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Faculty of Education



Early Childhood &  
Primary Education  
RESEARCH GROUP

THE COVID-19 AND EDUCATION IN MALTA (Cov-EM) STUDY

# Perspectives of Primary School Educators

RESEARCH REPORT 3

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THE COVID-19 AND EDUCATION IN MALTA (Cov-EM) STUDY  
**Perspectives of Primary School Educators**  
RESEARCH REPORT 3

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# Foreword

Gratitude is the feeling that guides me as I write the foreword to 'The COVID-19 and Education in Malta (Cov-EM) Study: Perspectives of Primary School Educators'. As an academic working in the field of pre-service teacher education in Malta and Gozo for more than twenty years, I am grateful to the primary school professionals and paraprofessionals who weathered the COVID-19 storm through their commitment to children, aged 5 to 11, learning by remote means. I am particularly grateful to the Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) research team, constituted by Dr. Charmaine Bonello, Dr. Rosienne Camilleri, Dr. Josephine Deguara, Dr. Josephine Milton and Dr. Tania Muscat, for this contribution of theirs to the local educational field. I am sure that this report will encourage many to proceed ahead with equal passion, enthusiasm and commitment in their own educational quest. This report presents the findings from two snapshots that coincide with the first (September 20) and second (September 21) pandemic waves. Snapshots that offer a detailed description of the views associated with two different groups of education professionals and paraprofessionals practicing in local state, church and independent schools. In surveying primary school educators' views about teaching and learning, the quality of learning spaces in conjunction with educators' views about the quality of their relationships and consequent well-being, the authors describe the perspectives of two different groups of primary school educators who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the world, and perhaps our thinking about life, as never before. This pandemic, even in this age of increasingly rapid medical, technological and other advances has clearly highlighted two global issues. First, the global frailty in the provision of 'societal services' such as healthcare and education. Second, the global gaps in the quality of provision. Malta and Gozo too have had to face the many challenges that subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic have exerted on our citizens. Many children especially found it challenging in having to rapidly adjust to a new experience of learning, outside of the school, whilst not quite being home-schooled. Pupil learning now became situated within the physical boundaries of the home but delivered through a computer screen. Physical proximity between teacher and pupil, as well as pupil with peers, was lost. Educators soon realised that unlike when in the classroom the quality of their teaching was now not in the main more dependent on factors within their sphere of control but to a much greater extent dependent on the quality and availability of resources beyond their control. Resources such as pupils' access to an appropriate study area, a computer for sole use by the primary school-aged child, good internet connectivity, use of a personal study space such as a bedroom for oneself and a safe and stable home-learning environment. The classroom, as we know it pre-COVID, ceased to exist, at least for a long while. The space in which learning occurred, or was meant to occur, no longer involved classrooms in schools. The 'imposed' novel experience of teaching and learning through remote means tore through the very essence and nature of relationships between educators and pupils. Now we acknowledge that this influenced, at times adversely, the well-being of many and especially so the more vulnerable.

This report is timely and insightful because regardless of whether you, the reader, is an educator or not, the findings allow you the opportunity to connect with educators through the reported results associated with educators' views. In tandem with this, your imagination affords you the pleasure to link with educators' views through your own experience of the pandemic. Regardless of whether your views are similar or contrasting. Life during the pandemic proved challenging for most. Educators discovered that their planning and preparation work had grown exponentially. Moreover, many had to rethink their pedagogical strategy and reengineer their teaching resources. Primary school educators taught groups of children, within the virtual classroom, with, at times, suddenly widely varying financial home contexts. Overnight, the parents

of many children lost their employment and their one source for financial remuneration. In contrast some other parents continued in their employment as usual with a very few experiencing increased financial remuneration. It seemed as if life's middle-ground was lost during the pandemic. Notwithstanding the many divides that the COVID-19 has magnified, this pandemic has defined the human condition. Clearly us humans are creatures needy of a physical reality driven by shared and sustained human contact and interaction. A physical reality that needs to be balanced by both indoor, and perhaps more importantly, outdoor lived experiences. Experiences that accumulate in and over our life-time and in support of a happy and healthy life trajectory.

The pandemic has also shown us that we Maltese and Gozitans are resilient and willing to take on board unforeseen challenges. Yet, we have also understood that resilience and willingness might at times not suffice. Resources need to be made available to people to: secure and safeguard their health, access quality primary education provision, and live and grow within quality indoor and outdoor spaces that foster well-being. Education is a particularly powerful societal tool that empowers individuals to navigate life's many challenges positively through learning. Primary school educators today are critical agents in the shaping of a near future Maltese society. Consequently, primary school educators need to be continuously empowered by clear and coherent policies that secure and safeguard their professional status, autonomy and agency. They also need to be afforded opportunities for them to access quality training that allows them to keep abreast with pedagogical and technological advances whilst moving ahead in their career trajectory. These last comments of mine have been inspired by a few of the many insightful recommendations made in this report. So now I urge you, the reader, to discover this report partially entitled 'Perspectives of Primary School Educators'. I hope that you will rediscover, during your reading of this report, just as many lessons as I have rediscovered during mine. I sincerely hope that you and I will remember and have the courage to apply the many lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic for the good of our children.



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# List of Abbreviations

<b>Cov-EM</b>	COVID-19 and Education in Malta
<b>COVID-19</b>	SARS-CoV-2 (2019-nCoV) coronavirus and Coronavirus Disease 2019
<b>DECPE</b>	Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education
<b>ECEC</b>	Early Childhood Education and Care
<b>ECPE</b>	Early Childhood and Primary Education
<b>FoE</b>	Faculty of Education
<b>FREC</b>	Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>LSE</b>	Learning Support Educator
<b>SLT</b>	School Leadership Team
<b>UM</b>	University of Malta



# About the Authors

The Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) research group currently comprises five female academics. All members form part of the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education (DECPE), within the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta.



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**TANIA MUSCAT** is a Senior Lecturer within the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education. She is a language educator with a specialisation in native language (Maltese) and literacy. Her research interests focus on using language as social practice namely the notion of children's identities as social, discursive, and materialist constructs. Over the years she has been involved in national project/s (*One Tablet Per Child*), national policy working group/s (*Teaching Maltese as a Foreign Language, 2019*) and small-scale EU funded project.

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First and foremost, we are grateful for the kind participation of primary school educators, learning support educators (LSEs), peripatetic teachers and other educators who took their time to take part in one or both runs of this research study. This study would not have been possible without their generous collaboration.

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We are also grateful to our families and loved ones for their patience, constant support, and encouragement to persevere in our academic and research endeavours.

Finally, we express our gratitude to the present members of the Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) Research Group for the reciprocal support, encouragement, and collegiality in our journey to grow together professionally as teacher educators, academics, and researchers.

# Executive Summary

## Perspectives of Primary School Educators in Malta

The COVID-19 and Education Malta (Cov-EM) research project has been carried out by the Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) Research Group within the Faculty of Education, University of Malta. A group of female academics sought to document and explore what can be learned from the insights of different stakeholders in Early and Primary Education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta. The study was conducted over two phases. During each phase (Phase 1 – September 2020; and Phase 2 – September 2021), an online questionnaire examining three main concepts over time – teaching and learning, learning spaces, and relationships and well-being - was sent to five stakeholders, namely Initial Teacher Education (ITE) university students, early childhood educators, primary school educators, school leaders, and parents via social media. The third phase of the project (May-June 2022) focused on children's participation in Early and Primary Education during post-COVID times.

Framed within a triad conceptual framework, the study presented in this report sought to obtain a clearer understanding of the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the pedagogies and practices, learning spaces, well-being and relationships from the perspectives of educators teaching and working in primary schools across Malta and Gozo. The main research question that guided this study was:

***What lessons can we learn from the perspectives of primary school educators during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta?***

The following sub-questions were also developed to guide the research:

- i. *How did primary school educators perceive and facilitate teaching and learning during the pandemic?*
- ii. *What learning spaces did primary school educators in Malta create and use during the pandemic?*
- iii. *In what ways, if any, did the pandemic impact the relationships and overall well-being of primary school educators in Malta?*

## Methods

An online survey was selected as a safe, effective, and efficient manner to collect data during the pandemic. The survey was first conducted in September 2020. Since the pandemic persisted, the research group decided to launch a second modified and adapted version of the survey in September 2021. The questionnaires were designed to measure respondents' attitudes, opinions or perceptions and were composed of multiple-choice items with a few open-ended items. The data was extracted and imported into SPSS for analysis. The participants were educators working with primary school-aged learners. The first survey totalled 207 participants, whilst the second survey yielded 126 participants. In both surveys, the large majority of participants were female (93.8% and 94.4% respectively), and their average age was 39.3 years for survey one and 39.9 years for survey 2 (ranging from 18-65+ years).

## Key Findings

Responses in both surveys were yielded from the three main educational sectors. Data indicates that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the personal and professional lives of primary school teachers was substantial. Generally, Survey 1 indicates an eclectic and disjointed approach to provision that resulted in unequal access to education with disparate efforts evident in the quality and quantity of instruction available to primary school learners. This seemed to mainly be linked to the absence of immediate and clear protocols for educators to follow with the closure of schools in March 2020. More positively, Survey 2 evidenced improved and more widespread access to education due to increased support, resources, and guidance. In both surveys, teachers validated the benefits of using digital technologies to reach learners in their homes in extraordinary times like a pandemic, whilst also expressing concern over the educational and affective repercussions of the pandemic.

## Teaching and Learning

In terms of the way primary school educators viewed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning, their responses pointed to several insights:

- There is evidence of different approaches (rather than universal or consistent practices) used by teachers to educate a whole generation of primary school learners during the lockdown periods, with **synchronous and asynchronous modes** adopted exclusively or interchangeably to facilitate the learning process. An increase in the use of synchronous modes was evident over time, with 67% and 78% of educators in Survey 1 and Survey 2 respectively indicating they opted for live online sessions over recorded or other asynchronous modes, viewing these as their most preferred and effective approaches.
- The data indicates there was minimal or uneven **guidance and support** regarding protocols and procedures to follow particularly during the first lockdown period. Only 23% (in the first lockdown) and 18% (after the third term) of participant educators claimed they followed a school-wide policy for remote online learning. 42% of respondents in the first survey were encouraged to choose any approach they preferred. This seemed to improve over time, yet **teacher confidence and effectiveness** could not be matched with the increase in demands and expectations from the teacher population to perform efficiently and in a timely manner. In Survey 2, 44% of respondents felt their confidence with delivering live online sessions increased over time, though this was not the case for 29% of educators who saw their confidence decreasing instead. Moreover, 51% were also less confident in addressing individual needs and managing behaviour in the online teaching scenario. Having said this, 67% felt supported by their SLT in the second run of the study.
- For most respondents, **teaching during COVID-19 times** became more challenging, as confirmed by 79% of the respondents in the first survey. 88% also indicated they spent more time on preparation and planning compared to pre-COVID times. The use of digital technologies did not necessarily translate into more innovative pedagogies – it was generally felt that teaching become more traditional compared to pre-COVID times and that teachers found it harder to address the needs of all learners through the shift to online modes.
- **Collaboration and support from colleagues** (72%) together with **teacher training** (53%) were seen to be helpful in assisting teachers to develop or enhance their digital skills in the face of the changing teaching landscape, particularly in the second survey.
- **Curriculum content and learning time** have been adversely impacted by the pandemic. Responses also indicated that a rather fragmented and subject-specific approach as opposed to a cross-curricular or integrated approach was adopted with key subject areas taking most prominence in terms of learning time.
- **Learning time** seemed to be greatly reduced for the main subject areas, and almost non-existent for those areas of learning considered to be less important in the hierarchical structure of subject matter in schools. Interestingly, mathematics as a subject area tended to take priority for more than half the respondents in the first survey, with 55% stating it was delivered more than twice a week compared to 15% for English and 10% for Maltese.
- 60% of teacher respondents were concerned about the **disappearance of some learners** from the online classroom during the lockdown periods and the learning losses that were inevitable, particularly for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities and those coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds. 54% of educators felt the loss of in-class support impacted children's learning as they struggled to grasp certain concepts without help, whilst 55% reported that access to learning for learners with additional needs and gifted children was also negatively affected.
- **Absenteeism** was one of the barriers to continued learning during the pandemic, particularly with regards to online learning during the school lockdown for certain groups of learners who fell through the net and could not be reached. 21% of respondents in the first survey noted that some learners were rarely or never present in online sessions. In Survey 2, 83% stated that most learners were regular in their attendance during the second year of the pandemic.
- **Assessment and monitoring** were also negatively affected by the shift to online or restricted learning spaces due to mitigating measures, with 'questioning' being a popular form of assessment in both online and in-class instruction (73% for Survey 1 and 64% in Survey 2). In the second survey, assessment through teacher-learner interaction during live online session became more frequent (78%). The data indicated that there was a decline in the use of formative assessment during the pandemic, most especially with regards to the use of group and collaborative tasks – with 94% of respondents in Survey 2 claiming the latter was not used at all.

## Learning Spaces

Some striking insights were also evident in the data gathered on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the new learning spaces.

- Despite having **access to technological devices** (87% in Survey 1 and 79% in Survey 2), there were several challenges experienced by teachers vis-a-vis the availability of adequate learning spaces and access to technology.
- The physical school closure meant teachers **shifted their workspace to their own homes**, which they shared with other family members. Having an undisturbed place from where to plan, prepare and deliver their lessons became difficult for many teachers, with some having to juggle family life and work simultaneously. Only 58% of teacher respondents in the first survey had enough physical space for their work-related tasks in their homes, while 50% in the second survey claimed to be able to work without disturbance.
- Teachers reported **developing new skills** during the pandemic including navigating online platforms (83%), the use of videoconferencing (72%), and PowerPoint presentations with voice-over (57%). Additionally, some teachers felt empowered and motivated to further develop and enhance their digital competencies to ensure continued learning for the learners.
- Both **gains and losses** were identified by teacher respondents in terms of outcomes for learners – they acknowledged that the shift to online modes benefited learners' digital skills, yet generally the social and emotional losses for primary school-aged learners were perceived to far outweigh any academic gains. In the second survey, only 39% felt children benefited academically during the pandemic, while 90% and 65% respectively believed learners suffered socially and emotionally.
- The data pointed to an overall **negative attitude towards online modes of learning** for primary school-aged learners – their teachers strongly felt that an exclusively remote online mode was **not developmentally appropriate**, though they did acknowledge its value as a temporary measure during an emergency. 66% in Survey 1 and 46% in Survey 2 were concerned that the online scenario made it difficult for learners to remain engaged. Moreover, 63% in the second survey felt that children had lost a substantial amount of learning over the pandemic period.
- Given a choice, more than half of the respondents (54%) in Survey 2 opted for an **exclusive face-to-face scenario post-COVID**, although two fifths of respondents (42%) were also in favour of retaining a **blended approach**.
- Difficulties were also mentioned in relation to having **adequate spaces** (indoor and outdoor) **and resources** to cater for their whole class when school doors were re-opened. This led to new challenges and strains for educators who were compelled to look for alternative ways to facilitate the teaching and learning process.

## Relationships and Well-being

The unprecedented global shifts to online modes of learning and the redesigned classroom spaces that happened quite abruptly led to inevitable changes in teachers' daily personal and working lives. The data collected in the two surveys indicated that primary school teachers were generally conversant about their occupational well-being, and aware of both negative and positive impact of the pandemic on their well-being and relationships:

- The COVID-19 lockdown negatively affected **the happiness and satisfaction with life** of most respondents in both surveys, although the situation seemed to be worse in the first run of the questionnaires, with 79% stating they experienced increased levels of stress and 75% feeling unhappy. Mixed responses were given in the second survey, with primary school teachers acknowledging both the pros and cons of the pandemic on their well-being – the responses shifted considerably so that 60% felt more stressed and 41% stating they felt generally less happy than pre-COVID times in Survey 2.
- **Increased burdens** were experienced by teachers because of the restrictions imposed when working within the confinements of one's home during lockdown or working in a restrictive classroom environment when schools reopened – this led to **stress and burnout** for some teachers, with 60% of teacher respondents in Survey 2 claiming they felt more stressed than pre-COVID times and less satisfied professionally (40%).
- Spending more time with family members, developing the resilience required to cope with the adverse circumstances of the emergency, and reducing the commuting element were the more positive effects of the pandemic according to the teacher respondents.
- Many respondents felt confident **teaching via online technology** (70% in Survey 1), though 51% felt exhausted and overwhelmed by the changes they experienced, which put a strain not only on their productivity and work life, but also on their mental health and family lives. A preference for 'normal' schooling was persistently expressed through the data.

- **Positive outcomes of the pandemic** in relation to overall well-being were also identified – including a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, feeling satisfied to have survived the year despite the hardships (70% in Survey 2), developing new skills and competencies (50%), and building stronger bonds with children and their families (29%).
- Other **advantages** were the comfort and flexibility of working from home, increased communication and interaction with families, and increased time with own family. Some **disadvantages** were the lack of support and collaboration, restricted physical movement, higher levels of stress, and increased difficulty to establish a work/life balance.
- Stress resulting from the unfamiliar circumstances, sudden changes and increased or transformed workloads and expectations were evident in teachers' responses. Data pointed to **an alleviation or exacerbation of stress and burnout depending on the levels of support and guidance** provided as perceived by the teacher respondents. 68% of educators in the second survey felt supported by senior staff with regards to their teaching duties but less so in terms of their mental well-being (44%).
- Overall, **teacher-learner relationships and learner-learner relationships**, deemed critical for the learning process, suffered. For those who adopted synchronous modes, partly or exclusively, teaching online through a screen meant uneven communication and contact with learners during the physical lockdown. This was made more difficult when solely asynchronous modes were used.
- When schools reopened their doors, the **restrictive environments**, use of masks and social distancing also had an impact on social interaction, the possibility for group work, and relationship-building.
- Teacher respondents felt that when **parents were supportive** during the pandemic, learners experienced a more positive learning experience and were more likely to benefit from the learning process. There were concerns for those families who would or could not participate or cooperate and on the repercussions for children's learning and development. 84% of educators in the first survey were confident in communicating remotely with parents and learners and parental presence during online lessons was evident for 56.1%. Generally, half of the respondents in the second survey felt supported by parents most of the time (47%). 59% of participant educators claimed parents were able to provide all resources needed for their children to participate fully in the learning process, whereas 20% claimed this was not possible.



## Recommendations

In the light of the above key findings, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary school educators in Malta, the following recommendations are being presented:

- There is evidently a **need for revised and improved strategic action on a national level** (higher education authorities, school leaders, and teacher training institutions) to help prepare, equip, and support the teacher population in future emergencies.
- A more **consistent and socially just educational response and provision** is to be guaranteed to reach all learners irrespective of which school they attend, who teaches them, or which family background or situation they come from. The principles of equality, children's rights, and inclusion are to be upheld and promoted even, or most especially, in dire circumstances.
- Efforts to continue to **reduce the digital divide between the home and the school**, and to **strengthen the home-school links** by acknowledging the significant role of parents in ensuring outcomes for learners are highly recommended.
- There is also an urgent call for **more widespread cultures of collaborative work and supportive systems** across the different levels and stakeholders in education.
- The differences in the kind of provision and support received by primary school-aged learners in Maltese classrooms point to **the need for more formal frameworks that guarantee the upskilling of the teacher population** in terms of **digital competencies**. More funding and investment in terms of technology-based pedagogy built on high-quality training both in initial and continuous professional development is thus a must.
- Following the prolonged period of irregular or restricted educational provision during the pandemic, our country requires a **clearer picture of the learning gains and losses** that resulted from the pandemic, together with a critical analysis of how any potential gaps in children's learning and development could be rectified.
- In view of the centrality of relationships for learning, development and overall well-being of both adults and children that the pandemic clearly pointed to, our educational system must continue to **build, promote and reinforce a culture of collaboration and sharing**, community-building, supportive and socially just learning spaces.
- Finally, the **mental health and overall well-being of teachers, learners and their families** in both normal and emergency situations need to be given priority during policy development and implementation, and decision-making processes that impact the learning and development of primary school-aged learners.







## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

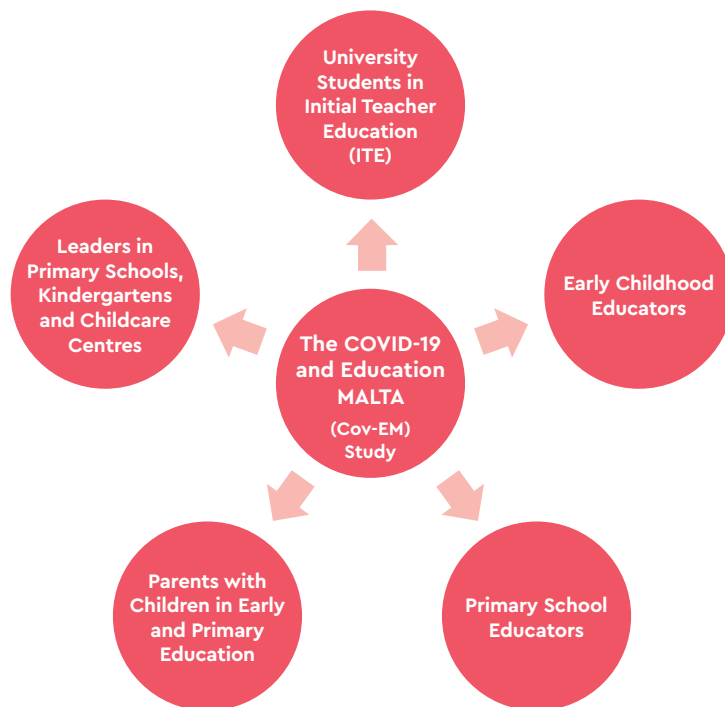
### 1.1 The Cov-EM Study

As the COVID-19 virus spread swiftly across Europe in March 2020, it turned the lives of adults, youth, and children upside down. Overnight, people had to become accustomed to new ways of working and living. In the Maltese islands, all education institutions, from childcare centres to the university campus were compelled to close their doors to in person teaching and learning. Amidst a pervading sense of fear of the unknown across all sectors in Malta and around the globe, lecturers and teachers in the educational arena were faced with the challenge of finding alternative ways of educating students remotely using the digital resources and tools available to them; either through their institutions or their homes. The entire profession of educators, from the early years sectors to the higher education sectors, were now compelled to change their usual way of teaching. The shift from face-to-face methods of teaching to modes and forms of technologically mediated online teaching impacted learning and influenced the manner of learning.

### 1.2 The ECPE Research Group and the Cov-EM Study

Following the disruptions and challenges brought on by these unforeseen periods of school and university closures in Malta due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020, two academics from the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education (DECPE) at the University of Malta felt it necessary to react to the challenges being faced. This led to the inception of the Early Childhood and Primary Education (ECPE) Research Group. Several individuals came together to create a space to work collaboratively online as they (i) felt the need to interact and support each other while maintaining physical distance, and (ii) identified an urgent need to fill in a gap in local research on COVID-19 and Early and Primary Education in Malta. In 2020, the eight members published their first research paper that tracks the birth and growth of the ECPE Research Group (Bonello et al., 2020) and another two papers related to COVID-19 and education (Bonello et al., 2021; Spiteri et al., 2022). In 2021, five members of the team continued to develop and extend the team's initial research work on the impact of COVID-19 on Education in Malta with the Cov-EM Study. The cluster of studies includes five research reports based on surveys presented in this research report in addition to another four reports which address the impact of COVID-19 on key stakeholders in education (Bonello et al., 2022; Deguara et al., 2022; Milton et al., 2022; Muscat et al., 2022). Figure 1.1 depicts the key stakeholders in the five reports, namely:

1. University students in Initial Teacher Education (ITE)
2. Early Childhood Educators
3. Primary School Educators
4. Parents of Children in Early and Primary Education
5. Leaders in Primary Schools, Kindergarten and Childcare Settings



**Figure 1.1:** The cluster of five studies within the overarching Cov-EM study

Each study offers perspectives from one of the various stakeholders involved in Maltese education – these are mentioned above. The educational concepts of teaching and learning, learning spaces, and relationships and well-being are central to the Cov-EM study and each of the five reports.

The Cov-EM study was conducted over two phases. The first phase, or Run 1, consisted of sending online questionnaires to the different stakeholders (university students, early childhood educators, primary educators, education leaders and parents) via social media platforms, which was conducted in September 2020. The second run, which likewise consisted of sending adapted online questionnaires to the different stakeholders, was conducted as the second phase in September 2021.

### 1.3 The Overarching Research Questions, Aims and Objectives of the Cov-EM Study

While initially it was thought that the COVID-19 emergency was mainly an issue of a few weeks, as things unfolded, stakeholders in education came to the realisation that the pandemic may influence our life for longer than we thought. Following two years of COVID-19 times in Malta, newspapers reported that on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 2022, as children returned to school, ‘several classrooms had to resort to online schooling because many students and teachers are stuck in quarantine’ (Calleja, 2022, p.1). Consequently, we continued to witness how education at all levels, was forced to shape and reshape its practices to meet the emerging societal and individual learners’ needs, relying on several remote methods to facilitate the learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a research group, we were, and still are, continuously concerned with the ways in which the new reality and changing educational scenarios are undoubtedly impacting stakeholders in Early, Primary and Higher Education. Ongoing dialogue, permeated through online meetings (during the first lockdown period), assisted us in identifying the key concepts we wanted to unpack to create new understandings about the impact of COVID-19 on the different stakeholders. We tapped into our personal and professional experiences in COVID-19 times and the relevant literature in search for the boundaries that were to frame our studies. We realised that the uncertainty which this period brings presented challenges and opportunities for innovations in how ‘teaching and learning’ takes place, and the ways in which this was continually reshaping education in Malta. The use of technology and online learning and its gradual uptake was becoming integral to compulsory and Higher Education.

Therefore, we inevitably extended our dialogue to the new 'learning spaces' stakeholders in Early and Primary settings and schools were experiencing. We also questioned the influence on relationships between the key players in the learning process and the impact on the stakeholders' well-being and concerns: **How is the reshaped teaching and learning within new 'learning spaces' impacting the overall 'well-being and relationships' of the different stakeholders?** We were then able to identify the research questions that also contributed to the process of determining the boundaries of the Cov-EM study - grounded in three main pillars of teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being (see Figure 1.2).

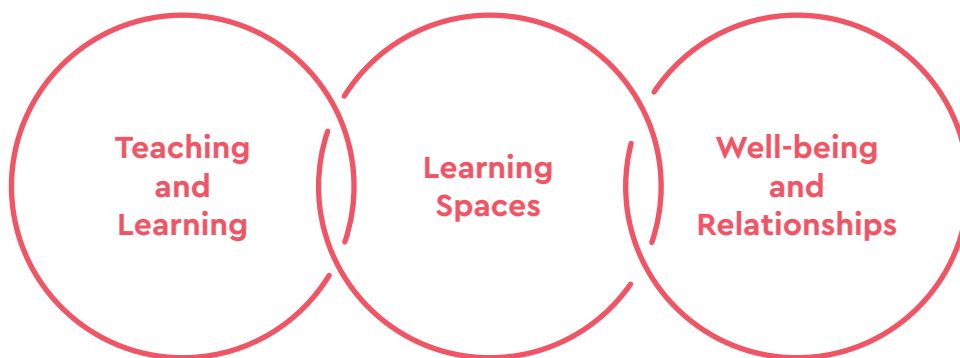
The overarching research question posed for the five studies is:

***What lessons can we learn from the perspectives of different stakeholders in Early, Primary and Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta?***

The collaborative dialogue, through online meetings amongst the research group allowed us to identify a conceptual research framework and theoretical background in which to couch our main research question for our research study, together with subsidiary questions specific to each of the five studies (see section 1.5).

#### 1.4 The Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Background

A conceptual framework was developed (based on the three concepts depicted in Figure 1.2 below), to guide the research design and to provide a theoretical lens through which to view the study and the research questions.



**Figure 1.2:** The three concepts that thread through the Cov-EM study

**Teaching and Learning:** For the purpose of this study, the term 'teaching and learning' focuses on the sudden shifts from physical to remote online teaching and learning brought about by the pandemic. This implies that terms such as hybrid, synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning, and other new pedagogical discourse are prominent in the way the concept of 'teaching and learning' is unpacked throughout the present study.

**Learning Spaces:** For the purposes of this study, the term 'learning spaces' refers to those spaces where different stakeholders in Early, Primary or Higher Education are experiencing online and/or offline teaching and learning during the pandemic. These include new learning spaces such as: the home environment; online platforms; and school/university learning spaces functioning within both online and offline zones (e.g. university students and lecturer present in the lecture hall, while some students follow the same lecture online from home).

**Well-being and Relationships:** For the purposes of this study, the term ‘relationships and well-being’ taps into the following aspects of these concepts as experienced by the different stakeholders during the pandemic:

- **Relationships** - the quality and opportunity of spending time with others in their personal (life relationships) and professional lives (working relationships).
- **Well-being** - a focus on subjective well-being i.e. including the different stakeholders’ positive and negative subjective evaluations of their lives during COVID-19 times. These include life and work satisfaction and their general physical, social, emotional, and psychological well-being as a reaction to the pandemic.



**Figure 1.3:** The three main overall aims and objectives of the COV-EM cluster of research studies.

The Cov-EM study set off with the intent to include children’s voices. Consequently, these five research reports will be followed by a post-Covid research study that includes child participation to ensure that children’s voices on this matter are heard (Article 12, United Nations, 1989). The ‘Early Years’ sector in the Maltese education system refers to the ages of 0-7 (MEDE, 2012). From the age of five, children start compulsory subject-based schooling in primary school settings. Five- to eleven-year-old children attend primary schools (Year 1 to Year 6), followed by another five years in secondary school (Forms 1 to 5).

Pandemic-related disruptions influenced the three concepts that frame the Cov-EM study (see Figure 1.5 above). Thus, relevant literature brought to the fore several classic and emerging theories that assisted in meeting the demands of:

1. new modes of teaching and learning;
2. novel learning spaces or environments; and
3. diverse physical and psychological aspects of well-being and relationships.

COVID-19 pandemic related disruptions influenced the three concepts that frame the Cov-EM study (as depicted in Figure 2 above). Thus, relevant literature brought to the fore several classic and emerging theories that assisted in meeting the demands of:

This study is informed by four main theories that apply to the aforementioned needs. As it taps into the concepts of new pedagogical approaches and learning spaces, this research study mirrors Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978). His theory is grounded in the belief that knowledge and thought are constructed through social interaction with more knowledgeable others who we learn from, such as educators, peers, family, and friends. Vygotsky’s theory underpins this study in two ways:

- (i) The Cov-EM study was designed, developed, and analysed by a group of researchers to co-construct new knowledge through an exploration of how COVID-19 impacted diverse stakeholders in Maltese education; and
- (ii) The study discovers how the use of new modes and means facilitated the process of learning from others during a pandemic.

Given the sudden turn to online learning in the new reality, this study's theoretical frame extends to Siemens' (2004) contemporary learning theory. Siemens' theory sees the integration of technology and social interactions as a space for the co-construction of knowledge. On the other hand, Maslow's (1908-1970) 'hierarchy of needs', underpins the concept of 'well-being and relationships' present in this study. The pandemic brought about new needs in the personal and professional lives of stakeholders in education. Maslow talks about the importance of feeling safe from physical and psychological harm, feeling respected, valued and accepted by others through interactions to realise one's potential. The Cov-EM study uncovers the needs of five stakeholders during COVID-19, taking us back to the foundations of Maslow's hierarchy. The fourth theory that frames this work is Bronfenbrenner's (1917-2005) ecological systems theory. In line with his view, the Cov-EM study sees the interaction of different stakeholders and environmental factors (for example, the unprecedented pandemic) as having a major influence on the learners' development, well-being and learning. With such a theoretical frame of mind we opted to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on five stakeholders in Maltese education over time.

## 1.5 The Cov-EM Study, Research Report 3: Primary School Educators

The study presented in this research report is informed and framed by the triad conceptual framework (see Figure 1.2 above) to obtain a clearer understanding of the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the pedagogies, learning spaces, well-being and relationships of Primary School Educators in Malta. Most importantly, this study sought to give educators in primary schools a voice to capture their experiences and perspectives on educating primary school-aged learners during COVID-19.

The objectives of this research study were:

1. to explore primary school educators' views and experiences about the impact of COVID-19 on *teaching and learning* within their classrooms and to gain insight into the pedagogies and practices that were adopted during the pandemic;
2. to find out about the new *learning spaces* created, both online and offline, and how these influenced experiences and practices in primary education throughout the pandemic;
3. to examine how the rapid shift to online learning and adherence to ongoing updated COVID-19 mitigation measures has affected their lives, practices, *relationships, and well-being*.

The next section presents the main research question and sub-questions selected for this particular study about the perspectives of primary school educators on the impact of COVID-19 on their personal and professional lives.

### 1.5.1 Research Questions for Primary School Educators in Malta

The main research question identified for this study was:

***What lessons can we learn from the perspectives of primary school educators during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta?***

This main question was further unpacked and supported through the following subsidiary questions that were developed to guide the research more clearly, as follows:

- i. *How did primary school educators perceive and facilitate teaching and learning during the pandemic?*
- ii. *What learning spaces did primary school educators in Malta create and use during the pandemic?*
- iii. *In what ways, if any, did the pandemic impact the relationships and overall well-being of primary school educators in Malta?*





## CHAPTER 2

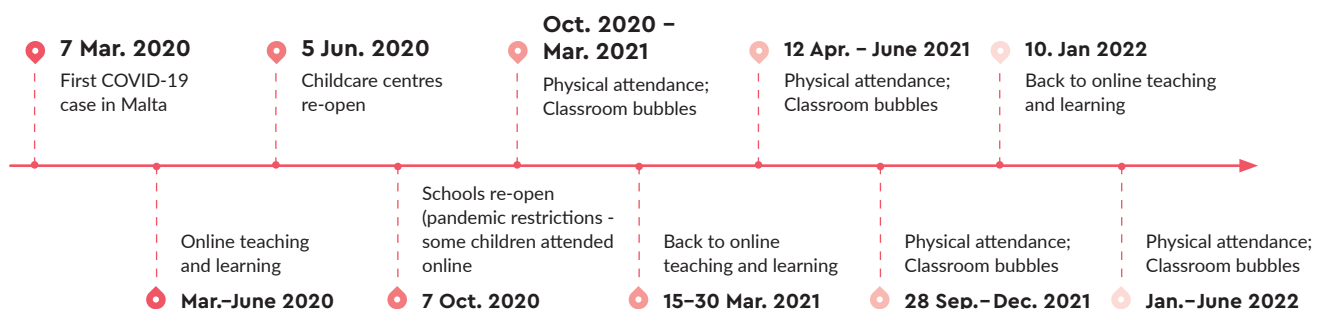
# Background to the Study

## 2.1 The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Schooling in Malta

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, leading to governments around the world making strategic decisions regarding education. In many countries, including Malta, educational institutions closed their physical premises and instead, various modes of online learning were rapidly adopted to ensure both the safety of educators and students, and the preservation of educational provision (UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, 2020; United Nations, 2020). The sudden shift to remote learning due to the spread of the global pandemic has undoubtedly impacted learning in primary schools in multiple ways. In Malta, schools closed their doors completely at two different points over the pandemic, on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020 for the first time, then again a second time during the following year, more specifically from the 10<sup>th</sup> March 2021 to the 12<sup>th</sup> April 2021. In the 2020-2021 academic year, schools across the world took different approaches to returning to school. Some schools returned with face-to-face lessons, using social distancing at all times, while others offered hybrid lessons (alternate face-to-face and online lessons) or only online lessons. In most countries, schools reopened for face-to-face teaching and learning from September to December 2020 with several mitigation measures (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020). These included temperature checks on arrival, wearing face masks, keeping students in bubbles and maintaining social distancing. Educators had to adjust to different environments, routines, and teaching methods to make sure that learning in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

Having the experience of a first lockdown and the indication during the summer of 2020 that the COVID-19 virus was there to stay for a longer time enabled governments to plan ahead for another period of school closures. In Malta, three scenarios were envisaged by the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) – (1) the ‘normal’ entry into schools, (2) a hybrid approach with split groups who alternate between having face-to-face sessions and online learning to minimise the number of students being in the same premises at a particular point in time, and (3) a total reliance on remote online instruction for a minimum of a term and a maximum of an entire scholastic year. The two teachers’ unions on the Maltese islands, i.e. the Union of Professional Educators (UPE) and the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT) reacted to this statement – the former highlighting a preference for asynchronous modes of online learning should this scenario become again a reality, while the latter focusing more on the adverse implications that delaying the physical entry into schools would have on the development, learning and overall well-being of students (MUT 2020; Sansone, 2020).

Given the developmental stage of primary school learners, there was a concern that learning losses occurred as a result of the shift to online modes and a moving away from the use of more hands-on, child-centred, face-to-face teaching and learning (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020). However, despite online learning not being necessarily ideal for the development and learning of primary school-aged learners if used as a sole measure, it played a significant role in the lives of children and their families (Karalar & Sidekli, 2021; Moss et al., 2020).



**Figure 2.1:** Timeline indicating school closure and the shift to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Maltese early and primary schools (2020–2022)





## CHAPTER 3

# Review of the Literature

### 3.1 The effects of COVID-19 on Pedagogy and Curriculum

To cater for the changing educational scenarios imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, different pedagogical approaches were used across schools around the globe. In a study conducted in Malta by Busuttill and Farrugia (2020), teacher respondents fell into two main categories in terms of pedagogies adopted during the lockdown period between March and June 2020 – those who adopted synchronous methods (73%) and those who used asynchronous modes (27%). Despite a preference for real-time online instruction, there was a combination of strategies and practices used by different educators – the study pointed to the eclectic way in which approaches were selected and the lack of consistency across schools, classrooms, and year groups.

Primary school teachers in the UK (Moss et al., 2020) felt that rather than imposing or expecting children to work through online tasks for the sake of completing their work, importance should be given to online learning activities being enjoyable and appealing to primary school-aged learners. Basic reading, writing, grammar, and spelling skills were given priority by teachers (Moss et al., 2020). Only about a third of teachers in this study encouraged children to engage in an activity that was completely different from the “normal” class, such as listening to a story or watching a movie. Similarly, few teachers set up conversation-stimulating tasks at home. In a survey conducted in Taiwan (Wu, 2021), primary school teachers claimed that they shared their screen during online teaching and used discussions and homemade videos. Lesson interactions varied, using synchronous and asynchronous video/ audio discussions. The disruptions resulting from school closures and mitigating measures imposed on educational settings during the pandemic are believed to have impacted children’s learning considerably and generated learning losses (Spiteri et al., 2022).

Anderson and Hira (2020) reported how primary school teacher participants in a study in the USA created new activities or modified old ones to be able to use technologies and resources accessible to students at home. Online learning was experienced as limiting in terms of it not only removing the possibility of assessing students’ progress by observing them in class but also of gauging their socio-emotional health through face-to-face contact. Teachers in the study claimed that, instead, they connected with their students through other means, by constantly keeping the channels of communication open and making themselves available through email, texting, or other means. Faced with this crisis, learning goals have been rethought. Due to time constraints and a different learning space, teachers reduced learning to life skills, the basic knowledge students needed for the next grade, and community-building activities (Anderson & Hira, 2020). Similar measures were also highlighted in a study by Lucas et al., (2020), where it was also reported that in remote learning, primary schools experienced a reduction in curriculum coverage, with primary teachers (83%) claiming that some or all areas of the curriculum received less attention.

Karalar and Sidekli (2021) reported a negative attitude towards online learning in a study with 173 primary school teachers in Turkey. No significant difference between gender and teachers’ attitude towards online education was found but a significant difference according to age and teaching experience was identified. On the other hand, notwithstanding the difficulties faced with the educational shifts that the pandemic brought to the teaching profession, in China 71% of teachers supported the introduction of online lessons (Song et al., 2020).

Developing resources for online assessment was not difficult for teachers in Serbia (Ninković et al., 2021). In Taiwan, primary school teachers used various methods of assessment, including in-class assessments, online tests and after-class assignments similar to the traditional class instruction (Wu, 2021). However, difficulties in managing students’ cheating in online assessments has been reported. In a study by Ninković et al., (2021), about half of the teachers claimed that they were not satisfied with online assessment, although more than half of them did their best to award some form of grades to their students. A survey in the UK (Lucas et al., 2020) found that 41% of primary school teachers reported that their students returned set work. Teachers’ voices in Maltese schools also echo the view that despite its validity as an alternative to normal schooling in an emergency situation such as a

pandemic, online learning changed the quality, effectiveness and accuracy of assessment in primary education: the study highlighted the centrality of relationships and the need for physical interaction when observing and assessing learners' responses and reaction as they experienced learning or when providing them with feedback (Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020).

### 3.2 The effects on COVID-19 on Learning Spaces

Across the globe, different platforms have been used for online learning. The most popular were applications that allow real-time video conferences such as Zoom, Google Meet & Hangout and Microsoft Teams, pre-recorded seminars such as YouTube, and sharing materials such as Google Classroom and Google Drive (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020; Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020). Although access to technology and stable internet connection is crucial in remote learning, in the study by Lucas et al. (2020), 13% of primary teachers claimed that the hardware and equipment that their school provided was poor. In a study in Sweden (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020), about one-third of teachers also reported that they had limited or no access to digital learning materials. In another study, most German teachers identified the lack of proper computer equipment and poor internet connectivity as the main obstacles to successful teaching (Klapproth et al., 2020).

With the sudden transition to remote learning, teachers faced the challenge of learning how to use new technologies almost exclusively in a matter of days. Various studies indicate the difficulties that resulted from the sudden shift to remote online learning. Teachers felt that little support was available to assist them in this transition and expressed their wish for further guidance (Anderson & Hira, 2020). The difficulties that the transition to online learning spaces brought in teachers' lives were also echoed in a study with teachers in China (Song et al., 2020) that included primary school teachers as respondents. 54% felt that online teaching was "somewhat difficult" and 7% felt that it was "extremely difficult". Teachers felt they needed support with regards to digital literacy as well as online teaching skills. In Australia and New Zealand (Flack et al., 2020), primary school teachers were significantly less likely to report feeling confident in their ability to meet the learning needs of students online than secondary school teachers. The loss in teacher confidence and teacher self-efficacy, at least during the first lockdown for a substantial number of educators, seem to have been one of the casualties of this pandemic and of the reliance on an online learning space.

The hasty transition to remote online learning at different points during the pandemic meant that teachers who were trained to adopt traditional and innovative pedagogies within a physical face-to-face context had to become resourceful and more flexible with their use of digital skills. Whether they liked it or not, educators for all sectors and year groups, including those working with younger children, were expected to use their knowledge and technological competences more prominently to reach their students. This meant a considerable shift in mindset and skill – and a willingness to create online learning spaces that were conducive to learning and development. Teachers' confidence and preparedness for this shift through previous training was considered to be limited by 65% of teacher respondents in a Maltese study, with only 49% claiming they felt competent in creating online resources to enhance their pedagogical effectiveness online (Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020). Moreover, teachers also felt that student engagement could be monitored to some extent through synchronous modes where they were able to interact online with students, whereas it was less visible when asynchronous modes were adopted. Another study pointed to the lack of confidence primary school teachers experienced in communicating remotely with students (Flack et al., 2020). This might be due to the limited ability of children to communicate through technology which might be restrained by lack of parental support. Teachers also expressed their need for support with regards to online teaching resources, and school-home cooperation (Song et al., 2020).

School closure during the COVID-19 pandemic led to numerous consequences – increased disruption to the learning process, restricted access to learning facilities and resources, loss of interest and motivation in learning, a resistance to changing circumstances, poor digital skills and the digital divide, lack of funding and training, and resistance to change amongst others (Oneyama et al., 2020).

### 3.3 The effects of COVID-19 on teachers' well-being

Little attention has been paid to the impact of school closures on the well-being of teachers, given the significant changes in the way teaching was held during COVID-19. Literature shows that the occupational well-being of teachers is extremely important to both themselves and their students (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Research has also found that the higher the work-related stress of teachers, the lower the students' educational outcomes (Herman et al., 2017). Teacher confusion and stress have been identified by UNESCO (2021) as one of the 13 adverse effects of school closures – these were deemed to be a result of the sudden

school closures, the uncertainty about the duration of the pandemic, and the unfamiliarity with online education. Recent studies found that primary school teachers experienced significant stress during school closure in Finland (Pöysä et al., 2021), in Poland (Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 2021) in Australia (Collie, 2021), in Malta (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020) and in China (Li et al., 2020).

Studies investigating teacher well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic identified multiple stressors that the teachers had to deal with. During school closures, a study with teachers in the UK found that they had to deal with an increased workload, worry for vulnerable students and uncertainties brought about by the pandemic (Kim & Asbury, 2020). On a more positive note, online learning eliminated the stress and cost associated with commuting so that teachers were able to better manage their time (Purwanto et al., 2020).

Teachers have also reaped some benefits from this stressful situation. Teachers have indicated that they feel that school closure strengthened their relationship with parents and improved trust between them, which may also be useful after the pandemic (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). More than half (62%) of primary school teachers surveyed in the UK (Lucas et al., 2020) reported being in contact with their students.

It is of concern that when compared to previous studies, teacher instructional and engagement efficacy scores were found to be lower in a study with 329 primary school teachers in the USA (Pressley, 2021). The results of this study also showed that teachers who taught only online had the lowest instructional efficiency scores compared to teachers who taught in hybrid or in-person only models. However, there was no difference in the engagement efficacy score. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that experience in teaching did not result in increased teaching efficacy. This difference may be due to lack of training with regards to online teaching and a difficulty for some educators to move out of their comfort zone. Teachers in this study may have also experienced reduced performance during COVID-19 due to the challenges of finding time for both teaching on the one hand and supporting their own families, the education of their own children as well as mental health issues on the other hand.

A similar difficulty was expressed by teachers in a study conducted with Maltese educators – the juggling act that teachers who were themselves parents had to carry out on a daily basis added onto the stressful situation that the pandemic brought to families (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020). On the other hand, teacher respondents identified several positive outcomes that resulted from the shift to online teaching and learning, and that benefited their overall well-being – a sense of empowerment and confidence in own ability to persevere in the face of novel circumstances, the collegiality between colleagues, stronger links between the home and the school, and an improved attitude towards the role of educators in general (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020).

Teachers' concern with well-being was not solely focused on their own survival. In a survey with 1,653 primary teachers in UK schools (Moss et al., 2020), it was conveyed that the teachers' main concern at the beginning of the lockdown was the well-being of their students. Teacher respondents gave priority to communicating with the students' families as part of their role during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to checking in on how families were dealing with basic food, health and emotional needs, teachers prioritised support in learning to ensure they reached all students as best as they possibly could. Most teachers (69%) claimed that they had conversations about welfare with parents and 22% were involved in the delivery of printed resources to homes. In a local study on the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of the Maltese population, Grech and Grech (2020) found that families, particularly those who were raising school-aged children and adolescents, experienced a general increase in anxiety levels because of the disruptions in routine and the new challenges created by the pandemic.

Teachers also indicated that remote learning has been more successful for students coming from higher social backgrounds, but even there, only one third of teachers claimed that remote learning has been successful with most students (Moss et al., 2020). Most teachers who worked with students coming from a low social background believe that the lockdown period may have a huge effect on academic achievement with about half of the teachers reporting that most of their students did not do any homework, which was of concern to them as educators. Almost all teachers claimed to be concerned about the well-being of some of their students, regardless of the social background of the child. This is in line with a study in Australia and New Zealand (Flack et al., 2020) in which teachers in remote, rural and lower socio-economic areas expressed worry about students' lack of access to technological devices and internet. Primary teachers were also concerned that they had been much less capable of meeting the needs of such students. A quarter of primary school teachers in this study "strongly agreed" that students would eventually need extra support when they return to the physical classroom. Borg and Mayo (2021) also claimed that the disparities in children's socio-economic backgrounds were made more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic.



## CHAPTER 4

# Research Design and Methodology

As the pandemic began to affect several spheres of our lives, including education and schooling, it became increasingly urgent and pertinent to understand the ways in which different stakeholders were being impacted by the rapid changes brought about by the COVID-19 restrictive measures that had to be adopted across the globe. Malta was no exception and, as a research group, it was decided to capture an initial snapshot of the educational arena by surveying various stakeholders, including primary school educators. The Cov-EM study was thus built on a positivist epistemological stance, using a quantitative approach and administering online questionnaires targeting different stakeholders in education, specifically at two points in time.

This study explored the experiences, perceptions, and views of primary school educators in Malta during COVID-19 times on their personal and professional lives through the use of an online survey. Initially, the focus of the Cov-EM study was intended to capture the reality experienced by primary school teachers and other stakeholders at one specific point in time i.e. September 2020. However, given the duration of the pandemic, the ECPE Research Group felt the need to launch a second run of the study one year later i.e. in September 2021, using a modified version of the questionnaire.

### 4.1 The participants

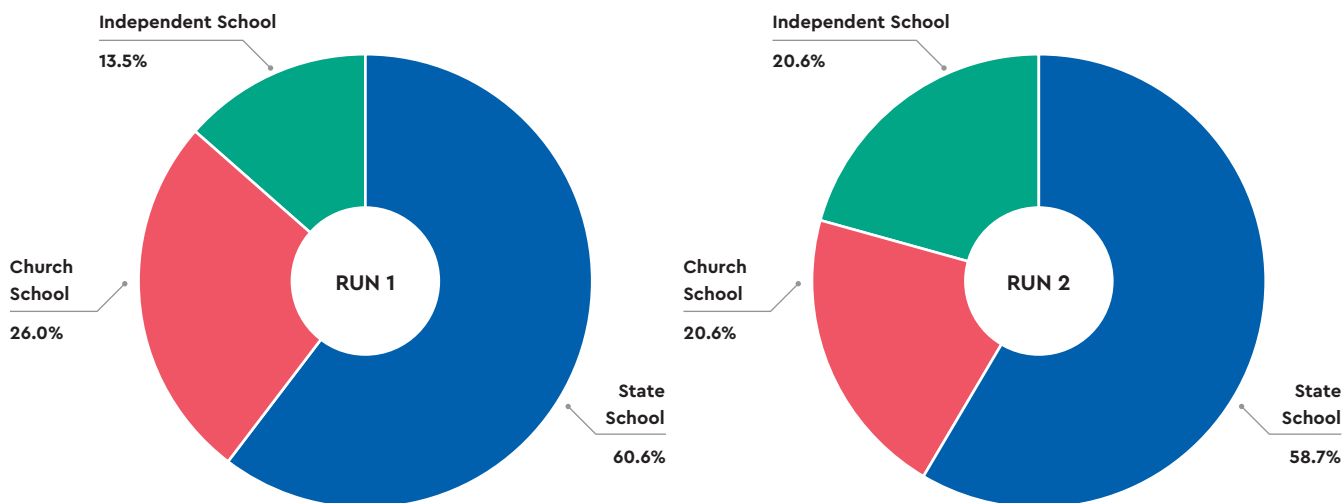
The participants of the study were primary school educators working in state, church, and independent schools in Malta. Recruitment of participants took place through the dissemination of the online survey via social media platforms and the university channels.

Table 4.1 below presents the participants according to their role in education, whether they were qualified as teachers, learning support educators or filling other teaching roles.

During the first survey a total of 207 primary school teachers, Learning Support Educators (LSEs) and other educators working in primary schools completed the online questionnaire. Of these, 204 were Maltese nationals (98.6%). The sample was composed of 195 (93.8%) females and 13 (6.3%) males. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 65+ years, with the average age of educators being 39.3 years. Of these, 43.2% (n=89) possessed an undergraduate qualification and 34.5% (n=71) a postgraduate qualification. 20.9% (n=43) had acquired a vocational qualification with a further 1.5% (n=3) stating they held a secondary qualification.

Role of Educators	Academic Year 2019/2020 1st Run		Academic Year 2020/2021 2nd Run	
	N	%	N	%
Year 1 & Year 2 teachers	36	19.3	24	19
Year 3 to Year 6 teachers	53	25.6	33	26.2
Supply teachers	10	4.8	3	2.4
Learning Support Educators (LSEs)	55	26.4	55	43.7
Complementary/ Literacy Support Educators	14	6.7	4	3.2
Peripatetic teachers	7	3.4	5	4
Nurture teachers	5	2.4	1	0.8
Others	23	11.1	1	0.8
Missing system	1	0.5	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 4.1:** Participants according to role in education and academic year



**Figure 4.1:** Participants according to school sector in Run 1 and Run 2

For the second run of the survey in September 2021, a total of 126 responses were registered. 97.6% of the respondents were Maltese (N=123) with 94.4% of these being female (N=119), 4.8% male (N=6) and 0.8% who identified themselves as 'other' (N=1). The average age of the participants in the second run was 39.9 years. As with the first run, many participants possessed an undergraduate (N=57/ 45.2%) or a vocational qualification (N=44/ 35.1%), followed by a postgraduate qualification (N=23/ 18.3%). 2 participants only had a secondary school leaving certificate (1.6%).

The two surveys yielded responses from the three main educational sectors i.e. state, church and independent schools as follows: in the first questionnaire, 60.6% of respondents worked in the state sector (N=126), whilst 26% and 13.5% respectively worked in the church (N=54) and independent (N=28) sectors. In the second run of the study, 58.7% (N=74) were state school employees, and 20.6% (N=26) each for the church and independent sector (N=26).

As expected from a cohort of educators working in primary schools, most of the respondents were female in both surveys. A similar number of educators teaching early primary years (19.3% for 1<sup>st</sup> run and 19% for 2<sup>nd</sup> run) and upper primary years (25.6% for 1<sup>st</sup> run and 26.2% for 2<sup>nd</sup> run) participated in both surveys. Learning Support Educators constituted a significant portion of the respondents, particularly in the second run of the study, amounting to 43.7% of the total participants. The first survey yielded a higher response rate than the one distributed a year later – with 208 respondents in September 2020 as opposed to 126 respondents in September 2021.

## 4.2 The Survey

### 4.2.1 Online Survey

Considering the conditions and restrictive measures that were in place during the design and collection of the data, the use of an online survey was deemed to be appropriate to gather quantitative data in an effective and timely manner (Sumi, 2019). Moreover, this mode was also consistent with that which most educators were using to communicate, teach and collaborate during the pandemic, as social distancing and restrictions imposed by the government needed to be respected and adhered to. A cross-sectional design was used to capture insights and realities at two different points during the pandemic, one year apart. To counteract for the disadvantage posed by the use of an online survey in terms of recruitment and sampling issues where access to the questionnaire by regular users of social media would be more likely (Wright, 2005), emails were also sent to the different educational sectors using our university channels.

### 4.2.2 The Questionnaires

The focus of the questionnaires was to gather the views and experiences of primary school educators in relation to their personal and professional realities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Designed by the ECPE Research Group, the questionnaires targeting educators were available in English.

The first survey consisted of 40 questions, two of which were open-ended ones. The type of questions used were mainly multiple-choice and 5-point Likert scales. Additional comments were also encouraged using an open-ended question at the end of both questionnaires. The second questionnaire focused on teachers' experiences and practices between September 2020 and June 2021. A modified version of the first run was developed, retaining some items whilst adapting or discarding others. Moreover, some new items were inserted to reflect and capture the changing circumstances and realities from the previous year (as indicated in Table 4.2). A total of 29 questions formed the second questionnaire, two of which were open-ended.

Questionnaire Sections	n	Focus and number of items in the first questionnaire	n	Focus and number of items in the second questionnaire
<b>1 Demographics &amp; Background</b>	9	Age, gender, nationality, locality, type of residence, role in education, number/age of residents in own home, highest level of education, educational sector	7	Age, gender, nationality, locality, role in education, highest level of education, educational sector
<b>2 Pedagogy &amp; Curriculum</b>	15	Modes of teaching and learning, direction provided by SLT, frequency and effectiveness of use of digital technologies, live sessions vs asynchronous modes, learners' confidence, access and participation during online sessions, assessment methods used, main concerns	12	Synchronous and asynchronous modes used, professional development in relation to online teaching skills, learners' access, participation, and level of attainment, assessment methods, main concerns, learning gains and losses
<b>3 Learning Spaces</b>	6	Access to resources and facilities to support learning remotely, effect of spaces on well-being, use of digital technologies, new skills acquired, preferences for post-COVID times	3	Access to resources and facilities to support learning, effect of restrictive measures and online learning on learners, preferences for post-COVID times
<b>4 Well-being &amp; Relationships</b>	9	Subjective well-being, daily time spent on activities, resilience and coping skills, confidence with online modes of teaching, advantages and disadvantages of working remotely, parental support and participation, support from SLT	6	Subjective well-being & happiness, impact of physical distancing on educators and learners, satisfaction and difficulties experienced during the pandemic, teacher confidence and self-efficacy, support received
<b>5 Any comments</b>	1	Open-ended question to elicit further insights from respondents	1	Same open-ended item
<b>Number of items</b>	<b>40</b>		<b>29</b>	

**Table 4.2:** Sections and number of items for first and second questionnaires

Before the dissemination of the questionnaires on social media platforms and through university channels, the two surveys were field tested with the help of several volunteers to ascertain that the design and the type of questions were appropriate, clear and answerable. The pilot study was also intended to ensure that any potential technical difficulties in the online version would be resolved prior to the launch of the survey.



### 4.3 Data Collection and analysis

SurveyMonkey was used to launch the online questionnaires mainly on social media platforms over the course of two consecutive years, one in September 2020 and a second one in September 2021. Once the data collection phase was over, SPSS was used to extract and analyse the quantitative data. Cronbach's alpha was computed for the two surveys to check the internal level of consistency – the resulting coefficient of 0.852 for the first survey and that of 0.881 for the second survey are indicative of an excellent internal consistency level and a good measure of scale reliability. In other words, the computation of Cronbach's alpha shows that sets of questions within the two surveys are closely related and therefore satisfactory in terms of internal consistency (Taber, 2018).

### 4.4 Ethical Procedures

Ethical clearance was sought and achieved through the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (FREC) on behalf of the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Subsequently, permission to conduct research in schools was also gained from the Ministry for Education and the Secretariat for Catholic Education. The online questionnaires included an introductory note outlining the purpose of the study as well as a statement detailing the procedures used to ensure that collection of data abided by the ethical requirements set by the research ethics committees concerned. Respondents were also informed that their responses would remain anonymous, that their IP addresses would not be gathered, and that participation was voluntary. The statement also indicates they would be giving their consent to participate in the study by submitting the questionnaire.

### 4.5 Limitations

The design of the first study included a substantial number of questions to target the three main aspects that were being studied i.e. pedagogy and curriculum, learning spaces and well-being. The idea was to gain as much data as possible about the wide-ranging impact of COVID-19 on primary school educators' personal and professional lives. This resulted in a rather lengthy survey that also allowed respondents to skip questions if they preferred to do so, which in turn led to some missing data across the questionnaire. In the second survey, the number of questions was reduced from 40 to 29, with respondents only allowed to proceed to a next question once they would have completed the previous one. The open-ended questions were the only questions that could be left out.

The use of social media platforms and university channels may have limited access to the online questionnaire by educators who may not be frequent users of digital technologies. An online questionnaire at a time when teachers were constantly using their digital devices due to physical distancing may have also been approached as an additional burden or chore, and therefore discarded. Moreover, opting for self-administered online questionnaires has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it is regarded as a convenient and efficient mode of data collection. On the other hand, self-reporting has also been linked to the inclusion of inaccurate information by respondents who may not remember past experiences well enough, or who may attempt to provide a 'correct answer' on the basis of social desirability or acquiescence (Ferrando et al., 2009).

The use of quantitative research methodology adopts a positivist stance with the researchers largely dictating which questions to be asked and which options to be given when answering closed-ended questions. There is an understanding amongst the ECPE Research Group that in order to obtain a more complete and authentic picture of the realities experienced by primary school educators, the quantitative data would best be supplemented by qualitative data to obtain a richer and deeper understanding of the individual experiences of these participants.



## CHAPTER 5

# Findings

### 5.1 Introduction

This section contains the results of both questionnaires. The data generated from each survey is presented in a structured and consecutive manner, starting with the data for the first run conducted in 2020, followed by the 2021 data from the second run of the questionnaire for primary school educators. Next, the descriptive data is used to create a discussion that aims to analyse and highlight the insights, similarities, and differences between the results of the two surveys. Key findings are later discussed in the light of relevant literature and conceptual frameworks that guide this study. Reference is made to the three pillars that constitute the triad conceptual framework model for the Cov-EM study (Figure 1.2), which consists of Teaching and Learning, Learning Spaces, and Well-being and Relationships.

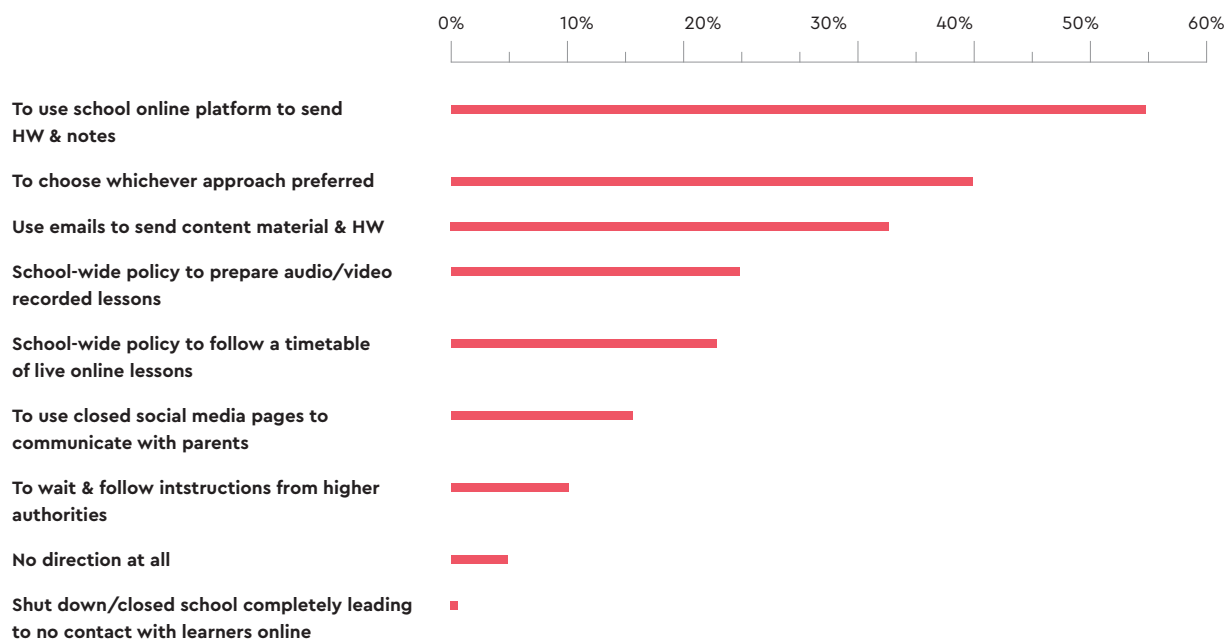
### 5.2 Results of the First Survey

Grouped into three main sections, the results of the survey conducted in September 2020 are presented below through figures and descriptions. The first section provides a clear depiction of primary school educators' views and experiences of pedagogy and curriculum. Subsequently, findings for the set of questions pertaining to learning spaces used during the pandemic are presented. Finally, the section on well-being and relationships will conclude the results for this part of the first run of the study.

#### 5.2.1 Teaching and Learning

This section describes the modes of teaching and learning adopted by primary school educators. Teacher participants were asked to delineate the recommendations and directions given to them by the School Leadership Team (SLT) at the beginning of the physical closure of schools (Figure 5.1), ticking multiple options where necessary. SLTs were noted to have mostly recommended the use of a school online platform to send homework and notes (55.1%). Teacher autonomy was also evident with 41.6% of primary educators stating they were directed to choose whichever approach they preferred. One third of respondents (34.8%) were encouraged to use emails to send content material and homework, whilst about a quarter (23%) had a school-wide policy to prepare audio/video recorded lessons, and 21.3% were generally encouraged to follow a timetable of live online lessons as a school. Only 14.6% were encouraged to use closed social media pages to communicate with parents and 9.6% were asked to wait and follow instructions from higher authorities. It is worth noting that 4.5% were provided with no direction at all, while 1 respondent (0.6%) reported that the school shut down completely, leading to no online contact with learners during the first physical closure.

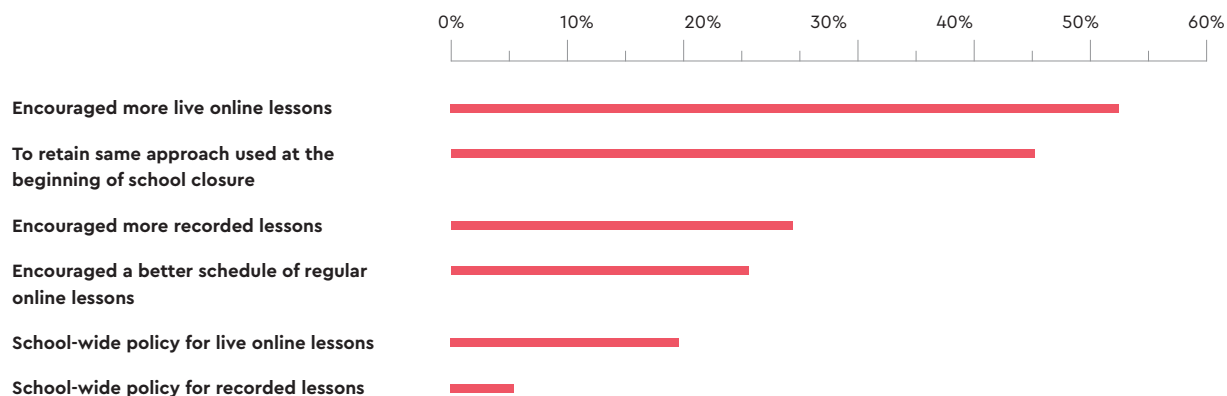
3.4% of primary school educators chose to add their own comments to the field 'other'. These included comments such as *'printed material collected by the guardians from the secretary's office regularly'*, *'school-wide policy to encourage live lessons, but no timetable was imposed'*, *'together with our employer, we decided to contact all the parents in the school'*, *'used messenger to communicate with parents'*, and *'used class Dojo'*. Five participants mentioned the use of MS Teams, one specifying that it was used to send children work, and then submit it.



**Figure 5.1:** Recommendations by the SLT at the start of the physical school closure

In Figure 5.2, where recommendations provided by the SLT during the third term are illustrated, it can be observed that half of the respondents pointed out that an increase in live online lessons (53.1%) was promoted by the SLT, whilst others chose to retain the same approach used at the beginning of the school closure (46.3%). 27.1% and 23.7% respectively noted that more recorded lessons and a better schedule of regular planned online lessons were encouraged by the SLT. On the other hand, a school-wide policy for live online lessons (18.1%) or for recorded lessons (5.1%) were the least popular.

Respondents were given an open-ended option to list any ‘other’ recommendations. 11.9% of the total respondents provided various replies, including guidance by the SLT in relation to how they could choose between live and recorded lessons (n=2), use their ‘improved online platform’ (n=1) or help with choosing an ‘online platform of their choice’ (n=1). Other participants claimed they were encouraged to send and receive daily work as well as communicate with parents (n=1), to have weekly zoom meetings apart from work on the school platform (n=1), to use the online platform Class Dojo (n=2) and to have an hour daily online lesson which is recorded (n=1). However, two participants claimed there was no communication from their leaders (n=2), with one participant also reporting how he ‘was not even included in the MS Teams’. One participant was encouraged to have ‘individualised live lessons with his student’.



**Figure 5.2:** Recommendations by the SLT during the third term

Live-online teaching was the most commonly used approach in teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown (67.2%) as shown in Figure 5.3, followed by daily work being sent to students (63.8%) and the posting of recorded lessons (50.3%). Additionally, respondents had the facility to also indicate 'other' modes of teaching and learning. 15.3% of the teacher participants included additional comments to capture the modes they adopted during the physical closure of schools more accurately. Some reported work being sent to children once a week (n=4), the use of emails (n=3), feedback on homework (n=2), the use of PowerPoints (n=2), daily posts about well-being sent to children (n=1), tips given to parents/guardians (n=1), and sharing of recorded stories (n=1). Other means of reaching the learners in their classrooms included sending hard copies for students who did not have facilities for online lessons (n=1), the use of games (n=1), live sessions both group and individualised according to learners' needs (n=1), and one-to-one online sessions with students with reading or learning difficulties (n=1). Individual responses also mentioned phone sessions (n=1), planning and a live-stream session with colleagues (n=1), closed Facebook page for parents (n=1), links to websites (n=1), voice-over PowerPoints (n=1) as well as webinars and focus groups with staff (n=1).

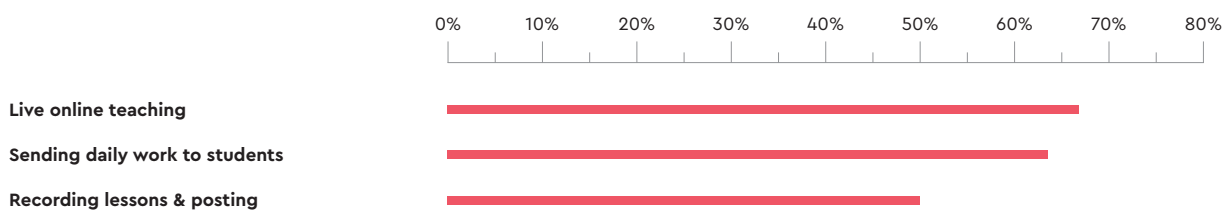


Figure 5.3: Approaches used to teach during COVID-19 lockdown

When primary school educators were asked to rate the effectiveness of various technologies, real-time (live) whole-class lessons through video conferencing using Zoom or MS Teams were considered to be the most effective by the largest group of participants (61.5%). On the contrary, 12.4% marked these as not useful at all. Real-time (live) sessions with small groups of learners through video conferencing were found to be similarly effective for 58.4% of the participants, although 13.2% did not regard them as valid in terms of pedagogical effectiveness. Video-recorded lessons and audio-recorded lessons with PPT as visual were rated to be very effective by half the participants (51.3% and 50.4% respectively). Furthermore, emails to learners via the parents and the school VLE technology (Klikks, Student Campus) were not as popular with teacher respondents, although they were still considered to be effective by a relatively good percentage with 43.1% and 36.2% respectively who marked these as 'a lot' or 'quite' effective (Figure 5.4).

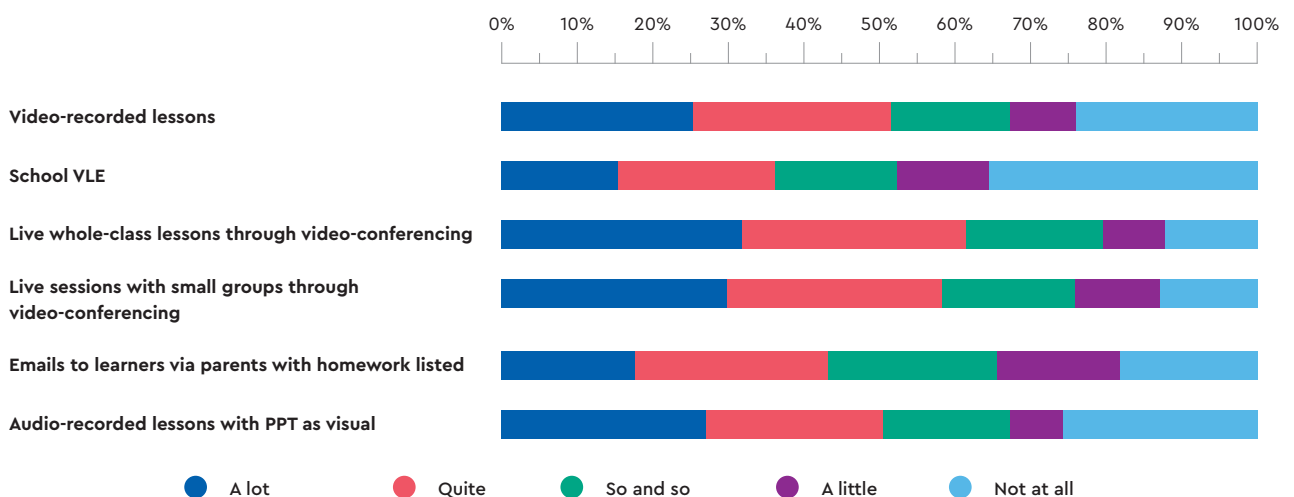


Figure 5.4: The usefulness of different technologies for teaching

Respondents were also asked to indicate the frequency of use for several digital technologies. As shown in figure 5.5, the school's online platform (e.g. Klikks) was an online tool that was reported to be used nearly every day by 36.5% of respondents. This was followed by emails to the learners via the parents with homework listed (33.8%) and real-time whole-class lessons through videoconferencing (24.8%). Video-recorded lessons, real-time with smaller groups of learners through video conferencing, and audio-recorded lessons with PPT as visuals were used to a lesser extent, with the largest group of respondents claiming that they never used them. Moreover, some participants (8.2%) mentioned the use of other online approaches, listing the usage of a private Facebook group (n=2), messenger (n=1), live quizzes (n=1), one-to-one sessions (n=2) and Padlet (n=1), amongst others.

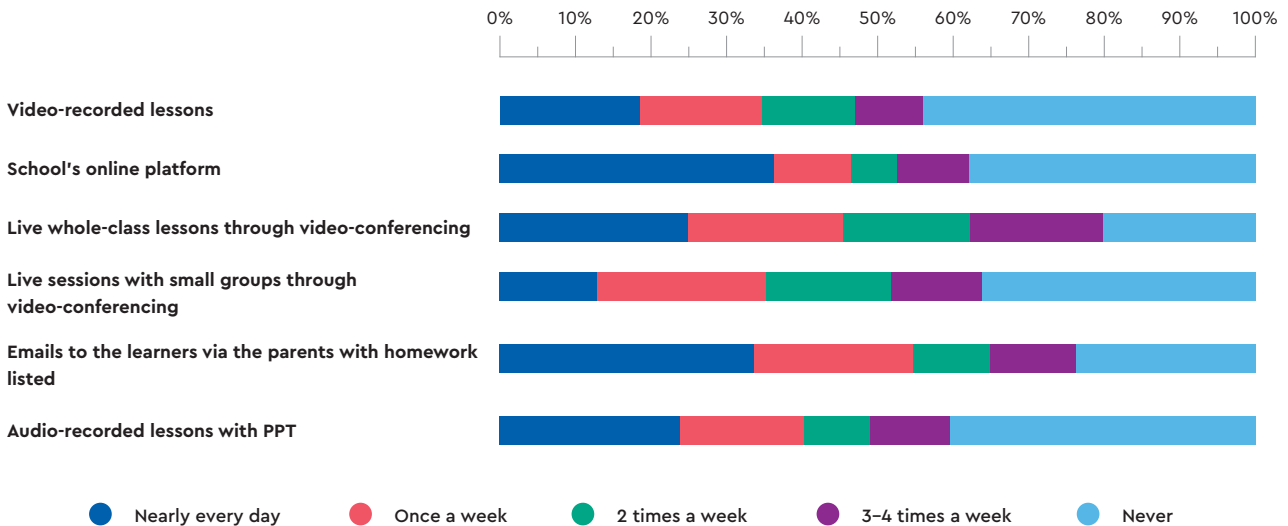


Figure 5.5: How often online teaching approaches were used

When asked whether primary school educators had opted to use the 'mute all' function during online sessions, most participants (69.8%) responded in the affirmative, whilst 11.9% indicated they had not utilised this function at all. It was interesting to note that a total of 18.2% of the respondents did not deliver any live sessions. Various reasons for using the 'mute' function were given by primary school educators. As shown in Figure 5.6, the most popular reasons were related to addressing the needs of the learners as a class or as individuals rather than because of a personal preference or a control issue from the part of the educator. The 'mute all' function was mainly used to counter for too much background noise at home (85.2%), followed by getting too noisy in general (67.2%) as well as the need for an educator to direct questions to specific learners (59.4%).

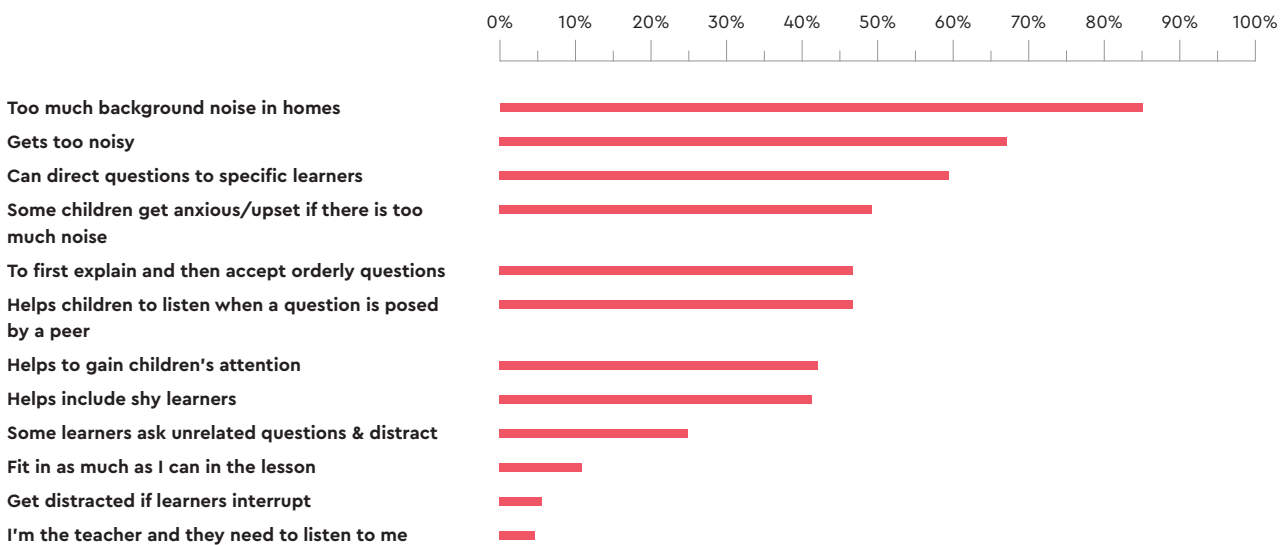


Figure 5.6: Reasons for using the 'mute' function

The largest number of primary educators reported that during live sessions, learners often or very often participated by talking to them (81.5%), followed by answering questions orally (76.4%) and submitting homework by email or uploading it (68.6%). To a lesser extent, complete online quizzes, talking with peers and thumbs-up function were also used. As shown in figure 5.7, working in small groups in 'break out' spaces, expressing their opinions and ideas to inform future planning, commenting through the 'chat' function, asking questions through chat and answering questions through chat were also infrequent.

Although there were many options to choose from relating to children's participation during live sessions, it is interesting to note that 4.8% of primary educators still chose to add their own comments in the field 'other'. These included entries such as: 'calls were answered by adults and in rare cases passed on the phone to their children' (n=1), 'did go online with smaller groups but not in the break out spaces' (n=1), 'had one-to-one sessions' (n=1), 'never gave live sessions' (n=2), 'out of a class of around 12 pupils, only 1 joined and the others never turned up, so live sessions had to be stopped' (n=1), and 'sharing photos of grade/school-based projects in closed social media group' (n=1). Other responses included 'difficult to apply for 5-year-olds so adjusted to keep my learners happy' (n=1), 'used to fill in the workbook pages and send answers for the parents to correct their work (n=1), and 'work assigned was uploaded by the parents as my students were too young to be able to do it - it was a joint effort between the teacher and parents.' (n=1).

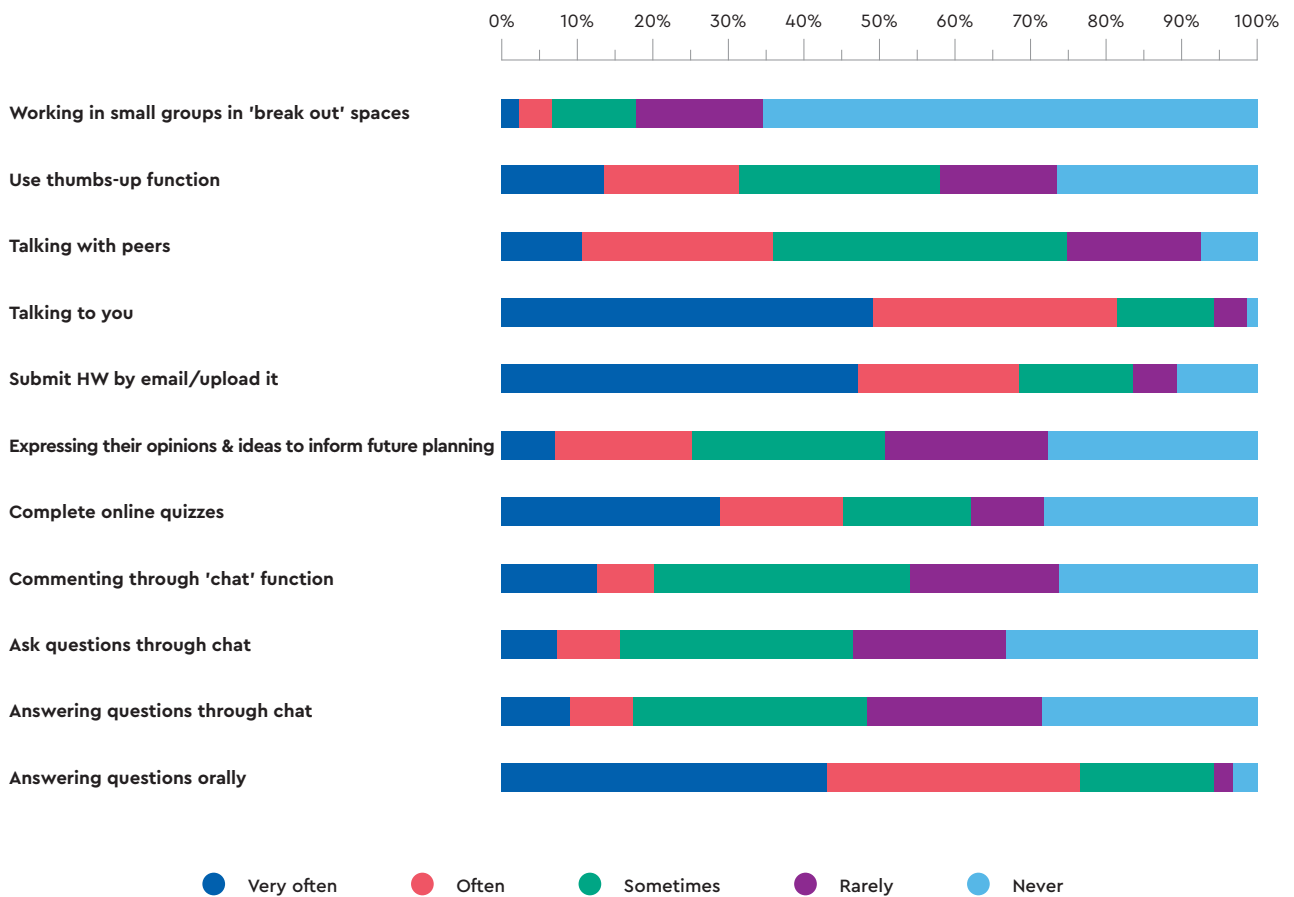


Figure 5.7: Children's ways of participating during live sessions

Figure 5.8 shows how frequently online lessons in different subjects were delivered. Online activities in mathematics were most frequently occurring 'more than twice a week' as reported by over half the participants (55%), with only 15% of the respondents delivering English online lessons and 10% delivering Maltese online lessons more than twice a week. The largest group of respondents reported having once a week online lessons for most subject areas including science (41%), followed by English and Maltese (37% each), social studies (34%) and religion (26%). It is also striking to note that some subjects were never delivered online. These include both key areas of learning such as English (20%), Maltese (25%), Mathematics (18%) and Science (27%), as well as other subject areas such as PSCD (66%), Expressive Arts (44%), Religion (37%) and Social Studies (31%). Others (11%) mentioned circle time (n=1), emotions (n=1), nurture group sessions (n=2), social skills group through show and tell, discussions, sharing (n=2), ICT and PE lessons once a week (n=2). Two participants highlighted how English, Maths and Maltese were given a priority. Three participants remarked that they were subject teachers whilst four participants pointed out how science/music/PE/arts/drama were done by the respective teachers.

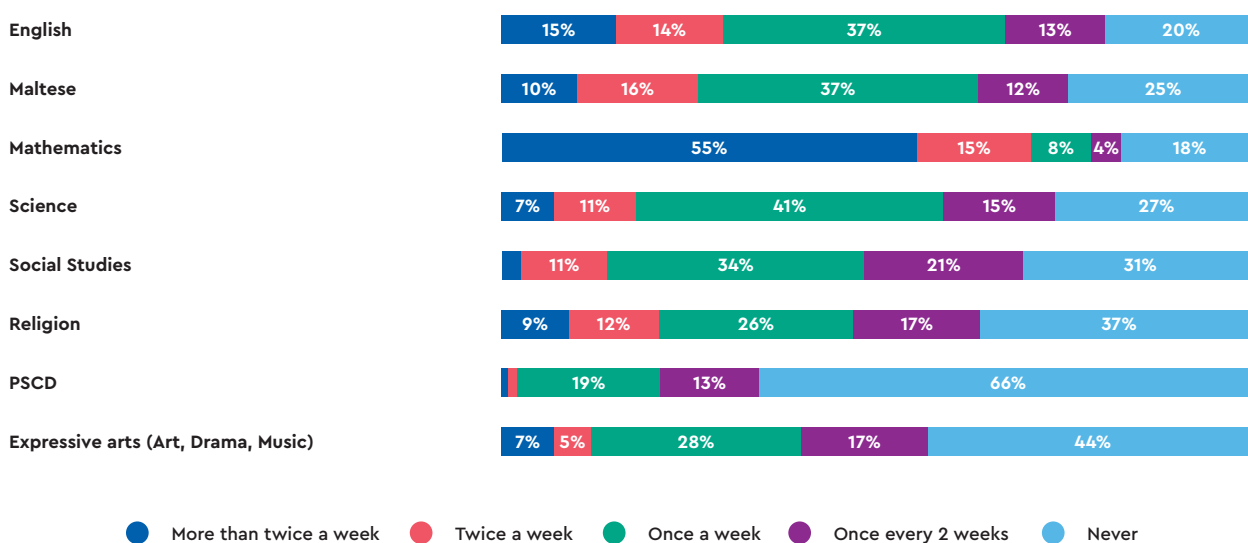
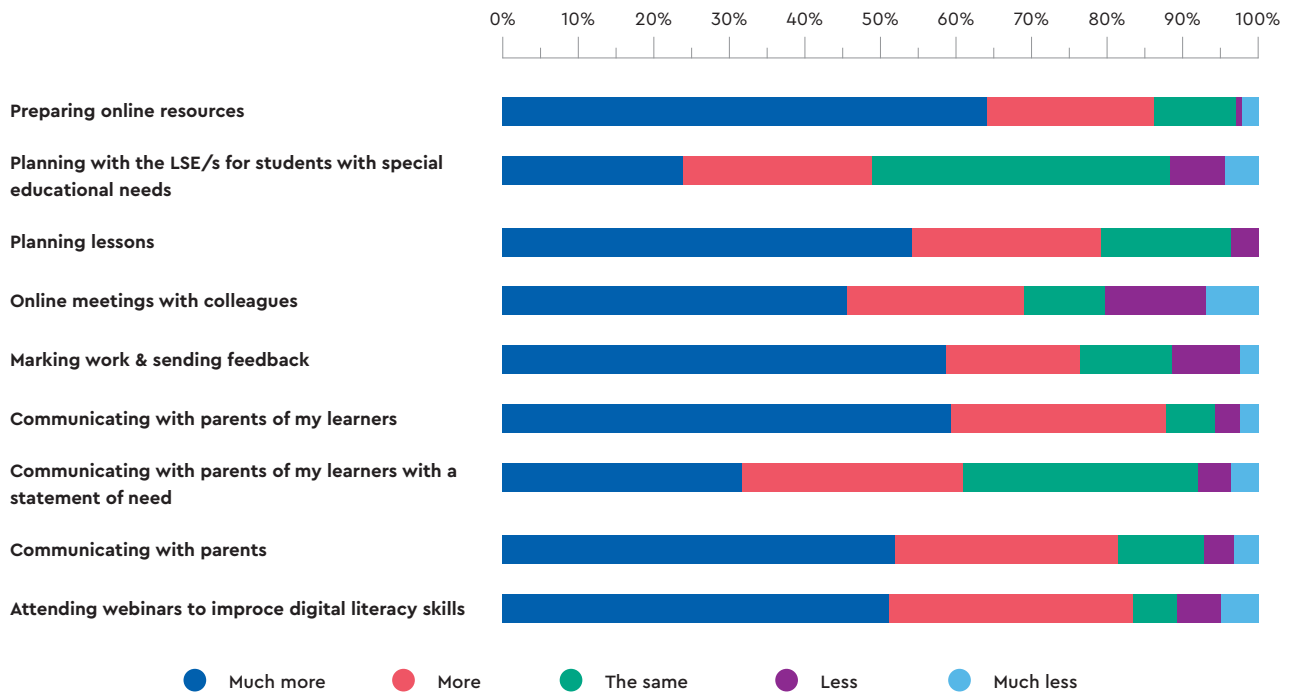


Figure 5.8: How frequently online activities were delivered in different areas

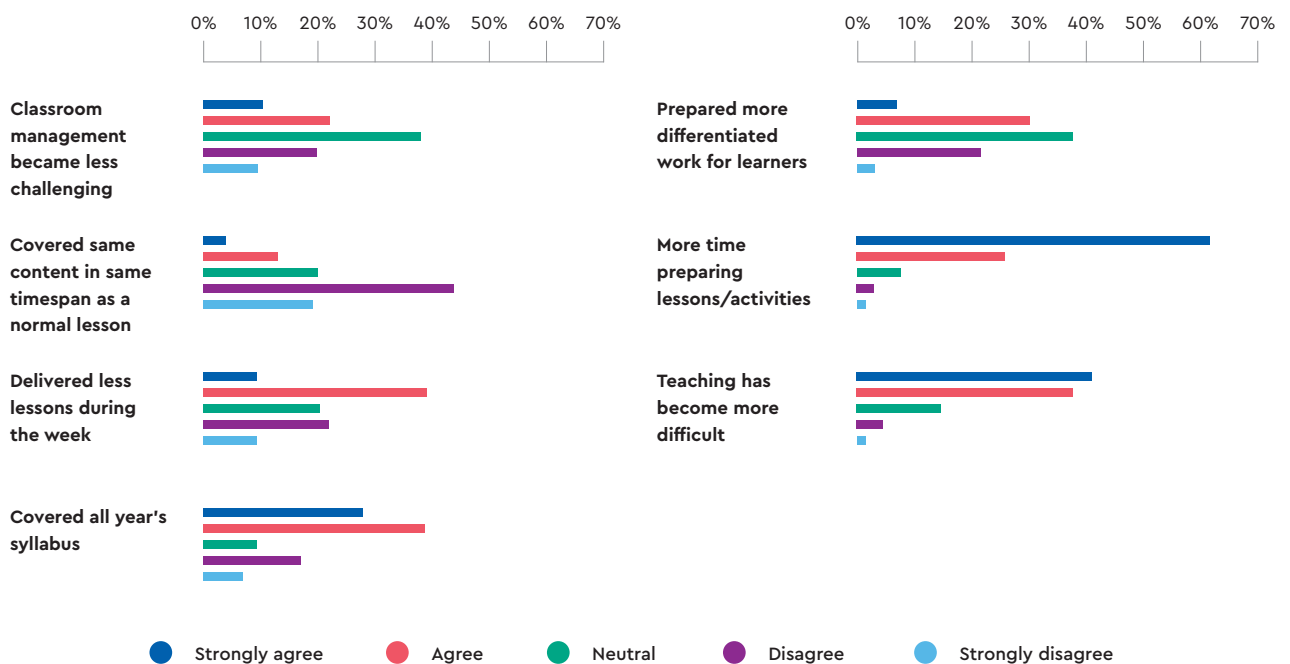
Figure 5.9 clearly shows that most educators spent much more time working during lockdown compared to pre-closing of schools. Plenty of time was spent in preparing online resources (86.5%), planning with the LSE/s for students with special educational needs (49.1%), planning lessons (79.1%), online meetings with colleagues (69%), marking work and sending feedback (76.4%). Moreover, a significant increase in time spent communicating with learners' parents (87.85%), communicating with parents of learners with a statement of need (61.1%), and attending webinars to improve digital skills (83.4%) were also reported by primary school educators.





**Figure 5.9:** Time spent on school-related activities during lockdown compared to pre-closing of schools

It is remarkable to note that only one-third of respondents (32.5%) agreed with the statement that classroom management during online lessons became less challenging. More than half the participants (63%) pointed out they did not cover the same content in the same timespan as a normal lesson whilst teaching online, and around half the participants (48.5%) delivered fewer lessons during the week. A quarter of the respondents (24.1%) claimed they did not cover the whole year's syllabus. Also, some respondents (37.2%) prepared more differentiated work for learners and almost all (87.8%) spent more time preparing lessons and activities. Moreover, a significant number of participants (79.1%) felt that teaching during the pandemic became more difficult, as shown in figure 5.10.



**Figure 5.10:** Responses to statements about online teaching

Figure 5.11 presents an overall positive picture of children's attitude and willingness to take part in online learning. 62.8% of respondents reported that learners were also often and very often willing to follow remote sessions. Similarly, 63.1% of participants claimed that learners were often or very often willing to participate actively during remote sessions. Almost all participants claimed that their learners were 'often' or 'very often' satisfied with the quality (91%) and frequency (84.6%) of remote teaching sessions. With regards to regular attendance, 61.4% indicated that learners were often or very often present during online lessons. 66.9% of participating teachers also pointed out that learners had the necessary devices to follow online sessions.

On the other hand, respondents stated that some learners often or very often struggled to understand without the support of the LSE (34.3%) or without teacher in-class support (24.3%), whereas over half the participants noted that learners 'sometimes' struggled to understand without teacher in-class support (53.6%). Referring to children with additional needs or the gifted and talented, 55% of teachers reported that these also 'sometimes' struggled to access learning. Some participants claimed that their students were 'rarely' or 'never' regular in their attendance (21%) and that they were 'sometimes' bored as they were not being challenged according to their abilities (41.4%). Moreover, 24.8% of the participants indicated that their learners were 'sometimes' able to submit tasks and activities electronically, while 13.2% claimed there were those learners who were rarely or never able to do so. It is worrying to note that a quarter of the educators stated their learners 'sometimes' had the necessary devices to follow remote learning (24.3%), whereas 8.7% noted that there were learners who did not have the necessary devices to follow remote learning.

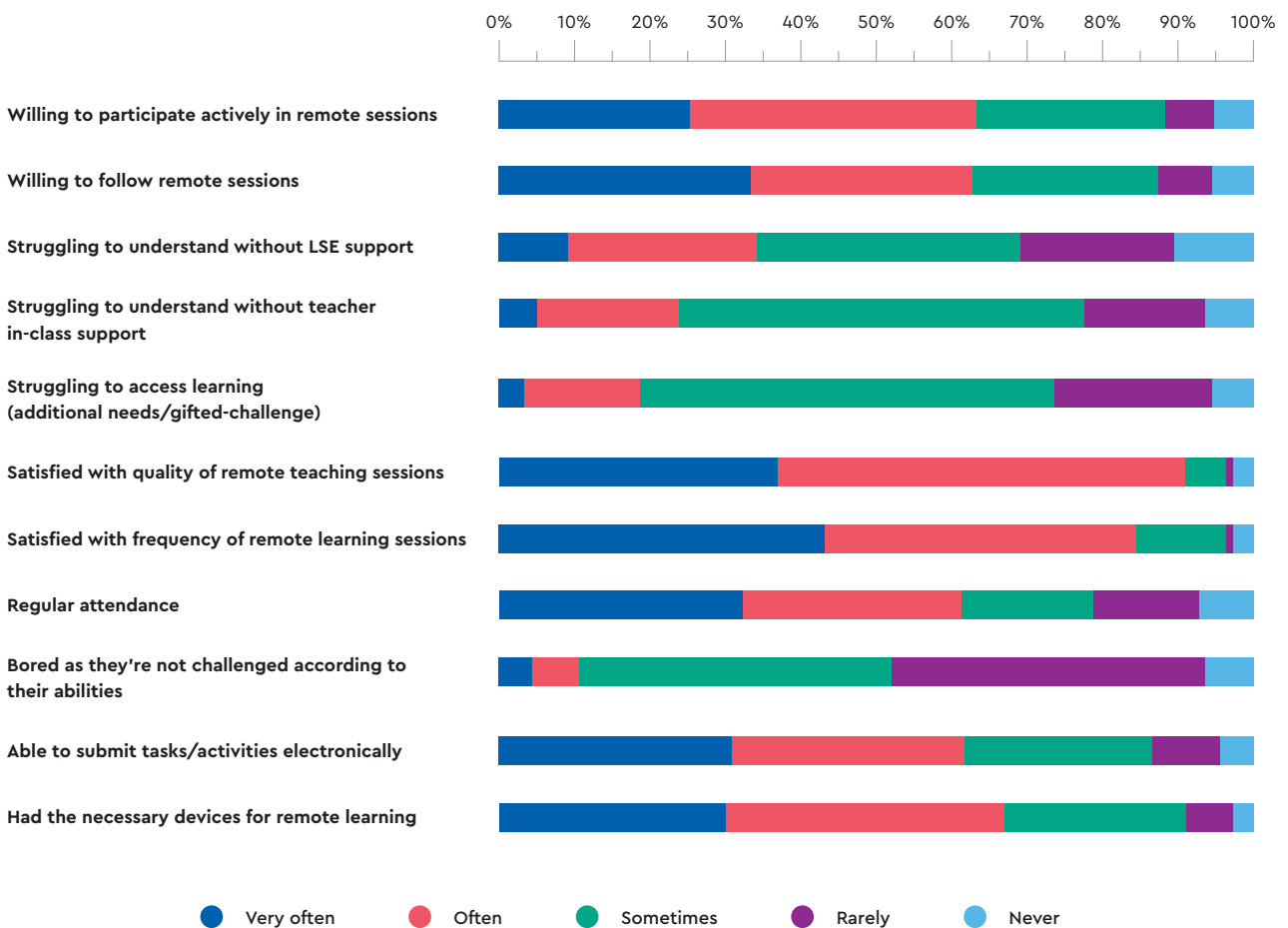
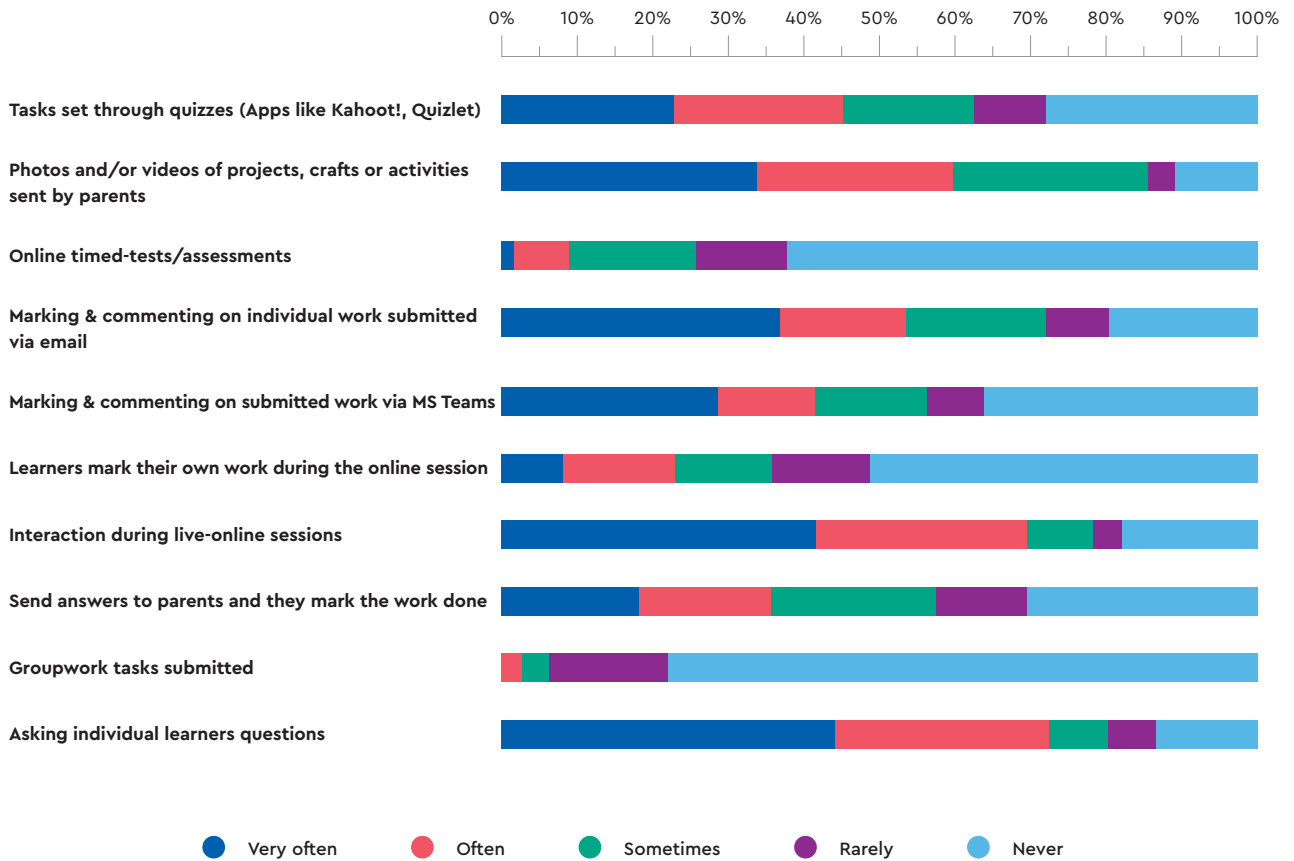


Figure 5.11: Learners' attitude and practices during the closure of schools

As shown in Figure 5.12, the most popular form of assessment during remote teaching adopted was ‘very often’ and ‘often’ asking individual learners questions about the lesson (72.5%), followed by interaction during live-online lessons (69.7%) and the use of photos and/ or videos of projects, crafts or activities sent to the teachers (59.8%). Having said this, according to the respondents, other forms of assessment were less popular - group work tasks (93.5%), online timed-tests or assessments (74%), and learners marking their own work during the online session (63.9%) were rarely or never used.



**Figure 5.12: Assessment of learners during remote teaching**

Participants were also asked to indicate their three greatest concerns about remote teaching and learning. Primary educators’ main worry seemed to be the difficulty that learners may experience in maintaining continuous online engagement for a long time (66.4%), followed by lack of face-to-face interaction (65.5%) and the disappearance of some children from the school radar (60.3%). Concerns about the lack of support for learners (41.4%), lack of pupil motivation (29.3%) lack of support for families (27.6%), lack of engagement on the learners’ part (25.9%) and reduced teaching time (25%) were also reported. Teaching becoming more traditional (16.4%) and reduced content (6.9%) resulted as the concerns that were least mentioned.

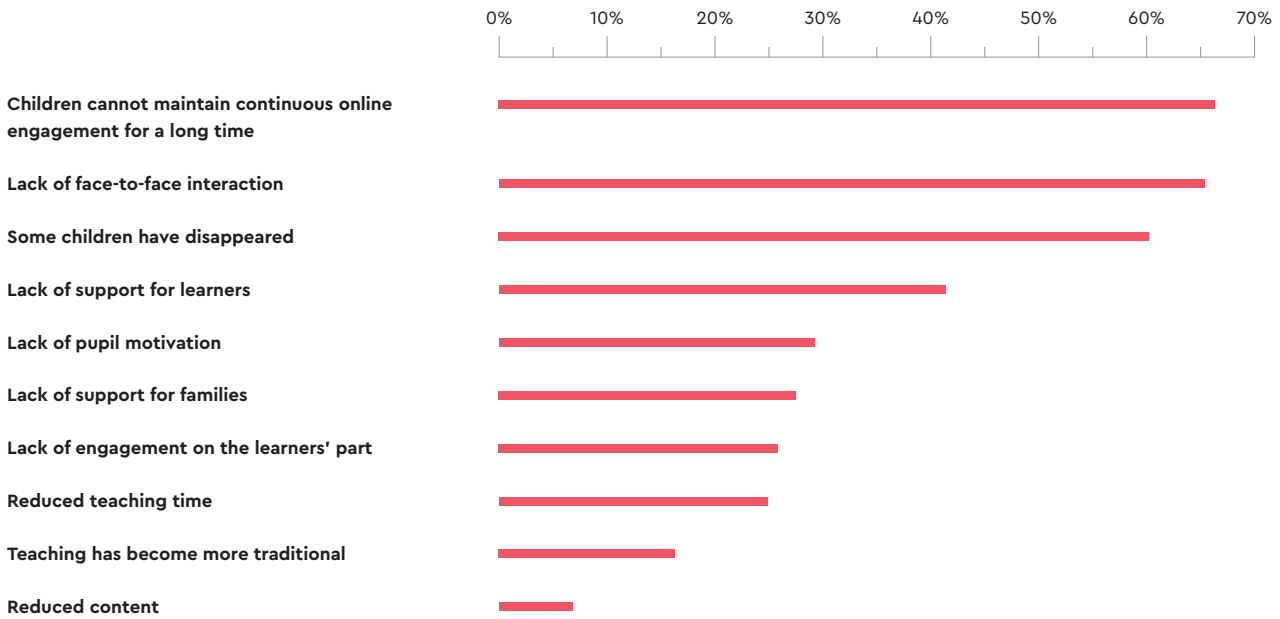


Figure 5.13: Three greatest concerns about remote teaching/learning

In the final part of the first section on teaching and learning, participating educators were invited to list any online experiences in which they perceived learners to be more motivated and engaged than usual.

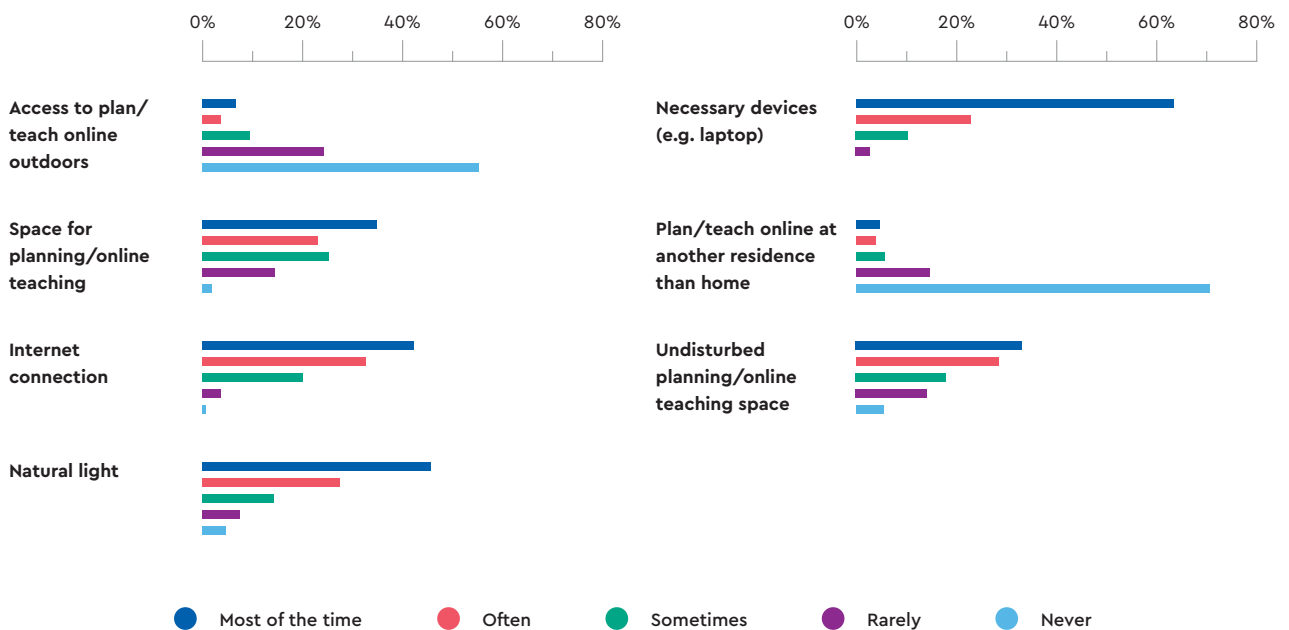


Figure 5.14: Perceived online experiences that motivated and engaged learners more than usual

Responses by 88 participants included quizzes (n=13), hands-on activities (n=11), science experiments (n=7), games (n=6), groupwork (n=4), art and crafts (n=4), discussions (n=4), reading activities (n=4), and use of Kahoot (n=3). Moreover, other responses included the use of video clips (n=3), presenting their work (n=3), preparing a video (n=3), flip grid projects (n=2), cooking lessons (n=2), show-and-tell sessions (n=2), PowerPoints (n=2), Nearpod (n=2), and using digital resources (n=2). Other activities which were reported to be engaging by individual participants were a science lesson with a small group, manipulatives in maths, one-to-one sessions, working mathematical schoolwork together, a treasure hunt around the house whilst recording videos of themselves, and an alphabet treasure hunt.

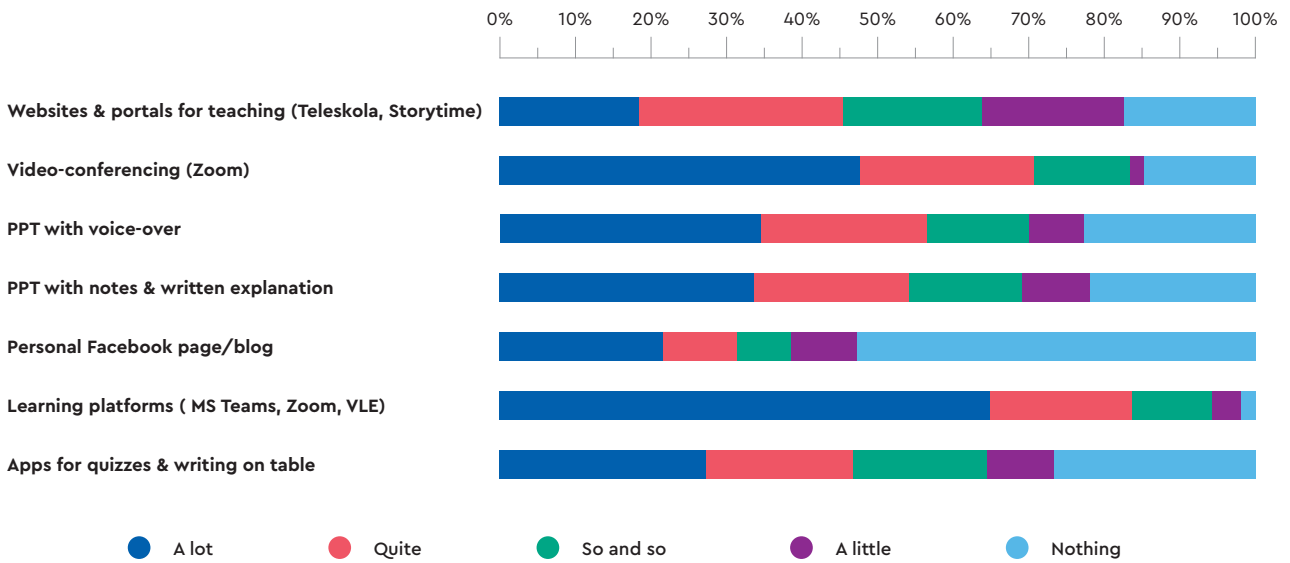
### 5.2.2 Learning Spaces

Figure 5.15 depicts the kind of physical or virtual spaces participating educators had access to during the physical closure of schools. As expected, over half of the respondents (55.3%) did not have any outdoor access to plan and/or teach online, with only 10.7% claiming this was a frequent practice on their part. Only 58.3% felt they generally had enough physical space available for them to conduct work-related activities in their homes. Some respondents indicated they experienced internet connection issues to a small or larger degree, with a fifth of respondents (20.2%) stating this happened sometimes, whereas another 4.8% pointed out they 'rarely' or 'never' had any connection. Natural light in their physical spaces was often or most often present for 73.3% of the participants, whilst 12.4% claimed they rarely or never had any. The necessary devices to conduct online teaching were often or most of the time available for use in all rooms and spaces in their homes for the majority (86.6%) of the respondents with only 2.9% indicating this was rarely possible. Planning or teaching online at a different residence to their home was not a possibility for 70.6% of the participants. Some also indicated they could rarely or never avail themselves of undisturbed planning and online teaching in their homes (20%), whereas 18.1% experienced this only sometimes.



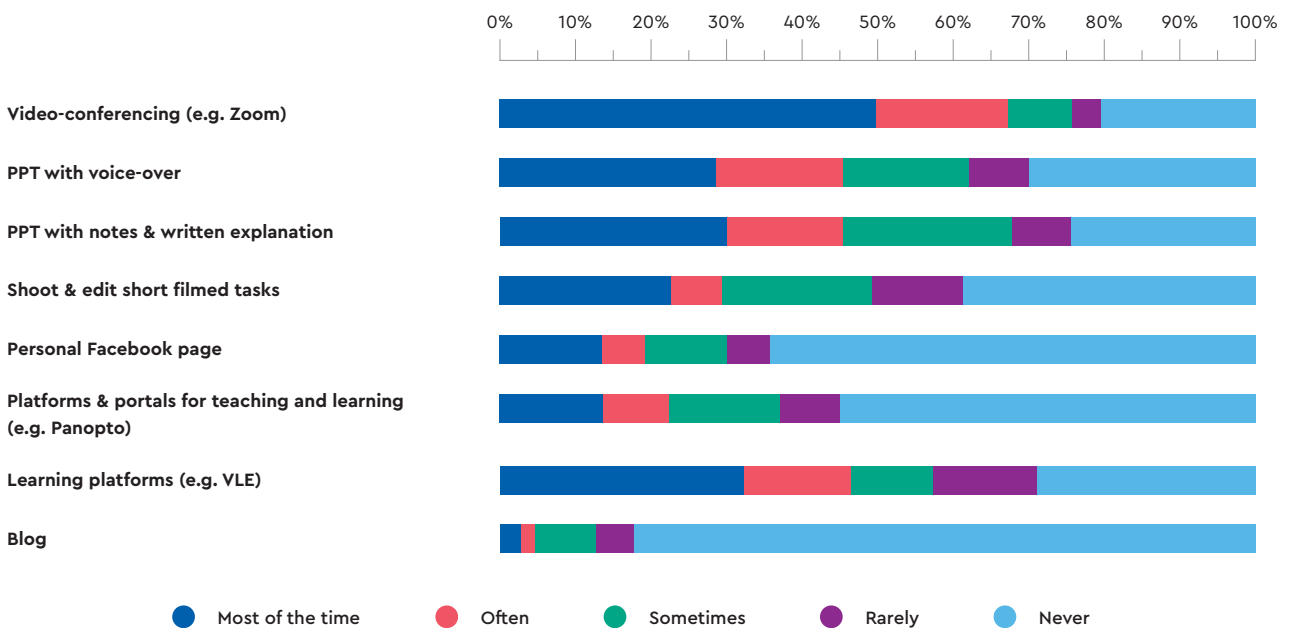
**Figure 5.15:** Primary educators' access to physical/virtual facilities to support teaching from home

In Figure 5.16, primary school educators were asked to identify any new skills they felt were acquired in relation to different virtual learning spaces. The use of learning platforms (83.8%) was the most predominantly gained new skill, followed by videoconferencing (70.9%). Also, just over half the respondents felt that they learnt a great deal with regards to the use of PowerPoints with voice over (56.5%) and the use of PowerPoints accompanied with notes and a written explanation (54.5%). Skills with regards to apps for quizzes and writing on table, as well as websites and portals for teaching had a more mixed response. Conversely, participants did not feel they gained much in terms of the use of personal Facebook page or blogs (61.4%). This describes a situation in which participating teachers were able to develop their professional skills through the use of different virtual learning platforms and tools as they sought to provide learners with a good-enough remote schooling experience.



**Figure 5.16:** The degree to which students learnt new skills

Figure 5.17 indicates the degree to which different modalities and tools were used to facilitate planning and online teaching. Primary school educators frequently used videoconferencing (67.3%). Close to half of the respondents also employed PowerPoints with voice-over (45.5%) and PowerPoints with accompanying notes and a written explanation (45.6%). Similarly, learning platforms were also regarded as helpful as a modality used repeatedly by 46.6% of the respondents to assist them in their preparation and pedagogy. Rather interestingly, shooting and editing short film were tasks regularly used by only 29.7%, with the largest number of respondents (38.6%) claiming that they never used these digital tools. Digital platforms usually used for communication between the school and the home were predominantly marked as never used. These include a classroom blog (82.2%), the use of a personal Facebook page (64.1%), as well as platforms and portals for teaching and learning (54.9%).



**Figure 5.17:** The degree to which primary educators used different teaching modalities to plan/teach online

As shown in Figure 5.18, the following aspects related to the changes experienced in terms of learning spaces were indicated by participants as having a negative/very negative impact on their well-being: not being able to meet with colleagues (87.6%), followed by not being able to go out with friends (81.5%), limited outdoors to gardens or walks (81.4%), having to stay indoors as much as possible (79.4%) and having less physical activity due to staying indoors (76.3%). This provides a good description of the general sense of unease with the shift to living and working in confined spaces with reduced contact with others. Mixed reactions were reported about the effect of having to teach mainly online, with 41.3% claiming that this had a 'positive' or 'very positive' effect on their well-being, whilst 38.1% felt it had a 'negative' or 'very negative' impact.

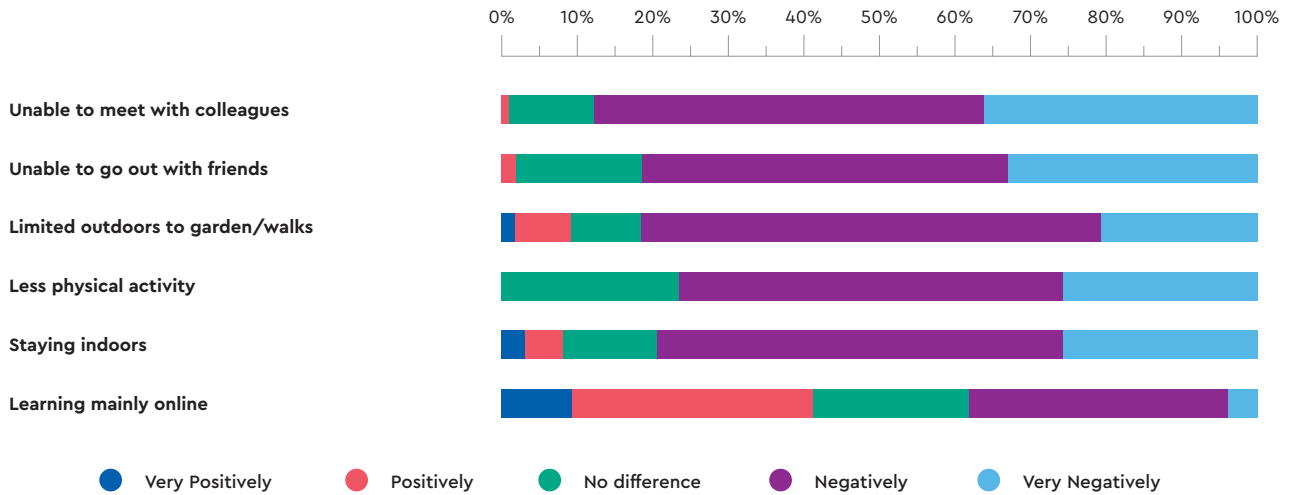


Figure 5.18: Effect of spaces on well-being

Figure 5.19 provides a good indication of participating teachers' preferences in relation to the use of learning spaces and modalities following the pandemic. The majority reported they preferred reverting to exclusively face-to-face modalities in classrooms (69.5%) when returning to 'normal' life in post-COVID times. Given a choice, a significant percentage (54.2%) also opted for a physical presence using both classrooms and available outdoor spaces. Surprisingly, 36% participants indicated they would like to retain a blended approach in their teaching whilst almost a third of the respondents (30.8%) suggested they would like to retain online learning as the modus operandi. It is interesting to note that 7.4% would not like to have exclusively face-to-face lessons in classrooms.

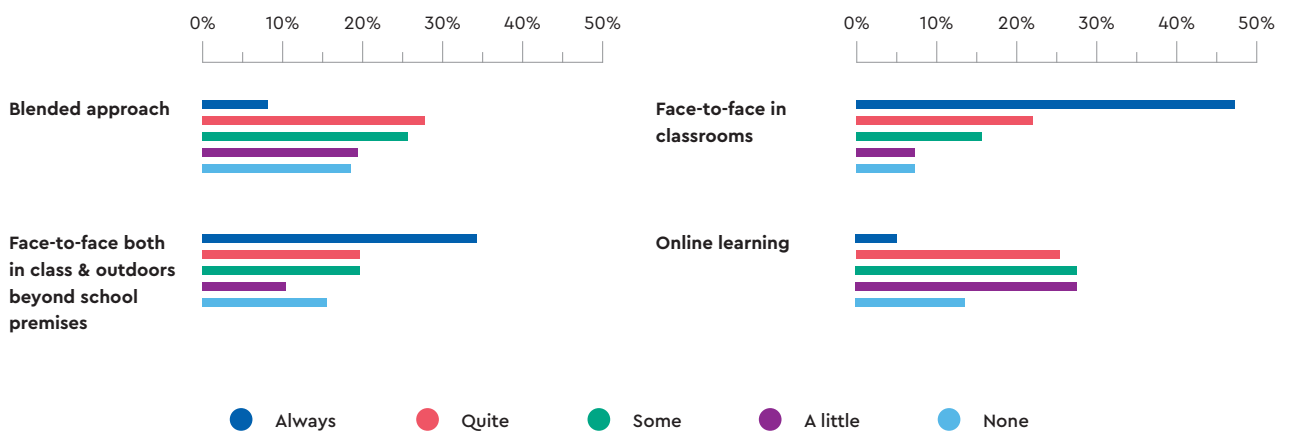
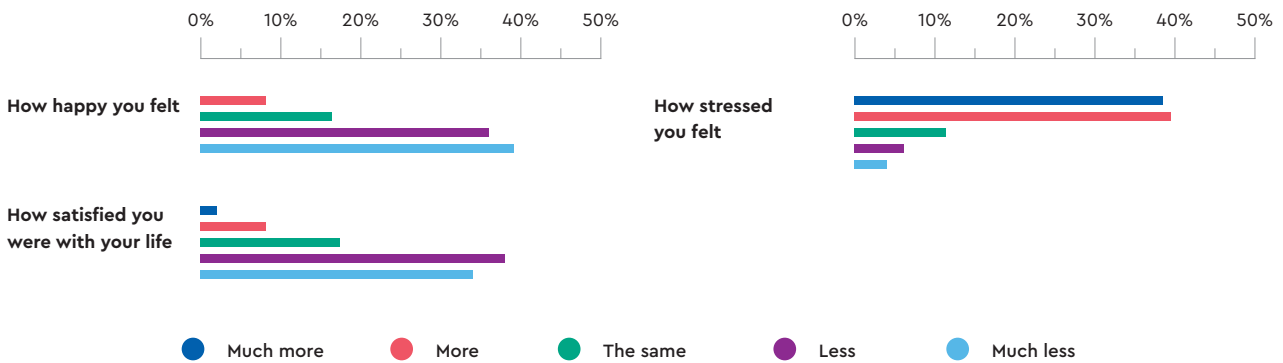


Figure 5.19: Learning spaces/modes primary educators would retain on returning to 'normal' times

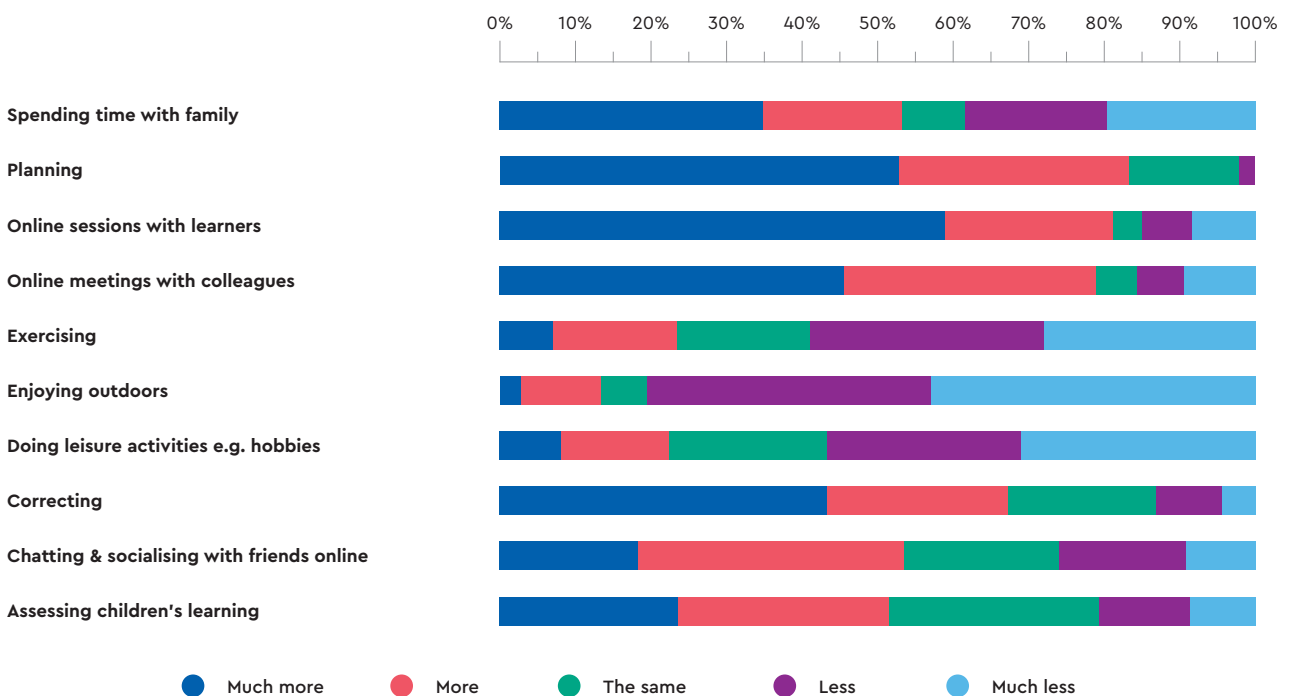
### 5.2.3 Well-being

In the third section of the questionnaire, a lens was placed on the impact of the shift to online teaching on primary school educators' well-being. As shown in Figure 5.20, most respondents claimed that the COVID-19 lockdown negatively affected their happiness (75.3%) and satisfaction with life (72.1%). In addition, 79.1% felt their stress levels increased exponentially during lockdown. Only about one tenth of respondents claimed that they felt happier (8.2%), more satisfied (10.3%) and less stressed (10.5%) compared to pre-pandemic times. Some respondents reported that their levels of happiness (16.5%), satisfaction (17.5%) and stress (11.5%) did not change due to the lockdown.



**Figure 5.20:** Happiness, satisfaction and stress as compared to pre-pandemic times

Figure 5.21 illustrates the way teachers' time on various activities and tasks compared when matched with pre-COVID times. Participating teachers' responses indicate a clear increase in time spent on planning (83.3%), online sessions with learners (81%), online meetings with colleagues (79.1%) and correcting (67.4%). Half of the participants (51.7%) also reported they spent more time assessing children's learning. Apart from a surge in work-related tasks, spending time with their family (53.7%) as well as chatting and socialising with friends online (53.7%) was also marked as having increased. It is interesting to note that less time was reported by respondents for enjoying the outdoors (80.2%), for exercising (58.7%) and for doing leisure activities and hobbies (56.7%) compared to before the pandemic.

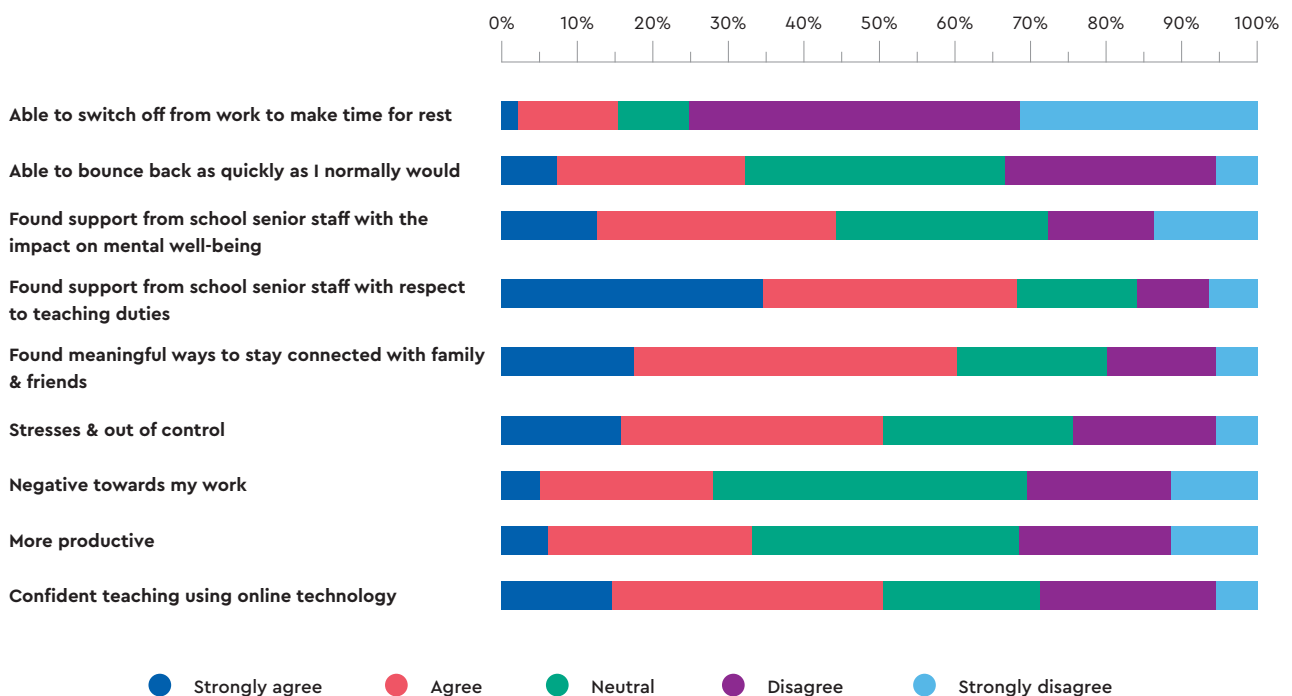


**Figure 5.21:** Daily time spent on activities during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic



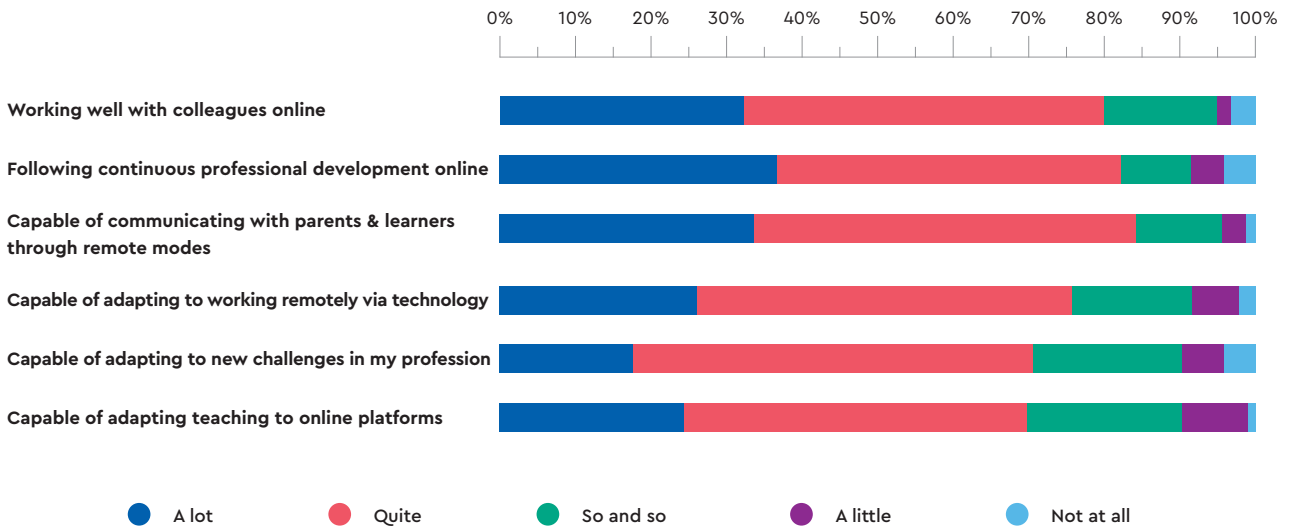
During the COVID-19 lockdown, primary school educators' well-being was impacted in a variety of ways as shown in Figure 5.22. Although 60.4% of respondents felt that they found meaningful ways to stay connected with family and friends, it is of concern to observe that only 15.6% stated they were able to switch off from work and rest, whilst 75.1% reported they could not do so. Most respondents (68.4%) found support from senior staff at their school with respect to their teaching duties, but less support in terms of the impact on their mental well-being (44.2%). A significant number of the respondents (50.5%) felt 'stressed and out of control'.

Responses show different views on whether participants were able to bounce back as quickly as they normally would, with 32.3% who reported they managed, 33.3% who did not, and 34.4% to whom it made no difference. It is noteworthy that some participants (28.1%) felt negative towards their work during this time. There were a range of responses with regards to productivity, with 31.3% who felt they were less productive, 33.4% more productive, whilst 35.4% reported that it made no difference. Half the participants (50.5%) claimed that they felt confident teaching via online technology, whereas 28.5% disagreed to a smaller or larger extent. Moreover, 21.1% reported no difference in their confidence in teaching through online technology. This data further describes how the pandemic and the accompanying changes resulting from the physical closure of schools had diverse reactions by and effects on primary school educators.



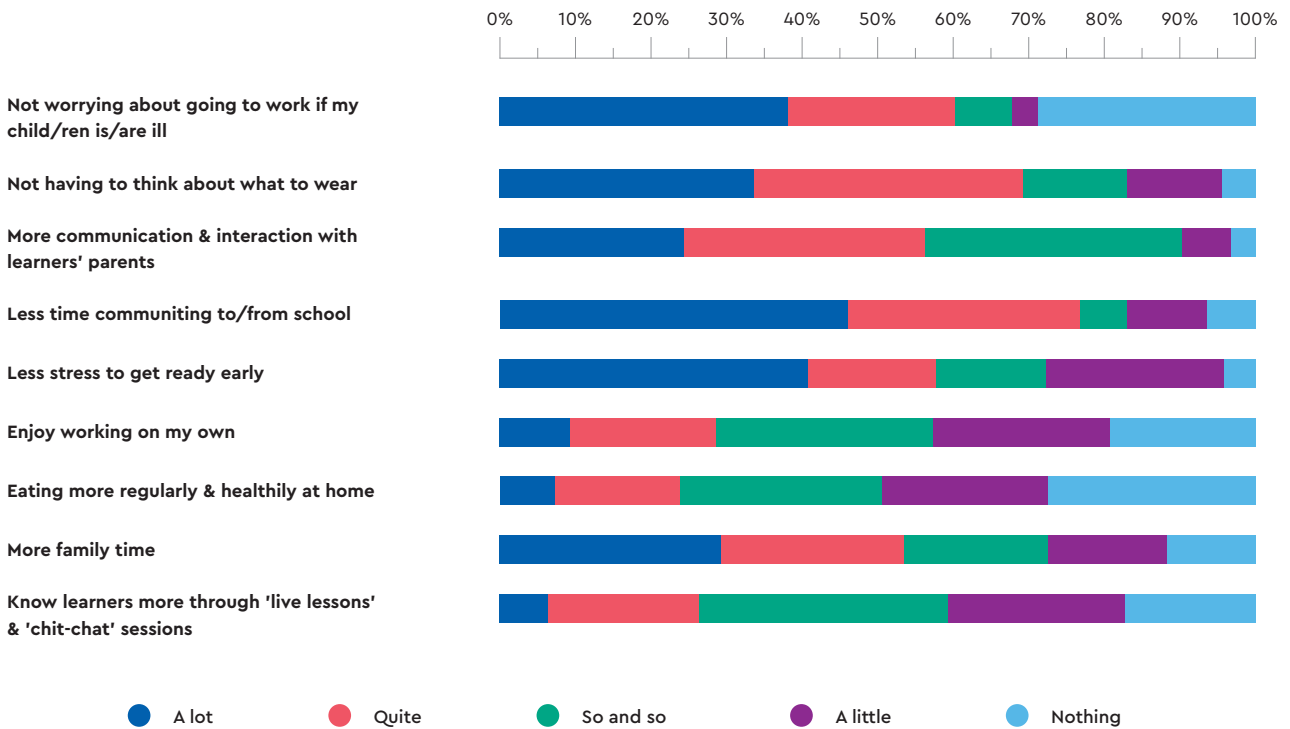
**Figure 5.22:** Agreement of primary school educators with the following statements in relation to well-being during COVID-19 times

Different levels of confidence in dealing with change are shown in Figure 5.23. A sense of empowerment transpires in the responses related to respondents' confidence with the shift to online modes of teaching and learning. More specifically, the majority felt very capable of adapting their teaching to online platforms (69.9%), adapting to the new challenges in their profession (70.5%), and adapting to working remotely through the use of technology (75.8%). Communicating with parents and learners through remote modes (84.2%) was also positively marked, as was the participating teachers' ability to attend continuous professional development online (82.1%) and their confidence with online collaborative work (80%).



**Figure 5.23:** Confidence of primary educators in dealing with change

Figure 5.24 portrays the numerous advantages of working remotely from home during the COVID-19 lockdown experienced by primary school educators. These include less time commuting to/from school (76.8%), not having to think about what to wear for work (69.5%), not worrying about going to work if their child/ren are ill (60.5%), less stress to get ready very early (57.9%), as well as more communication and interaction with learners' parents (56.4%) and more family time (53.7%). However, it is worth noting that only 28.7% enjoyed working on their own, and only 26.6% felt they got to know their learners more through 'live lessons' and 'chit-chat' sessions. Also, a quarter of respondents (24.2%) claimed that they ate more regularly and healthily at home.



**Figure 5.24:** Advantages of working remotely during the pandemic

In figure 5.25, participant primary educators indicated their perceived disadvantages of working remotely during the pandemic. A significant number of the respondents claimed they missed interacting (81.7%) and receiving support/ collaborating with colleagues (74.2%) most. They also experienced a lack of physical movement at home in contrast to school (64.6%) with the physical closure of schools. They also reported higher stress levels due to dealing with many changes at once (59.7%) and a difficulty to establish a work/life balance (54.8%).

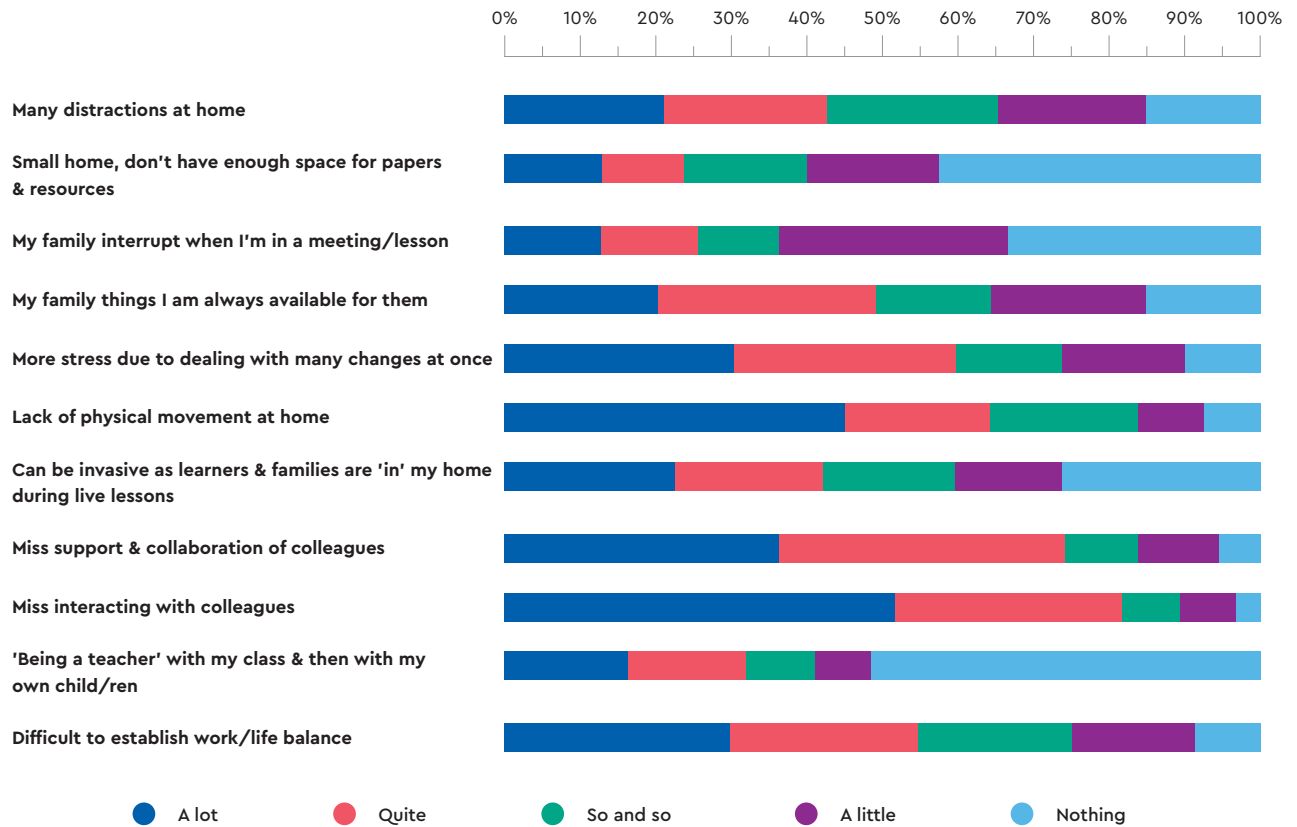


Figure 5.25: Disadvantages of working remotely during the pandemic

As shown in Figure 5.26, parents' support, and cooperation during the physical closure of schools was perceived by participating teachers as prevalent. Parents came across as being very supportive of primary educators' efforts mostly through scanning and sending children's completed work (70%), followed by acknowledgements of sent notes (63%), helping their children with tasks sent by their teachers (58.3%), as well as by sending photos and/or videos of work/activities to indicate completion of work (57.2%). Respondents also noted parental presence during online lessons or small group meetings (56.1%), timely completion of set tasks that require parental involvement (55%), emails with notes of appreciation (54.5%), and preparation of suitable places for learners to follow lessons and carry out activities (46.7%). Other gestures or actions taken by parents to facilitate their children's learning during the pandemic included helping other parents understand teachers' instruction/explanations (43.2%), ensuring learners attended online sessions (40%), and sharing ideas and suggestions with their children's teachers with regards to online activities (33%).

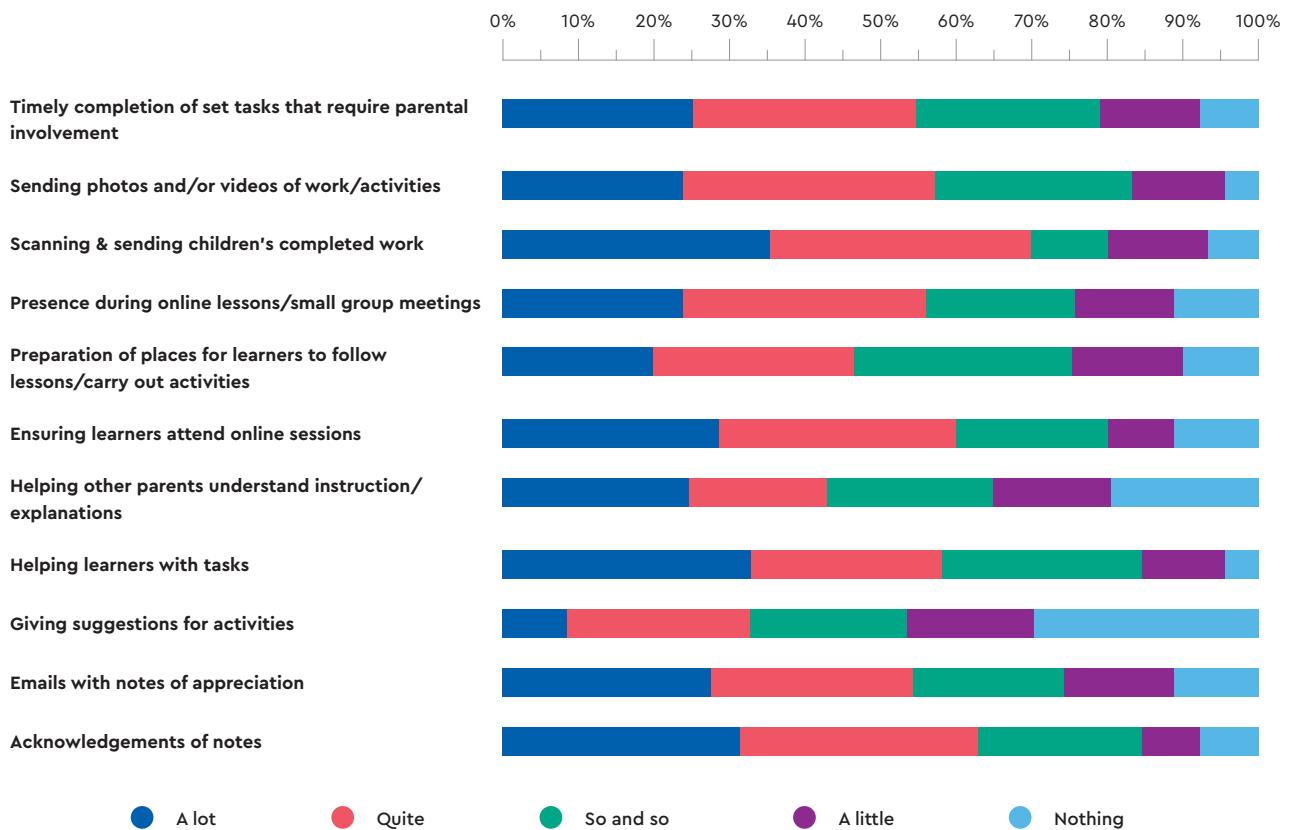


Figure 5.26: The degree to which parents were supportive of primary educators' efforts

In Figure 5.27, data regarding the degree to which teachers felt parents had supported their children's learning during the lockdown shows a range of responses. About half the participants (48.4%) reported that parents sat with their children to work on activities/tasks, whilst only 58.8% indicated that parents provided all required resources most of the time with one fifth of the respondents (20%) highlighting this happened rarely or not at all. It is also noteworthy that 40.3% of participants indicated that parents 'overly supported' as they did children's work for them. Over half the participants (52.3%) claimed that parents dedicated plenty of time with the children doing online lessons, 40.5% claimed that some parents regularly asked them instructions on how to adapt activities if their child did not understand, whilst 45.9% indicated that parents often asked for clarification of concepts so they could explain better to their children.

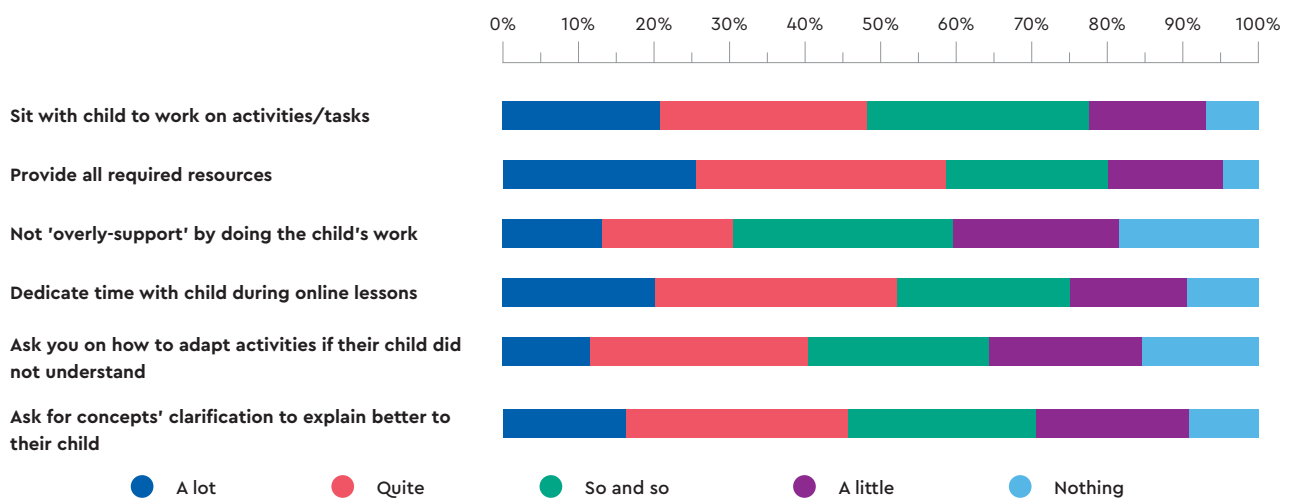
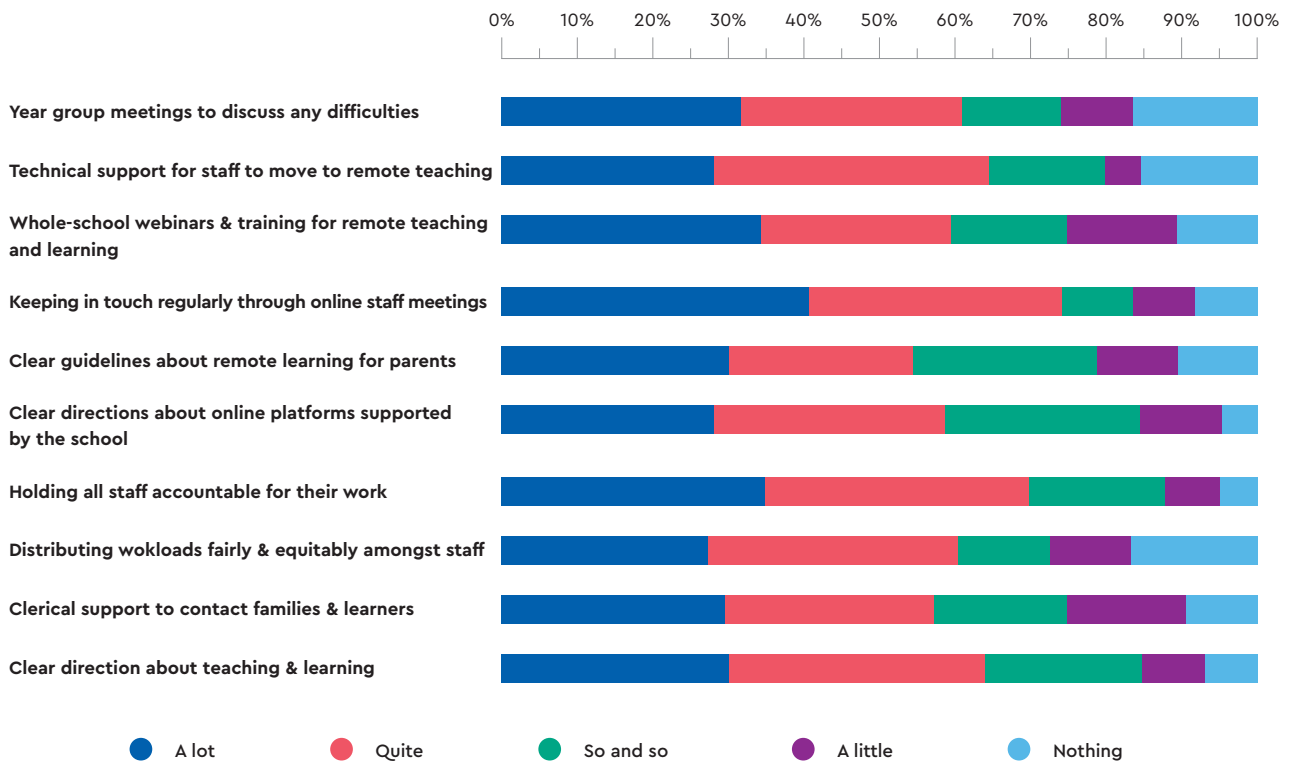


Figure 5.27: The degree to which parents supported their children in learning at home

Respondents were asked to indicate their experience of support received from the SLT. As shown in Figure 28, over half the participants indicated that the SLT was very supportive, mostly by keeping in touch regularly through online staff meetings (74.4%), followed by holding all staff accountable for their work (69.8%), providing technical support for staff to move to remote/online teaching (64.7%), giving clear direction about teaching and learning (63.9%), and organising year group meetings to discuss any difficulties (61.2%). Workloads were seen to have been distributed fairly and equitably amongst staff by 60.7% of the participating teachers, whereas 59.5% claimed that webinars and training sessions for remote/online teaching and learning had been organised by their leaders. According to 58.8% of the respondents, their school had also issued clear directions about online platforms, provided clerical support to contact families and learners (57.2%), and issued clear guidelines about remote learning for parents (54.6%).



**Figure 5.28:** The degree to which the school management team was supportive

The last open-ended question invited ‘any comments or points’ from the participants. 32 teacher respondents shared their insights and experiences through their comments. 6 participants mentioned the disappearance of some students from online lessons (n=6), with one respondent emphasising that “there need to be sanctions for lack of participation, in the same way as truancy is penalised”. Online learning was seen as challenging and stressful (n=4) especially for those teachers who had their own young children (n=3). Not enough devices at home were available to support online learning (n=2), and some felt they were stressed by the added workload during this period (n=2). Moreover, some felt that technology by itself could never replace the interaction between teacher and students in class (n=2) and teaching very young children only presented an extra burden since parents had to accompany their child throughout the live session and most work (n=1). Someone mentioned the very poor work sent to teachers (n=1) and that some subject areas such as science were too difficult to be taught online (n=1). One respondent also highlighted how assistant heads’ input during this period was non-existent and meetings with the head of school were fruitless most of the time. Another comment pointed out how not all educators were treated equally during this period - some educators were monitored regularly while other educators seemingly ‘vanished’.



Some comments focused on the disappearance of some learners from the school radar, something which many educators found particularly worrying and upsetting. The following comment sums these feelings up:

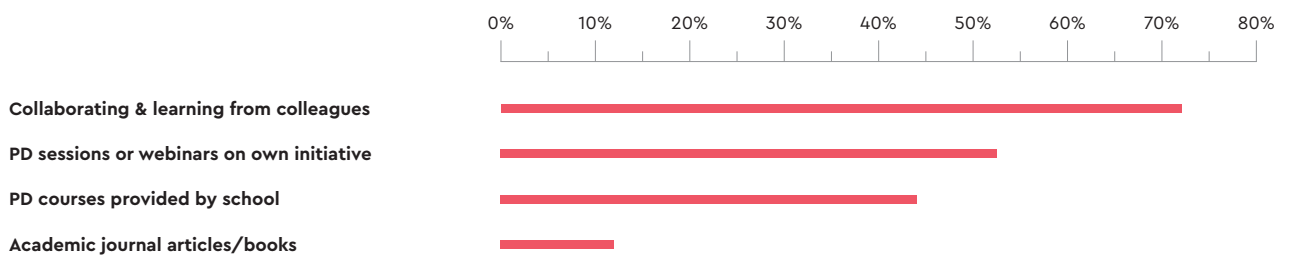
*I felt very stressed and upset because most of my students disappeared. I held twice weekly live online sessions with my class; only on one occasion I had a maximum of 6 students, despite the various attempts of our head of school to contact the parents via various media. My year group gave out HW daily on our year group facebook page (parents' fb). I used to submit the same work on our school tablets and on MS Teams, yet, only the 2 most active students provided most of the work. 2 sent some work randomly, whilst the others did none at all. I do not believe online learning is suitable for either extreme of learners (low or high); the average child might benefit if s/he has the ideal situation at home. (Respondent 6)*

### 5.3 Results of the Second Survey

This section presents the findings of the second survey conducted amongst primary school educators in September 2021. Like the results of the first survey, these are also organised under the three main themes of teaching and learning, learning spaces and well-being and relationships. It is worth keeping in mind that this re-run of the survey was completed by a total of 126 respondents, with a female majority (94.4%) and a distribution of 58.7%, 20.6% and another 20.6% across the state, church, and independent sectors respectively.

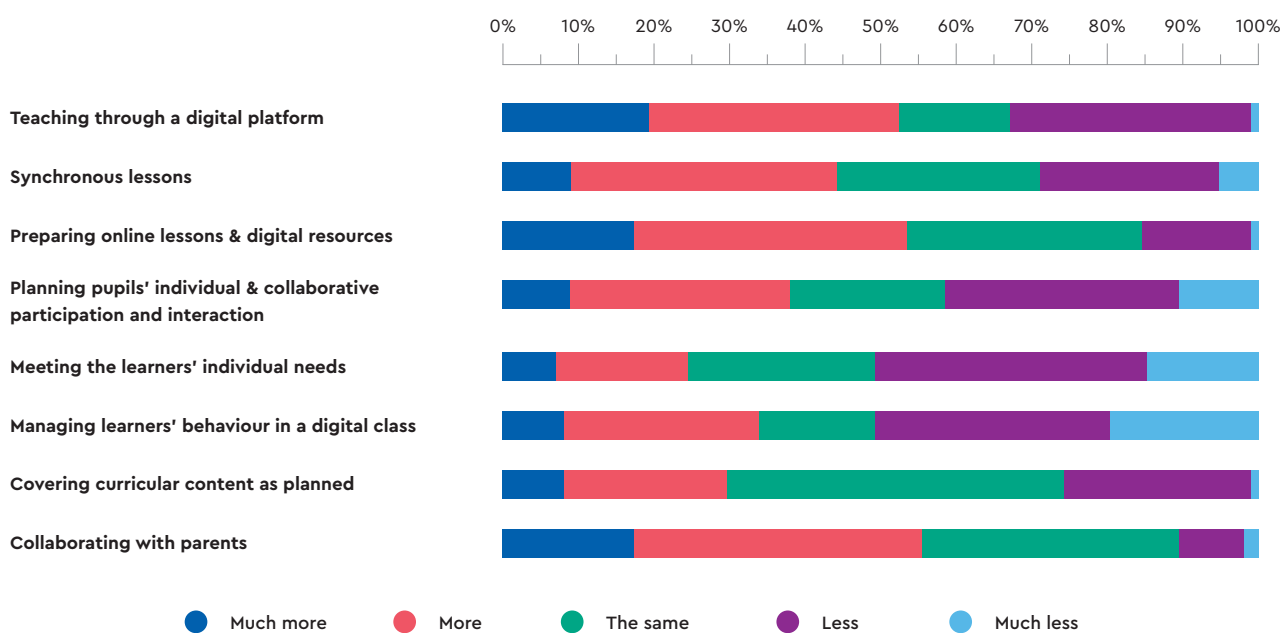
#### 5.3.1 Teaching and Learning

Teacher participants were asked to identify the different ways in which they improved their remote/online teaching skills during the year 2020-2021, selecting more than one option if they wanted to (see Figure 5.30). Most respondents chose collaborating and learning from colleagues as one important factor that helped them improve their online teaching skills (72.2%), followed by professional development sessions or webinars they attended on their own initiative (52.6%). 44.3% also attended professional development courses provided by their school sector (44.3%) and a further 12.4% read academic journal articles or books to inform themselves. 8 respondents (8.2%) specified other ways in which they felt their online skills were improved, including trying things out by trial and error (n=3), the use of YouTube videos (n=2), research (n=1), online forums/chats (n=1) and self-taught skills (n=1).



**Figure 5.30:** Ways in which remote learning skills of primary educators were improved

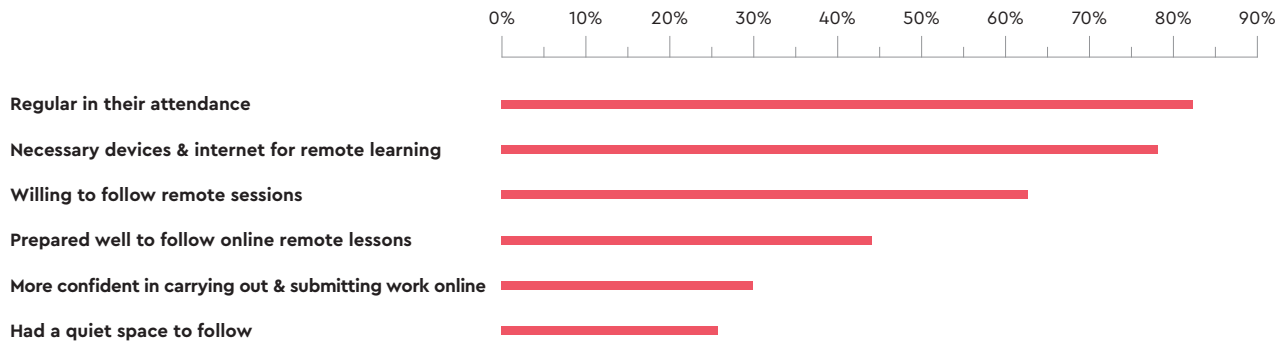
Figure 5.31 presents data about primary school educators' perceived level of confidence when they were teaching online during the year 2020-2021. Over half the respondents felt more confident collaborating with parents (55.6%), preparing online lessons and digital resources (53.6%) as well as teaching through a digital platform (52.6%). Confidence with synchronous live lessons also increased for 44.4% of respondents, although it decreased for 28.9% and stayed the same for 26.8%. There was a range of responses with regards to confidence in planning for pupils' individual and collaborative participation and interaction with percentages of 38.2% stating they felt more confident, 20.6% claiming they felt the same and 41.2% feeling less confident. Different responses were also given when asked about their confidence in delivering curriculum content as planned with 21.8% feeling more confident, 44.3% feeling the same whilst 25.7% feeling less confident during the year 2020-2021. Moreover, half the respondents (50.5%) reported feeling less confident in meeting the learners' individual needs as well as in managing learners' behaviour in a digital class. Two respondents also provided a comment for this question related to the difficulties that some learners experienced at home where the required parental support was not possible or available.



**Figure 5.31: Confidence levels of primary educators during the time/s of teaching online in 2020-2021**

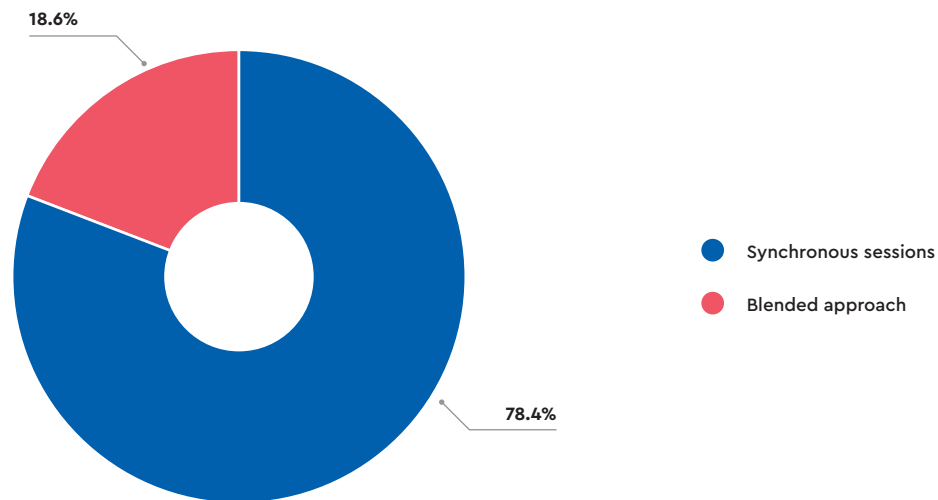
Figure 5.32 asked about learners' behaviour during the physical closure of schools. Most educators claimed that learners were regular in their attendance (82.5%) and had the necessary devices/internet connection to follow remote learning (78.4%). Only 62.9% were willing to follow online sessions with 44.3% claiming learners were well prepared for their online remote lessons. According to the survey respondents, a relatively small number of learners were more confident in carrying out and submitting work through the digital platform (29.9%) and had a personal quiet space to follow (25.8%). Furthermore, 7.2% of primary school educators chose to add their own comments in the field 'other'. Amongst the entries, respondents mentioned the lack of support from home (n=2), the need of some learners for continuous support from home to follow online lessons (n=1), connectivity issues (n=1), the inconsistent presentation of work by different learners (n=1), the distractions some learners experienced in their homes (n=1), the lack of participation during the lessons (n=1), and the fact that some children did not have any help from home (n=1).





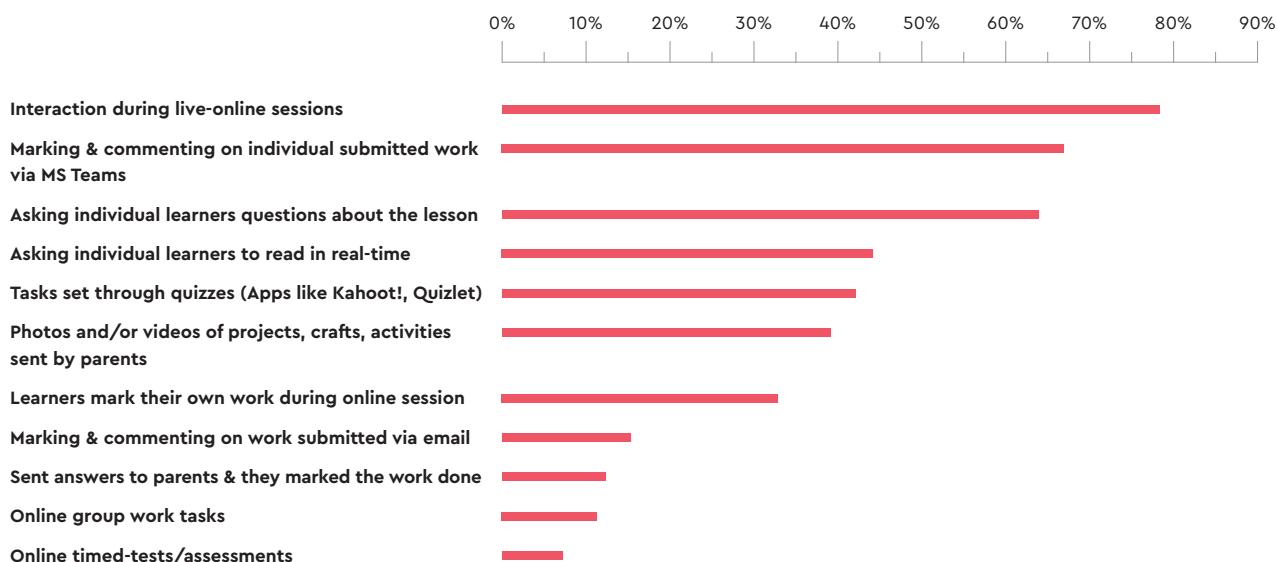
**Figure 5.32:** Learners' behaviour during the physical closure of schools

Figure 5.33 demonstrates respondent teachers' views on the modes of online learning they felt to be most effective to facilitate children's learning during the lockdown. Synchronous sessions were found to be by far the most effective for 78.4% of the primary school teachers, whilst 18.6% opted for a blended approach. Interestingly, no participants chose either asynchronous sessions or the option 'none of the above'. Furthermore, two respondents wrote a comment for the option 'Other'. One comment was related to how a daily plan and materials were sent to student a day before to prepare for lesson accordingly (n=1) and another comment explained how some students did far better with recorded sessions, so when asked, a video or a step-by-step PowerPoint was provided to the family.



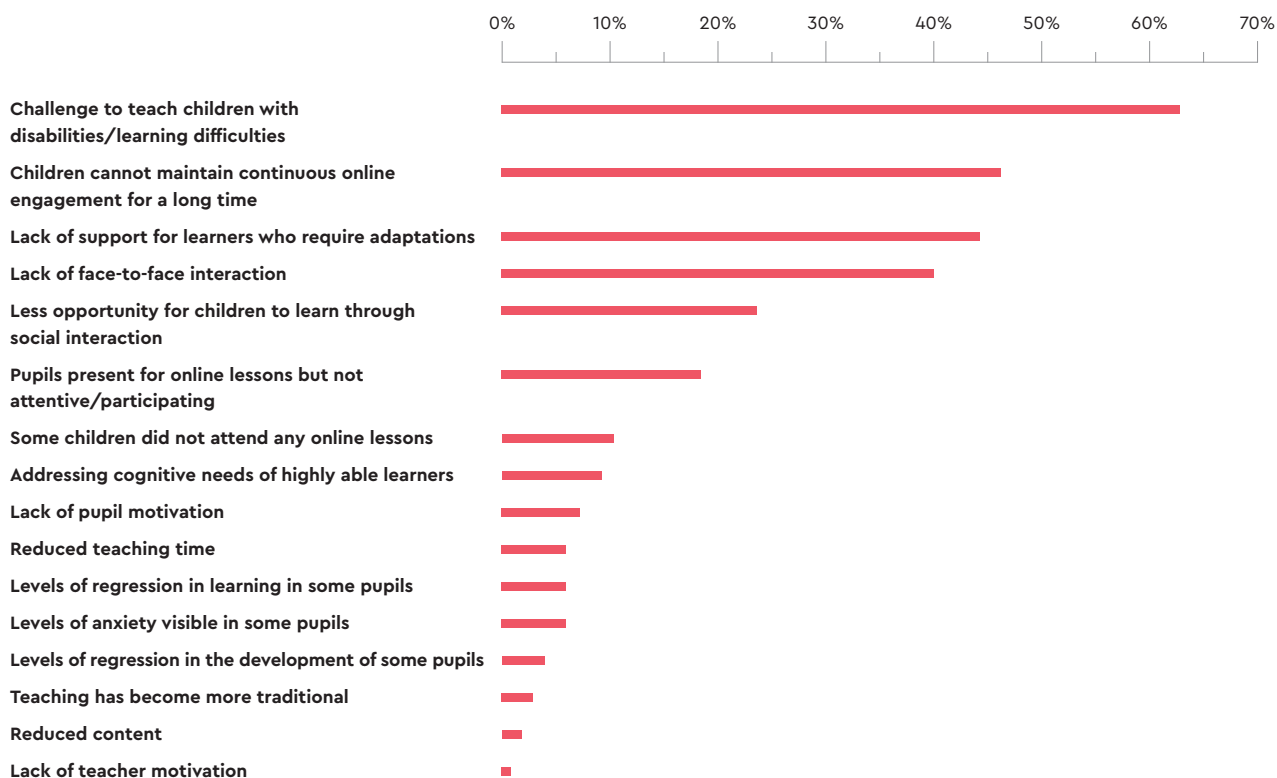
**Figure 5.33:** Most effective modes for children's learning

Figure 5.34 illustrates forms of assessment used by primary school teachers during remote online teaching. Participants marked interaction during live-online sessions as the most frequently used form of formative assessment whilst teaching remotely (78.4%), followed by marking and commenting on individual submitted work via MS Teams (67%), and asking individual learners questions about the lesson (63.9%). Online group work tasks and online timed tests/assessments were noted to be the least used, indicated to have been only used by 11.3% and 7.2% of participants respectively. Others (5.2%) commented how they prepared adapted work for students (n=1), marked students' work, and commented via class dojo (n=1), or correction of work through J2E platform (n=1).



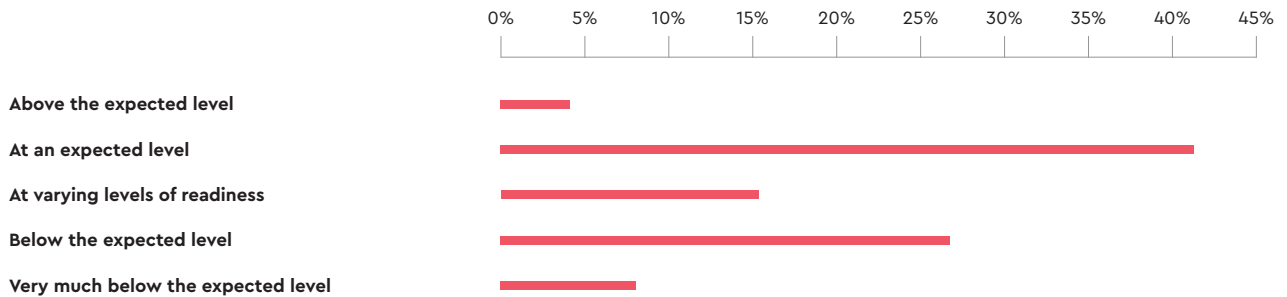
**Figure 5.34: Assessment used during remote teaching**

Figure 5.35 provides a description of several concerns that primary school educators experienced in relation to remote teaching/learning during 2020-2021. The three main concerns reported were their difficulties to reach children with learning difficulties or disabilities (62.9%), the challenge to maintain continuous online engagement for a long time (46.4%), and the lack of support for learners who require adaptations (44.3%). Concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction (40.2%), and less opportunity for children to learn through social interaction (23.7%) were also reported. About 18.6% were also concerned about having pupils present for online lessons but not attentive or participating. A tenth of primary school educators reported that some children ‘disappeared’ (10.3%) and that the cognitive needs of highly able learners might not have been reached (9.3%). 7.2% also reported lack of pupil motivation. Only few participants were concerned about reduced teaching time (6.2%), levels of regression in learning and levels of anxiety visible in some pupils (6.2%), levels of regression in the development of some pupils (4.1%), that teaching had become more traditional (3.1%), reduced content (2.1%) and lack of teacher motivation (1%). One participant chose to provide an open-ended response expressing concern about not being able to see everyone’s work immediately to gauge learning, understanding and fix mistakes together with no one-to-one time.



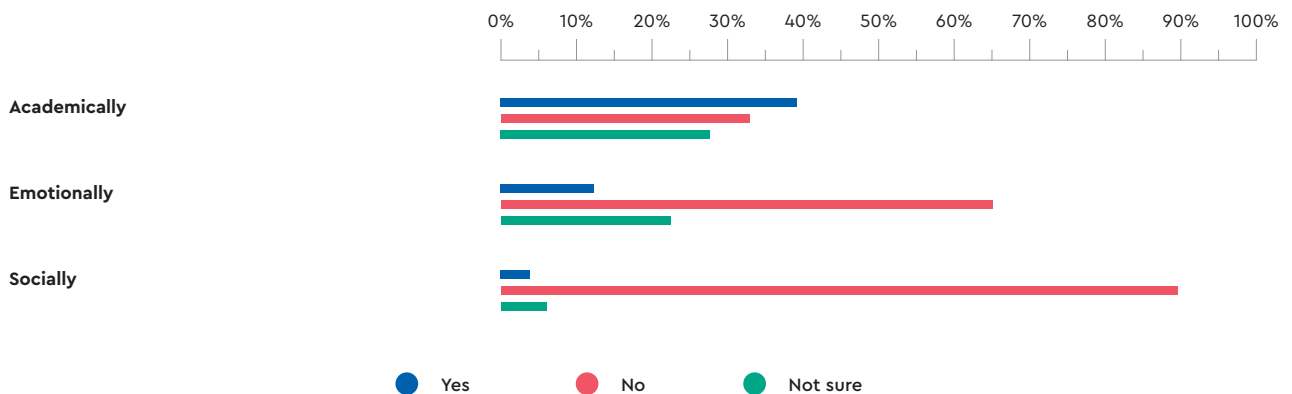
**Figure 5.35: Concerns about remote teaching/learning in 2020-2021**

In Figure 5.36, teacher respondents were asked about the academic level of their class at the start of the scholastic year. The largest number of respondents felt that at the beginning of the scholastic year 2020-2021, their class was generally at an expected level (41.2%). Of concern, is that about a quarter of respondents (26.8%) felt that their class was below the expected academic level and another 8.2% highlighted that their class was very much below the expected level. 4.1% reported that their class was above the expected level and 15.5% claimed their class was at varying levels of readiness.



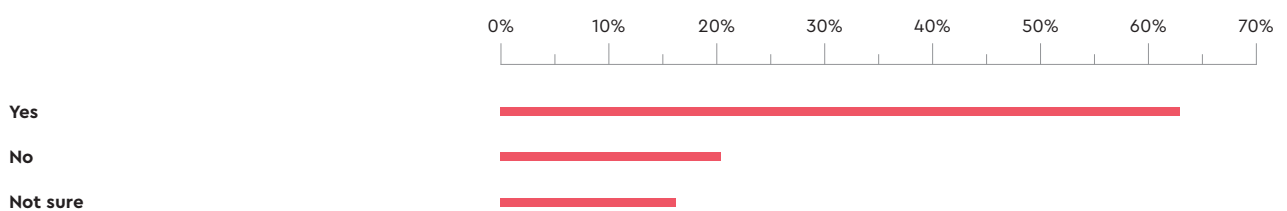
**Figure 5.36: Academic level of the class at the beginning of the scholastic year 2020-2021**

Figure 5.37 provides a rather negative view on gains on learners' academic, social, and emotional development during the pandemic. When asked whether they think that children benefitted through learning at home during the pandemic, most participants felt that learners did not benefit socially (89.7%) nor emotionally (64.9%). Opinions were disparate in relation to whether respondents felt their learners had benefitted academically during the school closure, with 39.2% agreeing that they benefitted academically, 33% disagreeing and 27.8% not sure about this.



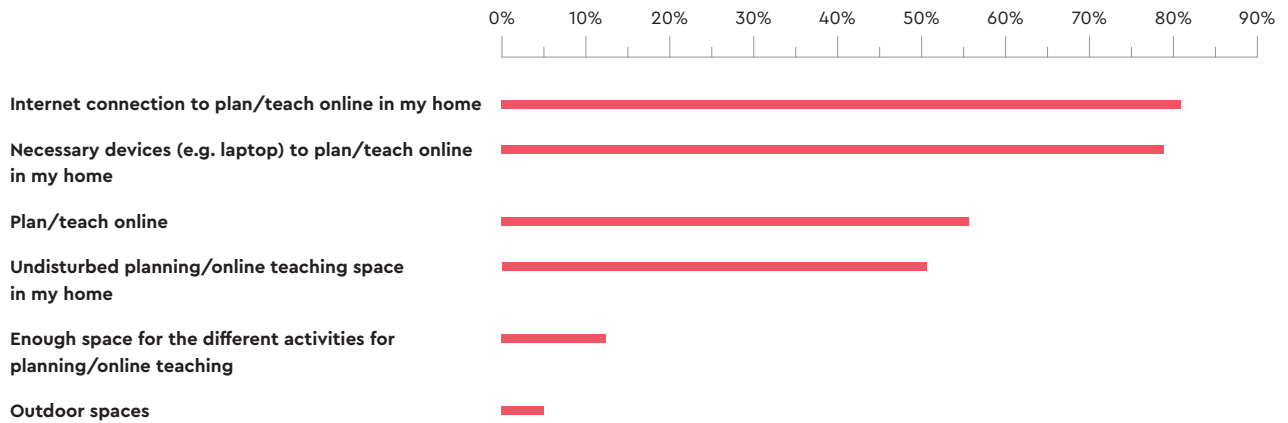
**Figure 5.37: Benefits for children through learning at home during the pandemic**

It is rather worrying yet somehow expected that most primary educators (62.9%) felt that children have 'lost' a substantial amount of learning during COVID-19 times, although one must also note that a fifth of the participants (20.6%) did not agree whilst 16.5% were not sure about this.



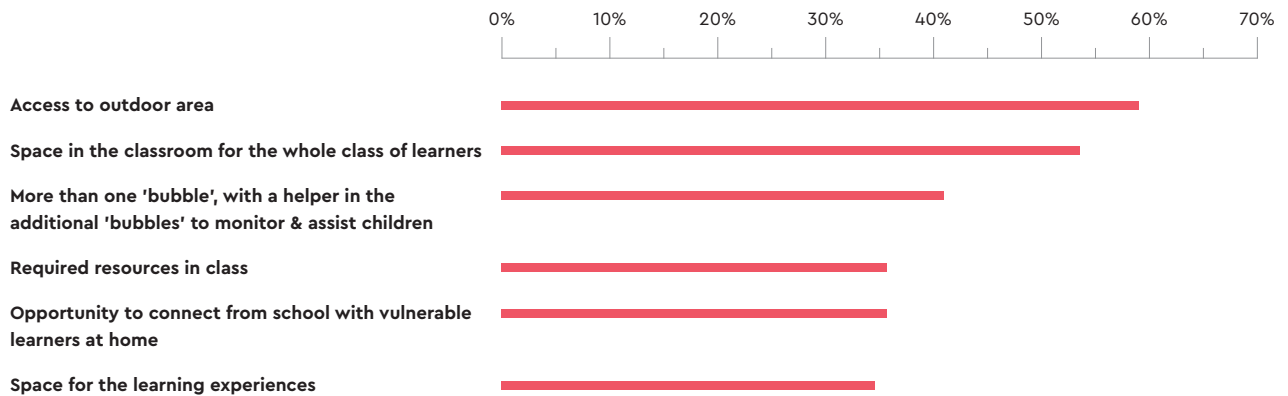
**Figure 5.38: Agreement about loss of learning during COVID-19 times**





**Figure 5.40: Access to learning spaces to support teaching from home**

Figure 5.41 focused on learning spaces available during the pandemic when schools were physically open during the scholastic year 2020-2021. Surprisingly, only just over half the participants claimed to have had access to an outdoor area (58.9%) or to have the required space in the classroom for the whole class of learners (53.7%). 41.1% indicated that when working through the 'bubble' system, as teachers they had more than one 'bubble' to manage. In this case, a helper or teacher assistant supported them in the additional 'bubbles' to monitor and assist children. Of more concern is that only 35.8% felt they had adequate resources in the classroom or the possibility to connect with vulnerable learners who could not attend school physically. Again, space seems to be limited even within the school premises, with only 34.7% feeling they had the required space for the learning experiences offered. In the open-ended option, three educators added information about the way learning was organised, with one claiming that she was tasked with replacing teachers, one was working from home and another one reporting on how hybrid sessions with both in class and at home students were being given simultaneously.



**Figure 5.41: Access to learning spaces when school was physically open**

When asked which learning spaces they would prefer to retain post-pandemic (Fig 5.41), the results were quite interesting with over half the participants (53.7%) opting for a return to 'normal' pre-COVID schooling with total physical presence in classrooms. Moreover, there were another 42.1% who were in favour of retaining a blended approach - physical presence in class with online learning spaces, thus opening up to new possibilities for teaching and learning. Only 4.2% were interested in retaining exclusively online learning space.

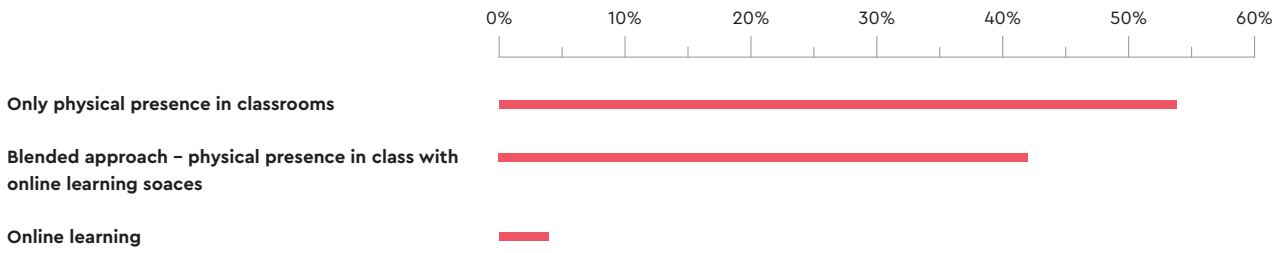


Figure 5.42: Learning spaces to retain in post-pandemic times

### 5.3.3 Well-being

Questions linked to well-being yielded some remarkable insights. When respondents were asked to compare their perceived levels of happiness, job satisfaction and stress between the current academic year (2020-2021) and the previous one (2019-2020), some contrasting responses were given with 40.9% feeling generally less happy, 39.8% reporting to be happier overall and 19.4% to see no difference in their experience (see Figure 5.43). Diverging views with regards to job satisfaction were also given, with 39.8% feeling worse than the previous year in terms of fulfilment, whereas 35.5% of the respondents claiming they generally felt better or much better. More significantly, it is to be noted that the largest number of respondents (60.3%) felt more stressed during 2020-2021, whilst only 20.4% reported feeling less pressured and strained by the changes brought by the pandemic to their lives.

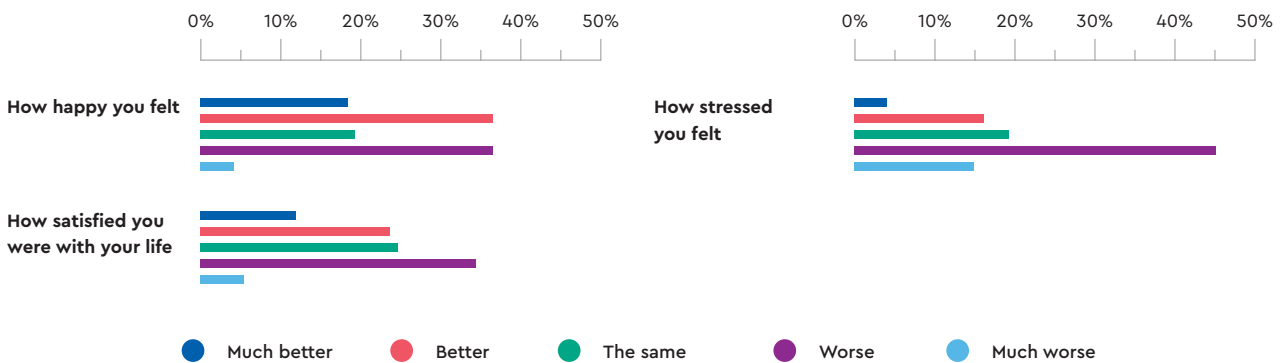
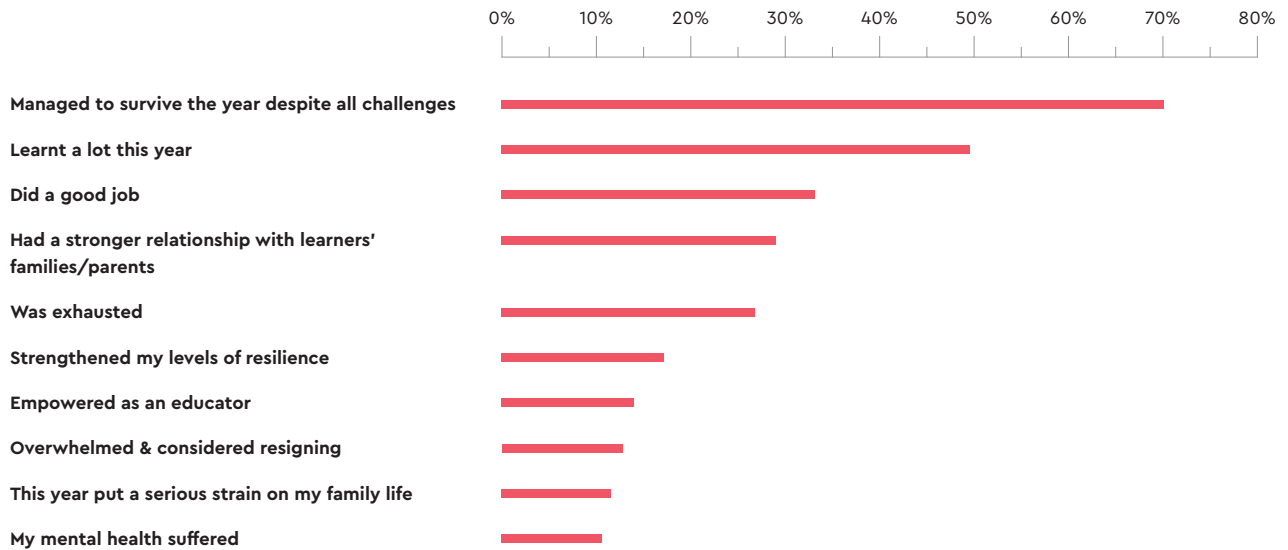


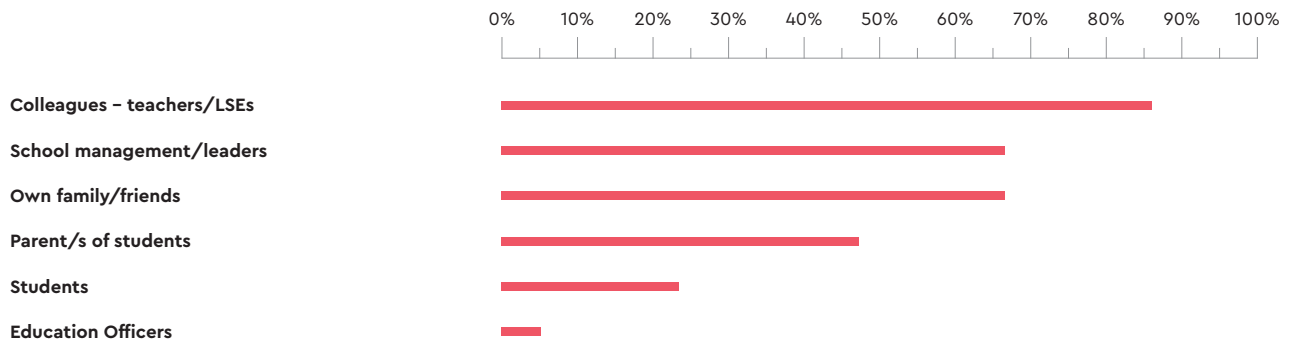
Figure 5.43: Happiness, satisfaction and stress as compared to pre-pandemic times

Figure 5.44 captures the respondents' reactions around their general feelings following the novel experience of 'working through the pandemic'. The most popular statement chosen by 69.9% of the respondents was that they had managed to survive the scholastic year despite the several challenges inherent in the new teaching scenario. This was followed by positive statements, with 49.5% qualifying the experience as a learning experience for themselves and 33.3% who felt satisfied with their own performance during the pandemic. The fourth most selected response indicated that participants felt they had built a stronger relationship with learners' families (29%). 17.2% also claimed they felt they had strengthened their levels of resilience and 14% felt empowered as educators. On a more negative note, it should be noted that about a quarter of respondents (26.9%) indicated that they felt 'exhausted' due to these changes. There were 12.9% who felt overwhelmed and considered resigning, 11.8% who felt that this year put a serious strain on their family life and 10.8% who felt their mental health suffered.



**Figure 5.44:** Feelings after teaching in the pandemic

In Figure 5.45, primary school educators highlighted the way different stakeholders supported them during the scholastic year 2020-2021. The question invited them to select only three stakeholders from the list to indicate who gave them the most support during the identified scholastic year. Most participants (86%) felt they were mostly supported by their colleagues (teachers and LSEs), followed by the SLT (66.7%), and their own family and friends (66.7%). About half of the respondents (47.3%) indicated that they received support from parents of students in their class. It was noted that students (23.7%) and education officers (5.4%) were perceived as providing less support.



**Figure 5.45:** Support provided during the 2020–2021 scholastic year

For the final open-ended question where primary educators were asked about their overall experience of teaching since the start of the pandemic, a wide array of diverging views were evident in the responses. These are represented in the form of a word cloud in Figure 5.46.



**Figure 5.46:** Overall experience during the pandemic over the past 18 months

As can be seen in the above figure, for some participants it proved to be a largely positive experience, describing it as being satisfactory and rewarding (n=12), fruitful (n=1) and fair (n=1). Some also claimed it was a good learning experience (n=20), with one specifying how it was ‘very eye-opening as to how technology can help the education and independence of our students.’ Another claimed ‘digital devices such as tablets and portals such as Teams proved to be great tools. Communicating online with parents is very effective.’

However, a larger number of primary educators felt it was overwhelming, exhausting or largely stressful (n=20) as well as a challenging experience (n=19). Five participants even defined the experience as ‘catastrophic’, and one explained how it felt like a ‘nightmare to always find out where I’m going to teach at the very last minute’. Some alluded to their intention to look for a new job – comments such as the following reflect the dire straits in which some educators found themselves: ‘I am thinking of getting a new, completely different job. Teaching is too exhausting’. Other comments included that this was ‘less fruitful than the physical class experience’, ‘left an impact on the children’s holistic development’, ‘felt like being on a rollercoaster ride’. One respondent pointed out how the pandemic ‘required teachers to be very flexible, more caring and patient’. One PSCD teacher wrote about her difficult experience being a teacher during the pandemic.

***I had to replace primary class teachers, sometimes due to COVID-19 quarantine, sickness, time off etc. At first I felt really angry because my subject was pretty much ignored (and it was really needed for children’s wellbeing), and also because I felt much more exposed to COVID-19... Something positive is that I made friends with some class teachers, which is quite rare for me. (Respondent 37)***

Some comments also referred to the lack of time to prepare well for their class when some schools only shared information too close to the beginning of the year. For instance, one respondent felt that more time was needed to prepare well for the school year – transfers were given only 3 weeks before the start of school although they had not applied for a transfer themselves. Suggestions made by teachers indicated the need for leaders to take into consideration planning and resource preparation before demanding changes from their teaching staff. Three participants pointed out how the lockdown of scholastic year March 2020 had been more challenging than the scholastic year 2020/2021 since they were not at all prepared to handle the situation and sudden shift to online learning. A participant explained how ‘work doubled and working time increased while family time was reduced to zero’. Furthermore, an LSE expressed a sense of frustration and concern.

***It was new. I learnt some new things about how to use online learning platform. I felt helpless when I wasn’t able to contact the student every time I had to do a lesson with him. I had to wait for the teacher to put me in a class with him to do individual work. He didn’t have all the help he needed from grownups and sometimes he didn’t understand that he had to enter the lesson at a certain time. I think it is better with some students to be physically present in class. For me it was not a good experience because you cannot be in control all the time when needed. (Respondent 39)***





An early primary educator acknowledged the difficulty that was turned into an opportunity during the pandemic.

***Although I am very much in favour of a hybrid work arrangement, I believe that teaching young children is difficult online. However, I do believe that as the circumstances were, I still worked very well, carried out all work required and both parents/students were very happy with the lessons. (Respondent 1)***

Further recommendations provided included the idea that LSEs also needed more support and motivation from the SLTs, that paperwork should be reduced for educators to have more time to dedicate to assisting learners who have learning difficulties, and that primary school learners would benefit to at least have a Physical Education lesson with a peripatetic teacher to have access to outdoor spaces. Additionally, it was suggested that some online activities should be kept after the pandemic – these include parents' meetings and training sessions for educators and parents. It was also felt that teachers should be provided with the necessary equipment to cope with online teaching.

***Real face to face teaching is irreplaceable. I hope that the schools will not go through another lockdown. Teachers should be provided with equipment as we had to buy certain things ourselves to be able to cope with online teaching. (Respondent 19)***

Another participant claimed that no student should be left out of lessons, or not given the opportunity to sit for their final exams, even if in quarantine. This was seen to be crucial not only for their academic life, but also for their mental health. Another comment mentioned the need for children to interact with others and develop important skills to survive in our society.

***I hope that we will not experience this again. I think the students have missed a lot although all the teachers made it a point to deliver the lessons. Children need to experience living in the community and in groups to be able to survive well in the future. Staying at home within the same four walls can make them more withdrawn from society and may cause some psychological difficulties to arise. (Respondent 9)***

One participant reported how work was still uploaded on MS Teams for the very few who decided to stay at home – which ensured that all children were being reached. Another respondent pointed out that deployment of peripatetic teachers meant that a lot of 'bewildered adults' were teaching mainstream curriculum without adequate preparation or training. Another interesting comment stated how educators needed to be empathised with and empowered.

***Educators need more empathy and to feel more empowered in their work. Too much paperwork and a lot less socializing with our students. It's a continuous rush towards assessing and testing. Which isn't giving any better results compared to previous years. (Respondent 6)***

Finally, a respondent compared the experience in schools with the previous year, highlighting the progress that was made.

***Year 2020–21 was much more organised and fruitful than year 2020. This is thanks to the resilience the majority of teachers showed driven by the dedication in our work to educate our students holistically. (Respondent 28)***

## 5.4 Discussion of Main Findings

### 5.4.1 Teaching and Learning

#### Modes of Online Learning

Although the task to rapidly shift their teaching to online modes was imposed upon educators with the physical closure of schools in March 2020 (UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, 2020), the variety of responses provided indicates there were diverse approaches and pedagogical decisions taken rather than universal or consistent practices. This concurs with earlier findings by a study with educators in Maltese schools that confirmed the eclectic nature of online modes of teaching and learning and the lack of consistency across schools, classrooms, and grades during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020).

A main distinction between synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching and learning adopted during school lockdown periods was outlined over the two surveys, with a clear preference for the former in terms of perceived pedagogical effectiveness. Eventually, this also developed into a blended approach. Teacher respondents resorted to one or both modes for several distinct reasons, including the need to reach their students no matter what or how, and the sense of duty as educators to do their part in this national and global emergency (Dong et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). In both surveys, synchronous sessions were found to be the most effective mode of online learning. In many ways, the pandemic created opportunities for educators worldwide to seek new digital solutions and thus changed the manner in which teaching and learning, as well as communication and collaboration occur within educational settings (Council of Europe, 2020).

There were shifts in perspective over the course of the pandemic – in that, whereas initially there was a certain degree of hope that this was a temporary and short-term measure of a matter of days or a few weeks, schools soon realised this would become a ‘new normal’ and that more regular online provision was needed. Live sessions became popular in that they made it more possible to provide students with the opportunity to continue developing their basic skills in the main subject areas, to give access to education, to monitor student progress, and to facilitate and gauge their socio-emotional and mental health to a smaller or larger degree.

At the same time, it became increasingly evident that more flexibility and fluidity in the modes and strategies to be adopted was needed – towards the end of the first scholastic year impacted by the pandemic as well as in the following year, teachers were more open to using a blended approach, with a combination of live online sessions as well as recorded lessons that could be accessed by their students and families at a convenient time. Upon returning to the physical classrooms, mitigating measures deemed it necessary for schools to still use online modes to reach those learners who were in quarantine – with varied practices being assumed that ranged from synchronous, asynchronous and also hybrid modes.

### Guidelines, Support and Teacher Autonomy

The survey clearly pointed to differences and gaps in the guidelines with which schools and leaders provided their teaching staff. According to survey 1, when schools closed in March 2020, there was no consistency with regards to School Leadership Teams’ (SLT) directions. Most encouraged the use of a school online platform to send homework and notes, some allowed primary educators to choose whichever approach they preferred, whilst some encouraged the use of emails to send material and homework. Only a few respondents were directed to follow a timetable of live online lessons or prepare recorded lessons. This coupled with a general difficulty to use digital technologies confidently and effectively (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2017; OECD, 2020) would have quite naturally led to the accumulation of stress and added burdens on the primary school teachers. These educators were expected to use their digital skills, model the use of technology and at the same time assist in any hiccups or difficulties their students and families might have had in relation to the accessing educational opportunities through the digital world (Redecker, 2017). In the presented work, primary school teacher respondents’ expressed wish for further guidance as echoed in other studies (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020; Flack et al., 2020).

In the first survey, 41.6% of teacher respondents stated they were directed by the SLT to adopt whichever approach they preferred. One is inclined to challenge the lack of guidelines and direction provided from higher educational authorities and the SLT – is it more likely that the physical closure of schools found authorities and leaders unprepared and unequipped to deal with such a large-scale emergency, putting them in a tight spot. Or was this an exercise in supporting teacher autonomy by giving educators generic guidelines and allowing room for creativity and independent decision-making in terms of pedagogy and curriculum? Although attractive as a possible rationale for the little guidance provided to educators in classrooms, the latter seems to be remotely removed from the largely top-down approach that is usually adopted in the Maltese educational system. There is a general sense that the difficulties arising from the lack of support experienced by teachers could have been lessened through more regular and consistent provision of guidance and support (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Song et al., 2020).

Live online teaching was the most commonly used approach by primary educators, although about a fifth of respondents claimed they did not deliver any live sessions at all. During the third term, more SMTs encouraged live online lessons. Sending daily work to students and posting recorded lessons were also common. Some respondents claimed there was very little direction given from the SLT, whereas others were encouraged to either retain a similar approach to what they had adopted in March 2020, or to increase the number of live sessions, recorded sessions or adopt a blended approach. Such findings indicates an improvement in terms of consistency and more regular provision following the first phase of the pandemic. Adopting a schoolwide policy for remote online provision was however not popular, even in the second year of mitigating measures.

### Digital Skills, Teacher Confidence and Collaboration

Teacher respondents identified helpful ways through which they felt they succeeded in improving their digital skills and competencies over the course of the pandemic. Collaborating with colleagues enabled their technological competencies to develop as they learned with and from each other, a finding which was also resounded in similar studies (Beck et al., 2020; Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020). Training and professional development sessions were also seen to be instrumental. There was less reliance on other forms of assistance such as reading related literature and self-taught activities directed towards the development of specific digital skills.

The demands posed by the changed circumstances paralleled in COVID-19-related studies across the globe were confirmed by a substantial number of teacher respondents in the first survey, 79.1% of whom claimed teaching during the pandemic had become more challenging (for instance, Li et al., 2020; Poysa et al., 2021; Song et al., 2020). The increase in the use of digital technologies did not necessarily translate into more innovative pedagogies and was experienced generally as limiting by educators in terms of its effectiveness to address the needs of all learners (Anderson & Hira, 2020). Some responses point out that teaching became more traditional than pre-COVID times, although teacher confidence seems to have increased for many teachers in the second year of the pandemic. More than half of teacher respondents in Survey 2 pointed to a perceived increase in level of confidence in relation to collaborating with parents, preparing online resources and materials, as well as teaching through a digital platform. On the other hand, half the respondents felt less confident in addressing individual needs and managing students' behaviour online.

### Curriculum Content and Learning Time

During the school closure in 2020, online activities were most frequent in the three main subject areas i.e., Mathematics, English and Maltese. They were rare or absent in subjects such as PSCD, the Expressive Arts, or Religion. More than half the participants did not cover the same content in the same timespan as a normal lesson held prior to COVID-19 usually would. Also, about half the participants delivered fewer lessons during the week, with a quarter of respondents claiming they did not cover the whole year's syllabus. It can be said that the covering of curriculum content was adversely impacted by the shift to online learning (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Lucas et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020). Moreover, responses also point to a fragmented and subject-specific approach adopted through online learning, focused more on what are considered to be key subject areas whilst discarding the practice of integrated and cross-curricular content. The reduction in curriculum content coverage did not however mean that teachers were less busy as professionals and practitioners. During this lockdown period, most primary educators spent much more time working compared to pre-closing of schools.

The repercussions of these drastic reductions and changes in terms of curriculum content delivery and pedagogical restrictions on the knowledge acquisition and skill development of a whole generation of learners are yet to be observed, measured, and assessed. There is undoubtedly a sense of learning losses caused by the pandemic-related disruptions that have yet to be acknowledged and addressed (Spiteri et al., 2022). Learning time seemed to be greatly reduced for the main subject areas, and almost non-existent for those areas of learning considered to be less important in the hierarchical structure of subject matter in schools (Lucas et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020). Notwithstanding this, there are also other equally important skills, attitudes and behaviours that may have been developed and acquired by students through the novel experiences gained from dealing with an emergency and changed circumstances – which leads one to consider other forms of learning that occur outside the confinement of teacher-led instruction and schooling when measuring learning gains and losses.

### One-Size-Fits-All vs Inclusive Practices

Many teacher respondents felt that teaching became more difficult, with some learners struggling to understand without the support of the LSE and without teacher in-class support. The responses pointed to the challenges brought by the removal of traditional schooling structures where primary school teachers would be assisted by one or more Learning Support Educators (LSEs) to address the diverse needs of all learners in their classrooms. It is evident that the physical presence of the educators and their role in monitoring, assessing, and intervening to facilitate learning and development in all learners was difficult to play out remotely from behind a computer screen (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020).

Having said this, almost all respondents in this study felt that students were satisfied with the quality and frequency of remote teaching sessions. It would be interesting to understand the basis upon which such a perception was formed by the respondents, and whether this perceived satisfaction was based on student feedback collected purposively, or simply primary teachers' impression built from being attuned with their students. However, some respondents also pointed to a one-size-fits-all approach

through online learning, where it became more likely that some students would experience boredom because they were not being challenged according to their abilities nor engaging in stimulating learning experiences that were built on peer interaction. Similarly, the reduced opportunities for interaction and discussions that resulted during remote online learning were viewed as limiting by gifted learners and led to negative attitudes towards online modes, which were in turn seen to be inappropriate and inefficient (Hyseni-Duraku & Hoxha, 2020). These insights reverberate similar findings in other studies on the negative impact of the lack of social interaction in online pedagogies adopted which was demotivating for many learners (Donnelly, 2020; Sintema, 2020). Adopting inclusive pedagogies and practices is usually viewed as an essential practice to cater for individual differences when teaching groups of diverse learners – a resort to more traditional approaches as indicated in the responses might have meant that differentiated learning was made more difficult, and in some cases became non-existent in the shifted learning scenario brought by the pandemic. One is inclined to question the effect this may have had on highly able and struggling learners at the two extremes as well as across the ability continuum.

Moreover, it was also worrying that some learners did not submit any work electronically or very rarely did so. This brings to mind recent studies that draw attention to the ways in which children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds with little or no access to adequate technology or regular connectivity would have found it difficult to participate fully (Dong et al., 2020; Spiteri, 2021; Spiteri et al., 2022), and to the uneven situations experienced by primary school teachers with regards to a significant reduction in submitted work during COVID-19 pandemic (Lucas et al., 2020). In similar manners, teacher respondents in this study were worried about learning losses for some students and about the disappearance of individuals from the online classroom. This caused teachers to be concerned about their inability to reach each learner, particularly those individuals who did not have easy or regular access to remote online learning, or those who were experiencing difficult home scenarios that impeded their learning for one or more reasons. In an educational era of inclusion, social justice, and free access to education for all, this new state of affairs for some children attending primary schooling has implications that are far more wide-reaching than the immediate loss of knowledge acquisition or basic skill development.

### Online Student Engagement and Student Absenteeism

Access to technology was paramount for student participation and engagement to be possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. In both surveys, most students were thought to have the necessary devices and sufficient internet connection to participate in remote online learning. In the first survey, more than 60% of respondents agreed that students were both willing and able to follow remote sessions through accessibility to digital devices and adequate connectivity. In Survey 2, 78.4% of teacher respondents claimed their students had the necessary devices and internet connection which allowed them to follow lessons remotely.

One would still be concerned about the rest of the cohort of students who for one or multiple reasons would not have the possibility to access learning when delivered remotely, such as in this case of a global emergency. In Malta, the digital gap between students coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds was bridged through the provision of free laptops and internet connection within a Digital Connect scheme in November 2021. This may have improved yet not solved the discrepancy issue between different learners' ability to access remote online learning – various studies pointed to a main concern of teachers across the globe in relation to the ways in which children coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds may have been negatively impacted compared to those coming from more modest or affluent homes (Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Spiteri et al., 2022).

In both surveys, about a fifth of primary educators claimed that students were not regular in their attendance during online lessons. In both surveys only about 62% of students were willing to follow remote sessions. In survey 2, less than half the educators reported that students were prepared well to follow online lessons. Similarly, to other data gathered from several studies, absenteeism was one of the barriers to continued learning during the pandemic, particularly with regards to online learning during the school lockdown for certain groups of learners who fell through the net and could not be reached (Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020; Caruana, 2020; Council of Europe, 2020; Spiteri et al., 2022).

### Monitoring, Assessment and Feedback

Most respondents felt that at the beginning of the scholastic year 2020-2021, their class was at an expected academic level but a third felt that their class was already below the expected level, indicating that the disruption caused by the pandemic and resulting impact of the first lockdown on children's learning was already visible. In survey 2, most educators felt that students did not benefit socially or emotionally through learning at home, but different views with regards to academic benefits were reported. Having said this, more than half of primary educators felt that children 'lost' a substantial amount of learning. In survey 2, primary educators suggested revision of topics done during online learning at the beginning of the school year, reduction and

reevaluation of the curriculum content and assessment of students at the beginning of the year to compensate for the learning losses set off by the sudden shift to online learning.

Some of the teachers' worries expressed in this study pointed to the awareness that children cannot maintain continuous online engagement for a long time, nor benefit fully from the learning process due to a lack of face-to-face interaction and a general lack of support for learners. In the second survey, the greatest concern was the challenge to teaching children with disabilities and learning difficulties. As mentioned earlier on, another great concern by 60.3% of respondents in the first survey was that some children 'disappeared', this was only indicated by 10% of participants in survey 2.

In both surveys, the most popular form of assessment during remote teaching was asking individual learners questions about the lesson, and interaction during live-online lessons. Marking and commenting on submitted work via MS Teams was also popular but it became more prevalent in the second survey. Online group work tasks and online timed-tests or assessments were the least used form of assessment in both surveys. These findings are corroborated by a study conducted with 400 Maltese teacher respondents on their use of formative assessments during the pandemic, which found a significant decline in the use of a combination of assessment strategies particularly when learning was transferred online (Said Pace, 2020). When schools were open during the pandemic, the most commonly used strategy according to this study was *Effective Questioning*, whilst this shifted to *oral or written feedback* when teaching happened online, with *written feedback* in the case of educators who exclusively used asynchronous modes.

### 5.4.2 Learning Spaces

The possibility of creating and having learning environments that are conducive to learning and development is regarded as necessary for optimal learning. Indeed, the learning space is described as a 'third teacher' (Malaguzzi, 1996) and a crucial component for student participation. Through the questionnaire, this study sought to gain information about the newly developed spaces for both teaching and learning – thus looking at 'learning space' through the eyes of the professional teacher from two angles – the position of the practitioner who requires adequate spaces for preparation and delivery on the one hand, and that of the learner who needs to accede to online learning spaces to learn.

#### Availability of Learning Space and Digital Resources

The physical closing of schools and the shift to remote online learning during different points in COVID-19 times meant that teachers were required to create a space for working and for facilitating their learners' education from within their own homes (Council of Europe, 2020). Although the majority of teacher respondents had access to technological devices and internet connection from home, there were still some challenges identified by the respondents in relation to the availability of space and technology (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020; Klapproth et al., 2020; Song et al., 2020).

Many respondents lacked an undisturbed place in their home for planning and for teaching – with only 58.3% of respondents in the first survey stating they had this most of the time. They often shared their home space and technological devices available with other members of their family, which at times made it harder to accomplish their work-related tasks. Having the comfort that comes from enjoying enough working space for planning/online teaching was thus an issue in both surveys – this seemed to be more pronounced in the second survey, where only 12.6% reported sufficiently having this.

Considering that most teacher respondents claimed to inhabit apartments or maisonettes (63.5%), the living/working spaces available was evidently restricted to mostly indoor one-floor spaces, shared with other members of their families. However, in survey 1, 73.3% did claim to have had natural light in the rooms where they work, plan and deliver online sessions. According to both surveys 1 and 2, most participants did not have access to plan and teach online from within an outdoor environment during the pandemic lockdown. This may seem to be an unnecessary detail yet living in confined spaces for an indefinite period of time inevitably led to strain and stress in the lives of teachers, which would otherwise not be experienced in their daily working lives – this will be further explored in the next section in the discussion on well-being.

#### Skill Development for Teachers and Learners

When asked about the new skills developed during the school closure with regards to the use of and participation in online learning spaces in Survey 1, the most predominant responses were navigating online learning platforms, using video-conferencing and PowerPoint presentations with voice over or with notes as tools for teaching and learning. In survey 1, video-conferencing

was the most used by primary educators to plan/teach online during COVID-19 lockdown. Teacher confidence seemed to have improved in the second survey.

Thus, although the shift to remote online teaching was in many ways imposed upon educators by the emergency itself rather than it being an option, it could still be valued for its learning potential – pushing primary school teachers out of their comfort zone and empowering them to develop and employ their digital competencies (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). It could be said that the pandemic permitted the discovery of one's own abilities or struggles in dealing effectively with the demands of sudden changes brought upon teachers in primary schools, just like it did for most educators working with differently aged learners. It also enabled teachers to develop professionally, as they sought to inform, train, and improve their digital skills, experimenting with novel ways of reaching their students remotely or in changed learning spaces that were restricted by the mitigating measures imposed by the local government to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

It is interesting to note that although, as discussed earlier, learning content and learning time were reduced for subject matter, teacher respondents indicated that other forms of learning were also happening relating to digital competencies. Through the mode of remote online learning, students learnt new skills mostly with regards to learning platforms, videoconferencing, the use of apps for quizzes, and working with the tablet, PowerPoints with notes and written explanation as well as PowerPoints with voice over. Having said this, it was quite evident that primary school teachers were highly dubious about the benefits of the shifted learning space to an online one – scepticism on the validity of this mode for the primary years became evident in their responses on their perceived academic, social and emotional benefits – in the eyes of the teacher respondents, the social and emotional losses for primary school-aged learners seemed to far outweigh the academic gains (Council of Europe, 2020; Onyema et al., 2020; Spiteri et al., 2021; Spiteri et al., 2022). With only 39.2% of teacher respondents stating to have observed academic benefits through learning from home during the physical lockdowns, one obtains a sense of the general negative attitude towards online learning for this group of educators. Teachers were certainly concerned that the online learning environment did not benefit their students' social nor emotional development – with 64.9% claiming primary school learners did not benefit emotionally from learning online during the pandemic and a higher 89.7% indicating there were no emotional gains either.

Learning losses were also feared through this mode. This corroborates with the international literature that highlighted this as an inevitable consequence of the online mode of learning specifically and the pandemic in general (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Karalar & Sidekli, 2021; Spiteri et al., 2021). Teacher respondents in the study voiced out their suggestions to stabilise the effects of the learning losses using a myriad of strategies – ranging from curricular changes and reductions, obtaining an overall picture of where students are at academically at the start of the year, the effective use of assessment of and for learning, providing additional support and extra classes to fill the gaps in learning, revising concepts and topics, and repeating the grade for those whose gaps are too wide to catch up on.

### Concerns and Challenges Emanating from Learning Spaces in the 'New Normal'

Student participation in online learning spaces during the physical closure of schools was a major concern for primary school teacher respondents – starting with a widely held belief that the online space makes it particularly challenging to cater for the needs of children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, the understanding that school-aged children generally lack the focus to maintain continuous online engagement for prolonged periods of time, and also the difficulties and learning restrictions brought by a lack of face-to-face interaction and a reduced social contact. This was also a concern of primary school teachers in a study with 177 participants on their attitudes towards online learning – this mode was largely deemed to be inadequate for learners who are still in the concrete operational stage and who would need concrete materials, resources and experiences to learn effectively and meaningfully (Karalar & Sidekli, 2021).

The use of remote online learning was undoubtedly acknowledged as invaluable in the face of a pandemic that required drastic educational measures, yet it did not replace the validity of the physical classrooms. In both surveys when asked which learning spaces/modes they would like to keep when returning to 'normal' life, the majority preferred reverting to exclusive face to face learning in schools. However, there were also about two fifths of respondents who were in favour of retaining a blended approach.

In survey 2, when asked to choose the learning spaces which they had access to when school was physically open during the scholastic year 2020-2021, only over half the participants claimed to have access to the outdoor area and the required space in the classroom for the whole class of learners. Most teachers did not have the required resources in the classroom, the opportunity to connect from school with vulnerable learners who were at home and the required space for the learning experiences offered. This goes to show that the pandemic created new challenges for both teachers and learners, as they were compelled to look at alternative ways to work, play, learn and live. Circumnavigating new educational territories became a daily

undertaking – as the data indicates, primary school teachers across the country were required to become even more creative, resourceful, brave, and resilient in the face of the constantly changing scenario and the reality of an unknown present and future for the schooling of a whole generation of learners. This had inevitable repercussions for their overall well-being as well as that of their learners and their families – which will be discussed further in the upcoming section.

### 5.4.3 Well-being

In similar ways that it has influenced the working and personal lives of doctors and medical professionals, the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted the lives and well-being of the teacher population around the world. Change is an inevitable aspect of life, yet the unprecedented global shifts to remote online learning and redesigned physical classrooms that happened overnight left teachers with little choice and far less time to prepare themselves for the changing teaching and learning scenario. However, responses in both surveys, but more prevalently in the second one, also reflect some positive outcomes as perceived by some teachers, particularly with regards to well-being and relationships. Considering the occupational well-being of teachers is crucial for themselves and their students (Madigan & Kim, 2021), this notion was well looked into through the data collected in this study.

#### Happiness, Satisfaction with Life and Job Satisfaction

According to survey 1, the COVID-19 lockdown negatively affected the happiness and satisfaction with life of most respondents. It was noted in survey 2, that whilst some participants felt happier and more satisfied in 2020-2021, others felt they were happier and more satisfied in the previous year (2019-2020) before the start of the pandemic. Delving deeper into the reasons for the varied responses provided by the primary school teachers, one can understand the ambivalence that they may have experienced – throughout the questionnaire, teacher respondents commented on the way change without a transitory period and with little or no guidance and support was hard to adjust to and brought with it stress and confusion – this was also mentioned in other similar studies (Collie, 2021; Jakubowski & Sitko-Dominik, 202; Li et al., 2020; Pöysä et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Being confined within the walls of one's home, and eventually, being restricted in the use of the classroom environment and resources due to the mitigating measures imposed also resulted in increased burdens on the part of the teachers. Yet, being at home, spending more time with family members, facing an adverse circumstance such as a pandemic yet surviving it, and reducing the commuting part throughout the day did impinge on an overall improved life experience for some (Purwanto et al., 2020).

Mixed reactions were reported about the effect of having to teach mainly online on their daily lives and consequently, their well-being. In survey one, during the pandemic, more time was spent by primary educators in planning online lessons, in attending online meetings with colleagues and in correcting and marking the work of their learners. There were a range of responses with regards to productivity during this period. Half the participants felt confident teaching via online technology, although many responses indicate a persistent preference for 'normal' schooling particularly for these age groups. A moderate number of teacher respondents felt exhausted and overwhelmed in both surveys, with some expressing how the pandemic and the changes it caused had put a strain on family life and on their mental health. The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the Maltese population was documented in a study conducted by Grech and Grech (2020) – an increase in anxiety levels, a disruption of routines, and hardships experienced by families, particularly those with school-aged children and adolescents were highlighted. This was also the case for many teachers who also had their own families to take care of.

Yet, the second survey also indicated a more proactive attitude in many teacher respondents who were also able to identify positive effects – such as, feeling empowered, doing a good job, feeling satisfied to having 'survived' the year despite the challenges and building stronger relationships with children and their families (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Teacher respondents were, for instance, appreciative of the reduced time commuting to and from school, the comfort of working from home and not needed to worry about what to wear every morning, and the freedom to stay at home caring for sick relatives. More advantages reported in survey one on the shift to online teaching and learning also included less stress to leave the house too early in the morning, the increased communication and interaction with parents, and more family time. The downside of the lockdown included the sometimes missing support and collaboration of leaders, colleagues, and some parents, the lack of physical movement at home, the higher levels of stress and the increased difficulty to establish a work/life balance.



## Teacher Stress and Burnout

Teacher well-being is said to be linked to student outcomes – in stressful working/ teaching environments where teachers' needs are not met and work-related stress is high, student performance suffers (Herman et al., 2017; Madigan & Kim, 2021). In both surveys, an increase in stress was reported with significant percentages indicating high stress levels for most teachers. In survey one, most respondents were not able to switch off from work and rest, and some felt negative towards their work during this time. This was to be expected, considering the ways in which daily habits were changed radically with increased difficulties to distinguish and create clearer boundaries between work and family life. Stress resulting from the unfamiliar circumstances, sudden changes and increased or transformed workloads and expectations were evident in teachers' responses.

Most found support from senior staff at their school with respect to their teaching duties although less than half of the teacher respondents reported receiving support from their school leaders, with the inevitable impact on their mental well-being. In survey 2, most participants felt that colleagues (teachers and LSEs), the school management team and their own family/friends gave them the most support. Also in the same survey, primary school teachers believed that they had improved professionally through this life experience of the pandemic. Still, only a small percentage felt they did a good job and reported feeling exhausted as a prevalent emotion and state of being – indicating a reduced sense of instructional efficacy (Pressley, 2021). Some also felt they had a stronger relationship with learners' families/parents (Anderson & Hira, 2020; Farrugia & Busuttill, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Considering that the occupational well-being of teachers is not only crucial for them but also for the well-being and outcomes of their students (Herman et al., 2017; Madigan & Kim, 2021), one is inclined to assume that the increased levels of teacher stress would have impinged on the well-being and learning of the students in their classrooms. Learning loss was a major concern for teacher respondents in both surveys, for instance – although the data cannot provide the necessary information about the causes of the perceived learning losses, this may have been partly impacted by the reduced sense of well-being of their teachers resulting from the challenges they were compelled to face for a prolonged period.

One can observe an improved attitude towards the changed circumstances over time, with teacher respondents acknowledging the pros as well as the cons of the shifts brought by the pandemic to their personal and professional lives, and a sense of resilience and empowerment this realisation and acceptance seems to have prompted at a later stage. The open-ended comments indicate that stress and burnout were alleviated or exacerbated by the levels of support and guidance provided as perceived by the teacher respondents. There were also clear expressions of teachers' resilience in comments such as: "Different but on the whole satisfied with the results" (Teacher respondent 18) or "Exhausting but at the same time I felt that students deserved the best we could possibly give them" (Teacher respondent 22) and "Exhausting but helped me discover new ways and means of teaching and learning. Furthermore, I felt I have regained my motivation and managed to also strengthen our teaching team" (Teacher respondent 23).

## Connections and Relationships

There seems to have been an adverse impact of the pandemic on activities that are meant to provide an outlet to cope with a stressful life, such as exercising, enjoying the outdoors, meeting with friends and family, and doing leisure activities. Respondents report a decrease in their ability to engage in such activities in the first survey. One can deduce that not being able to meet with colleagues, not being able to go out with friends, limited outdoors to gardens or walks, having to stay indoors as much as possible, and less physical activity due to staying indoors had a negative impact on the well-being of participating primary educators. The online scenario was particularly challenging for most educators working with primary-school aged children – there were concerns that they could not care nor cater adequately for the academic, social, and emotional needs of all learners, most especially those with disabilities, learning difficulties or children coming from disadvantaged or difficult family backgrounds (Busuttill & Farrugia, 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Spiteri et al., 2022). Teachers worried about those learners who 'disappeared' from the school radar – this was particularly pronounced in the first survey when drastic measures were taken to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus and education moved to an exclusively online learning space for several weeks in a row.

Teacher-learner relationships and learner-learner relationships, deemed critical for the learning process, suffered - an unescapable consequence of the radical yet necessary actions taken by local and international governments across the globe. As pointed out by some respondents in the open-ended questions, "the saddest part was seeing children being lonelier than ever" (Teacher respondent 41) and "I felt very stressed and upset because most of my students disappeared. I held twice weekly online sessions with my class; only on one occasion I had a maximum of six students!" (Teacher respondent 8). With uneven communication and contact that happened online/ remotely through a screen during physical lockdowns, the building and strengthening of relationships was already difficult, let alone when teaching and learning happened asynchronously as in the

following case: "I never 'met' my students during the sessions. We used forms and corrected work after. Most of my students did very poor work and I even sent emails which were not responded." (Teacher respondent 9).

Moreover, during the second year of the pandemic, when school doors were re-opened, the new seating arrangements and restrictive measures removed the possibility for learners to work with a partner or in small groups, although the use of the 'bubble system' helped introduce some element of this. The use of masks and the social distancing inhibited the relationship-building between adults and children and between learners themselves, particularly in the younger ages, where some teachers pointed out the difficulties that were unavoidable.

The reduced social interaction, both with family and friends as well as with colleagues, was also challenging for many respondents, although they found different ways to connect and maintain relationships. On the other hand, teacher respondents pointed to improved interactions and relationships with their students' parents and families, and the strengthened beliefs that parents were a key element in the success or otherwise of the newly constructed teaching and learning scenario. This was also corroborated in other local studies where better teacher-parent relationships were observed during the physical lockdown because the home-school link was reckoned to be instrumental for a successful educational experience (Bonello et al., 2022; Busuttil & Farrugia, 2020).

In survey 1, it was pointed out that many parents showed interest and dedicated a lot of time with the children doing online lessons. Parents were supportive of primary educators' efforts which were mostly gauged through parental participation and cooperation such as scanning and sending children's completed work, acknowledgements of sent notes and helping with sent tasks. However, some parents were not able or available to support their children while working on activities/tasks and there were also some families who did not provide the required resources. On the other hand, a few teacher respondents also mentioned they noticed that some of the work sent from home was evidently not the children's work.



## CHAPTER 6

# Conclusions and Recommendations

The main goal of this study was to explore and document the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the personal and professional lives of primary school teachers in Malta. It sought to understand how the pandemic affected their occupational lives, the pedagogies they adopted, the learning spaces, and their overall well-being as instrumental actors in the lives of a generation of learners who had experienced unprecedented disruptions to their educational journey. The results bring to the fore some remarkable insights into the ways in which teaching and learning processes were affected, learning spaces were changed, and teachers' and learners' well-being and relationships were impacted by the educational shifts that took place over time, as schools and homes responded and adjusted to the new circumstances.

When looking globally at the resulting data, it can be concluded that the impact of the pandemic on teachers' personal and professional lives was substantial. Starting with the rapidity and unpreparedness with which the shift to remote online learning happened, and the patchy way guidelines and support to teachers were provided, it becomes clear how teachers found themselves in dire circumstances that required them to rise to the occasion of fulfilling their roles in creative and proactive ways because of the pandemic. The situation seemed to improve slightly over time, yet this study strengthens the notion that physical presence and social interaction are deemed crucial for the education and advancement of primary school-aged learners from the lens of their teachers.

This study confirms that the continuation of the teaching and learning process for a whole generation of learners depended on educators' existent digital competencies and confidence, which were certainly not consistent with the increased demands placed on them due to the sudden shifts to online modes during school lockdown and ensuing mitigating measures when schools reopened their doors. Teacher collaboration with colleagues, the changing roles of teachers and parents, flexibility in decision-making regarding curriculum content and time, as well as a generally open attitude towards reaching out to learners in novel ways were instrumental for the success of the educational process. However, concerns and challenges were documented – these include the regression to more traditional approaches and a one-size-fits-all kind of pedagogy, the reduced learner engagement, and the disappearance of some learners from the educational scenario due to the changed learning spaces, issues of connectivity and access, as well as the difficulties experienced in providing formative assessment and ongoing, constructive monitoring and feedback.

The availability of adequate spaces and resources for learning was also explored, with data showing that this was one of the prominent factors that increased teachers' anxiety and stress levels. One major disadvantage expressed by many teachers was the lack of physical space during the lockdown where they could conduct their work through preparation, planning and teaching online – keeping in mind the majority lived in apartments or maisonettes, they worked from rooms in their homes that had to be shared with other family members. This did not always provide them with the quiet atmosphere and privacy that their work required. Upon their return to school after the lockdown periods, restrictions and mitigating measures were in place – this also negatively impacted the use of physical spaces in the school and the available resources and materials that could be used as learning tools and aids. Lack of access to digital devices and connectivity issues, especially where their learners were concerned, impeded the learning process of some children, particularly those coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

Moreover, it is clear that the online learning space pressed teachers to develop their digital competencies, with different responses evident from the teacher population – some took up the challenge and rose to the occasion, empowering themselves to upskill and experiment with new and innovative technologies, whilst others felt helpless and communicated with the learners

and families in their class in more traditional ways, adopting solely asynchronous modes such as sending emails with information and instructions on a weekly or daily basis. This led to inevitable shifts in learner engagement and motivation, as well as dubious effectiveness in terms of meaningful learning for some. Learning losses resulting from reduced learning content and learning time, as well as the inadequacy of the changed and restrictive learning spaces for primary school-aged learners were a main concern for teacher respondents. Some advantages were also noted. The pandemic positively influenced the links between the school and the home, with both parties realising more than ever before their mutual interdependence and co-reliance for the benefit of the young generation. Skill development for both teachers and learners was another plus, with some teachers feeling professionally empowered and others acknowledging the value of different forms of learning for both adults and children that arose from coping with an emergency and that go beyond academic learning.

The study shed some light on the teachers' mental health and well-being, and their general attitude towards the shifts experienced because of the pandemic. Teachers gave mixed responses on their experiences of the online mode and of the restrictive learning spaces in the first and second year of the pandemic-affected educational scenarios – these are indicative of the differences in attitude, openness towards or fear of change, and the varying degrees of support and guidance received from authorities and school leaders. There were also teachers who gave a balanced response – acknowledging the challenges that stemmed from the pandemic whilst recognising there were also some gains which could not be ignored. However, teacher stress was prevalent in both surveys with respondents clearly pointing to higher levels of tension and anxiety resulting from the increased demands and high expectations placed upon educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. This impacted their overall well-being, particularly because they found it hard to create and maintain boundaries between their work and family lives.

The ability to form and strengthen connections and relationships was an issue for teacher respondents who were aware of how the uneven and irregular communication and contact with learners and their families impinged on teacher-learner and learner-learner bonds. Interacting online via a screen could never replace the human connection more possible in the physical classroom according to most primary school teachers. Neither could the restrictive learning environment and the use of masks and social distancing when learning moved back to school settings – although necessary as measures, teachers were aware of the adverse effects of the pandemic on the well-being, learning and development of primary school-aged learners. The home-school links were strengthened in some respects, and parents seemed to become more conscious of the significant role of teachers once they shouldered more responsibilities regarding their children's education. However, teachers were also concerned about those families who became even more distant and alienated, with children falling through the net and disappearing from the educational scenario. In such cases, the gaps are feared to have become more pronounced – with learners coming from disadvantaged families or those with learning difficulties or disabilities suffering the most.

These insights are valuable, yet there are also limitations to the study that must be considered. The data was gathered at two different points in time; thus the results are indicative of teachers' experiences at these specific moments. The three notions of *teaching and learning*, *learning spaces*, and *well-being* and relationships were common for both surveys, but the questions differed between the two questionnaires. Moreover, the data is limited to the type and depth of the selected questions, with some open-ended ones that gave respondents a certain degree of flexibility in sharing their experiences and views. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has relented its overarching hold globally, it is still far from over at the time of publication - its effects, especially on the learning and development on current generations of children, but also on the teaching population are still to be evaluated and measured. The respondents were not necessarily the same for the two questionnaires, which may point to a totally different group of teachers participating in the first and second survey. Furthermore, although the questionnaires were shared via social media and disseminated through our professional channels, the data gathered cannot be generalised to the whole primary school teacher population due to the relatively small sample size as well as it being voluntary.

Several recommendations can be put forward following the rich insights that this study yielded:

- The diverse responses recorded with regards to the varied pedagogical solutions adopted by primary school teachers, and the differences in actions, attitudes, digital competence, and confidence point to a need for revised and improved strategic action from higher educational authorities, school leaders and teacher training institutions that help prepare and equip the teacher population for future emergencies.
- The uneven provision experienced by children attending different sectors and schools, which seemed to be namely based on school and teacher motivation, preparedness and proactiveness, and the presence or absence of school-wide policies, would need to be rectified to create more consistent and socially just educational provision that reaches all its learners, irrespective of location, ability, access, and motivation.

- There is also clear evidence that the home-school links must continue to be strengthened and built upon for the benefit of children, as well as a dire need for more widespread cultures of collaborative work and supportive systems across the different levels and stakeholders. The digital divide between the school and the home, especially for disadvantaged families, needs to be addressed to ensure access to digital devices and digital technologies for all.
- The use of technology-mediated educational provision proved to be instrumental during the pandemic emergency and it guaranteed some form of continued learning for primary school learners. Yet the discrepancies in the kind of provision and support received by different children point to the need for more formal frameworks that guarantee the upskilling of the teacher population in terms of digital competencies. More funding and investment in terms of technology-based pedagogy built on high-quality training both in initial and continuous professional development is thus a must.
- A broader picture of the learning gains and losses that resulted from the pandemic and a critical analysis of how to make up for potential gaps in children's learning and development are to become a priority following the prolonged period of irregular or restricted educational provision. Otherwise, once the effects of the pandemic become less pronounced and less immediate, we risk suffering from a systemic amnesia where the learning losses are not accounted for and where gaps in learning are simply forgotten to the detriment of those learners who suffered the brunt of the pandemic.
- The pandemic has clearly confirmed the centrality of relationships for learning, development and overall well-being of both adults and children – a culture of collaboration and sharing, community-building, supportive and socially just learning spaces must continue to be promoted and reinforced.
- Finally, the mental health and overall well-being of teachers, learners and their families in both normal and emergency situations need to be given priority during policy development and implementation, and decision-making processes that impact the learning and development of primary school-aged learners.



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# Appendix

## Appendix A

# Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Survey 1 2020 (N=208)	Survey 2 2021 (N=126)
	% (n)	% (n)
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	93.8 (195)	94.4 (119)
Male	6.3 (13)	4.8 (6)
Other	0	0
<b>Age range in years</b>		
18–24	2.8 (6)	4 (5)
25–34	31.7 (66)	27 (34)
34–44	34.6 (72)	37.3 (47)
45–54	20.7 (43)	25.4 (32)
55–64	8.7 (18)	5.6 (7)
65+	0.5 (1)	0.8 (1)
Missing data	1 (2)	0
<b>Nationality</b>		
Maltese	98.1 (204)	97.6 (123)
Other	1 (2)	2.4 (3)
Missing data	0 (2)	0
<b>Region/Location of residence</b>		
Southern Harbour, Malta	13 (26)	17 (22)
Northern Harbour, Malta	24 (49)	26 (33)
South Eastern Malta	15 (31)	9 (11)
Western Malta	15 (31)	25 (32)
Northern Malta	22 (45)	17 (22)
Gozo	5 (11)	5 (6)
Missing data	4 (9)	0
<b>Role in education</b>		
Learning Support Educator	26.4 (55)	43.7 (55)
Primary Teacher Year 1	12.9 (27)	8.7 (11)
Primary Teacher Year 2	6.3 (13)	10.3 (13)
Primary Teacher Year 3	3.4 (7)	5.6 (7)
Primary Teacher Year 4	3.8 (8)	7.9 (10)
Primary Teacher Year 5	7.2(15)	4.8 (6)

Primary Teacher Year 6	11.1(23)	7.9 (10)
Supply teacher	4.8 (10)	2.4 (3)
Peripatetic Teacher	3.4(7)	4 (5)
Nurture Teacher	2.4 (5)	0.8 (1)
Complementary Teacher	4.8 (10)	1.6 (2)
Literacy Support Teacher	1.9 (4)	1.6 (2)
Kindergarten Educator Reliever	-	0.8 (1)
Other	11.1 (23)	-
Missing data	0.5 (1)	0

<b>Highest level of education</b>		
Secondary Level	1.4 (3)	1.6 (2)
Vocational Qualifications	20.7 (43)	2.4 (3)
Bachelor's Degree	42.8 (89)	45.2 (57)
Diploma Level 4	-	4 (5)
Diploma Level 5	-	18.3 (23)
Award Level 4	-	5.6 (7)
Award Level 5	-	4.8 (6)
Post-graduate degree	34.1 (71)	18.3 (23)
Missing data	1 (2)	0

<b>Type of residence</b>		
Maisonette	30.8 (64)	-
Flat/apartment	32.7 (68)	-
Terraced house	26.4 (55)	-
Semi-detached Villa/house	14 (6.7)	-
Detached Villa/House	1 (0.5)	-
Other (townhouse, house of character, duplex apartment)	2.9 (6)	-

<b>Education sector</b>		
State School	60.6 (126)	58.7 (74)
Church School	26 (54)	20.6 (26)
Independent School	13.5 (28)	20.6 (26)

## Appendix B

# Geographical Regions of Malta

The six Maltese geographical regions according to the NSO classification as follows:

### 1. Southern Harbour

Cospicua; Fgura; Floriana; Ғal Luqa; Ғaḷ-Żabbar; Kalkara; Marsa; Paola; Santa Luċija; Senglea; Ғal Tarxien; Valletta; Vittoriosa; Xgħajra.

### 2. Northern Harbour

Birkirkara; Gżira; Ғal Qormi; Ғamrun; Msida; Pembroke; San Ġwann; Santa Venera; St Julian's; Swieqi; Ta' Xbiex; Tal-Pietà; Tas-Sliema.

### 3. South Eastern

Birżebbuġa; Gudja; Ғal-Ġhaxaq; Ғal Kirkop; Ғal Safi; Marsaskala; Marsaxlokk; Mqabba; Qrendi; Żejtun; Żurrieq.

### 4. Western

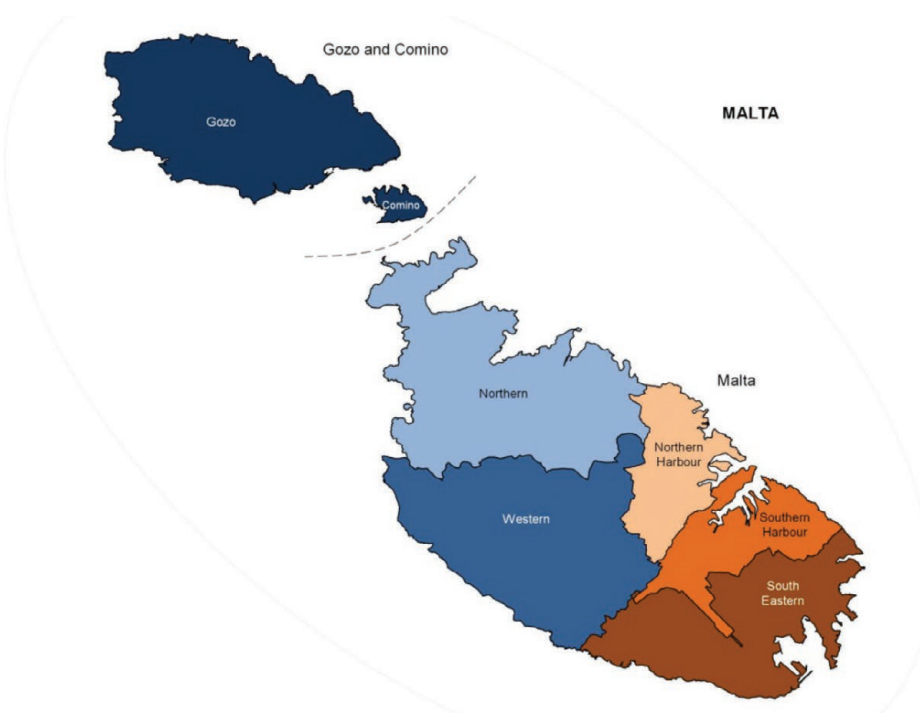
Ғad-Dingli; Ғal Balzan; Ғal Lija; ҒAttard; Ғaḷ-Żebbuġ; Iklin; Mdina; Mtarfa; Rabat; Siġġiewi.

### 5. Northern

Ғal Ġhargħur; Mellieħa; Mġarr; Mosta; Naxxar; St Paul's Bay.

### 6. Gozo & Comino

Fontana; Ġhajnsielem; Ġharb; Ġhasri; Munxar; Nadur; Qala; San Lawrenz; Ta' Kerċem; Ta' Sannat; Victoria; Xagħra; Xewkija; Żebbuġ.



Graphical Illustration of MALTA by NUTS Classification (NSO, 2021)









**L-Università ta' Malta**  
Faculty of Education



Early Childhood &  
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RESEARCH GROUP

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