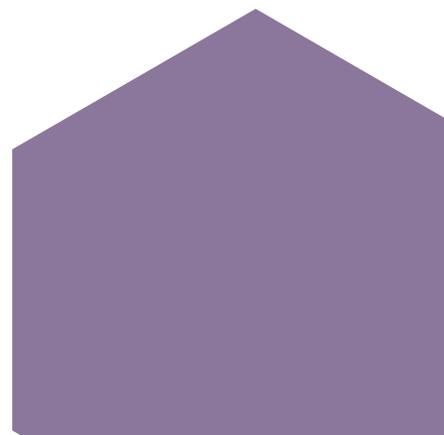
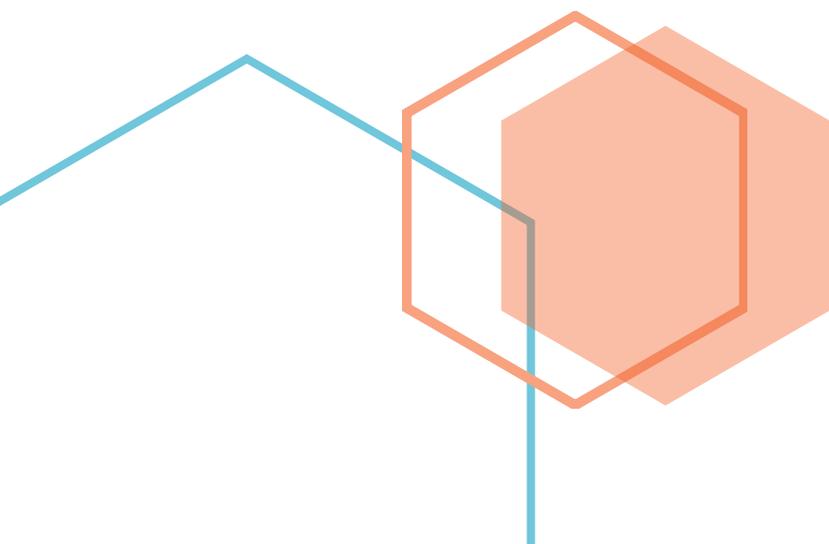


# It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent- Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?

Research Report on Parent-Teacher Relations during Covid-19  
and at-home learning in the Spring of 2020.

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## Table of Contents

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>PULSE POINTS</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>THE WRITING OF THIS REPORT</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH</b> .....	<b>9</b>
NAVIGATING IN VIRGIN SNOW .....	9
<b>RESEARCH PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>SENSITIZING CONCEPTS: AMBIGUOUS LOSS, BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY, AND BOUNDARY INTRUSION</b> .....	<b>12</b>
AMBIGUOUS LOSS .....	13
BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY .....	14
BOUNDARY INTRUSION.....	14
<b>METHODOLOGY AND METHODS</b> .....	<b>16</b>
WEB-BASED SURVEYS .....	16
<i>Sample Demographics of Web-Based Survey Respondents</i> .....	17
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS .....	20
LIMITATIONS.....	21
DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION .....	23
<b>THEMATIC INSIGHTS INTO PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONS DURING COVID-19:</b> .....	<b>24</b>
THE BLESSINGS AND BURDENS OF SCHOOL CLOSURES .....	26
<i>School Factors Influencing Pandemic Experiences and Parent-Teacher Relations</i> .....	28
<i>Home Conditions Influencing Pandemic Experiences and Parent-Teacher Relations</i> .....	33
<i>Policy Conditions Influencing Pandemic Experiences and Parent-Teacher Relations</i> .....	37
CHECKING IN AND CHECKING OUT.....	38
<i>Getting Together: Ambiguous Loss and Its Impact on Parent-Teacher Relations</i> .....	39
<i>Getting to Know Each Other: The Impact of Learning at Home on Parent-Child and Parent-Teacher Relations</i> .....	42
<i>Getting to Work: Boundary and Role Ambiguity and the Impact on Parent-Teacher Relations</i> .....	44
<i>Getting Grounded: Boundary Intrusion and the Impact on Parent-Teacher Relations</i> .....	48
<b>THE TENDER AND COMPLEX GEOGRAPHY OF PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONS</b> .....	<b>52</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>60</b>
APPENDIX A: PARENT SURVEY .....	60
APPENDIX B: TEACHER SURVEY .....	64
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL .....	67

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



## Foreword

As I read through Bonnie's *Summary of Highlights for Parents*, her *Pulse Points*, and her comprehensive report, mid-March 2020, when Alberta first felt the true 'shock wave' of the COVID-19 pandemic begin to disrupt what we had all taken for granted, seems so long ago. In truth it is, in some ways; 2021 is just around the corner, and I know I'm not alone in eagerly looking to bid 2020 a final farewell!

The topic of parent-teacher relations is one of the foundations on which Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA) was built. Utilizing the legislated body of school councils, connections between parents and teachers in pursuit of student success can be strengthened.

Bonnie's desire to learn how the abrupt pivot to online learning might impact parent-teacher perspectives and relations was much needed, and her request for support and assistance for this research project was exciting! ASCA is grateful to Alberta Education for agreeing, and allowing us to redirect a portion of our 2019-2020 conditional grant funding to support this important work.

Like many of you, I have young children in my life for whom this 'new way' of learning has become their daily reality. I think of where they may be in 25 years, looking back on having lived, learned, loved, and ideally, thrived through one of the world's most impactful global events ever to have occurred.

It is my most sincere hope that the researchers, and leaders, and teachers, and post-secondary education programmers, and decision makers of tomorrow – our children of today - have carefully considered the relevancy and importance of this interpretation of the human experience.

*Wendy Keiver, Executive Director, Alberta School Councils' Association*



## Acknowledgements

This research study began in the simplest of ways in the hardest of times.

The pivot to emergency remote teaching in March 2020 placed parents and teachers in uncharted territory. As someone who has dedicated an academic career to studying parents' experiences in schools, I wondered how this might shape the parent-teacher dynamic or highlight relational elements unnoticed in so-called 'normal' times. So, I picked up the phone with hopes of seizing an opportunity to explore this. I thank Wendy Keiver, Executive Director of the Alberta School Councils Association (ASCA), for being open to that phone conversation, and, along with ASCA President, Brandi Rai, for championing my research idea.

I thank Wendy and Brandi personally, as well as the ASCA collectively, for trusting my vision and research abilities, but also for providing the resources to ensure I could accomplish the research goal. The ASCA funding supported a graduate research assistant, Rita Lal.

An adage that is commonly cited when children's education is discussed, *it takes a village to raise a child*, was the seed from which this study grew. *It Takes a Virus* was an attempt to feel the pulse of Alberta parents and teachers who were catapulted into an arrangement neither could have predicted or asked for. I knew only two things at the start. To capture a provincial sentiment required a survey; to capture the immediacy, I knew I had to use social media to recruit. Neither survey nor social media are my methodological forté. I needed assistance.

On the cusp of doctoral research studies at the University of Alberta, Rita Lal was the ideal research assistant for this study. Rita earned a master's degree at the University of Lethbridge, where she completed a thesis, *The nature of parent participation at the high school level: An investigation.*" Rita helped with designing the survey instrument we used, but she deserves all the credit for creating and monitoring the Facebook page which housed the survey and served as our recruitment strategy. This launched the study. Additionally, she alone worked with Survey Monkey to explore cross-tabulations based on our demographic data. Rita assisted with initial coding of the survey data in the preliminary phase of analysis. I am in awe of her resourcefulness, work ethic, and enthusiasm. Perhaps most importantly, because she herself was in the thick of things as a mother and teacher, the discussions we had during initial coding made my thinking in later analyses and interpretation richer and deeper. For Rita, the ASCA funding afforded an important learning experience on her doctoral journey.

Without the parents and teachers who participated in this study, no data would exist, and there would be no story to tell. I thank the 1067 parents and 566 teachers who answered the survey, and the 10 parents and 10 teachers who accepted the invitation to participate in an individual virtual interview. In a moment when there likely were more pressing matters, they sacrificed their time. Ultimately, it is *their* footprints that are on the research landscape, not mine.

*Dr. Bonnie Stelmach, University of Alberta*



## Pulse Points

I am one among other scholars and educational organizations who rushed out to learn from parents, teachers, and students what was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Alberta Teachers' Association [ATA], 2020a, Brown et al., 2020; Bubb & Jones, 2020; Canadian Teachers' Federation [CTF], 2020; Garbe et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Putri et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020). These "rapid response" studies, or "glances" as Brown et al. and Schleicher called theirs, are intended to take the pulse of the educational community. It is challenging to be conclusive when COVID-19 has us re-evaluating on a daily basis.

COVID-19 is scientific fact, but it is also an epochal social phenomenon. There is an 8-inch pile of data resulting from this study that sits on the desk at which I write; in this avalanche of survey results and interviews heartbeats are buried. This report is intentionally prefaced with what I call *pulse points* to reflect the humanness of these parents' and teachers' experiences. The pulse points presented here reflect the heart of parents' and teachers' comments and bring these data alive to the complexity of this time.

### Pulse Point 1: Parent-teacher connections were enhanced for some; jeopardized for others.

In many reports communication between parents and teachers was described as not only more frequent, but more meaningful and personal because it was focused on specific aspects of children's learning, or allowed parents and teachers to get to know each other better. This enhanced parent-teacher relations. On the other hand, almost as many parents and teachers reported infrequent or complete lack of contact with each other. Parents reported they and their children felt disconnected; teachers reported an inability to reach some parents. This strained parent-teacher relations.

### Pulse Point 2: The pandemic afforded parents an opportunity to gain deeper understanding of their children as learners.

Many parent and teacher comments on the survey and during interviews made it clear that the experience of working closely with their children resulted in parents gaining insight into their children as learners. Learning styles, strengths, areas for improvement, as well as specific curriculum their children were learning about became more known for parents. For some parents, the experience clarified information that teachers had previously shared about their children's learning needs.

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



**Pulse Point 3: Parents' appreciation and respect for the role that teachers play in their children's learning was confirmed and/or increased. At the same time, some parents' faith in some teachers was shaken.**

There was a strong thread in parents' comments that they always appreciated how much teachers do for their children, but the pandemic made them more fully realize the teacher's academic and pedagogical expertise as well as the non-academic role they play in their children's lives. There were numerous notes of praise and gratitude toward teachers. Contrarily, there were a surprising number of comments indicating parents felt abandoned by their children's teachers, especially parents of children in language immersion programs or those with complex learning needs.

**Pulse Point 4: The pandemic afforded teachers new insights into their students.**

Because teachers were invited into family's personal spaces through virtual platforms, and were in more frequent contact, teachers obtained information that helped them understand their students and families in a new light.

**Pulse Point 5: Parents played a central role in overseeing their children's learning, including managing technology, especially for younger children.**

Parents reported spending a lot of time helping their children with work the teachers assigned. This included clarifying expectations, teaching concepts, setting up for virtual meetings, submitting assignments, and checking progress. This burdened parents of younger children in particular because their children did not know how to use or felt uncomfortable with technology, such as Google Meet.

**Pulse Point 6: A distinction between the natural authority of parents and teachers' positional authority was highlighted.**

There was a notable theme pointing to the role that teachers play in keeping students focused, engaged, and motivated to learn. The level of oversight parents took on during emergency remote teaching created conflict and disrupted the family dynamic; parents felt their children performed for and learned better from teachers. Some parents reported de-emphasizing schooling for the sake of preserving family relationships.

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



### Pulse Point 7: The lack of standardized approaches to facilitation of learning and technology were a source of frustration for parents.

Many examples were found in survey comments and interviews that parents had to contend with different platforms (e.g. Google Suite, Microsoft Team), a range of approaches and expectations (e.g. regular virtual meetings versus no virtual meetings), and disruptive shifts. Parents who had more than one child, and/or children in different schools or districts faced particular challenges in learning different technology, and keeping track of assignments and virtual meeting schedules for all their children as there was little or no perceived consistency among teachers, even within the same school. Many parents expressed the desire for technology tutorials. Teachers spent considerable time helping parents understand how to use the technology.

### Pulse Point 8: “Presence” is a key marker of how parents and teachers view each other’s commitment to children’s schooling.

Scholars of parent involvement have emphasized that a misleading binary of involved versus uninvolved parents emerges when parent involvement is defined in terms of volunteering at the school, attending school-sponsored meetings and functions, or responding to teacher requests for help (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Despite that, the pandemic emphasized that not only do teachers continue to gauge parents’ involvement by their presence, but learning at home gave an occasion for parents to also judge teachers’ involvement through their online presence. Presence is a narrow, but central marker of parent-teacher relations, resulting in parents and teachers sometimes making negative and perhaps distorted appraisals of each other.

### Pulse Point 9: The erosion of physical boundaries between school and home had an indirect, but clearly felt, impact on parent-teacher relations.

Unequivocally, many parents took over roles that would have been teachers’ or schools’ in pre-pandemic times. Parents established learning schedules, helped their children with material and submitting assignments, searched for learning resources, and created activities to keep their children engaged and occupied. Many parents found this overwhelming. It led some to realize teachers’ unique skill set; it led others to feel encroached upon. Teachers, too, found it helpful to see students in their homes but some also felt teaching from home intrusive, and wondered how virtual meetings make families and teachers vulnerable to judgment. Boundaries are often perceived to be barriers, but these data invite reconsideration of this assumption.

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



**Pulse Point 10: A non-traditional approach to schooling benefitted some child(ren).**

The non-traditional approach to schooling gave rise to what Kim and Asbury (2020) called “surprise stars” (p. 14)—those students who had a chance to excel at school because they were learning from home. Similarly, parents in this study reported their children were happier and enjoyed learning from home better. Learning at home was reported to be preferable for children who experienced bullying, craved a quieter work space, and benefited from one-on-one attention from the teacher.

**Pulse Point 11: There was confusion and/or disagreement over Ministry directives, and how they were interpreted by schools.**

It was evident that the parameters established by the Ministry of Education around learning foci and amount of work to be assigned was interpreted differently, and in some cases misunderstood. This led to tensions between parents and teachers, and instances of teacher blame. Some parents wanted more work for their children; other parents were concerned that too much work was assigned. The expectation that students would progress to the next grade was reported by both parents and teachers as demotivating, especially for students in higher grades. Consequently, parents and teachers worried that students were ill-prepared to advance.

**Pulse Point 12: The continuation of supports and provision of resources was a support for parents.**

The laying off of Educational Assistants (EAs), which occurred as a result of funding decisions, impacted both parents and teachers. It seemed that most contexts could not maintain EAs and other specialized supports (e.g. speech pathologist) at pre-pandemic levels for financial or structural reasons, but it was noted that for those families and teachers that continued to have access to these resources, it helped.



## The Writing of This Report

As society evolves, so, too, does our language. In the spirit of inclusion and bias-free communication, the singular “they” is used in the writing of this report to avoid gender assumptions regarding survey and interview participants. Gender specific terms such as “he” and “she” were maintained in verbatim citations to ensure the authenticity of participant voice.

The report begins with a context-setting section, followed by a description of the research purpose, questions, and design, an explanation of sensitizing concepts that guided the analysis and interpretation, limitations, and thematic insights.

I devoted space to explicating terms such as emergency remote teaching and online education for the sake of conceptual clarity. Beyond that section, however, I employ the term *learning at home* in keeping with Minister LaGrange's use of the term to be in line with the Alberta context.

Because there was considerable overlap in the nature of the comments on the open-ended survey questions, the data were analyzed holistically to capture key learning, rather than individually by research or survey question. This aligns with the overarching aim to report convergence around the topic of parent-teacher relations, and to honor divergent perspectives.



## Beware the Ides of March

I take some obvious liberties in titling this section with Shakespeare's line from his play, *Julius Caesar*, but the middle of March 2020 marked a turning point in Alberta schooling. While COVID-19 had taken a place in our lives by that point, March 15<sup>th</sup> would be the last day that students, parents, and teachers would know schooling as it was. On that day, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, reported 17 new COVID cases—a number that pales in comparison to the over 15,000 active cases (Government of Alberta, n.d.) that have been confirmed at the time of this writing. On the heels of Dr. Hinshaw's update Premier Jason Kenney cancelled K-12 classes indefinitely. Education Minister Adriana LaGrange cancelled Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) and assured grade 12 students they would graduate (Johnson, 2020). March 15, 2020 will be indelible in the history of Alberta's schools.

A few days later, on March 20<sup>th</sup> Minister LaGrange wrote a letter to Alberta parents emphasizing student safety as the priority, thus justifying school closures. But she also wrote, "student learning will continue" (Government of Alberta, 2020b, para. 3). In that letter, she described the expectations for teachers and students. Students in Division I (K-3) would focus on numeracy and literacy, and would be assigned an average of 5 hours each week. Division II (4-6) would have the same numeracy and literacy foci, but would receive some instruction in social studies and science, with the same number of hours assigned. Grade 7-9 students would focus on all four core subjects as well, receiving double the assigned hours of school work per week (10 hours). Finally, students in grades 10-12 would focus on subjects required for graduation—math, English, social studies and the three sciences (biology, chemistry, physics). Students in high school would have three hours of work per subject. Like PATs, general diploma exams were cancelled. There was assurance that students who were on track of progressing to the next grade or moving on to graduation, would be doing so. This might have settled some anxieties, but the pandemic destabilized life for Alberta families in such a widespread and interconnected manner that the closing of schools was just one among many ways that parents, educators, and students had to reimagine their day-to-day lives.

### **Navigating in Virgin Snow**

In an interview with Tom Power (2016—present), CBC radio host of *q*, the Canadian singer-songwriter, Alanis Morissette, said about this pandemic, "we're all navigating in virgin snow." This description is apt for what was occurring in schools in Alberta as well.

At the zenith of school closures in Spring 2020, UNESCO's time evolution map indicated 84.5% of the world's enrolled learners—close to 1.5 billion—were impacted by school closures (UNESCO, 2020). Thus, while Alberta was not alone, all school authorities in the province had the autonomy to set up the delivery of education to meet their communities' needs with only the basic parameters as outlined by Minister LaGrange as their guide. While Alberta is internationally reputed for its innovation and excellence in education, the COVID-19 pandemic dislodged fundamental assumptions that have been the bedrock of our educational practices, programs, and policies. With Minister LaGrange's promise that students would continue learning, all school authorities were pressed to answer the question *how?*

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



In a helpful online column, Hodges et al. (2020) coined *emergency remote teaching* to describe the pivot to online instruction. They were writing about the post-secondary education context, nonetheless their explanation of terminology is useful and aligns with what occurred in the K-12 sector in Alberta. What happened between March and June 2020 in Alberta schools was not ideal, nor was it meant to be. Emergency remote teaching required hasty improvisation which is a far cry from what is formally known in the literature as *online education*. Hodges et al. defined online education as involving “careful instructional design and planning, using a systematic model for design and developments” (p. 4). They pointed out that an effective online learning experience involves various forms of interaction between student and content, student and instructor, and student and other students. A robust online course takes months to develop, requires multimedia training and a cadre of support by technology experts and instructional designers, and will only get to a level of ‘perfection’ after being taught about three times. At best, most school authorities in Alberta had time over spring break to prepare, and without training and the system of supports required. Parents were equally thrown into a situation with which they may not have had any experience.

The closing of schools and the move to emergency remote teaching added to parents’ responsibilities. While many parents may have been supporting their children by monitoring or helping with homework in pre-pandemic times, emergency remote teaching meant the most basic elements of learning, such as the classroom, were stripped away, leaving parents in a relative void and tasked with structuring a learning environment, troubleshooting with technology, overseeing completion of daily tasks, and following teachers’ plans. Sahlberg (2020) has boldly argued that the pandemic highlights that school systems have been operating on a “logic of consumption” (p. 6) which assumes knowledge is to be delivered by teachers and received by students, instead of students being self-directed, creative, and actively engaged in designing their learning. Considering his conceptualization, it makes sense that some parents in this study felt overwhelmed or imposed upon taking on roles that were teacher-like. To be clear, the intention was not home education, which Alberta Education defines as “a parent-directed approach to educating a student...at home or elsewhere in which [parents] are responsible for making all decisions” (Government of Alberta, 2020a, para. 1). Anecdotally and through media, however, it became clear that some parents perceived their role as supporting teachers, while others felt they were supplanting teachers.

As trying as the COVID-19 pandemic has been and continues to be for families and educators, it is an occasion to learn. While there is an increasing amount of scholarly and professional research published on the impact of COVID-19 on students and educators (e.g. Alberta Teachers’ Association [ATA], 2020a; Canadian Teachers’ Federation [CTF], 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Wyse et al. 2020), my review of research turned up only two empirical studies that included parents. Of those two, only one specifically examined parents’ experiences (e.g. Garbe et al. 2020). This current study, then, punches a path in this winterland we find ourselves.



## Research Purpose and Questions

The adage *it takes a village to raise a child* is often invoked in professional and scholarly writing, as well as policy targeting parents' roles in their children's schooling. Decades of scholarship exist to demonstrate the value of positive parent-teacher relations for students. School closures at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Alberta had an immediate impact on the parent-teacher relationship. Given how the pandemic has caused us to rethink and question almost everything in our social and economic world, I assumed the new arrangement through learning at home would have an impact on parent-teacher relations. Has the pandemic changed teachers' understanding of and compassion for families? Has it affected how parents' view teachers' work? To what extent has the pandemic shaped the partnership that is at the center of the discourse on parent-teacher relations? Are there aspects of the parent-teacher dynamic to which we were previously blind to, or that were hidden by traditional assumptions and expectations guiding this relational work?

This study aimed to gain insight into how parents experienced their children's schooling in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, I sought understanding of how the pandemic shaped parent-teacher relations. These questions guided the inquiry:

1. How did parents and teachers experience their newly defined roles in emergency remote teaching?
2. What does the COVID-19 pandemic reveal about what is working and what is not working in the school-home dynamic?
3. To what extent have positive outcomes emerged in parent-teacher relations, connections, and communications as a result of COVID-19?
4. To what extent have parent-teacher relations, connections, and communications been impeded as a result of COVID-19?



## Sensitizing Concepts: Ambiguous Loss, Boundary Ambiguity, and Boundary Intrusion

*"It was a tap that just got turned off. There was no trickle, no good-byes...You were in school on Friday, and then you're done. You didn't say good-bye."*

The above statement was made by a parent during an individual interview when recalling the mandate for schools to shut down. For this parent, the experience highlighted that school is "not purely an academic thing." On the survey another parent noted "how much some teachers really miss being with the kids." In fact, there were many comments that suggested a key challenge was the loss of daily connection and structure that teachers and schools provided for students and parents:

*Young students revere their teachers. [My child] misses her teachers desperately. (Parent Survey)*

*I have never felt the need for structure of going to school as much as [during] this experience...we have been continually learning how to navigate. (Parent Survey)*

*Our grade 3 child has himself expressed how lost he has been and how hard learning is...he desperately has missed his teachers' direction, guidance... (Parent Survey)*

*I am NOT a teacher.... It was frustrating to be expected to take on that role on top of dealing with work and family responsibilities. (Parent Survey)*

*My child in particular needs to go back [to school] for that social piece. (Parent Interview)*

Teachers, too, talked and wrote about the separation from school as a hardship. In an interview, one teacher said, "it was hard to get out of bed some days because what's the point? I don't get to see my kids...laugh with them, teach them, see their ah-ha moments." A teacher wrote on the survey that "it was tough having that social interaction with students and colleagues suddenly taken away." Drawing on Lortie's (1975) notion of psychic rewards, Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) argue that the pandemic has dulled the emotional satisfaction of teaching that comes about through interaction with and responses from students.

The title of Kim and Asbury's (2020) study of 24 teachers' initial experiences with school closures in England echoes the Alberta experience; the first part of their title, *Like a Rug Had Been Pulled From Under You* (p. 1), speaks to a common experience of rupture and displacement. One teacher in that study implied their identity was in question because of it: "it just felt like I'd been ripped apart from my career almost because I couldn't see the kids. I couldn't say goodbye to them" (p. 13). Loss, uncertainty, and grief, countered by resilience, have been universal markers of this pandemic (Rettie & Daniels, 2020; Walsh, 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020). That



there could neither be any warning before school closures nor definitive forecasting of a return afterward heightened the impact.

I used what Bowen (2006) calls *sensitizing concepts* to provide analytic direction for making interpretations of this set of data. Knowing a researcher can never account for all the data (Thorne, 2016), sensitizing concepts can help the researcher to create coherent insights that might be relevant to those in need of knowledge. Importantly, sensitizing concepts enable the researcher to organize the data into conceptual categories. The above quotes point to narratives of ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity. Related concepts of boundary and role ambiguity, and boundary intrusion are also explicated here.

## **Ambiguous Loss**

Boss (1999) is credited for ambiguous loss theory. A scholar of family processes and a family therapist, Boss developed the theory to explain the experience of families who face unresolvable loss. Her foundational study in the 1970s focused on wives of pilots declared missing in action during the Vietnam War, but her later work focused on families' experiences with a loved one with Alzheimer's disease.

By definition, ambiguous loss is "a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution" (Boss, 2016, p. 270). There are two kinds: "physical absence with psychological presence" and "psychological absence with physical presence" (Boss, 2007, p. 105). Simply put, the first kind is "leaving without good-bye", which is how the parent quoted at the beginning of this section described school closure. The second type is "good-bye without leaving" (p. 105). From a family therapy point of view, the second type—psychological loss—could occur if a partner were preoccupied with work and remained emotionally unavailable to the relationship. The return to school in September 2020 without the freedom to interact with others as before may contribute to ambiguous loss of the second type, as students, teachers, and parents have said good-bye to old ways of being together (e.g. no interacting outside of cohorts) even though they are physically in the same space.

The grief that results from ambiguous loss, Boss (1999) asserts, is frozen; "the outside force that freezes the grief is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the loss" (p. 10). From a therapeutic point of view, Boss (2016) has noted "ambiguous loss is the most stressful type of loss because it defies resolution" (p. 270). Although this study did not have as its aim to undertake an investigation of grief, the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the loss of the ability to learn at school are akin to situations of ambiguous loss. A key assumption of ambiguous loss theory is that it is a relational phenomenon. Though typically applied in the study of couples and families, it is an appropriate lens through which to examine relationships of all types.



## Boundary Ambiguity

Boss (1993/2007) also developed the concept of boundary ambiguity. In family relations, ambiguous loss explains why a family may struggle when there is a loss without closure (e.g. missing person), but boundary ambiguity explains why a unit, such as a family, has uncertainty about who is part of the group or who is performing the expected roles.

A thread that holds the corpus of scholarship on parent involvement together is that it should be a relational, rather than transactional, dynamic forged by trusting relationships. In Alberta, this is entrenched in the Professional Practice Standards (Government of Alberta, n.d.). Fostering effective relationships is the first competency in the *Teaching Quality Standard*, *Leadership Quality Standard*, and *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard*, which were mandated by Ministerial Order, and came into effect in September 2019. In my research on Alberta parents' sense of belong in schools (Stelmach, 2020), I found that in contexts where parent-teacher relations are strong, parents feel like the school is a family. Given this, boundary ambiguity may be helpful for interpreting shifts and tensions in parent-teacher relations during the early days of COVID-19.

Boundary ambiguity is related to ambiguous loss, but is conceptually distinct. While ambiguous loss is the *situation* of loss without closure, boundary ambiguity affects the *perception* of the group in the context of that loss. It is a useful concept for this study because through the use of technology during learning at home—whether it was used extensively or not—teachers and parents entered into each other's private worlds in unprecedented ways. Furthermore, in some cases teachers travelled to students' homes to deliver learning materials or to have socially distanced visits. Parents had to figure out how to maintain domestic coherence within the context of multiple disruptions created by COVID-19.

Role ambiguity is a type of boundary ambiguity. Role ambiguity occurs when there is uncertainty about responsibilities because of a change in conditions (Berge and Holm, 2007). With learning taking place at home, there was a natural elevation of parents' roles in their children's learning, potentially creating ambiguity regarding their and teachers' roles.

## Boundary Intrusion

Boundary intrusion is a conceptual derivative of boundary ambiguity. Lee's (1995) study of clergy families is most cited with respect to boundary intrusion. In his study, he argued that intrusiveness is a variable of boundary ambiguity, and an experience of clergy who customarily must tend to demands from community. Clergy families are inevitably thrown into a life where a family member is in constant service to others, and are therefore pressed to establish ways to deal with the intrusions and keep their family life intact. School principals, especially those in rural contexts, experience boundary intrusion due to community expectations for principals to be active in the town (Preston et al., 2013). Boundary intrusion is a helpful concept for making sense of how parents and teachers navigated each other's worlds, since the boundaries between home and school became amorphous with emergency remote teaching.

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Ambiguous loss, boundary ambiguity, and boundary intrusion have had most impact on education through studies in the counselling of children, particularly those living with trauma or post-traumatic stress (Bocknek et al., 2009), families with transgender children (Catalpa & McGuire, 2018) or children living with autism (O'Brien, 2007) and other complexities (Scorgie, 2015). In a now-dated study, Leavitt (1995) used boundary ambiguity to articulate findings in a study about the communication habits between licensed home child care providers and parents. Thus, the current study answers a call to expand the concepts into other domains (Boss, 2007; Carroll, et al., 2007).



## Methodology and Methods

This qualitative study aimed to describe a phenomenon that has not been experienced by this generation of families and teachers. There was no intention to arrive at a definitive answer or theory, but rather, to humanize the experience of parents vis-à-vis teachers during learning at home, and ultimately, to create knowledge that could be applied to enhancing parent-teacher relations. As such, the research design can best be described as interpretive description (Thorne, 2016). Interpretive description has as its premise that new knowledge should “facilitate better application” (p. 27), and allows the reader to consider how the information could make a difference when applied to the context at hand. The approach was designed by a nursing scholar to address clinical problems. Like nursing, education is a professional discipline where theory is used to define problems and enrich understanding so that practical problems can be addressed. Given this kinship, interpretive description was an appropriate design.

Data were collected using two web-based surveys—one for parents and one for teachers—and individual interviews with volunteer parents and teachers (see Appendices A, B, and C).

### Web-Based Surveys

Given the desire to capture parent and teacher perspectives when they were closest to the experience, the time frame dictated that an adapted simple descriptive approach (Mertens, 2015) be used. A sampling frame was not created because we wanted to achieve maximum variation in participation from across the province, and gaining access to a list of Alberta parents would likely have been impossible because of privacy conditions. Instead, Rita created a Facebook page which explained the purpose of the study and housed a link to the survey. The link was shared in ASCA's June online newsletter. Parents and teachers were asked to consent to being a parent or teacher in the province of Alberta, and the data indicate that 2% ( $n = 23$ ) of parents and 9% ( $n = 53$ ) of teachers were not. We were unable to determine whether changes to participants' circumstances might have resulted in them relocating outside of Alberta, causing them to respond as non-Albertans. Respondents were allowed to proceed in the survey regardless of response. Nevertheless, we accepted this level of potential data pollution as an acceptable limitation.

The surveys were open between June 4 and July 11, 2020. Both included four- and five-point Likert-type scales (e.g. significantly declined, somewhat declined, remained the same, somewhat improved, significantly improved) and open-ended verbal responses. One thousand sixty-seven parents responded, and 566 teachers responded. At this time, number of parents of school-age children in Alberta is not documented, making a calculation of response rate a guess.



### Sample Demographics of Web-Based Survey Respondents

This section summarizes who among parents and teachers completed the web-based surveys.

**Parent Survey Respondents.** In general, more parents with elementary school-aged children responded to the survey than those with children in junior or senior high. The lowest number of responses was among parents with children in Grade 10-12, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Parent Participant Frequency Distributed by Grade of Children*

Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Kindergarten – Grade 3</b>	53%
<b>Grade 4-6</b>	46%
<b>Grade 7-9</b>	38%
<b>Grade 10-12</b>	23%

Almost half (49%) of parent respondents had two children in their family. The next most popular response was three children, which described 21% of parents. And 19% of parent respondents had one child (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Parent Participation Frequency Distributed by Number of Children in Family*

Answer Choices	Responses
<b>1</b>	19%
<b>2</b>	49%
<b>3</b>	21%
<b>4</b>	9%
<b>5</b>	2%
<b>6</b>	.6%
<b>More than 6</b>	.4%

The majority of parents (88%) described their family composition as a two parent household. Lone parent households represented 7% of respondents, and extended families represented 4%. Respondents were invited to describe their family composition in the category of “other.” Among the family compositions described were situational lone parent families where one

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



spouse works away from home for an extended period of time; foster families; separated; divorced; divorced with shared custody; blended; and cohabiting with a spouse's parents.

The majority (91%) of parents identified as female, which was a total of 927 respondents. Seven per cent of parents identified as male, which was a total of 75 respondents. Two parents identified as transgender. Sixteen parents chose not to identify. Among those who identified as female, 88% were from two-parent households. Among those who identified as male, 93% were from two-parent households (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*Parent Participation Frequency Distributed by Female/Male and Family Composition*

	Responses	Two parent household
<b>Female</b>	91%	88%
<b>Male</b>	7%	93%
<b>Transgender</b>	.2%	n/a

Most respondents had completed formal education beyond high school, with the majority having earned a post-secondary certificate or diploma (38%), or a bachelor degree (38%), as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Parent Participation Frequency Distributed Level of Education*

Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Did not complete high school</b>	2%
<b>Completed high school</b>	11%
<b>Post-secondary training (e.g. diploma or certificate program)</b>	38%
<b>Bachelor degree</b>	38%
<b>Master's degree</b>	10%
<b>Doctoral degree</b>	2%

Among parents who identified as female, 87% had a post-secondary diploma or certificate, 37% had a bachelor degree, 10% had a master's degree, and 2% had a doctorate. Among parents who identified as male, 93% had a post-secondary diploma or certificate, 51% had a bachelor degree, 12% had a master's degree and 4% had a doctorate (see Table 5).

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Table 5  
*Parent Participation Frequency Distributed by Female/Male and Level of Education*

Answer Choices	Responses by Female/Male	
	Female	Male
<b>Post-secondary training (e.g. diploma or certificate program)</b>	87%	93%
<b>Bachelor degree</b>	37%	51%
<b>Master's degree</b>	10%	12%
<b>Doctoral degree</b>	4%	2%

The characteristics of parent respondents aligns with trends in survey response behavior. In his review of research on survey response rates, Smith (2008) indicated that women, younger people, more affluent people, and those with more education are more likely to participate in surveys compared to men, older people, less affluent people, and those with less education. Although no information about household earnings was collected on this survey, level of education tends to be associated with higher income levels.

**Teacher Survey Respondents.** There was a fairly even distribution of responses from teachers in each of the grade divisions, but overall, more teachers who taught Kindergarten to Grade 6 responded than those who reported teaching in Grades 7 to 12 (see Table 6). This is a cautious generalization as teachers were invited to check more than one answer choice, and there is thus no clear indication of an over-representation by division.

Table 6  
*Teacher Participant Frequency Distributed by Grades Taught*

Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Kindergarten – Grade 3</b>	38%
<b>Grade 4-6</b>	29%
<b>Grade 7-9</b>	34%
<b>Grade 10-12</b>	26%

Almost double the number of teachers taught in an urban school (68%) compared to a rural school (32%). Less than 1% taught in a virtual context, which amounted to 4 teachers as indicated in Table 7.

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Table 7  
*Teacher Participant Frequency Distributed by Urban and Rural Schools*

Answer Choices	Responses
<b>Urban</b>	68%
<b>Rural</b>	32%
<b>Virtual (Cyber School)</b>	.8%

Most teacher respondents had one to five years of teaching experience. Number of respondents declined as years of teaching experience increased (see Table 8).

Table 8  
*Teacher Participant Frequency Distributed by Teaching Experience*

Answer Choices	Responses
<b>1-5 years</b>	25%
<b>6-10 years</b>	20%
<b>11-15 years</b>	19%
<b>16-20 years</b>	16%
<b>21-25 years</b>	9%
<b>26-30 years</b>	5%
<b>30+ years</b>	6%

## Individual Interviews

At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to volunteer for an individual virtual interview. They did so by registering their email. Based on this, a list separate from the survey was generated, ensuring participants could not be traced back to their survey responses. Rita selected every tenth parent and teacher from the lists, and moved to the next volunteer if anyone declined. Rita and I interviewed 10 parents (including one married couple) and 10 teachers.

The number of children in these parents' families ranged from one to five. Their children represented a range of grades from Kindergarten to just having completed high school. Three parents lived in rural Alberta, although one indicated their children attended an urban school. Seven parents indicated their children attended urban schools. Four fathers and six mothers

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



were interviewed. Only one was a full-time at-home parent. Some parents worked from home, while others were forced to work from home for a while after the pandemic struck, but were able to return to the workplace.

Among the ten teachers, four taught in rural schools, five taught in urban schools, and one described their school as being located in a “rurban” context. In their teaching assignments they represented Kindergarten through to high school. Some taught core subjects, while others were music or second language specialists, and teachers in Career and Technology Studies. One specialist teacher was reassigned after school closures as teacher support for students with exceptional learning needs. Some teachers also had school-aged children.

We interviewed participants using Google Meet between July 23 and August 5, 2020. Rita and I interviewed one teacher and one parent at the start of the interviewing phase so that we could discuss the protocol and revise questions if necessary. After that, Rita and I conducted interviews on our own. Most interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes long. Because of connectivity issues, I conducted one interview by telephone.

We received permission to record the interviews so that we could transcribe them. All participants agreed to this. Rita and I transcribed the interviews that we each conducted. In my experience, valuable analysis begins with transcription, and so it is not my practice to outsource this part of the research process. Further, for a novice researcher, transcribing one's own interviews can be instructive for improving one's interview skills. Rita and I wrote a brief summary of key ideas at the end of the transcripts. This enhanced member check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) because it gave participants an opportunity to confirm or disconfirm our preliminary interpretations. Transcripts were returned to participants via email usually within a week of the interviews, giving them an opportunity to add, change, or delete any of the information they provided. No substantial revisions to any transcripts were made.

### **Limitations**

Because the aim of this study was to get a provincial perspective regarding parent-teacher relations during the early stages of the pandemic, web-based surveys were an appropriate method. Web-based surveys are cost effective and quick when one wants to gather a large number of responses (Mertens, 2015). They are not without their limitations, however. Survey fatigue can prohibit potential respondents from participating because they are simply tired of being asked to give their opinion. At the time of data collection, I am aware that school authorities as well as other educational stakeholders were using surveys to consult with their teachers and families (e.g. ATA, 2020a). Nonetheless, we were satisfied that we had sufficient response.

Rita and I both completed the surveys to ensure they did not take longer than ten minutes, in keeping with Van Susteren's (2020) advice. Since the surveys were in English only, voices of those for whom English is a second language were likely not captured. Indeed, one parent wrote on the survey:

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



*As a side note, if future surveys were available in French also, it would be very beneficial to have...the Francophone perspective...The French speaking population in Alberta is increasing drastically and so many French people don't feel confident or comfortable completing a survey in English so they don't let their voices be heard. (Parent Survey)*

Facebook was selected as the medium for advertising the study and recruiting participants because it is the top ranked social media platform used among Canadian adults (Clement, 2020). According to Clement, 64% of the population in Canada uses Facebook; the highest usage is concentrated around those 25 years and older, which was the age group of our interest. This approach was effective for getting the word out quickly, but those without access to technology or those who do not engage with social media would not have had equal opportunity to participate.

In designing the survey, the fact that respondents could be both teachers and parents was not considered. In hindsight, a third survey could have been created to compensate for those with dual roles so that a comparison could have been made. It is clear that some teachers chose to complete the parent survey, as noted in comments such as, "I am also a teacher." Having no intention to generalize, however, this limitation did not preclude thematic analysis.

How respondents interpret survey items cannot be known, and this creates a limitation to the findings even though care was taken to communicate clearly. In reviewing the comments on the open-ended questions, it was noted that some questions were interpreted similarly; responses such as "see above" suggested an overlap. This was addressed by taking an aggregated approach through thematic analysis.

Individual interviews were conducted shortly after the survey closed; therefore, it provided an opportunity to drill down into some of the survey findings and invite participants' interpretations of the responses. Using two data collection methods and two data sources (parents and teachers) meant a more contextualized understanding could be achieved. Ultimately, however, all data are filtered through the researcher; as open to the data as one tries to be, researchers have blind and blank spots. Consequently, what appears on the following pages will be in harmony with some readers' experiences and perspectives, while some others will not find resonance. There was no expectation that this study would be representative of all parents and teachers in this province.

Finally, an overrepresentation of respondents who identified as female, parents from two-parent households, and parents with elementary school-aged children skewed the sample. Further, rural and urban residence of parent respondents was not recorded because of an unintended omission in the demographic section of the survey. Any attempt to identify relationships among demographic data were therefore fruitless. All studies, however, are methodological lessons for researchers. A more extensive pilot of the survey would have exposed the limitations disclosed here. In Donoghue's (2020) novel, *The Pull of the Stars*, historically set during a pandemic, a character said "let's not waste time on ruminations and regrets in the middle of a pandemic" (p. 206). In the spirit of interpretive description (Thorne, 2016), this study assumes it is a beginning, rather than an end point, and is oriented toward providing relevant and usable knowledge of a human experience.



## Data Analysis and Interpretation

The intrigue of qualitative data collection, Ellingson (2011) argues, usually ends with a perennial question: “What do I do with all this *stuff*?” (p. 601). The surveys yielded over 5600 written responses to the open-ended questions in addition to 13 closed ended questions, and there were 180 pages of transcripts from interviews with parents and teachers. There was a lot of stuff.

Rita and I first worked together on the parent survey using a process of open coding (Saldaña, 2013) of the written responses to the open-ended questions. In keeping with qualitative approaches, open coding allowed us to embrace the “contradictions, inconsistencies [and] exceptions” (Ellingson, 2011, p. 601) along with the convergent ideas. Rita completed open coding with the remainder of the written responses on the parent survey, and I completed open coding on the teacher survey. A focus on words or phrases that spoke to the overall research purpose was held throughout this stage. Qualitative researchers are not typically interested in counting things, but we decided to keep a rough tally so that we could understand the magnitude of experiences. This supported the creation of themes. With such a large qualitative data set, it takes considerable time to become acquainted with it; therefore, I repeated the open coding process with the written responses on the parent survey to reach conceptual conclusions about the data. Rita and I individually wrote memos to begin to make sense of the data, and our discussions refined our process and thinking.

My interest was in “storying” the data, rather than treating it atomistically because initial coding revealed perspectives that were both galvanizing and polarizing. I was motivated by Freeman's (2017) conceptualization of categorical thinking, which aims “to determine what something is in relation to the conceptual scheme that gives it meaning” (p. 10). Categorical thinking aligns with interpretive description (Thorne, 2016), as the work of data analysis in interpretive description is to progress from pieces to patterns, and ultimately, relationships to a coherent narrative. Thus, a second approach to analysis was followed once the data were coded. A process created by Maietta (2006) called sort, sift, think and shift was used. In this approach, the researcher “dives into” and “steps back” from the data. Diving in involved multiple readings of the data sources – surveys and transcripts—followed by memoing one's sense of the whole. In the diving in process, “pulse quotes” from the written survey responses and interview transcripts were highlighted and documented. For example, in response to the question “How have parent-teacher relationships been shaped by the new teaching and learning realities of the COVID-19 pandemic?” a teacher wrote, “Continue to have misgivings about our roles, what is in and out of scope, and level of control...” Conceptually, this reflected role ambiguity.

This latter method of examining the data was both scientific and artful, as it tethered the data pieces (e.g. codes and categories) to their experiential source (the participants), and at the same time, allowed for dis/assembling the pieces in ways that allowed for the certainties, uncertainties, coherence and tension that has marked this pandemic experience.



## Thematic Insights into Parent-Teacher Relations During COVID-19:

Despite a long history of valuing Alberta parents in schooling through their legislated role in advising principals and teachers on educational matters through school councils, and the advocacy of the Alberta School Councils' Association (ASCA), a study conducted by the Alberta Teachers' Association (2019) about moral distress among almost 1000 Alberta school leaders drew a surprising conclusion. Based on a survey question, "*What constraints do you experience as a school leader, if any, that make you unable to take appropriate action or do what you know to be right?*" (p. 13) school leaders reported parents to be nearly as constraining as the complex nature of classrooms. A survey respondent wrote, "Parental expectations and demands are overwhelming, and they too often are narrowly focused...they do not understand or sometimes even care about the impact on the school community as a whole—only focused on their child" (p. 41). While one expects parents to have particularistic interests towards their children, scholars have argued that parents are approaching their role with increased intensity when it comes to shaping positive experiences and future opportunities for their children (Crozier, 2019; Doepke & Ziliboti, 2019). Arguably, it is a positive trend to have parents keenly interested in their children's well-being, but taxonomies of monikers like "tiger parent", "helicopter parent" or "puddle parent" tend to have negative connotations, allowing educators to weaponize these terms.

A more recent concern has been raised by the results of a study on aggression in Alberta school communities (ATA, 2020b). Among 561 teachers, 15% reported parents to be perpetrators of bullying. Bullying primarily occurred during parent-teacher interviews, a primary venue where parents and teachers are presumably working together for the benefit of the child. Only 24% of school leaders in that study reported improvements in working relations with parents. This contrasts with the ATA's (2020b) more recent survey of teachers regarding the impact of COVID-19 in which 91% reported a positive working relationship with parents. There is also research that suggests teachers perceive parent involvement as a threat to their professionalism and status (De Carvalho, 2001; Sanders & Epstein, 2005), and that all too frequently parents' participation in educational matters is not much beyond tokenism (Stelmach, 2016). Thus, parent-teacher harmony has been an enduring question in this field (Nir & Ben-Ami, 2005; Pomerantz et al., 2007).

The above findings prompted the inclusion of questions to discern whether the pandemic has enhanced parent-teacher relations or how parents and teachers perceive each other. On the survey, 49% of parents and 43% of teachers reported their relationship has remained the same. Teachers reported more strongly that relations with parents improved or significantly improved (38%); only 18% of parents reported improvements. Given that 53% of teachers reported that the amount of interaction with parents somewhat or significantly increased, this may explain why they found improvements in parent-teacher relations. By contrast, 43% of parents reported decreased interaction with teachers. According to the ATA's study (2020b), 35% of teachers were using telephone to contact parents after school closures and 27% were using e-mail; voice-to-voice contact might also have impacted the nature of the conversation and feelings of connection. Other research has suggested that parents feel electronic communication depersonalizes their experiences with their children's teachers, and parents

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



feel a sense of belonging when teachers shows attention to specifics about their child or family (Stelmach & Herrera-Farfan, 2019). The importance of *relating* and not just communicating is emphasized in the following:

*I think [parent-teacher relationships] became more humanized versus being more professional. I can remember just one day calling to check in...I spent an hour and a half with Mom just talking about what she was going through, how it was affecting her business.... validating those feelings and saying, "I know, we're all going through it. I'm feeling the same way." I think those conversations with all of them made a big difference. (Teacher Interview)*

When interview participants were asked to comment on the stark difference between how parents and teachers responded on the survey regarding interaction, it was suggested that the loss of other forms of interaction, such as daily agendas or parent-teacher interviews might have made some parents feel less connected. Given that a significant number of respondents were parents of elementary school-aged children, this perhaps makes sense. Another explanation is that the burden of learning at home exacerbated other effects of the pandemic, impacting families' attention on school or response to teachers. In an interview one teacher gave the following example: "We also had some situations where kids legitimately had to go to work...they had to help out on the farm, or they had to take on a job to make things work or whatever the case might be." Thus, there might have been a natural decline in parents' perspectives of parent-teacher relations simply because of the unique context of the pandemic.

Based on responses to other survey questions, however, it seems the pandemic experience was perceived to have mostly enhanced parent-teacher relations or to have had no impact. This is noted in Tables 9 to 11.

Table 9: Parent Survey Questions

Survey Item	Significantly or Somewhat Increased	Remained the Same	Significantly or Somewhat Decreased
Since the pandemic my understanding of the demands of teachers has...	45%	38%	16%
Since the pandemic, I find that my respect for teachers has...	45%	41%	14%



Table 10: Teacher Survey Question: Understanding of Families

Survey Item	Significantly or Somewhat More Than Before	Significantly or Somewhat Less Than Before
<b>The pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning has resulted in me knowing my students' families:</b>	74%	26%

Table 11: Teacher Survey Question: Parents' Understanding of Teachers

Survey Item	Significantly or Somewhat Increased	Remained the Same	Significantly or Somewhat Decreased
<b>Since the pandemic I find that parents' understanding of the demands on me as a teacher has...</b>	63%	23%	14%

Looking at these survey results, one might conclude that the pandemic strengthened parent-teacher interactions and relationships overall. Examining the written comments on the survey and interviews, however, suggests a much more nuanced picture. Ultimately, learning at home was an experience that both unified and divided parents and teachers. Whether the experience brought parents and teachers together or drove them apart seemed to be related to two factors: (a) the overall experience of learning at home for families, and (b) the extent to which a school-home connection was maintained or broken during learning at home. These are discussed in turn in the following sections.

### **The Blessings and Burdens of School Closures**

On the survey, parents and teachers similarly reported on how the pivot caused by the pandemic personally affected them, with a slight majority indicating it was positive. Admittedly, these results were surprising considering a survey conducted by the Health Quality Council of Alberta (HQCA) between May and June of 2020 found that 72% of Albertans had a hard time dealing with "stress, anxiety or depression related to the COVID-19 pandemic" (p. 3). Nonetheless, as Table 12 shows, 34% of parents in the current study reported that "the

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



pandemic directive to move to distance teaching and learning has been" somewhat positive, and 33% reported it was somewhat negative. Overall, 53% of parents reported it was somewhat or mostly positive, and 54% of teachers reported similarly.

Table 12: Personal Impact of Distance Teaching & Learning on Teachers and Parents

	<b>Mostly Positive</b>	<b>Somewhat Positive</b>	<b>Somewhat Negative</b>	<b>Mostly Negative</b>
<b>Parents</b>	19%	34%	33%	14%
<b>Teachers</b>	14%	40%	32%	13%

When factoring in parents' level of education, the group with the highest number of negative responses was parents who reported their level of schooling as "did not complete high school." One must keep in mind, however, that there were only 16 parents in this category. Respondents from lone parent households were also less positive about the pandemic, with 48% reporting it was somewhat or mostly positive for them personally. Fifty-three per cent of respondents from two parent households reported it was somewhat or mostly positive for them personally. Only 70 parents from lone parent households took this survey, compared to 895 from two parent households, and 37 from extended family households. Given response rates, then, the results are offered as context but should not be generalized. Factors like socioeconomic and education levels have been identified in the literature as factors impacting parent-teacher relations, and one might expect this to be exacerbated under pandemic conditions.

Also worth noting is that 71% of teachers responding to the ATA (2020a) pandemic study felt the most at-risk students during learning at home were students from single parent homes. In that study, 56% of teachers were concerned about students living in single parent homes. Further, the highest group teachers considered to be at risk were students living in poverty (77%).

Whereas the personal impact of learning at home on parents and teachers was somewhat positive, a greater concern for parents and teachers in the current study was the impact on students. In responding to the survey item, "For my child(ren), I feel the pandemic directive to move to distance teaching and learning has been...", 42% of parents reported it was somewhat or mostly positive. Only 23% of teachers felt that the move to learning at home was somewhat or mostly positive. Rather, 77% of teachers felt that it was somewhat or mostly negative for students. High school teachers reported this most strongly, with 84% reporting a somewhat or mostly negative impact on students, compared to teachers of Kindergarten to Grade 3 (74%), Grade 4-6 (72%), and Grade 7-9 (79%).

Compared to teachers, parents did not feel as strongly about the negative impact of the move to learning at home for their children, although 58% reported it was somewhat or mostly

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



negative. And 55% reported it was somewhat or mostly negative for their family. Parents' concerns evolved around curriculum coverage. In interviews, parents expressed concerns about how the Ministry directive to ensure all students progressed through the grades distorted their children's actual learning. One parent wrote on the survey, "We are both highly educated adults and prioritize school very highly. There is no way our kids covered all the expected curriculum for this year." Those with children moving on to post-secondary education worried the most about their children's preparation.

In general, parents and teachers both felt that the move to learning at home was more negative for children or the family unit than it was for them personally. This is important because from a parent perspective, how learning at home was experienced by their children colored their own view about teachers and the school, and their own family contexts had much to do with how they felt about their role in learning at home. In the following, school and home conditions are discussed in relation to parents' and teachers' experiences.

### **School Factors Influencing Pandemic Experiences and Parent-Teacher Relations**

Although there was no intention for learning at home to mimic home education, comments on the survey and during interviews make it clear that parents took on, or felt compelled to take on, a facilitating role that stretched some of them beyond what their abilities or context allowed.

According to the ATA (2020a) pandemic study, 60% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed to the statement "parents/guardians helped facilitate student learning with my online instruction" (p. 31). Parents clearly did play a role that was arguably much more elevated for most compared to pre-pandemic times. In a rapid response study conducted in Australia, Brown et al. (2020) pointed out, "the shift to learning at home has necessarily disaggregated domains that are important to learning" (p. 20). Parents were not only required to provide the preconditions for learning, such as basic needs and psychological support, they also had to oversee the learning, and in some cases, locate curriculum resources, clarify tasks, and adjust learning tasks to align with their children's learning needs and styles. During an interview a parent said it was a significant change in their role from being "supporters of our kids' education to being partners in our kids' education." While this suggests a positive trajectory for parent-teacher relations, many parents also described it as overwhelming. Even parents who self-described themselves as highly involved in their children's learning before the pandemic, felt flung into a more demanding role.

A key insight from these data is that parents who had more positive experiences with learning at home were more likely to have positive feelings about parent-teacher relations. In reviewing the data, positive experiences were related to the following school and teacher behaviors and structures:

- A clear and coordinated plan informed parents about how school would proceed
- Teachers designed engaging assignments for students to complete

## It Takes a Virus:

### What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



- Teachers were available to answer parents' and students' questions
- Teachers provided timely and clear feedback on student work
- Teachers held regular face-to-face sessions and/or created videos to explain material and connect with students
- Teachers provided one-on-one support when students struggled
- Technology was straightforward and/or troubleshooting was provided
- Teachers and the school made learning materials and technology (e.g. Chromebook) available in ways that suited families (e.g. print packages in rural contexts)
- Teachers empathized with families' situations
- Parents and teachers had a strong relationship prior to the pandemic

A primary factor in parents' positive experiences with learning at home and their relationship with teachers was how they perceived teachers' effort and commitment. There were many notes of praise and appreciation for teachers in the data, such as the following:

*[Name of school] has continued to provide our family with an amazing experience. Our Gr. 7 teachers were on board from the first week; coordinating Zoom classes and assignment deadlines (Dropbox, etc.) and have never weakened. (We have an awesome Admin Team too—clearly setting the example.). Our Teachers and Admin. Team have bene responsive and helpful and supportive!! (Parent Survey)*

Teachers were described as “angels on earth” and “heroic.” Many parents expressed new or renewed understanding of and appreciation for teachers and the work they do:

*I already had a high respect for teachers. It has increased above that high threshold in light of COVID. (Parent Survey)*

*I think we get to see firsthand what our teachers do. I have always appreciated this, but now I'm seeing firsthand the level of commitment it takes to teach. (Parent Survey)*

*I think the pandemic kind of opened people's eyes to how much work it actually is... there's a lot of preparation outside of school hours.... It really opens your eyes about how much work they do when you're trying to make your own kid do stuff. (Parent Interview)*

Both parents and teachers used words like “team” and “collaboration” to describe the experience working together. One parent wrote, “I feel like this is much more of a ‘partnership’ as I teach/support their lessons” (Parent Survey).

Teachers, too, experienced a collaborative relationship with parents, and admired their resolve during this difficult time. One teacher went so far as to say on the survey, “we feel more connected as individuals. Because we now have the same “job” or “goal” (to educate their child), we seem to feel more like a team” (Teacher Survey).

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Teachers also gained new perspectives about families. In speaking about this during an interview, one teacher observed that moving teaching and learning into the home meant they “gained some empathy” as they were more in tune with parents’ lives. Virtual meetings in particular helped teachers understand how stressful it could be for parents juggling emergency remote teaching with other domestic responsibilities, as this teacher shared:

*For me personally, at the end of my time teaching I am more empathetic toward the parents because sometimes when you’re teaching you can see that little brother or sister running all around in the living room. And you’re like, if I’m that mom, I’d probably cry right now. So, at the end I kind of built a bond with them. Like, hey, I understand what you’re going through, let me take your kids for 30 minutes so you can breathe. That’s literally what I told one mom. When you’re in the school teaching, you don’t see those siblings. And they can be really annoying! They’re loud, they’re banging in the background, and mom is trying to quiet everyone down. (Teacher Interview)*

Thus, a silver lining in the struggle of the pandemic is that parents and teachers gained more, and perhaps clearer, insight into each other’s lives. It goes without saying that children are the link between parents and teachers, but it is not always the case that parents and teachers work together in unfettered ways. It took a virus for parents and teachers to experience partnership in a deeper way. In some ways the pandemic set the conditions for parents to truly feel like partners in children’s learning. One parent put it this way:

*It put us all on the same page..and I felt we had a common bond. I needed them and I think they need my kids.... Being away from the school environment...was hard. It really made me appreciate the teachers and the staff and the closeness of the school community. (Parent Survey)*

There was evidence of equal magnitude, however, suggesting learning at home was not a positive experience, and this strained parent-teacher relations. Pre-existing tensions between parents and teachers became emphasized, or new ones developed. Parents were at odds with teachers when:

- There was insufficient contact with teachers
- Expectations for student performance or completion of work was low
- Feedback on students’ assignments was slow or unclear
- Tasks were difficult for students to interpret or complete, requiring extensive parent direction
- School/teacher failed to consider home situation (e.g. multiple children, work responsibilities, cost of having to print lessons)
- There was no standard use of technology, causing parents to have to navigate different programs with each of their children
- Children perceived the assigned work as disengaging (e.g. worksheets)
- The parent-teacher relationship before the pandemic was weak

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



By far the most common concern that set a negative tone among parents was the lack of standardization in the approach to learning at home: "I wish the way teachers post homework was the same across the board especially when they are from the same school!" (Parent Survey) said one parent. Teachers and schools were given the autonomy to establish procedures and protocol. It seems this may have contributed to a particularly fractured experience for many parents who had more than one child in school. For example, parents faced conflicts with virtual meeting schedules, which was exacerbated if there was only one device in the home. There were multiple programs and platforms to learn, and parents of younger children were especially affected because their children needed help setting up and participating in the virtual meetings, accessing teacher-made or externally sourced videos, and downloading and submitting assignments. Further, depending on how teachers set up their communications, parents either had to relay multiple emails to their children, or they were locked out of programs and were unable to ensure their children were keeping up. While technology was frustrating for many parents, rural parents had additional challenges due to infrastructure. This parent shared this experience:

*Living in rural Alberta, our Internet connection, for example, isn't the best. You run out of bandwidth pretty quick with three kids hopping on there. And coupled with that is...we have one computer at home and I have three kids who needed to go on devices. So, I had to purchase an iPad—did I have to? Probably not. But for sanity's sake, ya I did. So, I mean we are very fortunate that that wasn't an issue for us...And then, just like I said, the different platforms. My littlest had, it was called Class Dojo, and he interacted with his teachers and his classmates. And then my middle girl had Google Meets every single Monday. And my oldest had Zoom and Google Chrome assignments that he had to do. And then we switched over to another one halfway during the pandemic to a different platform...And ya, the middle one also had another one (program), I already forget what it was, to submit all her stuff back and forth to the teacher. (Parent Interview)*

Given the above, it is not surprising that one of the most common responses to what would have helped parents to be successful in supporting their children, was tutorials and/or assistance for learning and managing the technology. Indeed, teachers reported spending a significant amount of time troubleshooting with parents while they, too, were on a steep learning curve with online delivery.

Some parents reported they had no direction at all with their children's lessons, and "had to learn how to assess, find [subject] curriculum, create lesson plans, and teach" (Parent Survey). Perceived lack of accountability for teachers led to comparisons, which in turn led to judgment. Teachers who did not have a strong online presence were interpreted as disengaged. I cite the following parent at length:

*It's different from teacher to teacher and school to school, even district to district. Biggest issue was understanding what was being required of my children in the beginning because it was a bit overwhelming being spammed all day with assignments, and each day no consistency in when they came or what order... that was very challenging. I'm the one who actually had to walk him through what to do*

## It Takes a Virus:

### What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



*and I couldn't figure it out. I can understand why so many families just decided to stop doing school...I wanted to support everyone, but honestly in so many ways it could [have] been less complicated....my kids were to read textbooks and only then do exams. No live calls, no online discussions. Some have been terrible while others exceptional!...COVID just made this more apparent. (Parent Survey)*

The above points to how deeply entrenched are the assumptions about what constitutes school and teaching. Understandably, it was difficult for many to re-imagine schooling beyond the brick and mortar arrangement that has dominated in Alberta since the introduction of the *Truancy and Compulsory School Attendance Act* in 1910 (Oreopoulos, 2005). Even those parents who were more tolerant of the imperfect situation expressed disappointment over the amount of time they perceived teachers spent providing synchronous learning opportunities. These comments reflect this:

*I thought it would just be a virtual classroom all day...And then clearly it turned out that, no, you're doing all of this work on your own and we'll pop in for a video for a half an hour twice a week.... I don't know what they were doing and why weren't they doing more stuff collectively as a class online? (Parent Interview)*

*I feel like teachers are doing the best they can and they are approachable. However, I feel that they could be doing more teaching online, rather than leaving it for parents to do the actual teaching. They could spend more time online with the kids helping with their assignments. (Parent Survey)*

Whereas Ministry directives provided guidelines for school authorities in terms of setting expectations, it was clear that parents' needs and expectations differed. The pandemic emphasized the role that interpretation and expectations play into parent-teacher relations. On the one hand were parents who felt too little work was being assigned, as noted by this teacher during an interview: "Each week [teachers] have a set of things they want to put on their online path form, but the parent will be like, 'Hey, we're done, what else can we do?' So that pressure is on. You feel like they are chasing you for homework." On the other hand, parents felt teachers misjudged the amount of time it would take to complete, as this parent wrote on the survey, "The work load sent was not for 5 hours per week. It was more like for 30 hours per week" (Parent Survey). Teachers struggled with striking a balance that would meet families' and students' needs, "Some [are] saying I reach out too often, others [are] saying I don't keep them informed enough" (Teacher Survey). There were teachers who were at their desk keeping school hours so that students could pop in virtually if they needed to, and many others who kept flexible hours to accommodate families. Some felt their efforts were rewarded; others felt their efforts went unnoticed. The pandemic situation exaggerated the natural frictions that can exist between parents and teachers. The media has emphasized how the pandemic has disproportionately impacted families, and so it is understandable the amount of stress parents were experiencing might have contributed to their appraisals of teachers, depending on their home conditions. Families felt the burden of learning at home in varying degrees.

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Teachers were as likely to have experienced increased stress levels as were the parents. One teacher in an interview brought this to light in suggesting the need for parents and teachers to be understanding of each other:

*It was hard to get out of bed some days because what's the point? I don't get to see my kids...laugh with them, teach them and see their ah-ha moments. And then I'm getting slammed by parent emails and kid emails, and it feels like I'm never doing enough. On both sides there is some disconnect with regards to being too hard.  
(Teacher Interview)*

The ATA (2020a) pandemic study confirms teaching from a distance impacted teachers' mental and physical health, dulled their passion for teaching, and elevated their concerns for their students' mental and emotional states. Only 50% reported feeling somewhat or very happy. Fifty per cent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day of teaching students at a distance" (p. 7). Seventy per cent indicated they are exhausted at day's end. And 35% agreed or strongly agreed that they were "experiencing the trauma of some of their students, with another 22% reporting they were unsure. In the best of times parent-teacher relations are complex, but the pandemic revealed that relationships are affected by factors that might be concealed from both parties. As a researcher who has been committed to coalition between parents and teachers, it was difficult to read sharp comments, but the value of this study is that it pulls back the curtain to provide some context as a foundation for compassion.

### **Home Conditions Influencing Pandemic Experiences and Parent-Teacher Relations**

Kim and Asbury's (2020) study involving teachers from the U.K. similarly concluded an upside to the pandemic was the rise of what they called "surprise stars" (p. 14); students who did not excel under the conditions of traditional schooling became more engaged and interested in learning when they were at home. In Bubb and Jones' (2020) survey of over 1000 Norwegian students in Grades 1 to 10, 63% of students felt they had more influence over their learning, and described "a sense of ownership and increased motivation by taking responsibility for their own routines and learning" (p. 216). Along this vein, thirteen-year old Veronique Mintz (2020) made headlines with her formidable argument for continuing with online learning from home. From their article in *The New York Times*:

*Distance learning gives me more control of my studies. I can focus more time on subjects that require greater effort and study. I don't have to sit through a teacher fielding questions that have already been answered. I can still collaborate with other students, but much more effectively. I am really enjoying FaceTiming friends who bring different perspectives and strengths to the work; we challenge one another and it's a richer learning experience. (para. 11)*

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



From the parent perspective, Bubb and Jones described parents as feeling home learning enhanced their connection to their children's learning and teachers, and felt they played "a more important role than before" (p. 217). As in the current study, when parents experienced positive outcomes for their children, they also felt their relationships with teachers were strengthened.

Thus, learning at home created possibilities for some families and their children. Based on parent and teacher reports of positive outcomes, shifting learning to the home appeared to benefit students who:

- did not find school a safe or welcoming environment;
- liked the ability to access videos to replay lessons to enhance understanding;
- felt more confident asking questions during one-on-one virtual conferencing with teachers;
- worked with teachers who found new or better ways to meet their learning needs;
- felt overlooked in classrooms where other students' needs occupied teachers' time; and,
- found regular classrooms distracting owing to other students' behavioral and emotional needs.

When asked about what it was like to have schooling taking place at home and online, one parent said,

*I'll be the first to admit it was novel at first. We were at home all day. My husband was home, I was home, it was kind of fun...our child is a self-starter, a good student. (Parent Interview)*

Having more time with their children, especially if parents' work normally took them away from home for extended periods of time, was among the reasons some parents felt positive about school closures. Parents enjoyed watching their children learn. As one parent wrote, "It was quite a positive experience.... It was nice to see how they are 'at school'...I got to see what hard workers they can be...and the amazing outcomes of some of their work that I may not have seen if they were at school" (Parent Survey). Others suggested that the pandemic afforded the family an opportunity to achieve "better balance between school, homework, extracurricular activities, and family life" (Parent Survey). It helped some to realize how overscheduled were their lives. Further, some parents who reported having children with exceptional learning needs felt learning at home improved their child's experiences and performance. For example, a parent indicated on the survey that their child's Individual Learning Plan was focused on "environmental mitigation" and once the environmental factors were eliminated "[they] had a kid who excelled at learning." Between that and having a teacher "willing to adapt", the family discovered "online learning was actually the support we didn't know we needed."

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Whether or not the experience of learning at home was positive was also contingent upon a number of conditions at home:

- age and number of children;
- parents' access to childcare;
- job flexibility to work from home and/or to adjust working hours;
- the availability of support from within or outside the family;
- comfort level with curriculum;
- Internet reliability and access to technology;
- nature of children's work habits and ability to learn independently;
- whether children's learning needs could be met in a home environment; and,
- whether the family's (especially children's) social and emotional health was impacted by the pandemic generally, and/or school closure specifically.

A comment on the parent survey brought to light how variations in circumstances impacted upon parents' capacity to support their children in the way they might have wanted to:

*I did feel like schools made assumptions about the capacity of parents. As an educated parent many assumed I would have high capacity to support my child; however, I am a single parent who works full time outside of the house, so I struggled to provide the structure and supervision needed for my child to succeed.*

Childcare and job flexibility were the most commonly reported items on the survey regarding what would have helped parents be successful. While there were some parents for whom the closing of schools had good outcomes, experiences like the following dominated the data:

*All I can say is that I hate homeschooling. It became a frustrating moment for me, my son, and my husband (almost traumatic) ...I did not have the time needed to bring about the learning objectives of each activity and support in the integration of knowledge...it has been really bad. (Parent Survey)*

*They don't teach math the same way as when I was going to school. So, I didn't even understand what they were telling me to teach my kids. Now I have to learn to do math again and teach my kid how to do math—it was just a lot. It was a lot going on, and I'm trying to work part-time from home. My one son has some anxiety issues.... He was very overwhelmed and very nervous all the time. He just thought for sure the COVID was going to get us...It was a lot to expect of people when all of a sudden your entire life got turned upside down in one day. (Parent Interview)*

It was also the case for some families that learning at home worked for one child, but was detrimental to another child's learning. For example, one parent commented that one of their children was an introvert and did very well learning at home, but another child needed the structure of school and the social outlet that it provided. Juggling the multiple needs of

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



children has been identified in other research as a key challenge for parents during school closure (Garbe et al., 2020).

Further, it was difficult to sustain learning at home. The parent quoted at the beginning of this section admitted that although school closure was novel and fun at first, “it was obvious right from the get-go that this was going to be a struggle” because their child who was studious and committed, became overwhelmed navigating the required and optional assignments given by the teacher. Even under seemingly ideal home conditions, then, so much depended on the children’s learning needs, which was clearly more than academic, and not necessarily within the parents’ realm to influence or control. This was emphasized by the experience of a stay-at-home parent during an interview. They said, “My daughter likes school and likes learning at school. She does not like having school at home.” The parent described the suddenness of the disruption as a “very, very difficult transition.” He further admitted, “It’s just been survival. Just flat out survival” (Parent Interview).

Teachers, too, realized the immense pressure that was placed on families. For some, it was surprising that families they considered highly involved and who prioritized education had to take a step back. This teacher said,

*I can think of one family in particular where the mom is exceptional. She's very on top of things. She's very involved in her kids' education, and she just said to me point blank, "This is not a priority for us right now." (Teacher Interview)*

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) long ago argued that schools are sites of reproduction of White, middle class values, giving those parents social capital that enhances their ability to engage with the school and their children’s teachers. Social capital theory underpins much research that demonstrates that parents from equity seeking groups struggle to fit into school the way other parents seem to naturally fit; socioeconomic conditions, ethnicity, gender orientation, culture, language, and family composition may thwart effective parent-teacher relationships, and parents’ ability to support their child’s learning (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Michaud & Stelmach, 2019; Rollock et al., 2015; Shuffleton, 2017; Vincent, 2000). This study, however, challenges the assumption that parents with social capital can assert what Crozier et al. (2011) refer to as “privileged capitals” (p. 199). Parents in this study who should have enjoyed advantages were equally frustrated and felt defeated, and yet teachers might make assumptions that parents, especially those perceived to have social advantages, have complete control and can make learning at home work. One noted, “I am well educated and extremely value education, and I would still likely give up on the lesson plans and do my own thing” (Parent Survey). This signals that elements external to school and home conditions, like a global pandemic, shape the educational experience, and ultimately parent-teacher relations. Educational policy, for example, can indirectly influence the parent-teacher dynamic. This is briefly discussed in the next section.



### **Policy Conditions Influencing Pandemic Experiences and Parent-Teacher Relations**

Literature on parent involvement primarily focuses on what teachers and principals must do to shape a positive relationship with families (Griffith, 2001; Marschall & Shah, 2020). While there are scholars who have critiqued how policy leads to limited conceptualizations of parent involvement or shapes parent behavior (e.g. Fernández & López, 2017; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020), little attention is paid to how policy indirectly shapes the parent-teacher dynamic. This study offered insights into this.

Two announcements made by Education Minister LaGrange at the commencement of school closures revolved around the prioritization of core subjects and assigned time for student work, and students' progression to the next grade. It is clear from the data that these parameters were not universally understood or agreed upon. As an example, one parent wrote on the survey "I strongly disagree with the school principals and teachers telling the kids that they automatically pass and that the school work/assignments are optional." A perceived problem with communication prompted this teacher to write:

*I don't think parents understood that we were only allowed to assign 5 hours of work per week for elementary. The government and schools did not communicate this clearly to parents. Many parents asked on several occasions why there was no more for their child to do. (Teacher Survey)*

Teachers reported struggling with sustaining students' interest in learning because it was perceived as optional. The decision about student grades positioned the school negatively vis-à-vis parents. This was the case for those who struggled with keeping their children on task. This concern was shared by parents and teachers, as the following suggest:

*They're (students) not stupid. If somebody says that it doesn't matter what you do for the rest of the year, you've passed, and your mark is as good as it was when you stopped being in class...that was definitely at the end of the year affecting [child's] performance...that was definitely a decision that was a very serious one and I think needed more thought. (Parent Interview)*

*I thought it undermined what I was doing.... If you already know you're going to pass it kind of takes the importance out of it. I thought it should have been treated with more importance" (Teacher Interview).*

For parents with children in higher grades, the handling of grades made it especially difficult to maintain their focus on school. Teachers felt that some students' grades were a false representation of their ability; students who received a "COVID-50", a term symbolic of teachers' dissatisfaction, were a source of concern.

Additionally, while some parents appreciated lenience around academic expectations, others were dissatisfied with the de-emphasis of programs such as music, art, and physical education, and what they perceived as lack of accountability for students to stay on top of their work. The voice of parents who had children in language immersion programs was

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



particularly unified in their concern that there was not an expectation for teachers to provide regular synchronous sessions for students to converse with each other. Non-bilingual parents felt their children's learning was impaired.

Teachers described feeling “devalued” (Teacher Interview) because their subject area was not prioritized, making it difficult to convince students and their parents of the value of completing the assigned work. Some specialist teachers who were reassigned as a result of the pandemic, had to adjust to students and material they did not know, affecting their confidence and self-efficacy. They shared with parents the concern over students progressing to the next grade.

One can understand policy makers' use of blunt measures during such unprecedented times. The pandemic situation provided insight into how provincial decisions influence the parent-teacher dynamic. Parents' assumptions about teachers' work were shaped by their knowledge and interpretations of these measures, which was sometimes discrepant from reality. In fact, a key concern expressed by teachers was that the pandemic distorted views of the profession. A survey respondent wrote, “Many parents believe that we are on “summer vacation” during online learning so I believe that many parents do not know what extra responsibilities are required during this time.” In an interview with a teacher, I asked them to comment on the fact that 33% of parents reported parent-teacher relations declined, while 38% of teachers reported it improved. They speculated that there was a public perception that teachers “dumped” their work on parents. They said that even their non-teaching friends assumed they could go golfing, saying, “It's a pandemic, you're not working” (Teacher Interview). Thus, school, home, and external conditions such as educational policy all contributed to parents' and teachers' perceptions of each other during learning at home. While there was applause for parents and teachers who were able to sustain their engagement, there was unfortunately criticism as well. The next part of the report considers perspectives analytically with the aim of demonstrating the complexity of parent-teacher relations.

### Checking In and Checking Out

Teachers' communication strategies and interpersonal behaviors play a key role in fostering parent engagement (Leithwood, 2009). I have argued elsewhere that despite the partnership discourse dominating discussions about parent-teacher relations, the relational dimension has been overshadowed by an “instrumentalist approach that is concerned with delivery” (Stelmach, 2020, p. 205). For example, schools distribute impressive amounts of information through their newsletters, websites, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and information systems (e.g. SchoolZone). I have been surprised to learn from the many teachers and principals in my graduate courses over the years, however, that while some parents diligently follow these information paths, a concerning number of parents do not access them, at least not regularly. Much effort is put into organizing events like parent orientation, socials, and guest speakers, and teachers lament that the same parents show up. Leithwood argued that “parents generally value personal communication more than teachers—or at least more than teachers believe they have time for” (p. 13). In my mind, there is an important distinction to be made between information and communication. While the former involves parents as passive

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



recipients, the latter gives parents agency in a dialogue that is potentially mutually benefitting. Information implies distribution; communication implies connection.

Technology has made it convenient to provide information, and the amount can be overwhelming such that parents do not even bother to look at it. With the stripping away of the taken-for-granted structures of schooling, the COVID-19 pandemic forced everyone's attention toward one main thing: children's learning. In a sense, it forced parents and teachers to talk to each other. This, in turn, made it possible for parents and teachers to talk about courses specifically and more often, and in a way that was more meaningful for parents when they had more complete information about curriculum. The way communication became focused and meaningful was arguably the most immediate positive outcome for parent-teacher relations.

For various reasons, however, it was also the case that contact between parents and teachers deteriorated, diminished or disappeared altogether, and the perception of each other as "checked out" tainted impressions. Simply put, the pandemic drove some parents and teachers together and drove others apart. I venture beyond this linear view of the findings, however, to contextualize their interactions through the following micro-themes:

- Getting Together
- Getting to Know Each Other
- Getting to Work
- Getting Grounded

### **Getting Together: Ambiguous Loss and Its Impact on Parent-Teacher Relations**

After March 15, 2020 classrooms in Alberta went dark. The pivot to learning at home and the voids that were created as a result tell us important things about the role of schools, and the home-school dynamic.

First, children missed their friends and teachers; teachers missed their students. School closure confirmed that teaching and learning is, as one parent put it, "so much more than academics" (Parent Interview). Teaching and learning constitute a relational enterprise. A teacher captured this during an interview: "So much of what motivates us comes from the reciprocity, you know, the reciprocal relationship you have through interacting in a real way, in real time with real faces." Some teachers assessed returning to school would be a risk benefit, which suggests the extent of the loss experienced. This teacher's statement reflects this:

*It was exhausting and I'm willing to assume the risks on the job to head back full time, full force in September. I'm looking forward to seeing actual teenagers, not just a video or even worse, just a voice to a black background, on my computer screen. (Teacher Survey)*

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Significant concern was expressed by parents whose children had a hard time dealing with the separation from school. Younger children, who may not have had the lifeline of social media the way most teenagers do, missed friends, as did those without siblings and those in rural contexts. Students who were active in extracurricular programs lost an outlet for their passions. Considering this, teachers were concerned about students' emotional, social, and physical states. These comments are telling:

*Online connection cannot replace real life in person. My daughter's social connections drastically were affected and I fear her mental health was negatively impacted (depression, loneliness). (Parent Survey)*

*I made it my mission to check in with [student] more often just because he had a very bad relationship with [a parent]. (Teacher Interview)*

*I truly hated online learning. Barely any students engaged and their mental health took a scary dive. Many of them reported being depressed. (Teacher Survey)*

At the same time, some teachers felt overwhelmed with the responsibility for students' emotional wellbeing when they could not interact face-to-face. As one teacher said, "When kids come onto a meet with cameras and mics off and only type how can we ensure their safety. It just turned into a constant battle of worry and guilt" (Teacher Survey).

Ambiguous loss theory (Boss, 1999) explains the feelings that emerge when something is there, but not there at the same time, or when there is a lack of closure. In the case of school closures, ambiguous loss underpins parents' and teachers' ability or inability to navigate a schooling context devoid of expected structures and face-to-face interaction. Technology was a poor substitute, and it led to frustration, which is evident in the following:

*Forgive all my tones here. It's the last day of school and we didn't even get a goodbye email... (Parent Survey)*

*My daughter's [elementary] teacher dropped the ball, didn't recognize her birthday... (Parent Survey)*

*Parents have started ghosting us....students wouldn't show up... (Teacher Survey)*

Through a lens of ambiguous loss, it is clear that there was a lingering expectation of presence that was unmet for some parents and teachers.

A parent described the importance of virtual conferencing, saying, "Once a week they'd do a Google Meet, but it was more of a hey, let's check in and see each other's faces...It was just a, I want you to know I'm still here and you're still here" (Parent Interview). In the study of parent involvement, researchers have attempted to dislodge a misleading assumption that parents who are seen in school are parents who care about their children's schooling. A

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



misleading binary of involved versus uninvolved parents emerges from such assumptions. In this study, parents applied this same logic to teachers:

*To be fair, I don't know what these teachers are doing behind the scenes. All I know is that they appear for a half an hour twice a week on my daughter's screen and they sent out an email to her once a day. (Parent Interview)*

Teachers' use of virtual conferencing and synchronous lesson delivery—or lack thereof—and their expedience with email and feedback to students was one of the most common compliments of and complaints against teachers. These modes of communication created a sense of connection in the absence of a classroom. But just as there is metrification of parent involvement determined by parents' visibility, teachers' online presence became the hallmark of teachers' engagement from the parents' point of view. This was made obvious by some piercing accusations that teachers were on a “5-month summer break” (Parent Survey) and undeserving of full salary. In an interview with a parent, I asked for feedback on this notion of presence, and the parent offered, “If you don't know specifically what someone is doing, or can't see them doing it, you assume they're doing nothing.” This is not to dismiss parents' legitimate concerns about not receiving the support they and their children required, but perhaps explains why some parents questioned teachers' engagement and commitment. As Boss (2007) explained, individuals experiencing ambiguous loss “have no other option but to construct their own truth about the status of the person absent in mind or body” (p. 105).

Considering the above, another interesting and perhaps important learning is what the pandemic situation reveals about how stakeholders define “actual teaching”. With work-from-home directives in place, the pandemic has challenged beliefs about how work is structured. The popular desire to have teachers approximate the classroom with an online surrogate presupposes a teacher-centered approach to education. A debate over teacher-centered versus student-centered models exceeds the scope of this study; nonetheless, how an education system is philosophically oriented positions parents and teachers in certain ways. In the physical absence of teachers, parents filled in a role they were neither prepared for nor able to replicate, one can understand how this would prompt them to feel “the parent has become the teacher” (Parent Survey). This points to a macro-systemic influence on parent-teacher relations, a notion relatively unconsidered until COVID-19 led to school closures.



### **Getting to Know Each Other: The Impact of Learning at Home on Parent-Child and Parent-Teacher Relations**

While report cards and parent-teacher interviews are primary ways in which parents receive information about their children's learning, having the ability to observe their children in virtual meetings and the chance to work with them directly was enlightening, even if their pre-pandemic experiences with school were positive. One parent said, "I realize how much we don't know what she's learning day-to-day or week-to-week. That could be because we haven't had to have that communication with the school because she really is a good student" (Parent Interview). Similarly, another parent wrote, "We always had a positive relationship but I certainly had a more accurate understanding of how my child was learning and where some of their challenges may be. (Parent Survey)

Teachers agreed. One said, "The comments I got from parents were very much along the lines of, we have a much better understanding of what our kids are like *as learners*" (Teacher Interview). I emphasize "as learners" because statements such as "parents know their children best" are key assumptions in the discourse on parent involvement, but the pandemic revealed areas of their children's lives about which they may not have had the most intimate knowledge.

Scholars such as Pushor (2019) have argued that parents' knowledge about their children complements teachers' knowledge and should be given equal status in the learning enterprise. Yet, in this study, the number of parents who gained new insights into their children's academic strengths or struggles indicated that parents' sensory or embodied knowledge of their children may not equip them to understand their children's learning as fully as Pushor suggests. Relatedly, a parent shared this during an interview:

*I learned really quickly—on [child's] report cards I would see things like she loses focus easily...I had no frame of reference...'cause I was kind of understanding that, okay, here's your homework, I'll give you an hour in this workbook. Here, sit in the corner and do it. And I'll come back in an hour and she's in the other room, like, playing with a doll!" (Parent Interview)*

For some parents, the only contact they have with teachers is a 15-minute session once or twice a year. More time to discuss and ask questions, and to actually see what their children are like while completing tasks was eye-opening for parents. A parent wrote on the survey, "Now that my kid is at home, I have a better understanding of what the teacher mentioned during our parent-teacher interviews." Some parents saw their children in a new light, as this parent did, "I never realized how much my kid talks. Or how easily distracted he is. I cannot fathom how [the teacher] manages to get him to LEARN anything."

However, even parents who described being in close contact with teachers regarding their child's learning needs pre-pandemic had profound experiences by witnessing their child as a learner for a sustained amount of time. This parent's experience was insightful:

## It Takes a Virus:

### What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



*I knew he was struggling at school and I knew things weren't great for him. I've had lots of meetings, and I met with everyone under the sun...But to actually be the one sitting beside him to help him grasp a concept, and seeing how difficult that was for him and how much effort that took for him, that was really, as a parent, that was really eye-opening, and heartbreaking actually, to watch him struggle like that. So, that was really interesting for me to be the one observing that and to see what his teachers were dealing with every day. (Parent Interview)*

Teachers, too, commented that parents were “getting a firsthand look at their children's limitations and celebrations”, including academic abilities, work ethic, drive, and focus. One teacher wrote “I have had a parent say to me that now she understands what I meant when her son was having issues focusing and completing work.” With more specific knowledge about their children as learners, parents reported feeling more confident engaging with the teacher and advocating for their children. This alone, is an important finding that can inform future directions for how schools work with parents in contexts such as parent-teacher interviews, for example.

Another reason communication between teachers and parents was enhanced was that it felt more personalized. One parent said, “I got a different understanding of them as a person/parent. It was good to see the “normal”, “personable” side of them (Parent Survey). Not only did parents learn more about teachers' skills, creativity and patience, but they saw how much teachers cared for their children when they watched interactions during Google Meets. Teachers made surprise visits to deliver cookies, Slurpees, and meals to students' homes, which gave them the chance to have discussions with parents about non-school matters and relate person-to-person, rather than teacher-to-parent.

Parents especially appreciated these demonstrations of care and compassion because COVID-19 isolation and uncertainty caused emotional turmoil for many. Bruhn (2011) has argued that crisis tends to enhance a sense of community. Unequivocally, the chance for teachers and parents to talk about the challenges and concerns with COVID-19—especially when teachers were also parents—created a bonding experience. Trust is often cited as a critical ingredient for healthy parent-teacher relations (Tschannen-Moran & Gereis, 2015), but vulnerability is the often-overlooked underbelly of trust. In writing about how the pandemic shaped parent-teacher relations, one parent wrote, “maybe the honesty is different” (Parent Survey). It did seem that for some at least, a virtual meeting, telephone call, or email created a sense of safety. This parent explained:

*My standards of school work lowered dramatically & I was ok with that.... the teacher was awesome to say just do what you can do & I listened to that honestly as compared to being physically in school. I would have reacted differently, I would have hidden more emotions. (Parent Survey)*

The pandemic situation made space for vulnerability, and gave parents and teachers permission to be open with each other. Teachers were invited into families' struggles, and they, too, related their own challenges. Thus, among all the constraints of COVID-19, there as unexpected liberty in communicating. For example, one parent wrote, “I feel like I can be

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



more honest in my situation because I can't hide. My child either gets the work done or doesn't & it is put more on me to explain the situation." Perhaps the pandemic situation eroded the clinical atmosphere of formalized interactions and any intimidation that can emerge when interactions take place on teacher territory. Perhaps computer screens provided neutral ground.

### **Getting to Work: Boundary and Role Ambiguity and the Impact on Parent-Teacher Relations**

Figuring out how to integrate schooling within the household was a key challenge for many families. Some found success by establishing a consistent routine and a schedule for school, but many parents discovered how difficult it was to motivate their children and keep them on task. Though teachers were assigning the work, parents felt they had to "fully take on the instructor role" (Parent Survey). Role and boundary ambiguity were evident as parents navigated a *parent as teacher* role, concurrently managing a *home as school* transition. Teachers, too, struggled with continuing with teaching in a way that defied the structures they were used to.

The physical absence of teachers created role ambiguity for many parents which was manifest in the resistance they received from their children. One parent, whose child was described as liking school, shared their frustrations over trying to get their child to do the work. They eventually appealed to the teacher for help:

*We said, "Look, she's not going to do her math for us—she is just flat out refusing. So, will you do an extra Google Meet with her on math days? Because she will do the work for you; she won't do it for me" ....And math got done Tuesdays and Thursdays like that, no problem. (Parent Interview)*

Based on the number of comments about motivation on the parent and teacher surveys, the above was not an isolated experience. These parents and teachers wrote,

*It takes fighting/yelling/manipulating/punishing to get my child to do any work. However, she is pretty much a perfect student at school. She loves her teachers and always does her work for her teachers. (Parent Survey)*

*I have had several parent requests for 'how do I explain this?' 'How do I motivate \_\_\_\_\_ to get work done?' 'How do you do this in the classroom?' (Teacher Survey)*

There were many pointed comments reflecting this sentiment "Parents aren't meant to teach their kids" (Parent Survey).

What the pandemic revealed is that parents' natural authority does not necessarily translate into teachers' positional authority when it comes to curriculum. The nature of teaching that parents engage in with their children outside of school differs from classroom instruction. Parents' teaching is coincidental with their nurturing and modeling in the course of everyday

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



living. Baking a batch of cookies or planting a tree with a child, for instance, creates opportunities for conveying concepts of measurement and conservation, but these activities are taken up for the purpose of bonding where learning is informal and organic. The role of instructor connotes a formal, purposeful arrangement with different rules of engagement. This comment describes how this distinction played out: "At the beginning we struggled with Mom being teacher, but by the end we got into a pattern" (Parent Survey).

One parent described taking on an intensive role as teacher as the only way to make the situation workable. Textbook activities were often assigned, and their child did not want to do it. "I know when [the teacher] does this", the parent said, "it means more crying from my child" (Parent Interview). This parent described designing lessons that matched their child's interests as a way to encourage them to engage in school. Most parents, however, were not positioned to take on this level of support, which had a resounding impact on their self-efficacy as a parent, as noted in this comment: "I feel like a failure when it comes to school" (Parent Survey).

With older children, parents tried to instill independence, an approach that was successful depending on their teenagers' drive and organizational skills. One parent explained,

*I told [my child] straight off the top...you are in charge of your own schooling. Okay? I am trusting you. Do not betray my trust. I expect you to keep in touch with your teachers. I expect you to submit whatever assignments they assign you in a timely fashion...if you need help, I am here for you, but I am not chasing you. I am not hounding you...And that worked out fairly well until...one day he came upstairs and he just like, "I am so behind. I am so behind I feel sick." (Parent Interview)*

Thankfully, this situation was remedied, but it emphasizes the importance of the structure of schooling and teachers' role in enforcing expectations.

Additionally, as described in an earlier section, many parents battled against their teenagers' perception that school was optional because of the provincial decision about grades; parents' arguments about the intrinsic value of schooling and the need to respect teachers fell flat when students said, "teacher and principal said I already passed" (Parent Survey). Thus, with the structure of school removed, there was considerable frustration, disappointment, and even resentment because of the blurring of roles and responsibilities. This inevitably colored how parents felt about teachers.

For teachers, the move to learning at home both shrank and expanded their role and responsibilities. One teacher proposed that the pandemic highlighted teachers' custodial, pastoral, and academic functions. With the move to learning at home, teachers could only expect to fulfil their academic function, but with "at least one hand" tied because of Minister LaGrange's announcement that "no one is going to get a lower grade than whatever they had when we locked down" (Teacher Interview). They may have spent considerably more time organizing learning for the online environment, but their work was unseen. Unable to

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



perform as they normally would in the classroom, teachers were highly reliant on parents. This comment describes how this impacted parent-teacher relations:

*Some of my parents think I should be online with kids 6 hours a day, like a teaching day at school. They have NO IDEA about how a lesson works—teach, practice together, practice alone. They don't get that they have to take over after practice together and monitor the practice alone part. They are angry. They are stressed. They take it out on us. (Teacher Survey)*

Teachers were frequently renegotiating their expectations for parent-teacher relations. One teacher wrote in the survey they “continue to have misgivings about our roles, what is in and out of scope, and level of control” (Teacher Survey).

As Kim and Asbury (2020) found in their study, teachers' identity is tied to their assumption that students can lean on them, but during the pandemic this was uncertain. In this current study, teachers especially felt ineffective with students who had complex learning needs, and sympathized with families who did not have the required supports. Provincial budget decisions that resulted in the laying off of Educational Assistants had a palpable impact on both parents and teachers.

Teachers also found themselves in unexpected uncomfortable situations with parents that emerged because of the online environment. Maintaining standards of academic integrity was one such situation. This teacher said,

*I did have two parents who became upset at my communication with them. Their children were doing very little work and when they were, they were cheating—sharing each other's work. Even when presented with clear evidence, they refused to believe it was possible their children weren't working. This soured our relationships as they felt frustrated I was “bothering” them. (Teacher Survey)*

The teacher's role in classroom management was also a source of role ambiguity. This came up during an interview with a parent, who remarked, “In the classroom [teachers] can sit there and say, “[Student], sit down and pay attention...if [student] is misbehaving at home, whose problem is that?” (Parent Interview). Maintaining an orderly and safe learning environment is a legislated responsibility for teachers according to the *Education Act*, but over a computer screen when in the privacy of students' homes teachers felt confused about their role in classroom management. One teacher claimed, “I had to break up a wrestling fight between brothers on the top bunk of their bed...by Google Meets, during a reading lesson. Situations were especially awkward when teachers had to intervene when parents were over-stepping their role, as this teacher experienced:

*My most interesting interaction with a parent was during the course of a final [exam] interview with her son...I could hear her audibly coaching him on the side as he responded to my questions. I actually had to intervene and say, “You know, Mrs. So and*

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



*So, you have to stop the coaching, that's, you know, not permitted. This is a final exam." (Teacher Interview)*

For some, the only way to reconcile tension-filled situations was to back off or reduce expectations, which left them feeling powerless to uphold a professional standard or achieve a professional relationship with parents. Others responded by being constantly available, which was acceptable for some, but overwhelming for many who had responsibilities for their own children's learning at home.

Boundary ambiguity was experienced as well. As originally defined, boundary ambiguity occurs when there is confusion over the structure or functioning within the group (Boss, 1993). In thinking about school as a relational construct, it is helpful for understanding why parents struggled with supporting their children at home. These parents' comments were insightful:

*The conditions between home and school are very, very different, right? .... So we are moving from a classroom to the living room. When we move from these two locations, the places in the home always serve dual purpose...your living room is also your entertainment room...in a school environment you can control it. You can remove all distractions and you have a teacher who's constantly monitoring....you can even do things like ban cell phones...You can't do that in the home. And so our conditions are very different. You're no longer competing against other distracted students in the classroom. You are competing with Xbox. You're competing with movies. You're competing with Play Station...Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram. Good luck, right? (Parent Interview)*

Siblings, and parents themselves were also distractions. One parent said, "he's the older kid and I was like, 'Could you help me with this? Could you help me with that?' So, he had to...go away where there were no distractions and he could just focus" (Parent Interview). Teachers might not have anticipated how learning would unfold at home, or how it would consume parents' time. Boundary ambiguity is demonstrated in the following:

*Often lessons are way too much work (and [teachers] can't tell because they aren't with my kid hearing her struggling to manage a project that has ballooned into what would have been numerous class blocks at school...there are no naturally time/class bell-time boundaries at home!). (Parent Survey)*

Indeed, both parents and teachers struggled to figure out how to respect each other, as these comments indicated:

*I have found it tough to judge how much to ask of the teachers. (Parent Survey)*

Not only did the tangible distractions at home work against many parents' efforts to work with their children, but it became clear that school and home are distinct psychological spaces. For example, one parent said,

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



*My daughter likes school and she likes learning at school. She does not like having school at home...the two are separate. When she's at home, she does home things; she doesn't want to do school work and so it was very, very difficult" (Parent Interview).*

Teachers faced their own boundary ambiguity with respect to parents' and their own time. For example, one teacher described a challenge of learning at home was, "Not wanting to "bother" them (parents) as they are dealing with way more than normal (Teacher Survey). Further, being at a desk but not in a classroom with students in front of them meant continual distractions. "Every 2-3 minutes another email comes in, and since it's your only communication with students, you feel obligated to immediately answer. This makes you constantly lose your groove in marking assignments" (Teacher Survey). Further, limitations on exam security and challenges with conducting in-class assessments due to student availability, meant the nature of assignments changed such that teachers' workload was increased. In tandem with the time required to create lessons for an online environment, the situation overwhelmed them and "crushed spirits." Attempts to contain their work day were often interpreted by parents as teachers' shirking their responsibilities.

According to a survey of 122 American parents regarding the impact of school closure in Spring 2020, the biggest challenge parents faced was balancing the responsibilities of their jobs with the multiple learning needs of their children, personal self-care, and domestic responsibilities (Garbe et al., 2020). As the above has shown, Alberta parents faced this too. Neither parent nor teacher was prepared for supporting their children's learning or teaching from their own homes, and neither could have predicted the emotional weight of such widespread disruption to their home, work, and social lives. Role and boundary ambiguity shed light on parents' and teachers' experiences with navigating new relationships in a situation where once expected roles became more fluid. In the next and final section, boundary intrusion provides insight into how parents and teachers navigated the structural realities that emerged during school closures.

### **Getting Grounded: Boundary Intrusion and the Impact on Parent-Teacher Relations**

With school closures, parents and teachers inevitably became uninvited guests in each other's home. This had implications for family dynamics and teacher's sense of professionalism.

In the ATA (2020b) pandemic study, a survey respondent said, "In the beginning most parents were diligent and engaged. This engagement has fallen off track significantly in the last few weeks" (p. vi). This was echoed in the current study as this teacher indicated:

*Some families' engagement started positively and as the months progressed, they refused to return phone calls and "show up" for meets, etc. If they did return phone calls, parents seemed more stressed and anxious and the tone towards me changed" (Teacher Survey).*

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Parents were commonly described as “shut down”, “ghosting” or having “dropped off the map” (Teacher Survey).

From the parents' perspective, however, de-prioritizing school was a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with the intrusion of school into their homes. As discussed in the aforementioned, motivating students to continue their schooling from home proved to be a significant challenge, and even though parents placed a high value on education, they also wanted to preserve their relationships with their children and have a healthy family dynamic. Parents commented,

*It put a huge strain on my relationship with my kids. (Parent Survey)*

*I wasn't involved. [Children's] mental health was more important (Parent Survey).*

In the midst of earning a living and maintaining a home, supporting their children's learning created significant anxiety. This parent's metaphor aptly described the weight of the responsibility: “It's kind of like every teacher puts a brick on your shoulder and weighs you down....Honestly, Sundays I dreaded looking at my email because I knew that I was having everyone's agenda for the week” (Parent Interview). When I asked this parent how they felt about schools re-opening in the Fall, the parent was glad, saying, “It was just too many bricks laid on my shoulders...And because I was overwhelmed, my kids often felt overwhelmed with what they were doing.” They indicated that they would sign up for home education before going through another experience of learning at home. Another parent took it even further, “If students don't go back to school in September, I'm seriously thinking we won't bother with school until they do. Too stressful” (Parent Survey). Such comments indicate the degree of boundary intrusion that these parents experienced, and explains why their involvement lessened or stopped altogether.

While teachers may have been frustrated when families disengaged, I detected a sense of relief among parents after they reportedly gave up. This parent serves as an example:

*We quit doing school about the middle of May. I just gave up completely because it was causing so much stress in our family....we really fell off the school wagon at that point. And we've never looked back! I haven't signed onto Google Classroom since then” (Parent Interview)*

These parents' concerns and struggles are reflected at a national level. Students' mental health has been a grave concern since the pandemic started. For example, 57% of Canadian youth aged 15 to 17 years reported their mental health was somewhat or much worse since pandemic directives started (Children First Canada, 2020). In that same survey 60% of 10 to 17 year olds reported that they disliked going to school online, and 60% felt unmotivated going to school online.

What can be learned from applying the concept of boundary intrusion to parent-teacher relations is that parents have more than school to be concerned about. Unequivocally, the

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



pandemic created unprecedented disruption to all families' lives; nonetheless, this study revealed that the parent-child relationship has much to do with the parent-teacher relationship. While teachers might assume that it is easy and natural for parents to support their children's learning at home—with or without a pandemic—it may, in fact, be detrimental.

Further, though we claim we are all in this pandemic together, we are, in fact, in this unequally due to varying circumstances. It is a reminder that a one-size-fits all approach to working with parents is insufficient.

This study also provided an important insight into the virtue of preserving boundaries as a way to maintain positive parent-teacher relations. This may seem counter-intuitive given some scholars have argued for teachers to make home visits as a way to neutralize power discrepancies and honor parent voice (Cremin et al., 2015; Pushor & Murphy, 2010; Wright et al., 2018). For both parents and teachers, containing a school day was a key challenge of the move to learning at home for. As is the case with digital communications, expectations for open accessibility and immediate response was particularly overwhelming for teachers, especially those who also had children who needed their support. Teachers also felt compelled to be in touch with parents more than they normally would be. Given that parents' own work schedules meant that schooling took place during the evening, this created tensions. This teacher's description was insightful:

*I felt like I was doing 2 full-time jobs. Creating and supplying work for the students that were participating. The second job was contacting and Zooming with every family....I worked longer hours and parents were demanding of my time any time of the day. I ended up turning off notifications because I was answering emails on the weekends and until I went to bed. (Teacher Survey)*

While teachers appreciated the stress that pivoting to learning at home created for parents, they were deflated when they experienced antagonism. The risk with digital communications is that it can erode social responsibility, and when this becomes the primary mode of communicating, it can have negative consequences for parent-teacher relations, especially during such an emotionally-charged time. One teacher wrote, "I have never received such degrading and cruel emails from parents in my career...my mental health was in shambles and I was to the point that I was afraid to check my inbox" (Teacher Survey). Another teacher suggested, "An unfortunate dynamic that has shifted is that we're leaning towards customer service" (Teacher Interview), and ultimately, as professionals, teachers were expected to accept whatever behavior they presented to teachers—those who "lash out" and those who "become introverted"... "the customer is always right." There is evidence that technology has invited negative interactions even prior to the pandemic (e.g. ATA, 2019). The extreme reliance on technology as a mode of communication however, and the exaggerated fluidity of time and space that learning at home created, emphasizes parent-teacher interactions as risk-laden.

Technology was a vehicle for boundary intrusion in another way. Virtual conferencing gave parents direct access to the "classroom", which made teachers vulnerable to scrutiny by parents who did not necessarily have full understanding of what was going on in a lesson. One

## It Takes a Virus: What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



teacher described it as “having a backseat driver” (Teacher Survey), an outcome that was only possible because parents had access to Google Classroom. One teacher described learning at home as an intrusion on their home, and reported going to the school for much of the school closure to maintain that sense of privacy. One teacher even wondered whether parents would negatively judge them based on seeing their home.

Further, the pandemic experience coupled with online teaching unfortunately made some teachers feel like unwilling spectators in uncensored versions of their parents’ lives. Teachers were brought into situations with parents, for example, who “poured their heart out about their working situation” in ways that were ultimately “too revealing and detailed” (Teacher Survey). One teacher felt particularly impacted by situations in which discretion was not taken when virtual conferencing was going on, and felt it was “way, way too personal...and very uncomfortable.” Significantly, the teacher felt a “professional boundary is not being respected” (Teacher Interview). For this teacher, the violation was so impactful that in an attempt to regain a professional boundary, they sterilized the space by removing art and focusing the webcam away from any living space. They called these actions “compartmentalizing”. To advocate for boundaries between parents and teachers goes against the discourse of relationship that predominates parent-teacher relations. The typical assumption is that boundaries should be dismantled so that trust can develop. But, the experience of boundary intrusion can contaminate parent-teacher relations when teachers feel professionalism has been eroded.

Given the preceding discussion on role and boundary ambiguity, and boundary intrusion, it is fair to say that through this pandemic both parents and teachers discovered the necessity of, at least some, boundaries. This is in keeping with Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) who has suggested that a “shift in attitude toward a more inclusive and communicative stance with families does not mean, however, that schools should be without boundaries” (p. 241). By this, she does not mean a separation between parents and teachers, but a softer definition of boundary that delineates each other’s spaces—classroom and home—while at the same time emphasizing the collective responsibility that parents and teachers inevitably share. Parents and teachers are separate but necessary chambers of the heart of school, which is the children.



## The Tender and Complex Geography of Parent-Teacher Relations

*“...there is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools”*  
(Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, Frontispiece)

The above line appears in the opening of the Acknowledgments section in Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) book, *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other*. I love this line, and I am guilty of overusing it in my writing, teaching, and public speaking. But here I am again pulled by the gravity of its artistry and simplicity.

When we talk about parents and teachers working together, that word *relationship* works upon us like gravity, too. But what happens when parents and teachers find themselves in the borderlands?

Much attention has been given to the notion of authentic parent-teacher partnerships (Auerbach, 2012). Authentic partnerships are typically defined as meaningful, but rarely is it discussed how meaning can be derived from tension or disagreement. Yet, this is the reality scholars, practitioners, and policy makers have been trying to overcome. What has been presented here is perhaps not novel, even though COVID-19 surely is. The reality is that there always has been and will always be differences of opinion and experience between teachers and parents because teachers have a universalistic interest in serving all children, and parents have a particularistic interest in advocating for their child (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). But what I learned from the parents and teachers in this study is that the borderlands—the place of “contested terrain and common ground” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 247)—is precisely where perspectives can play out and lead to richer understanding. Lawrence-Lightfoot draws on the notion of borderlands that is attributed to Anzaldúa (1987), a Chicano scholar, who conceptualized the borderland as a place where different cultures meet, figuratively and literally. It is in this space that connection and constraint find synergy to emphasize the complexity of human relations. This study reminds us of this.

Without the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, our society might not be reimagining how we conduct business, how we worship, how we interact with others, how we interact with nature, or how we ensure dignity for the most vulnerable in society. Our values have been revealed through the way we have prioritized and sacrificed through this difficult time. The disruption is almost immeasurable at this point, and this has exposed how interconnected and interdependent are our social and economic worlds. In the triumphs and trials between parents and teachers in this study, the same can be emphasized. I am completing my writing on the day that junior and senior high students will return to at-home learning; Grades K-6 will be restricted to at-home learning following their scheduled winter break. With gratitude, I point to the parents and teachers who courageously shared their struggles and celebrations, for this puts us on trodden ground at a time when we are all searching for a path.



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It Takes a Virus:  
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## Appendices

Appended in this section:

- Parent Survey
- Teacher Survey
- Interview Protocol

### APPENDIX A: PARENT SURVEY

Q1: Consent to participate in study

- I Agree
- I Disagree

Q2: Are you a parent in the province of Alberta?

- Yes
- No

Q3: I am a parent with children in grades (check all that apply):

- Kindergarten to Grade 3
- Grade 4-6
- Grade 7-9
- Grade 10-12

Q4: Number of children in my family:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- More than 6

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Q5: I would describe my family composition as:

- Lone parent household
- Two parent household
- Extended family household (other relatives such as grandparents, are part of the household)
- Other (please specify)

Q6: I identify as:

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Choose not to answer

Q7: Which of the following best describes your level of formal schooling?

- Did not complete high school
- Completed high school
- Post-secondary training (e.g. diploma or certificate program)
- Bachelor degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree

Q8: For me personally, the pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning has been:

- Mostly Positive
- Somewhat Positive
- Somewhat Negative
- Mostly Negative

Q9: For my child(ren), I feel the pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning has been:

- Mostly Positive
- Somewhat Positive
- Somewhat Negative
- Mostly Negative

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Q10: For my family, I feel the pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning has been:

- Mostly Positive
- Somewhat Positive
- Somewhat Negative
- Mostly Negative

Q11: Since the pandemic, I feel my engagement (amount of interaction) with teachers has:

- Significantly Increased
- Somewhat Increased
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Decreased
- Significantly Decreased

Q12: Since the pandemic, I feel my relationship with teachers has:

- Significantly Improved
- Somewhat Improved
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Declined
- Significantly Declined

Q13: Since the pandemic, my participation in school-initiated opportunities (e.g. meetings, committees, volunteering) has:

- Significantly Increased
- Somewhat Increased
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Decreased
- Significantly Decreased

Q14: Since the pandemic, my understanding of the demands of teachers has:

- Significantly Increased
- Somewhat Increased
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Decreased
- Significantly Decreased

Please Explain:

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Q15: Since the pandemic, I find that my respect for teachers has:

- Significantly Increased
- Somewhat Increased
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Decreased
- Significantly Decreased

Please Explain:

Q16: Describe any positive impacts you have experienced regarding parent-teacher relationships since the pandemic.

Q17: Describe any challenges you have experienced regarding parent-teacher relationships since the pandemic.

Q18: What supports helped or would have helped you to be successful in your new role during the pandemic (new role requiring you to be more directly involved in your children's schooling)?

Q19: Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experiences?



## APPENDIX B: TEACHER SURVEY

Q1: Consent to participate in study

- I Agree
- I Disagree

Q2: Are you a teacher in the province of Alberta?

- Yes
- No

Q3: I teach grades (check all that apply):

- Kindergarten to Grade 3
- Grade 4-6
- Grade 7-9
- Grade 10-12

Q4: My schooling context is:

- Rural
- Urban
- Virtual (Cyber School)

Q5: I identify as:

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Choose not to answer

Q6: My experience in the profession is:

- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- 16-20 years
- 21-25 years
- 26-30 years
- 30+ years

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Q7: For me personally, the pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning has been:

- Mostly Positive
- Somewhat Positive
- Somewhat Negative
- Mostly Negative

Q8: For my students, I feel the pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning has been:

- Mostly Positive
- Somewhat Positive
- Somewhat Negative
- Mostly Negative

Q9: Since the pandemic, I feel my engagement (amount of interaction) with parents has:

- Significantly Increased
- Somewhat Increased
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Decreased
- Significantly Decreased

Q10: Since the pandemic, I feel my relationship with parents has:

- Significantly Improved
- Somewhat Improved
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Declined
- Significantly Declined

Q11: Since the pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning has resulted in me knowing my students' families:

- Significantly better than before the pandemic
- Somewhat better than before the pandemic
- Somewhat less than before the pandemic
- Significantly less than before the pandemic

It Takes a Virus:  
What Can Be Learned About Parent-Teacher Relations from Pandemic Realities?



Q12: Since the pandemic I find that parent's understanding of the demands on me as a teacher has:

- Significantly Increased
- Somewhat Increased
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Decreased
- Significantly Decreased

Please Explain:

Q13: Since the pandemic, I find that parents' respect for teachers has:

- Significantly Increased
- Somewhat Increased
- Remained the Same
- Somewhat Decreased
- Significantly Decreased

Please Explain:

Q14: Describe any positive impacts you have experienced regarding parent-teacher relationships since the pandemic.

Q15: Describe any challenges you have experienced regarding parent-teacher relationships since the pandemic.

Q16: What supports helped or would have helped you to be successful with parents during the pandemic?

Q17: Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experiences?



## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Individual Interview Questions

Following a review of the purpose of the study and participants' rights, I will ask each participant to:

1. introduce themselves
2. provide a brief description of the grades of their children if they are parents, or the grades taught if they are a teacher, and any other information they wish to provide.

### Questions

1. Describe your experiences as a teacher or parent during the transition to distant teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Tell me what you have found to be rewarding about distant teaching and learning.  
Areas to consider:
  - a. About how your role might have shifted
  - b. About how you experienced working with teachers/parents
  - c. About how you experienced working with students/your child(ren)
3. Tell me what you have found to be challenging about distant teaching and learning.  
Areas to consider:
  - a. About how your role might have shifted
  - b. About how you experienced working with teachers/parents
  - c. About how you experienced working with students/your child(ren)
4. What new insights about your child's teachers/your students' families did you gain because of the pandemic directive to move to distant teaching and learning?
5. What new understanding, if any, about teachers/parents were made possible because of the pandemic? Were there things about teaching/parenting that were hidden from view before the pandemic?