).

Settlement Workers are essential members of school communities, but are stretched thin (Allen et al., 2021). Therefore, for school boards to continue to provide accessible and timely support and avoid settlement worker burnout, a balance of workers to families must be considered (Negi et al., 2019). Also, because the role of SWIS is often overlooked by staff, it is vital that boards and faculties of education educate current and future educators about the wealth of information and services available.

Personalised support was necessary not only for the parents of the multilingual children, but also for the children themselves. The parents in this study recognised the language benefits experienced by their children when they received small-group instruction. The parents' observations coincided with other findings, suggesting that breakout groups empower student learning and increase collaboration and English language acquisition (Chandler, 2016; Cheung, 2021). The lack of differentiation affects not only learning but also engagement among children (Timmons et al., 2021). To support children virtually, particularly when working with language learners, educators are encouraged to collaborate, share their experience, and use each other as resource providers. Additionally, because kindergarten teachers do not receive coaching support, school boards should consider investing in educator training so that teachers can meet the needs of young multilingual learners remotely and face to face.

The Kindergarten Program (2016) recognises families as valued partners in the child's learning journey. The participants in the study felt challenged, uncomfortable, and sad when communicating with their child's educator online. Families with limited proficiency, who once felt confident communicating with educators, now experienced anxiety and insecurity using virtual platforms (Chen, 2021). The effects of virtual learning coincide with longstanding barriers to teacher–parent communication, such as lack of translation services, impersonal forms of communication (email, messages), and limited cultural and personal trust and understanding among families (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). To help teachers increase their confidence when communicating with multilingual families, school boards and education faculty programmes should provide current and pre-service educators with culturally responsive training, resources, and strategies. Moreover, communication and partnerships can continue to grow when parents' voices are welcomed, validated, and reflected within the school, and are involved in necessary decision-making processes with official translation support (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2020).

Limitations

The purpose of this study was to explore parents' experience with supporting the English language development of their ELL child in an online (virtual) kindergarten programme. In conducting the research, the researchers experienced several limitations relating to recruitment and sample size. The school board's research ethics protocol limited the methods used to recruit participants. Because recruitment was virtual (by means of the school's online platform), the researchers could appeal only to families who visited the website. Therefore, the recruitment method limited the potential for families who did not access the site regularly, making it difficult to reach others who met the criteria and intention of the study.

Secondly, the researchers had a limited number of participants. Only two of the seven families who were interested in participating in the study met the research criteria. The recruitment process may have affected the participant sample size. The number of participants also affected the generalisability of the results. However, the case-study method emphasises building an understanding of the phenomenon explored using a single-to-small sample size (Stake, 1995).

Conclusion

The emergence of COVID-19 sparked the use of a new educational platform for learners and parents to navigate and adapt to. The transition to online learning has put parents of English language learners at the centre of their child's language journey. For the participants in the study, supporting the language development of their child created additional stressors caused by the differences in language between home and online instruction, taking on the role of translator and teacher, lack of familiarity with the online learning tools, and the constant need to support their child's focus during whole-group instruction. Moreover, the online learning environment removed the natural opportunities for parents and teachers to communicate, so parents who had emerging English language proficiency felt less comfortable reaching out.

Despite the challenges of supporting their children's language development, the parents continued to find success in the language opportunities provided by small-group instruction (breakout rooms) and continued to persevere beyond the language barriers by initiating support from translators (Allen et al., 2021).

Although the virtual school has become an option for most boards, it is critical that research surrounding online learning with multilingual families and learners continues. Based on the findings, it is recommended that schools emphasise providing multilingual learner parents and families with ongoing workshops on the current and relevant practices, platforms, resources, and expectations in the school, and technological support in their native language. Such workshops would provide families with the tools and confidence to continue to support their children in person and online. Consideration should also be given to families' mental health and wellbeing by providing information to support groups and community groups (virtual and online) that meet the cultural and language needs of families and encourage cross-cultural connections and networks. Additionally, the experience and opinions of multilingual parents should be welcomed, considered, and represented in large-scale decision-making.

To ensure clarity in communication, and responsive support between families and educators, greater investment in translation services for families is necessary, as well as extending educators' understanding of services. An investment in translation services will not only make support more accessible for multilingual families but will also help to avoid translator burnout (Allen et al., 2021).

Lastly, differentiated instruction is difficult to attain in the virtual school, especially in kindergarten, where teachers do not receive coaching support. Therefore, it is essential to invest

in educator training and resources, and to encourage educator collaboration so that the language and academic needs of multilingual learners are met virtually and face to face. To continue a proactive approach, pre-service teacher candidates would benefit from receiving training and resources on instructional approaches, and school and community support and services to better meet the needs of their future students.

As a result, developing a deeper understanding of the current structure of the virtual school as well as parent and guardian perspectives is necessary to support multilingual families and children so that young English language learners may continue to develop as competent and expressive twenty-first century learners.

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