

Teaching Young Children during COVID-19: Lessons from Early Educators in Louisiana

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Summary:

- COVID-19 dramatically changed teaching and learning in early childhood education (ECE) programs. This report describes the experiences of 518 teachers working with children ages 3-5 in child care centers and school-based preschool programs in Louisiana in Fall 2020.
- Most teachers (58%) reported teaching primarily in person, but child care teachers were far more likely to be teaching in person (83%) than school-based teachers (39%).
- Teachers working remotely reported far greater concerns about the quality of instruction, their ability to assess children's needs, and children's development.
- While 73% of teachers working in person described the quality of teacher-child interactions at their site as *good* or *excellent*, this was true for only 24% of teachers working remotely.
- Among remote/hybrid teachers, 81% reported that the children in their class were learning less than normal, compared to 30% of in person teachers.

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly changed teaching and learning in early childhood education (ECE) programs. While the pandemic created challenges for learners of all ages, young children, who learn through close interactions and hands-on experiences, need considerable supervision, and oftentimes lack attention spans for online instruction, faced unique difficulties.

Nationwide, many ECE programs, particularly those in child care settings, continued to offer in person care and education. They made many changes to daily practices to ensure health and safety, including mask wearing, physical distancing, reduced group sizes, and restricting activities. These changes made teaching young children, who learn through playing, sharing, and close interactions with teachers and peers, more challenging.¹

Teaching 3- to 5-year-old children remotely also proved difficult. Young children struggled to pay attention and required significant involvement from an additional, in person caregiver.² Teachers experienced difficulties identifying the needs of their virtual learners and supporting the development of foundational social and emotional skills.³

Much has been written about the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in K-12 education, including the challenges of remote learning and increasing educational inequities, but there has been less focus on how COVID-19 has altered teaching and learning in ECE.⁴ Children’s early learning experiences shape their skills at kindergarten entry and can have lasting effects. Understanding how COVID-19 impacted the experiences and learning of the youngest learners is vital as the nation begins to recover from the pandemic and teachers work to meet children’s individual needs in the classroom.

This report aims to fill this gap using survey data from 518 teachers working with children ages 3-5 in child care centers and school-based settings in Louisiana. It describes the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in ECE classrooms and highlights differences depending on whether teachers were teaching primarily in person versus remotely (e.g., through online class meetings, video lessons, or learning packets sent home) or in a hybrid of remote and in person teaching.

The report is organized into four sections. The first gives a brief overview of the sample and survey. The second describes the challenges of providing high-quality early learning experiences during COVID-19. It highlights changes to in person activities and the difficulties of remote instruction for young children. Section 3 describes teachers’ perceptions of the pandemic’s impact on the quality of learning experiences children received this fall. The final section highlights teacher’s concerns about children’s learning and development.

1. Overview of the Sample & Survey

The Study of Early Education in Louisiana (SEELA) Fall 2020 Teacher Workforce Survey was fielded between October – December 2020 in three Louisiana parishes: Jefferson, Orleans, and Rapides.⁵ All teachers working with children 0-5 at publicly funded ECE sites were invited to participate in the SEELA survey. The survey was distributed online and on paper, was available in English and Spanish, and could be completed in about 30 minutes. Respondents received a \$25 gift card to thank them for their time.

In total, 1,497 teachers completed the survey, for a response rate of 63%.⁶ This report focuses on the 518 lead teachers and co-teachers who reported working with preschool age children (3- to 5-year-olds) in child care centers and school-based settings.

Nearly all surveyed teachers were female (99%), and on average, they were 42 years old. About one-half of teachers (51%) were White and 43% were Black. Seventy percent of teachers had at least a bachelor’s degree, and one-quarter (24%) had no post-secondary degree. About one-half of teachers (48%) lived in households with total incomes below \$45,000 per year. On average, teachers had an hourly wage of \$17.88, but this ranged from \$7.25 to \$34 per hour, with significant variation by site type. Teachers had an average of 14 children in their class.

Overall, 41% of teachers worked in child care settings and 59% worked in school-based preschool programs. As shown in Table 1, the majority of teachers (58%) reported that they had primarily been teaching and caring for children in person since August. The remainder reported that they had primarily taught either remotely or using a hybrid combination of remote and in person options. The likelihood of in person teaching varied considerably by site type. While most child care teachers (83%) reported teaching and caring for children primarily in person, less than one-half of school-based teachers (39%) did.

Table 1. Mode of Instruction, by Site Type

	In person teaching	Remote/hybrid teaching
Overall (N = 518)	58%	42%
Child care teachers (N = 210)	83%	17%
School teachers (N = 298)	39%	61%

Of the teachers doing at least some remote/virtual instruction, almost all (95%) reported doing a hybrid model of teaching that included a combination of both in person and virtual instruction. In this report, the responses of teachers doing any regular remote teaching – including fully virtual instruction and hybrid – are grouped together.

2. Classroom Experiences During COVID-19

Changes to In Person Instruction

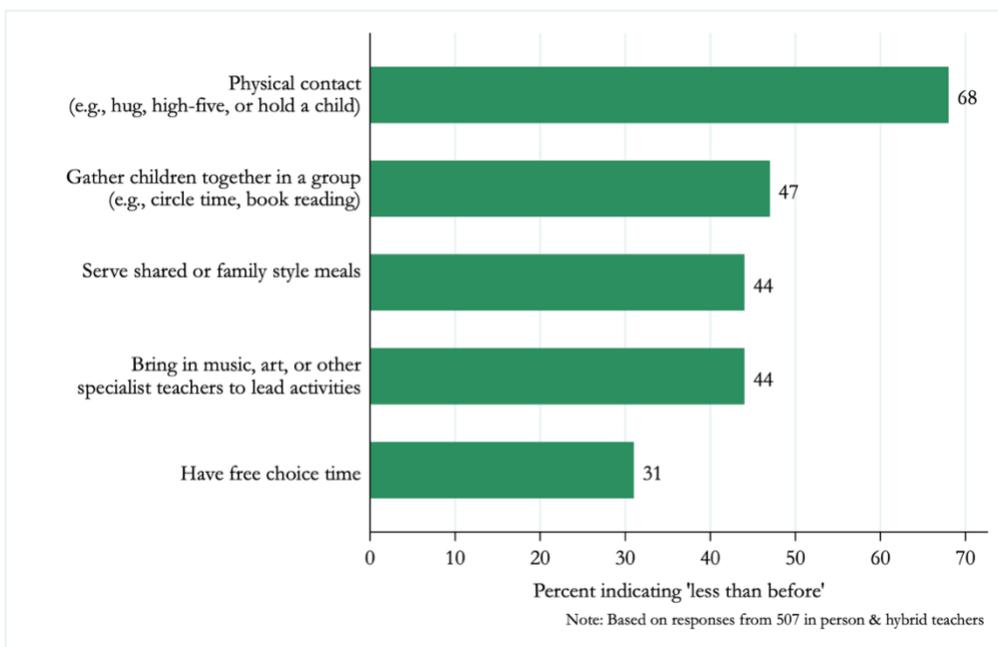
Nearly all teachers continued to do at least some in person teaching. They had to adjust – and help the young children in their care to adjust – to new routines designed to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19, including mask wearing, social distancing, and heightened cleaning protocols.

Despite these efforts to protect themselves and the children and families they serve, most teachers remained concerned about health and safety. Three-quarters (76%) reported that they were moderately or very concerned that families might send sick children to their site, and about one-half reported concerns that co-workers would come to work while sick (50%) or that people would be exposed to COVID-19 at their site (56%).

Teachers also found the new routines challenging to implement and worried about how the pandemic affected their ability to teach. Over one-third of teachers (38%) reported that they were moderately or very concerned that stress from COVID-19 would impact their teaching. As one noted: “Because of COVID teaching guidelines I feel like every day is my first day of teaching. It is constant reevaluation of strategies to teach.”⁷

The pandemic upended many traditional approaches to teaching and learning in ECE classrooms. Figure 1 shows the percentage of in person and hybrid teachers who reported doing common activities less often than before COVID-19. Two-thirds of teachers (68%) noted declines in physical contact, such as hugging, high-fiving, and holding children. Nearly one-half reported that they were less likely to gather children together in a group for circle time or book reading activities (47%); that they were having less shared or family style meals (44%); and that they were bringing in music, art, or other specialist teachers to lead activities less often (44%). About one-third of teachers (31%) indicated they were having less free choice time during which children choose their own activities.

Figure 1. Teachers Reporting Declines to Common In Person Activities



These changes impacted teaching and learning opportunities. One wrote, “At this point, we are more worried about cleaning and keeping the students 6 feet apart than we are teaching. It is very overwhelming. I can't hug or show any kind of affection to my students and that makes me sad.” Another shared, “The children are practicing social distancing, but they just want to play with each other. They are not sharing toys. They are adjusting to air hugs, air high-fives, and air hand shakes. Sometimes, they need a real hug.”

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Challenges of Remote/Virtual Instruction

Although nearly all teachers were doing some teaching in person, many teachers (42%), especially those working in school-based programs, reported remote or hybrid teaching as their primary form of instruction since August. These teachers faced the challenge of engaging and holding the attention of preschool-aged children in virtual settings.

Most remote/hybrid teachers (86%) indicated that they were holding live group or individual meetings with the children in their class. About three-quarters of teachers (78%) indicated that they were communicating with children and families through email or text message, and about two-thirds of teachers (64%) reported sending home physical materials for the children to use.

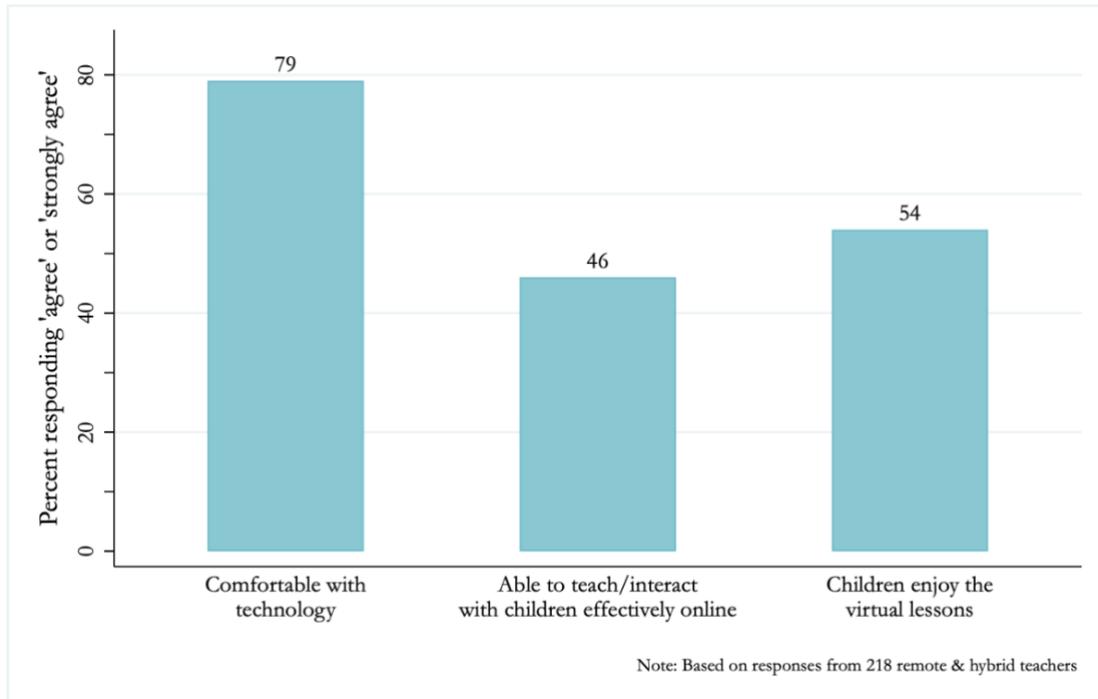
Notably, 14% of teachers reported no live, virtual interactions with children. Overall, remote and hybrid teachers spent little time actually interacting with children virtually. For instance, the median number of hours teachers spent directly interacting with children in virtual meetings was 5 hours a week. One teacher noted that the minimal amount of direct instruction time posed a challenge: "I feel that the 45 minutes or so I spend online with them is not enough for them to develop all the skills that are taught at school. Parents are required to complete work and lessons at home but I am not sure how much time is actually being devoted to the teaching and development of their child."

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In addition to the limited opportunities to interact with their students, teachers also reported that attendance at virtual sessions was oftentimes low. While nearly all in person teachers reported that many or all children were attending classes regularly, only 81% of remote/hybrid teachers reported that this was true for their virtual sessions. In part, these attendance challenges may be related to a lack of reliable internet access. Over one-half of remote/hybrid teachers (53%) reported that at least one child in their class did not have reliable internet, with 13% reporting that many or all of the children in their class lacked access to reliable internet.

Teachers also struggled with using technology and adjusting their teaching to a virtual format. Figure 2 shows that 79% of remote/hybrid teachers agreed that they were comfortable with technology, meaning that about one in five remote/hybrid teachers were *not* comfortable using technology to teach virtually. Beyond this, less than one-half of remote/hybrid teachers indicated they were able to interact with children effectively online (46%) and just over one-half thought the children enjoyed their virtual lessons (54%). One teacher wrote, "I do not feel I can be as effective online with an early learner. Children need hands on, face to face interaction and emotional support that I can't give online."

Figure 2. Challenges of Remote/Virtual Instruction



3. Quality of Teaching During COVID-19

Teaching Quality

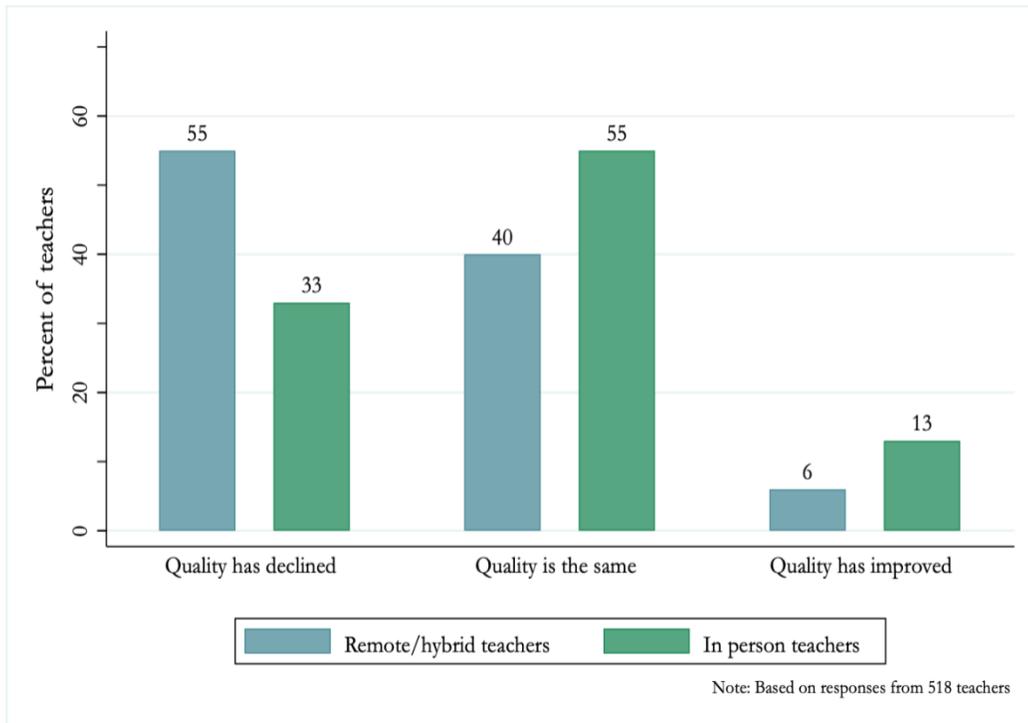
Most teachers reported that the quality of teacher-child interactions at their site had either stayed the same (48%) or even improved (10%) relative to before COVID-19. Nonetheless, 42% reported that the quality of teacher-child interactions at their site had declined because of the changes and challenges created by COVID-19.

One teacher noted: “Due to all the added steps we are taking with cleaning and sanitizing, I find myself less engaged with the children. The children are spending more time in free play and outdoors so we can stay on top of the sanitizing. The interpersonal relationships among the children and with teachers are suffering due to the social distancing, mask wearing, and again the time we have to take away from the children. Nothing I do feels like real teaching anymore.”

Another wrote about the difficulty of masks in the classrooms, saying, “My concern is the children cannot see my expression or my mouth when I’m working with them. It is hard to teach words and numbers or just to read a story with the mask. We work things out but it has been a little tougher.”

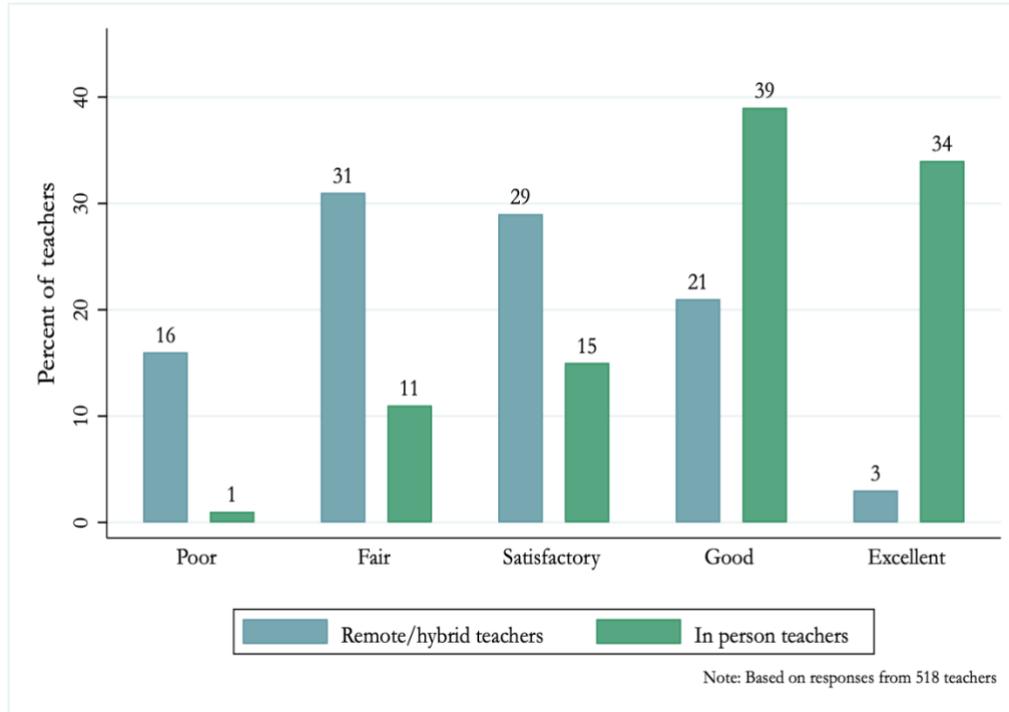
As shown in Figure 3, remote/hybrid teachers were far more likely to report declines in interaction quality. Over one-half of remote/hybrid teachers (55%) reported that the quality of interactions with children at their site had declined, compared to only one-third of teachers working primarily in person.

Figure 3. Reported Impact of COVID-19 on the Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions, by Mode



Remote/hybrid teachers were also far less likely to describe the overall quality of their virtual interactions positively. Figure 4 shows that nearly one-half of remote/hybrid teachers (47%) described their virtual interactions as *poor* or *fair*, and just one-quarter (24%) indicated that their virtual interactions were *good* or *excellent*. In person teachers were three times more likely (73%) to characterize their interactions with children as *good* or *excellent*.

Figure 4. Teachers' Perceived Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions, by Mode



Many teachers faced the additional challenge of managing in person and remote instruction *at the same time*. About one-third of all teachers (30%), including 75% of teachers who indicated doing any regular remote teaching, reported that they had done in person and virtual instruction *simultaneously*.

These teachers reported challenges engaging their virtual learners and providing them with the same quality of instruction as children attending in person classes. One wrote: “Those who chose not to return remained virtual and are online with us and being taught at the same time as the children in the classroom. This has been awful for the virtual students, as it is impossible to devote enough attention to them to keep them highly engaged through a screen. It seems extremely inappropriate, developmentally speaking, and I am very concerned about it.”

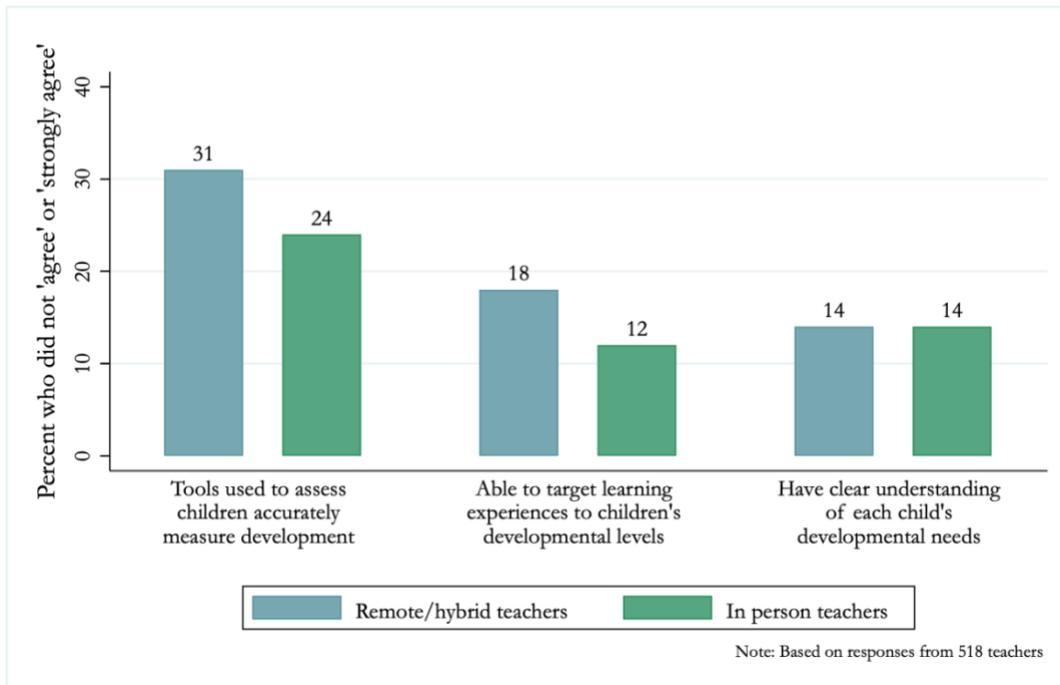
“This has been awful for the virtual students, as it is impossible to devote enough attention to them to keep them highly engaged through a screen. It seems extremely inappropriate, developmentally speaking, and I am very concerned about it.”

A second teacher noted: “Tackling both in person and virtual simultaneously is a much bigger challenge than I thought it would be. Signing into technology, getting things ready, and trying to focus on the screen and the in person kids feels almost impossible everyday. It gets done but it pulls way more energy from me than my job should do.”

Assessing Children and Providing Needed Services

Although the majority of teachers indicated they had both a clear understanding of their children’s developmental needs and were able to target learning experiences to meet those needs, a significant portion – particularly those engaged in virtual instruction – struggled to do so. As shown in Figure 5, about one-third of remote/hybrid teachers (31%) indicated that they did not agree that the tools they used to assess children were accurately measuring children’s learning. Nearly one-fifth of remote/hybrid teachers (18%) did not agree that they were able to target their teaching to children’s learning needs.

Figure 5. Teacher Concerns About Assessing Children’s Skills and Identifying Needs, by Mode

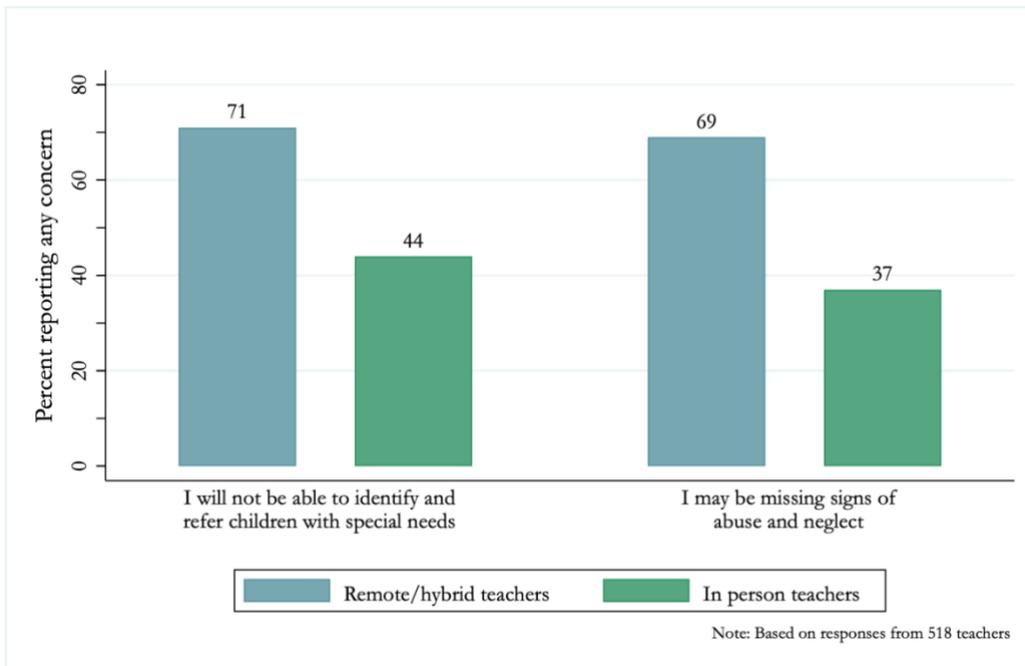


One teacher wrote: “I am finding it quite difficult to properly assess and service the remote students. I am relying on parent conversations to help with my assessments, which I feel will not be accurate.” Another emphasized, “It is absurd to expect the teacher to observe how a student performs when they are online for 30 minutes with no interaction.”

Teachers, especially those doing remote/hybrid teaching, were particularly concerned about failing to identify children with special needs or those experiencing abuse and neglect (Figure 6). Nearly three-quarters of remote/hybrid teachers (71%) expressed concern about their ability to identify children who may have special needs. This concern was considerably less common, though still high, among in person teachers (44%). One teacher noted, “I’m concerned that I can’t pinpoint if a child is acting out because of COVID restrictions and lack of interaction/experience; or if it is because they actually have a behavior issue.”

Similarly, 69% of remote/hybrid teachers indicated they were concerned they might be missing signs of abuse and neglect among their virtual learners, making them nearly two times more likely to express this concern than in person teachers (37%).

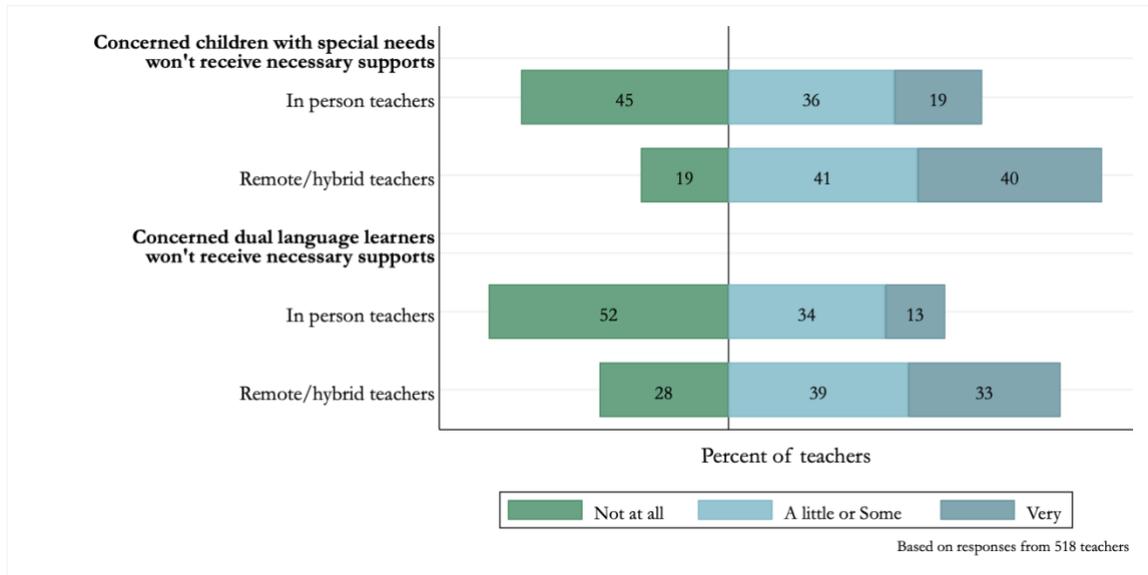
Figure 6. Percentage of Teachers Reporting Concerns Identifying Children, by Mode



Many teachers also reported concerns about providing necessary services to children who had been identified as having special needs⁸ or who were dual language learners (DLL).⁹ As shown in Figure 7, 81% of remote/hybrid teachers and 55% of in person teachers reported that they were at least a little concerned that children with special needs would not receive the services and supports that they required. Remote/hybrid teachers were two times more likely than in person teachers to report they were *very* concerned about inadequate services for children with special needs (40% compared to 19%).

Similarly, 72% of remote/hybrid teachers and 47% of in person teachers reported at least a little concern that DLL children wouldn't receive necessary supports. Again, remote/hybrid teachers were more than twice as likely as in person teachers to report they were very concerned (33% compared to 13%).

Figure 7. Percentage of Teachers Concerned Children Won't Receive Needed Services, by Mode



In free responses, teachers across both modes elaborated on these concerns. One wrote, "I have been concerned that the virtual support is not adequate enough to meet their individual needs." Another wrote, "I am concerned that students with special needs will be 'lost in the shuffle' of all the other concerns right now."

Teachers also reported concerns about children's ability to access necessary mental health supports, including 38% of remote/hybrid teachers and 28% of in person teachers.

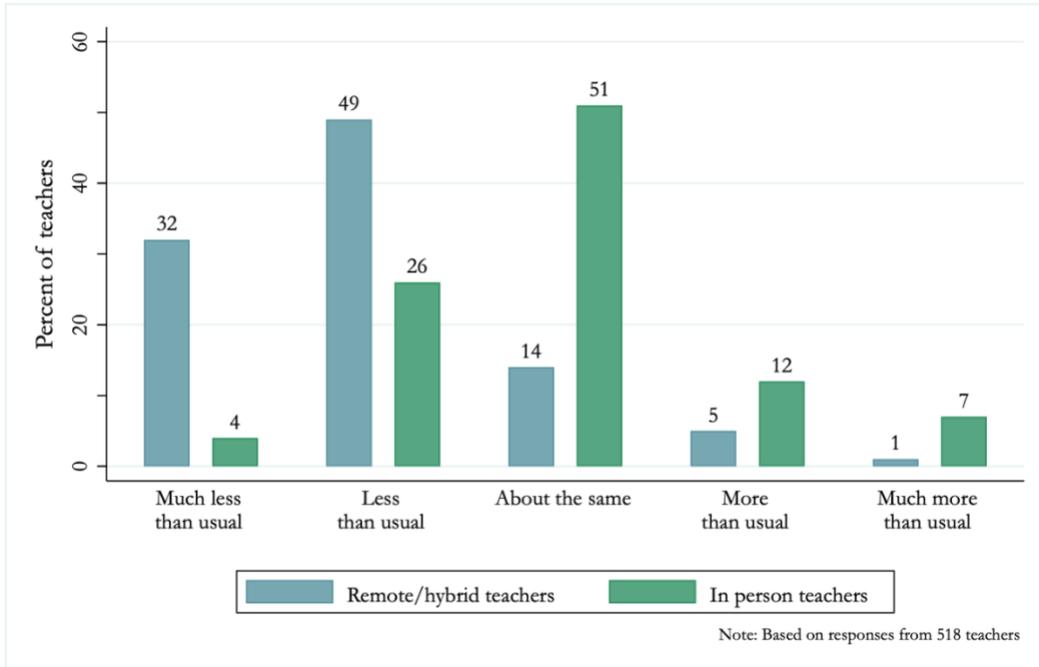
4. Teacher Concerns about Children's Development

Learning During COVID-19

As highlighted above, remote/hybrid teachers had much greater concerns about teaching during COVID-19 than in person teachers did. There were also striking differences by mode in teachers' reports of how much children were learning.

Figure 8 shows that while most teachers working in person (70%) reported that children were learning about the same or more than usual, just 20% of remote/hybrid teachers also reported this about their virtual learners. In fact, remote/hybrid teachers were eight times more likely (32%) to say that children were learning much less than usual, compared to in person teachers (4%).

Figure 8. Teacher Reports of How Much Children Are Learning Compared to Usual, by Mode



Children’s Social, Emotional, & Behavioral Challenges

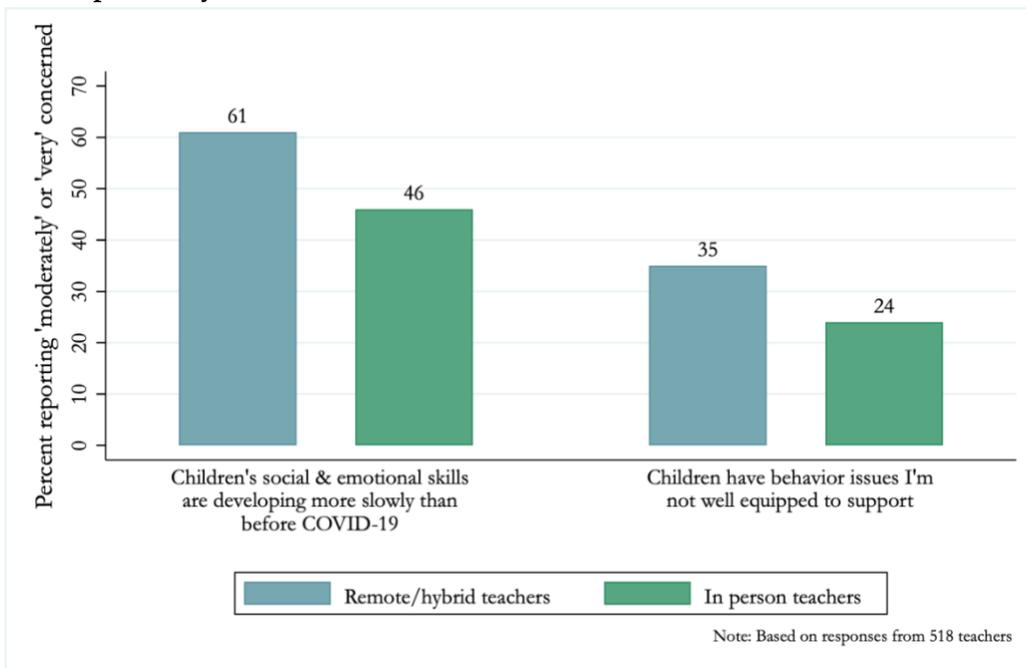
In addition to overall concerns about the amount children were learning, many teachers also expressed concern about the effect of COVID-19 on the development of children’s social skills and their behavior.

Figure 9 shows teachers’ concerns about children’s social and emotional development and their behavior issues: 61% of remote/hybrid teachers – and nearly one-half of all in person teachers (46%) – reported that they were moderately or very concerned that children’s social and emotional skills were developing more slowly because of COVID-19.

One teacher wrote, “We are not working in small groups, playdoh and cooking activities are not allowed, we are not doing “fun engaging” hands on activities, there is no gross motor skills, field trips and family engagement have been canceled. I feel like the lack of these things are hindering the social and emotional growth of my students which is impacting our learning environment.”

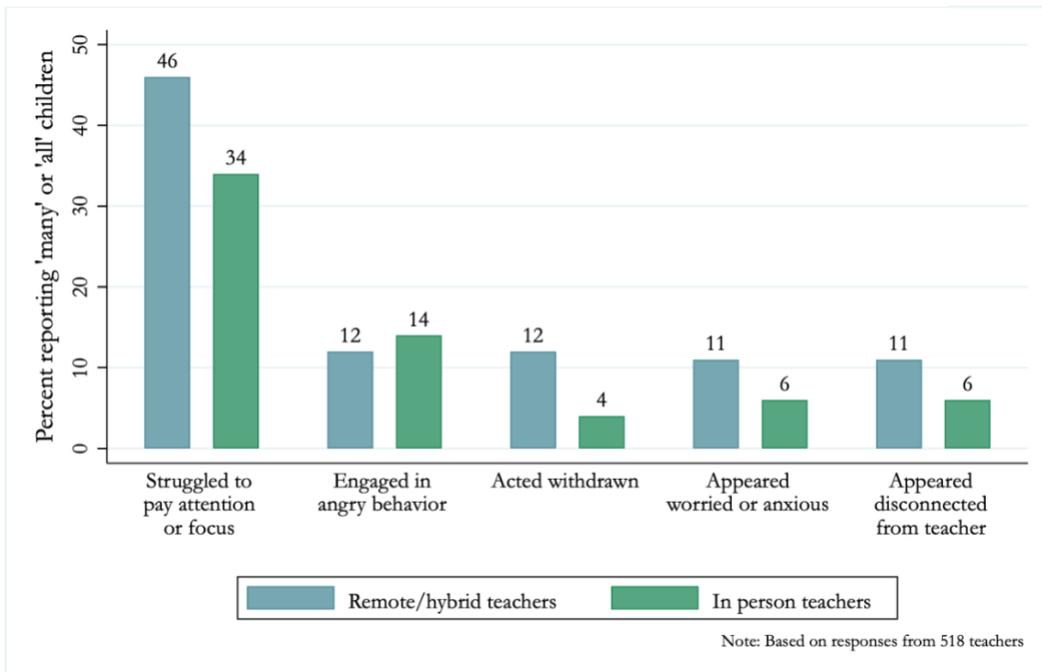
Teachers also reported feeling concerned that children had behavior issues they were not well-equipped to support, including 35% of remote/hybrid teachers and 24% of in person teachers.

Figure 9. Teacher Concerns about Supporting Children’s Social & Emotional Development, by Mode



Almost all teachers across both in person and remote/hybrid modes of instruction indicated that at least a few children in their class were struggling to pay attention or focus. Nearly one-half of remote/hybrid teachers (46%) indicated that many or all children had attention issues during instruction, compared to one-third of in person teachers (34%) (Figure 10). One teacher wrote, “Their attention spans are much shorter than students I’ve taught in the past.”

Figure 10. Teacher Reports of Child Behavior Problems, by Mode



Just over one-tenth of remote/hybrid teachers also reported that many or all of the children in their class were engaging in angry behavior (12%), acting withdrawn (12%), appearing anxious (11%), or were disconnected from the teacher (11%).

In person teachers also noted these challenges. One wrote, “Some students have been acting out more than usual and some students have anxiety about leaving their family when coming to school.” Another noted, “In the start of school, there was a definite change in the children’s behaviors compared to other years. They were more dependent on the teachers to do everything for them and more interested in playing independently than with a group. You could tell they had

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been in quarantine for a while. We had lots of wild, aggressive behaviors. Now that it has been a few months, the children seem to be back in the routine and interacting and socializing more like normal years.”

Implications

ECE teachers have faced daunting challenges educating young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. In person teachers navigated new routines and managed social distancing, often while stressed about their own safety and the safety of the families they serve. Remote teachers found it challenging to hold children's attention and to effectively interact with them online. Many teachers juggled hybrid instruction, sometimes teaching children in person and virtually at the same time.

According to the Louisiana early educators who completed this survey, COVID-19 seriously compromised their ability to provide high-quality instructional experiences and has affected how much children are learning. Concerns were much more pronounced among teachers doing remote or hybrid instruction. Almost one-half of remote/hybrid teachers described the quality of teacher-child interactions as less than satisfactory, whereas most in person teachers described the quality as good or excellent. Remote/hybrid teachers were also far more concerned that the children they taught were learning less than usual and lagging in social and emotional development.

Teachers reported difficulties assessing children's needs. They worried they were failing to identify children with special needs or children suffering from abuse or neglect. They also expressed concerns that children with special needs, dual language learners, and children in need of mental health supports were not receiving necessary services. These findings echo evidence from other surveys that suggest few preschool children with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) are receiving the supports and services that they are entitled to, and that identifying children with special needs during COVID-19 is difficult as specialists are not visiting classrooms.¹⁰

Addressing the challenges early educators faced in reaching and teaching young children will require considerable long-term investments in young children, their families, and their teachers. Communities need support for comprehensive screening to quickly assess children's developmental needs and target services accordingly. They need support engaging with families to best meet young children's needs. In many cases, this will mean facilitating high quality in person learning opportunities for young children as soon as it is safe this summer and fall. It will also mean paying particular attention to those families who, for a host of reasons, may need to continue with remote or hybrid instruction during the transition. In all of these efforts, it is important to center racial equity and cultural responsiveness to address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on children and families of color.

Meeting young children's needs will also require an influx of resources to support early educators. Teachers in child care centers, preschools, and other ECE programs will encounter a wider range of learning levels this coming year than in previous years as young children enter classrooms from different pandemic learning environments. Teachers will need need to differentiate instruction to meet each child's individual needs. They will, no doubt, need training to build their capacity to do so. They will also need financial and other supports to ensure their wellbeing as they continue the work of building high-quality learning environments in the difficult context of the pandemic and recovery.

Endnotes

¹ Grindal, T., Smith, S., Nakamura, J., & Granja, M. (2021). Early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic: The experiences of Arkansas educators. *SRI International*. Retrieved from https://www.sri.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ARISE-Memo_Early-childhood-education-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic_02042021_with-Appendices.pdf

² Sonnenschein, S. & Stites, M. (2020, November 25). It's not just ABCs – Preschool parents worry their kids are missing out on critical social skills during the pandemic. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/its-not-just-abcs-preschool-parents-worry-their-kids-are-missing-out-on-critical-social-skills-during-the-pandemic-150434>

³ Carr, R.C. (2020). *The North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten program and remote learning services during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings from a statewide survey of teachers*. Center for Child and Family Policy, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University. Retrieved from https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/NC%20Pre-K%20Remote%20Learning%20COVID%20Report_7.2020_Final.pdf

⁴ Kraft, M.A., Simon, N.S., & Lyon, M.A. (2020). Sustaining a sense of success: The importance of teacher working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. EdWorkingPaper: 20-279. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/35nj-v890>

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⁵ These three parishes are large, diverse, and include rural and urban settings. Jefferson Parish has a population of 432,493; the racial breakdown is 65% White, 28% Black, and 15% Hispanic/Latino; and the child poverty rate is 28%. Orleans Parish has a population of 390,144; the racial breakdown is 35% White, 60% Black, and 6% Hispanic/Latino; and the child poverty rate is 33%. Rapides Parish has a population of 129,648; the racial breakdown is 64% White, 32% Black, and 3% Hispanic/Latino; and the child poverty rate is 26%. In comparison, the overall population in Louisiana is 4,648,794; the racial composition is 63% White, 33% Black, and 5% Hispanic/Latino; and the child poverty rate is 27%.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). Population Estimates, July 1, 2019 (V2019) – Louisiana [data table]. *Quick Facts*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/LA/PST045219>

⁶ This response rate is high, as surveys of early educators typically do not exceed 40%.

Boyd-Swan, C. & Herbst, C.M. (2019) Racial and ethnic discrimination in the labor market for child care teachers. *Educational Researcher*, 48(7), 394-406. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19867941>

⁷ Some quotes included in this report have been lightly edited for clarity.

⁸ Children with special needs include those with an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP), a diagnosed disability, a chronic illness or medical problem, or a severe social/emotional problem.

⁹ In this sample, 54% of teachers reported that they had at least one child with special needs in their class, and 56% reported that they had at least one dual language learner (DLL) in their class. Statistics presented here include reports from all teachers regardless of whether they indicated having a child with special needs or a DLL in their class.

¹⁰ Grindal, T., Smith, S., Nakamura, J., & Granja, M. (2021). Early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic: The experiences of Arkansas educators. *SRI International*. Retrieved from https://www.sri.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ARISE-Memo_Early-childhood-education-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic_02042021_with-Appendices.pdf

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